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**Ideology in the age of mediatised politics:
From ‘belief systems’ to the re-contextualizing principle of discourse**

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Abstract

Mediatized politics is often associated with a metamorphosis of politics; a shift from philosophical fermentations to effective media campaigning and from rational argumentation to personal appeals, sound-bites and dramatic effects. The question this article raises is whether this alleged metamorphosis allows some space for ideology to emerge and play any role in contemporary politics and, if so, what the implications for the study of political ideology in the age of mediatization are? As I will argue, to study ideology in the context of mediatized politics is not to make big claims about the survival or demise of some ‘grand’ belief systems but to analytically address the potential of political discourse, as it is articulated through several media genres within specific socio-political contexts, to *re-contextualize* symbolisms from the past serving the *effective exercise of political power* in the present. I will further illustrate this attempted revisionism by briefly examining three televised political advertisements, which I take as an example of mediatized politics, by the American Democratic Party for the 2008 presidential election in the US, by the British Conservative party for the 2010 general election in the UK and by the Panhellenic Socialist Movement for the 2009 parliamentary election in Greece, respectively.

Introduction

This article has a dual goal: it argues that mediatized politics, albeit pragmatically driven and aesthetically/emotionally ridden¹, may be still ideological; and, by virtue of doing so, it makes the claim that ideological politics in the age of mediatization can no longer be studied while taking for granted the essentialist conceptions with which ideology has been, extensively, bestowed so far. I particularly refer here to the conception of ideology, widely popular and influential in political theory and science, as rational sets of ideas, with closed and rigid structures, that articulate a normative view of politics and its relation to the society (what society has to look like and how politics can contribute to the realization of this ideal); a conception that is often, for the sake of brevity, referred as ‘belief systems’².

The mediatization of politics, as I will argue in the first part of this article, appertains to a metamorphosis of political discourse (personalization, conversationalization, dramatization) which, albeit overstated and often misinterpreted, is quite far from the Enlightenment ideal of ‘proper’ political discourse (abstraction, *raison d’être*, purity)³. Ideology, however, has been linked to this essentialist concern about rationality and consistency in political discourse as much as it has been linked to the pragmatic concern about the effective exercise of power through political discourse⁴. As Sartori has succinctly put it ‘this is, it seems to me, the single major reason that ideology is so important to us. We are concerned about ideologies because we are concerned, in the final analysis, with the power of man over man, with how populations and nations can be mobilized and manipulated [...]’⁵. From this point of view, mediatized politics could be intrinsically ideological since media are said to constitute the primary locus where political power is symbolically claimed and contested in late modern societies⁶.

It is, however, the personal appeals, sound-bites and dramatic effects rather than the rational belief systems that symbolically facilitate the exercise of power through the media⁷. By this token, the following dilemma seems to emerge: what weighs more as ‘ideological’ in contemporary politics: the adherence to belief systems developed at some point in history – particularly, those that emerged in the late eighteenth and that, in the course of the nineteenth century, were subsequently acclaimed as the ‘grand narratives’ that shaped politics in the twentieth century, such as liberalism, conservatism, socialism, communism, etc.⁸ – or the use of any symbolic form in so far as it is oriented at serving the exercise of power?⁹

As I will illustrate in greater depth in the second and third parts of this article, this is a pseudo-dilemma as it is not particular (rationalist and cohesive or bombastic and dissimulative) ideas that are implanted with the privilege of enacting certain patterns of political (self)representation and mobilizing certain forms of political action but, generally, the historicity of discourse, by virtue of its *re-contextualizing principle*. Discourse, by appropriating and realigning different ideas, concepts and practices of symbolic meaning from the past, within specific socio-institutional contexts, gives rise to new regimes of meaning, and in doing so, it (re)organises and (re)orders current political practice in these contexts¹⁰. Re-contextualization has been found, in one way or another, to be a constitutive aspect even of the alleged ‘grand’ *ideologies* of the twentieth century¹¹ and needs, therefore, to be located in the heart of the concept of *Ideology* as such.

If we understand ideology, as is proposed here, as a discursive practice of re-contextualization of symbolisms from the past, then, the ideological potential of mediatized political discourse is neither a priori impossible nor de facto possible; it rather becomes a matter of analysis of the generic and contextual aspects of mediatized politics. Do specific generic properties allow symbolisms from the past to emerge in media platforms, such as political advertising, which I

take as my empirical point of reference? Do these symbolisms hold any relevance to the historical itinerary of political institutions, such as political parties? Do re-contextualized symbolisms play any role in the current context, in respect of the challenges and opportunities the latter raises for the institutions, and how they perform this role discursively?

These are questions to be put at the centre of the ideological analysis of mediatized politics, turning our attention from the out-of-touch grand narratives of mega-politics to the palpable practices of political communication as they are discursively enacted in different *media genres* and develop within different *socio-institutional contexts*. In the last part of this article, I will try to grapple with these questions by taking televised political advertising as an example of mediatized politics and examining its different generic rubrics, such as the ‘talking head’, ‘man-in-the-street’ and ‘cinéma-vérité’ genres, within different institutional contexts – the American Democratic party (2008 presidential election), the British Conservative Party (2010 general election) and the Greek Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) (2009 parliamentary election), respectively.

First, however, it is necessary to unpack the rather contestable neologism ‘mediatized politics’, especially in terms of the metamorphosis the concept of mediatization seems to imply for the very ontology of the ‘political’ itself. Arguably, as John Thompson has acutely noted¹², ‘it is this mediatization [...], rather than the alleged secularization and rationalization of social life, which should provide the principal frame of reference with regard to which the analysis of ideology is reconsidered today’.

Mediatization as personalization, conversationalization and dramatization: unitary media logic or contextualised practices of media use?

