



Online Prosumers and Penal Policy Formation in an Age of Digital Polarization and Populism: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

This article explores the influence of right-wing social media users on penal policy formation processes. Through a passive digital ethnography approach, the study examines online debates preceding and following recent legislative interventions adopted in Italy by the new right-wing government in power since late 2022, namely the criminalization of unauthorized rave parties and the punitive approach to migration management. The article discusses the role of social media users as prosumers, who both consume and produce content, and shows how social media platforms amplify political polarization by promoting selective exposure to like-minded viewpoints and facilitating the spread of divisive content. It also showcases how prosumers contribute to the propagation of punitive narratives and engage in direct interactions with populist leaders through social media platforms. Conversely, political leaders—specifically Italy’s Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni in this case study—use these platforms to disseminate their narratives and create support for their penal policies, employing fear-mongering tactics and simplistic messaging. Our findings suggest that, while social media platforms have transformed political discourse, in the Italian scenario their direct influence on penal policy making from the ground-up remains limited. Instead, traditional top-down channels continue to dominate the process of penal policy formation.

Keywords Penal policy formation · Online prosumerism · Penal populism · Digital polarization · Law-making · Italy

Introduction

Research on social media has consistently shown that, when people consume news via social media, they often tend to sort themselves into relatively segregated networks, with important implications for the polarization of public debate, the rise of populist stances, and the development of digital propaganda (e.g., Bakshy et al., 2015; Flaxman et al., 2016; Yarchi et al., 2021). At the same time, scholars have also stressed how active social media users play a peculiar role in the production and dissemination of information online, being not only passive receivers and ‘consumers’ but also ‘prosumers’ of contents (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). In the new digital environment of the Web 2.0—the shift in internet usage from static websites to interactive platforms and

user-generated content—prosumers are those individuals who actively participate in creating, sharing, and engaging with content on social media platforms. Prosumerism has been discussed in relation to, among other things, political participation or the propagation of dangerous misinformation. Criminologists have highlighted the significance of these issues within the discipline due to the substantial social harms they generate (e.g., Lavorgna, 2021). However, the role of dynamics associated with prosumerism in shaping the ideation, support, and implementation of new legislation has been relatively underexplored (e.g., Baum & Potter, 2019; Ranchordás, 2017; Schroeder, 2019).

In the current context, where tools such as social network analytics and sentiment analysis are increasingly used in defining political strategies (e.g., Recuero et al., 2019; Yusuf et al., 2018), discourses and narratives raised in the online arena do matter when it comes to law-making, particularly when topics eliciting strong emotions and public fears dominate policy discussions. These insights hold particular relevance for criminological and criminal justice scholarship, especially regarding the formulation and implementation of penal policies and strategies.

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Besides exacerbating political polarization and enabling the dissemination of dangerous misinformation, social media platforms can also bolster penal populist discourses by compounding and serving as a conduit for populist rhetoric, amplifying public anxieties, and facilitating the rapid dissemination of punitive narratives. Direct engagement between populist leaders and their followers plays an important role in this regard (e.g., Ayres França et al., 2022; Bracciale et al., 2021; Gil de Zúñiga, et al., 2020; Pérez-Curiel, 2020). The analysis of these dynamics falls within the purview of, and contributes to, digital criminology, as it seeks to understand the multifaceted relationship between digital technologies and the different aspects of the criminal legal system (see Smith et al., 2017; Powell et al., 2018), including public perceptions of crime and the influence of online interactions on policy formulation and implementation.

The relationship between populist discourses, penal policy making and social media platforms can unfold through either top-down or bottom-up processes. On one hand, political leaders and influential figures utilize social media to disseminate penal populist narratives and policies, employing fear-mongering tactics and divisive language to shape public opinion and garner support for specific policies. Conversely, social media platforms provide a space for populist supporters to express their views and influence policy making from the grassroots level. Individuals can voice their fears and frustrations directly, potentially leading to the enactment of harsher penal measures through user-generated content. While we acknowledge that online conversations may not generally and necessarily impact law-making, these dynamics assume a peculiar connotation within the populist context, in real life as well as on social media platforms. Populist party supporters are often more actively engaged in shaping policies compared to other supporters. This is because populism tends to emphasize the idea of representing the ‘will of the people’ against perceived elites or established institutions. As a result, populist leaders and parties often encourage direct participation and involvement from their supporters in policy-making processes. From this perspective, within populist movements, social media have become the ‘people’s voice’ and the ‘people’s rally’ (Gerbaudo, 2018).

In this exploratory study, we aim to investigate the extent to which, if at all, the growing influence of social media and its power dynamics directly shape penal policy decisions and penal policy formation at the national-level from the ground-up. To delve deeper into these intricate dynamics, this study employs a passive digital ethnography approach to examine, as a case study, the online discussions among supporters of Italy’s current majority party, ‘Fratelli d’Italia’ (Brothers of Italy). Our study specifically examines the social media profiles and interactions of Italy’s current Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, to explore the impact of user-generated content

and comments on penal policy formation. These discussions are analyzed, in particular, before and after two legislative interventions enacted in Italy after the general elections of September 2022, which resulted in the establishment of a new executive led by far-right leader Giorgia Meloni: (1) the criminalization of unauthorized rave parties; and (2) the new punitive approach to the management of migration flows into the country, especially coming from the Mediterranean Sea by boats. To lay the groundwork for our analysis, we first examine the emergence and importance of digital *agoras*, along with the rise of prosumers on social media platforms during periods of rising digital polarization and penal populist politics. Building on this foundation, the article focuses on these two laws as a case study to investigate the connection between penal policy making and digital dynamics in the Italian context.

