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Reactions to Audiovisual Adaptation on Social Media: The Case of *How To Get Away With Murder*

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1. Introduction

Up until a few years ago, before Web 2.0, the practice of audiovisual translation (AVT) tended to not be questioned by its end users, i.e. film and TV audiences. The target-language versions of the products made available either on the big or small screen were the only ones accessible to them. If mistakes, inaccuracies or conscious manipulation were noticed, they were either ignored by the general population of non-academics or ascribed to the audiovisual translators' poor skills, or – in the case of cut scenes or edited language – to specific editorial policies on the part of broadcasters and distributors. In the last few years, however, things have radically changed due to several factors, among which are ever more demanding audiences, increased passive knowledge of English – which is the source language for most audiovisual products exported globally – and, thanks to digitization, the multiplicity of platforms and modes of consumption, including streaming and illegal downloading. Easier access to either the source-language versions of films and TV shows or to alternative target-language versions of these products – for example fansubbed versions available online – have contributed to raising viewer expectations for target versions that are as close as possible to their source-language counterparts, which, in turn, goes hand in hand with the demand for accountability and transparency from the distributors of these contents. As a consequence of these technological advances, fandoms have become more demanding when it comes to the adaptation of their favorite films and TV shows, and more vocal in speaking out against what they perceive as violations of the source-language versions.

The internet – through personal blogs, online reviews, and, especially, through social media – provides the perfect tools for fans and even casual viewers to talk about their opinions on the subject of audiovisual adaptation and to share them with likeminded people. Professionals in the field of audiovisual translation generally tend to feel undermined by forms of crowd-sourced translation such as fansubbing (Antonini and Bucaria 2015, O'Hagan 2009, 2011, 2015) or by critiques of their work by viewers who usually lack the professional experience or certifications to fully understand the rationale behind certain adaptation choices and the subtleties of the market. However, at a time in which multiple target language versions are simultaneously available to viewers, it appears to be especially important for scholars and practitioners of AVT alike to take

into consideration the manner in which audiences perceive these different modes of adaptation. In a market in which we are seeing “major transformations in consumption patterns” (Esser *et al* 2016: 2) and in which the boundaries between content consumers and producers have become more blurred (see the idea of “prosumers” in Tapscott and Williams 2006), audience preferences will inevitably be a deciding factor for the AVT industry in the future (Esser *et al.* 2016, Chaume 2016: 72). In fact, new developments in the AVT market are already moving in the direction of a blended system that is able to incorporate more unconventional roles. Netflix’s new recruiting test for subtitlers, in which candidates are asked to answer a questionnaire and take a subtitling test, but no previous professional certification is needed in order to be hired, is a clear example. Despite the sometimes justified concerns that these new trends present for more traditional AVT production and distribution models – for example in terms of more lax quality standards or stricter adaptation timeframes – perhaps the AVT industry would benefit from looking at the ways in which end-users relate to and talk about adapted audiovisual products as a way to be more flexible and receptive to the changing market. This chapter aims at taking a first step in this direction by looking at the ways in which AVT is talked about on one specific social networking website, *Twitter*, as a way to investigate the way in which certain aspects of AVT localization are perceived by their direct end-users. Specifically, this case study looks at Italian tweeters’ reactions to a 2016 incident concerning the adaptation of the US TV series *How to Get Away With Murder* (*HTGAWM*) (2014-ongoing), in which a sex scene between two men was edited out of the version that was aired on Italian national TV network Rai2 (see section 2).

Twitter is a microblogging networking service founded in 2006, which allows users to post tweets of up to 280 characters (140 at the time of writing), links, videos, and images in order to interact with other users without the need for reciprocity. Public posts can be seen by all users, even those who are not the followers of the original poster. Users can interact with fellow tweeters by liking or retweeting their posts, or by directly responding to them. Typically, *Twitter* posts are accompanied by hashtags, or thematic labels preceded by the symbol #, which can function as markers or keywords for the subject that users are addressing in their post. Hashtags can therefore have an informative function – in that they help index posts according to specific topics – but also a relational and interpersonal one, as users employ them to relate to other users by tapping on to ongoing conversations in the community. This way, *Twitter* hashtags create *searcheable talk*, i.e. “online conversation[s] where people render their talk more findable and hence more affiliative” (Zappavigna 2012: 95).

With its 330 million monthly active users – about 7 million of which are in Italy – and 500 million tweets sent per day (Salman 2018), it is no surprise that *Twitter*'s extremely large collection of natural language is often used as a research tool in fields that range from the social sciences to epidemiology to marketing. Some of the most common kinds of analysis that can be carried out with *Twitter* metadata are sentiment analysis, or opinion mining (which is concerned with opinions and moods expressed on social media), time series analysis (an analysis of distribution of tweets over time), and network analysis (an analysis of the networks of users that interlink on social media, e.g. who retweets or likes whose posts). In the field of Media Studies, *Twitter* is often used in the sub-discipline of Audience Studies, especially from the point of view of “audiencing,” i.e. “the public performance of belonging to the distributed audience for a shared media event” (Highfield *et al.* 2013: 315), and “second screening” (e.g. Blake 2017), i.e. the simultaneous use of multiple screens (cell phone or computer) by viewers while they are watching TV. Through second screening, viewers can express their opinions and/or feelings on what they are watching on social media – usually at the same time as they are watching it – or engage with a community of users who are watching the same shows or live events. Studies on the use of hashtags during live events include for example the Eurovision Song Contest (Highfield *et al.* 2013), current events programmes (D'heer and Verdegem 2015, Rossi and Giglietto 2016), and coverage of natural disasters (Bruns and Burgess 2011), in which temporality appears to be a key dimension in the viewers' interaction with multiple media platforms. Moreover, while second screening might appear to be naturally less relevant as far as fiction is concerned because of shifting viewing habits and the increasing availability of on-demand and streaming services, research suggests (Wood and Baughman 2012) that broadcasters are willing to exploit the marketing opportunities of convergence and transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2006) to engage the viewers of serial TV as well.