Technical means of inscription and dissemination of information have been an integral part of the management of politics, at least since medieval times, when European monarchs

extensively used woodcuts and engravings for their image-making¹³. However, the institutionally embedded and technologically advanced communication platforms, to which we refer when we talk about *the media* nowadays, are deployed in contemporary political communication not under the emperor's doctrines or the ruling party's will, as was the case up until the mid-twentieth century in many Western European countries (and as it still is in many other parts of the world), but on the basis of media's independent set of rules, norms and routines, what is loosely called 'media logic'.¹⁴ As Meyer argues, 'the rules of media logic recast the constitutive factors in political logic, in many cases by assigning them new shades of meaning and by adding to them new elements drawn from the media's own set of laws'¹⁵. In the age of media's institutional autonomy and technological advancement and sophistication, mediatization is, therefore, effectively taken to entail the colonization of political logic by the media logic¹⁶.

Other than these media-centric developments, several socio-political processes, potentially related to, but by no means exhausted through the media, are also considered to have paved the way for the triumph of media logic. Among these processes is the growing 're-secularization' and 'managerialization' of politics, in the postwar period, that is, the gradual disentanglement of the major political parties in Western democracies from the passionate ideational tensions and anchorages of the past (e.g. liberalism vs. conservatism or liberalism vs. communism) and their convergence toward a more or less moderate and pragmatist approach to politics that is immersed in the search for workable policies and electable party positions (e.g. Third Way politics)¹⁷.

Re-secularization of politics is also fostered by the waning of class-cleavages which, inevitably, has deprived political parties of a solid base of support, and the constantly increasing disaffection of the electorate as a result of both the managerial turn of politics and the decline of 'class politics'¹⁸. In such a destabilized and fluid socio-political terrain, the

argument goes, political parties are forced to resort to the media and adopt their logic so as to re-establish a channel of communication with the electorate, thereby effectively running their campaigns.¹⁹ Does, however, the need of political institutions to adapt to the media *modus operandi* necessarily produce the colonization of politics by a media logic?

Let me answer this question by illustrating, first, what is usually considered to be this notorious media logic. When we refer to the media logic we mainly refer to some paradigmatic representational patterns through which media, conventionally, communicate politics to the wider public and which, are often argued to, have given rise to the three following interrelated trends: *personalization*, *conversationalization* and *dramatization*. Personalization is said to derive from the explicit preference of media's grammar for personal figures as communicators of the political message instead of impersonal reports. Emphasis is put, particularly, on prominent actors' (e.g. party leaders) personality features, such as honesty, humanity, friendliness but also decisiveness and competence, as components of the 'mediatized political charisma'²⁰. Closely related, the conversationalizing trend emanates from media proclivity to represent politics as a conversational routine, framed with phrases from the quotidian vocabulary in the form of sound-bites, providing, therefore, more space for an 'episodic' than a 'thematic' coverage of issues²¹. Finally, dramatization is attributed to media's tendency to invest representation with a dramatic tone, highlighting conflictual, extravagant and grandiose aspects of events which, ultimately, construe politics as a spectacle²².

Personalization, conversationalization and dramatization are trends detectable, more or less, in all the patterns through which politics is represented in different media platforms (news broadcasts, political advertising, political debates and interviews, etc.) and in practices through which the political is constructed as an identity and form of action beyond media platforms (in the way political actors frame their speeches in rallies, conventions, even closed-door caucuses and in the ways they professionally stage themselves when they are exposed in public venues).

In the age of mediatized politics, the former fuse into the latter traversing the whole ontology of politics.

Undeniable as it may be that these trends dominate contemporary political communication, the theoretical choice to reduce them to a unitary media logic is not. First of all, the core essences of personalization, conversationalization and dramatization, that is, personal appeal, simplified rhetoric and dramatic style, respectively, had a prominent place in political rhetoric long before the emergence of mass media. As Jamieson has noted for the election campaigns in ‘Jefferson, Jackson or Lincoln’s time [...] their messages were briefer [...] than those of any sixty second spot ad. The air then was filled not with substantive disputes but with simplification, sloganeering and slander’²³. Arguably, simplification and, by virtue of their simplifying aspects, personalization and dramatization are the means via which political rhetoric seeks to familiarize the public with processes and structures that are, otherwise, alien to and even unperceived by the latter²⁴.

Even if we accept the argument that the three aforementioned trends have been intensified and invested with different qualities in the age of mediatization²⁵, the hypothesis of a single and unitary media logic that colonizes politics is still unsustainable. Not all these trends are ascribed the same qualities across different media formats and socio-institutional contexts. Sensational and dramatist framing of politics, for instance, has been reported to significantly vary between the tabloid press and the classic broadsheets²⁶, as well as, personal appeals have been argued to find a more fertile ground in the social media than in the party official websites and forums²⁷. On the other hand, the ‘raw materials’ out of which telegenic leadership is fashioned, for instance, are drawn on symbolic conventions and structures that are already salient in the political culture of each context, such as the Gaullist legacy of the heroic leader in the French right-wing UMP²⁸.

These notes illustrate, if anything, that the three interrelated and interdependent trends of personalization, conversationalization and dramatization are neither more nor less than some abstract ‘ideographs’ or ‘ideotypes’ that acquire their particular meaning and qualities in concrete practices of political communication. Mediatized politics, therefore, is not politics colonized by a unitary media logic but politics performed through some conventionalised representational patterns (genres) which are informed by the practices of media use, embedded in specific socio-political milieus (contexts).

Pragmatism and historicity in mediatized politics: the re-contextualizing principle of discourse

One of the most debated political projects in the age of mediatization is the so-called ‘New Labour’ project in the UK, which emerged within the general euphoria around Third Way politics, as a pragmatically driven response to the socio-economic demands and challenges of the new, complex, highly interdependent and unpredictable world, beyond the dogmatic anchorages of neoliberalism and social democracy²⁹. As Tony Blair, the man whose name has become synonymous with the New Labour project (Blairite politics), once put it ‘The 21st century will not be a battle around ideology. But it will be a struggle for progress. Guided not by dogmatic ideology but by pragmatic ideals’³⁰. Blair and the other ‘pragmatists’ are right in arguing that in the age of diversification, multiculturalism, globalization and, I would add, mediatization, politics is not adhered to any specific belief system or grand narrative of the past. At the same time, however, the lack of consistency and historical determinism cannot be taken to amount to the eradication from new political projects of beliefs, ideas and other symbolic fragments of the past. This is something that neither Blair nor any other pragmatist politician would eagerly endorse.

