

Political *Selfies*: Image Events in the New Media Field

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Abstract

With the advent of Internet and the Web 2.0 operations along with the social media tools, we have witnessed a fundamental shift in political communication standards. Locating selfie within a broader trend of postmodern political campaigning, this chapter asserts that this new form of communication – partly unmediated- presents opportunities for new forms of interaction between citizens and politicians, new forms of political image making and new ways to attract media attention. More specifically, we suggest that political selfie reconfigures and shifts traditional ways of political communication through four distinct but interrelated uses: (a) self-generated material, disengaged by traditional media, (b) sense of intimacy, (c) political branding tool and, (d) media attention device. Within this context, this research reconsiders media events in the digital media field and suggests that political selfies can be regarded as a new type of image events, which challenge the obsolete representations of the traditional political figure with an aura of proximity and intimacy. Based on a number of well-known and striking political selfies and drawing on theories on media events and celebrity politics, we argue that, compared to the past, this new activity can contribute to attract public attention and build renewed personal brands of the political actors.

Introduction

“We’re in standard class, as usual, and a couple of people walk up and ask if they can take selfies. Soon there ‘s a stream of visitors.”

Ed Miliband, interview to S. Hattenstone, *The Guardian*, 7th March 2015

Politicians have always understood the power of the visual and in particular of their own portraits. From antiquity till nowadays, depictions of political figures have played an important role in the construction of their public image (Rosenberg, Kahn, and Tran, 1991; Sassoon, 2004; Barrett & Barrington, 2005; Hoffman, 2011). Napoléon Bonaparte -amongst those that recognised the importance of the political portraits- asked his royal court artist and confidant, Jacques Louis David, to create

and stage his public image as an indisputable leader and romantic hero (Johnson – Cartee & Copeland, 2004). David's paintings such as "*Napoleon Crossing the Great St. Bernard Pass*" (1800) and "*The Coronation of Emperor Napoleon and Empress Josephine*" (1804), are well known portraits of the famous general. Since the early 20th century, posters and photographs of political leaders have taken over from paintings but still retain the significance of the visual to construct and communicate political power. From Mao Zedong's giant banners to Barack Obama's "Hope" poster, the visual has always been central in the realm of politics both as a tool to construct the image of the political figure and as a way to attract public and media attention (Min, Duo, & Landsberger, 2003; Cartwright & Mandiberg, 2009; Marland, 2012).

Since the last four decades political communication strategies had focused on the careful articulation of political discourse combined with the careful image making of politicians through television (Jeffrey, 2005). Quite often, this televisualized political action was taking the form of a media event, conceived as special occasion, which television - as the dominant medium - turned it into an extraordinary shared experience, placed at the center of public sphere. With the advent of Internet and the Web 2.0 operations along with the social media tools, the most powerful images do not come from television footage and the way that contemporary politicians communicate with the public has dramatically changed (Sparkes-Vian, 2013; Ekström and Eriksson, 2013). We have witnessed a fundamental shift in political communication standards, upgrading the speed and scale of exposure in the public arena. As a result, social networking sites have become significant sources of information with regard to politics (Terblanche, 2011).

Within this context, selfies represent a special aspect of this new trend and, although their revolutionary character is still open to debate, they certainly contribute to attracting public attention. As such, this new practice on behalf of politicians cannot leave unaffected the ways in which contemporary media events unfold within the world of politics. At a time when the rise of participatory media (including social media) is striking, the old approach of media events needs redefinition and extension.

Being a new and growing phenomenon, selfie can be discussed from different perspectives (psychoanalytical, sociological, technological etc), contributing to a

broader argumentation and unveiling different aspects of the selfie -use as well as its impact in the realm of politics (McAllister, 2007; Stanyer, 2013; Vivienne & Burgess, 2013). This study adopts a political communication and media-centric approach in order to examine selfies as tools for the construction of politicians' public images. Within this context, we regard selfies as a new type of image events, which might subvert the obsolete representations of the traditional political figure. Based on an examination of a number of political selfies that have attracted wide media attention, nationally or internationally, we argue that - compared to the past - this new tool provides an extended image of politicians' lives attracting wide media coverage and offering the potential of a new type of political portraits of a less stilted and more intimate nature.

