

**Bypassing the messenger: Candidates' campaign on the Social Networking Sites in three first-order elections**

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*1 - Introduction*

Since modern campaigns have been essentially disputed on traditional media, their news coverage becomes one of the most important links between politicians and the electorate (see Norris et al., 1999). However, the literature has been observing, especially since the early 90s, an increasing tendency of the press and television, when reporting politics, to emphasize conflict, strategy, horse-race and other entertaining and controversial aspects, instead of presenting relevant policy information to the citizens. This trend of framing political events not only contributes to less informed citizens but it also affects citizens' attitudes towards politics. It also raises the following question: Why does the traditional media coverage of elections emphasize the strategy/horse-race and conflict in the campaigns and lacks other important aspects, such as the candidates and parties' positions on relevant political issues? There are two possible explanations.

The first explanation puts the responsibility on the media, with a large amount of literature blaming the messenger, stating that the uninformative news result from the media distortion of the real campaign. In this perspective, the highly controversial and *uninformative news* of electoral campaigns are the result of journalistic/editorial norms and the commercial principles that nowadays rule traditional media. The second one asserts that the news coverage by the traditional media may, in fact, reflect new political campaigns where candidates are more concerned with strategic and mass marketing ideals and less worried with presenting substantial policy information to the electorate. In this view, traditional media news coverage might be controversial, entertaining and lack substantial political issues simply because the main electoral competitors prefer to avoid those issues and produce *hollow campaigns*. This makes us question how informative would be political campaigns not mediated by the traditional media.

The Internet and Social Networking Sites (SNS) arise, in this context, as an important instrument for political parties and candidates to bypass the traditional media and more easily reach voters, presenting their ideas and positions directly to them at a relatively small cost. This paper explores the unclear and puzzling responsibility of both traditional media and political actors for the lack of substantial political issues in the news media coverage of political elections, by comparing the electoral campaigns made by the political parties and candidates in the SNS with the news coverage of those campaigns made by the press. The research question of this paper is: How informative are the unmediated electoral campaigns made on the SNS, in comparison to their traditional news media coverage? Or, to put it in a different way, to what extent is the media logic and agenda of traditional mass media hindering the electoral competitors from producing more informative and less conflict-driven campaigns? In order to answer this question it was carried out an extensive content analysis of the press coverage and SNS campaign in three national elections (US 2012; Italy 2013; and Brazil 2014). The results suggest that the campaigns made by the candidates or political parties on the SNS are, in general, less framed in terms of conflict or horse-race/strategy and more focused on substantial political issues, in comparison to the news coverage made by the press.

This paper is divided in nine sections. The next four sections explore, based on the existing literature, the puzzle behind this paper's research question. First I briefly discuss (in section 2) the traditional news media coverage of political events and its effects on the audience. The sections 3 and 4 elaborate on why traditional news media and political candidates/parties, respectively, might be accountable for the lack of issues and the salience of conflict/strategy in the electoral campaigns. The section five elaborates on why the Internet, more specifically the SNS, not only is an important arena for political campaigning but also an unique instrument to understand to what extent are the campaigns being 'distorted', in terms of frames, by the news messengers. The research hypotheses, methodology and the data are presented in section 6. The final three sections present the results of the campaign analysis of the three elections: the US presidential election of 2012 (section 7), the Italian parliamentary election of 2013 (section 8), and the Brazilian election of 2014 (section 8).

## 2 - Media Framing of Politics and the Effect on Democracy

According to the literature, in the news coverage of political events, the press and television increasingly started to use, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, a *strategy/horse-race frame*, highlighting aspects such as the parties' and candidates' strategies, their actions to gain political advantage, which candidate is winning or losing and their positions in the opinion polls, instead of focusing on substantial political issues such as the candidates' positions on relevant political subjects, known as *policy coverage* (Patterson, 1993) or *issue coverage* frame (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Journalists have become, apparently, more concerned with the race, making use of war and sport expressions, stressing the style and personality of political candidates and the strategy behind political actors in order to gain a political advantage (see Jamieson, 1992; Nord and Strömbäck, 2006; Weaver, 1972) or they simply focus on the way candidates campaign (Norris et al., 1999, p. 74). Besides that, the conflict between actors is another aspect that the media appear to stress, and which, according to Devitt (1997), tends to be more salient when the news stories also emphasize the horse-race and strategy of the campaign. Several studies showed this prominence of the *conflict frame* in the news coverage of political events, made by the press and television (e.g. Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Simon, 2006).

Regarding the impact of this kind of coverage, the salience of strategy, horse-race and conflict frames (instead of the policy/issue coverage frame) potentially has two negative impacts on modern democracies. The first is making the news less informative, which ultimately might contribute to less informed citizens. This happens not only because there is less attention devoted by the journalists, in the newspapers and broadcast news programs, to policy issues but also because the salience of strategy, horse-race and conflict aspects in the news also make the audience less attentive to the issue information that the news story may also contain (Rhee, 1997; Valentino et al. 2001). The second impact is a negative effect on audience's attitudes towards politics<sup>1</sup>. According to some authors (see e.g. Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; de Vreese, 2004a; Ansolabehere et al., 1994), this type of coverage eventually increases the audience's political cynicism (by portraying the

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<sup>1</sup> Although the main conviction in literature is that media coverage and type of frames used have an impact on the audience (see e.g. Devitt, 1997; Nelson & Oxley 1999; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004; Berinsky & Kinder, 2006) there are also contradictory standings (see Scheufele, 2000).

politicians as controversial and conflicting individuals that only care with their personal careers and winning in politics) and reduces their sense of political efficacy<sup>2</sup>. Overall, the use of these news frames, according to de Vreese (2003; 2004b), inspires in the public negative evaluations, and deters positive ones as well, of the political events reported by the journalists.

In sum, the uninformed, negative and strategy/horse-race focused coverage, by reducing the level of information that citizens might get, can make the voters formulate imprecise judgments, increase political cynicism of the citizens, reduce their sense of political efficacy and, ultimately, it might also reduce their willingness to turn out, since, as Graber (1976, p.301) observes, the choices of the voters become “even more difficult because they must be made between lesser evils”. Of course, considering these effects on citizen’s attitudes, this brings the question of why does strategy/horse-race and conflict frames (instead of a policy/issue frame) dominate the traditional media coverage of electoral campaigns? There are, as we mentioned, two possible explanations. One is that media are, in fact, distorting the campaigns, neglecting the political issues raised by the candidates and parties. The second is that media coverage is simply reflecting increasingly less informative and more ‘strategic’ campaigns made by the campaigners.

### *3 - Why would the mass media distort the campaigns?*

According to Shoemaker and Reese (1996, p. 6), in the traditional media, content can be shaped due to 1) journalists’ beliefs, by 2) media routines and also by 3) outside forces and institutions. Some authors argue that the main reason for media to distort the campaigns in the news is the journalists’ misperception of what politics and elections are about (See Patterson, 1993; Lloyd, 2004). According to Patterson (1993), the journalists make use of a *game schema*<sup>3</sup>, when reporting political events. The idea is that, contrarily to citizens (that see elections as an opportunity to choose, among the various candidates, the right person to

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<sup>2</sup> A person’s conviction that she can, with her efforts, influence and the political process and change the social outcomes (Pinkleton et al., 2002).

<sup>3</sup> The schema “is a cognitive structure that a person uses when processing new information and retrieving old information” (Patterson, 1993, p.56).

solve their problems) journalists see politics only as a game where candidates compete to gain personal advantages and are willing to do anything in order to win.

The salience of strategy and conflict can also be a result of media's organizational routines. One example is the need for newspapers and broadcast news programs to find always 'fresh' material. While candidates' political positions and issues discussed usually don't vary much, the game in the elections is more dynamic and a better source for journalists to rely on (see Patterson, 1993). Also, according to Nord & Strömbäck (2006), news stories about strategy and conflict are easier to report, requiring, compared to news about political issues, considerable less investigative work, and will suit better the number of commentators and experts that news media increasingly make us of. The use of conflict and strategy frames also facilitates the journalists' decision of how to present the story to the public, by giving to the piece, automatically, some level of "newsworthiness" (see Shoemaker and Reese, 1996; de Vreese, 2003).

