

FACT-CHECKING IN CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM

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ITALY- 2016

PAGELLA POLITICA

In December 2016 a referendum was held in Italy to approve a series of reforms in the national constitution. In this context, Pagella Politica fact-checking initiative verified the news circulating in various media in order to promote a more informed debate and vote.

1. CONTEXT

In December 2016, a referendum was held in Italy on a series of changes to the current Constitution. It was a major political battle for the former Prime minister Matteo Renzi: he announced his will to change the Constitution and the current institutional system on his very first speech to the Italian Parliament, at the beginning of 2013. He was able to pass a legislation focused on changing the composition of the Senate, and abolishing the so-called “perfect bicameralism”, meaning the equality of powers and role between the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate.

The political debate around the referendum was heated. The issues at stake were high, so during the summer and autumn of 2016 there was much discussion between those in favour of the changes, mainly the ruling Democratic Party, and the political forces opposed to them, more or less the whole remaining political spectrum and a minority inside the same Democratic Party. The Prime minister Renzi wasn't able to avoid a strong personalisation of the vote, which came mainly as a referendum about himself and his government. Finally, the “No” vote, contrary to the reforms – won by a large margin, of almost 60% to 40% and the Prime Minister resigned shortly afterwards.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE INITIATIVE

In this context, Pagella Politica's main objective was to sensitise the public on the issue of fake news and the dimension of the phenomenon in Italy.

1. The author is Director of Pagella Politica

Side objectives of the initiative were:

- To make Pagella Politica's fact-checking project better known, triggering a public debate on an issue that was mainly discussed with reference to foreign situations (i.e., the US presidential elections).
- Expand Pagella Politica's network of collaborators and their profile in the media landscape.

3. DESIGN OF THE INITIATIVE

- Media analysis.** Based on the experience of the US presidential elections, news related to the referendum were analysed.
- Publication of the information and promotion of the findings.** The findings were published prior to the election and disseminated through various alliances and tools.

4. GOVERNANCE AND ALLIANCES

As part of the usual activities of the *Pagella Politica*, the research and writing were carried out by two members of the staff, with the assistance of the social media manager when it came to promotion.

The initiative started without partners, but some important alliances took place once the product was ready and they helped to disseminate the information.

5. FUNDING

The initiative was conducted as part of the usual activities of Pagella Politica, without a particular effort in financing.

6. IMPLEMENTATION

Media analysis

The initiative was essentially a remake of [the media analysis about the US elections done by Craig Silverman at BuzzFeed](#) in November 2016. Using a tool for collecting and sharing data from Facebook, BuzzFeed said that, in the three months before the presidential elections, some fake election news stories were able to generate even more engagement than the most popular stories from established and legitimate news outlets, such as the New York Times or the Washington Post.

This analysis had a huge success and made headlines around the world. Pagella Politica's initiative aimed at verifying what was happening in Italy almost at the same time, given that the constitutional referendum and the US elections happened only weeks apart.

In concrete terms, Pagella Politica made a similar analysis for the Italian media ecosystem. The organisation used [the BuzzSumo tool](#), Pro version to analyse the engagement of posts containing "Referendum" in their title in the two months before the referendum (October–November 2016). To ensure full disclosure of data and methods, the organisation registered the results in [a publicly available Google Sheet](#).

Publication of the information and promotion of the findings. Pagella Politica wrote an article summarising the findings and [published it on its website](#). It also produced [an infographic](#) with the same results and published the materials two days ahead of the vote, and immediately started promoting it through its social media and contacts in Italian newspapers, radio and TV.



Source: Pagella Politica (2016)

7. RESULTS

Views and scope

The blog post was a success in terms of views. Google Analytics show that it had more than tenfold the views that Pagella Politica's most read analysis of the month usually has. On social media, the article established a new record for the Facebook audience reached by a Pagella Politica's content (not including videos). Pagella Politica experienced an important increase in Facebook and Twitter followers.

Media coverage

The findings were the object of many articles on Italian media. For example, the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* ran [an article](#), as did *Il Sole 24 Ore*, *Il Foglio*, *Il Post* and others. Some days later, Sky TG 24's website quoted the organisation in [an article](#) addressing the issue of fake news in Italy. Internationally, *CNN Money* [talked about Pagella Politica's article](#).

Partnerships

At the moment of the article's publication, Pagella Politica had already struck a deal with the Italian news agency AGI for a daily column for its website, due to get started the following week. With the instant success of the article, the news agency decided to anticipate the start of the collaboration to that very same day, re-posting the article [on their website too](#).

Case study

Pagella Politica's experience has become an useful case study to be commented and discussed in public events, to trigger reflections on the spread of fake news and its influence on democratic processes. For example, Pagella's staff presented the initiative in April, 2017 during the [International Journalism Festival](#) in Perugia, Italy, as well as in various other public occasions in the following months.

8. CHALLENGES

Fact-checking is a relatively new and little-known phenomenon in Italy, often met with resistance and looked at with suspicion by the general media environment. The initiative on the referendum took the bet of better informing the public about the spread of disinformation and misinformation in the country, hoping to get wider attention and to reach a much wider audience than usual. With hindsight, the bet has been won, but the amount of coverage obtained by the enquiry's results couldn't be predicted.

9. LESSONS

TIMING

The initiative showed the importance of quickly following up on themes that are hot in the public debate, both nationally and internationally. That is an obvious focus of the activities of established media, but less so for fact-checking projects, which are often a product of a more extensive research/analysis approach: for this reason, they tend to be less ready to follow and react to the everyday issues of political debate.

MORE DYNAMIC COMMUNICATIONS

At the moment of the publication, Pagella Politica had not yet experimented with producing video content. With hindsight, a short video presenting the results would have been even more successful in terms of social media audience, given mainly the strong focus of Facebook on that kind of content.

FOCUSING THE ENERGY

There are a few, defining moments when media enterprises in general and fact-checking projects in particular have the opportunity to reach a wider audience, and the experience with the referendum confirmed that the electoral process is the best one. The organisation learned the importance of focusing its energies in advance, planning the initiatives to maximise their impact.

FLEXIBILITY

The day-to-day work at Pagella Politica consists mainly in verifying single statements by national politicians. Pagella Politica continued to do so in the weeks and months leading to the referendum, but the true breakthrough came with the referendum initiative: this taught the importance of adapting the work to a slightly different focus – from pure political fact-checking to media analysis – in order to intercept new segments of public.

Pagella Politica – Italy

Pagella Politica is an Italian fact-checking project. Since its founding in October 2012 as a website run by a group of friends, all students in economics and social sciences, the project has grown to a stable presence in the Italian media landscape. It has a segment on fact-checking during a weekly talk show on the national TV (Night Tabloid, Rai2), a daily column on the Italian news agency AGI, and a bimonthly section on the foreign policy magazine East. Ahead of the 2014 European parliamentary elections, Pagella Politica launched the short-lived but highly successful project FactCheckEU. On its website more than 2.200 statements by dozens of national and local political figures are verified. Its staff is based in Rome and Milan.

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