The overall discussion is structured in three parts: firstly, we delineate the innovative characteristics of political communication in the new media context, secondly we focus on the penetration of selfies in the world of politics, serving a series of substantive purposes. Thirdly, with special regard to media-event culture, we analyze the figure of celebrity politician and its role in the participatory culture of the digital media world.

New forms of Political Communication and the selfies

Politicians around the world have always been in a constant agony of efficiently managing their reputation and their image (Scammell, 2003; Newman, 1993; Oržekauskas and Šmaižienė, 2007). For decades now, spin doctors, communication consultants, PR gurus and media trainers have been employed by all sort of politicians in order to cultivate their image and build their reputation. In this respect, it can be argued that politicians are in a perpetual state of relationship marketing (Bannon, 2005). In the burst of the new technological era and with the advent of social media, politicians have found themselves equipped with more venues to manage their image and build upon their reputation (Baringhorst, Kneip and Niesyto, 2009; Towner & Dulio, 2012).

New unmediated channels of communication offer new ways of profiling and message dissemination, bringing about changes in the media and political culture that

have led to a modernization of political communication. Politicians around the world have adopted a wide array of Internet-based communication tools, embarking on virtual strategies, trying to capitalize on the opportunities offered by the ICTs. Norris (2001) characterized this phase of political campaigning as postmodern campaigning, and Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) have defined the media environment of the postmodern campaigning as the “Third Age of Political Communication”.

Politicians in the USA took the lead in exploiting the new communication tools in order to achieve more efficient campaigns. In the US elections of 2008, politicians made a great progress in the use of new media, breaking new ground by using tools such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other online video sharing websites in ways that these social media have never been used before. Among the most striking examples was the Howard Dean’s Web campaign in 2004 to raise money and organise supporters (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Hindman, 2008; Trippi, 2004; Towner & Dulio, 2012: 97). Dean raised \$27 million in total through online contributions during the campaign (Vargas, 2008). Equally important was his use of Meetup.com to organize thousands of offline gatherings, bringing together nearly 200,000 supporters (Price, 2004). The Obama campaign built on this and greatly surpassed Dean’s campaign in the areas of fundraising and organization with the astronomical amount of roughly \$500 million raised online (Vargas 2008, Towner & Dulio, 2012:101). The Obama campaign included its own Web site, Facebook, YouTube, as well as other tools such as the creation of a personal social networking site (SNS), My.BarackObama.com (MyBO). Being among the most popular politicians in Facebook, Barak Obama had registered 32,313,965 friends by the Election Day in 2012, 22,112,160 Twitter followers of @barackobama, 2,304,851 Google+ followers, 2.2 million volunteers, and 382,000 blog posts, using the phrase “Voting for Obama” between September 1 and November 4, 2012, according to Google search (Author, 2014: 215). Through MyBO, Obama managed to organize hundreds of thousands of events. The successful use of Web 2.0 applications by Barack Obama set the example for other politicians too. As a result, candidates and parties around the world extended their Web presence.

Within this hyper-technological environment, *selfie* made its appearance and was added in the communication quiver of modern politicians. In 2013, ‘selfie’ was

proclaimed the word of the year by the Oxford Dictionaries; a choice that reflects the frequent use of the word. With the advent of smart-phones, equipped with high quality cameras, more and more people take pictures of themselves for various purposes, ranging from the social to the professional ones. This new habit of self-portraits extends the existing practices of image creation (Rettberg, 2014; Schau & Gilly, 2003). Given the importance of personal photography in processes of identity formation, the ways we capture and disseminate our selfies in the cyberworld have notable repercussions on how the others perceive us. The popularity of selfies along with their role in identity and image formation have attracted the interest of many scholars from various disciplines (Ardévol & Gómez-Cruz, 2012; Fausing, 2013; Houghton et al., 2013; Gye, 2007; Bruno et al., 2014)

In the digital age, the snapshot has become a key mode of communication for many people who want to record and publish their lives. Various platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Flickr and Photobucket, among others, are there to host our photos and allow us to communicate our own stories and messages. As Chalfen (1991: 5) argues, personal photography is ‘primarily a medium of communication’ and selfies in Gye’s (2007:282) words, “reflect the view of ourselves that we want to project out into the world”. The use of self portraiture has been extensively used by politicians around the world. The idiosyncrasy of this new practice permits various uses through which each politician can serve different purposes. We discern four distinct, but interrelated uses of selfies that serve the needs of the politicians:

(a) Self generated material, disengaged by traditional media

Mobile phone photography allows politicians to produce their own images and disseminate them in the selected platforms. Political actors, independent from professional photographers’ and paparazzi’s practices and desires, can make their own visual claim, deciding upon the kind of images they want to project to their electorate. As neither traditional promotional photographic material nor paparazzi’s snapshots will cease to exist, we mainly refer here to those photos that portray the more spontaneous, naturalistic and unpretentious depictions that selfies could insinuate. Selfies, as a supplementary communication tactic, have brought about changes in the pattern of political communication through its endemic characteristics i.e self generated material that can reach a global audience, disengaged by mainstream media,

and capable of enabling new forms of interactivity. In this sense, selfies may well fall in the category of the communication practices that Manuel Castells (2009) has defined as *mass self-communication* in order to explain and underline the rise of creators of user-generated content that can potentially reach a global audience. Applications such as Instagram (with more than 7 million users in its first year of operation (Aguayo & Calvert, 2013:181), Tweeter or Facebook allow users to reach various audiences with whom there is a high possibility of interaction (Bakardjieva, 2009; Boyd, 2011; Graham, Broersma, and Hazelhoff. 2013; Boyd, D. 2011).

(b) Sense of intimacy

The fact that selfie has been extensively used by common people in a carefree way endows the practice with an aura of laxity and intimacy, which is metonymically transferred to its users. Though in reality, many of the selfies that are being taken involve the narcissistic need of looking good as happened in most photos (Fausing,2013; Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz, 2012), the fact that many of these snapshots portray spontaneous moments of us, alone or with others, is enough to partly safeguard its unpretentious nature especially in comparison with traditional political photos. Such photos, as Frosh (2001: 43) argues, constitute “conventional and definitive representations of the domestic”. In this sense, politicians through selfies can create their own more familiar and friendlier images and moreover, they can promote a simpler and more intimate profile by getting involved in practices that are so popular. Since as Murray (2015:1) argues selfie “ flourishes as one of the most effective outlets for self – definition”, it could possibly be used by politicians in order to promote a more congenial persona.

(c) Political branding tool

As Jacobs (1981:104) suggests, “we use snapshots to communicate to ourselves, and to those around us, and to those who will succeed us, that in fact we exist. With snapshots we become our own historians, and through them we proclaim and affirm our existence”. Taking this into consideration along with the above mentioned characteristics, self portraits can reflect how a person wants to be perceived. Selfies enable us to customise our image and partly control the building of our reputation (Rettberg, 2014; Lasén & Gómez-Cruz, 2009). As such, they can turn out to be a valuable political branding tool. As Scammell (2007) suggested, political branding is

not just the use of traditional advertising, but is an all-encompassing marketing and image identity campaign. Gye (2007: 280-281), in her engrossing study, explains that photography can create connections with those we select, can be imprinted in memory and even contribute to our personal narration as an “important function of personal photography, one that extends its existence as a material prosthesis for personal memory, is the role it plays as an aid to storytelling.” Politicians can use selfies to tell stories that in the traditional ways might seem unnatural. By taking advantage of the sense of closeness that selfies foster, politicians use them in various ways: as a tool of political marketing, ranging from communicating messages, to constructing a political image or even just in securing visibility. Moreover, selfies have a wider life span that is not confined in the pre-electoral period. In the constant chase of fame and self-promotion within the political world, selfies of politicians with celebrities have been added in the toolkit of political spin doctors.

(d) Media attention device

In the context that the media have always been attracted to political imagery both as producers and reproducers (Marland, 2012), selfies could probably function as an informal press release. Political selfies per se or even the procedure of a politician taking a selfie have frequently been in the epicenter of media attention. Selfies attract media attention and they even become front-page news. Despite the fact that publicity does not always have the desirable results, it certainly achieves a universal goal for any politician - known or unknown - aspiring to become popular, to claim his/her existence and to communicate messages (Holt, Shelata, Strömbäck and Ljungberg, 2013). In any case, we should not disregard the fact that even virtual campaigns function in conjunction with traditional campaigning and in this sense both new and traditional media are necessary.

