# MILESTONE 3 - MS3 Outlining anticorruption claims-making processes

Description:

This milestone focuses on identifying and analyzing the processes through which anti-corruption claims are socially constructed and circulated, especially on social media. It includes mapping the actors engaged in claims-making, examining the narratives and mechanisms they employ, studying variations in these processes across different contexts and timeframes, and assessing their impact on transparency, integrity, and institutional accountability.

Work Packages involved:

WP3 – Analysis of claims-making actors, narratives, and mechanisms

WP4 – Assessing variation and impact of anti-corruption claims-making

WP6 – Dissemination, community building, exploitation

Research Activities (RA):

RA3: Analysis of claims-making actors

RA4: Analysis of narratives and mechanisms

RA5: Analysis of variation in claims-making and neutralization processes

RA6: Evaluation of the impact of claims-making and neutralization processes

# 1.1 General data overview and methodology

Dataset creation:

All Facebook posts containing at least one of the following keywords were collected via CrowdTangle:

*corruzione, tangente/tangenti, corrotto/corrotti, mazzetta/mazzette, abuso di potere, anticorruzione, abuso d'ufficio, peculato, Anac, malversazione, traffico di influenze, appropriazione indebita, Spazzacorrotti, induzione indebita, Legge Severino, turbativa d'asta, voto di scambio, clientelare, collusione, corruttivo/corruttivi, clientelismo, nepotismo, segreto d'ufficio.*

Timeframe: 1 January 2021 – 31 December 2023
Language: Only Italian-language posts were included.
Platform analyzed: Facebook (posts published by Pages and in public Groups).

**Accounts monitored by CrowdTangle (Facebook)**
CrowdTangle monitors:
  ● Facebook Pages with over 100,000 "likes", public Groups, and verified profiles.
  ● Types of data provided by CrowdTangle
  ● Time of publication of the content
  ● Type of post (video, image, text)
  ● Page or public Group where the content was published
  ● Number of interactions (e.g., "Likes," reactions, comments, shares) or video views
  ● Other public Pages that shared the content

What CrowdTangle does not monitor
  ● Reach or impressions of posts
  ● Temporary content such as Stories
  ● Demographic information about users (e.g., location, age); while CrowdTangle shows the total number of "Likes," it does not provide details about the individuals who interacted with the content
  ● Paid or boosted posts (CrowdTangle does not distinguish between organic and paid interactions)
  ● Data or posts from private accounts or content with age or location restrictions

**General data on the number of posts**

Total posts: 369.602
Pages posts: 143.790
Group posts: 225.812

Sommossa total post 2021 - 2023

**Figure 1.1 Total post 2021-2023**

Our analysis highlights that posts published in Facebook groups are considerably more numerous than those published on pages. This pattern is expected, as groups are generally more widespread and often used by ordinary citizens to share content. By contrast, page posts tend to achieve greater visibility. While CrowdTangle does not provide metrics on views, engagement data clearly show that content from pages circulates more widely and generates significantly higher interaction levels.

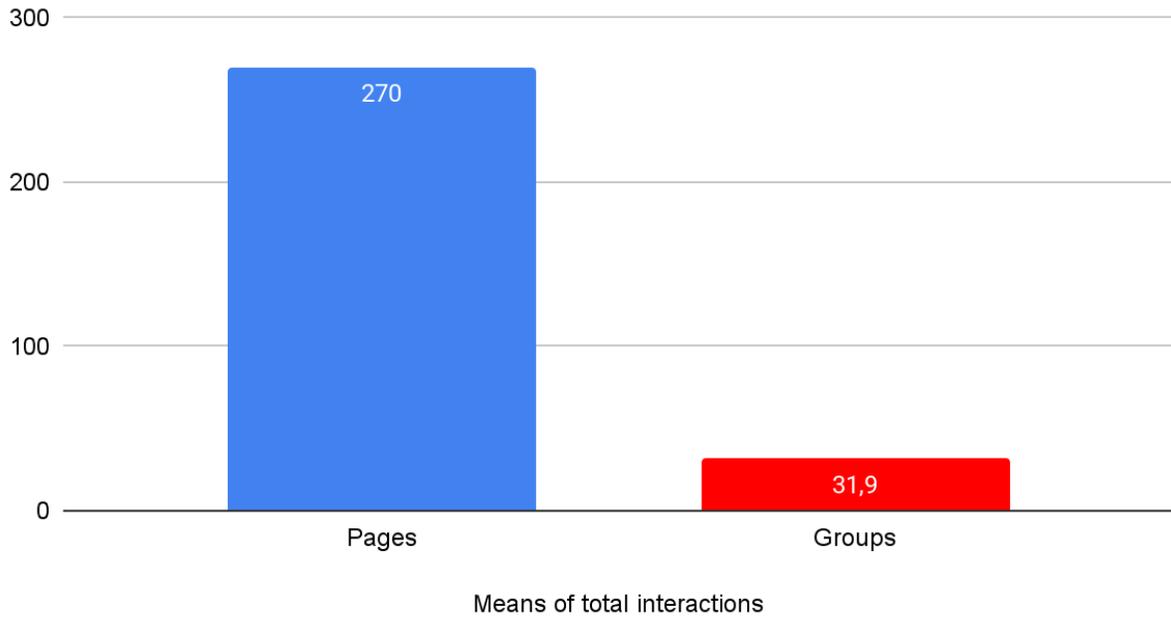## Means of total interactions 2021 - 2023



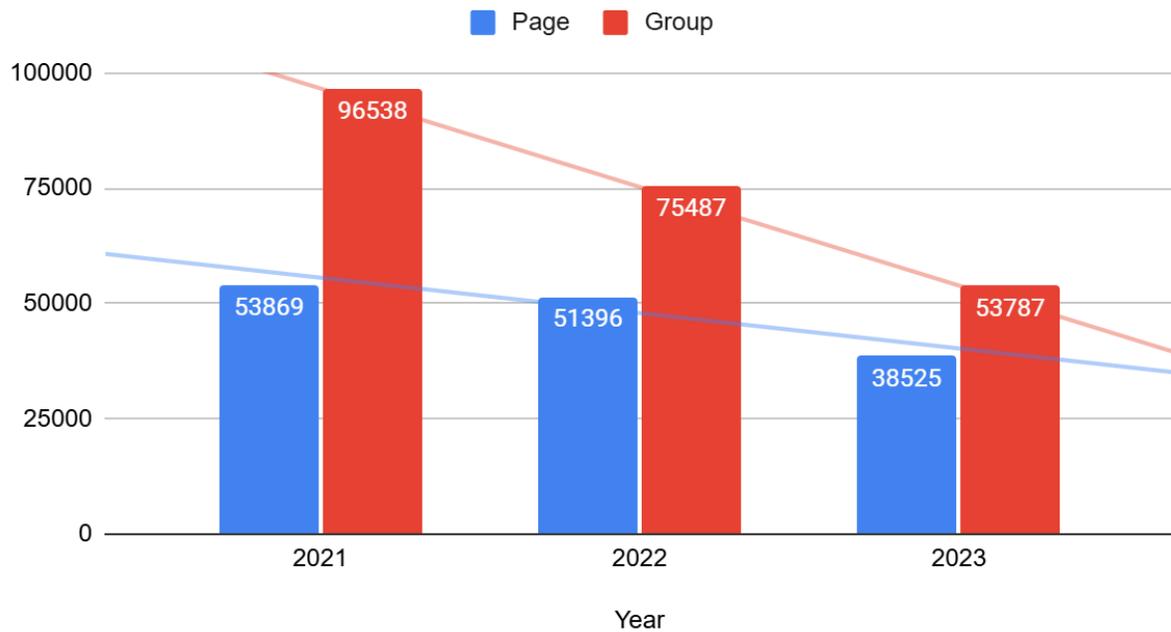**Figure 1.2 Means of total interaction 2021 - 2023**

