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(doi: 10.53227/113723)

Rivista di Digital Politics (ISSN 2785-0072)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2024

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# Social sanctions during disasters. The Italian case of coronavirus on Twitter

## **SOCIAL SANCTIONS DURING DISASTERS. THE ITALIAN CASE OF CORONAVIRUS ON TWITTER**

Natural disasters disrupt group stability but also bring out the potential in social capital, aiding in organizing collective responses, social norms and sanctions. In the digital environment, two forces can swiftly modify social norms: the digital propaganda discourse on the digital sphere and platform affordances. As social media has transformed Italian political propaganda, shaping a new form of communication distinct from the past, recognizing the role of affordances in the normative context is crucial. Twitter's communicative arena operates based on these affordances, continually evolving and shaping new communication strategies. Politicians leverage these affordances to advance their goals, engaging with their audience uniquely. Observing changing social norms, especially during crises like Covid-19, is possible from the perspective of the technical communication system. This study explores collective resilience and social norms during Italy's first Covid-19 wave, considering political and technical dimensions. Analysing two catalytic events through digital ethnography and content analysis of tweets, focusing on #Milanononsiferma and #Navigli, reveals distinct patterns in the first wave of the pandemic in Italy. In the first phase, conflicting opinions among experts and politicians made health issues challenging to identify. Social sanctioning targeted mask-wearing individuals. In the second phase, severity forced a convergence of natural and artificial factors, shifting sanctioning towards unmasked crowds. This evolution can be understood through socio-technical features: the extensive use of hashtags on Twitter may have amplified messages from political leaders and media, intensifying the a low-cost sanctioning and the adoption of norms that bolster social capital and a sense of belonging.

**KEYWORDS** *Covid-19, Social Sanctions, Disasters, Affordances, Political Communication.*

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## 1. Introduction

Social norms, the unwritten rules that govern our behaviour, can undergo rapid transformation in times of crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic, with its unprecedented scale and impact, presented a unique opportunity to study how social norms evolve and how they can be influenced by digital communication and political discourse. This article examines the first wave of the pandemic in Italy, focusing on the role of Twitter as a platform for mediating these two forces and shaping collective resilience. In order to study the possible evolution of social sanctions, we focused on two events: the campaign #Milanononsiferma and the issue of the crowds on Navigli, because even if they happened in a specific city, their resonance affected all the country and the debate spread out of Lombardy.

When, on the 21st of February, the first case of coronavirus was identified in Codogno, public opinion was split after an initial moment of confusion and despondency; this occurred specifically in Lombardy, the most exposed territory at the time. The authorities closed schools and universities, events were suspended, many companies made their employees work from home, and stay-at-home orders were issued in the province of Lodi and the Veneto region. On the 22nd of February, a decree law declared eleven municipalities as «red zones», and people could not enter or reach beyond their borders. Such restrictive measures undoubtedly had a significant impact on public opinion. While many embraced staying home, others insisted on the importance of continuing their daily routine and lives. For example, #Milanononsiferma was the hashtag of the Milanese municipality and its mayor, Giuseppe Sala) promoted to reassure citizens and encourage them to go out, preventing an economic blockade. On the 8th of March, a new phase started: due to a significant increase in contagion, Lombardy and other Northern areas became red zones. On the 11th of March, Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte announced on live television the extension of the red zone to the entire country. From that moment on, everything changed: all Italians had to stay home, even for work (if possible), many nonessential factories, companies and shops temporarily closed, and citizens could leave their homes only due to severe and proven reasons which had to be formalised into a self-certification. During this stage, the public opinion focus shifted from the ontological discussion about the possible economic disaster to the importance of compliance with the strict and indispensable rules imposed.

