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Digital Trust and Authority: Political Communication Practices and Participation Among Italian Citizens

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Abstract: This paper investigates how Italian citizens' practices and experiences with the media shape their trust, perceptions of authority, and opportunities for political

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participation. Focusing on digital and social media, the study explores whether these platforms provide the conditions for meaningful engagement in the country's democratic life. In a context marked by disinformation, polarization, and growing scepticism toward institutions, digital media simultaneously expand access to political information and expose users to new uncertainties. Drawing on qualitative data from the Horizon Europe project MeDeMAP, including 36 semi-structured interviews and four focus groups (n=68), the analysis highlights ambivalent media perceptions: participants report improved access to information and new forms of interaction with political actors, but also encounter polarized content, low-quality information, and performative political communication. Trust and authority emerge as a dynamic and situated practices, shaped by everyday media use and the perceived proximity—or distance—between citizens and institutions. Using a semantic map, the study proposes a fourfold typology of participation and trust configurations, illustrating the heterogeneity of citizens' engagement with political communication in a hybrid media environment.

Keywords: political participation, social media, media trust, MeDeMAP, Italy

Confiance et autorité numériques : pratiques de communication politique et participation des citoyens italiens

Résumé : Cet article examine comment les pratiques et les expériences des citoyens italiens avec les médias façonnent leur confiance, leur perception de l'autorité et leurs possibilités de participation politique. Centrée sur les médias numériques et sociaux, l'étude explore si ces plateformes offrent les conditions d'un engagement significatif dans la vie démocratique du pays. Dans un contexte marqué par la désinformation, la polarisation et un scepticisme croissant envers les institutions, les médias numériques élargissent simultanément l'accès à l'information politique et exposent les utilisateurs à de nouvelles incertitudes. À partir de données qualitatives issues du projet Horizon Europe MeDeMAP, comprenant 36 entretiens semi-directifs et quatre groupes de discussion (n=68), l'analyse met en lumière des perceptions ambivalentes des médias : les participants font état d'un meilleur accès à l'information et de nouvelles formes d'interaction avec les acteurs politiques, mais sont également confrontés à des contenus polarisés, à une information de faible qualité et à une communication politique performative. La confiance et l'autorité apparaissent comme des pratiques dynamiques et situées, façonnées par l'usage quotidien des médias et la proximité – ou la distance – perçue entre les citoyens et les institutions. À l'aide d'une carte sémantique, l'étude propose une typologie en quatre volets des configurations de participation et de confiance, illustrant l'hétérogénéité de l'engagement des citoyens dans la communication politique au sein d'un environnement médiatique hybride.

Mots-clés: participation politique, médias sociaux, confiance dans les médias, MeDeMAP, Italie

Introduction

The contemporary media ecosystem is an unstable and constantly changing environment, shaped by the convergence of technological, social and political transformations. Over the last decade, disruptions of varying nature and intensity – from the COVID-19 pandemic to renewed geopolitical tensions – have further highlighted the structural fragility of public debate. These “shocks” have not only accelerated the processes of redefinition and fragmentation, but have also highlighted the difficulty for institutions, media actors and citizens to maintain a steady communicative connection. In this context, the relationship between citizens, media and politics appears increasingly fluid, contested and subject to renegotiation, thus opening up new, albeit often ambiguous, spaces for communication and democratic participation.

As digital platforms redefine both the supply and demand for information, traditional conventions related to authority, legitimacy and credibility have been destabilised (Bartsch et al., 2025; Carlson, 2017). At the same time, trust in the media and institutions has emerged as a problematic issue, increasingly influenced by flows of disinformation, dynamics of polarisation, and scepticism towards elites and professional communication (Strömbäck et al., 2020; Tsifti et al., 2022). Political communication itself has undergone a substantial transformation: digital infrastructures amplify opportunities for citizen engagement, but at the same time introduce new vulnerabilities related to skills, credibility and exposure to unreliable content (Humprecht et al., 2022; Štětka & Mihelj, 2024).

To understand these transformations, it is necessary to move beyond deterministic perspectives and adopt a framework that captures the interaction between material infrastructures and cultural practices (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2025). Rather than unfolding as a linear and predictable process, digitalisation has catalysed a profound hybridisation between historically distinct spheres: public and private, institutional and personal, professional and amateur. This growing porosity generates continuous negotiations of symbolic authority and legitimacy, prompting journalists, media institutions and political actors to continually reposition themselves within a communicative environment whose norms and hierarchies can no longer be taken for granted.

In this context, trust in media and institutions can no longer be conceptualised as a stable individual disposition, but must instead be understood as a dynamic, relational and context-dependent process. Following Couldry's (2004) perspective, trust emerges as a situated practice, built over time through repeated interactions, forms of recognition and the perceived ability of institutions to respond to demands for representation and transparency. Trust therefore goes beyond simply assessing the accuracy of information: it also encompasses a broader assessment of the extent to which media institutions symbolize citizens, mediating their relationship with the democratic order. In this reconfigured communicative landscape, authority becomes

less tied to formal hierarchies and more to performative and contextual practices negotiated in everyday discursive encounters. These changes have profound implications for the quality of public debate and the nature of citizens participation, which increasingly takes shape through unconventional forms, ranging from online mobilisation to symbolic protest, grassroots fact-checking and other distributed practices.