"Mediatization" is still evident and important, taking new patterns, but reflecting a well known situation, where despite the expanded and constantly renewed power of the media the world of politics has retained control as to the function of political procedures (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). To be more precise, this control has taken on new dimensions, where the repercussions of "mediatization" are sometimes hardly predictable. This is the case because in the current participatory culture of digital world, media events - as part of a process of politics' mediatization - have met new

ways of implementation, where a wide range of players (politicians, audience members and journalists) are entitled to be both media users and content producers.

Reconsidering media events in the digital media field

Media events are a special aspect of media's flow, susceptible to different understandings depending on the perspective of the researcher. In the majority of the academic studies they have been regarded as rituals, having a relationship with a content-specific setting of a particular era (Couldry, 2003; Cottle, 2006), whereas limited research has been devoted to their economic dimensions (Kramer, 2008). Whatever the approach, it is indisputable that media events constitute a very dynamic phenomenon. The way they are perceived and produced is affected by the characteristics of the communication landscape, including the number of media institutions, their technologies as well as the degree of the existing competition.

Initially (that is over the first 50 years of broadcasting) media events were interpreted as a form of ritual, as public ceremonies of historical character, broadcast live on television, a perspective adopted by Dayan and Katz (1992). More precisely, they detected three basic "types" of media events: the "contest" (such as big sports events), the "conquest" (such as the televisualised form of the first visit to the moon) and the "coronation" (such as weddings, funerals, commemorations) (Katz and Dayan, 1986: 135-144; Dayan and Katz 1992: 25-53). Defining media events as "the high holidays of mass communication", as the exceptional interruptions of the monotonous daily routine, that render everydayness something special, they saw in them a distinctive "genre" of the media world, different from other patterns or genres (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 1).

In short, among the major features attributed to these special public ceremonies were the following (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 5-12): a) They turned audience's thought and attention to outstanding things, b) they referred to happenings with unpredictable evolution, transmitted in real time, c) their value derived from the fact that they were taking place outside the traditional studios and their organization did not depend on the media companies but on public bodies with whom media cooperated, d) Before the events' realization, there was a phase of careful planning, preparation and

advertising so as to ignite feelings of anticipation and impatience, e) At the time of their presentation they were treated with reverence, respect, solemnity and awe. Even when conflict was part of the event, emphasis was placed on reconciliation, f) They were enclosed by a particular worth of viewing, propagated by the public, and derived from media's unanimity in presenting them, g) They were watched by large audiences in an atmosphere of celebration, gathered in groups, "integrating societies in a collective heartbeat".

With the advances in broadcasting technologies addressing media events as ceremonial events soon turned out to be an obsolete perspective. That's why scholars made new references to "disruptive events, such as Disaster, Terror and War", characterizing them as "co-productions" between the broadcasters and the perpetrators of disruption (Katz & Liebes, 2007: 157). These events, albeit unexpected and mostly unwelcome, were seen by the academic community to rise in importance, receiving live broadcasting coverage. This was considered to be the world of news events, typically consisting of stories of some conflict. Nevertheless, other types of popular media events have still been focusing on the "process of reconciliation", since as Katz (1980: 5)ⁱ argues "celebrates the resolution or overcoming of conflict" in order to bring rivals together

The above rethinking of media events approach denotes that media events themselves are open to new designations depending on the developments of the communication landscape. In this respect, the recent rise and popularity of social media and Web 2.0 technologies must have given rise to new ways of media events implementation, requiring a further rethinking of this phenomenon. From an audience oriented perspective, nowadays the construction of these events is mainly governed by the amateur citizens, wandering in a digital world where actions are characterized by increasing visibility (Ferreira, 2014).ⁱⁱ However, the contemporary highly active group of digital media users may as well include politicians.

Thereupon, in modern societies, where the online environment has caused the blurring of boundaries between content producers and audiences, politicians function as media producers through the increasing use of social media (Ekman & Widholm, 2014). This new role destabilises the traditional relationship between politicians and news

journalism in the sense that it alters the dynamics between reporters and political sources. A new type of "mediatized interdependency" or interrelationship emerges, since due to the use of social media both politicians and journalists have the potential to be both "media actors" and "media sources" (Ekman & Widholm, 2014: 5).ⁱⁱⁱ

Within this context, political selfies can be conceived as image events in the sense that they constitute an interruption to the traditional political communication tactics and a partial disengagement from traditional media. Political selfies, as described above, are a user-generated practice that can be transmitted in real time and attract people's and media's attention. Selfies, as a practice and as an output, have the potential to reverse the media game; they can give politicians mastery over something that was often out of their hands: they can create their own image events without the need of mediators. Elected officials can share a moment that they like, the public gets excited to see it, and there's no "middle man" in the process. However, selfies, albeit commonly regarded as light-hearted self-depictions, do not constitute "innocent" tools of political image making. Political selfies can introduce risks and can easily provoke scathing criticism.