As mentioned above, social media can be an important meaning-making site in which viewers make their opinions and emotions heard, for example through explicit or implicit evaluation of events, issues, and experiences. This chapter intends to start investigating the ways in which *Twitter* users express such feelings as well as affiliation/disaffiliation with the rest of the virtual community on the issue of audiovisual adaptation by applying the appraisal theory devised by Martin and White (2005), which will be described in detail in section 3.

2. The localization of *How To Get Away With Murder* in Italy

The case study taken into consideration here was selected as one of the most reported-on incidents regarding adaptation/localization in Italy in recent times. I refer to adaptation in the broader sense

of not only translating dialogue from a source to a target language, but preparing a given foreign TV series in this case for a local (Italian) audience (localization). In fact, the incident in question concerns a scene without dialogue.

On July 8th, 2016, the Italian national network Rai2 started airing the much-anticipated US TV series *How to Get Away With Murder (HTGAWM)*, which was originally broadcast on ABC in the 10pm slot on Thursdays. The crime/legal drama stars Academy Award winning actress Viola Davis as Annalise Keating, a law professor at a prestigious university, who, together with some of her students and employees, becomes progressively involved in a murder plot. The series was created by Peter Nowalk and produced by Shonda Rhimes, and began airing its 4th season on September 28th, 2017. A successful series overall, the pilot episode garnered over 14 million viewers in the US in September 2014.

By July 2016, the series had already been broadcasted in Italy by subscription-based channel FOXItalia for about a year and a half under the title *Le regole del delitto perfetto* (The rules for a perfect murder). When the state-owned network Rai2 aired the pilot episode at around 9pm on the evening of Friday, July 8th, it became apparent to fans of the series who had already seen the episode elsewhere that a sex scene between one of the main characters, Connor (Jack Falahee) and his love interest Oliver (Conrad Ricamora), had been cut out. The incident caused an overwhelming reaction among *Twitter* users, who started accusing Rai of homophobia and bigotry. Fans even brought the incident to the attention of actor Jack Falahee (@RestingPlatypus), creator Peter Nowalk (@petenowalk), and producer Shonda Rhimes (@shondarhimes), who, in turn, tweeted to condemn the censoring of their show and of beloved screen couple “Coliver.” They also asked their fans to let them know if *HTGAWM* had been censored in other countries. As a consequence of the international attention and involvement of the series’ actor, creator, and producer, the story went viral and was covered by both the national and international press, e.g. *Variety* (Vivarelli 2016), *The Huffington Post* (Wong 2016), *The Hollywood Reporter* (Anderson 2016), *Entertainment Weekly* (Beard 2016), and various online publications and blogs. The following day Rai2 top executive Ilaria Dallatana issued a statement about the incident:

Non c'è stata nessuna censura, semplicemente un eccesso di pudore dovuto alla sensibilità individuale di chi si occupa di confezionare l'edizione delle serie per il prime time. Capisco l'irritazione, ma mi preme far notare che dopo anni e anni di serie esclusivamente poliziesche, Rai Due ha cominciato a proporre titoli di diverso contenuto, quali *Le regole del delitto perfetto* e *Jane the Virgin*, che tratta di maternità surrogata. Anche queste polemiche ci aiutano a prendere le giuste misure per il futuro. Come dimostrano anche le scelte fatte per i nuovi palinsesti, Rai2 sarà sempre più sensibile alla complessità del mondo contemporaneo.

There was no censorship, only an excessive amount of modesty due to the individual sensitivity of the person who edits the series for primetime. I understand people's irritation, but I'd like to point out that after years and years of exclusively airing crime series, RaiDue has started to offer different contents as well, for example *How To Get Away With Murder* and *Jane the Virgin*, which is about surrogate pregnancy. These controversies help us identify the way to go for the future. As shown also by our new programming choices, Rai2 will be more and more attentive to the complexity of contemporary society.

(Franco, 2016)

The statement, which was not generally perceived as an apology but as a defensive justification for what had happened, caused even more controversy and infuriated fans even more because of a perceived refusal to be held accountable for the mistake and the backhanded attempt to attach the blame to a single individual rather than network policies. In general, the attempt is clear in the statement to distance Rai2 from the accusations of bigotry levelled online by specifically referencing the network's recent progressive programming choices. The statement was generally perceived as "too little, too late;" a clumsy attempt at patching things up after being publicly shamed in the national and international press. Of course, *Twitter* users were also quick to note that *Jane the Virgin* is not about surrogate pregnancy, a gaffe that did not help Rai2's case. After the statement was issued, Rai2 announced in a tweet that the first two episodes of *HTGAWM* would be aired in an unedited version the following day (Sunday, July 10th). Rai's press office even tweeted the new schedule directly to the attention of Shonda Rhimes, specifically in response to her tweet in which she writes: "censorship of any love is inexcusable, #HTGAWM #loveislove":

@Raiofficialnews True @shondarhimes. An integral version of the episode is scheduled to air tomorrow at 9pm on @Rai2. #LoveIsLove #htgawm

In the flurry of *Twitter* activity around this incident in early July 2016, one main new hashtag rose to prominence with Italian users who were commenting on *HTGAWM*: #RaiOmofoba (or #raiomofoba), i.e. "homophobic Rai".

¹ Users first began to use #RaiOmofoba in the immediate aftermath of the edited episode broadcast, with the first occurrence appearing on July 8th. After its very first occurrence, the use of this hashtag seemed to become a conscious effort to start a movement to expose Rai2's censorship, as shown in the tweets below:

@User @RaiTv @RaiDue semplicemente OMOFOBI. #HTGAWM #Raiomofoba
@RaiTv @RaiDue simply HOMOPHOBES. #HTGAWM #RaiOmofoba

@User Propongo di far partire l'hashtag #RaiOmofoba, per denunciare lo scempio che @RaiDue ha fatto con #HTGAWM. Bisogna sconfiggere l'ignoranza!
I propose to start the hashtag #RaiOmofoba, to denounce how @RaiDue butchered #HTGAWM. Ignorance needs to be defeated!