Within this hybrid and unstable communicative environment, trust, authority and participation must be understood as interconnected and mutually constitutive processes. Authority no longer derives primarily from formal institutional status, but emerges through situated performances of credibility, responsiveness and symbolic representation (Carlson & Lewis, 2015). Trust, in turn, is shaped by citizens' assessments of these performances and by their everyday encounters with media and political actors in digital spaces (Metzger et al., 2021). Finally, participation increasingly takes place through practices—such as commenting, sharing, verifying or mobilising—that both depend on and continually reshape perceptions of who holds authority and who deserves trust (Dahlgren, 2009). From this perspective, trust is not merely a prerequisite for democratic engagement, but a dynamic arena in which authority is contested and participation is enacted. It is this triangulation that guides our empirical investigation.

In this scenario, Italy represents a particularly salient case for investigating these issues. The country is characterised by long-standing concerns regarding media pluralism, political parallelism (Mancini, 2013; Cornia, 2016; Sileoni & Vigevari, 2016), and structural weaknesses in digital literacy and media education (OECD, 2021; Selva, 2020). At the same time, Italy shows extensive penetration of social media platforms as primary sources of political information (AGCOM, 2023), coupled with recurrent vulnerabilities to misinformation and low institutional trust (European Commission, 2022). These conditions make the Italian public sphere a theoretically relevant and empirically rich vantage point from which to observe how citizens negotiate trust, relate to political institutions, and participate in democratic life under conditions of digital transformation. Through a qualitative study conducted on a heterogeneous sample of Italian users, we seek to illuminate the tensions, ambivalences, and everyday practices through which citizens engage with (social) media, institutional communication, and the broader Italian public sphere. In this sense, the Italian case serves as a theoretically productive site for examining the situational, processual, and relational nature of trust, authority, and public participation.

1. Theoretical Framework: Trust, Authority and Participation in Hybrid Media Environments

The Trust is widely recognised as a fundamental pillar of social and political life; an essential prerequisite for both collective cohesion and meaningful civic participation (Fukuyama, 1996). Its importance has become increasingly evident in both the media

and political landscape, where strengthening trust becomes a cornerstone for lasting legitimacy and institutional stability (Thomassen et al., 2017; Wilner et al, 2022). In the specific context of civic engagement, trust acts as a necessary enabling factor: it underpins citizens' willingness to participate actively, sustains their involvement over time, and shapes their perception of their contribution as decisive in democratic processes (Boulianne, 2020).

Trust—whether directed toward media systems or political institutions—constitutes a performative and dynamic construct, shaped by situational factors and by the specific issues at stake (Garusi & Leonhardt, 2024; Uth, 2026). Its inherently relational nature implies that trust cannot be treated as a stable disposition but rather as an ongoing evaluative practice embedded in everyday interactions with information and authority. Within this framework, the interdependence between media trust and political trust plays a particularly salient role. As scholarship has shown, the declining credibility of journalism can have cascading effects on the perceived legitimacy of political institutions, just as political disaffection can further erode confidence in the media's capacity to act as a democratic intermediary (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen & Steindl, 2018).

1.1. *Digital Authority, Social Media and the Political Context*

The rise of social media has profoundly reconfigured the contemporary communication ecology, reshaping the modalities through which information is produced, circulated, and appropriated by citizens. Digital platforms have not only transformed individual practices of news consumption, decision-making, and interpersonal interaction, but have also expanded opportunities for participatory engagement (Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2020). Within the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017), traditional and digital logics now interact in increasingly interdependent ways, thereby redefining the conditions under which political information acquires visibility, legitimacy, and interpretive authority.

These transformations in digital citizenship have significant implications for the mechanisms through which authority and trust are constructed. Authority in political communication can no longer be understood as a stable attribute rooted in institutional status; rather, it has evolved into a discursive and relational process in which credibility must be continuously enacted and recognized through practices of transparency, accountability, and sustained public engagement (Vos & Thomas, 2018). Historically, authoritative status was grounded in institutional structures—certified expertise, formal public mandates, and editorial gatekeeping. However, the diffusion of digital technologies, and social media in particular, has destabilized this paradigm by enabling new actors and communicative practices to claim legitimacy in the public sphere (Boyd & Crawford, 2012).

Today, authority is increasingly generated through performative dynamics such as visibility, audience interaction, with algorithmic amplification (Tandoc, Yao & Wu, 2020) playing a crucial role in shaping these dynamics by curating information flows, personalizing content, and reinforcing specific signals of relevance and credibility

(Splendore, 2024). As a result, authority becomes a contingent and emergent property of interactions between users, platforms, and political actors, rather than a prerogative of pre-established institutions (Splendore & Rega, 2017).

This shift from an institutional to a performative, platform-mediated model of authority also contributes to making trust more unstable, situational, and contested. In this panorama, trust is increasingly negotiated at the intersection of human judgment, socio-political expectations, and algorithmic infrastructures, making the relationship between citizens and institutions more fluid and dependent on the dynamics of digital ecosystems (Wenzel & Nelson, 2020).