## 2. Social sanctions and natural disasters

Every society is the result of the intersection between social structures that create usages; as Radcliffe-Brown writes, these usages are «certain modes of behaviour which are usual, and which characterise that particular community» (1952, 205). Stinchcombe (2015, 229) interprets social structures as any stable variable of society, such as population characteristics, laws, or institutions – except organisations that are «a set of stable social relations deliberately created, with the explicit intention of continuously accomplishing some specific goals or purposes». These usages, as specified by Radcliffe-Brown (1952), are controlled by the authority of society. Among them there are patterns that reflect an authoritarian spirit behind every society: social sanctions. Social sanctions are reactions of part of the society toward behaviour that can be approved or rejected; they organise the usages of the community, regulate attitudes and reinforce constructive actions in the context of a specific ambience. What we usually call conscience, hence, is the reflex of this sanction pattern into a single individual mind (Radcliffe-Brown 1952). Strictly connected to sanctions, there are norms which are «ideas in the minds of the members of a group» (Homans 1950; Pidcocke 1968, 264) and can change according to the context. All these sets are part of the broader concept of social capital and are the foundation of social stability because they shape how individuals behave (Pidcocke 1968) and create an equilibrium (Coleman 1988). According to Pidcocke (1968), this shaping also contributes power.

This equilibrium maintenance is crucial to resist the problems the collectivity has to face. Natural disasters are, for instance, one of these. Natural disasters, indeed, are calamities that threaten social order and social stability: they are a natural issue, but also a social one (Dynes and Quarantelli 1990). The effects of disasters go far beyond the end of the danger and after the substantial demographic losses. As Arnstein Aassve *et al.* (2020) studied, the fear of disasters affects social interactions in the short and the long term, impacting social trust. Social life is so fragile that disasters create unsolvable problems; this means that communities affected by disaster will be «permanently damaged» (Dynes 2002, 1) but, at the same time, the configuration and the development of social capital are crucial to keeping the community alive: norms and social sanctions may be identified as an interesting attempt to survive. As Dynes and Quarantelli (1990) evidenced, catastrophes not only reinforce communities but may also result in conflicts. A crucial point revolves around allocation: the allocation of blame and resources. The lack of resources resulting from a crisis creates disputes over their distribution in the rehabilitation phase, generating discontent with dysfunctionality if in the presence of a political dimension, an

ideological constituent or vested interests. Many circumstances may influence the situation, creating pro-social or anti-social approaches.

Considering the danger that natural disasters represent for social stability, social sanctions have been considered crucial for the survival of society (Radcliffe-Brown 1952). During catastrophes, norms and sanctioning change and can help shape a new ritualisation and a new setting of social roles (Krebs 1984). In this newfound ritualisation lies the possibility of social security re-birth and reconstruction, reducing the need for formal control (Quarantelli 2001). Social sanctions arise from social structures (reflecting how the community is already managing issues) and simultaneously define common behaviours; indeed, they create a sense of civic duty and responsibility that helps actors in the fight to survive during a disaster (Bourgeois *et al.* 2020). Social norms and social sanctions appear to be fundamental tools for the community's livelihood: they are the structural representation of the attempt at maintenance made by the single individual and the whole population during the reconstruction period.

In conclusion of this first section, we can assume the theoretical framework according to which social sanctions are part of the natural disaster response of society for their organisation of behaviour, and they mutate and adapt according to the evolution of the situation and under the influence of power.

### 3. Where and how sanctions occur: the Twitter sphere

Since the digital society, social sanctions have been implemented on the internet. To quote Rost *et al.* (2016), on social media platforms, sanctioning occurs in low-cost situations, and the online technical conditions (visibility and low costs) have contributed to the expansion of social enforcement. In this sense, it could be interesting studying how social sanctions are shaped on digital platforms.

To study social sanctions on digital platforms, a note about the digital environment is necessary. Reflections on the Covid-19 epidemic must consider the context of the digital society in which it occurred. The widespread presence of digital platforms has accentuated the dynamics of social sanctions, contributing to social enforcement. These social pressures, conveyed through digital channels, played a significant role in shaping collective perceptions and individual behaviours in response to the pandemic.

As we noted in the previous part, social sanctions arise from social structures and they mutate accordingly (Bourgeois *et al.* 2020). For this reason, to analyse social sanctions on Twitter, we should also consider the environment they are in. In the digital sphere, two forces can rapidly contribute to the evolution of social norms and sanctions: the digital propaganda discourse widespread on platforms and the structure of said platforms. Specifically, given the purposes of this paper, we will be looking at these dynamics in the Twitter-sphere.