Finally, economic and market forces also appear to have a significant impact in the media coverage of political campaigns. The referred change in the media style of reporting political events might be the outcome of a transformation in the news media where a 'party logic' gave way to a 'public logic' and then to a 'media logic' (Mazzoleni, 1987; Brants & Praag, 2006). The arrival of this media logic, which "coincided with the appearance and growth of commercial television, with its consumerist idea of giving the public what it wants", passed to the media "the power to define who and what is politically relevant" (Brants & Praag, 2006, p. 30). The result is an arena "characterized by the conflict between market and democratic principles, where media presentation of issues is distorted to gain attention, rather than provide information" (Savigny, 2002, p. 1). When the media start to depend on advertising money, the loyalty of the audience becomes crucial.

The responsibility of the messenger is not, however, crystal clear. The literature equally suggests that the politicians might be somehow responsible for the lack of issues and the focus on strategy and conflict in the news coverage of political campaigns. According to this view, the increasingly professionalized campaigns, ruled by marketing principles, are becoming more and more strategic and negative and less concerned with presenting and discussing political issues. The next section explores this perspective.

#### *4 - Modern political campaigns*

It is possible that the accusations of a lack of interest in policy issues by the traditional media are, to some extent, unfair or exacerbated and that the news coverage of political campaigns may in fact reflect, with very little distortion, the actual political campaigns. According to Newman (1999), the mass marketing strategies adopted in the modern campaigns, and not the media, are the true culprits for citizens' political cynicism. We can find in literature at least six aspects that may contribute to the lack of substantial political issues in the campaigns.

The first one emerges from the increasing complexity and fragmentation of societies which reduced the citizens' attachment to political parties (see e.g. Dalton, 2004). The targets of political parties' campaign are no longer "fixed social categories" that political parties had historically to mobilize but a large share of an unattached and volatile electorate that parties nowadays have to persuade (see Farrell & Webb, 2000, p.105). In this scenario, in order to not alienate the electorate, candidates might prefer to avoid and not discuss relevant political issues (Graber, 1976), especially if they already have high levels of public support of voting intentions (Maarek, 2012, p.47) – strategy that can become even more salient as opinion polls become more refined and common.

A second aspect, to some extent connected, is the development of catch-all parties and the convergence of parties' policy standings (Thomas, 1980; Katz & Mair, 1995; Mair, 2008). Having fewer issues to distinguish themselves, parties must find other ways to appeal to the electorate. As Mair (2013, p.83) put it, "party-voter distances have become more stretched, while party-party differences have shrunk, with both processes combining to reinforce a growing popular indifference to parties and, potentially to the world of politics in general". In addition, the dominant role of political parties as intermediaries between citizens and governments, aggregating citizens' preferences and being their representatives, was challenged and is making political parties, these days, rely less on the "compellingness of their programs" and more on the "appeal of individual candidates" in

order to “sustain their nominal prominence in the minds of most citizens” (Schmitter, 2001, p.84).

The third aspect is the increasing unpredictability of the problems that a government might face, a “consequence of the growing economic interdependence” that discourages the “candidates to make detailed promises” (Manin, 1997, p. 220). In this view, the mutation and increasing complexity of the countries’ socio-economic realities, which render the future more unforeseeable, make it more difficult for parties (at least the ones with real expectations of forming a government) to keep up with their previous plans and fulfill all their promises.

Another point is the external and internal constraints that political parties face nowadays (Mair, 2009) that severely limits the political choices of the elected politicians and, naturally, the range of their campaign promises. A good example are the executive and legislative competences being transferred from the national level to supranational organizations, a good example being the European integration process.

The fifth aspect is the increasing importance of money in some electoral campaigns. The candidates’ constant pursuit of money not only gives them “little time for other important activities such as learning about issues, meeting with ordinary citizens, and formulating policy proposals” (Ansolabehere et al., 1993, p.70) but also might deter them from taking some political standings that might push away potential contributors.

Finally, the logic of the mass media might also have an impact on the campaign made by political actors, who depend on the media to reach the electorate. The commercial imperatives that rule the traditional news media, with their own agenda, produce changes in the political parties who adopt more scenic and cosmetic approaches to politics, in order to become more attractive to journalists and get more visibility (see Blumler, 1990; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999), condensing their rhetoric to “attention-getting phrases and catchy punch lines that symbolize their campaign”, which are more suitable to television and, consequently, have better chance of appearing in the news (Ansolabehere et al., 1993, p. 59).

Regarding the prominence of the conflict frame, it is also possible that the conflict presented in the news media coverage of political elections simply reflect the negative campaign made by the political actors (see Ansolabehere et al., 1994). The salience of conflict may be a consequence of candidates' and parties' strategies to reach and mobilize an audience increasingly discontent and disconnected from politics (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995), rather than a distortion by "blood-thirsty" mediators, especially in more disputed elections (Kahn & Kenney, 1999). Besides being the best strategy to reach the most uninterested and distrustful citizens, by attacking the opponent, the candidates supposedly have a better chance to dissuade the opponent's supporters and persuade the undecided voters.

In sum, it is hard to identify which one of these two trends, the professionalization of the campaigns or the functioning of traditional media, has a greater impact in shaping modern political communication and has contributed more for the increasingly less informative campaigns. However, if the media are in fact distorting the campaigns, there are some reasons, in this technological era, to be optimistic about the future of political campaigning and citizens' attitudes towards politics. On the one hand, this means that politicians, to some extent, are still interested in informing the electorate about their own positions and pledges. On the other hand, the development of more effective communication platforms on the Internet might offer candidates the opportunity to bypass the traditional media and still reach a considerable amount of the electorate.

### *5 - Political communication on the Internet*

The Internet was portrayed by Joe Trippi (2008) as the long-awaited media that would repair the citizens' high, and increasing, political cynicism and low sense of political efficacy that, allegedly, the negative political ads and mainstream journalistic pieces had originated. Concerning the role of the Internet in political communication, according to Hooghe & Vissers (2008), we can distinguish three types of communication that candidates and parties can promote online: (i) "pure-interactive communication", when the discussion is made between ordinary citizens (for example in an Internet forum); (ii) "institutional communication", when the information is made only top-down by an institutional actor; finally (iii) "institutional-interactive communication", when both institutional and non-

institutional actors communicate with each other. Most of the expectations for the use of the Internet as a campaign tool were linked to institutional-interactive communication and pure-interactive communication features that the Internet for the first time allowed. However, besides this interactivity, it is also important to pay attention to the unilateral top-down communication made by parties and candidates on the Internet during electoral campaigns because, as Boas (2008, p.21) puts it, a crucial advantage of the Internet is the possibility for political actors “to circumvent the mass media, and to influence its coverage”. The Internet allows the candidates to communicate directly to citizens in a platform not ruled by commercial principles and present to the audience, free from any distortions, what they really want them to know and discuss.

Even though in the early days of the Internet the candidates’ visibility on this media was relatively small, the development of Web 2.0 and the popularity of the SNS, transformed the Internet in a *push medium* (Maarek, 2011, p.158), increasing considerably the number of passive recipients of the parties’ and candidates’ campaign messages. The Social Networking Sites, with their unique characteristics, can be used by political actors, in their campaigns, as their personal newspaper and television channel. As Trechsel<sup>4</sup> notes, “The “News Feed” page on Facebook, for instance, might gradually become the modern newspaper.” In the SNS the candidates and parties are considerably less dependent on the traditional media’s commercial logic and can convey directly to a broad and diverse audience, in a very inexpensive way, the aspects they find relevant throughout their campaign. The political actors’ audience on the internet is no longer mainly composed by journalists and the most politically sophisticated/interested citizens, but a larger share of the electorate that candidates aim to inform, mobilize and even persuade.

The SNS are online platforms that allow users to share information (like text, video and images) with a community of users in the same network (and also beyond that, since nowadays some of the content of mainstream media news is originated on the SNS<sup>5</sup>). The popularity of these platforms makes them very interesting tools for political

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<sup>4</sup> A. Trechsel (forthcoming). *Towards a Paparazzi Democracy*.