If the intention was to bring attention to the incident, Italian *Twitter* users definitely succeeded, as the hashtag topped the list of trending topics in Italy on July 9th. After Rai aired the unedited episode, however, the hashtag did not stop its course. *Twitter* users – including actor Jack Falahee – tweeted exalting messages praising the positive result that fans were able to obtain through a concerted community effort against censorship.

Unfortunately, users had a chance to resurrect #RaiOmofoba in relation to a different incident that occurred less than a month after the *HTGAWM* one, on August 1st, 2016. One of Rai's networks, Rai4, aired the film *Mine vaganti* (Ferzan Ozpetek, 2010), which tells the story of two brothers from the Southern Italian region of Puglia who come out as gay to their conservative parents. Despite the fact that the comedy shows only a kiss between two men and does not contain homosexual sex scenes, Rai4 prefaced the film with a warning about its content being suitable only for adult viewers. *Twitter* users were quick to level their harsh criticism towards Rai, with obvious references to the recent *HTGAWM* incident. In this case as well, Rai issued an apology, explaining that the warning was a “banale errore” (simple mistake) and a “svista” (oversight), which, albeit more sincere-sounding than the previous one, highlighted even more the comparison with the awkward apology issued by Rai2's director a few weeks prior.

3. *Twitter* as insight into users' attitude and engagement

As mentioned above, microblogging can provide invaluable insight into the users' interpersonal meaning expressed through evaluative language. The appraisal theory devised by Martin and White (2005) is a useful tool in attempting to categorize Italian *Twitter* users' reactions to the *HTHAWM* incident as an expression of interpersonal meaning. Following a concise description of this framework, a qualitative analysis of the collected tweets will be carried out with the help of Zappavigna's (2012) application of the appraisal system to microblogging.

Couched in systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and in J.R. Firth's and M.A.K. Halliday's work, appraisal theory purports that evaluation is a domain of interpersonal meaning, which uses language to express attitudes and stances about people and events. While the other metafunctions of language identified by SFL – ideational and textual – have to do respectively with construing experience and information flow (Martin and White 2005), interpersonal meaning is concerned with “negotiating social relations: how people are interacting, including the feelings they try to share” (Martin and White 2005: 7). In this context, appraisal is intended as a set of discourse semantic resources used to express interpersonal meaning. The appraisal system is composed of the three subsystems of ATTITUDE, ENGAGEMENT, and GRADUATION. Attitude is concerned with mapping feelings; engagement is concerned with adopting a stance in relation to other texts; and graduation with the gradability of meaning. In turn, the network branches out into more delicate (or finer) subsystems, and the different areas of meaning can be expressed through different linguistic resources. These aspects will be dealt with in more detail in the following sections, with particular reference to the attitude and engagement systems, whereas, for reasons of space, the graduation system will be referenced only when relevant.

The tweets containing the hashtag #RaiOmofoba, which was posted over 8,200 times, were retrieved by means of *Twitter*'s advance search feature, which apart from keywords and other parameters, also allows the researcher to select a timeframe for the search. The selected window was July 8th-11th, 2016, which allowed us to cover the first few days (Friday to Monday) in which the hashtag #RaiOmofoba developed, between the moment that the edited episode was broadcast and the day after the unedited episode was aired. An initial qualitative analysis was carried out with the NVivo software to generate a word frequency list.

3.1. ATTITUDE

ATTITUDE involves choices from resources of AFFECT (expressing emotion), JUDGEMENT (assessing behavior), and APPRECIATION (estimating value). The same tweets often contain a mixture of these three subsystems, as they may describe a feeling, and offer judgement and/or appreciation at the same time, sometimes about different aspects of the incident.

3.1.1 AFFECT

Affect is “concerned with registering positive or negative feelings: do we feel happy or sad, confident or anxious, interested or bored?” (Martin and White 2005: 42). When it comes to how

Twitter users expressed affect in the aftermath of the *HTGAWM* incident, the most common reactions expressed sadness, surprise, indignation, disgust, shame, disbelief/incredulousness, disappointment, frustration, and derision of Rai's decision. Both positive and negative emotions can be found in the tweets, with a preponderance of the latter.

An example of feelings on the sadness/happiness continuum can be found in the tweets below. The first user draws a parallel between the *HGTAWM* incident and the 2008 censoring of the film *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2006), also aired by Rai2. The second user expresses happiness about the fact that the *Twitter* community was able to create hype around the incident, which in turn caused Rai2 to air the unedited episode.

@User Nel 2008 Brokeback Mountain, nel 2016 HTGAWM...**che tristezza** vedere come in Italia certe cose non cambino mai @RaiDue #RaiOmofoba #HTGAWM
In 2008 Brokeback Mountain, in 2016 HTGAWM...**how sad** to see that in Italy some things never change @RaiDue #RaiOmofoba #HTGAWM

@User Sono **MOLTO felice** che i fan e non di #htgawm siano riusciti a far uscire la notizia e a mobilitare la Rai. Basta censure. #RaiOmofoba
I'm **VERY happy** that #htgawm fans and non-fans have managed to get the news out and to get Rai to act. Stop censoring. #RaiOmofoba

Other tweets contain mixed emotions, such as the following, in which the user says s/he is satisfied about the decision to air the unedited episodes, but saddened by Rai2's statement in which they blame an "excess of modesty:"

@User **Felice** della scelta di ritrasmettere i primi ep. integrali di #HTGAWM domani, **triste** per la giustificazione "eccesso di pudore"! #RaiOmofoba
Happy about the decision to re-air the first unedited episodes of #HTGAWM, **sad** about the justification of "excess of modesty"! #RaiOmofoba

In the tweets above, the feelings of sadness/happiness are expressed through the use of specific lexical items, such as the noun *tristezza* (sadness) and the adjectives *felice* (happy) – in one case intensified by the adverb *molto* (very) – and *triste* (sad).