### *Digital propaganda on Twitter: the Italian case*

It should be considered how it is unthinkable to talk about political propaganda without talking about the web, as *social campaigning* makes the electoral struggle entirely new (Calise and Musella 2019). Digital propaganda on Twitter has become a significant concern due to its potential impact on public opinion. It has been of great interest to the social sciences because social media has increased the rate of content consumption, resulting in less crystallisation of events in the shared and personal imagination. Political events follow one another continuously, determining how each event can be taken singularly, extrapolating it from the others precisely because they are too old, belonging to a past that the cognitive system traces back to a time too distant from us. The detection of linguistic markers of digital deception, including propaganda, has been examined to develop predictive models to classify suspicious news on Twitter (Glenski *et al.* 2019), but this does not allow for cleaning up the large volume of news that occurs on the platform, defining the underlying phenomenon as challenging to resolve. The role of social media in spreading fake news has been highlighted, particularly during events such as the 2016 Us presidential election, highlighting the challenges posed by the circulation of fake news on social media platforms such as Twitter (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). In the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, some authors have underlined how it came with an added dimension of «infodemic» crisis (Sacco *et al.* 2020). However, this definition is far from unanimous, as others note how, at least in the acute phase of the crisis, the spread of fake news was relatively contained (Caliandro *et al.* 2020).

Nonetheless, it is crucial to note that the platform assumed a significant role in the public sphere. Fake news or not, Twitter has become an important space where political discussions and interactions related to the health emergency take place. Furthermore, the use of social media for political communication and propaganda during events such as elections has been studied, demonstrating organisations' manipulation of informativeness and social presence on their platforms (Elareshi *et al.* 2021; Carpentier *et al.* 2019).

The use of social media for radicalising discourses and propaganda dissemination by extremist groups was also analysed, highlighting the global reach and impact of digital propaganda on platforms such as Twitter (Putra and Sibaroni 2022). The responsibility of social media in times of social and political manipulation has been discussed, highlighting the possibility of social media profiling being used for advertising and political manipulation (Reisach 2021).

In particular, in Italy, the metamorphosis of political communication has been the subject of extensive scholarly research, spanning several areas, including media dynamics, political landscapes, and social change. Within the Italian political arena, substantial changes have taken place regarding e-democracy, the evolution of right-wing populism and the profound impact of the media on the fabric of political communication, in line with the systematic changes that have taken place from the Democrazia Cristiana period, through the Berlusconi's rule, and up to the contemporary situation.

Many studies have emphasised the central role of online platforms in the involvement of Italian citizens, which profoundly transformed the information environment in which political actors move (Rullo and Nunziata 2021). The symbiotic relationship between media and political communication in Italy has emerged as a focal point of the academic examination (Ciaglia 2013; Vaccari 2015). Furthermore, investigations into media imaginaries of digital protest in Italy have accentuated the emergence of techno-fragmented media imaginaries (Treré *et al.* 2017; Serafis *et al.* 2023).

As much as the Twitter platform has undergone significant transformation to date, the importance of the platform for political propaganda cannot be ignored. The impact that some political actions, such as Mayor Sala's campaign #Milanononsiferma, allows us to observe the importance that digital platforms, and specifically Twitter, have not only in directing the political agendas of the various actors in the field or the direction of the debate in the communication arena but also for its influence on normative reactions.

### *Twitter affordances: the technical architecture of discourses*

The role of platforms in the political domain has become a focal point of academic inquiry, reflecting a growing recognition of the central influence of digital platforms on political communication and engagement. Political actors, when communicating on social media, take into account the affordances of the platforms and their uses to exploit them for their purposes. A notable strand of research has illuminated the role of digital possibilities in shaping distinct styles of political expression, particularly evident among young people engaged in collective political discourse on social media platforms (Lerat

and Kligler-Vilenchik 2019). This underlines how digital opportunities shape the articulation of political views, particularly in the context of social media engagement. Consequently, a phenomenon may be perceived differently from platform to platform. In this work, we assume that affordances are the technical architecture of social media and participatory cultures thriving on those platforms (Caliandro and Anselmi 2021).