Such a case is the well-know selfie of the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, posing with the US President, Barack Obama, and the Danish Prime Minister, Helle Thorning Schmidt, in the memorial service of Nelson Mandela. Both the selfie and the photos of the three leaders, squeezing in for the shot, quickly went viral on the internet, triggering a Twitter backlash with users suggesting it was an inappropriate behaviour on the part of the political actors. The frenzied reproduction of both the image and the reaction by the media was nicknamed "Selfiegate". As Miltner and Baym (2015:1702) argue "Selfiegate is not just a media event; it is also a media scandal and a moral panic".

Despite the criticism that the political leaders received for their disrespect, this instant expression of magnificent egocentricity on their part – symbols of our times, has been registered as a wider and indicative picture of our era, where communication technology has made indiscernible the segregation between the public and the private, shattering the existing values, rules and engagements according to which each field used to function. Even if selfie is just another trend, we should not disregard the fact

that modern politics has ceased to be just a business about public issues; it has now been transformed into a polymorphous field of personal stories, where each one feels the need to shape it so as to secure and maintain his/her particularity. The incompatible childish behaviour of the three leaders at the memorial service of Nelson Mandela emanated from the new trends and morals of the contemporary era that prioritises the enlarged projection of the self.

Thereupon, we do not suggest that selfies are immune to traditional media management as this would have constituted an overstatement and would have neglected critical discussions of privacy in politicians' lives (Stanyer & Wring, 2004; Stanyer, 2013; Kuhn, 2004). What we suggest is that the rise of personal communication tools, such as the selfie, can possibly enhance politicians' control over the construction of their political image.

Political selfies and the construction of intimacy

In a world where politics are packaged and marketed as brands and politicians have followed strict patterns of stylisation, selfies allow politicians to display a more spontaneous and authentic image, even though, in most cases, these are still the "products" of attentive image control. In this context, selfies could be conceived as a unique chance for politicians to suppress the steel rules of typical appearance, imposed on them for decades by the show business etiquette (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Franklin, 1994).

Through selfies political figures are enabled to become more accessible in two ways: by getting involved in common people's activities, or by permitting the electorate to acquire a selfie with them. With reference to the first, former Secretary of the State, Colin Powell's selfie encapsulates the attempt to appear authentic, accessible and spontaneous. Powell posted on his Facebook a selfie he took 60 years ago. In his post entitled "Throwback Thursday - I was doing selfies 60 years before you, Facebook folks. Eat your heart out Ellen!", Powell makes a reference to Ellen De Generes' famous Oscar selfie, gathering approximately 115,000 likes. The vintage selfie portrays the teenager Powell, standing in front of a mirror with an old-style camera in his hands in an attempt to capture his own reflection (diaforetiko, 2014). In the same

line, the 11th European Commission President, José Manuel Barroso, and the European Commissioners Maros Sefconic and Viviane Reding posed for a selfie just before the discussions of the European Parliament in 2014 (Kathimerini, 2014). Their ordinary action, albeit incompatible with the etiquette of the European Union, broke the solemnity or pomposity, which European politics is traditionally linked with.

The selfie mania knows no borders and has equally been embraced by international political figures and national politicians. Such is the case of the former Conservative Greek Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis. Mitsotakis succumbed to the selfie trend three days before Christmas of 2013, when he decided to upload a family self-portrait on his personal twitter account (newsit, 2013). If as Gye (2007) argues selfies "reflect the view of ourselves that we want to project out into the world", then the former Greek Minister, self-photographed with his three children, attempted to forge the image of a good father who devoted time to his close family members. His message "Good Morning!! Many Happy Returns and Merry Christmas!!" may seem typical, but as self-generated content, which frames the selfie, contributes to the promotion of a familiar and friendly profile, morally accepted by the Greek society, which traditionally places great importance on family values. A politician simply acting like human being may not make news in the classical sense of the word, however when the self-portrait starts going viral it turns into a type of image event, focusing on the inner aspects of the political actor's privacy.