## Post per year



**Figure 1.3 Total interaction per year**

The number of posts published each year shows a downward trend over the 2021–2023 period. This decrease, however, should not be interpreted as a direct reflection of the public debate on corruption. Rather, it aligns with the general decline in the volume of content published on Facebook over time, a trend widely observed across the platform in recent years.

## 2 RA3 – Analysis of claims-making actors

The objective of RA3 is to identify, map, and classify the actors involved in the processes of anti-corruption claims-making on Facebook within the Italian public sphere. This research activity aims to understand who participates in the social construction of corruption online and how intensely they engage in this activity.

**Specific goals**

- Identification of actors

    - Detect and categorize the main Facebook entities (Pages, public Groups, verified profiles) that post about corruption-related topics, based on the selected set of keywords.

    - Differentiate actors by their nature (e.g., institutional actors, political parties, NGOs, grassroots movements, media outlets, individual activists).

    - Highlight influential profiles with high activity or engagement levels.

- Classification and typology

    - Develop a classification framework to distinguish between *claims-making actors* (those who denounce and frame corruption) and *neutralizing actors* (those who downplay or contest such claims).

    - Analyze their organizational characteristics (institutional vs. non-institutional, professional vs. grassroots).

**Introduction**

The study of actors involved in corruption-related discussions on social media constitutes a crucial step toward understanding how these platforms contribute to the social construction of corruption. Building on the objectives of RA3, which aims to map and classify the entities intervening in the online debate, our analysis focuses on identifying the main categories of actors active on Facebook, the most widely used platform in the Italian context.
Previous research highlights that the proliferation of digital media, and particularly social media, has disrupted the traditional public sphere by amplifying the number and heterogeneity of voices participating in public debates. This shift has allowed not only institutional actors—such as politicians, parties, and legacy media outlets—to remain central in agenda-setting processes but has also opened new spaces for non-institutional actors, including communities, alternative media, and ordinary citizens, who previously

had limited access to the public discourse on corruption. As shown in studies such as Marchetti et al. (2024), this expansion of actors simultaneously broadens the range of perspectives while introducing new challenges, including increased risks of polarization and political instrumentalization of corruption scandals.

Within this framework, RA3 examines the universe of actors who generated the 369.602 posts included in the corpus, classifying them through a codebook designed to capture both their organizational nature and their political orientation. Particular attention is given to Facebook groups, considered as communities, where the political or non-political character of their activity must be specified. By analyzing the interplay between institutional and non-institutional actors, this section aims to shed light on the dynamics through which corruption is discussed, framed, and potentially polarized in the digital public sphere.

**Methodology**

The first step of the analysis consisted in compiling the list of actors who published the 369.602 posts included in the corpus. In total, 36.984 unique actors were identified as having published at least one post within the reference period. To classify these actors, we applied a selection criterion: only those who had published at least five posts during the reference period and reached an average of at least 20 interactions per post were included. This filtering process resulted in a subset of 5.254 actors meeting the criteria. Each of these actors was subsequently manually coded according to a predefined codebook, based on four main features: account name, account handle, page category, and page description. The coding process produced two key variables: (1) Type of entities and (2) Political/Non-political. We considered Facebook groups as communities, and for these communities it was necessary to indicate whether they were political or non-political.

Summary of actor selection process

- Total posts analyzed: 369.602

- Unique actors identified: 36.984

Selection criteria for classification

- At least 5 posts in the reference period OR

- An average of $\geq$ 20 interactions per post

Resulting subset:

5.379 actors

221.250 posts (produced by the analyzed actors)

**Codebook**

**Table 2.1 – Codebook Type of entities**

| Type of entities | | Code | Description | Examples by Italian corpus |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Political actors | National parties | 1 | Main national political parties | Movimento 5 Stelle, Lega, Partito Democratico, Forza Italia, etc. |
| | National politicians | 2 | National politicians who are members of the European parliament, the national parliament, and the government structure | Luigi Di Maio, Andrea Orlando, Antonio Tajani, etc. |
| | Local parties | 3 | Local sections of the main domestic political parties | MoVimento 5 Stelle Campania, Partito Democratico del Lazio, Lega Umbria, etc. |
| | Local politicians | 4 | Local government members (mayors, councilors, regional governors) | Vincenzo De Luca, Michele Emiliano, Virginia Raggi, etc. |
| Media actors | National media | 5 | National newspapers, news websites, tv channels, radio, televisions or radio programs, magazines | Il Fatto Quotidiano, Sky Tg 24, Report, Fanpage.it, etc. |
| | Local media | 6 | Local newspapers, news websites, tv channels, radio, magazines | Giornale di Sicilia, Milano Today, Cronache Maceratesi, etc. |
| | Journalists | 7 | Professional journalists (print press, online news outlets, television, radio) | Marco Travaglio, Nicola Porro, Enrico Mentana, Maurizio Belpietro, etc. |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Alternative media | 8 | Alternative in relation to mainstream media (for Italy: not regularly registered in the Italian courts; PLEASE CLARIFY FOR OTHER COUNTRIES) | Notiziario 360, Silenzi e falsità della stampa italiana, NewNotizie.it, etc. |
| | Disinformation | 9 | Facebook pages included in the blacklists of debunking sites (for Italy: e.g., butac.it, bufale.net and avaaz.org; PLEASE CLARIFY FOR OTHER COUNTRIES) | Quello che i TG non dicono, Adesso Basta, L'attivista a 5 stelle, etc. |
| Ordinary people | Bloggers | 10 | Ordinary people who have a public page or blog (residual category that does not contain politicians, journalists, or celebrities/influencers). | Pierre Cantagallo, Emilia Clementi, Calvani Daniele, etc. |
| | Communities | 11 | Communities of people joined by a common interest (all Facebook groups must be classified as communities). | Noi Poliziotti per sempre, Briganti, La cultura negli aforismi, Il razzismo non ci piace, W IL M5S, Raggi Forever, Politici Corrotti, etc. |
| Other actors | Institutions and Public administrations | 12 | Police, Army, municipalities | Polizia di Stato, Carabinieri, Comune di Frosinone, etc. |
| | Association/organization | 13 | NGO, local associations, organizations | Libera Contro le Mafie, Comitato Ventotene, MamAfrica, etc. |
| | Celebrities/Influencers | 14 | Artists, singers, influencers | Costantino della Gherardesca, Diego Fusaro, Luca Tommassini, Vinicio Capossela, etc. |
| | Business/Publishing | 15 | Private company, publishers | Mondadori, Netflix |
| | Trade Union | 16 | Trade union organization | CGIL; Cisl, Uil |