Investigations into the motivations behind social media use have revealed connections with increased political information sharing and offline political engagement. Lane *et al.* (2017) outline the indirect pathways leading from online political discussions to offline political participation, emphasising the intermediary role played by social media opportunities. Prakasam and Huxtable-Thomas (2020) examination of Reddit opportunities shed light on the dynamic nature of user loyalties, emphasising the impact of platform opportunities on user behaviour and engagement. Rama (2020) studied that on Reddit, social action is realised and perceived through affordances. These elements actively contribute to creating, promoting, and managing social situations within the community.

Beyond political expression, the influence of technological affordances of online learning platforms on entrepreneurial behaviour has been explored, highlighting the role of digital opportunities in shaping learners' actions and decisions (Zhang 2022). Similarly, the study of knowledge platform affordances conducted by Jiao *et al.* (2022) demonstrated a direct and positive influence on collaboration outcomes, accentuating the transformative impact of digital affordances on collaboration outcomes. Political communication was also analysed using specific platforms such as YouTube and TikTok. Soriano and Gaw (2022) and Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2023) examined how influencers strategically exploit platform affordances to facilitate, amplify and strengthen the dissemination of their political agenda within broader networks of political actors. Furthermore, the analysis of political manifestos on Whatsapp conducted by Sahoo (2021) highlighted the tension within the design and architecture of the platform, illustrating the profound impact of platform affordances on political communication strategies. The exploration of technological opportunities and the use of decision-making platforms within political parties, as studied by Deseriis (2017), offers insights into how platform affordances shape political and decision-making processes within organisational structures. Furthermore, investigations into the relationship between the perceived credibility of social media and Generation Z's political engagement (Alfred and Wong 2022) shed light on the influence of platform affordances on users' political engagement and behaviour. When observing fast-moving



phenomena that occur mainly on digital platforms, the affordances of the platform under investigation are a pivotal element to be considered.

In our case, it is interesting how we deal with two hashtags summarising the different phases of the first wave of Covid-19 in Italy. In particular, the official hashtag of the City of Milan's campaign, #Milanononsiferma, reflects the deliberate attempt to resist the rush of fear associated with the virus. This hashtag embodies the initial will to face the crisis with determination and resilience. On the other hand, the wide use of a second hashtag, which is also often adopted by media and political figures, paves the way for a broader discussion about reopenings and the risks associated with the gatherings. These hashtags, which have become symbols of different perspectives during the pandemic, reflect the complexity of social and communicative dynamics in a digital context, highlighting the ability of online platforms to influence public debate and shape collective perceptions of socially relevant events.

The consideration of affordances as the technical architecture of participatory cultures (Caliandro and Anselmi 2021) and of their discourses helps in the delineation of the sphere in which the sanctioning happens. This section, indeed, wanted to shed a light on two of the main influences on the discourse (and also on the evolution of social sanction) on Twitter: political and propagandic discourses online and the socio-technical structures they happen within.

## 4. Research question and methodology

Given the theoretical premises enunciated, the objective of this research is to analyse the shift of social sanctions on Twitter during the first wave of Covid-19. This study aims to comprehend the evolution of social sanctions during the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy, considering the intersecting dimensions of political and technical factors. The analysis delved into the evaluation of two pivotal events occurring in distinct phases of the emergency. The study was conducted through the sentiment analysis of the tweets from the two datasets of #Milanononsiferma and #Navigli to detect social sanctions. The methodology of sentiment analysis allows us to analyse users' perspectives toward an issue, making sense in the virality system of social media (Pawar 2016). As a result, we manually categorised sentiments of tweets into positive, negative, or neutral allowing us to understand if they presented social sanctions and, if it was the case, toward who.