The New Labour project, for instance, within its market-oriented and highly personalized (Blairite) rhetoric, managed to rearticulate concepts of ‘justice’ and ‘equality’, inherited from

the party's social democratic tradition, with the 'self-development' from classic liberalism, the 'equal worth' and 'cohesion' from ethical socialism and communitarianism and the Thatcherite 'not rights without responsibilities', among others³¹. What we politically experience in the age of mediatization, therefore, is more what Terdiman has called, a 'heteroglot'³², that is, a hybrid or a hotchpotch of both pragmatic concerns and historical trends, reforming acts and sedimented myths, promotion of some interests at the expense of others, a sense of continuity and discontinuity, in the final analysis, than a unilateral disentanglement from the ideas and practices of the past. This hybridity, I argue, is not merely a strategic option of political actors (individual and collective) in order to broaden their popular base of support—what Kirchheimer³³ has called 'catchall' party politics—but a cumulative effect of the *historicity of political discourse* itself.

I take here historicity to grasp both the historically conditioned or, simply historical, nature of discourse, referred to by Kristeva as the 'insertion of history into text', and the historically constitutive or historicizing capacity of discourse, the 'insertion of text into history', in her terms³⁴, and I see both these aspects imbricating within the *re-contextualizing* principle of discourse. By re-contextualization I mean the disarticulation and dis-embedding of concepts, ideas, discourses and practices from the socio-historical contexts in which they were originally produced and/or chronically reproduced, and their re-articulation and re-embedding into new contexts³⁵. By virtue of its re-contextualizing principle, discourse carries with it the socio-historical referents and implications of the de-contextualized practices (historical aspect) while, at the same time, by resituating the latter within new socio-institutional and, therewith, semantic contexts, it inevitably transforms their meaning (historicising aspect)³⁶.

Discourse appears, therefore, always to precede the emergence of specific institutional practices circumscribing the space within which individuals and groups can understand and self-define themselves as political subjects (identity-making), understand and define the

political reality within which they have to act (representation) and, eventually, understand and define the available means and ways of acting (action-mobilization)³⁷. Arguably, such an approach to political discourse is primarily informed by post-structuralist discourse theory and, at this point, it is necessary to refer to the implications this raises for the attempted reconceptualization of ideology as re-contextualization.

Post-structuralist discourse-political theory: towards an understanding of ideology as the re-contextualizing potential of mediatized politics

The post-structuralist social theory of discourse takes as its point of departure the ‘radical contingency’, ongoing fluidity and complexity, that traverses late modern societies and comes to suggest that discourse, by ascribing a particular, relatively fixed, meaning, to concepts that are principally ‘empty signifiers’ (without any immanent meaning), gives rise to social practices through which the fluidity of the social is temporarily organized and ordered³⁸. The discursive ordering of the social, however, if anything, mystifies the very condition of radical contingency that traverses the latter; discourse construes social relations as effectively fixated and consolidated while, in principle, they are open-ended and precarious. This ‘ontological misrecognition’ of social relations as givens in the regimes of meaning that discourse creates, crucially, differs from the Marxist ‘epistemological misrecognition’ of social relations as classless and eternal in the (false) consciousness of the working class; but it is still taken by discourse theorists (through a rather neo-Marxist/Gramscian prism) to establish and sustain the domination of a cluster of (class, gendered, nationalist, etc.) interests in the form of hegemony³⁹.

Political science, being rather hostile to post-structuralist discourse theory, has not yet systematically embarked on debates around re-contextualization and its relevance to the study of ideology, although there have been significant initiatives to this direction. Michael Freeden’s work on the ‘conceptual morphology’ of ideologies⁴⁰ could be an exemplar in this regard.

Freeden espouses the post-structuralist principle of radical contingency, which he construes as inherent indeterminacy and contestability of political discourse, thereby rejecting the essentialist conception of ideology as a doctrinaire belief system. Quite the contrary, he argues that although concrete ideologies are usually treated and studied as set of ideas, ideology, in its conceptual generality, is the process of producing political ideas through the effective decontestation of political meaning. In other words, what in post-structuralist discourse theory described as the ordering capacity of discourse, Freeden perceives as ‘a wide-ranging structural arrangement ‘that attributes meaning to a range of mutually defining political concepts’⁴¹ without, however, ever resulting in a total decontestation of political discourse.

From this point of view, ideologies may be seen as (discursive) formations, relatively open-ended and porous in their boundaries (permeability), with their concepts acquiring meaning always in relation to other concepts that are closely linked to them⁴² or, as I would put it, in re-contextualizing terms, in relation to the context within which they are resituated. Some of these concepts, Freeden suggests, are ‘core’ and, therefore, ineliminable and some others are ‘adjacent’ and ‘peripheral’ and, therefore, subject to change (priority)⁴³, a principle which reminds us that discourse by re-contextualizing ideas and practices, simultaneously, (re)orders and organises them. Finally, Freeden draws our attention to the fact that some concepts are allotted relatively more space than others in an ideology (proportionality)⁴⁴. That is, crucially, a matter of inclusion and exclusion of certain socio-historical referents, and of their topical connotations, in the process of re-contextualization.

Freeden, however, does not espouse the ‘Manichaeism’ of post-structuralist discourse theory to treat everything as discourse, and, therewith, the alleged capacity of discourse to establish a single and universal hegemony. He, instead, stresses that we need seriously to take into account the subjects’ agency over discourse⁴⁵, that is, the instrumental use of discourse by political actors, as a means of pursuing their specific institutional interests and goals, in a variety of

different and unexpected ways that do not necessarily result in establishing and sustaining a hegemonic order⁴⁶.

Although I warmly defend Freeden's scepticism about the concept of hegemony, I wish to argue that it is important to retain the critical element of discourse theory acknowledging that discourse, as already mentioned, through re-contextualizing ideas and practices, carries with it social-historical referents that are imbricated with (multiple and permeable rather than single and rigid) asymmetries and relations of domination, which subjects, regardless of whether they are aware of them or not, may serve and sustain while drawing on certain discursive formations⁴⁷. As Michel Foucault has succinctly posed it 'people know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does'⁴⁸. Consequently, ideology qua re-contextualization should be sensitive to both the instrumentalities (actor's strategies and pursuits) and structuralities (social asymmetries and relations of domination) in the effective exercise of power and, most crucially, to their intersection – discourse may reproduce social asymmetries *while being used* by actors as a means of pursuing their goals and may serve or challenge social asymmetries *in order to* pursue actor's goals.