Our analysis indicates that while the emergence of prosumers on social media platforms has significantly impacted public discourse and political engagement, especially on politically-sensitive or politically-tense matters, their direct influence on law-making in general, and penal policy formation in particular, remains, to say the least, in a nascent stage. Despite the potentially transformative potential of social media, our case study indicates that, in the Italian context, ‘wannabe’ prosumers and their opinions have not yet attained the requisite level of influence to effectively drive legislative changes from the grassroots up. This suggests that while social media platforms have certainly expanded the public sphere and fostered new forms of engagement, traditional channels of political influence and decision-making dynamics still largely dominate the policy formation landscape.

The Rise of Prosumers in the New Digital Agoras

The advent of the Web 2.0 has led to fundamental transformations in the relationship between media and politics, leading to a plethora of changes in different areas, ranging from the politico-media nexus (e.g., Kruse et al., 2018; Trottier & Fuchs, 2014) to modifications of power dynamics (e.g., Bruns et al., 2016; Gilani et al., 2020). Two main trends, in particular, are of core relevance for the present study. On the one hand, political discussions have colonized the realm of digital communications, with social media platforms gaining an increasingly important role for political discourse and identity formation (Papacharissi, 2016). On the other hand, a variety of new sociotechnical features have led to noxious forms of political polarization, which are generally considered harmful to the functioning of contemporary democracies as forms of ‘democratic erosion’ (Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2021; Svulik, 2019).

As previously noted, the advent and popularization of social media platforms have revolutionized the media landscape in many ways. For instance, social media platforms have substantially changed how information is sought after (Pearson, 2021). A considerable number of people now primarily access news online by browsing the homepages of their preferred news outlets. Conversely, those with limited exposure to traditional news sources predominantly rely on social media for their news intake (Flaxman et al., 2016).

Additionally, given the interactive nature of social media platforms, users have become active participants, creating and sharing their own content alongside consuming information from others. This shift has empowered individuals to play a more active role in shaping online communities and content, blurring the traditional boundaries between producers and consumers on the internet. The rise of ‘prosumers’ (Toffler, 1980)¹ and the increased popularity of user-generated content have facilitated the partial implosion of traditional dynamics in information production and consumption, significantly altering previously established power relations (Foucault, 1980; Zajc, 2015). The ‘prosumptive’ use of social media has been also associated with online political participation in late modern democracies (e.g., Yamamoto et al., 2020), as it has proved capable of providing virtual spaces amounting to new digital *agoras* (Ranchordás, 2017) for political engagement where narratives are effectively *co-produced* by users (Wahlström & Törnberg, 2021). Within these *agoras*, through new and enhanced sociotechnical possibilities, different voices are now heard (e.g., Walsh, 2020), operating in a space where they can (or attempt to) create a different type of power dislocated from its traditional sites, and linked to a new type of mediatic and digital capital. This way, ordinary citizens utilizing social media platforms may influence the representation of and the narratives surrounding important policy issues, often developing counter-narratives and oppositional discourses (Lavorgna, 2021; Lavorgna et al., 2021, 2022) or acting as agenda-setters and advancing specific claims as to measures to be enacted (Luckner, 2021).² Online platforms are not solely utilized by ordinary citizens, but also by politicians themselves. This phenomenon, known as ‘celebrity politics’, has garnered criticism for its potential to trivialize, sensationalize, and oversimplify

political discourse, thereby contributing to the erosion of democratic engagement (Crouch, 2004; Giglioli & Baldini, 2019; Putnam, 2000).

While external influences on legislative activities of elected bodies have traditionally been seen as detrimental to their functioning, the role of media intervention and integration within relevant political and legal processes has been increasingly recognized, and certainly does not represent a novelty. Traditional media that existed prior to the advent of digital and internet based-platforms heavily engaged in it (e.g., Ash et al., 2021; Peleg & Bogoch, 2012). The concept of ‘mediatization’, for instance, has been used to stress how social institutions became increasingly dependent on cynical media and their commercial logic (Hjarvard, 2008; Peleg & Bogoch, 2012), with media activities extending and partially substituting non-media ones (Schulz, 2004). The emergence of social media and prosumerism, with their new logic and power dynamic, expanded the opportunities for citizen engagement, information dissemination, and direct participation in political and policy-making processes. However, it has also introduced new challenges for the integrity of public discourse, policy discussions and decision-making. Social media platforms enable direct and immediate communication between citizens and policy makers. Prosumers are now positioned to engage in dialogue, provide feedback, and exert pressure on politicians, this way potentially creating a new channel for influencing decision-making processes.

Digital Environments and Penal Populism

An enduring concern in recent times is that the identities formed or reinforced online are increasingly polarized, with the effect that people’s partisan allegiances can distort preference formation at the expense of factual information (Mullinix, 2016; Settle, 2018). Research has shown that overall, due to both social and technical features of social media, how we get information online is generally associated with an increase in the ideological distance between individuals, leading to major intergroup segregation leading to antagonistic dynamics with non-groups members (e.g., Bakshy et al., 2015; Devlin & Grant, 2017; Sasahara et al., 2021; Schmidt et al., 2017). This antagonism constructed and amplified within social media environments has major political (e.g., ‘information gerrymandering’, see Stewart et al., 2019) and social (e.g., erosion of empathy linked to the marginalization of outgroups, see Wojcieszak, 2010; the increased use of confrontation, insult and misinformation, see Katz, 1997) consequences. It also impacts intergroup dynamics (Tajfel, 1970). Through the use of converging narratives (Lavorgna, 2021; Lavorgna & Carr, 2021), polarization can penetrate across all social identities, leading to further demarcation

¹ The term ‘prosumer’ is a combination of the words ‘producer’ and ‘consumer’ and refers to a concept that emerged in the field of economics and marketing. A prosumer is an individual who not only consumes goods or services but also actively participates in their production or customization.