1.2. *Negotiating Authority and Trust in Online Political Spaces*

The strategic embedding of digital media in political communication, which began to take shape in the late 1990s and reached a turning point with Obama's presidential campaign (Copeland & Rommele, 2014), marked a radical paradigm shift in the architecture of political communication, from a predominantly traditional mediated model, centred on institutional gatekeepers, towards a more direct, promotional and continuous flow of content distributed through digital platforms.

Existing research has repeatedly demonstrated a positive association between the institutional use of social media and public trust (Porumbescu, 2017; Mansoor, 2021). Yet this relationship is neither linear nor universally positive. The affordances of social media can amplify polarisation, heighten perceptions of conflict, or undermine trust in political actors—particularly when information is shaped by user-generated dynamics, algorithmic filtering, or selective exposure (Echeverría & Mani, 2020). As Seaver (2017: 5) argues, algorithms are not stable technical objects interacting with culture from the outside, but unstable entities continuously enacted through the practices people use to engage with them. Building on this perspective, the present paper does not dismiss the enormous and unprecedented power of algorithmic infrastructures but shifts the analytical focus toward how this power is experienced at the level of everyday life. Over the past decade, platforms have reshaped social relationships through affordances and algorithmic systems designed by private companies that commodify personal data and unilaterally extract value from users' behaviour. Yet agency and everyday practices remain analytically consequential: drawing on Couldry's (2004) conception of "media as practice," this paper argues that understanding algorithmic media requires attending to the needs these systems fulfil, as well as unpacking the computational procedures through which human practices bring them into being.

At the same time, institutional social media practices that prioritise transparency, responsiveness, and participatory engagement have the potential to strengthen public trust. Their effectiveness, however, depends on the extent to which they provide meaningful opportunities for interaction, ensure forms of accountability, and foster perceptions of accessibility. In this sense, the capacity of digital platforms to enhance trust is conditional rather than inherent, emerging from the interplay between

communicative strategies, platform logics, and citizens' expectations of institutional behaviour.

Based on Eurobarometer 98 data (winter 2021–2022), Miconi (2025) underscores the multifaceted nature of media trust and its interdependence with political trust. The analysis shows that confidence in the media declines when citizens perceive traditional news outlets as biased or inaccurate, while heightened awareness of disinformation serves as a strong predictor of distrust—particularly in contexts characterised by intense political partisanship or patterns of selective exposure to social media content. A further distinction emerges between traditional and digital media: trust in legacy news organisations tends to be higher in economically affluent regions, whereas confidence in the internet and social platforms is more widespread in lower-income or post-socialist contexts, where institutional sources are often approached with scepticism.

Comparative findings also highlight significant divergences between more and less consolidated democracies. In established democracies, institutional uses of social media generally foster transparency, dialogue, and participatory interaction, producing overall positive effects on public trust. By contrast, in developing contexts, infrastructural weaknesses and digital access disparities can hinder the effectiveness of such strategies, reinforcing vulnerabilities to propaganda, information control, or limited pluralism (Chi, Kamarudin & Rahman, 2024; Splendore & Curini, 2020).

2. Methodology

The study forms part of the European research project Mapping Media for Future Democracies (McDeMAP), which investigates the evolving role of media systems in contemporary democracies. In line with the project's objectives, the Italian component adopts a qualitative design aimed at capturing the situated ways in which citizens interpret, negotiate, and enact their relationship with the media, political institutions, and the public sphere. This approach responds to the theoretical orientation outlined in the introduction and literature review: if trust and participation are increasingly configured as dynamic, relational, and practice-based phenomena, then they require methodologies capable of grasping the micro-processes through which meaning is constructed

2.1. *Research Design and Sampling Criteria*

Data collection took place during the summer of 2024 and relied on two complementary methods: 38 individual semi-structured interviews and four focus groups, totalling 68 participants. Sampling followed a logic of maximum heterogeneity, ensuring variation across age, gender, educational level, occupational status, and geographical origin. Rather than aiming for statistical representativeness, this strategy sought to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and interpretative frameworks.

To foster productive deliberation, focus group participants were distributed into relatively homogeneous subgroups based on age (18–35; 35+) and political interest (high vs. low). This configuration aimed not to control the discussion but to create interactional settings in which participants could articulate shared assumptions and contest positions, generating meaningful discursive dynamics.

Prior to data collection, several pre-tests were conducted to evaluate the validity of the interview and focus group guides and to refine the most effective approach for addressing sensitive or complex themes. These pre-tests informed adjustments in question phrasing, sequencing, and facilitation strategies, enhancing the reliability of the methodology.

2.2. *Epistemological Orientation and Theoretical Framework*

The analysis draws on a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), privileging an inductive engagement with the data and a reflexive movement between empirical material and conceptual elaboration. This choice reflects the theoretical premises outlined above: in hybrid media environments marked by porosity, instability, and the coexistence of human and algorithmic actors, predefined categories risk flattening rather than clarifying the complexity of communicative practices (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory, in this sense, is not merely a methodological procedure but an epistemological stance — one that treats meaning as emergent, contested, and inseparable from the contexts in which it is produced.