As we can conclude from the preceding discussion, the re-contextualizing principle, and its power-making implications is, crucially, a 'tropism' of political discourse in general and of media discourse in particular⁴⁹; it does not render, however, mediatized politics *necessarily* ideological. As we have seen, drawing on Freeden's conceptual morphology, ideologies are characterised by some ineliminable core concepts of historical relevance to political institutions or other groups (not of concepts and ideas in general) and serve the exercise of power by these specific groups and institutions (not the power over society in general).

Consequently, as I wish to put it, mediatized discourse is ideological in so far as (a) it re-contextualizes concepts which hold a *symbolic meaning* for a specific social group or institution (symbolisms), that is, concepts related by abstraction and convention to the historical itinerary of this group/institution, and (b) the performed re-contextualization of symbolisms serves the potential of this group/institution to enhance its relational position in a given social context, by justifying, for instance, its specific strategies and pursuits and/or by (de)legitimising/(de)mystifying specific asymmetries and relations of domination that are embedded in this context.

Earlier on in this paper, I argued that mediatized politics is politics performed through some contextualised representational patterns in which the abstract trends of personalization, conversationalization and dramatization acquire their concrete meaning. By this token, the potential of these representational patterns to re-contextualize symbolisms from the past of a specific group/institution serving the effective exercise of power by this group/institution – the ideological potential of mediatized politics – is a matter of what Aristotle calls, ‘analytics’; not a matter of a ‘grand theory’ that can reject or accept this potential in advance⁵⁰. It is, particularly, a matter of discourse analytics which focuses (a) on the *genres*, via which mediatized politics can be accessed as a concrete discursive practice, so as to detect whether, and in what ways, this practice encloses the re-contextualization of symbolisms and (b) on the *context*, in which mediatized politics is embedded as a concrete socio-institutional practice, so as to understand which symbolisms hold a historical relevance for a specific group or institution and what are the social differentials these symbolisms carry with them as well as the challenges this group or institution faces in the present.

I shall focus on these analytical categories in greater length using some empirical examples from perhaps the most popular and widespread platform of political communication, televised

political advertising,⁵¹ and the one that offers us easy and ample access to the aforementioned dominant trends of representing politics in the age of mediatization⁵².

The ideological potential of mediatized politics: some examples

Generic and contextual options in the case-studies

Genre is a widely recognisable, conventional pattern of representation, ‘[...] that is associated with and party enacts a socially ratified type of activity’⁵³. The broadcasts⁵⁴ chosen as examples in my inquiry draw on the three most commonly used in political advertising genres, which discursively instantiate into concrete practices (ratified type of activities) the three major (ideographic) trends in mediatized politics, introduced earlier, those of personalization, conversationalization and dramatization, respectively. More particularly, the spot by Barak Obama, *The country I love*, for the presidential election of 2008, constitutes a leader’s personal address to the electorate; a form of what Devlin calls *talking head spot*⁵⁵, in which, customarily, the candidate/leader is presented as the most skilful and appropriate for the office and the one to be trusted. The electoral broadcast by the British Conservative Party, *A new kind of government for Britain*, for the General Election of 2010, relies instead on the ordinary voter so as to elicit support for the party and/or endorsement of the leader; the so-called *man-in-the-street* genre⁵⁶. Finally, in the spot by the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), *Go!*, for the Greek parliamentary election of 2009, the foci of attention is the enthusiastic interaction of people with the leader in real life settings, what has been referred as *cinéma-vérité* format⁵⁷.

It is important to note here that when I refer to discursive articulation or instantiation (of abstract trends into concrete practices) I mean the meaning-making potential of semiosis in its entirety; not only the purely linguistic material and the cognitive schemata it mobilises (Derridean logocentrism) but also, especially in the age of the multi-generic media discourse, the aesthetic and affective qualities of the ample audio-visual material (multimodality)⁵⁸. As

Freeden has stressed, ideologies nowadays are more effectively disseminated through ‘emotional visual symbols [...] than rational argument’.⁵⁹ Contra to the Enlightenment legacy which has, rather derogatively, relegated the emotive dynamic of aesthetics to the realm of political instincts, a burgeoning sociology of emotions has highlighted the heuristic effect of affect on the very processes of cognition⁶⁰. ‘Affect delimits the emotional potentialities of the image that orient us towards legitimate ways of feeling’⁶¹ and crucially, ‘the way we feel structures the way we think and ultimately the way we act’⁶².

Context, in the way understood here, refers to a social site of interaction shaped by the routines, norms and internal logics that are traceable in its micro-genealogy⁶³. I take here the American Democratic party as an example of an institutional setting situated in a context the genealogy of which is characterised by the absence of an aristocratic and feudalist *ancient regime* and, therefore, by the early establishment of a liberal democratic one, the basic principles of which have been espoused by both the two major political parties in the US⁶⁴. I take the British Conservative party (also referred as ‘the Tories’), on the other hand, as an example of an institutional setting located in a more fragmented political context. This context has evolved out of the collapse of the *ancient regime* and the competing forces this collapse unleashed, that is, conservative forces, which have defended the idea of organic society and the return to traditional values, liberal forces, which have enshrined the ideas of individual freedom and self-development, and, later on, socialist and labour forces, which have stood for state protectionism, social justice and union rights⁶⁵.

Finally, I take Greek PASOK as an example of an institutional setting that is grounded in a context of, recently established, parliamentary democracy. This context has been shaped, primarily, by the historical traumas of a late civil war and junta and, more, particularly, by the polarization between some oppressive, militarist and anti-communist forces, identified with the ‘evil Right’, and some oppressed, anti-Right and pro-communist forces (both without a clear

class structure), identified with the ‘resistant Left’⁶⁶. These paradigmatically different genealogical characteristics, broadly sketched out above, have given rise to different practices, values and discourses that can be said to be of symbolic meaning for the parties whose political advertisements are examined here. Let me now illustrate what these symbolisms are and how they are related to the current pragmatic concerns of the three parties by discussing the ways they are re-contextualized in the aforementioned generic rubrics.