<sup>5</sup> Twitter As A Breaking (And Often Credible) News Source (Available on: <http://www.complex.com/tech/2013/01/10-things-about-technology-you-need-to-get-over/twitter-as-news-source>).

communication. In 2012 (on its sixth anniversary), Twitter reached 140 million active users, with those users posting 340 million tweets per day<sup>6</sup>. The fact that everyone can share the information with people in their networks is also the great advantage of campaigning in the SNS. This means that in the SNS, supporters work as mediators and pass the information content, that to a certain extent works as a ‘two step-flow of communication model’ (see Katz, 1957), potentially increasing considerably the audience of the messages.

The specific characteristics of the SNS, being relatively free (of both costs and media distortions), easily updated, and with a potentially broader audience, make of this platform an excellent instrument (although not without some shortcomings) to access which campaign aspects (e.g. substantial political issue, strategy, conflict) were privileged by the political actors or, too put in other words, how politicians choose to frame their own campaigns. For this reason, analyzing and comparing the campaign made on the SNS and the traditional media coverage of the same campaign, which is the objective of this paper, can help us understand better which factor, media logic or campaign strategy, is contributing more for the lack of substantial political information in the news coverage of political elections made by the traditional news media.

## *6 - Research Hypotheses and methodology*

As we saw, it is unclear which trend in political communication, a) the *media logic* of traditional media when reporting political campaigns or b) the professionalization and modernization of those campaigns by the political parties and candidates, is playing a more important role for the absence of substantial political issues in traditional media news coverage of political events. In order to examine this question I developed two sets of competing hypotheses; a) *uninformative news* – if the highly controversial and issue-lacking news coverage of electoral campaigns are the result of the journalistic/editorial norms and commercial principles that nowadays rule traditional media; and b) *hollow*

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<sup>6</sup> Twitter turns six. (March 21, 2012). <https://blog.twitter.com/2012/twitter-turns-six>

*campaigns* – if the main campaign actors prefer to avoid in their campaigns the discussion of substantial political issues.

For the first set, the *uninformative news*, we can expect that if the media logic or journalistic conventions are responsible for making the news coverage of electoral campaigns less informative then:

*H1a – The media coverage of the parties/candidates elections campaigns will give less emphasis on issues/policies than the campaign presented by these parties/candidates in the Social Network Sites.*

*H1b– The media coverage of the parties/candidates elections campaigns will give more emphasis on strategy and horse-race aspects than the campaign presented by these parties/candidates in the Social Network Sites.*

*H1c – The media coverage of the parties/candidates elections campaigns will show more conflict between political actors than the campaign presented by these parties/candidates in the Social Network Sites.*

*H1d – The SNS will offer a greater diversity of issues than the media coverage of those elections.*

The first three hypotheses (H1a; H1b; H1c) are linked to the frames used in the campaign. They reproduce our expectation that the commercial logic of traditional news media or the journalistic principles and beliefs produce less informative campaigns – meaning that political events in the press will be framed more in terms of strategy, horse-race and conflict instead of substantial political issues (Patterson, 1993; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

The fourth hypothesis (H1d), distinctively, relates to the nature of the issues that are presented in the campaigns. Traditional news media, during political campaigns, might distort the political campaigns not only by neglecting the substantial political issues in their news coverage but also by following the audience’s “issue-attention cycles”. According to Downs (1972) the salience of domestic issues is unstable since public opinion rarely remains focused or interested in one issue or problem for long periods. It is then expected

that media, following the preferences of the public, focus their news coverage on the “hot” issues and neglect other subjects that arouse less interest in the public.

For the second set, *hollow campaigns*, contrarily to the previous one, we can expect that if political parties and candidates are not interested in producing more informative electoral campaigns then:

*H2a – The media coverage of the parties/candidates elections campaigns will give the same or more emphasis on issues/policies than the campaign presented by these parties/candidates in the Social Network Sites.*

*H2b– The media coverage of the parties/candidates elections campaigns will give the same or less emphasis on strategy and horse-race aspects than the campaign presented by these parties/candidates in the Social Network Sites.*

*H2c – The media coverage of the parties/candidates elections campaigns will show the same or less conflict between political actors than the campaign presented by these parties/candidates in the Social Network Sites.*

*H2d – The SNS will not offer a greater diversity of issues than the media coverage of those elections.*

This second set of hypotheses challenges the responsibility of the mediators’ intervention and media logic for lacking substantial political issues in traditional media’s coverage and, on the contrary, reflects the assumption that modernization and professionalization of political actors’ campaigns are responsible for this phenomenon. The Table 1 shows an overview of these two main sets of hypotheses.

	<i>Uninformative News</i>	<i>Hollow Campaigns</i>
<b>Issue/policy frame</b>	More salient on the SNS campaign	More or equally salient in the press
<b>Strategy/horse-race frame</b>	Less salient in the SNS campaign	Less or equally salient in the press

<b>Conflict frame</b>	Less salient in the SNS campaign	Less or equally salient in the press
<b>Diversity in political issues</b>	Greater on the SNS campaign	Equal or Greater in the press

**Table 1 – Overview of the two main sets of hypotheses (H1 – Uninformative News Vs. H2 – Hollow Campaigns)**

In order to test those research hypotheses, a substantial content analysis of traditional news coverage of political elections and the political candidates' campaign on SNS was carried out in three national elections of three countries (USA 2012, Italy 2013 and Brazil 2014), during the four weeks before the election-day. Concerning the press coverage, I selected two major national newspapers of each country and systematically, deductively and manually coded all the news stories with more than 10 lines that were presented in the newspaper's section that was specifically created for the election. In total, in the case of US, I analyzed 460 news stories (232 stories from the New York Times, and 228 pieces from the Washington Post). In the case of Italy, a total of 742 news pieces were analyzed (419 in Corriere della Sera and in of La Repubblica). Finally, for Brazil, the analysis included 836 news stories (345 from Folha de São Paulo and 491 from Globo). Similarly, I collected and coded, for the same period of time, the campaign of the main candidates (for US and Brazil) and the main political parties (for Italy) in three different SNS: Facebook, Twitter and Youtube.

The Tables 2, 3 and 4 present all the SNS data that was collected and coded. In the case of Twitter only the posts made by candidates or political parties were considered in the analysis. For the Facebook all the public posts were collected and coded. In the case of Youtube we analyzed all the videos that were five minutes or shorter.

Regarding the campaign on the SNS, the focus of this paper is in institutional (top-down) communication. For this reason, other types of communication are not included in this analysis (from citizens to candidates or between citizens). The selection of candidates and parties to include in the analysis was a tradeoff between having a large number of cases, that would give us also more variety and accurate information, and adjusting the

collected content to recourses' limitations and time constrains. For the US case we included in the analysis the two main candidates in 2012 presidential election (the incumbent president Barack Obama and the republican candidate Mitt Romney). In total, 1626 posts and videos were analyzed (Table 2). For the case of Italy we coded the posts made by the four main parties in the 2013 election (Movimento Cinque Stelle, Partito Democratico, il Popolo della Libertà and Scelta Civica). In total, 5899 posts and videos were collected and coded (Table 3). For Brazil we analyzed the online campaign of the three candidates with chances of winning (Dilma Rousseff, Aécio Neves e Marina Silva) for a total of 2189 posts and videos.

	Twitter	Facebook	Youtube	Total
Obama	<b>974</b>	79	<b>288</b>	1341
Romney	114	<b>122</b>	49	285
Total	1088	201	337	<b>1626</b>

**Table 2 - SNS usage by the US candidates (2012)**

	Twitter	Facebook	Youtube	Total
Partito Democratico	534	100	<b>199</b>	833
Il Popolo della Libertà	<b>2132</b>	383	28	2543
Scelta Cívica	1214	200	43	1457
MoVimento 5 Stelle	494	<b>565</b>	7	1066
Total	4374	1248	277	<b>5899</b>

**Table 3 - SNS usage by Italian parties (2013)**

	Twitter	Facebook	Youtube	Total
Aécio Neves	486	129	<b>166</b>	781
Marina Silva	<b>863</b>	123	103	1089
Dilma Rousseff	100	<b>139</b>	80	319
Total	1449	391	349	<b>2189</b>

**Table 4 - SNS usage by the Brazilian candidates (2014)**

To identify the frames presented in the campaign I used in this analysis a deductive approach, which means that the frames were previously defined, identified and incorporated in our analysis' codebook. This approach allows us to compare different contexts and, specifically in our case, different countries. The codebook used in this analysis was adapted from the one used for the European project<sup>7</sup> that, following the definition presented by de Vreese (2003, p.27) defines frames as “an emphasis in salience of some aspects of a topic”.