**Table 2.2 – Codebook Political/Non-political**

|  | Code | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Political | 1 | Reference to a specific leader, party/movement, or political faction. Enter this code even if there are generic references to a political area (e.g. left-wing or right-wing) without explicit reference to a political party or figure. |
| Non-political | 2 | If there is no explicit reference to the politics (as indicated above), insert non-political. |

**Results**

**Table 2.3 Actor classification (2021-2023)**

| Category | N. | % |
|---|---|---|
| Communities | 2666 | 49.56 |
| Local media | 515 | 9.57 |
| National politicians | 401 | 7.45 |
| National media | 330 | 6.13 |
| Associations/organizations | 264 | 4.91 |
| Bloggers | 240 | 4.46 |
| Local politicians | 197 | 3.66 |
| Alternative media | 193 | 3.59 |
| Local parties | 161 | 2.99 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Journalists | 121 | 2.25 |
| Disinformation | 65 | 1.21 |
| Trade union | 59 | 1.1 |
| Institutions and Public administrations | 58 | 1.08 |
| National parties | 54 | 1 |
| Business/Publishing | 30 | 0.56 |
| Celebrities/Influencers | 25 | 0.46 |
| **Total** | **5379** | **100** |

**Table 2.4 Total post per category (2021-2023)**

| Category | Total post (N.) | Total post % |
|---|---|---|
| Communities | 141875 | 64,12 |
| Local media | 27433 | 12,4 |
| National media | 16373 | 7,4 |
| National politicians | 6872 | 3,11 |
| Alternative media | 6477 | 2,93 |
| Associations/organizations | 6234 | 2,82 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Bloggers | 4556 | 2,06 |
| Local politicians | 2810 | 1,27 |
| Journalists | 2535 | 1,15 |
| Local parties | 1984 | 0,9 |
| Disinformation | 1382 | 0,62 |
| National parties | 1264 | 0,57 |
| Institutions and Public administrations | 558 | 0,25 |
| Celebrities/Influencers | 372 | 0,17 |
| Business/Publishing | 323 | 0,15 |
| Trade union | 202 | 0,09 |
| **Total** | **221250** | **100** |

The two tables present complementary insights into the actor landscape in corruption-related discussions on Facebook. The first table maps the distribution of unique actors (5.379 in total), while the second shows the total number of posts published by each category (221.250 posts). Despite measuring different dimensions—actors versus volume of content—the two distributions are remarkably similar, indicating that the activity levels of most categories are proportional to their numerical weight.

In both cases, communities dominate the landscape, representing almost half of the actors (48,99%) and producing nearly two-thirds of the posts (49,56%). This confirms the pivotal role of Facebook groups as arenas for grassroots participation, where ordinary citizens engage extensively in the debate on corruption. Local media and national media follow at considerable distance, both in number of actors and in post production, reinforcing the idea that traditional journalism—especially at the local level—still plays a significant, though secondary, role in this digital environment.

Institutional and elite actors—such as national politicians, parties, and journalists—collectively account for a modest share of both actors and posts, indicating their relatively limited direct involvement in producing content compared to citizen-driven communities. Minor categories, including disinformation

sources, celebrities/influencers, and trade unions, are quantitatively negligible but remain relevant in qualitative terms due to their potential impact on narratives and framing.

**Table 2.5 Means of interaction per category**

| Category | Means of post interaction |
|---|---|
| Journalists | 1757,21 |
| Business Casa editrice | 1654,38 |
| National politicians | 1639,68 |
| Celebrities Influencers | 1437,7 |
| National parties | 834,66 |
| Bloggers | 585,46 |
| Local politicians | 545,74 |
| Institutions Public administrations | 199,08 |
| National media | 197,64 |
| Alternative media | 181,53 |
| Disinformation | 128,01 |
| Local parties | 119,89 |
| Associations organizations | 102,17 |
| Communities | 88,07 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Local media | 48,54 |
| Sindacati | 46,62 |
| **Total** | **301.11** |

The table presents the average number of interactions per post (means of interaction) for each actor category.

The highest average is recorded by journalists, with 1,757.21 interactions per post, followed closely by business/publishing actors (Casa editrice) at 1,654.38, and national politicians at 1,639.68. These figures suggest that professionalized actors—both from the media and political elites—retain strong centrality in the dynamics of visibility and engagement on social media when corruption is addressed.

The high value for the business/publishing category deserves particular attention. This figure is significantly influenced by a small number of highly viral posts, especially from large national entertainment platforms or commercial brands. For instance, posts from streaming services like Netflix, promoting films or shows that reference corruption in humorous or indirect ways (such as Quo Vado by Checco Zalone), can generate exceptional engagement. While this content is not always explicitly political or part of an anti-corruption discourse, it contributes to shaping public perception by embedding corruption narratives in popular culture and entertainment logics. These viral peaks, though statistically infrequent, elevate the overall average of the category, showing how symbolic resonance and mass appeal can outweigh thematic consistency.

High average interactions are also observed for celebrities/influencers (1,437.7) and national politicians (1,639.68), confirming that visibility and reach are not exclusively tied to numerical prevalence but to symbolic capital, algorithmic amplification, and network centrality. These actors, though fewer in number, play a central role in framing narratives and setting the agenda.

Conversely, grassroots actors, such as communities (88.07), associations (102.17), and local parties (119.89), despite being often prolific in terms of post production, show significantly lower average engagement. This supports the idea of a hybrid public sphere where bottom-up participation drives volume and pluralism, while top-down or highly visible actors concentrate attention and influence.

Even categories often perceived as disruptive or influential in other contexts—such as alternative media (181.53) and disinformation actors (128.01)—record relatively modest engagement.