Moreover, selfie can function as an activity of proximity between politicians and their electorate. An activity much needed in an era characterized by dwindling citizen interest in politics and distrust of politicians (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Dahlgren, 2009). Although selfie cannot act as a panacea to such a complex condition, it can contribute with an aura of proximity in this unequal relationship. While, some years ago getting photos with politicians was a rare experience, reserved for the few, nowadays, there are occasions, in which anyone may easily request a selfie with a politician. The absolution of the casual political appearance and behaviour and the need for proximity were primarily initiated by a well-known religious figure, Pope Francis. Pope Francis consciously succumbed to the first ever "Papal selfie", posing with teenagers inside Saint Peter's Basilica at the Vatican. The famous selfie went

viral on social media, denoting that even the traditionally most conservative public figures feel the need to be equated with ordinary people.

From the UK Prime Minister David Cameron, to the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the 67th United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, we witness political figures to take advantage of every photo opportunity (Gayle, 2014). As Harris (2015) argues “our politicians are clearly keen to prove they are men and women of the people”. Politicians resort to selfies in their attempt to display alternative aspects of their personalities. This is evidenced by the wide circulated selfies by both the German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the French president François Hollande posing with teenagers in their attempt to abandon – for a while - the role of the inaccessible and strict politicians (Gayle, 2014).

Selfies, celebrities and the contemporary media-event culture

These new roles, assumed by politicians, unfold in a political culture, characterized by the convergence of celebrity and politics (Mukherjee, 2004; Nash, 2008; West and Orman, 2002). By the time that politics was imbued by the entertainment and media industries’ logic, political communication adopted tactics similar to the show business. The spectacle became an integral part of the politicians’ communication practices, which inevitably led to degradation with regard to our criteria of selecting politicians. As Debord (1967/2004) and other scholars (Lash and Urry, 1994; Haug, 1987) have argued, capital had produced the spectacle in order to lure the masses into a hypnotic stupor, divert their attention from social injustices so as to seduce them into inertia. The society of the spectacle has been a fertile ground for the development of celebrity politics.

Celebrity politics is a phenomenon of post-modern society and can be defined as the case in which the boundaries between show business and politics are blurred. Barack Obama is considered to be the first political figure to exemplify this phenomenon in the context of his first election in November 2008. Celebrity politics, despite having provoked intense criticism, does not necessarily impinge on the proper political representation. It is regarded as part of "the nature of political representation generally" if the latter is seen as "a cultural act which seeks to realise a form of political attractiveness through the gestures and images of popular culture" (Street,

2004: 449). As Street (2004: 436) notes "it is at least plausible that political ventures into the world of popular culture are a legitimate part of the complex ways in which political representation functions in modern democracies".

The appearance of the celebrity politician has been connected with the creation of a post-democratic society, where politics resembles a bustling spectacle offered to an audience of spectators (Zolo, 1992; Crouch, 2004). Furthermore, it has been associated with a new type of governance in the late modern constitution of public sphere, where the state is undermined, hierarchies have been replaced by networks, identities are unstable and the media play a pivotal role (Marsh et al., 2010). However, at the same time, celebrity politics marks a paradigm shift in political communication (Davis, 2010). It represents a new type of communication between politicians and citizens, the form of which is dictated by the race for the acquisition of symbolic power, taking place between political actors and media practitioners, as well as by the character of the political field. In the new type of political communication great emphasis is placed on individual politicians and as a result politics is "personalised" (Street, 2004: 441).

Either as celebrity politicians by themselves or in the company of celebrities, politicians have always been flirting with the star system (Corner and Pels, 2003; Street 2004; Van Zoonen 2006; Couldry and Markham, 2007). Especially over the last years, celebrities have played an important role in the political campaigns or in other political affairs, either as distant supporters or active participants in the actual political battle. Such is the case of New Labour in Britain after 1997, where celebrities were utilized extensively in the delivery of policy (Street, 2012: 347-350). Moreover, research has proved that celebrity politics can have an energizing effect on public sphere, connecting citizens with a political cause. In the UK, celebrity politicians have met with the positive attitude of young citizens, regarding them as an alternative to elected politicians and formal government and connecting them with the characteristic of authenticity (Inthorn & Street, 2011).