The analysis was oriented by an initial sensitising framework drawn from Carpentier and Wimmer (2025), particularly their emphasis on the interplay between material and symbolic conditions of participation, which provided a productive entry point for shaping the research questions and orienting the analytical process. As the analysis progressed, two dimensions emerged as particularly relevant for interpreting participants' engagement with political communication: public connection and trust/authority. The first, public connection (Couldry et al., 2008), refers to the symbolic, affective, and practical modalities through which individuals perceive themselves as connected — or disconnected — from public life, making it possible to move beyond narrowly instrumental understandings of participation and to consider the role of belonging, recognition, and everyday meaning-making in sustaining democratic engagement. The second, trust/authority, is understood not as an intrinsic property of media institutions, but as a situated and relational outcome emerging from everyday routines of exposure, selection, evaluation, and verification of information (Livingstone & Lunt, 2013). Taken together, these two axes provide an interpretive framework for analysing the ambivalence and fluidity that characterise citizens' engagement with the contemporary information environment.

Rather than fixed variables defined in advance, the empirical indicators associated with these axes were constructed progressively through the analysis itself, functioning as evolving sensitising concepts iteratively refined through constant comparison across cases, themes, and discursive constellations. For public connection, this process brought into focus dimensions such as modes of exposure to political

information (intentional or incidental), degrees of engagement with public issues, perceived civic efficacy, and the extent to which political information was embedded in everyday media routines. For trust/authority, it highlighted perceived source reliability, the legitimacy attributed to media and institutional actors, expectations of transparency and responsiveness, and recurring discursive references to manipulation, polarisation, credibility, and verification. The analytic process developed through an open coding phase — aimed at identifying recurring themes, narrative tensions, and salient patterns — followed by axial coding, organising categories relationally to trace connections across cases and examine the conditions under which different meanings of trust, authority, and participation took shape. The resulting semantic map should therefore be understood as a grounded analytical construct: one that synthesises recurrent discursive constellations identified in the data while preserving the situated, qualitative, and processual character of participants' accounts.

The semantic map therefore results from an interpretive comparison of recurring discursive constellations rather than from a deterministic classificatory procedure. The four configurations should be understood as grounded analytical constructs: they synthesise patterned orientations found in the data while preserving the qualitative, situated, and processual character of participants' accounts.

2.3. *Rationality of Research Design*

The adoption of a qualitative design should not be interpreted as an alternative to quantitative analyses of trust or authority but as an epistemological choice grounded in the need to examine trust as a process rather than a measurable disposition. Quantitative indicators can map levels of trust; they cannot illuminate how trust is justified, negotiated, and transformed in relation to individuals' biographical trajectories and everyday encounters with digital media.

In this sense, the two methodological components offered complementary contributions. Focus groups enabled the observation of dialogical dynamics and collective sense-making, capturing how participants co-constructed or contested meanings in real time. Individual interviews, in contrast, afforded the depth necessary to reconstruct media biographies and to trace the long-term evolution of personal relationships with information, politics, and institutional authority.

Through this qualitative approach, the study sought to develop an empirically grounded and theoretically informed account of how trust, authority and democratic participation take shape within Italy's hybrid and increasingly unstable media environment.

2.4. *Procedures, Ethics, and Anonymization*

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the MeDeMAP project and with the GDPR. Participants received a detailed information sheet outlining the aims of the study, the data-handling procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and fully

transcribed, and all data were stored securely and made accessible only to the research team.

Participants' names and any potentially identifying details were replaced with pseudonyms; when contextual information risked compromising anonymity, it was reformulated. All quotations included in the article are drawn from these transcripts and are presented in anonymized form.

3. Findings

The qualitative analysis of interviews and focus groups revealed recurring patterns in the ways citizens make sense of their relationships with digital media, political institutions, and the public sphere. To organise these patterns analytically, we developed four discursive configurations capturing different orientations towards public connection, trust, and mediated participation. Rather than fixed typologies, these should be understood as grounded interpretive repertoires whose value is heuristic rather than statistically representative.

To visualise how these orientations relate to one another, we developed a two-dimensional semantic map (Figure 1), grounded both in key debates on media and democracy and in the empirical distinctions that became salient through the analysis. Rather than applying a predefined classificatory scheme, the map gradually took shape around two dimensions that proved especially important across the dataset.

The first dimension, represented on the horizontal axis, concerns public connection. It captures a continuum between more active and intentional forms of engagement with public life and more passive or incidental forms of exposure to political information (Carpentier, 2011; Jenkins et al., 2016). In this sense, it reflects the extent to which participants positioned themselves as active agents shaping their informational environment, or instead as observers embedded in the routines of everyday media use.

The second dimension, represented on the vertical axis, concerns trust in political and institutional communication. It captures participants' evaluative orientations towards media and political institutions, ranging from confidence and perceived legitimacy to marked scepticism (Reveilhac & Boomgaarden, 2025). In participants' accounts, trust worked as an important mediating dimension, shaping not only what kinds of information were considered accessible, but also how their credibility, relevance, and authority were judged (Lupia, 2016; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017).

Taken together, these two dimensions helped us interpret how different forms of public connection were combined with different ways of evaluating political and informational environments. The resulting configurations highlight the diversity of political orientations in hybrid media settings and show how citizens move between

engagement, withdrawal, scepticism, and selective uses of both digital and traditional media (Papacharissi, 2010; Dahlgren, 2013).