Overall, these figures illustrate the coexistence of two dynamics: a participatory base that expands the conversation's reach, and a small set of actors—often institutional, media-related, or entertainment-based—whose content shapes the peaks of visibility and frames the dominant interpretations of corruption on social media.

**Table 2.6 - Top 10 Accounts by Average Interactions – Journalists**

| Account | Post example | Means of interaction |
|---|---|---|
| Lorenzo Tosa | https://www.facebook.com/100044563983825/posts/376794477149319 | 22657,25 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Andrea Scanzi | https://www.facebook.com/100044294836323/posts/66385603843 4218 | 16063,45 |
| Leonardo Cecchi | https://www.facebook.com/1468582010125799/posts/2835148320135821 | 11772,34 |
| Roberto Saviano | https://www.facebook.com/100044445845937/posts/330708485087344 | 7607,5 |
| Gianluca Daluiso | https://www.facebook.com/100050250619600/posts/630205735331108 | 6553,46 |
| Pagina Alessandro Orsini | https://www.facebook.com/100036275363411/posts/375686780317164 | 4915,87 |
| Sigfrido Ranucci | https://www.facebook.com/100050151894142/posts/687460266269030 | 4602,05 |
| Sabrina Giannini | https://www.facebook.com/100051334788084/posts/339445551109935 | 4142,43 |
| Lino Polimeni | https://www.facebook.com/100044064949761/posts/288329420117704 | 3690,08 |
| Luca Sommi | https://www.facebook.com/100051603856242/posts/754401229623332 | 3588 |

The table illustrates the ranking of national journalists by average interactions per post, revealing a heterogeneous composition of this category. While it includes prominent figures traditionally associated with legacy media—such as Andrea Scanzi, Roberto Saviano, and Sigfrido Ranucci, known for their work in major newspapers and television programs—it also features actors who have built much of their visibility directly within digital platforms. For example, Lorenzo Tosa and Leonardo Cecchi, despite their journalistic background, are primarily recognized for their prolific and highly engaging activity on Facebook rather than for their contributions to established media outlets.

This mixture underscores the complexity of applying traditional media categories to the analysis of social media dynamics. The digital environment allows for new forms of celebrity and influence, where journalistic credibility can emerge or be amplified outside the conventional circuits of print and broadcast media. Moreover, the presence of hybrid figures—both "legacy" journalists and platform-native commentators—highlights the blurring boundaries between professional journalism and opinion-based activism in the online debate on corruption.

**Table 2.7 - Top 10 Accounts by Average Interactions – National politicians**

| Account | Esempio post | Means of total interaction | Partito |
|---|---|---|---|
| Giuseppe Conte | https://www.facebook.com/383458618802776/posts/1251016375380325 | 34066,87 | m5s |
| Alessandro Di Battista | https://www.facebook.com/299413980170673/posts/3830893860355983 | 16493,81 | ex m5s |
| Alfonso Bonafede | https://www.facebook.com/100044379641195/posts/577226110433372 | 15473,6 | m5s |
| Alessio Villarosa | https://www.facebook.com/432710136804455/posts/5502779373130814 | 14909,63 | m5s |
| Giorgia Meloni | https://www.facebook.com/38919827644/posts/101593709795 32645 | 14131 | fratelli d'italia |
| Paola Taverna | https://www.facebook.com/414379725319621/posts/4036842923073265 | 13445,88 | m5s |
| Isabella Tovaglieri | https://www.facebook.com/100044369801829/posts/780754893413497 | 13144,43 | lega |
| Matteo Salvini | https://www.facebook.com/252306033154/posts/10158942032308155 | 12883,33 | lega |
| Matteo Renzi | https://www.facebook.com/100044405650360/posts/637509554405894 | 11581,2 | centro |
| Danilo Toninelli | https://www.facebook.com/394306980707405/posts/1909141702557251 | 7867 | m5s |

The ranking of national politicians by average interactions per post highlights a marked dominance of actors linked to the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S). Figures such as Giuseppe Conte, Alessandro Di Battista, Alfonso Bonafede, Alessio Villarosa, Paola Taverna, and Danilo Toninelli occupy six of the ten top positions, underscoring the party's ability to mobilize engagement on Facebook. This finding reflects the historical affinity of the M5S with digital platforms, which has characterized its political communication strategy since its inception, privileging direct connection with citizens and bypassing traditional media filters.

In contrast, the absence of Partito Democratico (PD) representatives in the ranking is striking. Despite being a major political force, PD actors do not appear among the top-performing profiles in terms of engagement on corruption-related content, suggesting either a lower investment in this thematic area or a communication style less oriented toward viralization and populist framing, which typically drives interactions on social media.

The presence of leaders from other parties—such as Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini (right-wing) and Matteo Renzi (center)—confirms that high engagement is not exclusive to M5S but rather reflects broader dynamics of personalization of political communication and leader-centric narratives typical of Facebook. Nevertheless, the overwhelming weight of M5S actors reinforces the party's centrality in the online debate on corruption during the period analyzed.

**Table 2.8 - Top 10 Accounts by Average Interactions – Alternative media**

| account | Esempio post | Media interazioni |
|---|---|---|
| Ilcinegico.com | https://www.facebook.com/704229129667989/posts/4295385893885610 | 6840 |
| Flusso di Coscienza | https://www.facebook.com/602174143600291/posts/1051442892006745 | 3939,38 |
| OttolinaTv | https://www.facebook.com/100065557896945/posts/518186020376657 | 3873,37 |
| Icone | https://www.facebook.com/2362999967356036/posts/3544078532581501 | 2103 |
| La Cronaca di Roma | https://www.facebook.com/176408156369112/posts/690853338257922 | 1864,21 |
| Agtw | https://www.facebook.com/1994385233906262/posts/4550360564975370 | 1677,5 |
| Chi ha paura del buio? | https://www.facebook.com/244186155685360/posts/5024153367688591 | 1633,5 |
| UN Popolo Distrutto | https://www.facebook.com/100050672311048/posts/447421293623611 | 1397 |
| Contro il Potere | https://www.facebook.com/1354997397875029/posts/6384030601638325 | 1248 |
| Radio Maria | https://www.facebook.com/114014721969820/posts/3985227061515214 | 1089,52 |

The ranking of alternative media by average interactions highlights the heterogeneity of this category, which brings together a variety of websites and Facebook pages presenting themselves as news outlets but lacking the professional standards typical of legacy media. A telling indicator of this difference is that many of these actors are not officially registered as journalistic entities with Italian tribunals, a legal requirement for recognized news organizations.

Although these platforms mimic the aesthetics and formats of online newspapers, their editorial approaches are often ambiguous, relying heavily on sensationalist or clickbait content designed to maximize engagement rather than adhere to journalistic rigor. Several examples in the ranking illustrate this dynamic, combining high levels of interaction with content that frequently blurs the line between information and opinion, or even veers toward problematic narratives.