Specifically, as social capital and social sanctions are slippery concepts, we operationalised the shift of social sanctions as a shift of opinion on Twitter:

the core of the concept, indeed, lies in the mutation of opinion toward the two catalytic event we are considering.

First, we need to understand if public opinion supports the campaign #Milanononsiferma, criticising the emptiness of streets and people's apprehension; later, it is helpful to comprehend whether, after the Navigli issue, users were blaming the strolling crowd or not. To better explore how social sanctions evolved through these two phases, a sentiment analysis will be conducted on the intersection of #Milanononsiferma and #Navigli datasets to cross-check users who commented on both topics and understand if and how their opinions shifted.

The two phases of the Covid-19 pandemic that this paper has considered refer for the first phase to the initial period of the pandemic in Italy, where closing public places and restricting people to not moving from their living space was adopted as a method to reduce contagion. This first phase thus still outlines a lack of knowledge of the phenomenon, its perilicity and the impact it would later have. The second phase, on the other hand, is ascribed to that period where a reopening of public spaces had begun, going to reconstruct a kind of return to social habits that predated the pandemic, but were still marked by a fear of the virus. The hashtags were chosen on the events of the City of Milan precisely because of the communicative and social characteristics of the city. This stands as Italy's most dynamic hub in various fields, making it a city always on the move and where stopping is not conceived. This attitude of not stopping is shaped as a cultural and behavioral element of the narrative that individuals and the city have decided to adopt. The impact and the discussion about these issues, furthermore, were not limited to Milan. This is why the analysis can look at the entire national context.

We decided to study Twitter because it is one of the most active social media for news reporting (Broersma and Graham 2012). At the time of the data collection, it was possible to access Apis (the data were, indeed, collected in real-time in 2020, long before the Apis-gate), and its data are easily processable because of their basic structure made of 280 characters, mentions, retweets and hashtags (Caliando and Gandini 2017).

The two datasets of tweets were created by scraping Twitter's Streaming API, collecting real-time data with a focus on two hashtags, #navigli and #Milanononsiferma. The datasets cover a limited period: #Milanononsiferma on the 27th and 28th of February and #navigli from the 7th to the 9th of May. From their intersection, we created a dataset of tweets by users who belonged to both #Navigli and #Milanononsiferma, valid for a crossing analysis and a comparative study of behaviour.

We collected 9670 tweets for #Milanononsiferma and 6923 for #navigli. Then we cleaned this dataset, removing retweets and got 2624 posts for #Milanononsiferma and 5103 for #Navigli. Our empirical study is based on two sub-datasets of randomly selected tweets (1066 for #Milanononsiferma and 1599 for #Navigli) and follows a mix of computational sociology and ethnographic content analysis. Thanks to the combination of the naturalistic techniques of data collection and scraping or crawling through a platform, it is possible to process, discrete and analyse the flux of everyday information. The epistemological guiding principle was to follow the medium (Rogers 2013), which, according to Caliandro and Gandini (2017), helps in the observation of online environments following what the medium does in his native context, grounding by the digital methods of the platforms and embracing their natural logic and affordances (Caliandro 2014).

## 5. Social sanctions on Twitter: understanding disaster and sanctioning shifting

To preliminarily examine the Twitter discussion in the first two moments of the first wave of coronavirus in Italy, we created two wordclouds. The analysis of the keywords that are detected by the wordcloud of #Milanononsiferma detects a complex landscape of discussion and concern («fear», «emergency»): as the emergency erupts, the concern is not only health-related but mostly economic («economy») – as evidenced by the Milan municipality's campaign to promote the continuation of activities. The themes that stand out concern the impact of the natural disaster on the Milanese economy and critical assembly situations such as schools; the doubt about the use of masks, at that time with unclear indications even from the WHO; the role of institutional figures («mayor», «Fontana») who were facing the pressure of economic and health uncertainty at that time.



FIG. 1. #Milanansiferma wordcloud.  
 Source: authors'elaboration.

