Ferrari, E. (2018) Fake accounts, real activism: political faking and user-generated satire as activist intervention. *New Media and Society*, 20(6), pp. 2208-2223. (doi: 10.1177/1461444817731918)

https://eprints.gla.ac.uk/260126/

Deposited on 15 February 2023

Fake accounts, real activism: political faking and user-generated satire as activist

intervention

Elisabetta Ferrari
University of Glasgow, UK

Contact Information:
Elisabetta Ferrari, Department of Sociology, School of Social and Political Sciences,
Adam Smith Building, Bute Gardens, Glasgow, UK G12 8RT
Email: elisabetta.ferrari@glasgow.ac.uk
Twitter: @betty_ferrari

Abstract

In this paper I explore user-generated political satire in Italy by focusing on fake political accounts. By fake accounts I refer to humorous social media accounts that satirize a politician or a political organization through impersonation. I investigate political faking and user-generated satire as an activist intervention. Through in-depth interviews I explore the motivations and the relationship with Italian politics of a sample of fake accounts creators. The results show that most of the satirists interviewed here consider satire as a form of activism and even those who do not, still recognize the subversive nature of satire. Furthermore, a majority of the interviewees have complex biographies of activism that predate the creation of the fake accounts. For a smaller number of them, the fake accounts have also provided new possibilities to engage in activism away-from-keyboard (AFK).

Keywords

Introduction

On September 30, 2015 the then Italian Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, joked with reporters about his favorite soccer team, *AC Fiorentina*, which was at that time leading the Italian championship. After a Question Time session at the Parliament, he said "I'm thinking about approving a decree to end the championship now: whoever is leading it now, is the winner"[1] (Redazione Fatto Quotidiano, 2015). Jokes about football abound in Italian politics. What makes this one stand out is the fact that the Prime Minister was quoting an earlier tweet by *Renzo Mattei*, the satirical "fake" account that impersonates him. The tweet, published a few days before, read: "The decree to end the 2015/16 Championship today is ready. AC Fiorentina is the Italian Champion! #InterFiorentina" (Renzo Mattei, 2015b).

In this paper I explore user-generated (UG) political satire in Italy, by focusing in particular on "fake" political accounts. *Fake accounts* refer to humorous social media accounts that satirize a politician or a political organization by impersonating him/her/it. While the satirized politician or organization is usually the main target of their satire, fake accounts also satirize anyone – be it a member of the public, a journalist or a political actor – who does not recognize the account as fake and interacts with it as if it were the "true" one. Fake social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter have proliferated in the last few years in Italy, becoming an established subgenre of satire,

---

[1] All material in Italian was translated by the author.

which draws media coverage, public attention and sometimes, as can be seen above, even unexpected recognition by the satirized.

While the recent literature on political satire has largely focused on the United States and TV programs like *The Daily Show*, this study advocates for a double shift of perspective: firstly, by considering user-generated satire, it provides an account of more horizontal types of political humor; secondly, by analyzing cases from Italy, it expands and problematizes existing conceptualizations of satire, thus contributing to a growing body of research on political satire outside of the United States (e.g. Baym and Jones, 2012; Wilson, 2011; Yang and Jiang, 2015).

In this paper I examine different ways of looking at the role of user-generated satire and suggest we should think of it as an activist media practice. I then describe the Italian fake accounts that I analyze, and briefly explain the political context in which they are situated. Using in-depth interviews conducted with twelve creators of fake accounts, I explore the narratives that these satirists employ to make sense of their activity in the context of Italian politics. The results show that most satirists interviewed here consider satire as a form of activism. Furthermore, the majority of the interviewees have complex biographies of activism that predate the creation of the fake accounts; for a smaller number of them, the fake accounts have also provided new possibilities to engage in activism away-from-keyboard (AFK).

The political fakes examined here should not be confused with the phenomena of misinformation and propaganda on social network sites which have come to be imprecisely labeled as "fake news" after the American presidential elections of 2016: the faking examined here is a form of playful political critique, not algorithmically-driven deception.

UG political satire as an activist media practice

A body of research on the role of humor and satire has emerged in the field of political communication. This literature examines the role of political humor in the political process, in particular how citizens' exposure to satirical content can foster political knowledge, interest, and participation (e.g. Hart, 2013; Holbert, 2013). This research has primarily considered TV shows in the United States, notably *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* (e.g. Day, 2013; Young, 2013).

Most of this literature, however, is built upon a vertical vision of political satire, according to which professional satirists produce satirical content for the consumption of the public. The emergence of user-generated political satire, enabled by digital technologies, drastically changes the picture: satire is no longer solely in the hands of professionals (Crittenden et al., 2011). Therefore the challenge for the scholarship on political satire is to shift its understanding of the phenomenon from a vertical view – where the powerful satirist directs the public to a critique of politicians – to a more

horizontal situation in which many users-satirists generate satirical content for different micro-publics that intersect with each other and sometimes interact with the broader media system. Furthermore, rather than only focusing on the effects of satire on the public that consumes it, we should also investigate the value of satire for the members of the public that decide to produce it. How can we conceptualize the role of such grassroots forms of satire?