This phenomenon is significant in the context of corruption-related discourse: by adopting the appearance of news media while circumventing professional accountability, alternative media can shape public perceptions and potentially fuel polarization. The coexistence of such actors alongside legacy outlets reinforces the fragmentation of the digital public sphere, where diverse and sometimes conflicting sources contribute to constructing narratives around corruption.

**Table 2.9 - Political vs non political account**

| Political/vs non political | Number of actors | Means of interactions |
|---|---|---|
| Non political | 2342 | 236.36 |
| Political | 1485 | 480.50 |
| Total | 3827 | / |

**Table 2.10 Political orientation**

| Orientamento politico | N. account | Means of interactions |
|---|---|---|
| m5s | 538 | 551.59 |
| lega | 148 | 671.15 |
| sinistra | 108 | 149.99 |
| pd | 95 | 277.66 |
| centro sinistra | 82 | 739.17 |
| fratelli d'italia | 60 | 533.60 |
| sovranismo | 58 | 868.61 |
| ex m5s | 57 | 967.67 |
| anti globalismo | 43 | 124.49 |
| centro | 29 | 717.80 |
| antipolitica | 27 | 76.56 |
| forza italia | 26 | 268.48 |
| centro destra | 25 | 212.41 |
| localismo | 23 | 320.80 |
| destra | 19 | 277.61 |
| anti destra | 17 | 225.80 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| civico | 13 | 224.58 |
| anti sinistra | 3 | 59.20 |
| anti m5s | 1 | 473.71 |
| Total | 1372 | |

The joint analysis of the two tables provides an overview of the distribution of political and non-political actors and the various political orientations represented in the corpus.

The first table shows that non-political actors are numerically predominant (2,342) compared to political actors (1,485). However, political actors record a much higher average number of interactions (480.50 vs 236.36), indicating that, while less numerous, their content generates greater attention and engagement.

The second table offers a more detailed view of the political field. The Five Star Movement (M5S) emerges as the most represented category, with 538 accounts, followed by the Lega (148 accounts) and related orientations such as centre-left (82) and Fratelli d'Italia (60). Other specific subcategories, such as former M5S and sovereigntist, although smaller in size, record very high average interactions (967.67 and 868.61, respectively).

Among traditional parties, the Partito Democratico (PD) appears with 95 accounts and an average of 277.66 interactions, while Forza Italia counts 26 accounts with 268.48 interactions. Additional orientations such as left, centre, right, and localism show smaller numbers but illustrate the fragmentation and diversity of political actors engaged in the debate.

Overall, these data suggest that, while the political landscape on Facebook is broad and varied, certain areas – particularly those linked to M5S and post-M5S actors – stand out for their strong presence and exceptionally high engagement levels, whereas more traditional formations maintain a relatively modest presence both in numerical terms and in average interactions.

**Conclusions**

In conclusion, the analysis of actors and their engagement patterns on Facebook reveals a highly heterogeneous landscape. Non-political actors dominate numerically, yet political figures – particularly those linked to the Five Star Movement (M5S) – achieve the highest average interactions, underscoring their continued centrality in the debate on corruption. The data also highlight the presence of hybrid actors, such as journalists and alternative media, whose influence often stems from their activity on social platforms rather than from traditional media roles. Moreover, the emergence of viral content from unexpected sources, such as entertainment networks or influencers, illustrates how public perceptions of corruption are shaped by a wide variety of content types, beyond strictly political or institutional narratives.

# 3 RA4: Analysis of narratives and mechanisms

The objective of RA4 is to analyze the narratives and mechanisms through which corruption-related claims are constructed and disseminated on Facebook. Building on the actor mapping carried out in RA3, this activity investigates how different types of actors – both institutional and non-institutional – frame corruption and employ storytelling strategies to legitimize their positions and mobilize audiences. The analysis focuses on recurring frames, rhetorical devices, and emotional appeals that characterize these narratives, and on how they circulate within the broader digital public sphere.

This activity contributes directly to several specific goals of the project, including:

Understanding the social construction of corruption (SO3) through the examination of how narratives define what counts as corrupt behavior;

Exploring claims-making and neutralization mechanisms (SO4) by analyzing discursive strategies used to accuse, justify, or downplay corruption;

Identifying the impact of these narratives on public perceptions (SO5), particularly in terms of engagement and resonance across communities.

## Introduction

The RA4 investigates the narratives and discursive mechanisms through which corruption is framed and given meaning in the digital public sphere. Building on a constructivist approach (Berger & Luckmann 1966) and integrating insights from the theory of mediated construction of reality (Couldry & Hepp 2017), corruption is analyzed not simply as a legal or institutional matter but as a social construct shaped through mediated communication. In highly mediatized societies, media no longer merely transmit information but become constitutive of social reality: they set the parameters within which corruption is discussed, define its moral and emotional dimensions, and influence the collective understanding of what constitutes corrupt behavior.

Within this framework, RA4 examines how the actors mapped in RA3 – from institutional elites to grassroots communities and alternative media – use frames, rhetorical strategies, and symbolic resources to construct claims about corruption. As underlined by Marchetti et al. (2024), digital platforms intensify this process by introducing new logics of visibility and participation, where personal storytelling, political commentary, and entertainment coalesce. This approach allows us to explore how corruption narratives are produced, circulated, and contested within a hybrid media system, and how they contribute to shaping public perceptions and moral judgments.

## Methodology

For the RA4, the analysis focused exclusively on the posts published by the actors previously coded in RA3 (Total posts: 221.250). This ensured consistency between the actor classification phase and the narrative analysis phase, allowing us to examine how the same actors construct and disseminate narratives about corruption. The content analysis was conducted using the QDA Miner software from the Provalis Research suite.

The corpus was divided into six semesters covering the period 2021–2023. For each semester, we applied an unsupervised topic modeling procedure to identify the main thematic clusters emerging in the discussion during that period (the complete results of this exploratory step are provided in the appendix).

These topics served as the empirical basis for building a keyword-based codebook, which was then used to perform a manual coding of the entire corpus. This two-step approach made it possible to combine automated extraction of recurring themes with an interpretive classification aimed at identifying the main patterns of discussion related to corruption.

These topics served as the empirical basis for building a keyword-based codebook, which was subsequently applied in a manual coding of the entire corpus to detect recurring discussion patterns.

The manual coding was conducted across four analytical levels:

1) <u>Discussion domains</u> – to indicate the general area or topic in which corruption is discussed (e.g., health, universities, public procurement).

2) <u>Crimes</u> – to classify posts according to keywords related to specific offenses, in order to identify the type of corruption being referred to.

3) <u>Specific cases</u> – to capture references to major corruption cases that dominated the public debate during the analysis period and that also emerged from the topic modeling phase.