² It is worth noting that not everyone has the social or cultural capital (or is willing) to participate in social media discussions, rendering social media a space where only some people—not all—participate and engage with. That said, data suggest that as many as 62.3% of the world’s population actively uses social media (Chaffey, 2024).

and radicalization (Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2021). Digital polarization leads to the creation of echo chambers when individuals are exposed to information that systematically aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, reinforcing their perspectives while limiting exposure to opposing viewpoints. This creates an environment where differing opinions are ignored or dismissed, deepening divisions and inhibiting constructive dialogue (e.g., Cinelli et al., 2021).

Political leaders also fuel political conflicts based on pre-existing cleavages that are at the basis for party formation and voter identification (Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2021). Echo chambers on social media, particularly within far-right populism, are reinforced internally by users who share and amplify like-minded content, creating insular communities. Externally, political leaders contribute by disseminating polarizing rhetoric and validating extremist views, exacerbating the echo chamber effect and fostering a sense of legitimacy among followers. This dual reinforcement from within and without amplifies polarization and entrenches ideological divisions (Barberá, 2020).

Political polarization on social media platforms significantly influences populist discourses related to crime and punishment policies. The term ‘penal populism’ describes the adoption of harsh and punitive criminal justice policies and rhetoric by political leaders to appeal to public fears and anxieties about crime and disorder (Garland, 2001, 2022). Populism, in this context, refers to a political strategy that seeks to gain support by appealing to the concerns of ordinary people (Pratt, 2007, 2023; Roberts et al., 2002; Zimring & Johnson, 2006). Populist politicians often exploit public fears and concerns about crime and safety, and social media exacerbates and intensifies these emotions (Aguerrí et al., 2022; Schroeder, 2019). Digital polarization contributes to an environment characterized by heightened emotions and anxiety surrounding issues of crime and punishment, which creates favorable conditions for populist politicians to rally support for their policies. These policies tend to be based on simplistic or misleading information and have adverse consequences for marginalized communities (Engesser et al., 2017; Postill, 2018).

In recent years, the influence of social media platforms on political strategies promoting tougher criminal justice policies has become increasingly evident. In our analysis, we examine social media interactions within *digital agoras prior to* and *following* two highly debated legal interventions promoted by the right-wing Italian government in power since October 2022. These interventions pertain to anti-social behavior and immigration management policies. Before discussing the methodology used, we offer a concise summary of the particular legal interventions being examined within the evolving Italian political landscape.

The New Italian Political Context and the First Legislative Interventions of the Meloni’s Government Concerning Law-and-Order and Immigration Policy

Giorgia Meloni, the leader of Italy’s far-right party ‘Fratelli d’Italia’ (Brothers of Italy), has been serving as the country’s Prime Minister since October 2022. Under her leadership, her party holds the majority in a center-right coalition government. In recent years, Meloni and her party have gained popularity, particularly among conservative voters disenchanted with mainstream political parties (Vampa, 2023). Meloni’s leadership holds a dominant role in national politics, while political resistance from the center-left tends to find greater success at the regional and municipal levels (e.g., Bolgherini & Grimaldi, 2022; Bordignon et al., 2024).

Meloni’s populist approach is characterized by several defining features (Donà, 2022). Firstly, her populism is rooted in a strong sense of nationalism and patriotism. She emphasizes the importance of Italian culture, history, and safeguarding the nation from perceived external threats like immigration. Additionally, she takes an anti-European Union stance, criticizing the EU’s economic policies and advocating against further surrendering of national sovereignty to supranational institutions. Secondly, Meloni’s populist approach places great emphasis on traditional conservative values, including family, religion, and national identity. Lastly, and importantly for the purposes of this article, one of the notable aspects of Meloni’s populism is her emphasis on law and order. She has voiced criticism of Italy’s justice system and immigration policies, advocating for stricter controls on immigration and harsher penalties for criminals who threaten public safety, aiming to protect law-abiding citizens. (Baldini et al., 2022; Nadeau, 2018). Simultaneously, in line with trends observed since the late 1990s, there exists a juxtaposition between stringent policies and narratives targeting specific groups and a relatively lenient approach towards white-collar criminality (Corda, 2016).

Anti-social behavior, including vandalism, loitering, and public drunkenness, frequently dominates discussions within penal populist discourses (Jennings et al., 2017; Pratt & Miao, 2019). These narratives call for harsh punishment and often portray young individuals as threats to public safety (Waiton, 2008), resulting in policies that disproportionately impact them (Mooney & Young, 2006). Additionally, the concept of ‘cimmigration’, blending immigration and criminal law enforcement (Bosworth, 2014; Franko, 2019), has been a focus for populist politicians advocating for strict immigration control to combat crime (Barker, 2012), a stance commonly seen on the right-wing agenda long before gaining power.

Consistent with these views, one of the first legislative initiatives of Ms. Meloni's government was the adoption of a legislative decree (D.L. No. 162/2022, converted into Law No. 199/2022) imposing severe custodial sentences on organizers of illegal rave parties. The swift introduction of this piece of legislation was prompted by a 3-day unauthorized Halloween rave party held in the city of Modena. The new law criminalized organizers or promoters of events that endanger public order or safety, with prison terms ranging from 3 to 6 years, accompanied by fines ranging from €1000 to €10,000. Concerns have been raised that this law could potentially grant authorities the power to suppress peaceful protests, as it applies to gatherings of 50 or more people that 'arbitrarily invade other people's land or buildings' (Giuffrida, 2022).