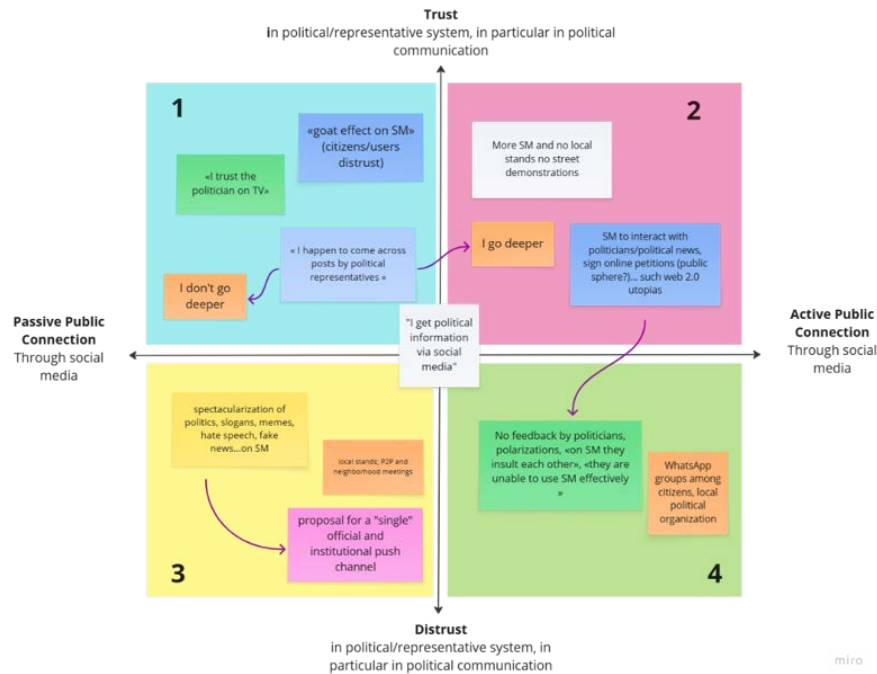


Figure 1. *The mixed-motive model of two-way communication (Grunig, 2001)*

3.1. *Quadrant 1: Traditional media orientation and passive digital engagement.*

This configuration aligns with a classic model of *duty-based citizenship* (Dalton, 2008), in which trust in institutional news media sustains a spectator-like stance toward public life. Participants attribute authority to professional journalism, perceived as a domain regulated by norms of verification and accountability. As a result, media consumption is framed as a responsible yet essentially *delegated* practice: individuals rely on institutional intermediaries to guarantee the accuracy and legitimacy of information:

(F, 41): “I go to websites because they are more reliable [...] I think the site is official, regulated, it has policies that prevent falsehoods from being published, [...] the author of the site cannot publish false news because they would face criminal charges.”

This reliance on institutional sources reinforces selective engagement and a vertical model of information consumption, where citizens delegate interpretation to

professional intermediaries. This discursive recall a sort of *delegated epistemic trust* (Couldry & Hepp, 2018): the conviction that official communicative actors—rather than citizens—carry the burden of verification. Digital platforms, by contrast, are described as unregulated spaces fostering polarisation, incivility, and communicative disorder. Distrust of social media is not limited to the quality of information but also affects the relational and participatory dimension: social media is perceived as polarised and conflictual places that inhibit constructive debate (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2019).

(M, 24): There is no debate, the comments section becomes a pigsty. Insults start flying, the usual comments like “this is the left, this is the right”, or “Go Giorgia”. There's everything, and in a democracy, saying “Go Giorgia” or engaging in satire is fine, but then it gets out of hand. Democracy is given a voice to something that isn't.

The data reveal a widespread devaluation of online participation, often perceived as having limited real-world impact or as a “degraded” form of engagement compared to traditional, in-person political action. This critical stance toward digital activism is frequently coupled with a clear distinction between the agency afforded by online platforms and the perceived authenticity and courage of physical participation. As one participant notes:

(F, 36-44): “Those who comment don't really make a difference. The ones who truly act are those who put their body and soul into it. By choice, I am not part of that group, but the truth is, we are all keyboard warriors, whereas going out into the streets is something else entirely.”

Interviews and focus groups further indicate that many users encounter political news incidentally rather than actively seeking it, engaging with information as part of a largely passive, everyday media consumption (Bode, 2016). In this context, the line between news and entertainment often blurs, with exposure frequently mediated by algorithmic mechanisms that deliver content to personal feeds rather than through intentional search.

(F, 43): “Sometimes I come across political news, but not consciously—I don't actively look for information; it just happens that I see certain pages on my Facebook homepage. It's not intentional; it just occurs.”

In this quadrant, the algorithmic dimension intensifies passive exposure: ranking and recommendation systems saturate the user's feed with fragmented and incidental content, reinforcing the role of the citizen as an informed yet largely disengaged spectator. It is expressed in the non-consumption or acritical consumption of news, in passively accepting the algorithms that create information ‘bubbles’, or in repeating the opinions of others without reflection.

(M, 35) “Let's say I don't look for the news on social media, but I find it. I have found that the most important, relevant news needs very little time to appear and

it's there. Also, because there is an algorithm of views that gets them to the front page”.

Algorithmic filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011) arise from content personalization, whereby collaborative filtering mechanisms shape users' information environments based on the past behaviour of supposedly similar others. The risk is that of being trapped in self-reinforcing informational loops that favour homogenization over differentiation, potentially undermining the epistemic diversity democratic participation requires.