The analysis of the keywords in the dataset related to the hashtag #Navigli, linked to the crowding and aperitif on the Milanese Navigli during the early stages of reopening during the red zone in Lombardy and throughout Italy, reveals several relevant themes and concerns. In particular: the mention of «assemblages» and «contagions» suggests significant concern about the spread of the virus due to the large groups of people on the Navigli; the word «fuck» suggests a strong emotional reaction, indicating a level of frustration or bewilderment; the mention of «mask» and «rules» highlights discussion about compliance with health regulations and precautions, particularly the use of masks; the mention of Sala (the Mayor of Milan, Giuseppe Sala) indicates the involvement of local institutional figures in addressing the situation and implementing control measures; the mention of «phase» suggests an awareness of the different stages of reopening and the related challenges and concerns for any change in the order; the mention of «Milanese» indicates that the local community is central to the discussions and could be the subject of reflection or criticism.



FIG. 2. #Navigli wordcloud.

*Source:* authors' elaboration.

Coronavirus evolution in Italy, at least until the 4th of May (the date that marks the start of the phase of easing), can be mainly summed up in two catalytic situations: the #Milanononsiferma campaign and the indignation due to the massive presence of crowds on Navigli, a gathering place in Milan. The analysis of the reactions on Twitter to these two events, respectively, which happened in two different contexts (before and after the national lockdown), could help in the definition of the response behaviour of the actors to understand if users waged a sort of social sanctioning through tweets and how this possible sanctioning changed throughout the two different events.

As explained in the first section, social sanctions are a means of community resistance. The question of our research is if the addressees of social sanctions changed during the two considered stages because of the subjection to two different stimuli: on the one hand, a desolated Milan fighting for #Milanononsiferma; on the other hand, a too crowded city during the national lockdown. The study aims to understand if the qualitative intensity of social sanctions changed over time and based on exposure to different inputs.

#Milanononsiferma campaign was promoted on the 27th of February, while the Navigli issue was from the 7th of May. As already mentioned, the characteristic features of the temporal and, consequently, pandemics contexts are strikingly different. The first event occurred when Italy was not in lockdown (excluding Codogno and the other red zones), and 112 cases of coronavirus were counted. After the first moment of shock and distress caused by the virus, people outside the red zones (in other words, of course, the majority of Italians) felt safe (or, at least, safer than others) and, given very scarce numbers

of cases, they felt the urge to regain a sense of normality and to face a possible economic issue caused by the slowdown of activities and by the damaged reputation of the country. On the 7th of May (the day of the controversial episode of #Navigli), the situation was completely different. Not only was the country in complete lockdown since the 11th of March, but the number of cases had been on the increase: with more than 210 thousand registered cases and more than 28 thousand deaths ascribed to the pandemic, Italy was, without doubt, one of the nations most affected by Coronavirus.

For chronological order, our study should start from #Milanononsiferma. From the 1066 tweets analysed from a random selection, we classified 559 as favouring the campaign, while 304 were against it. The campaign started with a video celebrating the city of Milan and was relaunched by the mayor, Giuseppe Sala. Many tweets, indeed (especially the ones from news bots), report the news without adding a particular emphasis on their opinion. These posts were 201 out of 1066 and were considered not opinionated; therefore, they did not apply to the study (N.A.).

A substantial majority of positive tweets can be detected: people hailed the advertising operation, often inviting others not to yield to fear and panic but rather to go back to everyday life and live the city as before the virus. On many occasions, the impulse seems to be given by an economic interest: Milan, one of the most important production centres in Italy, has been slowed down for about a week, and its businesses were in danger. The urgent need was to restart the economy and reconstitute the image of a country that relies heavily on international tourism and export. One of the most significant tweets on the matter for many aspects and implications is by Nicola Zingaretti, secretary of the Democratic Party (Pd):

Stasera sono a Milano perché mi sembra giusto raccogliere l'appello del sindaco @BeppeSala per sostenere questa città. Dobbiamo essere tutti uniti, bisogna sconfiggere il virus seguendo la scienza ma non bisogna distruggere la vita o diffondere il panico #Milanononsiferma

The appeal of Zingaretti is not to give in to fear and to avoid panic and, consequently, economic paralysis. This tweet has an interesting follow-up, as some critical posts of the dataset #Navigli will refer to this one: sometime after that, indeed, Zingaretti contracted the virus; this occurrence has been seen by many as critically in contrast and linked by a cause-and-effect relationship with the, so considered, shallowness shown toward the epidemic.