Other users express decisively negative emotions. One reoccurring feeling is disappointment – both in general terms and more specifically directed at either Rai or at the whole country – with the noun *delusione* (disappointment) being the most recurrent:

@User **Che delusione** #raiomofoba
What a disappointment #raiomofoba

@User #RaiOmofoba non è neanche più una sorpresa, solo l'ennesima **delusione** che questo paese ci dà
#RaiOmofoba is not even a surprise anymore, just the umpteenth **disappointment** that this country has given us

A form of disappointment can also to be found in a number of tweets expressing the users' disenchantment about Rai's treatment of this particular TV series in light of the broadcaster's track record of pre-emptively editing films and TV shows before airing. In other words, viewers felt that they should not be surprised by this kind of behavior because Rai has always acted this way. In the following tweet, the user directly references Rai2's censoring of *Brokeback Mountain* a few years prior by attaching a GIF of a hug between the film's two protagonists.

@User Che poi da una rete televisiva che ha censurato questo film che cosa vi aspettavate?
#raiomofoba
What did you expect from a TV channel that censored this film? #raiomofoba

While in the previous case the affect is inscribed in the tweets, expressed explicitly through specific lexical items, in this tweet the disappointment is implicit, or invoked, according to Martin and White's terminology (2005). As Zappavigna notes, it is often the case that attitude on *Twitter* is expressed through the use of hashtags instead of explicit lexis (Zappavigna 2012: 62), which is here realized by the use of #raiomofoba coupled with the rhetorical question "what did you expect?"

The most common negative reactions in the affect sphere, however, were comprised in a range going from frustration to outright indignation and disgust. Some of the most typical tweets contain the nouns *schifo* (informal for "disgust") and *vergogna* (shame) or their adjective and verb variations, respectively *schifato/a* ("disgusted") and *mi vergogno* (I'm ashamed). Feelings of embarrassment (adj. *imbarazzato/a*) and indignation (n. *indignazione*) often co-occur as well.

@User **Mi vergogno** di essere italiana in sti casi dove attori dall'altra parte del mondo sgridano le nostre reti televisive. **Schifo**. #RaiOmofoba
I'm ashamed to be Italian in these cases where actors on the other side of the world tell off our TV channels. **Disgust/Gross**. #RaiOmofoba

@User Sono **disgustata, imbarazzata** e ancora una volta **mi vergogno** di vivere in un paese così.
#RaiOmofoba
I'm **disgusted, embarrassed** and once again **I'm ashamed** to live in a country like this.
#RaiOmofoba

Feelings of shame are typically related not only to the inherent injustice and disrespect of Rai2's censoring choice but also to the negative attention that the incident drew to Italy on an international scale, both from the actors, creator, and producers involved in *HTGAWM* and from the press. In fact, a number of users included in their tweets links to various articles and reports on the incident published both in the Italian and international press (see below).

The tweet below is an example of graduation of the affect resources by means of an intensifier (the adjective *grande*). In Martin and White's taxonomy this is an instance of upscaling, which "frequently acts to construe the speaker/writer as maximally committed to the value position being advanced and hence as strongly aligning the reader into that value position" (2005: 152):

@User Provo **grande vergogna** in questo momento è [sic] condivido l'**indignazione** generale su
Twitter #RaiOmofoba #HTGAWM
I feel **great shame** right now and I share the general **indignation** on *Twitter* #RaiOmofoba
#HTGAWM

3.1.2 JUDGEMENT

Having so far discussed the resources used in the #RaiOmofoba tweets to express emotions (affect), we now move on to consider how *Twitter* users express JUDGEMENT, i.e. the area of meaning that is concerned with ethics. Just like the other resources relating to attitude in the appraisal model, judgement can also be positive or negative. However, since *Twitter* is often used to complain about daily life (Zappavigna 2012), it is not surprising to see a prevalence of instances of criticism towards other people, current events, etc. In this case, a considerable number of tweets expressed negative judgement of Rai with regard to the broadcaster's ethics ("propriety" in Martin and White's system) or lack thereof. Typically, the most common resources used to express explicit criticism are once again along the lines of *vergogna* (shame) and *schifo* (disgust). However, although they are the same nouns and verb variations used to express affect, this time judgement targets Rai directly in the sense of "shame on you" or "you should be ashamed of yourselves." The adjectives *vergognoso* (shameful) and *scandaloso* (scandalous) are also frequent occurrences.

- @User È **scandaloso** che, in un momento storico così importante per l'Italia, la #Rai censuri una scena omosessuale. **Vergognoso**. #RaiOmofoba
It's **scandalous** that at such an important historical moment for Italy #Rai censor a homosexual scene. **Shameful**. #RaiOmofoba
- @User **Vergognatevi** per quello che avete fatto e per come parlate! “Eccesso di pudore”?!?! Questa è discriminazione e omofobia #RaiOmofoba
Shame on you for what you've done and for the way you talk” “Excess of modesty”?!?! This is discrimination and homophobia #RaiOmofoba
- @User **che vergogna** la rai...già non la guardavo mai, adesso **mi fa schifo!** Siamo nel 2016 non nel tardo medioevo! #RaiOmofoba
shame on Rai...I already wasn't watching it, now **it disgusts me!** It's 2016, not the late Middle Ages! #RaiOmofoba

The tweets expressing judgment in the form of shame and disgust typically expose Rai's disconnect with the times and its retrograde and homophobic mentality – which is more suitable for the Middle Ages than 2016 – particularly at a time when the Italian Parliament had just passed a bill on same-sex unions. The criticism appears particularly burning because of Rai2's self-proclaimed image as a young network and the new direction towards innovative and modern programming that had just been announced by Rai executives only a few weeks prior to the incident. Along the same lines, *Twitter* users highlighted the broadcaster's hypocrisy in relation to the fact that only a few months prior to the incident, during the widely popular singing competition Festival di Sanremo – which, as usual, was broadcasted live on Rai – many singers sported rainbow-colored ribbons in support of same-sex unions. This was seen in retrospect as an instrumental use of the issue by Rai, which on that occasion seemingly sided with members of the LGBTQ community but effectively failed them when it came to representing them on screen.