4) <u>Political leaders and parties</u> – to identify references to key political leaders and parties, enabling the measurement of how much and in what ways these figures are discussed in relation to corruption.

The following section presents the codebook employed for manual coding.

**Table 3.1 Codebook**

| Topic | Code | Keywords |
|---|---|---|
| Discussion domains | Vitalizio | VITALIZIO, VITALIZI |
| | Religione | GESÙ, SPIRITO_SANTO, VERGINE_MARIA, RENDIAMO_GRAZIE_A_DIO, VANGELO_DEL_GIORNO, AMORE_DIVINO |
| | Arresti | ARRESTATO, DOMICILIARI, ARRESTI, ARRESTATI, ARRESTATA, CARCERE, CELLA |
| | Indagini | PROCURA, INCHIESTA, INDAGINE, INDAGATI, PM, INDAGATO, INDAGINI, PROCURATORE, ACCUSA, REATI, INCHIESTE |

| | Processi | CORTE_D'APPELLO, CORTE_DI_APPELLO, SENTENZA, CONDANNA, PROCESSO, CASSAZIONE, GIUDICI, CONDANNATO, CONDANNATA, ASSOLTO, ASSOLTA, TRIBUNALE, GIUDICE, PROCESSI, ATTI_GIUDIZIARI, RINVIO_A_GIUDIZIO, RINVIATI_A_GIUDIZIO |
|---|---|---|
| | Leggi anticorruzione | RIFORMA, BONAFEDE, RIFORMA_DELLA_GIUSTIZIA, LEGGE_ANTICORRUZIONE, CARTABIA, LEGGI_ANTICORRUZIONE, SEVERINO |
| | Anac | ANAC, AUTORITÀ_NAZIONALE_ANTICORRUZIONE, BUSIA |
| | Anticorruzione | ANTICORRUZIONE, ANTI_CORRUZIONE |
| | Regione | REGIONE, REGIONALE |
| | Rifiuti | RIFIUTI, DISCARICA, DISCARICHE |
| | Criminalità organizzata | NDRANGHETA, ANTIMAFIA, MAFIE, MAFIA, MAFIOSO, MAFIOSA, GRATTERI, FALCONE, CAMORRA, SACRA_CORONA_UNITA, COSA_NOSTRA, CLAN, BOSS, MESSINA_DENARO |
| | Comuni | COMUNALE, SINDACO, COMUNALI |
| | Covid | PANDEMIA, COVID |
| | Vaccini | VACCINO, VACCINALE, PANDEMICO, ASTRA_ZENECA, ASTRAZENECA, PFIZER, FARMACEUTICA, FARMACEUTICHE, SIERO, COVIDIOTI |
| | Reddito di cittadinanza | REDDITO_DI_CITTADINANZA, DECRETO_DIGNITÀ |
| | Green | GREEN, AUTO_ELETTRICHE, DECRETO_CLIMA, IDROGEOLOGICO, ENERGIA_VERDE, CLIMATICO |
| | Calcio | CALCIO, CALCIATORE |
| | Superbonus | SUPERBONUS, SUPER_BONUS, BONUS_EDILIZIO |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | PNRR | PNRR, PIANO_NAZIONALE_DI_RIPRESA_E_RESILIENZA, NEXT_GENERATION, RECOVERY_FUND, RECOVERY_PLAN, FONDO_EUROPEO_PER_LA_RIPRESA |
| | Guerra in Ucraina | RUSSIA, UCRAINA, PUTIN, NATO, RUSSO, UCRAINO, ZELENSKY, CRIMEA, KOLOMOYSKYI, SHEFIR, ZAPORIŽŽJA |
| | Israele | HAMAS, PALESTINESI, GAZA, PALESTINESE, ISRAELE, NETANYAHU, ABU_MAZEN, PALESTINA |
| | Whistleblowing | WHISTLEBLOWING, WHISTLEBLOWER |
| | Diritti civili | DDL_ZAN, DIRITTI_CIVILI, LGBT, LGBTQ+ |
| | Sanità | ASL, OSPEDALI, OSPEDALE, PRIMARIO, LISTE_DI_ATTESA, INTRAMOENIA, DISPOSITIVI_MEDICI, SANITOPOLI, CITTÀ_DELLA_SALUTE, MASCHERINE |
| | Appalti | APPALTI, APPALTO |
| | Concorsi | CONCORSI, CONCORSO |
| | Università | UNIVERSITÀ, UNIVERSITARIO, ATENEI, ATENEO, RETTORE |
| | Lobby | LOBBY, LOBBYING, LOBBISTA, LOBBISMO |
| | Rifugiati | RIFUGIATI, MODELLO_RIACE, SPRAR, EMERGENZA_MIGRANTI |
| Crime | Finanziamento illecito | FINANZIAMENTO_ILLECITO |
| | Voto di scambio | VOTO_DI_SCAMBIO, SCAMBIO_ELETTORALE |
| | Peculato | PECULATO |
| | Abuso di ufficio | ABUSO_D'UFFICIO, ABUSO_DI_UFFICIO |
| | Evasione fiscale | EVASIONE_FISCALE, EVASO_IL_FISCO, PARADISI_FISCALI, PARADISO_FISCALE, FRODATO_IL_FISCO, FRODE_FISCALE |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Falso in bilancio | FALSO IN BILANCIO |
| | Truffa aggravata | TRUFFA AGGRAVATA, FALSO_IDEOLOGICO |
| | Traffico di influenze | TRAFFICO_DI_INFLUENZE |
| | Tangenti | TANGENTE, TANGENTI, MAZZETTA, MAZZETTE, BUSTARELLA, BUSTARELLE |
| | Concussione | CONCUSSIONE |
| | Malversazione | MALVERSAZIONE |
| | Collusione | COLLUSIONE |
| | Clientelismo/Nepotismo | CLIENTELISMO, CLIENTELARE, NEPOTISMO, NEPOTISMI |
| | Appropriazione indebita | APPROPRIAZIONE_INDEBITA |
| | Violazione segreto d'ufficio | VIOLAZIONE_SEGRETOD'UFFICIO |
| | Induzione indebita | INDUZIONE_INDEBITA |
| | Riciclaggio | RICICLAGGIO |
| Recurring specific cases | Scandali Renzi | CONSIP, TIZIANO_RENZI, LUCA_LOTTI, GIGLIO_MAGICO, BOSCHI, FONDAZIONE_OPEN |
| | Caso Amara/Davigo | PIERO_AMARA, DAVIGO, LOGGIA_UNGHERIA |
| | Caso Mimmo Lucano | MIMMO_LUCALO, RIACE |
| | Qatargate | PANZERI, KAILI, QATARGATE, QUATARGATE |
| | Palamara | PALAMARA, MAGISTRATURA_DEMOCRATICA |
| | Pandora Papers | PANDORA_PAPERS |
| | Anas | ANAS, TOMMASO__VERDINI |
| | Processi Berlusconi | PREVITI, SME, RUBY, MAFIOSO_DI_ARCORE, MILLS, CAIMANO, BUNGA_BUNGA |
| | Falcone/Borsellino | FALCONE, BORSELLINO, CAPACI |
| Politicians | Meloni | MELONI |