The storytelling of the campaign #Milanononsiferma is not only a general optimism toward the situation at times but also the circumstance to bring forward criticism toward those who, according to the users, alarmed the count-

ry. The target of many accusations is Attilio Fontana, governor of the region of Lombardy, who, some days before the campaign, showed himself in a press conference with a mask on:

Caro presidente Fontana. La mia azienda ha registrato un crollo degli ordinativi del 90% questa settimana a causa della psicosi. Compito delle istituzioni è rassicurare il popolo e non creare il panico con queste carnevalate. Pirla! #Milanononsiferma.

In this first phase the fear was for an economic disaster. However, radical changes will manifest after the national lockdown.

After the national lockdown, the narrative becomes more intricate and tangled: the country has suffered months of total lockdown, but there are the first relaxations of the restrictive measures, resulting in an incredible crowd on the Navigli; of course, many users commented online on this issue. Out of the 1599 #Navigli tweets analysed, we could count 1006 tweets with social sanctions and 205 without them. 269 posts out of 1599 report objectively the events or jokes about the situation; these could not be considered as a sanction or a justification of the situation. Therefore, they had to be categorised as not applicable (N.a.).

After two months of national lockdown, after many sacrifices and deaths, the majority of users considered the situation on #Navigli disrespectful and dangerous for the collective safety.

L'episodio dei #Navigli mostra che aumentare le sanzioni non basta e non può bastare. Se una società non ha il concetto di responsabilità e di salvaguardia in maniera condivisa è destinata ad essere sconfitta<sup>1</sup>.

Questa #fase2 sta funzionando, soprattutto sul #Navigli. Figuriamoci dal #18maggio. Fidarsi del buon senso degli italiani è un grave errore. #Covid19 #Covid\_19<sup>2</sup>

Contrary to expectations, the second cluster is not the opposite of the first. Users are not defending crowds on the Navigli: many tweets focus not on excuses or justification but on shifting focus, deflecting the attention to the media's intentions. According to some users, indeed, the press' narration was exaggerating the situation to distract from the incompetence of the regional

<sup>1</sup> The #Navigli episode shows that increasing sanctions is not enough and cannot be enough. If a society does not have the concept of responsibility and safeguarding in a shared way, it is doomed to defeat.

<sup>2</sup> This #phase2 is working, especially on #Navigli. Let alone since #18May. Trusting the Italians' common sense is a big mistake. #COVID19 #Covid\_19.

ruling class. More than an absence of social sanctions, it could be said that the target of the sanctioning is no longer other citizens but the media that, with their overstatements, are accused of distracting citizens from an important political issue.

Per spiegare che, a due mesi e mezzo di distanza, i numeri della #Lombardia restino catastrofici, occultando le responsabilità di #Fontana, #Galleria e #Confindustria, sta passando la linea della stigmatizzazione dei milanesi. #iostocoimilanesi #ForzaMilano #ape #Navigli<sup>3</sup>.

To shed further light on the role of social sanctions, it would be appropriate to compare the two events to understand if users who commented #Milanononsiferma also tweeted about #Navigli and how their perception has been altered in this translation. With these intentions, the two datasets were crisscrossed, creating a list of their shared users and finding 155 mutual commenters. These users were checked individually on the original dataset of #Milanononsiferma and #Navigli to explore and confront their behaviour in the two phases. Many of the users who, in the first instance, supported the campaign #Milanononsiferma and sanctioned the ones who were scared of the virus in the context of #Navigli changed their minds and shifted their negative social sanctioning toward the ones who were crowding the streets: this behavioural shifting was detected in 124 from the total of 155 tweets. Here is an example of the opinion shift of a user who, at the end of February, posted:

Ecco come la gente preparata, che ha a che fare con la malattia ogni giorno, spiega come sono inutili stupidi allarmismi. Matteo Bassetti, direttore della clinica di malattie infettive dell'ospedale San Martino di Genova. #27febbraio #Milanononsiferma #cornavirusitalia<sup>4</sup>

And on May retweeted:

#Navigli La Fase 3 è come la Fase 2 solo che non c'arriviamo<sup>5</sup>.