For the policy/issue frame it was examined if the news stories or the information posted on the SNS dealt with substantive policy issues, problems and solutions presented by the political actors, the politicians' position regarding those issues, suggestions of legislation and real-world problems or situations with policy implications. The strategy/horse-race frame was considered when the news stories or the information posted on SNS dealt with winning or losing in politics, the candidates' position in the opinion polls or opinion polls in general (vote intention, issue preference, etc.), how the elections might affect the different candidates and parties, strategies of the actors in the race and the way they campaign. Finally, for the conflict frame, we examined if the SNS posts and news stories presented disagreement between actors and also if they contain attacks made by the political candidates to their opponents.

Besides the referred three main frames of this analysis, we also measured in this study the salience of four other frames: The Personalization frame (when the news/posts emphasize private aspects or personal characteristics of political candidates); Scandal frame (stories dealing with scandals connected to political candidates, from disrespectful utterances/gaffes to questionable/immoral or illegal behavior); Human-interest frame (news/posts that focus on personal stories that might generate some emotional reaction in the audience); and the Media relations frame (stories that deal extensively with relations between candidates and journalists, how the former try to influence the media or simply how different media are perceiving the campaigns).

One important aspect of the media frames is that they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. As Iyengar (1991, p.14) notes regarding his media frames typology, “in practice,

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<sup>7</sup> The Mediatization and Framing of the 2009 EP Elections, coordinated by Jesper Strömbäck.

few news reports are exclusively episodic or thematic”. For this reason this analysis considers not only the presence of the media frames but also which one of them first appears in the story (that we will consider the story ‘predominant frame’). By looking at this aspect we can get important additional information about which aspects both journalists and political actors chose to emphasize the most during the campaign.

Finally, this paper also examines the nature of the discussed issues. For this purpose we adapted the issue typology developed in the 2009 EUprofiler (see Trechsel & Mair, 2011). Some of the categories were excluded (specific for the European elections), others were divided in two (e.g Welfare/family; and Health) and others were also included. The final issue typology includes 13 categories: Economy and work; Finances and Taxes; Society, Religion, and Culture; Institutional Design; Health; National Security; Transport and Energy; Law and Order; Foreign Policy; Welfare and Family; Education; Environmental Protection; and Migration and Immigration. In addition, we will also code as other when the discussed issue does not clearly fit any of the referred categories, and as “various” when different issues from different categories are equally discussed in the piece.

## *7 - The US presidential elections of 2012, uninformative news or hollow campaign?*

With respect to the outcome of the 2012 US presidential elections, held on November 6, the result was the re-election of the incumbent president, the Democratic candidate Barack Obama, with 51.1% of the vote and 332 electoral votes. Obama’s main challenger in this election, the Republican candidate Mitt Romney received 47,2% of the vote which was translated in 206 of the electoral votes. Despite the considerable difference in terms of electoral votes, the last month of the campaign saw a much contested election as a consequence, to a certain extent, of the first debate between the two presidential candidates, on October 3. After this debate, which the media critics unanimously considered to have been “won” by Romney, Obama’s lead in opinion polls started to be challenged. As a result of that, both candidates got an extra incentive to intensify their campaign efforts in the last weeks before Election Day. On the one hand, the democratic campaign had to recover from

the president's unconvincing performance in the first debate that increased their concerns about losing the re-election. On the other hand, the Republican campaign used this "victory" in the debate to build on a momentum that could convince the needed voters and turn the election in favour of its candidate.

Regarding the traditional news coverage of the last month of the presidential campaign, the results reflect the *media logic* pattern of covering political elections that was discussed in this paper. Similarly to what Patterson (1993) observed, the frame that dominated the news coverage of the campaign was the horse-race/strategy. As we can see in Figure 1, 76.7%<sup>8</sup> of the news pieces dealt in an extensive way with aspects related to how campaigns were conducted, the candidates' strategies and their places in the race<sup>9</sup>. In addition to that, half of the stories in the press (49.8%) presented conflict between the different campaign actors. Apparently, not only American journalists found the conflict newsworthy but the public also appears attracted by this style of campaigning, which might help us understand its salience in the news. As a journalist conjectures in a piece about the last debate, "the relative civility [between the two candidates] left viewers restless and inclined to look elsewhere"<sup>10</sup>. In addition to this, only 38% of the news stories included the Issue frame and only 34.3 % of the news pieces also shown a candidate's standing on at least one political issue.

In addition to this, when we compare the two media<sup>11</sup> the results give strong support to the *media logic* hypothesis (see Figure 1). As this hypothesis predicted, the salience of the Strategy/horse-race and Conflict frames was higher in the press in comparison to the candidates' campaign on the SNS. In the case of the Strategy/Horse-race frame the differences were not only statistically significant (at the 0.001 level<sup>12</sup>) but they were also substantial. While in the news coverage this frame was present in 76.7% of the stories, in the case of the SNS campaign it was only salient in 47.9% of the posts. In respect to the

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<sup>8</sup> It was given same weight to the news stories of the two newspapers to calculate all frequencies.

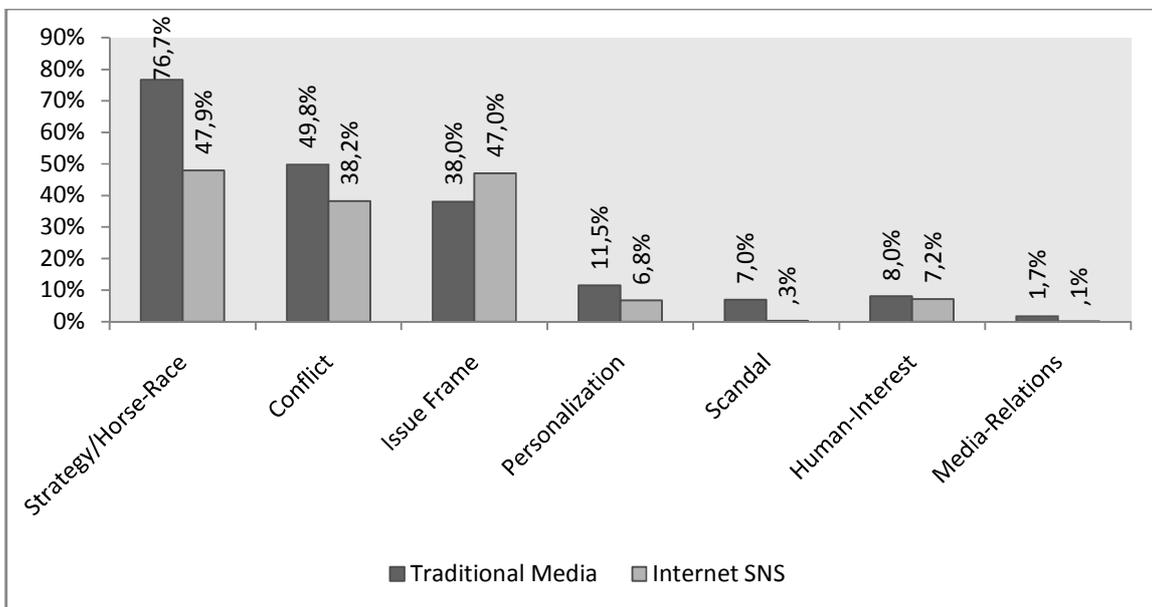
<sup>9</sup> All averages were calculated after giving the same weight to the two newspapers, and to all the candidates and SNS platforms (e.g. all Facebook posts in Romney campaign had the same weight as all Obama's posts in Twitter).