In this context, selfies of politicians with celebrities can be conceived as a tactic according to which politicians build their brand and their 'celebrity status'. Various selfies of politicians posing with celebrities, such as those of Hillary Clinton posing

with actress Meryl Streep and former UK Labour party leader Ed Miliband on a giggly selfie with the famous singer Lily Allen, have attracted wide media attention and have successfully gone viral (Daily Caller, 2014; Sandbrook, 2014). This interaction between politicians and celebrities is governed by the charismatic enforcement of the latter, based on the power of the image. The political influence of the celebrities stems from the love and devotion of their fans. More love and devotion means more publicity that is eventually converted into an invaluable "political power", thanks to which a number of purposes can be achieved. The evolution of digital technologies has come to turn celebrities' action within the field of politics into an easily disseminated phenomenon, visible to the digitalized global society.

Concluding Remarks

The ways in which politics work are not static, but they are evolving according to the changes in the communication field. Just as the television age gave rise to new televised forms of political communication, social media along with their innovative tools (such as selfies) are meant to establish newer forms of politics. This chapter addressed some generic features from the employment of selfies in political communication. In this context, we argue that a selfie undoubtedly represents an interesting new development in media forms and its popularity among politicians introduces a further set of considerations that touches upon issues of political branding, political engagement and media events.

At a time when politics has become debased, it is essential that politicians find innovative ways of communicating and interacting with the public. Locating selfie within a broader trend of postmodern political campaigning, this chapter asserts that this new form of communication –partly unmediated- presents opportunities for new forms of interaction between citizens and politicians.

Several politicians nowadays take and post selfies on social networking sites, as a way of disseminating visual snapshots of their daily life. This ever-growing activity in practice deviates from traditional forms of political communication, however in essence refers to the frequent concern of politicians to portray themselves as ordinary citizens with ordinary roles and habits. Through selfies politicians construct symbolic

values regarding themselves, which do not differ greatly from those of the average citizen. Therefore, causing a blurring of boundaries between the personal and professional realms selfies constitute an attempt to bring them closer to the civil society. Additionally, through the use of selfies politicians tend to shift the tone of communication with the public towards a more personalized and sensational style.

This attempt to rebuild a more personalized and congenial tone of communication seems successful, since the selfies represent a new type of media/image event, familiar to contemporary digital audience. It is a widely known and favourite practice of digital media users, based on the so-called rationale of user-generated content, upon which the impact of digital media has been established.

Moreover, in all probability the selfies, taken by politicians, wouldn't have had such great appeal to the public if the latter had not been accustomed to an increased personalization of politics in news reporting after the advent of social media. The world of contemporary journalism, observing the activity of political actors on social networking sites, has placed particular emphasis on their private and personal spheres, contributing to a de-politicization of politics (Ekman & Widholm, 2014).

Generally, it can be argued that selfies represent the transition of political actors from the era of stylized public image in the age of "exculpation" in the sense that they allow themselves to adopt poses of different kinds on a background that varies, containing moments deriving from different aspects of life with regard to professional obligations or relaxation and fun. This chapter attempted to examine selfie as a new tool of political communication by placing the discussion and the analysis in a very specific theoretical context that of media events and celebrity politics. Future research might well consider other theoretical and methodological approaches that could address questions regarding the function of selfie in relation to privacy issues and political engagement even from a more systematic quantitative approach.

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ⁱ For instance, in this respect Eurovision song contest is conceived as a media event "bringing together rivals to watch a ritual conflict, rather than a (news) story of bitter hostility" (Katz, 1980: 5).

ⁱⁱ Generally, the construction of journalistic events has gone through various phases based on the evolutions of the communication landscape. Prior to the development of mass communication means the role of the political active intellectual (a person with recognition in society) was decisive in leading or creating events. With the spread of the press and other means of communication journalistic events became ubiquitous with professional journalists having the upper hand in their construction thanks to the power of the narratives and the framing options (Ferreira, 2014).

ⁱⁱⁱ More specifically, Twitter has proved to be a new journalistic tool for information gathering, enhancing the elements of personalization and "celebritization" in political news coverage (Ekman & Widholm, 2014: 11).