I suggest we think of UG political satire as a form of political activism in its own right, alongside other online and offline activist media practices that aim to "to challenge or alter dominant, expected, or accepted ways of doing society, culture, and politics" (Lievrouw, 2011: 19). Looking at the longer history of political satire from the perspective of activism allows us to appreciate how satire, including impersonation (Schechter, 1994), can become an instance of resistance and direct challenge to power, as suggested by the frequent attempts to censor or manipulate it (see Tsakona and Popa, 2011). Day (2011) considers political satire as one face of activism, which might not directly engender change, but can create the cultural conditions for such change to be advocated and realized. Satire is a direct response to the manufactured character of contemporary politics: an intervention in the public sphere which has the objective to reshape the political conversation, by highlighting its contradictions and generating dissent (Day, 2011). The function of this satirical dissent is to "undermine the power of the dominant narrative" (Day, 2011: 187). Recent satirical interventions like the culture

jamming of *Adbusters* (Lievrouw, 2011) proved central to the emergence of Occupy Wall Street (Gerbaudo, 2012: 110), while the impersonations of *The Yes Men* (Day, 2011) gave resonance to the demands of the global justice movement. Impersonations, as Schechter (1994) argues, are particularly powerful in calling power into question.

In thinking of UG political satire as an activist practice, this research follows recent scholarship that has sought to investigate the centrality of media practices to contemporary activism (Barassi, 2015; Mattoni, 2012), thus focusing not only on media texts, but also on the process of creating activist media and its meaning for the everyday life of activists. As a digital activist media practice, UG satire is shaped by the affordances of digital media (Earl and Kimport, 2011), which have been discussed in the vibrant scholarship on the opportunities and constraints of digital activism (e.g. Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Gerbaudo, 2012). The questions of efficacy and mainstream co-optation that characterize the debate on digital activism (Yang, 2016) present themselves also when thinking about the power of UG satire and its relation to offline activism. For instance, while Yang and Jiang (2015) find that Chinese user-generated satire is a form of grassroots critique and mobilization against power, Wilson (2011) argues that fake political accounts in Australia are a performative and playful activity, fueled by public recognition: play, not activism. Such contradictions should be addressed by taking into consideration the different political contexts in which UG satire is created.

UG satire in Italy

Our understanding of Italian user-generated satire needs to take into account the relevance of satire in the political culture of the country. Mascha (2011) argues that under Fascism political cartooning created a counter-hegemonic discourse to oppose the regime. More recently, impersonation was a key element of the satire against Silvio Berlusconi, and thus an element of political contention (see Watters, 2011). While TV has historically been a crucial arena for satire (Novelli, 2012), the use of digital media, as highlighted by Cepernich (2012), has renewed Italian political satire and resulted in a complementarity between web 2.0 and TV. Furthermore, satire in Italy has often been at the center of the political debate, and has taken up, at times, an explicitly partisan nature. The most striking case of crossover between the world of satire and the world of politics is that of former comedian Beppe Grillo, who created the Five Star Movement (*Movimento Cinque Stelle)* – now one of Italy's main parties.

Given the characteristics of satire in the Italian political context, it would be legitimate to hypothesize that Italian UG political satire could be best described as activism. However, recent studies of Italian UG satire on social media do not fully confirm this hypothesis (Boni and Ricci, 2015; Ricci, 2013). In their analysis of the satirical Facebook page *Siamo la gente il potere ci temono* (roughly translatable as the voluntarily grammatically incorrect "We are the people, the power fear us"), dedicated

to satirizing the supporters of the Five Star Movement, they find that only some contributors to the page are driven by political motivations.

In order to conceptualize user-generated political satire, I explore the narratives that the creators of fake satirical accounts employ to make sense of their activity and its place in Italian politics.

Methodology

In this paper I investigate the motivations, the experiences and the personal narratives of the creators of a purposive sample of Italian fake political accounts. To do so, I employed 7 individual and 2 group semi-structured interviews, conducted either in person or via Skype. The interviews investigated the story behind the creation of the fake accounts, the biographies of their authors and the role of the fake accounts and of satire within Italian politics. As can be seen from Table 1, my sample consists of 12 interviewees, who manage the 8 different fake accounts examined in this paper. A few of the accounts were created by more than one person; in such cases, when possible, I tried to interview more than one individual.

[Table 1 here]

The sample includes the most relevant and famous Italian political fake accounts, as can be inferred by media coverage (Benvenuto and Bracconi, 2015) and social media

popularity (see Table 1). A few additional accounts were contacted, but did not agree to take part in the study or could not be interviewed (e.g *L'Apparato, D'Alema Er Massimo)*, including two accounts satirizing right-wing politicians (i.e. *Salveenee*, *AIemannoTW*). Although the majority of the accounts in the sample satirize left-wing politicians, an effort has been made to include popular accounts that refer to center-right politicians (*Napoletani con Salvini* and *Arfio Marchini*), or that do not specifically concern a leftist politician (*Feudalesimo e Libertà*, *Gli Eurocrati*).

Although the press has revealed most of the real names of the interviewees, I protect their privacy by attributing the content and quotes from the interviews to their account's name, as opposed to their personal one. Multiple interviewees for the same account are numbered (e.g. Casalegglo1, Casalegglo2, etc.).