Other tweets target Rai's hypocrisy in censoring same-sex kisses while at the same time allowing other kinds of sexually charged content to be aired without censorship, such as graphic heterosexual sex scenes and scantily dressed showgirls and dancers, which users saw as demeaning to women's dignity. Specifically, many users referenced a 2012 incident, in which Argentine showgirl Belén Rodríguez had walked on stage during the above-mentioned Festival di Sanremo wearing a very revealing dress that left part of her crotch – and with it her strategically placed butterfly-shaped tattoo – exposed.² Many on *Twitter* highlighted the paradox of showing such a revealing look on national television while censoring a kiss between two men.

Apart from the explicit lexical resources described above, one of the most common responses to the whole incident was to express invoked negative judgement via sarcasm and irony. The use of satire and humor in general is of course not a new strategy as a response to current events or as social commentary – see for example political cartoons in magazines and newspapers, and stand-up comedy in comedy clubs and on television. However, computer-mediated communication (CMC) in general and social media in particular have increased the number of opportunities for users to share content online and to offer personal (often sarcastic) commentary on any number of social and political issues, and current events. A recent example is the great quantity of memes and image macros (Shifman 2013, Chiaro 2017) that have been and continue to be created since the beginning of the 2016 US presidential election, and which are widely circulated through social media. In the case of Trump opponents, the idea is of course to use social media to expose the ridiculous; to express dissent and resistance to dominant discourses (Sørensen 2016) through punching up (Krefting 2014), i.e. selecting as the target of comedy powerful social and political structures rather than the underdog and the disempowered.

As far as the reasons for using humor are concerned, in her study of the language of microblogging, Zappavigna notes that similarly to face to face communication humor can be used on social media to invoke solidarity and to diffuse tension, often through the use of emoticons or initialisms such as “LOL” or “Laugh Out Loud.” However, with particular reference to microblogging and other social networking services, Zappavigna also introduces the idea of “ambient humor,” which “invokes a putative community of users who may have no direct virtual contact but share in the expression of certain values, often aesthetic values” (2012: 152). In other words, *Twitter* users tend to employ humor in order to relate to other users who are not necessarily their followers but who share similar sensibilities or attitudes towards specific events or issues. However, as Zappavigna notes, the sarcastic meaning and ambient humor might be difficult to analyze, both because of the 140-character restriction by which contextual references to understand the humor are not always provided (2012: 152), and because simple quantitative analysis (for example a word frequency list) does not provide clear interpretation without the additional use of qualitative analysis (2012: 58). In other words, sarcasm is more often than not invoked rather than explicit, since there are no clear linguistic markers of this meaning except for the hashtags and the other users’ background knowledge of the incident. The following tweet is a case in point:

@User Quel momento in cui ti accorgi che neanche il vangelo va bene per la rai. #raiomofoba
#censurai #eccessodipudore

That moment when you realize that not even the gospel is ok for rai. #raiomofoba #censurai
#eccessodipudore

The tweet includes a detail of Giotto's "Kiss of Judas" fresco, which depicts the moment from the New Testament in which Judas, one of Jesus' disciples, kisses Jesus in order to signal to the Romans that that is the man they should arrest. The fresco portrays Judas in the act of approaching Jesus' face in order to carry out his betrayal. In other words, the fresco portrays a kiss between two men (the very thing that Rai had censored). Therefore, this user defiantly imagines that the broadcaster's disapproval of this kind of behavior extends to the Gospel as well. This tweet is only one example of the humorous use of *Twitter's* feature that, similarly to other social networking services, allows users to share external links, images, and videos. *Twitter* users commenting on the *HTGAWM* incident took full advantage of this feature by sharing screen grabs and GIFs mostly from the TV series in question (for example, Viola Davis' character in *HTGAWM* rolling her eyes) as well as from more local, seemingly unrelated material, such as the TV show *Uomini e donne*, which could be described roughly as an Italian version of *The Bachelor/Bachelorette* reality shows, only with a live studio audience. The association with *Uomini e Donne* in this case was made popular by the announcement that, in its next season, the show would feature a gay bachelor.

A further target for sarcasm is Rai's obligatory TV license fee (*canone*), which many Italians already see as unfair given the poor quality of the programming on national television. Numerous *Twitter* users saw the incident as an incongruity and as further evidence for the lack of respect for paying subscribers. *Twitter* users felt that by virtue of paying a subscription fee, subscribers should be at least entitled to watching the full version of the show.

@User Cara @RaiDue volevo dirti che farò dei **tagli al canone**..così, per eccesso di pudore
#Coliver #htgawm #RaiOmofoba #loveislove
Dear @RaiDue I just wanted to let you know that I'll be doing **some cuts to my license fee**.just so, because of an excess of modesty #Coliver #htgawm #RaiOmofoba #loveislove

Similarly to the previous tweets containing sarcasm, the humorous content is not conveyed by the linguistic elements per se but by their interaction with the additional elements attached to the tweet, in this case the direct mention of #htgawm and #RaiOmofoba, which anchor the tweet within a specific theme.