Personalizing social values in the ‘liberal’ way

Obama’s entire campaign for the 2008 presidential election was effectively built upon the two master frames of ‘hope’ and ‘change’, already inserted into the public debate, almost four years earlier, through his keynote speech to the Democratic National Convention, titled ‘The Audacity of Hope’⁶⁷. In that particular TV commercial I examine here, in which Obama addresses the electorate as the Democratic candidate for the presidency, themes from that speech return, but hope as a driving force of change is downplayed. As Obama makes clear at the very beginning of his address – *‘I’m Barack Obama. America is a country of strong families and strong values. My life has been blessed of both’* – he would not talk about the audacious hope but about family and values, the bedrock of American nation.

Obama refers to American values not in an abstract and didactic way but from his own personal experience throughout his life, a life that he describes as inextricably interwoven with these values. Description is both verbal – Obama explains how his life and, therefore, his personality have been shaped by the values of *‘accountability and self-reliance’*, *‘love of country’*, which refers to patriotism, *‘working hard without making excuses’*, which also points to self-reliance and responsibility, and *‘treating your neighbour as you’d like to be treated’*, which, apparently, refers to solidarity – and visual – pictures from his own life (e.g. as a baby in his mother’s arms,

as a law student and associate working for Chicago local communities, as a senator chatting with working people, the elderly and soldiers) authenticate what he says.

As stressed so far in this paper, language and, hence, the multimodality of semiosis, do not have a mere referential function but a conceptually constitutive one. That commercial, by seeking to convince the viewer that Obama as president will be committed to and driven by America's core values, construes certain social values as a personal lived experience. Accountability and self-reliance, for example, are reconstructed through Obama's personal struggle to make ends meet as a student by taking several jobs and loans, and solidarity in his decision to reject Wall Street jobs to work, instead, for the devastated neighbourhoods of Chicago.

As already noted, personalization in politics has often been deplored as an aesthetic technique that draws attention to personal appeals and differences countering the lack of consistent beliefs, values and vision⁶⁸. In Obama's case, however, personalization plays a role in the opposite direction, as we can see. It draws attention to Obama's commitment to values and beliefs that a candidate like him—almost unknown before the primary contest and lacking the recognisability and support that party leaders in parliamentary regimes enjoy because of the strong hierarchical organisation and social penetration of their parties⁶⁹—would not otherwise have been able to claim.

By no means do these personalised values comprise a coherent and consistent belief system, but they do carry with them strong symbolic meanings. Accountability as a value, for instance, comes directly from the classic liberal principle of the rule of law, and self-reliance recalls the liberal insistence on the priority of individual freedom and self-development. Solidarity, on the other hand, which qualifies individual freedom with responsibility—also resonant in some streams of liberalism—echoes a motif of Christian ethics ('treating your neighbour as you'd

like to be treated') and communitarian ethos⁷⁰. Finally, love of country touches directly upon the reigning symbol of American patriotism.

This modicum of liberalism, of communitarianism, and of patriotism, albeit ambivalent and permeable as a discursive formation, holds its own relevance in the party's history. It lies at the core of what Lakoff calls the 'nurturant parent' model; that is, a progressive way of thinking about family and the role of parents not as authoritarian discipliners of children but as guiders and assistants that enable their children to become autonomous and responsible citizens.⁷¹ Lakoff argues that this model has structured liberal democratic thinking in the US, in the sense that the latter equally values freedom, which allows the pursuit of individual dreams, and responsibility and solidarity, which secure the national interest.

Hope and change might have been Obama's 'Trojan Horse' in the primaries but they were not enough to take him to the White House, especially in a context where 'middle-of-the-road' and moderate political projects are more resonant than the radical and erratic ones.⁷² Obama's personal career, however, is by no means an exemplar of the 'middle-of-the-road' cliché; an African-American with Muslim name who had openly admitted experimentation with marijuana and cocaine, with Reverend Wright⁷³ as his mentor, and who had an ambivalent position on the Iraq war and an openly pro-LGBD rights agenda as senator⁷⁴.

Hope, other than a politically powerful word, especially for progressive, democratic and left politics, is also an affective disposition on which Obama chiefly capitalizes in this spot. Hope, in the political sociology of emotions, is considered a positive but moderate affective disposition; it does not mobilise voters to act in an immediate and impetuous way but encourages them, first, to favourably process information related to the candidate⁷⁵. In this presidential spot, hope directs attention to the personalized discourse of social values and hence to the information that presents (legitimises) Obama as a man committed to classic and

diachronic values of the American democratic tradition so as to dispel the shadows of radicalism hovering over him. In doing so, hope is not related to change but to public reassurance.

Conversationalizing Big Society in the 'conservative' way

In the run-up to the British General Election of 2010, Conservatives under David Cameron's leadership built their campaign upon the so-called 'Big Society' project, which, in the particular electoral broadcast examined here, acquires 'flesh and bones' in the narratives of three ordinary people ('summarized', in the end, as a single meta-narrative by the leader). Particularly, these lay narratives perform a double function in the broadcast, an iconic and a symbolic one. First, the three persons figure in this broadcast as 'iconic' characters in the sense that they are represented in such a way that highlights their 'family resemblance' to a known social subject (iconic meaning) rather than their particular physical similarities with a known individual (indexical meaning)⁷⁶, that is, it highlights these characteristics that allow the viewer to recognise in these characters the three broader social categories that synthesise the Big Society: the hard-working mother, Julie; the welfare services volunteer, Daniel; and the responsible entrepreneur, Ian, rather than Julie, Daniel and Ian as individual personalities. Second, the option of the 'ordinary person' to deliver the party message has a symbolic meaning in the sense that it construes political participation as an everyday practice, open to and accessible by all, a practice that is not dominated by the jargon of party cadres and the alienating bureaucratic platforms of institutions but is open to the conversational routines of citizens.