The second legislative intervention considered for the present study (D.L. No. 1/2023, converted into Law No. 15/2023), dealing with the management of migration flows into the country, enacted a new system which directly targets civil sea rescue organizations by envisaging high fines and the seizure and confiscation of the ship if the captain and shipowner do not comply with new, stricter rules. Serious concerns have been raised by NGOs involved in sea search and rescue operations. One of the most contentious aspects of the new legislation is a provision that requires NGOs to request a port of entry immediately after completing a rescue operation and to promptly proceed to the assigned disembarkation port designated by competent authorities. As a result, this provision hampers NGOs from conducting multiple rescues within a single mission, as they are now obligated to proceed directly to the designated port after each rescue operation, potentially disregarding other distress calls (Tranchina, 2023).

These two pieces of legislation have been criticized, respectively, as an example of highly performative yet ineffectual penal populism (though in this context performativity *is* action, see Garland, 2001, p. 22; Newburn & Jones, 2005) and as a *de-facto* criminalization of sea rescue, in contrast with international provisions (e.g., Calvi, 2022; ASGI, 2023; Masera, 2023).

Ms. Meloni's penal policy appears to be a blend of rhetoric-driven measures aimed at political gain, which fail to effectively identify or address underlying issues, and an increasing reliance on punitive approaches to tackle long-standing, alleged "emergencies".

Methodology

For this exploratory study, we investigated the online debates that took place shortly *before* and *after* the legislative interventions described above. Data were collected retrospectively through research notes and analyzed in mid-2023,

covering posts and comments published from January 2019 to June 2023. It is important to note that we do not claim to have conducted a comprehensive study of a specific virtual community. However, we approached the research with an ethnographic perspective and incorporated elements of the ethnographic method to gain insights into the dynamics of online discussions (e.g., Androutopoulos, 2008; Blevins & Holt, 2009). As discussed in detail within the literature (see e.g., Fuchs, 2017; Lavorgna, 2021), in the current landscape of increasing 'digital positivism' driven by big data research methods and computational criminology in online research, this work underscores the importance of preserving space for qualitative analyses of smaller datasets that emphasize interpretative and critical approaches. Such qualitative analyses enable a closer examination of specific online social networks, allowing researchers to 'zoom in' and scrutinize them in greater detail (see, e.g., Latzko-Toth et al., 2022; Lavorgna & Carr, 2021; Kermani et al., 2024).

Our digital research concentrated on purposefully chosen open social media pages and groups. Initially, we focused on Ms. Meloni's official Facebook page, boasting 2.7 million followers, and the largest support group for Ms. Meloni on Facebook, which has 115,000 members and operates as an open group. We also examined Meloni's official X/Twitter account with 1.8 million followers and her Instagram account with 1.5 million followers. However, we found that the content largely mirrored what was posted on Facebook, resulting in data saturation across these additional platforms. The posts analyzed varied in engagement, ranging from a minimum of slightly over 100 comments, 200 shares, and 1000 likes (in the supporting group) to over 11 thousand comments, 2.4 thousand shares, and 29 thousand likes on Ms. Meloni's official page. The majority of user comments were directed towards Ms. Meloni or other members of the community as a whole, although some user-to-user interactions were also observed. These comments primarily consisted of text, occasionally accompanied by memes, pictures, and emoticons.³ While these figures served as our initial focus, we also examined the content linked within the posts, extending our analysis by up to one additional click (for instance, there were several re-posts from *La Verità* ['The Truth'], a conservative right-wing Italian newspaper) or via shared hashtags. Overall, twenty posts (and the comments linked to them) were particularly meaningful for our work because they were closely linked to our case studies, but our observation extended beyond them. This adaptive and flexible approach enabled the observation of political

³ It is noteworthy that one of the prominent prosumers who initiated several significant posts in the support group is likely operating a fake profile. This suspicion arises from the profile's suspicious activity, which exclusively shares conspiratorial, anti-vax, and pro-Russia content.

conversations in their natural settings—specifically, the prosumptive agoras of interactive social media platforms, where users could easily engage, whether by actively creating new content over time or by making occasional comments, on specific political and law-making agendas. Overall, the digital ethnographic approach afforded us the opportunity to ‘zoom in’ and explore the convergence of polarizing narratives online in a more culturally oriented and detailed manner, and enabled us to better understand and examine the ideological underpinnings of legislative interventions and their support within the online space.

The decision to focus on Ms. Meloni’s profiles is strategic, given her prominence and influence within the right-wing social media sphere. While examining the content and interactions related to a single political figure may introduce limitations, the goal of this exploratory study is to analyze the impact of social media dynamics associated with a polarizing and highly influential figure on penal policy formation. We acknowledge concerns regarding the representativeness of social media data, as many individuals either do not use social media or engage infrequently, making such data unrepresentative of the offline population (Splichal, 2022, p. 7). However, the intent of this study is not to represent the entire electorate but to explore the potential influence of social media activity on penal policy formation through a detailed case study.

Data (here defined as all material publicly available, such as words, images/memes, and videos) were collected manually; research notes were used to capture and synthesize relevant information in an ethically-sensitive way. Our practical strategy was guided by the need to safeguard the privacy and anonymity of the participants observed in our study, while ensuring respect for existing guidelines for online research on social media and the policies of the platform accessed (e.g., BSA, 2023). Due to the nature of our study, we were constrained to observe only public content, which introduces a selective visibility bias (as discussed by Yarchi et al., 2021, p. 114). The quotes provided in the following section have been slightly edited to maintain anonymity and improve clarity. This research received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Bologna.

Studies on polarization on social media are often based on computational methodologies and large datasets (e.g., Martella & Roncarolo, 2023; Radicioni et al., 2021; Yarchi et al., 2021). In our exploratory study, however, we chose to prioritize qualitative analysis of a smaller dataset to delve into the dynamics connecting specific narratives promoted by online network supporters with the legislative interventions and how these choices are received by the supporters. Adopting a constructivist epistemology, this study does not seek external generalization, but rather aims to provide meaningful insights through interpretation. With our approach, we align ourselves with the existing literature

acknowledging the significance of employing a diverse range of methods and epistemologies when working with social media data (Halford et al., 2018).