<sup>10</sup> Initial Reactions Suggest That Some Viewers Lost Interest The Third Time Around, *The New York Times* (23/10/12)

<sup>11</sup> The same weight was given to each post to analyze the salience of each frame and type of issues in the SNS,

<sup>12</sup> All significance levels we present are from Chi-square tests

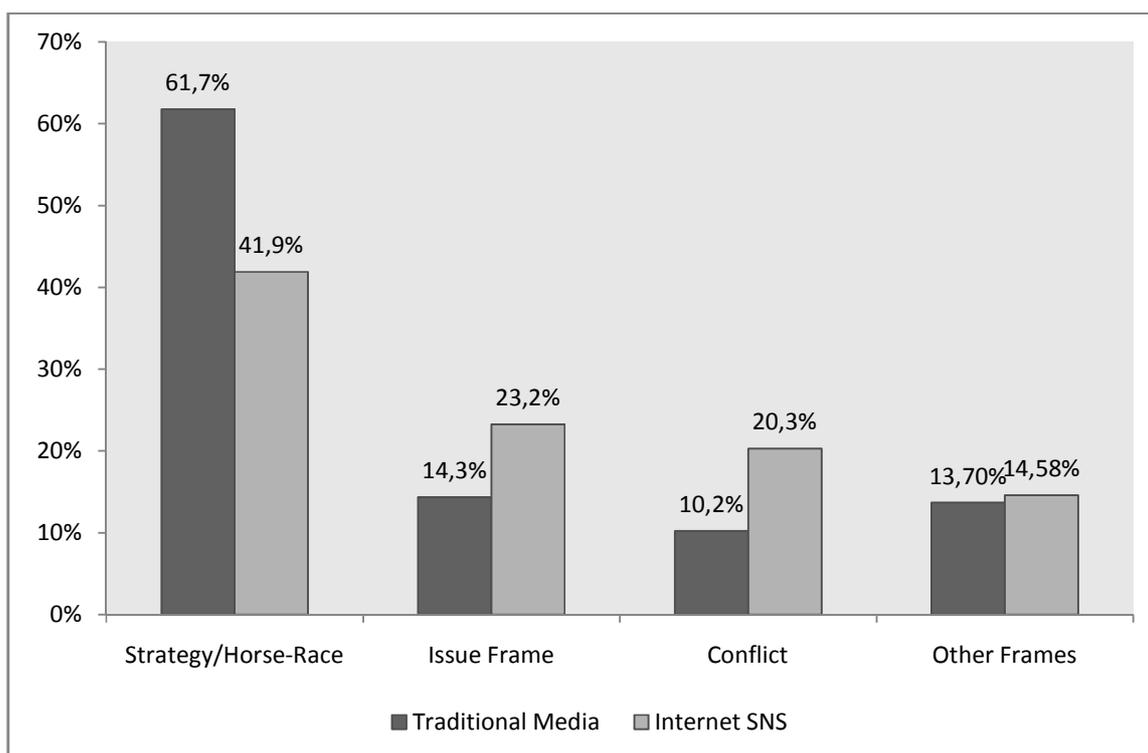
conflict frame, the difference between the two media was less salient (49.8% in the news media and 38.2% in the SNS), but still statistically significant ( $p=0.000$ ). Finally, regarding the Issue frame, the difference was also in the expected direction by the *media logic* hypothesis, being more salient in the candidates' campaign (47%) than in the news coverage (38%). This difference in the Issue frame, even though it was smaller in comparison to strategy and conflict frames, was equally significant in statistical terms ( $p=0.001$ ).



**Figure 1 – Salience of Frames in the news media and in the SNS campaign of the 2012 US elections**

When we look at the first ‘predominant’ frame presented in the news stories and SNS posts the picture slightly changes (see Figure 2). The differences in the Strategy/horse-race and Issue frames remain the same but in the case of the latter the differences become more salient and statistical significant ( $p=0.000$ ). The main reason for this result is the fact that the news stories in the press are in general longer and can deal, in an extensive way, with several aspects of the reported event. This means that when the traditional media uses the Issue frame in the story, this frame is often not the first to appear in the piece. On the

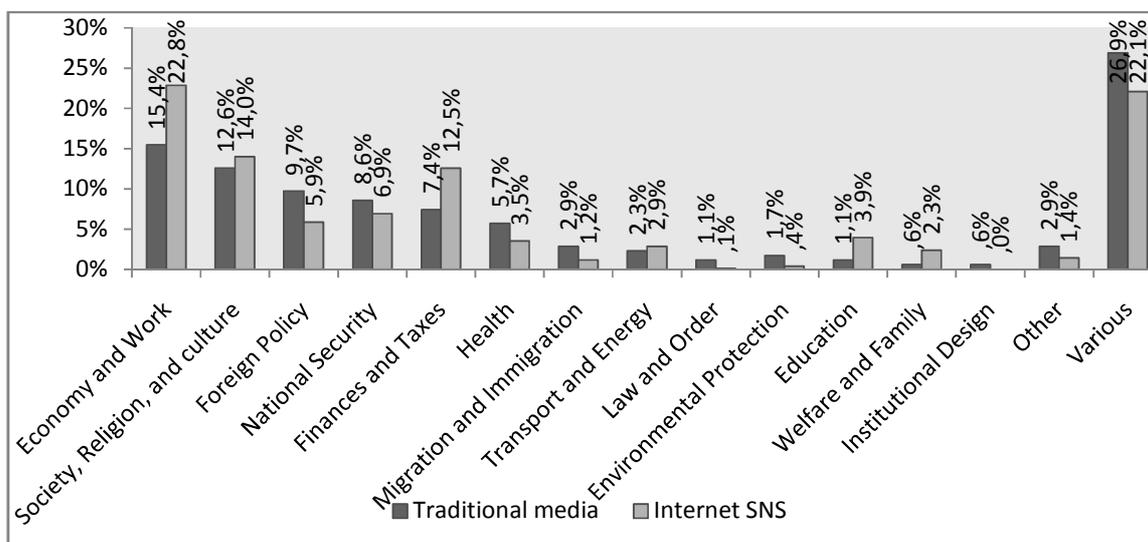
other side, the Twitter posts being considerably shorter (if they do not include any additional information such as video or articles) often include fewer frames, which explains the higher salience of the Issue frame in the SNS, compared to the press, but also the increased salience of the Conflict frame. When we consider the first frames, the conflict between the actors becomes more salient in the SNS (20.3%) than in the traditional news media coverage of the elections (10.2%). This means that, even though the press includes conflict more often in their stories, the attacks between candidates, when compared to the candidates' posts in the SNS, are fewer times the central aspect of the news articles in the press.



**Figure 2 - First frames in the news media and in the SNS campaign of the 2012 US elections**

Finally, regarding the type of issues that were discussed, we can observe a relation between the news media and the SNS (Figure 3). The five categories of issues that were

more salient in the press (Economy and Work; Society, Religion and Culture; Foreign Policy; National Security; and Foreign Policy) were also the most salient types of issues in the SNS campaign. The results suggest that the issues more visible in the press were also the most salient issues in the candidates' online campaign. Out of the 13 types of issues, six of them were more salient in the SNS and other seven were more salient in the news coverage of the election. If, in the one hand, we cannot say that the press neglected issues that were relevant in the candidates' campaign, on the other hand, some issue categories such as Immigration, Law and Order, Institutional Design and Environmental protection were apparently considerably more salient in the press. In these cases, contrarily to what was suggested by Grabber (1976), we couldn't find support that the press almost never takes an initiative to explore issues that are not salient to the actors. On the contrary, in some cases, the journalists took the initiative to address some of the issues (e.g. environmental protection) that the candidates, for electoral considerations<sup>13</sup>, apparently chose to avoid in their campaign.



**Figure 3 - Type of issues in the news media and in the SNS campaign of the 2012 US elections**

In sum, the results show us that the journalists reported the campaign mainly in terms of the candidates' strategies, how they campaign and their situation in the polls, to the detriment of substantial political issues. When we consider the main frame used, the

<sup>13</sup> Candidates Agree World Is Warming, but Talk Stops There. *The New York Times* (19/10/12)

press only used the Issue frame in 14.3% of the articles. On the other side, the candidates' campaign on the SNS used the frames of Strategy/Horse-race and Issues with the same frequency.