More humor is derived by imagined scenarios in which Rai airs notoriously controversial TV series – such as *Game of Thrones*, *Orange is the New Black* and *Shameless* – but is unable to broadcast most of the content because of its raciness:

@User Immaginate se #Rai2 trasmettesse #gamesofthrones [sic]. Riuscirebbe a mandare in onda tutte le 6 stagioni in 2 ore. #HTGAWM
Imagine if #gamesofthrones [sic] was on #Rai2. They would manage to air all 6 seasons in 2 hours. #HTGAWM

More fodder for sarcasm and ridicule was provided by further developments in the *HTGAWM* incident. One development occurred when a *Twitter* user claimed that s/he agreed with Rai's choice to censor the gay sex scene because "il rischio che il telespettatore diventi gay guardandolo è concreto" [there's a concrete risk that viewers might become gay by watching it]. Whether the tweet was an instance of trolling (i.e. a deliberate attempt to cause disruption and enraged reactions) or not, humorous responses brought this statement to its extreme consequences. For example:

@User quindi sono detenuta di Litchfield che ha 11 cloni, una laurea in medicina e una famiglia nel south side #RaiOmofoba
so I'm an inmate at Litchfield who has 11 clones, a degree in medicine and a family on the south side #RaiOmofoba

@User Quindi se guardo "Uomini e donne" rischio di diventare una semianalfabeta?
#RaiOmofoba
so if I watch "Uomini e donne" I run the risk of becoming semi-illiterate?
#RaiOmofoba

Both tweets employ hyperbole with the clear intent of ridiculing the original user's faulty reasoning. The author of the first tweet implies that, by following the same reasoning, she has watched so much television that she is now an inmate at Lichfield Penitentiary (the primary setting of *Orange is the New Black*) who has 11 clones (similarly to the protagonist in *Orphan Black*) and a medical degree (presumably from being exposed to *Grey's Anatomy* and/or other medical dramas), and lives on the South Side of Chicago just like the working-class protagonists of *Shameless*. The second tweet includes a reference to the reality show *Uomini e donne*, which has a reputation for featuring rather low-brow, crass contestants. In both cases, the sarcasm is only obvious to other users who share background knowledge of the mentioned shows, which in turn speaks to these users' desire to partake in the ambient humor of the community discussing the *HTGAWM* incident.

Another development that spurred further sarcastic tweets is Rai4's (aforementioned) decision to preface the broadcast of Ferzan Ozpetek's film *Mine vaganti* with a "bollino rosso" (red mark), indicating that the film was only suitable for an adult audience. Even after Rai4's apology on the

following day – in which the mistake was attributed to an oversight – *Twitter* users rebooted the hashtags #RaiOmofoba and #eccessodipudore as a direct reference to the *HTGAWM* case that occurred less than a month earlier.

@User @RaiQuattro @Raiofficialnews Certo che come #MineVaganti siete proprio perfetti. Sarà un altro eccesso di pudore come #HTGAWM. #RaiOmofoba
@RaiQuattro @Raiofficialnews You are certainly perfect as “loose cannons.” It must have been another case of excess of modesty like with #HTGAWM.
#RaiOmofoba

@User Ma l’hanno capito che siamo nel 2016? La scusa sarà che chi ha messo il bollino era daltonico...vergogna #RaiOmofoba
Have they understood that we’re in 2016? Their excuse is going to be that the person who put the red mark was color-blind...shame on you #RaiOmofoba

The first tweet contains a rather sophisticated example of verbal humor playing on the meaning of the film title (similar to “loose cannons” or “time bombs”) and an explicit comparison with the censoring intervention on *HTGAWM*. The second tweet, once again using a hyperbole, offers an example of a ridiculous excuse that, based on the its track record, Rai is likely to put forward to apologize for another case of content “manipulation.” It is notable that, even though these last two tweets were not written as a direct reaction to the *HTGAWM* incident, viewers seem to show remarkable awareness of the patterns at play within certain kinds broadcasting policies even as far as autochthonous products are concerned, as well as an increased intolerance towards censoring choices made for them a priori by broadcasters.

3.1.3 APPRECIATION

Lastly, the third subsystem included in the attitude system is APPRECIATION, i.e. the area of meaning concerning the aesthetic value of a text. This discourse semantic resource is used to express attitudes about objects, states and processes. An example can be “our ‘reactions’ to things (do they catch our attention; do they please us?), their ‘composition’ (balance and complexity) and their ‘value’ (how innovative, authentic, timely, etc.)” (Martin and White 2005: 56). In the context of social media, appreciation is implicit when users repost another user’s tweet (retweet) or post a link to an external resource, such as a newspaper article. In this case, Zappavigna (2012) talks of meta-

evaluation because, even in the absence of commentary, the act itself of referencing means that users consider the referent noteworthy.

The most notable example of appreciation in the sense of negative aesthetic evaluation is found among the tweets containing #RaiOmofoba was the reference to Italy's and/or Rai's *figuraccia* or *figura di merda*. With an Italian phrase almost as untranslatable as its opposite, *bella figura*, many users expressed their displeasure in seeing that Rai's decision to censor the homosexual sex scene had garnered the attention of the international press and of the *HTGAWM* creative team, thus making Italy and Italians look bad in the eyes of the world. In fact, many tweets include modifiers to the nouns *figuraccia* or *figura di merda*, such as *mondiale*, *planetaria* (worldwide), *globale* (global), and *transoceanica* (transatlantic) to define the scope of this public relations disaster.

@User Una **figuraccia** di **proporzioni planetarie**, persino peggiore dei Bunga Bunga di Mr B.
#RaiOmofoba

A **gaffe** of planetary proportions, even worse than Mr B's Bunga Bunga. #RaiOmofoba

@User Anche EW parla della **figura di merda** della RAI... #RaiOmofoba

Even EW talks about RAI's **shitty gaffe**... #RaiOmofoba

In order to put this *figuraccia* into perspective, the first user above unfavorably compares it to the impact of Silvio Berlusconi's infamous Bunga Bunga parties. The second user reposts a link to an *Entertainment Weekly* article referencing the fact that Rai's "shitty gaffe" (an admittedly inadequate translation) was picked up by a major US show business publication.