Additionally, as lamented by Yarchi et al. (2021), researchers’ heavily reliance on platforms with open API (such as X/Twitter) for computational research based on large datasets might have led to some overgeneralization on algorithmic and social features of social media, and on how they contribute to polarization dynamics. Each platform, indeed, has its own characteristics (including demographic trends, see Gambo & Özad, 2020), and biases linked to data selection (if only motivated by research ethics and practical difficulties in using automated ways to gathering data from many other platforms) can be problematic. Moreover, some platforms limit, to different extents, the publication of certain posts and comments. For the present study, we employed a cross-platform approach to mitigate potential issues; however, as noted above, for the scope of our work differences between platforms were irrelevant.

After collecting the data and research notes, we conducted a manual qualitative thematic analysis, with a specific focus on the symbolic power of language (Bourdieu, 1977) and linguistic structures and strategies. Our aim was to uncover the intricate relationship between language and social practices, as well as to reveal the embedded ideologies within rhetorical techniques (Masroor et al., 2019). We conducted a thorough thematic analysis of the data, employing a balanced approach of both inductive and deductive coding (focusing on rave parties, immigration, criminalization, punishment, rhetorical artifacts; see Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Each researcher independently performed the analysis, after which the results were jointly discussed, synthesized, and integrated. Together, we identified four key themes to guide our analysis and discussion: positioning, recontextualization, nostalgia and pride, and disappointment. These themes provided a framework for understanding the dynamics at play and facilitated a comprehensive analysis of the data.

Results: Feeding Pre-Existing Narratives and Responding to Penal Policy Formation

Positioning

Both Ms. Meloni’s own narrative (especially during the campaign period) and that of her supporters (both before and after the general elections) are consistent in positioning various ‘others’ (the targets of the legislative intervention, or the political counterparts) via a number of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ polarizing strategies (van Dijk, 1993; Oddo, 2011; Devlin & Grant, 2017). These revolve around the contrasting dynamics of ‘positive self-presentations’ and ‘negative

other-presentations' (Masroor et al., 2019, p. 5). While some of the positive self-presentations (such as 'the morally good Italians' [*gli Italiani perbene*]), will be discussed in the context of the 'nostalgia and pride' theme, our main focus in this section is the exploration of negative other-presentations.

Three primary groups of 'others' consistently emerge: left-wing individuals, immigrants, and globalist elites. These groups are prominently positioned as 'others' in Meloni's posts during the pre-electoral period, and their presence continues in the posts and comments of prosumers, sometimes accompanied by offensive remarks. This is not unexpected, as the perception of community consensus can empower extreme members to express their views more strongly, leading to a decline in respect and empathy toward those outside the group (Yarchi et al., 2021).

For instance, with regard to illegal rave parties, during the summer of 2021, even amid pandemic restrictions, Ms. Meloni expressed her discontent regarding the inaccessibility of legitimate clubs while highlighting the presence of young people 'dancing around in inopportune public places during raves or other uncontrolled events' (7.7.21). She shared the comments of a right-wing journalist who asserted that these events were attended by 'party-goers' from other countries and immigrants (21.8.21). Subsequently, her supporters created and shared an image online framing rave-goers as 'people bivouacking amassed among drugs', allegedly using her words (23.8.21). Following the shutdown of a rave event in Modena, Ms. Meloni commented, 'we demonstrated that, when the State is present, its citizens can live in a more secure Nation' (2.11.22).

Her supporters actively engaged in commenting on these matters. As rave-goers were associated with the political Left, they were dismissed, in examples from August to the end of 2022, as 'red ticks', 'drug addicts', 'runaways', 'gutter punks' [*punkabbestia*], 'anarchists who only want to do what they want, that is drugs, not working, sex... not matter with whom...', and 'the rotten part of the country'. There were also instances of attacks directed towards self-managed 'social centres' [*centri sociali*, which are present in numerous cities in Italy and typically associated with various left-wing political networks],⁴ accused of 'producing an unacceptable climate of hate' (19.12.22).

In early January 2023 (3.1.23), announcing via social media the decree on the management of migration flows, Ms. Meloni wrote: 'Illegal immigration and human trafficking: Italy's era of persecuting those who respect the rules and turning a blind eye to those who systematically violate them has come to an end'. In March 2023, while commenting on the management of migration flows into the country,

Ms. Meloni emphasized that it was their intention not to succumb to the pressures of those advocating for a world without national borders (15.3.23). Her supporters, in discussions about immigration in the days and weeks following several posts by Ms. Meloni on the topic (e.g., among those considered, 21.2.19; 13.1.20; 13.4.20; 9.8.21; 11.8.22; 3.1.23; 19.3.23), targeted the 'global elites', NGOs involved in migrant rescues in the Mediterranean, and journalists perceived as left-wing or 'globalist'. They expressed desires for them to 'go to North Korea', or even issued threats of violence, stating that they would personally confront them ('you make me puke... if I see you around... one by one, incusing women... I will teach you [...] REVOLUTION!'). There is an assumption that rescue missions are nothing else but 'visions' supported by 'others', i.e. privileged individuals, and that these actions are perceived as 'diverting resources from impoverished Italians'.

Migration toward Italy is considered 'an invasion of monkeys and pigs' protected by 'do-gooders' [*buonisti*, a depreciative term employed to indicate those with excessively moral and benevolent behavior]. Those perceived as being on the Left (basically all political parties and ideologies that are not aligned with the far-right) are often portrayed as 'inept and incompetent without any merit', 'causing only harm', 'vulgar and angry', and even referred to as 'the cancer of Italy'. Some users express the belief that the in-group must 'stop' them (including, according to a few users, 'the Communist Pope'), while others suggest that this is part of an alleged '[Leftist] attempt to have the country invaded by immigrants, as they will never vote for the Right'.