This gives rise to a significant paradox: although aware of the potential offered by digital technology in terms of speed and accessibility of information, many prefer not to make active or intentional use of it. Instead, they prefer a regulated and professional information ecosystem, in which communication remains predominantly one-way. In this context, political participation takes the form of selective and passive consumption of information, in which citizens limit themselves to the role of informed spectators, delegating the production and legitimisation of content to official mediators. Civic engagement does not disappear, but retreats into more traditional and institutionalised forms, where authority replaces debate, and distance guarantees protection from a digital arena that is perceived as chaotic.

3.2. *Quadrant 2: Optimistic Engagement with Social Media*

Participants in this configuration express an optimistic and participatory view of digital media, perceiving them as enabling tools for political expression and citizens engagement. Social platforms are described as accessible, inclusive, and flexible spaces that facilitate direct communication with political representatives, allowing users to bypass traditional hierarchies of information. This orientation resonates with Carpentier's (2011) concept of the *microphysics of democracy*, where even minimal acts of participation—such as commenting, sharing, or following a candidate—carry political significance and contribute to the construction of civic identity. Similarly, Dahlgren's (2009) notion of *everyday politics* is evident: citizenship is enacted through routine, often informal, interactions that may not be explicitly framed as political but nonetheless shape public life.

Importantly, participants' optimism does not translate into unconditional trust in political or media institutions. Rather, trust is *situated* and contingent, shaped by clarity of communication, perceived proximity to political actors, and the emotional resonance of messages (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). In other words, social media provide not merely channels for information, but contexts in which citizens can cultivate a sense of agency and relational closeness with politics. As one participant explains:

(F, 38): “For me, social media is definitely the most inclusive context. Hate speech exists, but social media lets me have a voice without having to go into the streets.”

(P6, F, 20): “If in a 30-second or one-minute video you can explain your goals or show me verified results of what you've done, I am much more likely to follow you

on social media than watching a two-hour program where nothing sticks with me.”

These examples illustrate how digital engagement is experienced as both efficient and emotionally resonant, enabling users to participate in political life in ways that are meaningful within their everyday routines. Here, platform logics are perceived positively: algorithmic visibility can facilitate proximity to leaders, increase the salience of niche issues, and support forms of coordination and micro-mobilisation that strengthen emotional investment in political life.

In this sense, public connection is not simply a matter of *access* to platforms, but of personalized and interactive engagement, in which the effectiveness of communication, clarity of messaging, and capacity to evoke emotional resonance contribute to perceived legitimacy (van Dijck, 2013; Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014).

This “user-centered” trust contrasts with the hierarchical, institutionally mediated trust observed in Quadrant 1, highlighting a shift toward a more distributed and participatory model of civic engagement, where digital media serve as sites for the negotiation and expression of political presence. This aligns with studies on digital civic engagement that emphasize how online interactions supplement, rather than replace, offline participation, supporting *hybrid forms of citizenship* (Theocharis & van Deth, 2018).

3.3. *Negotiating Authority and Trust in Online Political Spaces*

This configuration is characterized by pervasive distrust toward the media ecosystem, encompassing both traditional outlets and digital platforms. Distrust here is systemic, extending beyond any single medium. Individuals within this profile often experience a sense of exclusion from the public sphere and report weak connections to political and informational processes, which results in low levels of civic engagement (Coleman & Blumler, 2009).

(F, 38): *“It really seems like everything is about the meme, the funny thing. And if I do it, that’s fine, but if a political figure does it, no!”*

Social media, despite their potential for inclusion, are frequently perceived as channels for superficial, performative, or manipulative content, incapable of sustaining constructive political debate (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). In contexts of high mistrust, algorithmic systems are interpreted as devices that amplify conflict, repetition, and informational closure. We noted an awareness of the role of algorithms in selecting and organizing information and participants’ frequent references to “information bubbles” capture this ambivalence particularly well.

(F, 23): *“social media is a relative tool, because it adapts to us. There is an algorithm. Instead, there isn’t one on TV and so maybe on social media I see content inside my bubble more often. Obviously if I don’t go looking for it, if I go*

and get informed and look for the politician I'm interested in. Social media is relative if you passively suffer it"

The experience of *algorithmic* information bubbles is therefore understood both as a technological (structural) limitation and as evidence of a deeper crisis of credibility within the information system.

At the same time, traditional media do not necessarily inspire confidence, being described as distant, overly politicized, or irrelevant to everyday concerns (Reveillac & Boomgaarden, 2025). As one participant highlighted, the blending of entertainment and politics in traditional media fosters misinformation and reinforces disengagement:

(P7, M, 52): *"If I turn on the TV and they broadcast harmful shows, objectively harmful, that's how people grow up. If you put on Temptations Island or Big Brother, you create the false myth of progress, and people think that's freedom, that's wealth. You're an idiot. But those who produce it are not stupid—they do it on purpose. The more stupid the people are, the easier it is to govern them. It's sad, but that's how it is."*

This generalised distrust contributes to an *informational apathy*, where lack of perceived utility of information leads to withdrawal from political life (Hartley & Schwartz, 2020). Nevertheless, participants also suggest pathways for restoring trust, emphasizing the need for accessible, transparent, and reliable institutional channels. For instance, some advocated for official government platforms that unify information across media and social networks, ensuring clarity and accountability. These proposals reflect an implicit demand for *public mediation* (Couldry & Hepp, 2018) and illustrate how citizens negotiate engagement through selective, critical consumption rather than passive acceptance.