As the situation experienced a change in perception (from the economic issue to the health disaster) reinforced by the political and media communi-

<sup>3</sup> To explain that, two and a half months later, the #Lombardy numbers remain catastrophic, concealing the responsibilities of #Fontana, #Galleria and #Confindustria, the line of stigmatizing the Milanese is being passed. #iostocoimilanesi #ForzaMilano #ape #Navigli.

<sup>4</sup> Here's how prepared people who deal with the disease every day explain how silly scaremongering is unnecessary. - Matteo Bassetti, director of the infectious diseases clinic at San Martino Hospital in Genoa. #27February #Milanononsiferma #cornavirusitalia.

<sup>5</sup> #Navigli Phase 3 is like Phase 2 only we don't get there.



cation, many users changed the object of their sanctions. The shift of opinion that occurred on Twitter evolved with the cultural and mediatic hegemony: when the public concern referred to the economic crisis, many users were pushing in the direction of normality probably because they were driven by the statements of many politicians and prominent figures; months later, after the declaration of the pandemic, the imposition of a national lockdown by the authorities and a massive informational operation by the media, the mass emotionality was altered and was directed against detractors of the new norms. An example of an influential node that changed ideas during events is the World Health Organization (and, consequently, most healthcare institutions). In February, they declared useless personal protective equipment such as masks, reconsidered them and highly recommended their compulsoriness to government authorities.

## 6. Conclusions

The analysis confirmed the division of the first wave of coronavirus in Italy into two different patterns: in the first moment, with the problematic identification of the health problem due to the conflicting opinions of experts and politicians, there was general support for the #Milanononsiferma campaign. The social sanctioning, in this case, was aimed at those who alerted the country by wearing masks and not going out. In the second phase, the health issues became more severe and undeniable: the natural and man-made causes of the disaster began to collide, and the sanctioning shifted to the crowd on the Navigli. Even those not directly sanctioning the crowd were not defending it: their sanction shifted to the political and media narrative, blaming exaggerations for distancing citizens from political responsibility.

The comparative analysis showed that users changed their sanctioning object during the two phases. These results are aligned with other studies about the Covid-19 pandemic, according to which different situations during the health disaster evoked different emotional reactions, which have an impact on policy support and political actions (Reston and Back 2021).

What is interesting, is that the evolution of health circumstances led to a change in the political and media hegemony, highly spread by the platform's affordances. It can be assumed that this structural change impacted people's consciences. Since conscience is nothing but the representation of norms in an individual's mind (Radcliffe-Brown 1952), a variation of social norms resulted in a shift of social sanctions. As we assume affordances not merely as the structural construction, but also the socio-technical environment where usages hap-

pen and are consolidated (Caliandro and Anselmi 2021), Twitter served as both an amplifier and a vehicle for social capital. Twitter's massive hashtag uses amplified messages from political leaders and from the media, bringing users to adopt similar sanctioning positions and behaviors. Political leaders and media, indeed, could be included in what Piddocke (1968) considered power, so their influence on social sanctioning is confirmed also in the Coronavirus case. Secondly, its ability to connect people and facilitate social interactions may have influenced sanctioning behaviours by promoting the adoption of norms that enhance social capital and belonging.

Individuals aligned their sanctioning practices with online communities to maintain social ties and gain social recognition, as usually happens also in the analogic dimension (Coleman 1988). On Twitter we assisted to a general social sanctions shift (from the #Milanononsiferma campaign to the issue of Navigli) which had a particular resonance and was influenced by the political and media discourses. Given the abundance in social sanctioning on digital platforms due to the low-cost situation (Rost *et al.* 2016), the platform helped shape and amplify the discussion and, therefore, the sanctioning shift.

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