Overall, in othering processes a number of strategies are employed, ranging from the use of pronouns (ours versus theirs) and the use of hyperboles to stress (in-group) self-glorification and (out-group) dehumanization (Ekman, 2019; Masroor et al., 2019). In this context, the act of pillorying becomes a central element of positioning, as insults play a significant role in constructing intergroup identities (in accordance with Korostelina, 2014). This is particularly evident when the social acceptance of the out-group is discouraged, and negative characteristics are attributed to its members. For example, when referring to a female minister from the previous government, numerous offensive remarks (Summer 2021 and 2022 until the elections) are employed (e.g., 'They are so ugly, uglier than the things they do!'; 'She is uglier than a monkey'; 'Her lips are like those of a pig, she is the minister of pigs'; 'She is crazy, a Trojan horse'; 'She should be whipped on the public square, according to the Islamic usages she is so fond of'). In line with the findings of Yarchi et al. (2021, p. 114), our observations reveal patterns of cross-cutting posts that prioritize conflict over meaningful argumentation. These posts serve as public declarations aimed at silencing and shaming opponents within the digital sphere, fostering that climate of toxic communication online

⁴ These self-managed social centres are often squatting properties that serve as spaces for alternative and non-commercial activities.

that is now recognized as harmful and criminogenic by digital criminology scholars (see Lavorgna & Powell, 2023).

Recontextualization

We also observed how discussions surrounding crime and punishment policies tapped into public anxieties and concerns regarding safety and crime, with these emotions being amplified in online spaces (Aguerri et al., 2022; Schroeder, 2019). Specifically, when examining the discourse on immigrants and refugees in both Ms. Meloni's posts and user interactions on Facebook, we noted the strategy, as outlined by Ekman (2019), of remediating and recontextualizing mainstream news related to immigration. This involved reframing or reformulating parts of the text or omitting explanatory factors in a way that shifted the focus to crime, social unrest, economic costs, or cultural misunderstandings. By employing this strategy, the narrative shifted from an 'us' versus 'them' dynamic to a narrative of 'order' and safety versus 'disorder' and lawlessness.

Meloni's narratives consistently displayed strong anti-immigrant positions both before and after the elections. These views were already prominent in her political manifesto during the pre-electoral period. For example, in the posts considered as early as 2019 (e.g., 21.2.19), she called for naval blockades to prevent migrant boats from departing North Africa in order to 'stop human traffickers' (a recurring *leitmotif* consistently present since at least 2014). In another example among many, in the summer of 2022, she commented on a violent incident in a seaside town in Italy, highlighting the fact that the offenders were 'four [allegedly North African] youngsters completely wet and shirtless', emphasizing the perceived unsustainability of the situation ('The situation has become really unsustainable') (24.6.22).

The association between (darker-skinned and/or Muslim) immigrants and (fear of) crime was frequently observed in the content produced by Meloni's supporters, which also in this case was mostly published in response to Meloni's own posts, or below other material in the support group showing general support to Ms. Meloni. Conspiratorial ideas emerged in some posts and comments retrieved especially from August 2021, expressing concerns about an 'Islamic invasion' characterized as either 'silent' or 'violent', with the suggestion that armed attackers rather than individuals in need could enter Italian shores through the same routes. Other fears included the 'destruction of Christian churches', an alleged 'increase in crimes against humanity', or being 'forced to convert to Islam'. In news reports about refugees arriving from Afghanistan, women were warned to 'prepare themselves for being compelled to wear burqas'. Quotes attributed to Oriana Fallaci, a controversial Italian journalist critical of Islam in her later years, were used, both within posts and as images

shared on social media platforms, to emphasize the idea that 'Europe is becoming Eurabia' and that 'Immigration, rather than terrorism, is the weapon they count on to conquer, annihilate and destroy us. Immigration is a weapon aimed at conquering and destroying Western society'. Many supporters expressed general fears that immigrants would bring 'terrorism and crime' and 'import barbaric practices', frequently mentioning concerns about sexual violence and advocating for curfews.

Consider, for example, the following snippets:

'Criminals who run our cities doing atrocities like the one against Pamela [an Italian 18-year-old woman who in 2018 was brutally murdered by a Nigerian drug dealer] are nothing but a gift by those leftist communists and globalists that have filled our ITALY with illegal immigrants' (22.2.23);

'I hope some will be soon relocated elsewhere, as with everything that is happening around us [presence of immigrants] it is impossible to live!' (3.1.23);

'If we continue to incarcerate smugglers in Italian prisons, taxpayers would be burdened with this [the cost of their incarceration] for 30 years?!' (19.3.23).

The potential refugee status of immigrants often faces scrutiny, with questions raised such as, 'If there is truly a war, why do they flee instead of staying in their country to fight? Why aren't these African countries developing a bit?'. Additionally, there are calls for immigrants to be 'sent back to their home countries!' (Comments to Meloni's posts on 21.2.19 and 3.1.23).

Similarly, discussions on rave parties are recontextualized and presented as matters of law and order. For instance, Ms. Meloni's posts in November and December 2022 highlight the importance of prosecuting those who participate in illegal raves. Commenting on the new criminalization of illegal rave parties, she noted: 'It is a provision that I stand by and take pride in because Italy, after years of governments bowing down to illegality, will no longer be the worst performer in terms of safety (...) It is fair to prosecute those who arrive from all Europe to participate to illegal raves where they abusively occupy private or public spaces, without respecting any safety prescription and, moreover, facilitating the trade and use of drugs' (2.11.22); [commenting on a manifestation against the 'anti-rave decree'] 'Our Government (...) won't be intimidated by those who wish to see Italy as subjugated by illegality' (19.12.22). Consistently, following these statements, her supporters also emphasize how Italy has become a 'safe haven' [zona franca] for those who wish to defy the law, going so far as to suggest that rave parties are organized in Italy specifically because the country allows for lawlessness.