## *8 - The Italian parliamentary election of 2013, uninformative news or hollow campaign?*

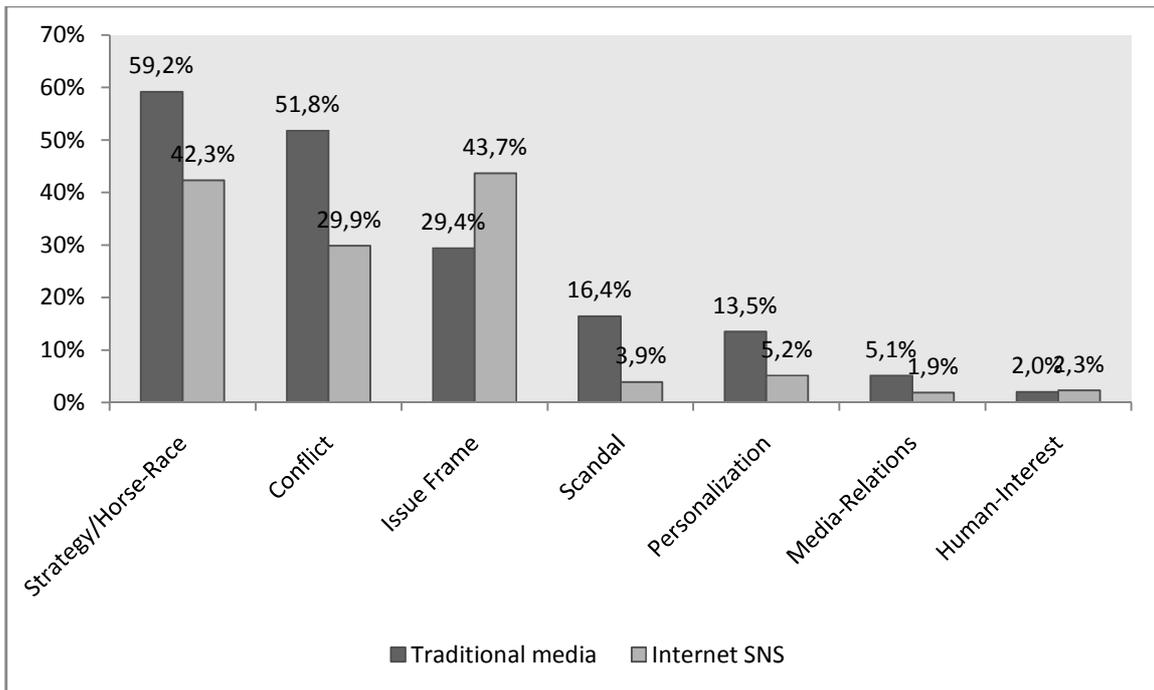
The 2013 parliamentary elections in Italy took place on February 24-25 and were won by a centre-left coalition led by Pier Luigi Bersani's *Partito Democratico*. The parties in this coalition received in total 29.5% of the popular, winning a big majority in the Chamber of Deputies but only a small majority in the Senate. The second most voted contender was the centre-right coalition led by former prime-minister Silvio Berlusconi's *il Popolo della Libertà*. The great surprise of the elections was the young party *Movimento Cinque Stelle*, led by comedian Beppe Grillo that, with 25.5% of vote share, was the most voted single party. The centre coalition, led by the incumbent prime minister Mario Monti' and his newly created *Scelta Civica*, managed only to get slightly more than 10% of the vote.

Regarding the news coverage of the Italian elections of 2012, the results show that, similarly to what we saw in the case of the US, the most salient frames were again the Strategy/Horse-race and the Conflict frames (see Figure 4). The Strategy/Horse-race frame was used in 59.2% of the news while 51.8% showed some sort of conflict between the actors. On the other side, only 29.4% of the news articles dealt extensively with substantial political issues and considerably less (24.2%) shown the parties' positions or opinion about those policy aspects.

Besides the salience of Strategy/Horse-race and Conflict frames, also a relatively high number of stories dealt with Scandals connected to the political actors. Contrary to the case of US where the scandals were exclusively related to gaffes and statements from politicians that were seen as outrageous, in the Italian case the stories included not only cases of gaffes or considered outrageous statements from politicians (which were the only examples of "scandal" present in the US campaign) but also cases of questionable

behaviour of politicians connected to their public offices (e.g. the connection of PD to bad management practices, revealed one month before the election-day, that led to the bailout of the oldest Italian bank “Monte dei Paschi di Siena”) or their personal lives (e.g. the false curriculum of the leader of a neo-liberal party “Fare per Fermare il Declino”). The Scandal frame was the fourth most used frame, present in 16.4 % of the press news stories,

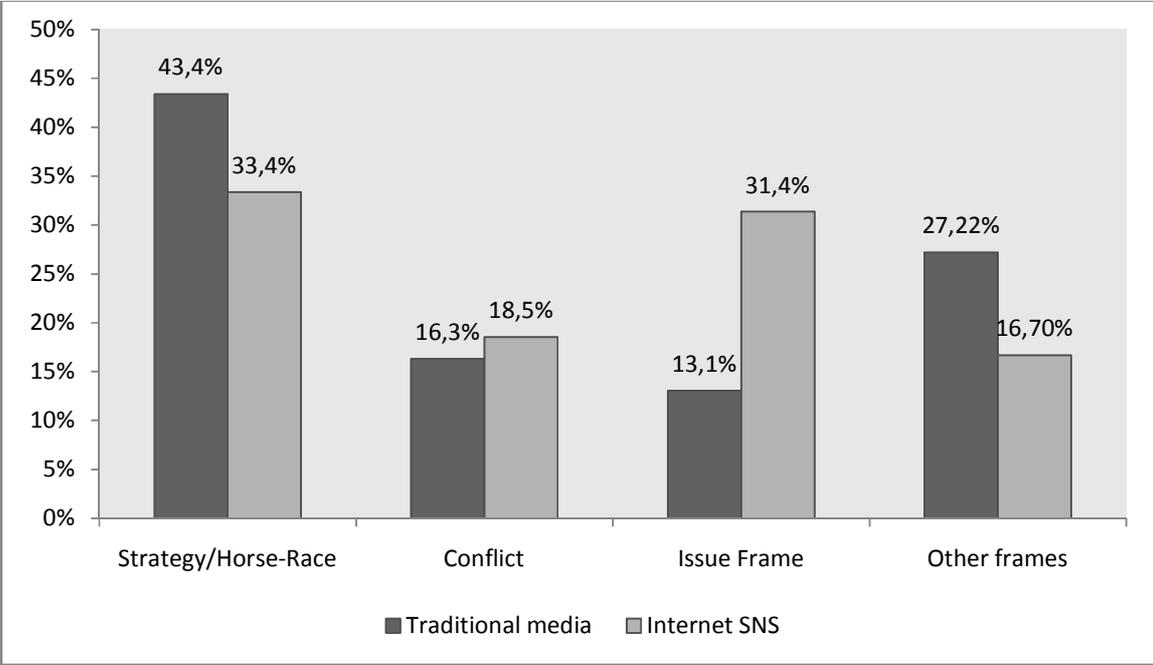
Regarding the SNS campaign, the results suggest, similarly to what we saw for the US case, that the campaign framed by the parties gave less salience to the Strategy/Horse-race and conflict aspects of the campaign (see Figure 4). The Strategy/Horse-race frame was present in 42,3 of the SNS campaign and only 29.9% of the weighted posts had included conflict between actors. On the other side, the Issue frame was the most salient frame in the SNS campaign (43.7%) being the difference with the press coverage, regarding this frame, not only statistical but also substantively significant. The results suggest that, in fact, the parties tried to frame their own campaign mainly in terms of policy aspects.