Crucially, conversationalization may end up simplifying and trivialising political discourse by 'inevitably butchering complexity and reducing politics to clever tricks'⁷⁷. However, by opening up politics to lay persons, conversationalization may be argued to open up the party to society, and particularly in this case, a party that has been negatively identified with the wealthy

elites by a large part of society⁷⁸. Does it mean that conversationalized Big Society drive Tories away from their conservative past? Not exactly.

First of all, we can indeed detect the re-articulation of some cornerstone symbolisms in the party's history, such as the prominence of family as a social unit (one of the 'High Tory' values) in Julie's narrative, the self-reliant individual who does not 'parasitize' on the state, in Daniel's narrative, and the free growing entrepreneurship, in Ian's (key elements of the Thatcherite legacy), with a chain of connotations that draw upon libertarianism and communitarianism. A 'strong family', for instance, is reconstructed, beyond a patriarchal frame, as a family in which the mother is ascribed an active and independent role (although Julie is married, her husband is absent from all the family activities represented in the broadcast) and children are the foci of care rather than discipline. Moreover, self-reliance is not associated with the Thatcherite opportunistic individualism ('get on your bike', buy your council house, become a shareholder, make money in the end, etc.⁷⁹) but with a spirit of solidarity exemplified by the voluntary help of people in welfare services (Daniel: '[...] *you have to have a look of empathy and understanding [...]*'). Finally, a 'new' entrepreneurial profile emerges, that of the responsible entrepreneur, who cares about his employees apart from making profit (Ian: '*I love running my own business [...] but it's very tough sometimes, of course you take responsibility for the guys. You are one big happy family*').

We could say that Cameronian 'Big Society' re-contextualizes symbolisms of the Conservative party, using the Blairite Third Way as a platform of re-contextualization rather than Thatcherite neo-conservatism and neoliberalism. But this interpretation still does not do justice to the conceptual promiscuity that characterises re-contextualization in this broadcast. Although the 'strength' of family is re-evaluated in a libertarian frame, the symbolic form of 'strong family' as such is nostalgically represented as a lost ideal that can be retrieved through the return to traditional values (Julie: '*I want the country to go back to where it used to be, where family*

was important [...]'), which is a trope par excellence of conservative political thinking.⁸⁰ Similarly, the communitarian connotations of public service may ameliorate the supreme individualism of self-reliance but, at the same time, the way it is re-contextualized prioritises self-organized communities of volunteers rather than state-subsidised/supported collective agency (Daniel: *'I don't see things as: there is a problem, there is a solution. For me there is always a man who can or a woman who can'*). This implies that there is no need for greater governmental care (e.g. extension and improvement of the welfare and public services) - the 'liberal' response of the protectionist left - but for greater social responsibility on the people's side - the 'conservative' response of the neoliberal right⁸¹.

As in the Obama spot, hope also emotionally permeates this Tory broadcast through the happy faces of the three characters and their optimistic view of the future. While, however, hope in Obama's case encourages the viewer to seek more information about him in the narrative of his value-blessed life, in this case hope encourages the viewer to seek the information she needs about the Big Society in the narratives of three ordinary people, thereby shifting attention from the responsibility of the party-government to the responsibilities of civic society. In doing so, hope induces the viewer to consider responsible entrepreneurship, for instance, as a sufficient condition for the increase of employment and voluntary action for the protection of public welfare.

Consequently, the conversationalized Big Society, on the one hand, seeks to popularise and humanise Tories by dispelling the shadow of the 'nasty party'⁸² and, on the other hand, it seeks to dissimulate the limited role of government or, more particularly, its exclusive role in ensuring the freedom of market and in promoting public spending cuts (a neoliberal agenda), by presenting it as a transfer of political responsibility from government to the citizens (Cameron: *'Real changes come not just from what politicians do but from what people do, what you do'*)⁸³.

Dramatizing Struggle in the 'ethno-populist' way

Almost a year after Obama's triumph, PASOK, the left-of-centre party founded in 1974 by Andreas Papandreou that dominated Greek politics throughout the post-dictatorship era, won a landslide under the leadership of Papandreou's son, who also campaigned for 'hope' and 'change'. Although, however, in the case of Obama, these concepts were 'discovered' in his 2004 speech on the 'Audacity of Hope', in the case of PASOK, they are deeply embedded in the 'culture of resistance', which flourished within the Left during the tumultuous post-war period as noted earlier, and which has marked the historical itinerary of the party since its outset.⁸⁴ Gradually, as the historical traumas of the civil-war and junta faded away and the party started adapting to globalising and modernising imperatives, the culture of resistance degenerated into a vague, but still tremendously popular and influential, ethno-populist imaginary of resistance; an imagined resistance against anything and anyone that could be perceived as a threat to the national and popular sovereignty of Greeks⁸⁵.

In this 'cinéma-vérité' spot, hope and change are embodied once again in the imaginary of resistance, which is construed now, through the 'gladiator metaphor', as an awaited contest and a struggle (leader's voiceover: *'now it's the time to struggle for Greece'*; visual representation: Mr Papandreou enters a weightlifting stadium, crowded with people that applaud and cheer as they are waiting for him to reach the stand of the arena). Metaphors of conflict and battle are widely used in political rhetoric since, except for familiarising the public with complicated and abstract concepts, they impart a dramatic dimension to the narrative that aims at mobilising and polarising voters⁸⁶. In particular, dramatization by stimulating enthusiasm, an emotional state more overwhelming than hope, invites the viewer to empathise with the represented subjects⁸⁷; in this case, with the metaphorically represented struggle of the leader.

However, the leader's voiceover, to which we listen as we watch him walking in the (backstage) corridors of the stadium before entering the arena, tells the viewer what to struggle for (*'release its [country's] great potential, build a strong economy'* etc.) but not against whom. Arguably, this indeterminacy allows the viewer to project onto the otherwise vague imaginary of resistance the wrongdoings, asymmetries, logics and enemies against which s/he wishes to fight by voting for PASOK. At the same time, however, dramatized indeterminacy can be said to disorient people from the urgent fiscal problems,⁸⁸ such as the substantially increased public debt and deficit of the Greek economy at that time, which could problematize the party's ambitious programme of economic policy (i.e. increase in wages and pensions).