| | Salvini | SALVINI |
|---|---|---|
| | Tajani | TAJANI |
| | Schlein | SCHLEIN |
| | Letta | LETTA |
| | Zingaretti | ZINGARETTI |
| | Berlusconi | BERLUSCONI |
| | Conte | CONTE |
| | Draghi | DRAGHI |
| | Fratoianni | FRATOIANNI |
| | Renzi | RENZI |
| | Calenda | CALENDA |
| Parties | Partito Democratico | PARTITO_DEMOCRATICO; PD |
| | Movimento 5 Stelle | 5_STELLE; CINQUE_STELLE; M5S |
| | Fratelli d'Italia | FRATELLI_D'ITALIA; FDI |
| | Lega | LEGA |
| | Forza Italia | FORZA_ITALIA; FI |
| | Alleanza verdi sinistra/ Sinistra Italiana | VERDI_SINISTRA; AVS, SINISTRA_ITALIANA |
| | Italia viva | ITALIA_VIVA |
| | Azione | AZIONE |

## Results

*General findings*

**Table 3.2 Coding frequencies Discussion domains (tot. Post 221.250; 2021-2023)**

| Code | Freq. | % posts |
|---|---|---|
| Indagini | 75850 | 34,30% |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Processi | 65073 | 29,40% |
| Criminalità Organizzata | 45536 | 20,60% |
| Arresti | 38617 | 17,50% |
| Comune | 23757 | 10,70% |
| Covid | 19327 | 8,70% |
| Regione | 18824 | 8,50% |
| Leggi Anticorruzione | 17559 | 7,90% |
| Sanità | 17420 | 7,90% |
| Guerra In Ucraina | 13456 | 6,10% |
| Religione | 9908 | 4,50% |
| Reddito Di Cittadinanza | 9361 | 4,20% |
| Concorsi | 8569 | 3,90% |
| Pnrr | 8219 | 3,70% |
| Anticorruzione | 7380 | 3,30% |
| Vitalizio | 6065 | 2,70% |
| Rifiuti | 5750 | 2,60% |
| Lobby | 5148 | 2,30% |
| Università | 4522 | 2,00% |
| Green | 4465 | 2,00% |
| Calcio | 3634 | 1,60% |
| Appalti | 3565 | 1,60% |
| Israele | 3421 | 1,50% |
| Anac | 2971 | 1,30% |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Superbonus | 2801 | 1,30% |
| Whistleblowing | 1440 | 0,70% |
| Rifugiati | 781 | 0,40% |
| Diritti Civili | 591 | 0,30% |

The distribution of codes highlights that discussions on Facebook related to corruption are strongly concentrated around certain thematic areas. Indagini (34.30%), processi (29.40%), and arresti (17.50%) dominate the debate. This result is not surprising: public conversations about corruption are heavily influenced by specific cases and judicial proceedings, meaning the topic tends to gain traction primarily when contingent scandals or prosecutorial actions are revealed.

The third most frequent theme, criminalià organizzata (20.60%), reflects the structural link between corruption and mafia-related phenomena in the Italian context. The notable presence of references to local entities, such as comuni (10.70%) and regioni (8.50%), suggests that corruption is often framed at a territorial level, intertwined with local governance and administrative practices.

Other significant areas include sanità (7.90%) and reddito di cittadinanza (4.20%), which show that corruption is not only discussed in terms of political wrongdoing but also in connection to welfare policies and the management of public services. Likewise, references to the Covid-19 pandemic (8.70%) and the war in Ukraine (6.10%) demonstrate that corruption debates intersect with emergent crises and geopolitical contexts, revealing a strong media contingency in how the issue is framed.

The category religione (4.50%) is particularly interesting and somewhat ambiguous, yet emblematic of how the term "corruption" circulates on social media. In these cases, users frequently invoke "moral corruption," framing it as a spiritual decline or estrangement from God rather than strictly institutional wrongdoing. This illustrates the semantic expansion of corruption beyond its legal or political meaning, encompassing broader cultural and moral dimensions.

Themes such as legislazione anticorruzione (7.90%), PNRR (3.70%), and green policies (2.00%) reflect attention to reform strategies and policy debates, while more unexpected topics – such as calcio (1.60%), diritti civili (0.30%), or religion itself – underscore the narrative variety already observed in topic modeling analyses.

**Table 3.3 Coding frequencies Crime (tot. Post 221.250; 2021-2023)**

| Code | Freq. | % posts |
|---|---|---|
| Tangenti | 33309 | 15,10% |
| Peculato | 12323 | 5,60% |
| Voto di scambio | 12019 | 5,40% |
| Concussione | 9593 | 4,30% |

| | | |
|---|---:|---:|
| Clientelismo/nepotismo | 9152 | 4,10% |
| Riciclaggio | 8283 | 3,70% |
| Evasione fiscale | 6482 | 2,90% |
| Traffico di influenze | 4934 | 2,20% |
| Appropriazione indebita | 4392 | 2,00% |
| Collusione | 3438 | 1,60% |
| Finanziamento illecito | 3194 | 1,40% |
| Abuso d'ufficio | 2889 | 1,30% |
| Truffa aggravata | 2520 | 1,10% |
| Induzione indebita | 2095 | 0,90% |
| Falso in bilancio | 1858 | 0,80% |
| Appalti truccati | 1324 | 0,60% |
| Malversazione | 797 | 0,40% |

The data on corruption-related offenses show that the discussion on Facebook is heavily concentrated on a few key crimes, with Tangenti (15.10%) emerging as by far the most referenced category. This prominence aligns with the symbolic centrality of "tangenti" in the Italian collective imagination, historically associated with major corruption scandals and widely recognized by the public as the quintessential form of bribery.

The following group of offenses – peculato (5.60%) and voto di scambio (5.40%) – also receive significant attention, reflecting both concerns over the misuse of public funds and the recurring issue of electoral corruption, especially in local contexts. Other crimes such as concussione (4.30%), clientelismo_nepotismo (4.10%), and riciclaggio (3.70%) indicate that the discourse extends beyond straightforward bribery to include broader forms of abuse of office and systemic corruption practices.