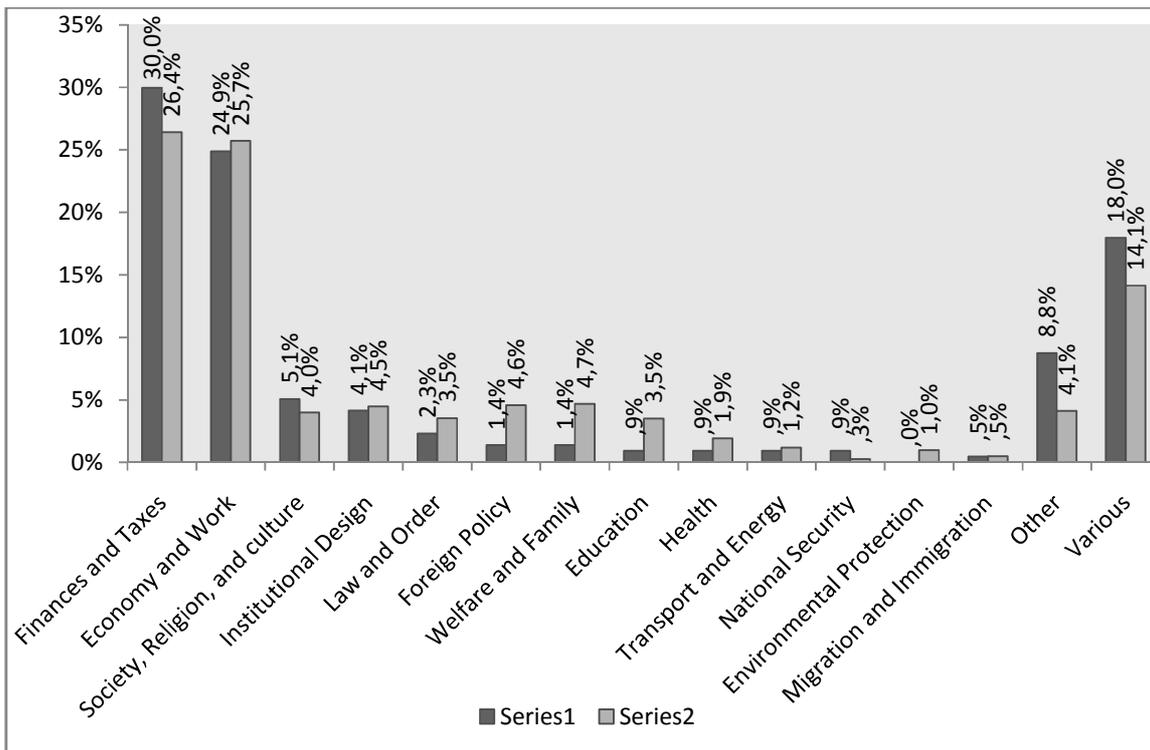
**Figure 4 - Frames present in the news media and in the SNS campaign of the 2013 Italian Elections**

When we look at the First-frame presented in the news media and in the SNS (Figure 5), the differences remain statically significant but, as we also observed for the case of the US,

the Conflict frame becomes more salient in the SNS. This shows us that even though the press frames more often the events in terms of conflict, in comparison to how candidates and parties frame the campaign on the Internet, this frame is not so often the first/main aspect present in the story. On the other side, for identical reasons, the salience of issues in the Internet also becomes more prominent, with 31.4% of the SNS posts using the Issue frame as the first/main frame, against the 13.1% of the press. This results seem however natural considering the usually longer articles in the press compared to the SNS posts, particularly the 140 characters of Twitter (if there isn't any extra content), that make it more difficult for journalists to make use only one or two frames to convey a political event.



**Figure 5 - First frames in the news media and in the SNS campaign of the 2013 Italian Elections**



**Figure 6 - Type of issues in the news media and in the SNS campaign of the 2013 Italian Elections**

Regarding the type of issues that were present in the news media and in the SNS, the results show that there were clearly two categories of issues (Economy and Works; and Finances and Taxes), that dominated both the news coverage of the election and the campaign made by the candidates on the internet. Regarding the remaining types of issues, even though the salience of those topics in the press was generally lower than in the SNS campaign, we cannot say that the media neglected parts of the candidates' issue agenda.

## *8 - The Brazilian presidential elections of 2012.*

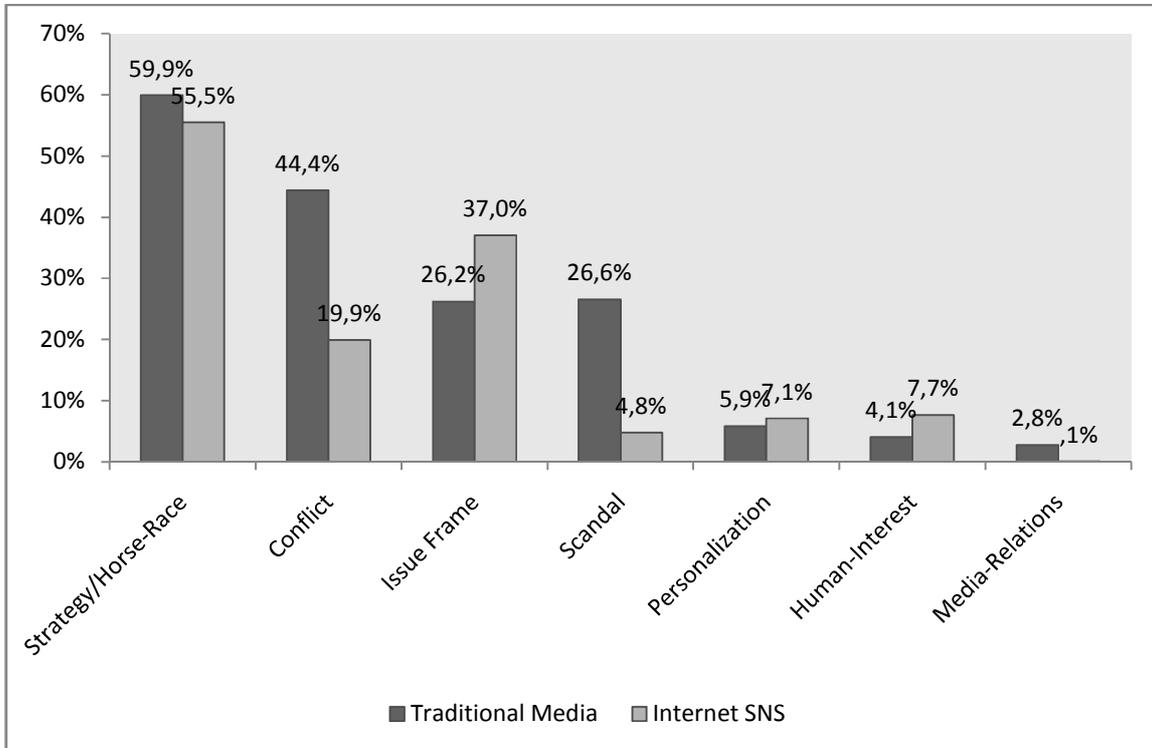
In the first round of the 2014 Brazilian presidential election, that took place on October 5, there were three candidates competing for a place in the eventual runoff election. One of them was the incumbent president, Dilma Rousseff, the candidate of the Partido Trabalhista (PT). The second one was Aécio Neves, the candidate of Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB) and a former Governor of Minas Gerais. The third one was Marina Silva,

originally from PT and a former member in one of Lula's governments, the candidate of Partido Socialista Brasileiro (PSB) after the death of Eduardo Campos.

Regarding the salience of the frames in the Brazilian campaign, the results suggest for Brazil a pattern similar to the one we observed for both Italy and US. With respect to the Strategy/Horse-Race frame, it was again more salient in the press (being present in 59.9% of the stories), while in the case of the candidates' campaign on the Internet the percentage of messages framed in terms of strategy was 55.5%. Nevertheless, the difference is considerably smaller than the one we observed in the previous two cases. Regarding the Conflict frame, the difference between the two campaigns is more noticeable, with the press showing conflict between political actors in 44.4% of all news while in the SNS campaign it was included in only 19.9% of the posts. It is interesting that the press often mention the conflict as one of the main strategies of the PT and PSDB candidates, in our analysis the conflict was two times higher in the traditional news media in comparison to the candidates' communication on the SNS. Even though we cannot say that was an outcome of a deliberate distortion, the results suggest that when political candidates don't rely on traditional media to campaign (e.g. news media coverage or television advertisement) they tend to produce, as it is the case in the Social Networking Sites, less negative campaigns. Not only less negative but apparently also more "informative" as well, in terms of the salience of substantial political issues. While the Issue frame was only present in 26.2% of the news in the press, this number was relatively higher in the case of the candidates' campaign on the SNS (37%).