As a conclusion to this section on attitude, it is also worth noting that the use of swearwords in the tweets taken into consideration was not limited to the case mentioned above. Although Martin and White (2005) do not cover swearing in depth, perhaps it could be catalogued as a way to heighten and reinforce attitude through linguistic means, almost as a form of upscaled graduation (see above) used to convey a more intense reaction to the issue at hand in terms of emotions, judgement, and appreciation. For example:

@User **Cazzo** io a quest'ora dovrei essere un mostro con tutte ste serie che guardo #RaiOmofoba
With all the series I watch I should be a **fucking** monster by now #RaiOmofoba

@User "Eccesso di pudore", io nelle tue parole leggo un eccesso di **stronzate** #RaiOmofoba

“Excess of modesty”, in your words I read an excess of **bullshit** #RaiOmofoba

In the first example above, the user is responding to the previously mentioned tweet concerning the concrete possibility that viewers might become gay as a consequence of watching homosexual sex scenes. By using the Italian swearword *cazzo*, the tweeter reinforces his/her reaction, possibly adding a more colloquial, humorous tone to the observation. The second tweet, on the other hand, is built on the antithesis between the expression used by Rai2’s executive in her apology, “eccesso di pudore,” and the perceived “eccesso di stronzate” that that apology seemingly masks. Once again, the choice to use a swearword possibly indicates a more plain-spoken approach aimed at ridiculing Dallatana’s poorly phrased excuse.

3.2. ENGAGEMENT

Within the appraisal system, ENGAGEMENT is the area of meaning concerned with adopting a stance and positioning oneself in relation to other texts. It has clear connections with Bakhtin’s notions of intertextuality and heteroglossia (1981), since it is concerned with the dialogic relationship that speakers/writers establish with what has been said/written before. This system of resources appears to be extremely relevant in a discussion of social media because it takes into consideration the relationships that users of these networking services enter into with respect to a community of other users. Specifically, users can employ this system to build solidarity or distance themselves from previous social media posts or, in other words, to align or disalign themselves with specific issues or opinions.

Some of the most common resources to express engagement on *Twitter* are retweets, direct responses to other users’ tweets, hashtags, and direct mention of another user’s handle in the text of the tweet. All of these strategies indicate the users’ wish to enter into a conversation either with a single user (or their point of view) or with a community of users, which Zappavigna, given the lack of reciprocity that characterizes *Twitter*, refers to as “ambient audience” (2012: 64). In other words, users can either engage directly with a fellow tweeter – typically by responding to their tweet or tagging their handle in a new tweet preceded by the symbol @ – or engage more indirectly with the community at large by tagging their posts with the hashtag(s) relevant to a specific discourse.

In the case of the *HTGAWM* debacle, one of the most common early reactions to the realization that Rai2 had aired an edited version of the first episode was effectively to “troll” @RaiDue. The practice of trolling, defined by the *Cambridge English Dictionary* as leaving “an

insulting message on the internet in order to annoy someone,” was in this case carried out by deliberately tagging @RaiDue in posts containing images, GIFs, and short videos showing homosexual couples engaged in kissing or more explicit sexual behavior, all the way to pornographic images. The idea was of course to tease the powers that be with content that would almost certainly be disturbing or offending to them while at the same time clearly making their dissent heard and seen. Furthermore, while the primary purpose of this kind of trolling might not necessarily have been to create humor, a sense of elation can no doubt be perceived in this kind of posts, which challenges bigots while creating camaraderie with the vast majority of the community using #RaiOmofoba.

In terms of alignment/disalignment, a qualitative analysis of the tweets tagged #RaiOmofoba shows that the overwhelming majority of users disaligned with Rai2’s censoring intervention, which also clearly transpired from the description of attitude resources in the previous section. However, a minority of users chose to align with Rai, for example by condemning the exaggerated reaction and use of the hashtag #RaiOmofoba – especially after the broadcaster’s apology – or simply by expressing their disgust in seeing two men kissing on television (see examples below). These users choose to disalign with the general trend on *Twitter*, but at the same time engage with the community by joining the conversation through the hashtag #RaiOmofoba.

@User Adesso anche dopo le scuse dovete continuare ad indignarvi? Avete stufato, hanno sbagliato, e state esagerando #RaiOmofoba
Do you have to keep being outraged even after the apology? I’ve had enough, they made a mistake, and you’re exaggerating #RaiOmofoba

@User Mi dispiace questo vittimismo del mondo gay che grida sui social #RaiOmofoba ritengo sia solo una moda del momento #RaiNonOmofoba @RaiDue
I’m sorry to see that the gay world has such a persecution complex and shouts #RaiOmofoba on social media – I think it’s just a fad #RaiNonOmofoba @RaiDue

@User Io sono etero e prentendo che in tv passi roba che no [sic] mi faccia rimettere il pranzo di natale. Grazie #Rai #RaiOmofoba
I’m heterosexual and I want TV to air stuff that doesn’t make me throw up my Christmas meal. Thank you #Rai #RaiOmofoba

As in the case of the user who acknowledges a direct cause and effect connection between one’s sexuality and watching homosexual sex scenes, the two Rai supporters above were either ridiculed or openly insulted by other users for their bigotry.

As already mentioned, however, the majority of tweets marked with the hashtag #RaiOmofoba tend to express their disaffiliation with Rai and, as a consequence, their alignment with the rest of the *Twitter* community using #RaiOmofoba. This overwhelming stance against what was perceived as bigoted and retrograde ideology on the part of Rai should, however, not be surprising if we consider the demographics of *Twitter* users, who on average tend to be younger and more educated than users of other social networking services such as Facebook (Agostini 2013).

A clear example of engagement that Martin and White attribute to the subcategory of distance (2005: 113-14) is the fact that a considerable number of tweeters directly engaged with members of the *HTGAWM* creative team who had spoken out against censorship by either responding to their tweets or directly tagging them in their own posts in English:

@User To @shondarhimes I am Italian and I am very sorry for the #CensoredScene in #HTGAWM ! #LoveAlwaysWin #RaiOmofoba

@User @petenowalk I'm Italian and I'm so sorry for the stupid people with no brain We're not all like them! #loveislove #RaiOmofoba

Despite their sometimes-limited English skills, the authors of the tweets above express a clear intention to apologize on behalf of Italy as a whole; to detach themselves from the idea that all Italians are homophobes; and therefore to disaffiliate themselves from certain negative qualities – such as bigotry and closed-mindedness – that Rai2 had seemingly displayed through their censoring choice.