(F, 24): *"I watch the news, but if I'm really interested in a topic, I go look for it on the official website. This idea of promoting institutional channels more should definitely be emphasized."*

(P5, M, 28): *"[...] Create an official channel of the Italian State, where they explain not only how to vote but also who. Objectively, it tells you what the various parties are proposing. Then the message is broadcast on TV, in newspapers, on social media. Because we also have government social channels. You send a unified message to everyone. Then it's up to you whether to check that or go see Meloni's profile. That's everyone's freedom. But you have the same tool for everyone, objective, and you make your choices."*

This orientation toward institutional sources may represent a strategy for reconstructing trust—not so much through direct participation, but through informed consumption, supported by tools and channels that ensure clarity, reliability, and transparency.

3.4. *Quadrant 4: Active Civic Participation with Critical Stance toward Social Media*

The last configuration reflects a civically engaged orientation combined with a critical stance toward the communicative dynamics of digital platforms. Participants recognize the presence of political content online but challenge its presentation, dominated by polarization, personal attacks, and spectacle-driven logic. Digitalized political discourse is perceived as excessively performative, reduced to sharp remarks, viral memes, and antagonistic exchanges, often disconnected from the substantive issues of public life.

(M, 27): “Political information exists, but the problem is how it is presented. On social media, you see videos where people attack each other. You see Giorgia Meloni attacking Conte and vice versa.”

Criticism of the *memetization* of politics (Halversen & Weeks, 2023) is particularly pronounced among young adults, who, while acknowledging the aggregative potential of these forms, question their capacity to generate lasting political awareness.

(M, 24): “The other day I was at a football party, and a friend told me that a mayor near Milan is very viral on TikTok because he uses our slang. So, it becomes viral and gets followed by us (young people). But even there, the problem is that we focus on virality for things we use, for the meme — so how much importance can it really have?”

This tension reflects a structural dualism between political substance and communicative performativity (Wells et al., 2020), highlighting the risk that political spectacle, while increasing visibility and access, may empty citizens engagement of meaningful content. However, the data also indicate that distrust toward social media does not necessarily translate into a wholesale rejection of digital tools. On the contrary, many people continue to use them pragmatically and selectively, as in the case of local initiatives, neighbourhood WhatsApp groups, petitions, or civic mobilizations. In these contexts, trust is built not on institutional authority but through proximity, reciprocity, and horizontal solidarity.

(F, 65): “I think social media do a lot, because I also see the WhatsApp group, the small initiatives, many times you manage to achieve a lot. A practical example: they had removed tram 73, we mobilized in the neighbourhood and collected signatures in shops, and in the end, it was partially restored. So, in the end, something is achieved, maybe not on the level of the French Revolution, but...”

The digital environment is not entirely rejected but selectively adapted to the needs of pragmatic, local, and relational activism. In this sense, digital spaces emerge as profoundly ambivalent: on the one hand, they represent an effective infrastructure for coordinating localised collective action, facilitating rapid and accessible networked ties among individuals linked by geographic proximity or shared values; on the other hand, they are perceived as fragile and unreliable spaces for public deliberation.

While digital platforms continuously redefine relationships and experiences through algorithmic systems developed by private companies that commodify personal data and extract value from users' behaviour, we foreground the enabling dimension of user agency within these processes. Drawing on findings from our interviews and focus groups, the analysis confirms what Kapsch (2022) identifies as "small acts of algorithm engagement" in everyday media use — micro-level practices through which users actively, if often tacitly, shape their own algorithmic experience. Users emerge as agents who can habit, choice and meaningfully participate in the enactment of algorithmic media.

The algorithmic organisation of visibility amplifies this ambivalence: it can help small-scale civic initiatives gain traction, while at the same time rewarding conflict, simplification, and spectacle in broader political debate. Accordingly, the crisis of trust in traditional media and political arenas does not equate to disengagement but rather gives rise to alternative and situated practices of civic agency — including, and perhaps especially, through algorithmic platforms themselves.

4. Discussion of Main Results

The four discursive configurations reveal a complex landscape of civic engagement and trust in the Italian digital public sphere. Taken together, they show that citizens' experiences cannot be reduced to a linear continuum running from trust to distrust or from participation to apathy. Rather, engagement emerges as a situated and relational practice shaped by the interplay between personal dispositions, perceptions of institutional authority, and the affordances of platformed media environments.

Quadrants 1 and 3 highlight the persistence of scepticism or selective passivity, demonstrating that trust in institutional media and political actors remains a critical mediator of engagement. In these configurations, participation is constrained by perceptions of unreliability, polarization, or performativity in digital spaces, indicating that digital platforms alone do not guarantee meaningful democratic involvement (Prior, 2007; Papacharissi, 2010). By contrast, Quadrants 2 and 4 emphasise the enabling potential of social media, albeit in different ways: optimism and proactive engagement in Quadrant 2 reflect trust mediated through interaction and perceived proximity, whereas Quadrant 4 shows that even critical and selective uses of digital tools can sustain locally meaningful forms of participation.