Given the design of this research, which focuses on how the creators of a sample of prominent fake accounts make sense of their satire, I cannot provide a comprehensive assessment of the actual role of satire in the Italian context or to explain how the public reacts to it. Furthermore, I do not claim to capture the opinion of *all* fake accounts creators or user-generated satirists. However, by including a number of very prominent accounts and by shifting the focus on the processes that lead to the production of satirical content, this research sheds light on an underexplored topic and provides a good starting point for future research in this area.

Gurus, pro-feudalism parties, Marxist collectives: the satire of the fake accounts

The first findings of the study pertain to who the authors of the fake accounts are. All of the interviewees are male and with a high level of education (most have college degrees and beyond). They work in politics, in the media, and in creative occupations. They all categorize themselves as leftists (or center-leftists), and express varying degrees of discomfort with the present state of the Left in Italian politics. The absence of women among the creators of some of the most relevant Italian fake accounts is a striking finding of this study; Ricci (2013) already discovered a male-dominated Italian faking scene, and this study reinforces that finding. Although this does not exclude the possibility of a lively production of UG satire by Italian women, this paper shows how the most prominent accounts are driven by male authorship.

The fake accounts vary in their preferred social network site (but all rely on Facebook and/or Twitter), in the subjects they satirize and in their style. Some accounts are managed by groups of people, some by just one author. Some authors create and maintain more than one account, some just focus on one fake. In the following, I provide a brief description of each account and contextualize its satire.

In fall 2012, the left-wing coalition held primary elections to determine who should be the candidate Prime Minister for the general elections of 2013. In this context, a group created *Marxisti per Tabacci* (Marxists for Tabacci), which posed on Facebook and Twitter as a fake Marxist collective in support of Bruno Tabacci, one of the

candidates in the primary election. The account used Marxist references and Soviet iconography, for instance inserting Tabacci's face into a Soviet poster, alongside Marx, Engels and Lenin (Marxisti per Tabacci, 2012). The satirical power of the account rests on the fact that Tabacci was the most centrist candidate in the primaries, given his political history as a Christian-democrat. By using Soviet symbols to support a centrist candidate, *Marxisti per Tabacci* provided a critique of the primary elections and of the shift towards centrist positions of the left-wing coalition.

The general elections of 2013 signaled a dramatic change in the Italian political landscape, with the emergence of new important players and the decline of Silvio Berlusconi. Three of the fakes were created during that election campaign: *Casalegglo*, *Feudalesimo e Libertà*, *Arfio Marchini*. *Casalegglo* is a fake account created on Twitter by a collective of writers called diecimila.me. The account impersonates Gianroberto Casaleggio (deceased in 2016), one of the key figures behind the emergence and the electoral success of the Five Star Movement. In 2013 the real Casaleggio did not have a Twitter account, and the fake was successful in deceiving many into believing that it was real; when they revealed their fakeness, 10 days after opening the account, they had already accumulated 20,000 followers (Casalegglo2, 2015). The fake spoke in brief and surreal sentences, proposing absurd policy measures, e.g. "Ozone hole useless. Close." (Diecimila.me, 2013: 12). This style played on the mysterious guru-like image of the

real Casaleggio, who rarely appeared in public, but was enthusiastic about digital media (Natale and Ballatore, 2014).

The proliferation of bizarre parties in the Italian elections inspired the creators of *Feudalesimo e Libertà* (Feudalism and Freedom), who developed a Facebook page, Twitter account, and website to campaign for a party that would uphold and celebrate feudal values. As they explain it: "the name plays on the many parties that use the word 'freedom' in their names inappropriately, so we also utilize it. But of course with feudalism it becomes an oxymoron, because feudalism can be seen as everything but freedom" (Feudalesimo e Libertà, 2015). Their visual identity is based on an imagined medieval style: their logo is a medieval helmet (see Feudalesimo e Libertà, 2012).

Lastly, the city of Rome also held its mayoral elections in 2013. During the election campaign, the fake *Arfio Marchini* satirized one of the independent center-right contestants in the mayoral race, Alfio Marchini[2]. The Facebook page of the fake, to date, still has double the "likes" of the real Marchini (88,769 versus 45,299). The fake developed its own electoral slogan "Roma ti amo" (Rome I love you), which parodied the real Marchini's campaign materials. One of the themes often used in the impersonation is that of Marchini's wealth. For example, the "About" section of the fake's Facebook page reads: "I would like more spaces for polo and for golf. I dream of

---

[2] The choice of the name of the fake, which only differs in one letter from the real candidate, is particularly funny in Italian, given that the use of the letter "r" instead of the letter "l" is one of the typical features associated with Roman dialect.

a city and of a regatta on the Tiber river. For the poor I'm thinking about [instituting] some richness days" (Arfio Marchini, n.d.).