An example of distancing is evident in a tweet by one of the major actors in the Italian mediascape and direct competitor of Rai, FOXItalia, which had been broadcasting *HTGAWM* before Rai:

@UffstampaFOX Su @foxtvit in passato, oggi e in futuro, serie tv in versione integrale. Senza censure, sempre. #Sky. #HTGAWM #leregoleldelittoperfetto
On @foxtvit in the past, today and in the future, unedited TV series. Without censorship, always. #Sky. #HTGAWM #leregoleldelittoperfetto

By capitalizing on the incident, FOX chooses to reinforce its position as a provider of uncensored content (as opposed to Rai) by promising its subscribers to keep up their commitment to always offer them unedited series. Despite the fact that FOX did not use the hashtag #RaiOmofoba, they successfully put themselves in direct opposition to Rai and polarized engagement even further. The

tweet spurred hilarity among *Twitter* users – on whom the not-so-subtle dig at Rai was not lost – and the same message was included in the *HTGAWM* season 3 promo aired on FOX in December 2016.

As Zappavigna notes (2012: 61), *Twitter* is often criticized for providing a platform for inane, mundane comments often concerning everyday life and its little annoyances. Social media in general, even when they are meant to be used for activism, are often seen as ineffective as they tend to provide an echo chamber for users that already think alike, without ever opening up a real conversation about a given issue. However, the *HTGAWM* incident could be considered as a case in which the engagement of Italian and international *Twitter* communities actually brought some tangible results. When Rai issued an apology and rescheduled the unedited episodes for Sunday July 10th, this was seen as a victory against homophobia by the *Twitter* community as a whole, as *HTGAWM* actor Jack Falahee and creator Peter Nowalk triumphantly announced in the immediate aftermath:

@petenowalk Good news, thanks to all the fans for making this happen. #HTGAWM
 #LoveIsLoveIsLove

@RestingPlatypus WE ended censorship in this case. YOU ALL inspire me. Thank you for
 your voices! #loveislove

Whether or not this was a case of successful activism carried out through social media, the fact is clear that the *Twitter* community confirmed its function of “watchdog” as far as social and political issues are concerned. While this sentiment was evident in a number of posts, one user summarized it successfully by addressing @RaiDue directly:

@User Spero di non dover più twittare #RaiOmofoba ma attenta a quello che fai @RaiDue che
 Twitter ti tiene d’occhio
 I hope I won’t have to tweet #RaiOmofoba anymore but be careful what you do @RaiDue
 ‘cause *Twitter* is watching you

4. Conclusion

This chapter investigates the reaction of the *Twitter* community to the airing of an episode of the US TV series *How To Get Away With Murder*, in which Italian network Rai2 had decided to delete a

homosexual sex scene. By using the appraisal framework devised by Martin and White (2005), the evaluative language used in tweets including the hashtag #RaiOmofoba was qualitatively analyzed according to the resources of the attitude and engagement systems. As far as attitude was concerned, users expressed overwhelmingly negative emotions, mainly linked to feelings of disappointment, shame, and disgust. They expressed mostly negative judgement towards Rai2's choice to censor the episode as exposing the network's seemingly disconnect with the times and hypocrisy. They also expressed negative appreciation of the impact that such an incident might have on Italy's reputation worldwide. Engagement was mainly expressed through disalignment with the values represented by Rai2 in this scenario – i.e. bigoted mentality and disconnect with the times – and alignment with the rest of the virtual community that stood up for shared values in support not only of the LGBTQ community, but also of Rai's subscribers' right to watch unedited content. Humor, especially in the form of sarcasm, was also often used to put across negative judgement and to engage with the community.

A few more observations seem to be in order by way of conclusion. One significant aspect of this incident has to do with certain dynamics in the AVT distribution in Italy and specifically the idea of accountability. If we concede that Rai did not intentionally censor the scene – in other words, even if it was indeed an innocent mistake – the fact remains that if a single person was responsible for such an impactful choice this exposes a flaw in the system itself. If one accepts that there is no consistency in the process and that a single editor may decide to excise a scene that s/he personally perceives to be offensive or controversial reveals an anything-goes approach in which nobody can ultimately be considered accountable. However, I would argue that whether or not Rai intended to make a stance by censoring the homosexual sex scene is not the main point in our discussion. How the incident was handled, though, might be more important. The fact that Rai did not offer an apology per se but at best a somewhat piqued justification for the incident demonstrates a lack of accountability towards their viewers/subscribers, a refusal to take responsibility, if not for an intended censorship, then at least for a flawed execution of the adaptation process for the series.

A second point that is worth making pertains to the increased agency of consumers of audiovisual content and their resistance to official forms of AVT that no longer respond to their needs. The overwhelming *Twitter* reaction to what was perceived as an act of censorship is an unequivocal message – not only to Rai but to all broadcasters – that in the digital/social media age there is no room for “mistakes;” that fans are much more demanding and unforgiving; and much less willing to abide by practices that were perhaps ignored or accepted by the less technologically savvy previous generations that had no access to source-language versions and had a reduced knowledge of English. It appears that the small but demographically significant segment of the

Italian population that uses *Twitter* is ready to keep the AVT industry on its toes. As Chaume notes, “the days of decisions taken by just a few agents, used to dictating what audiences like and dislike, are progressively coming to an end” (2016: 72).

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Glossary:

- Microblogging – Short messages posted for an online audience, typically on platforms such as *Twitter* and *Instagram*, which might contain text, video, images, audio, or hyperlinks.
- Fansubbing – Subtitling created by non-professional subtitlers, usually made available on dedicated online platforms where users can download subtitle files independent of the video content it relates to.
- Audiencing – The public display (usually on social media) of belonging to the audience for a given media event.

- Prosumers – People who both consume and produce (producer + consumer) a given product or content, usually referring to the active role that some members of the audience take on with respect to media content.

Endnotes:

¹ Other recurring hashtags were #CensuRai – playing on the words *censura* (censorship) and *Rai* – and #eccessodipudore.

² Incidentally, “la farfallina,” or little butterfly, as it started to be referred to at the time in Italian, is a childish euphemism for the female genitalia.