Besides the differences in these three frames, it is also interesting to notice that political scandals were considerably more salient in the traditional media news coverage of the election. While in the SNS the Scandal frame was used in 4.8% of the stories, in the case of the traditional news media the number was five times higher (26.6%). This suggests that, somehow surprisingly but similarly to what we observed for Italy, the presidential candidates in Brazil were much less interested, in comparison to the journalists, in bringing up to the campaign the political scandals. One possible explanation is that the most salient scandal during the campaign (a major scheme of corruption in the state company

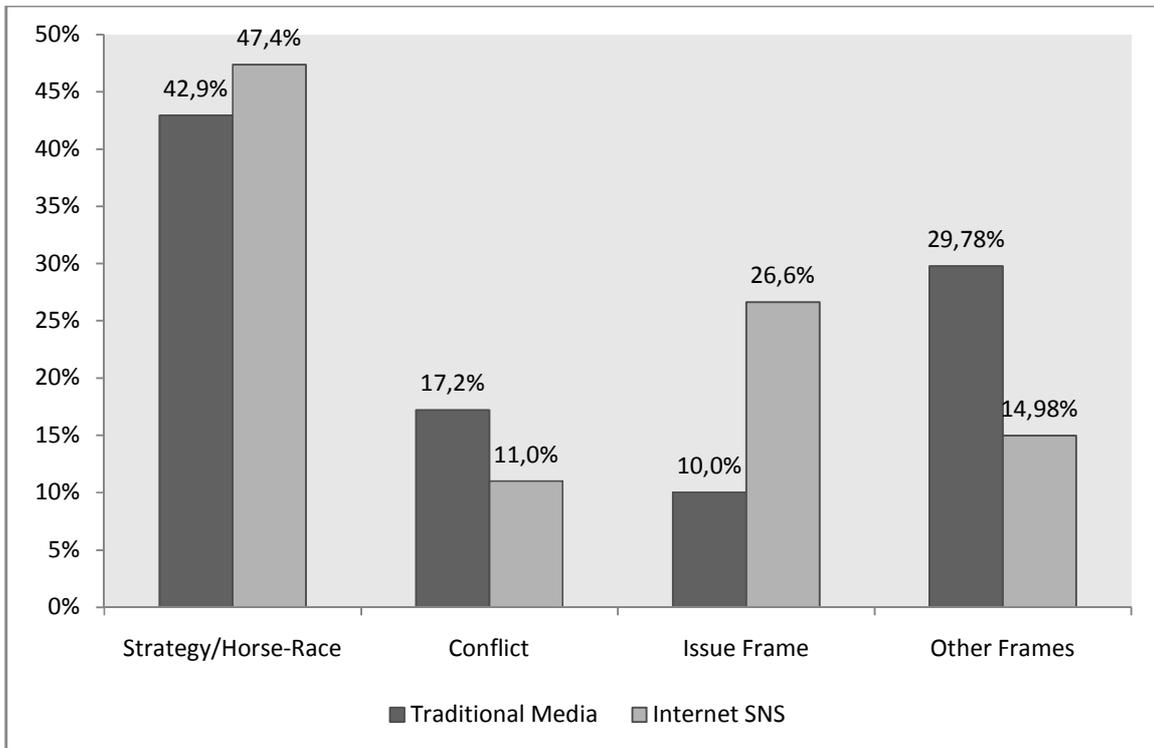
Petrobrás), even though it was mostly connected to PT, also involved politicians of other political parties, including the PSB of Marina Silva.



**Graph 7 - Salience of Frames in the news media and in the SNS campaign of the 2014 Brazilian elections**

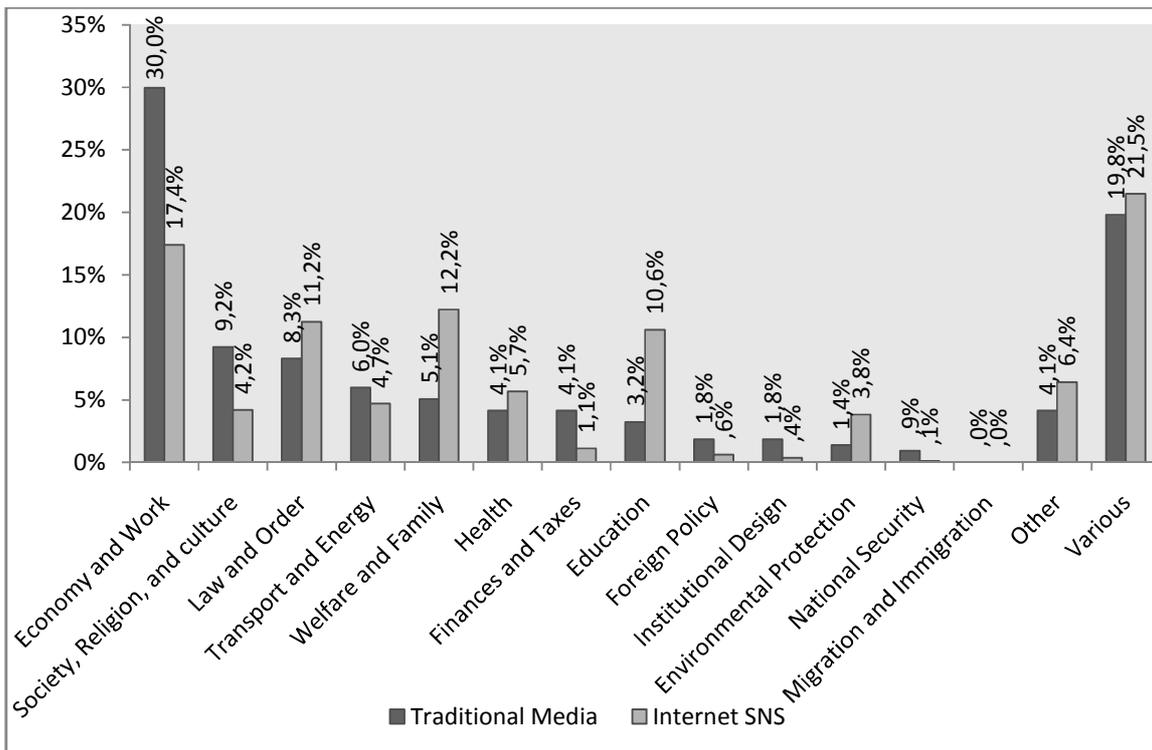
When we look at the first frame used, however, the picture slightly changes and the Strategy/Horse-Race frame becomes more salient in the Internet campaign (47.4%) in comparison to the traditional news media coverage made by the press (52.9%). Considering the two previous cases, US and Italy, these results are surprising and might be explained, to a certain extent, by the extremely high salience of the Scandal frame in the news coverage of this election. The fact that journalists had in the scandal an “exciting” aspect to report about during the election, might have made the strategy and horse-race aspects of the campaign less “appealing” to them. On the other side, the conflict, differently from what we saw for the case of Italy and US, was less salient in the SNS campaign, in comparison to the press coverage. The issue frame was the only one which differences between media shown results in the direction of what we observed for US and Italy. The salience of this

frame on the Internet (26.6%) was, in fact, two times higher than its salience in the traditional media (10%).



**Graph 8 - First frames in the news media and in the SNS campaign of the 2014 Brazilian elections**

Finally, when we look at the nature of the issues presented in both media, we cannot clearly say that the press neglected any of the issue categories that were more salient in the candidates' online campaign. In the one hand, some categories of issues such as 'Education' and 'Environmental Protection' were considerably more salient in the SNS in comparison to the press. On the other hand, three categories ('Economy and Work', 'Society, Religion and Culture' and 'Finances and Taxes') had a higher visibility in the traditional news media.



**Graph 9 - Type of issues in the news media and in the SNS campaign of the 2014 Brazilian elections**

To conclude, this analysis of the frames used in the US and Italy campaigns give strong support to the first set of hypotheses (*Uninformative News*). Similarly to the study of Crigler et al. (2012) that found that candidates' campaign on Youtube was less negative compared to their television adds (at least in one of the cases that were analyzed), we also found here that, in general, the campaign made by the candidates on the SNS presented less conflict than the news coverage made by the press of the same elections. On the other side, the SNS campaign is more times framed in terms of substantial political issues. The results suggest that not only that candidates do try to convey and discuss political issues during their campaigns but also that the Internet, by allowing the candidates of bypassing the journalists when campaigning, has the potential (as its penetration and popularity increases) to contribute in the future for more informative and less conflict/strategy driven campaigns.

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