In fall 2013, the biggest party of the center-left, *Partito Democratico* (Democratic Party, *PD*), held primary elections to select its leadership. The three main candidates in the primaries soon became the object of different impersonations. The two most successful ones, *Renzo Mattei* and *Gianni Kuperlo,* respectively impersonate Matteo Renzi (who won the primaries and later became Prime Minister) and Gianni Cuperlo (who was the runner-up). *Gianni Kuperlo* was created as a Twitter account at a time when the real Cuperlo did not yet have an account on the social network. Interestingly, even after the real Cuperlo created his Twitter account, news agencies and online media kept mistaking the two, attributing some of the remarks made through the fake account to the real Cuperlo. The impersonation presents a hyperbolic version of the intellectualist, "old left" vibe that has been associated to the real Cuperlo. His long-standing "About" section on Twitter is eloquent: "God is dead, Marx is dead and Renzi is the PD's leader and Prime Minister. Give me vodka. Fake intellectual of the PD" (Gianni Kuperlo, n.d.). *Renzo Mattei* was created shortly after *Gianni Kuperlo,* also as a Twitter account (and later Facebook page). The real Renzi has often used his relative youth to cast himself as a force of innovation for Italian politics. The fake takes this discourse to the extreme and portrays the character as more attentive to appearance than to substance, as can be seen in the description of the fake in the "About" section on

Twitter: "I dream of a *cool* Italy, with a new *concept* and a *vision* that looks to the *future*. A country with a recognizable brand and a shiny *packaging* [words in italics in English in the original]" (Renzo Mattei, n.d.).

The Facebook page *Gli Eurocrati* (The Eurocrats) was created in March 2014, right after the end of the Letta government, in a moment when the influence of the European Union and the European Central Bank became yet again a very salient topic in Italy. *Gli Eurocrati* satirizes EU burocrats and their pro-austerity discourse, as can be seen by their satire during the Greek debit crisis, where the account provided an exaggerated anti-Greek position. For instance, they published a meme in which the Star Wars character Darth Vader was added to the picture of a press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and appeared to address the Greek government, by saying: "Useless Mediterranean Head of Government, I find your lack of austerity disturbing" (Gli Eurocrati, 2015).

The most recent and short-lived of the accounts, *Napoletani con Salvini* (People of Naples with Salvini) was created in May 2015. The page portrayed the existence of a fake organization based in Naples that supported the leader of the Northern League (*Lega Nord*), Matteo Salvini. The most prominent satirical component of the fake is the paradoxical support of a group of people from Southern Italy for a party, the Northern League, that was created specifically to advance the interests of the northern regions against the South of the country. Of the fakes examined here, this represents the most

deliberate attempt to deceive the public, since the page never acknowledged to be a parody until it ceased operations and openly declared that it had been "trolling everyone" (Atte, 2015). The language of the fake parodied the populist and anti-immigrant discourse employed by Salvini.

"Maybe it's sublimated politics": political faking as activism

As one might expect, fun is a primary motivation for the satirists I interview. They want to have fun and they want their public to have fun. Sometimes, fun is really the only motivation for the creation of the accounts. As the creator of *Napoletani con Salvini* puts it, the motivation for the creation of a fake is "total narcissism. I mean, personal entertainment and that's it" (Napoletani con Salvini, 2015). One of the creators of *Renzo Mattei*, speaking of satire in general, states:

> These [satirical] things need to be evaluated on the basis of how much they make people laugh and if they make people laugh… for me this is their aim and that's more than enough. Personally, I don't believe there is a political value in that… (Renzo Mattei, 2015a)

But having fun is not a mindless and disengaged activity. The author of *Arfio Marchini* suggests that making people laugh is also a form of responsibility: "Those of us who do this thing [satire] have a pretty big sense of responsibility… both because you make [people's] days better, but also because you transmit a message" (Arfio Marchini, 2015). He also adds that he likes to make people happy and that "this thing, satire, in some way, is a thing that makes me very happy" (Arfio Marchini, 2015).

There is more to satire than fun and personal happiness. Some of the satirists regard satire as a tool for making people think about the political and social reality they live in. Speaking of a tweet that addressed the issue of gay marriage, implicitly criticizing the government for not doing enough on the topic, one of *Renzo Mattei*'s authors explains: "I don't know, we're talking of 500 retweets, that, I mean, for a profile like ours really is a considerable number. So that means that somehow, besides making them laugh, it prompted – in at least 500 – a reflection" (Renzo Mattei, 2015a). This is also echoed in the words of *Gianni Kuperlo*'s creator:

> (…) in some way, the starting point of faking is to take the contradictions of reality and make them collide, and in this way somehow tell the truth. So in this sense, yes, I understand that a fake is funny, but it also has a serious function. (Gianni Kuperlo, 2015)

Others are even more forthcoming in explicitly characterizing their satire as a form of political activism. The authors of *Feudalesimo e Libertà* say that they perceive their satire, at least partially, as a form of political activism:

> Interviewee1: Partially, yes, because we really want people to get something out of what we write…
> Interviewee2: in our own small way…
> Interviewee2: in our own small way… but obviously we don't just talk about politics, we critique society in its entirety. (Feudalesimo e Libertà, 2015)

For the author of *Marxisti per Tabacci*, the experience of the fake account was definitely a form of activism, although he underlines that they could have probably done even more with it, with the appropriate motivations and resources:

Ehm... yes, it was definitely a form of activism. When you talk about social issues it is a form of political activism… yes, in a literal sense yes. But then if we had really had the motivation, the energy and the time mostly, to be politically active, we would have probably done it in another way or at least we would have looked for a different outcome [for the fake], we would not have let it die as it did, but we would have looked for another outcome. (Marxisti per Tabacci, 2015)

The author of *Gianni Kuperlo* also shares the view that satire, "if done well", can be a powerful way of "saying things that others wouldn't say" and carving up "small spaces of freedom" (Gianni Kuperlo, 2015). Speaking of Italian leftist politics, and the Democratic Party in particular, he portrays his satire as activism in this way:

In my own small way, yes [it is activism]. I told you what I think of the debate in the Democratic Party and… I wouldn't know which side to choose in that debate (…) so… yeah, for sure, my satire is born out of a disenchantment about the dynamics of public debate in the country… and it's a disenchantment I sublimate making people laugh, yeah. Maybe it's sublimated politics, that's it. (Gianni Kuperlo, 2015)

The different satirists come to terms with their satire in different ways; some are more explicit than others in talking about their satirical work as a form of activism. It is interesting to see, however, that even those who would not claim to be doing activism through the fakes, conceptualize satire as having a potentially very important role in educating the public, uncovering the follies of the powerful and changing the public conversation. Their characterization of satire is, in many ways, exactly what an activist definition of satire would look like. In short, while they refuse the label of activism, what they describe is largely satire as an activist media practice, challenging the status

quo (Lievrouw, 2011). Take for instance, the following definition of satire (and its role) given by one of the creators of *Casalegglo*, who refused to label his satire as activist, but nevertheless argues:

> I stick to the classic definition, which is *castigat ridendo mores*[3]. Satire is something subversive and it's created to… the idea is that you see the world as it is, there is something you don't like, you denounce the fact that you don't like it, but you do it without turning it into a heavy discourse, you keep it light and try to communicate it through laughter. To me that's the only right definition. (Casalegglo2, 2015)

The other interviewee behind *Casalegglo* laments that the public is gradually losing the distinction between simple humor and satire. To him,

> someone who wants to do political satire has some objective regarding that topic, politics… he is contesting something, generally [chuckles] power, in practice… if you are just doing comedy it's a thing of its own (…) and if you start doing satire on other things – not against the system, against power, against the status quo – but on anything, just because it's funny, then that is different… then it's not political satire anymore, in my opinion. (Casalegglo1, 2015)

As evidenced in these quotes, although they choose not to call it a form of activism, the interviewees regard satire highly, seeing it as subversive, contesting power and criticizing the problems of the world. Even if they do not call it activism, they clearly understand faking as an activist practice.

"Then for a series of reasons we left": biographies of activism and satire

---

[3] In Latin. Literally: "one corrects customs by laughing at them".

While developing this project, I was mainly interested in understanding how the creators of these famous fake accounts see themselves and their work. Obviously, I imagined that they had an interest in politics, and I also hypothesized, knowing enough about satire and politics in Italy, that they would all identify with some definition of leftism. What I hadn't anticipated was the depth of the political engagement of some of these activists. Without overstating my findings in this respect – which concern nine out of twelve interviewees – following the traces of these experiences provides a snapshot of a generation of activists that struggled, in different ways, to find a place in the ever-changing landscape of the Italian Left.

The interviewees have been student activists, party organizers, NGO volunteers, and aides to different politicians. With one exception, all the satirists who have had experiences of political activism have also ended them. While this was not a key element of all the interviews, some of their comments display a general discomfort with leftist politics, which is probably one of the reasons why these experiences of activism are now over. Take, for instance, what the author of *Gianni Kuperlo* says:

> I was active between 2007 and 2011. I was [a party activist] in my town,
> and I understood that that was not what I liked to do and that it wasn't…
> a party like that, I mean, political activism done in that way was not for
> me, so I just peacefully left. (Gianni Kuperlo, 2015)

Similarly, the authors of *Feudalesimo e Libertà*, who met because they were all activists in the same student organization, recall:

Interviewee1: [we were active] at the university level. But it was more… more than being a mirror of national politics, it was more… yeah, something within the university, where anyway…

Interviewee2: Let's say we saw enough to know that to be [active] within an institution you need to be able to navigate through the mud. I mean, in practice, in Italy, obviously everyone just criticizes politicians, but it's all impregnated with… with nepotism, clientelism, tricks and things like that (…) There are partisan interests even there. (Feudalesimo e Libertà, 2015)

The creators of *Marxisti per Tabacci* and of *Renzo Mattei* also met through many years of activism in two distinct student organizations at the university level. What follows is an abridged version of the biography of engagement of the authors behind *Renzo Mattei*:

We met at the University of Bologna. We were involved in university politics, in [our department] and then in the university at large, and in parallel to that we also got involved in the youth organization of the Democratic Party. Yeah… so… we really lived politics from the inside, so… I mean, we learned all about the dynamics of politics, we had a lot of very positive experiences, and some less positive ones. Then for a series of reasons we left – together – that environment. But nevertheless we still retained (…) this motivation to try and do something. So with some friends we continued our political activism with an NGO. (…) And the three of us – as I said before it was really random – we found ourselves talking again about politics through satire. (…) So… maybe our way to deal with these [political] topics on our own was to translate them into [the fake]. We can say… I mean… this character is born out of the passion for politics that the three of us share. Which is something that is really present in our lives. It doesn't take the form of militancy right now, but surely it's a form of activism. (Renzo Mattei, 2015a)

The creator of *Arfio Marchini* also shares a similar biography, with experiences in student movements and Roman politics. He attributes his decision to create the fake to his nostalgia for this engagement:

> It was partly because of nostalgia – because I was living far away from the campaign – and since I have also worked in press offices in Rome and in [the local institutions], so I always lived Roman politics… I was also active in it, I had experiences in the student movements… I always felt Roman politics very… very close to me. So partly for nostalgia, partly to experiment with a new language, I created the page. (Arfio Marchini, 2015)

It is possible that this high level of previous engagement or activism is not a trait shared by all fake accounts creators. However, it is worth underlining that these are some of the most prominent fakes in Italy, and they share remarkably similar biographies of intense activism that cannot be considered a simple coincidence.