Nostalgia and Pride

Ms. Meloni has tried to publicly distance herself from the neofascist past of her political side (or, at least, to distance her neofascist past from fascism itself, see Ghiglioni, 2023). In the content created by some of her supporters, however, there are instances where references to fascism and the occasional use of far-right symbolism can be observed. These include the presence of the Italian fascist eagle and the association of black hearts with the Italian flag. Slogans such as ‘Dio, Patria, Famiglia’ [‘God, Nation, Family’], which originated during the Renaissance but were widely used in the fascist era, are commonly observed. It is not uncommon for social groups to appeal to socio-cultural dimensions that are (perceived to be) valued in a particular context to gain in-group or public approval, thus legitimizing their biases (Masroor et al., 2019).

Italy, as the beloved *patria*, is something to be actively protected ([rhyming] *La Patria non si svende, si difende* [‘Your Country is something you need to defend, not to sell off’], 24.9.22), and there are calls for action in this regard, as exemplified in the following snippets from the pre-electoral period (2021–2022):

‘Good evening, we are still talking here, but when are we going to act? We are just cowards, can you wake up, let’s all go to Rome, to the Senate, let’s do what we have to do...they cannot arrest us all’ (21.8.2021); ‘Forgive my ignorance, but couldn’t we arrange a super-revolt against those bastards governing us?? It is useless to write on social media if we don’t translate it into concrete actions’ (21.8.21);

‘Come on, Giorgia, you have your people following you, be vocal and mobilize your supporters to take to the streets, you have to defend our people’ (9.8.21).

Unsurprisingly, anti-European sentiments are common (e.g., ‘Let’s get out of the EU!’; ‘I just hope we will be a sovereign nation again, as we were before this damn EU, they destroyed everything our ancestors had built (...), being independent is the best possible thing in this world, but modern society is destroying that’, 24.9.22). The world beyond Italy is often perceived negatively, seen as a place for those who lack patriotism for their own country (‘You need to go away, you are disrespecting Italy, our beautiful country, you are not patriots!’, 21.8.21).

A contrast is drawn between an idealized, nostalgic Italy of the past (the ‘good old days’) and the current state of the country. Consistently, present-day Italy is depicted as a ‘banana republic’, a place where illegality thrives and is allowed, for instance, when claiming that some ravers came from France, as in France rave parties would never be allowed. It is referred to as ‘the beautiful country [*bel paese*] of illegality!’, the ‘rubbish dump of Europe’, or a ‘refugee

camp’. If Ms. Meloni describes Italy as a ‘Nation be revived’ in her first new year’s speech as Prime Minister (1.1.23), her supporters similarly called, in their comments, for the need to ‘bring back order and legality’, as ‘Italy deserves discipline and order’ (‘We want more rules for everyone!’) after being ruined ‘by incompetents creating damages, being paid to propagate lies and go against the Constitution’. In order for this to happen, some ‘good old days’ measures are supported, such as reinstating compulsory military service (*naia*, in a slang term), as a way to educate and improve the youth.

Disappointment

So far, we have observed instances of alignment between Ms. Meloni and her supporters. However, after Ms. Meloni assumed the role of Prime Minister of Italy, we began to notice a growing number of disgruntled voices among her former supporters. While the overall popular support remains strong, with several posts and comments showing general support to the Prime Minister (e.g., ‘Go on, Giorgia. We are all with you!’; ‘You are the politician we were dreaming of!’), many individuals increasingly expressed their dissatisfaction with the continued arrival of undocumented migrants by boat (‘Congratulations for the great job and all the electoral promises [clapping hands] [with irony]’⁵, 19.3.23; ‘Nice to see your post remembering Pamela [the young Italian woman murdered by a Nigerian drug dealer, see above], but what are you doing about illegal immigration? [...] You won the elections first and foremost to solve this problem’, 22.2.23). Others voiced their grievances regarding certain decisions related to European and foreign policy (‘One would have expected to see some backbone, given all that was said while being in the opposition... Rather than Brothers of Italy, we should name you Brothers of Ukraine, or Sisters of Europe’, 6.3.23) or, more generally, expressed a growing frustration that their concerns have not yet been addressed (‘I care about things close to me!! Prices are going up; inflation is going up!! You are doing a terrible job!!’, 3.1.23; ‘This is outrageous! This is against what you promised in the electoral campaign [with reference to the possibility to maintaining a special early retirement policy for women], we won’t forget about this!’, 19.12.22). It is suggested/recognized that raves were not an actual security priority (‘So we don’t have raves anymore... but there are still robberies, drug dealing, (...) and now they want to decriminalize abuse of office. Don’t you feel fooled?’, 4.7.23).

⁵ A minor methodological note is that the use of irony and teasing in this context can hinder the aptness of certain automated analyses (such as sentiment analyses) in determining indicators of hostility or elements of de-polarization.

Discussion: The Inability of Right-Wing ‘Wannabe’ Prosumers to Influence Penal Policy Formation From the Ground-Up

While the connection between politics and social media is not new, as various actors utilize these platforms to advance their interests and values (e.g., Nahon, 2016), the specific dynamics shaping law-making in general, and penal policy formation in particular, have yet to be fully understood. Political leaders, like Giorgia Meloni in our study, by acting as prosumers themselves, deliberately employ social media to promote penal populist narratives. This approach enhances their symbolic power and amplifies their message, effectively laying the groundwork for advancing specific legislative initiatives. In doing so, as the literature on the participatory nature of Web 2.0 and social media use by individuals suggests, they play a significant role—albeit with varying degrees of influence—in driving demands for populist penal measures.