As I have pointed out, indeterminacy and contingency in political discourse are not uncontrollable but managed through the decontesting and ordering conceptual effect of the re-contextualization of symbolisms. How does the re-contextualization of the imaginary of resistance manage the indeterminacy around Papandreou's call for struggle? The imaginary of resistance has so far been mentioned in the discourse of PASOK as constructing an enemy, usually external (the West, Europe or foreign forces in general) or internal (the Right, oligarchies or the 'big interests' in general) to the country⁸⁹. In this broadcast there is no hint of an external national enemy, and the internal enemy that Papandreou demonised in his public speeches – the 'evil Right' and its corrupted governance – is absent too.

Arguably, the affective disposition of enthusiasm, stimulated by the crowd's warm welcome to the leader, invites, as already noted, the viewer to empathise with this 'celebrative ritual' rather than identify an enemy. Beyond the enthusiasm of the crowd, however, we can discern the fluctuating emotional state of the leader, revealed primarily by his facial expressions. Sometimes he looks happy and optimistic and sometimes troubled and uncertain as he gets ready to enter the stadium. This 'backstage' switch from hope to anxiety and vice versa

crucially disrupts the celebrative ritual that unfolds ‘frontstage’, begging for the viewer’s attention to (and reflection on) what really concerns the leader, that is, the structural inefficiencies of the Greek state (*‘it needs work to make our state more efficient’*), rather than the current fiscal problems, and, predominately, people’s eagerness to change themselves and abandon the practices that are related to these structural inefficiencies (*‘to overcome ourselves and create the Greece we want’*).

The ‘enemy’ we are looking for is not easily spotted, therefore, since it does not lie somewhere ‘out there’, on the ‘other side’, but inside our own social selves, for instance in the chronic pathogenies of clientelism (the extra-institutional distribution of benefits based on personal and party affiliations) and hedonism (the mentality in which prosperity is envisaged as an unconditional given lasting forever) that have occasionally been acknowledged by Papandreou and others within the progressive Left as the major causes for the inefficiency of the state and the inertia of civic society⁹⁰.

To sum up, the gladiator metaphor re-contextualizes the imaginary of resistance through two different dramatic motifs. The first dramatic motif is the enthusiast indeterminacy that re-contextualizes the imaginary of resistance as an abstract ‘struggle for change’, which invites the viewer to empathise with the celebratory ritual of the forthcoming victory, thereby dissimulating current problems that would need urgent solutions (e.g. measures of austerity) after the election. The second dramatic motif is the switching dipole of hope and anxiety that re-contextualizes the imaginary of resistance as the ‘struggle to change ourselves’, which invites the viewer to reflect on, and thereby demystifying, chronic pathogenies that lie behind the current problems.

Conclusion

In the age of mediatization, politics is widely moulded by the interrelated trends of personalization, conversationalization and dramatization, which, however, do not deterministically derive from any unitary media logic but they are ascribed different aesthetic and affective qualities within different, context-embedded, genres, thereby heightening and leveraging, or neglecting and downplaying, the historicity of political discourse. The images that narrate aspects of Obama's life, for example, and on the basis of which we, as viewers, are invited to assess his moderation and patriotism (through the affective disposition of hope), personalize social values that can be traced in an imaginary (the 'nurturant parent') with strong roots in the American liberal democratic tradition.

The ideological potential of mediatized politics, inextricably interrelated with the historicity of political discourse, needs therefore to be 'disenchanted'; historicity does not mean cementation of political discourse with closed belief systems and coherent philosophic traditions but re-contextualization of 'fragments', potentially antithetic and contradicting, from the past which hold a symbolic meaning for parties or groups. The three lay narratives that conversationalize the Big Society project, for example, re-contextualize several concepts with symbolic meaning for the Conservative party (strong family, self-reliance, growing entrepreneurship) in such a way that, on the one hand, the aspects which are related to the 'nasty' profile of the party (patriarchal remnants, individualism, deified profit-making) are ameliorated and, on the other, the conservative mentality (return to tradition, need for disciplined and responsible individuals rather than 'nanny' governments) is consolidated.

If mediatization and its ramifications need to be taken seriously into account in the study of ideology, informing the reconceptualization of the latter as a re-contextualizing practice, ideology needs also to be taken seriously into account in the study of mediatized politics,

illustrating the ways power is effectively exercised through re-contextualization. PASOK, for example, the Greek left-of-centre party, contested an electoral victory in 2009 launching an ambitious and ‘extravagant’ manifesto that had to be legitimized against the government’s (and other national and foreign authorities’) assertion for the need of fiscal consolidation. As I showed, examining an electoral broadcast from that campaign, PASOK’s discourse claimed legitimacy through the re-contextualization of the ethno-populist imaginary of resistance as a dramatized struggle for eradicating chronic socio-political pathogenies (which are ‘revealed’ as the ‘real’ problems) rather than coping with the current economic exigencies (which are dissimulated).

Ideology, inextricably imbricated with power-making, operates in the age of mediatized politics both in the cognitive and affective dynamics of the personalized, conversationalized and dramatized political discourse by re-contextualizing symbolisms from the past so as to mobilise (or demobilise) and legitimize (or delegitimize), *inter alia*, certain institutional actions, social asymmetries and relations of domination, in the present. What we as, researchers and analysts, need to do is constantly look for the different forms these dynamics take in different genres and contexts of mediatized politics.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author

Notes

1. M. Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

2. See indicatively G. Sartori, ‘Politics, Ideology and Belief Systems’, *Revue Européenne des sciences sociales*, 17(46) (1979), pp. 91-114; M. Seliger, *Ideology and Politics* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976).