"Something permanent, something real": satire as a platform for away-from-keyboard activism

Given the intense trajectories of activism of some of the satirists, it is not so surprising that in the interviews they spend quite some time thinking about the offline, away-from-keyboard (AFK) impact of their satire.

The creators of *Marxisti per Tabacci* spent a lot of time reflecting on whether their satire was in fact helping out the leftist forces that they wanted to criticize in the first place. This reflexive discussion centered around the fact that they felt that, by

turning Tabacci into a funny character, they somehow also cast a more positive light on the primaries in which he competed – primaries they had set out to fiercely criticize. However, what the author I interviewed feels is the most positive outcome of the fake is the fact that their use of Soviet and Marxist references prompted some young people to discover some of that communist legacy, to "maybe go and look up who Brezhnev was" (Marxisti per Tabacci, 2015).

The author of *Gianni Kuperlo* interestingly reports that the popularity of his account has led him to acquire legitimacy in the political environment, especially in the discussions that take place on Twitter. His case is peculiar, in that he disclosed his personal identity; in this way, the success of the fake also brought him popularity under his real name (or rather, Twitter handle) and a political legitimacy that, he argues, he would not have otherwise acquired even in 20 years of traditional political activism. However, he says he does not intend to use the fake as a way to boost his personal political career; in his words: "I don't aspire to be a tribune of the people after playing the court fool" (Gianni Kuperlo, 2015).

Two of the fake accounts, on the contrary, have engaged in AFK forms of activism. The authors of *Feudalesimo e Libertà* have created a non-profit organization, through which they want to "promote medieval culture, satire and events throughout the country, just like with the Facebook page. The main aim of the organization is to create a *community* of people with shared interests and passions (…)" (Feudalesimo e Libertà,

n.d.). In addition to fundraising purposes, they created the organization to avoid "dispersing the group we created around the Facebook page" (Feudalesimo e Libertà, 2015), which includes up to 25 contributors and hundreds of thousands of fans.

The AFK activism of *Arfio Marchini* was even more explicitly political. Regular citizens used the fake account's Facebook page to air their grievances. His author says that the Facebook page helped promote a few petitions that were brought to the attention of the city administration, which he characterizes as "little things, practical things", "to improve people's lives" (Arfio Marchini, 2015). But he also has another goal: transforming the fake account into a civic, independent formation that could run in the local elections. He explains:

> I have this weird idea, once I get to 100,000 likes, my idea is to go and see… I mean, really understand who really wants to get seriously engaged [in politics]. My idea would be to really have a "Rome I love you" party for the local elections. (…) And to try and transform this thing [the fake] into a very concrete thing. And, then, I mean… I don't know how many votes it can get, but I'm sure I can find 50 fools who want to run in the local elections… but fundamentally, that's my idea. I want to see how much an experiment with a fake can become something permanent, something real. (Arfio Marchini, 2015)

The author of *Arfio Marchini* is certainly an outlier, because the other satirists do not share this level of projected AFK activism. Nevertheless, his position is interesting because it allows us to outline how the desire to be politically active can take different forms, that are shaped both by the political context and by the different circumstances of one's personal life.

Conclusion

The interviews provide a picture that brings credit to the characterization of satire as a form of activism. Granted, the responses of the interviewees are mixed. While some would openly characterize faking as a form of activism, others insist on the pedagogical function of the fake accounts. But the most interesting finding is probably the fact that even the authors who shy away from the label of activism recognize in satire certain key attributes; they say that it is subversive, that it is critical, and that it attacks the status quo. In short, even if they would not call it activism, their definition of satire is aligned with Day's activist definition of satire (2011).

Moreover – and unexpectedly – for most of the interviewees satire is not a one-off, self-standing form of activism, but rather a new episode of political engagement within a longer trajectory of political activism. As detailed above, being active in politics has been an important part of life for nine of the twelve interviewees; some are even explicit in saying that they perceive that faking is now an outlet through which they can continue, in a new form, their long-standing political activism. While this might not be a characteristic common to all Italian authors of UG satire, especially given the demographic limitations of the sample, the striking similarity between the biographies of activism of the satirists interviewed here clearly points to certain characteristics, perhaps generational, that are worth investigating. These satirists have walked away from traditional politics and activism in a moment of political turmoil and

profound change in the Italian left. Through their words it is possible to read a common discomfort with contemporary Italian politics and thus the unwillingness to take part in it directly, while at the same time still trying to make an intervention in the public debate. It is in this light that we should also read the attention to more tangible, away-from-keyboard forms of engagement that a smaller number of interviewees have undertaken through the fake accounts.