Our objective for this study was to investigate the extent to which the increasing impact of social media shapes legislative decisions and penal policy formation, considering in particular the involvement of supporters of the new right-wing government in the Italian context led by Ms. Meloni. We hypothesized that the increasing mediatization practices and power dynamics of social media could have a direct impact on penal policy choices (Hjarvard, 2008; Peleg & Bogoch, 2012). If our initial hypothesis were true, we would have anticipated observing a direct influence of bottom-up information creation and dissemination on legislative interventions, leading to the framing and promotion of specific penal policy agendas. However, our findings do not support such a hypothesis. Instead, we found that bottom-up narratives and contents primarily served to reinforce pre-existing ideologies and identities, rather than directly shaping and fostering specific penal policy options. Right-wing online supporters of Giorgia Meloni in our study lacked the symbolic and practical ability to use language as a tool of social power, i.e., not just as a means of communication but also a medium through which power relations are exercised in society (see Bourdieu, 1991). The dynamics of the influence of online networks we observed was more aligned with a top-down framework where politicians utilize social media to consolidate and expand political support for certain policies and legislative initiatives, this way reinforcing the symbolic power of their communicative strategies in targeted sections of society.

In our case study, while social media interactions can indeed amplify and propagate narratives, their impact on legislative interventions is mediated by other factors such as political strategies, ideology, identity, media

manipulation, and practical concerns. As we observed, social media users do not appear to wield significant influence on policy formation. While they may perceive themselves as *active* participants in shaping policy debates, acting as proactive prosumers, their actual role eventually more closely resembles that of *passive* commentators. Their contributions, although frequent, tend to echo existing narratives rather than drive meaningful change, ultimately reinforcing rather than shaping the established discourse or driving new penal policy choices.

Internationally, some progressive movements have demonstrated a better understanding of how social media can serve as both a space and a tool for legal and policy change. By harnessing the power of social media, progressive advocates have been able in cases such as the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements to build solidarity, challenge dominant narratives, and pressure policy makers to enact meaningful criminal legal reforms regardless of any prior initiative by political leaders (e.g., Powell et al., 2018, ch. 8; Kaplan, 2020; Williams et al., 2021). In contrast, the Italian case analyzed in this article suggests that right-wing supporters, whether actively creating new, shareable content in a more activist and motivated manner or simply expressing their support through comments, have encountered challenges in directly influencing penal policy making through social media platforms. Additionally, once their preferred government assumed power, it was met with the intricate realities of governance, necessitating the juggling of diverse priorities and considerations. Ultimately, the two laws discussed in this article—the criminalization of rave parties and the new punitive rules governing mass migration—mainly served the purpose of restating and reinforcing through law-making basic political and ‘cultural’ tenets of the new majority right-wing party led by now-Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, consistent with the promises and messaging during of the 2022 electoral campaign. While the two legislative interventions initially garnered support and appeal among Ms. Meloni’s online supporters, reflected in contents and interactions on social media platforms, in the aftermath they also attracted criticism by unsatisfied and frustrated followers, especially those who did not see the new provisions translating into actual crime control and punishment outcomes.

Conclusion

The present study focused on Ms. Meloni’s social media profiles and related engagement due to her notable influence in the current Italian political landscape and right-wing online discourse. This provided a substantial case study for examining the role of ‘wannabe’ prosumers in shaping public discourse and penal policy. While

acknowledging the limitations of social media data, our study aimed to understand the mechanisms through which social media activity and interactions may influence penal policy formation in the Italian context, without claiming generalizability. This exploratory approach was intended to test a research hypothesis. Broader and more diverse studies could build on these findings to further validate and extend the insights gained.

As social media continues to play a central role for public discourse and political narratives, the question of its impact on penal policy making remains complex. Despite the rise of political influencers and prosumers in the context of social networks, actively generating and sharing content online, and their active participation in online discussions, our study suggests that the power to influence legislative decisions continues to largely remain in the hands of more traditional political actors. While social media platforms have provided avenues for individuals to express their viewpoints, the direct sway of these voices on penal policy making processes remains limited. In the national context considered in this article, the formulation and adoption of policies continue to be predominantly influenced by top-down channels, with established institutions and political leaders shaping the agenda.

In the Italian case, where penal policy remains a centralized competence, with no devolved authority granted to local or regional governments, discussions around penal policy are highly polarized at the national level. While online debates provide a platform for expressing frustration and dissatisfaction, they appear to have little impact on actual policy formation. Furthermore, despite the fervent advocacy of right-wing social media users for more stringent penal measures, the translation of their demands into concrete and punitively effective legislative changes faces obstacles. The complexities of governance, legal considerations, and the necessity for broad-based support in decision-making processes persistently influence legislative outcomes, and issues like crime and punishment make no exception. Although right-wing ‘wannabe’ prosumers may support and push for swift policy changes online, the realities of governing and policy making often necessitate a more nuanced approach that balances various considerations and priorities.

Overall, in conclusion, while social media can fuel public discourse and highlight pressing issues pertaining to crime and punishment, our study indicates how the translation of online sentiment into tangible policy outcomes is still mainly led and mediated by established political processes and institutional frameworks. Hence, from a digital criminology perspective, understanding the nuances of social media’s impact on penal policy formation requires a multidimensional analysis that considers both online dynamics and offline political realities as well as a nuanced examination of the ways in which digital technologies shape public

perceptions, political discourse, and penal policy outcomes within the broader socio-political context.

Declarations

Conflict of interests The Authors declare they have no competing interests that are directly or indirectly related to the work submitted for publication.

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