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3. See M. Scammell and A.I. Langer, 'Political Advertising: Why is it so boring?', *Media, Culture and Society*, 28(5) (2006), pp. 763-784.
 4. B.L. Brock, M.E. Huglen, J.F. Klumpp and S. Howell, *Making Sense of Political Ideology: The Power of Language in Democracy* (MaryLand: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005); T. Eagleton, *Ideology. An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991); S. Hall, 'The rediscovery of "ideology": the return of the repressed in the media' in M. Gurevitch, T. Bennett, J. Curran and J. Woollacott (eds.), *Culture, Society and the Media* (London: Methuen, 1982), pp. 56-90; J.B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture. Social Theory in the era of Mass Communication* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990).
 5. G. Sartori, *op. cit.*, Ref. 2, p. 113.
 6. M. Castells, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1; N. Couldry, 'The Hidden Injuries of Media Power', *Journal of Consumer Culture* 1(2) (2001), pp. 155-177; J.B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity. A Social Theory of the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).
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 9. A. Giddens, 'Four Theses on Ideology', *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 7(1) (1983), pp. 18-21; J.B. Thompson, *op. cit.*, Ref. 4.
 10. R. Wodak and N. Fairclough, 'Recontextualizing European higher education policies: the cases of Austria and Romania', *Critical Discourse Studies* 7(1) (2010), pp. 19-40.
 11. As Leach, a proponent of the 'belief system' nomenclature, admits, in liberalism, for instance, someone can trace an amalgam of inspirations from the 16th century Protestant non-conformism, the 17th century scientific revolution and the 18th century continental strands of Enlightenment; see

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- R. Leach, *op. cit.*, Ref. 8. Hobsbawm's historical genealogy of fascism, an allegedly doctrinaire and totalitarian ideology, also illustrates heterogeneity by reconstructing fascism as a revitalization of old conservatism and counter-revolution nostalgia interspersed with the aggressive militarist and nationalist pulls of the early 20th century, in E. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 1995). For a more conceptually thorough morphological analysis of the ideological 'Titans' of the 20th century see M. Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
12. J.B. Thompson, *op. cit.*, Ref. 4, p.265.
 13. see J.B. Thompson, *op. cit.*, Ref. 6.
 14. D.L. Altheide, and R.P. Snow, *Media Logic* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1979).
 15. T. Meyer, *op. cit.*, Ref. 7, p. 54.
 16. see S. Hjarvard, 'The Mediatization of Society. A Theory of the Media as Agents of Social and Cultural Change', *Nordicam Review*, 29(2) (2008), pp.105-134; T. Meyer, *op. cit.*, Ref. 7; J. Street, *op. cit.*, Ref. 7.
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- Mancini, 'Leader, president, person', *European Journal of Communication*, 26(1) (2011), pp. 48-63.
21. See N. Fairclough, *Media Discourse* (Cambridge : Polity, 1995); D. Hallin, 'Soundbite news: television coverage of elections 1968-1988', *Journal of Communication* 42(2) (1992), pp. 5-24; S. Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
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36. R. Wodak, *op. cit.*, Ref. 35.
37. B.L. Brock, et al, *op. cit.*, Ref. 4.
38. L. Chouliaraki and N. Fairclough, *op. cit.*, Ref. 35; E. Laclau and S. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Social Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).
39. L. Chouliaraki and N. Fairclough, *op. cit.*, Ref. 35.
40. M. Freeden, *op. cit.*, Ref. 11; M. Freeden, *Ideology. A Very Short Introduction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003).
41. M. Freeden, *op. cit.*, Ref. 11, p. 54.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Several discourse analysts do also consider necessary that critical discourse analysis needs to pay more attention to the intentionality of the addresser, not at the expense of, but as a supplement to,

its sensitivity to the structuralities of power; see D. Mancin and A. Mayr, *How to do Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Sage, 2012); S. Price, *Discourse Address Power: the politics of public communication* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007); T. van Dijk, 'Ideology and discourse analysis', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11(2) (2006), pp. 115-140; R. Wodak, *Disorders of Discourse* (London: Longman, 1996).

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49. L. Chouliaraki, *op. cit.*, Ref. 35; L. Chouliaraki, 'Digital Witnessing in conflict zones: The politics of remediation', *Information Communication and Society*, 18(11) (2015), pp. 1362-1377.

50. L. Chouliaraki, 'Towards an Analytics of Mediation', *Critical Discourse Studies*, 3(2) (2006), pp. 153-178.

51. We should note here that in the UK, where paid televised political advertisements are not allowed, political parties are only allocated free time according to the rules enacted in the relevant legislation, such as the Communications acts, for their so-called Party Electoral Broadcasts (PEBs). Concerning what I am interested in in this article, however, the difference is only nominal - advertisements are called PEBs rather than spots or commercials in the UK – since, representationally, PEBs are structured by the 'classic' generic rubrics of political advertising (see B. McNair, *op. cit.*, Ref. 25), as those identified in the empirical examples I use.

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53. N. Fairclough, *op. cit.*, Ref. 34, p. 284.

54. The videos of the three advertisements discussed here are available online; the one by the Democratic party can be accessed through the Museum of the Moving Image/The Living Room Candidate, on the page of 'Presidential Campaign Commercials 1952-2012': B. Obama, *The Country I love* (2008), available at www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/2008/country-i-love; The Conservatives' electoral broadcast can be accessed through the BBC website on the page

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- ‘Election 2010’: *Party election broadcast by the Conservative party – broadcast in England on 13 April 2010*, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/election_2010/8618179.stm; and PASOK’s spot through the YouTube channel greekbox: Παπανδρέου Πάμε! Πρωθυπουργικό Σποτ (2009), available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5E7jpU0xWuk>
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62. M. Castells, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, p.192.
- 63 P. Bourdieu, *op. cit.*, Ref. 47; A. Davis, *The Mediation of Power. A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2007); J.G. March and J.P. Olsen, ‘The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life,’ *The American Political Science Review*, 78(3) (1984), pp. 734-749.
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67. M. Castells, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1.

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68. W.L. Bennett, *News: The Politics of Illusion* (New York, NY: Longman, 2003); B.L. Brock et al, *op. cit.*, Ref. 4.
69. N. Anstead and A Chadwick, 'Parties, election campaigning and the Internet: toward a comparative institutional approach,' in A. Chadwick and P. Howard (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 56-71.
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