Given the extent of their previous political activism, it is interesting to see how much they show to be reflexive about the offline impact of their online satire. Perhaps because of their biographies of activism, they are very cautious and distinguish between their current activism – the fakes – and other forms of activism, which they perceive to be more intensive and more effective. The author of *Marxisti per Tabacci*, in a sentence quoted above, sums it up by saying that while their fake is a form of activism, "if we had really had the motivation, the energy and the time mostly, to be politically active, we would probably have done it in another way" (Marxisti per Tabacci, 2015). In this sense, satire can be seen as form of activism, but this does not mean that the satirists disregard or disrespect other, more traditional forms of activism. Satire is the outlet through which, at this moment in their life, under the present political conditions, they are best able to express their passion for politics.

This paper intended to contribute to the scholarship on political satire by further shifting the focus to user-generated satire and by broadening the geographical scope of

previous research. By analyzing the motivations and narratives employed by a sample of Italian satirists to make sense of their user-generated satire, it provides a complex and multifaceted account of satire as an activist media practice. Not only is satire a form of activism for a majority of the interviewees, they also share a certain common biography of previous political activism, which strongly impacts on their satire today. While fun is obviously a crucial component for these satirical authors, their reflexivity and their deep, personal connection to politics makes their satire a compelling intervention in the public debate, that highlights some of the contradictions and the shortcomings of Italian politics.

Further research on this topic could help investigate the role that satirical fake accounts play in Italian politics. Day (2013) suggests that we should evaluate satire for its capacity to shift the conversation and enrich the political imaginary. Writing briefly about the Italian fake accounts, Bentivegna (2015) also suggests that they reframe the political discussion. While there are indications that this might indeed be the case, as evidenced by the popularity of the accounts, there is clearly room for research in this respect. In particular, further research should also focus on the emergence of right wing humorous user-generated content and its increased relevance in the Italian online sphere.

Secondly, this paper has argued in favor of grounding the analysis of user-generated satire in an understanding of the political context in which that satire

emerges. The differences between the results of this paper and Wilson's (2001) view of faking as a form of fandom, could also stem, for instance, by the diversity of the two political cultures considered – the Italian and the Australian. Thus more research in different countries could help us make sense of the role of these new forms of user-generated political satire and also move us further away from a scholarship that has been long too focused on English-speaking countries.

Lastly, the findings surrounding the role of satire in the lives of a handful of individuals with interesting biographies of activism open up a promising avenue for research into the changing modalities of activism and especially in periods of no visible mobilization – what social movements scholar Alberto Melucci called "latency" (1989). It certainly seems that for a few of the interviewees, satire has become a way to continue being politically active, when personal and political conditions made it no longer suitable for them to sustain more direct forms of engagement in political activism. It would thus be interesting to investigate how the search for new and alternative opportunities of engagement is connected to the transformations of leftist politics, in Italy and elsewhere; and if and how these new opportunities can sustain more traditional forms of activism.

References

Arfio Marchini (2015) Personal interview.

Arfio Marchini (n.d.) About Section. *Facebook*, Available from:
https://www.facebook.com/ArfioMarchini/info?tab=page_info (accessed 30
October 2015).

Atte A (2015) Ecco come la pagina 'Napoletani con Salvini' ha fregato (quasi) tutti -
Termometro Politico. *Termometro Politico*, 16th June, Available from:
http://www.termometropolitico.it/1178525_ecco-come-la-pagina-napoletani-con-
salvini-ha-fregato-quasi-tutti.html (accessed 31 October 2015).

Barassi V (2015) Activism on the Web: Everyday Struggles Against Digital Capitalism.
New York, NY and Oxon, UK: Routledge.

Baym G and Jones JP (2012) News Parody in Global Perspective: Politics, Power, and
Resistance. *Popular Communication*, 10(1–2), 2–13.

Bennett WL and Segerberg A (2013) *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media
and the Personalization of Contentious Politics*. Cambridge Studies in Contentious
Politics, Cambridge University Press.

Bentivegna S (2015) *A colpi di tweet: la politica in prima persona*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Benvenuto R and Bracconi M (2015) Fake, quei falsi che dicono il vero. *La Repubblica*,

Available from: http://inchieste.repubblica.it/it/repubblica/rep-it/2015/06/05/news/il_trionfo_degli_avatar_in_politica-115817082/?ref=HREC1-37#apertura (accessed 18 March 2017).

Boni F and Ricci O (2015) Dalla dissacrazione all'umiliazione: nuove forme di satira politica online tra violenza simbolica e distinzione. *Comunicazione Politica*, (1), 27–42.

Casalegglo1 (2015) Personal Interview.

Casalegglo2 (2015) Personal interview.

Cepernich C (2012) La satira politica al tempo di internet. *Comunicazione politica*, (1), 73–88.

Crittenden VL, Hopkins LM and Simmons JM (2011) Satirists as opinion leaders: is social media redefining roles? *Journal of Public Affairs*, 11(3), 174–180.

Day A (2011) *Satire and dissent: interventions in contemporary political debate*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Day A (2013) Shifting the conversation: Colbert's super PAC and the measurement of satirical efficacy. *International Journal of Communication*, 7(1), 414–429.

Diecimila.me (2013) *Essere Casalegglo: fine del mondo in tre, due, uno minuti*. Add Editore.

Earl J and Kimport K (2011) *Digitally enabled social change: activism in the Internet Age*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press.