Across all four quadrants, social media do not function as neutral channels of democratic participation; they operate instead as socio-technical infrastructures that shape visibility, interaction, and legitimacy. Their democratic effects are therefore contingent on how citizens negotiate trust, authority, and public connection within platformed environments. For some participants, the residual authority of traditional media still provides a stabilising framework. For others, more distributed and performative forms of engagement become meaningful precisely because they create directness, recognition, or coordination outside institutional routines.

The findings also suggest that the relationship between media use, trust, and participation is not causal in any simple sense. Rather than positing a linear effect of digital media on democratic engagement, the analysis identifies a set of mediating mechanisms through which hybrid media environments shape citizens' orientations. Incidental exposure broadens access to public issues but can weaken intentional information practices. Perceived proximity to political actors can increase engagement and emotional investment, even in the absence of stable institutional trust. Performative and conflict-driven communication may enhance visibility while simultaneously eroding credibility over time. Finally, algorithmically structured visibility shapes salience, repetition, and selective exposure, thereby intensifying both engagement and informational closure depending on the broader interpretive context.

These findings suggest that the Italian media ecosystem offers conditions of possibility for democratic engagement, but in a highly contingent and uneven manner. Meaningful participation does not emerge automatically from platform use; it takes shape through the dynamic interplay between trust, authority, civic efficacy, and strategic action. In this sense, the digital public sphere simultaneously enables and constrains democratic practice: it affords opportunities for visibility, coordination, and expression, yet it also reproduces vulnerabilities linked to misinformation, performativity, and structural inequalities in media literacy and access. Understanding citizens' mediated experiences in Italy therefore requires attention to the plurality of trust relations, forms of authority recognition, and participatory strategies that coexist within contemporary hybrid media systems.

Conclusion

Our findings underscore the relational and situated nature of trust: rather than a fixed attitude, trust emerges as a dynamic evaluative practice shaped by repeated encounters with media, institutions, platforms, and peers. Authority, likewise, is no longer rooted only in formal institutional status; it is increasingly enacted through visibility, responsiveness, and communicative performance in digital and hybrid spaces. These dynamics produce differentiated patterns of participation, ranging from passive reliance on traditional media to critically engaged and localised forms of civic action supported by digital tools.

The study shows that social media and hybrid communication practices create both opportunities and constraints for civic agency. They can increase access to political information, facilitate participatory engagement, and enable citizens to bypass traditional hierarchies of communication. At the same time, they may intensify polarization, reward spectacle-driven political discourse, and enable the circulation of manipulated or low-quality information, while algorithmic logics reinforce salience, repetition, and selective exposure. Participants' frequent references to "information bubbles" capture this ambivalence particularly well.

The digital media landscape poses significant challenges to democratic processes, particularly in terms of information reliability, filter bubbles, and the manipulation of public debate. Yet there is a growing awareness that media education and active civic engagement are crucial for democratic participation, alongside a widespread desire for political communication that prefers substance over spectacle. As Markham (2021) argues, it is necessary to break interpretative frames that assign responsibility exclusively to algorithms or solely to individual users. The relationship between citizens and algorithmic media remains fundamentally ambivalent: uncertain and potentially harmful, yet productive, shaped by structural power asymmetries and automation strategies.

By mapping these experiences along the axes of public connection and trust in political and institutional communication, the paper captures the heterogeneity of communicative practices in contemporary Italy. Citizens oscillate between active and passive engagement, strategic uses of social media, and selective reliance on institutional sources. Importantly, distrust does not necessarily translate into disengagement; it can coexist with pragmatic forms of local participation, such as neighbourhood initiatives, petitions, and community-based activism. These practices illustrate the need to shift attention from formal structures alone to the everyday mediations through which political authority and civic agency are experienced and enacted (Couldry, 2004).

The analysis also points to a clear citizen demand for more transparent political communication, which privileges accountability and meaningful interaction over spectacle or sensationalism. Digital and traditional media can support civic competence and democratic participation when they are perceived as responsive and trustworthy. Conversely, media environments that amplify conflict, or prioritise virality over substance risk deepening disengagement and mistrust.

More broadly, our findings suggest that social media may provide conditions of possibility for democratic participation, but only insofar as citizens' practices, institutional transparency, and the wider informational ecosystem support meaningful forms of connection, recognition, and accountability.

The analysis is grounded in the Italian case, a context theoretically significant for its combination of political parallelism, informational vulnerabilities, and strong platform penetration. These specific conditions shape the configurations identified here, and accordingly the article does not claim statistical generalisability. Its contribution is instead analytical and theoretical: the four configurations are proposed as heuristic patterns that may inform the interpretation of other contexts through contextual comparison rather than direct extrapolation. A further limitation is that the study is neither longitudinal nor comparative and cannot account for how these configurations evolve over time or vary across different media systems. Future research could address this by combining longitudinal tracking of media practices with comparative analysis across contexts characterised by different degrees of political parallelism, platform dependence, and institutional trust. The value of the

present study lies less in broad generalisation than in offering an interpretive framework for understanding how trust, public connection, and mediated participation are negotiated in contemporary hybrid media environments.

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