KEEPING IT FAKE: EXPLORING USER-GENERATED POLITICAL FAKES AND THEIR PUBLICS

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Introduction

This paper investigates user-generated political satire, focusing in particular on one genre: fake political accounts. Such fakes, created as social network profiles, satirize politicians or political organizations by impersonating them. Through the impersonation they also satirize anyone – be it a member of the public, a journalist or a political actor – who does not recognize the account as fake and interacts with it as if it were the "real" one. This type of satirical intervention in the public sphere is becoming increasingly popular in different countries (see Wilson, 2011), although it has not been studied extensively. This paper thus provides an exploration of political faking in the context of Italian user-generated satire.

While fakeness has often raised concerns related to its presumed inauthentic nature, I argue that political faking can articulate a powerful critique of the political, by highlighting the carefully manufactured nature of contemporary politics and unmasking its pretense to authenticity. In the paper I investigate how the authors of some Italian fake political accounts navigate the issue of fakeness vis-à-vis the social network platforms they use and the public(s) they encounter; I also focus on how the authors conceptualize their relationships with their public(s).

Method and limitations

I conducted semi-structured interviews with a sample of fake political accounts' creators. The sample, purposive and convenient, includes 12 interviewees, who manage the 8 fake accounts considered in this paper, as indicated in Table 1. Given the nature of these accounts, protecting the privacy of their creators is a priority; I thus attribute the content and quotes from the interviews to their account's name, as opposed to their personal one.

Table 1 - Characteristics of the sample of fake accounts

Fake Account	Facebook likes	Twitter followers	Number of interviewees	Number of authors
Renzo Mattei	14,511	37,000	3	3
Gianni Kuperlo	2,392	27,300	1	1
Casalegglo	304	74,100	2	7
Arfio Marchini	72,711	8,605	1	1
Feudalesimo e Libertà	388,186	11,000	2	5
Marxisti per Tabacci	39,306	3,119	1	Up to 10
Napoletani con Salvini	2,619	-	1	2
Gli Eurocrati	16,213	-	1	2

Note: the follower count refers to December 10, 2015.

My analysis of the publics and their reactions to the satire of the fake accounts is the result of how interviewees make sense of them, and thus it might not correspond to what individual members of the public experience. Nevertheless, there is a certain uniformity in the descriptions given by the interviewees that indicates that the map might be a good starting point for the explorations of publics on social network sites. Further research could complement my work with a systematical content analysis or discourse analysis of users' public comments and reactions.

Findings

Firstly, following the suggestion of one interviewee, I identify two modes of faking: mimetic and explicit. Mimetic fakes impersonate the politician without disclosing that they are fake; they attempt to deceive the public into believing that they are the real thing. On the contrary, explicit fakes impersonate the politician, but do not attempt to hide the fact that they are fake. For instance, their names are close to the real names of the politicians, but different enough to be identified as fakes. Yet, despite the fact that these accounts do not make an effort to deceive the public, many members of the public – but also politicians and journalists – have regarded these fake accounts as real.

Secondly, as can be seen in Figure 1, I map the interactions of the fakes and their public(s) along two axes: one referring to the public's understanding of the satire (do they get it?), the other to the uses that the public makes of the satire, which can be arranged on a continuum between "instrumental" and "textual" use[1].

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[1] The distinction between "instrumental" and "textual" aims at discerning what users do with the satire of the fake accounts, with the understanding that one can derive enjoyment from using satire instrumentally, as well as "simply" consuming it as text.
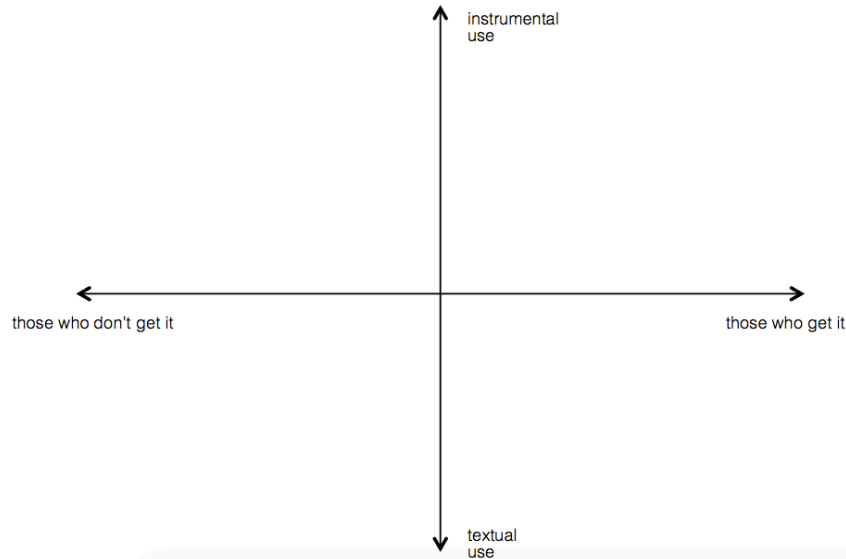
Figure 1. Map of the publics of the fake accounts.

The map allows us to identify five broad categories, going counter-clockwise from the bottom-right quadrant: 1) those who get the satire and just enjoy it; 2) those who get it and use it for their own ends; 3) those who use instrumentally the satire they don't get; 4) those who just don't get it; 5) uncertainty (corresponding to the area at the intersection of the axes). In the paper I provide examples for each category and discuss how interviewees relate to these different publics.

What we would normally understand as the public of a satirist is comprised of people who understand the satire and consume it for their enjoyment. However, mapping the publics of the fake accounts, as they emerge on/through social media, helps us visualize how the fakes deal simultaneously with a much broader spectrum of possible reactions and interactions – four quadrants, not one – which I argue is a function of how "networked publics" operate (boyd 2011).

Furthermore, the category of uncertainty points to an interesting phenomenon, in that the lack of context prevents the satirists from fully understanding what some members of their publics are doing with their satire. Furthermore, this category of uncertainty highlights the multiple meanings and motivations that users can attach to user-generated content. Even the public of the accounts has a public, i.e. users adjust how they interact with the satire of the fake accounts according to their specific audience and their motivations. It is entirely possible that some people who do get the satire of the fakes actually choose to "play dumb" just to see how other people will react. In this sense, they are also involved in a form of playful faking.

Conclusions

My contribution is twofold. Firstly, I suggest that the fake accounts help us visualize slices of the public that we wouldn't otherwise visualize. Digital technologies allow

satirists to get in touch with people who they would have never been able to reach before. However, not all the people that they can reach will be equally predisposed to understanding their satire. In fact, that some people get the joke and some people don't has always been part of satire: not everyone appreciates it in the same way (Day, 2011). Some people have always been excluded by the joke, but now – because of digital technologies – they are part of the potential audience of the joke, and thus become more visible. I thus propose to think of satire (even offline!) as a participatory practice, in which satirists and satirees co-construct the satirical text.

Secondly, I argue for fakeness as a powerful critique to the political and its pretense to authenticity. Fake accounts negotiate their fakeness on a thin line between being popular and being critical, between being understood and being pungent. But this is true also for "regular users": they also have a public; they also adjust their online persona by negotiating different levels of fakeness in order to achieve their goals. Fakeness is part of our daily interactions, as part of networked publics – and it is not necessarily a marker of insincerity. When used as a mode of satire, fakeness can be a playful and effective intervention that criticizes those who lay claims to authenticity, particularly in the political sphere.

References

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