Feudalesimo e Libertà (2012) Facebook post. Available from: https://www.facebook.com/feudalesimoeliberta/photos/a.287794628029481.10737 41839.181334612008817/181712068637738/?type=3&theater (accessed 1 June 2017).

Feudalesimo e Libertà (2015) Personal interview.

Feudalesimo e Libertà (n.d.) Chi Siamo. Available from: http://www.feudalesimoeliberta.org/chi-siamo (accessed 30 October 2015).

Gerbaudo P (2012) *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism*. Pluto Press.

Gianni Kuperlo (2015) Personal interview.

Gianni Kuperlo (n.d.) Twitter Profile. Available from: https://twitter.com/GianniCuperIoPD (accessed 30 October 2015).

Gli Eurocrati (2015) Facebook post. Available from: https://www.facebook.com/eurocrati/photos/a.272046592969812.1073741829.267 617373412734/451414075033062/?type=3&theater (accessed 1 June 2017).

Hart RP (2013) The rhetoric of political comedy: A tragedy? *International Journal of*

Communication, 7(1), 338–370.

Holbert RL (2013) Developing a normative approach to political satire: An empirical perspective. *International Journal of Communication*, 7, 305–323.

Lievrouw LA (2011) *Alternative and Activist New Media*. Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Marxisti per Tabacci (2012) Facebook post. Available from: https://www.facebook.com/MarxistiPerTabacci/photos/a.286922841416563.63056 .286914678084046/297701477005366/?type=3&theater (accessed 1 June 2017).

Marxisti per Tabacci (2015) Personal interview.

Mascha E (2011) Mocking Fascism: popular culture and political satire as counter-hegemony. In: Tsakona V and Popa DE (eds), *Studies in Political Humour. In between political critique and public entertainment*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, pp. 191–213.

Mattoni A (2012) *Media Practices and Protest Politics : How Precarious Workers Mobilise*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Melucci A (1989) *Nomads of the present*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Napoletani con Salvini (2015) Personal interview.

Natale S and Ballatore a. (2014) The web will kill them all: new media, digital utopia,

and political struggle in the Italian 5-Star Movement. *Media, Culture & Society*,
36(1), 105–121, Available from:

http://mcs.sagepub.com/content/36/1/105.abstract.

Novelli E (2012) Satira, politica e televisione in Italia. *Comunicazione politica*, (1), 57–
72.

Redazione Fatto Quotidiano (2015) Twitter, Renzi: 'Decreto per far vincere campionato
alla Fiorentina'. Premier alla Camera cita il suo profilo fake. *Il Fatto Quotidiano*,
30th September, Available from:

http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2015/09/30/matteo-renzi-scherza-sulla-fiorentina-e-
cita-il-suo-profilo-fake-su-twitter/2084174/ (accessed 28 October 2015).

Renzo Mattei (2015a) Personal interview.

Renzo Mattei (2015b) Tweet. Available from:

https://twitter.com/RenzoMattei/status/648251532614479872 (accessed 28
October 2015).

Renzo Mattei (n.d.) Twitter profile. Available from: https://twitter.com/RenzoMattei
(accessed 30 October 2015).

Ricci O (2013) Siamo la gente, il potere ci temono. Nuove forme di satira online tra
identità e partecipazione. *Sociologia della Comunicazione*, (46), 74–94.

Schechter J (1994) *Satiric impersonations: from Aristophanes to the Guerrilla Girls*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.

Tsakona V and Popa DE (eds) (2011) *Studies in Political Humour. In between political critique and public entertainment*. John Benjamins.

Watters C (2011) Being Berlusconi: Sabina Guzzanti's impersonation of the Italian Prime Minister between stage and screen. In: Tsakona V and Popa DE (eds), *Studies in Political Humour. In between political critique and public entertainment*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, pp. 167–189.

Wilson J (2011) Playing with politics: Political fans and Twitter faking in post-broadcast democracy. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 17(4), 445–461.

Yang G (2016) Activism. In: Peters B (ed.), *Digital Keywords: A Vocabulary of Information Society and Culture*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 1–17.

Yang G and Jiang M (2015) The networked practice of online political satire in China: between ritual and resistance. *The International Communication Gazette*, 77(3), 215–231.

Young DG (2013) Political satire and Occupy Wall Street: How comics co-opted strategies of the protest paradigm to legitimize a movement. *International Journal*

of Communication, 7(1), 371–393.

Table 1

Measures of popularity on social media for the fake accounts (as of November 1, 2016)

and number of interviewees and authors for each account.

Fake Account	Facebook likes	Twitter followers[a]	Number of interviewees	Approximate number of authors
Renzo Mattei	52,604	45,000	3	3
Gianni Kuperlo	2,559	30,200	1	1
Casalegglo	304[b]	79,200	2	7
Arfio Marchini	88,769	9,214	1	1
Feudalesimo e Libertà	523,742	11,400	2	5
Marxisti per Tabacci	39,840	3,051	1	Up to 10
Napoletani con Salvini	2,539	-	1	2
Gli Eurocrati	51,922	-	1	2

[a] High follower counts are approximated to the hundreds by Twitter.

[b] *Casalegglo* uses a regular personal profile, not updated regularly, which probably indicates that it is used as a placeholder, while most of the activity takes place on Twitter. The friend count is from December 10, 2015.