Offenses like evasione fiscale (2.90%), traffico di influenze (2.20%), and appropriazione indebita (2.00%) appear less frequently but still highlight the multifaceted nature of corruption-related debates. Meanwhile, categories such as collusione, finanziamento illecito, and abuso d'ufficio register even lower frequencies (around or below 1.5%), suggesting that while these forms of misconduct are part of the legal framework, they occupy a more marginal position in public conversations.

The lower end of the distribution, including truffa aggravata, induzione indebita, falso in bilancio, appalti truccati, and malversazione, indicates that certain legally recognized offenses linked to corruption gain limited visibility or resonance in online discussions. This pattern suggests that the public narrative of

corruption is selective, privileging certain offenses (notably tangenti) that carry strong cultural and symbolic weight, while others remain largely confined to technical or judicial discourse.

**Table 3.4 Coding frequencies Specific cases (tot. Post 221.250; 2021-2023)**

| Code | Cases | % Cases |
|---|---|---|
| Scandali Berlusconi | 6800 | 3,10% |
| Qatargate | 4196 | 1,90% |
| Scandali Renzi | 3481 | 1,60% |
| Caso amara_davigo | 2463 | 1,10% |
| Palamara | 2244 | 1,00% |
| Caso mimmo lucano | 1142 | 0,50% |
| Anas | 694 | 0,30% |
| Pandora papers | 170 | 0,10% |

Scandali Berlusconi (3.10%): Refers to the wide array of judicial proceedings involving former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, including corruption, tax fraud, and the so-called "bunga bunga" cases. These scandals spanned decades and became a central reference point in Italian public discourse on political corruption.

Qatargate (1.90%): Refers to the 2022–2023 investigation involving members of the European Parliament accused of receiving bribes from Qatar and Morocco to influence EU political decisions. Among those implicated was former Italian MEP Antonio Panzeri. It is considered one of the largest corruption scandals in the EU's recent history.

Scandali Renzi (1.60%): Concerns judicial investigations linked to former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and his political circle, including the Fondazione Open and Consip cases, focusing on alleged illicit financing and ties with business figures.

Caso Amara/Davigo (1.10%): Involves revelations by lawyer Piero Amara about the alleged "Ungheria Lodge," a clandestine network of magistrates and officials. The case also drew in former judge Piercamillo Davigo and sparked debates about internal dynamics and transparency within the Italian judiciary.

Palamara (1.00%): Refers to the case involving former magistrate Luca Palamara, accused of corruption and influence peddling. The scandal exposed systemic issues within Italy's judiciary, including controversies over appointments and factionalism inside the High Council of the Judiciary (CSM).

Caso Mimmo Lucano (0.50%): Refers to former mayor of Riace Mimmo Lucano, known for his migrant reception model. He was initially convicted for irregularities in fund management but later acquitted of

many charges. The case sparked national debates on migration policies and the criminalization of solidarity.

Anas (0.30%): Refers specifically to the investigation into corruption and bid rigging involving Tommaso Verdini, son of former senator Denis Verdini, related to public contracts worth approximately €180 million managed by Anas, Italy's national road agency. The case revealed networks of political influence and private consulting tied to public procurement.

Pandora Papers (0.10%): Part of the 2021 international investigation exposing the use of tax havens by politicians and business figures worldwide. Several Italian names appeared, although the impact on domestic debate was smaller compared to other countries.

**Table 3.5 Coding frequencies Political leaders  (tot. Post 221.250; 2021-2023)**

| Code | Cases | % Cases |
|---|---|---|
| Conte | 27828 | 12,60% |
| Meloni | 17104 | 7,70% |
| Draghi | 15434 | 7,00% |
| Berlusconi | 15181 | 6,90% |
| Salvini | 14564 | 6,60% |
| Renzi | 12680 | 5,70% |
| Letta | 4932 | 2,20% |
| Calenda | 3111 | 1,40% |
| Zingaretti | 1647 | 0,70% |
| Schlein | 1337 | 0,60% |
| Tajani | 1106 | 0,50% |
| Fratoianni | 465 | 0,20% |

The table reveals that former and current prime ministers dominate the discussion on corruption-related topics. Giuseppe Conte (12.6%) leads by a large margin, followed by Giorgia Meloni (7.7%), Mario Draghi (7.0%), Silvio Berlusconi (6.9%), and Matteo Renzi (5.7%). All of these figures have held the office of prime minister, suggesting that the role itself carries a high degree of public visibility and scrutiny, making these leaders central to online narratives about corruption.

Other influential figures, such as Matteo Salvini (6.6%), appear prominently despite never having served as prime minister, likely due to their enduring presence in national politics and polarizing leadership roles. In contrast, political figures who have not led the government—such as Enrico Letta, Carlo Calenda, Nicola Zingaretti, Elly Schlein, Antonio Tajani, and Nicola Fratoianni—generate significantly less engagement, each remaining below 3% of total mentions.

**Table 3.56  Coding frequencies Parties  (tot. Post 221.250; 2021-2023)**

| Code | Cases | % Cases |
|---|---|---|
| Movimento 5 Stelle | 30579 | 13,80% |
| Partito Democratico | 19143 | 8,70% |
| Lega | 17313 | 7,80% |
| Forza Italia | 14290 | 6,50% |
| Fratelli D'Italia | 7864 | 3,60% |
| Italia Viva | 3669 | 1,70% |
| Azione | 1519 | 0,70% |
| Alleanza Verdi Sinistra_Sinistra Italiana | 835 | 0,40% |

The data indicate that discussions on corruption overwhelmingly focus on Movimento 5 Stelle (13.8%), which stands out as the most frequently mentioned party, followed at some distance by the Partito Democratico (8.7%) and the Lega (7.8%). These three parties dominate the conversation, reflecting both their central role in recent Italian governments and their strong presence in public debate.

In the case of the Partito Democratico, and to a lesser extent the Lega, local corruption scandals played a significant role in driving mentions. These parties often emerge in discussions connected to specific regional or municipal investigations, underscoring how corruption narratives are not limited to national politics but are also shaped by local dynamics.

Forza Italia (6.5%) also holds a significant share, rooted in the enduring legacy of Berlusconi-era controversies. In contrast, Fratelli d'Italia (3.6%)—despite its current prominence in government—shows a lower frequency, likely reflecting the time frame of the dataset (2021–2023) when its rise was still consolidating.

Minor parties such as Italia Viva (1.7%), Azione (0.7%), and the Alleanza Verdi-Sinistra (0.4%) appear marginal, mirroring their reduced parliamentary weight and media presence.

*Topic per category of actor*

We now move on to examining how the various topics are addressed by different categories of actors, with the aim of understanding how the dynamics of the discussion unfold. The following heatmaps show the percentage of posts containing each topic relative to the total posts within each actor category.

**Figure 3.1 Heatmap topic per category - General topic**



Heatmap topic per category
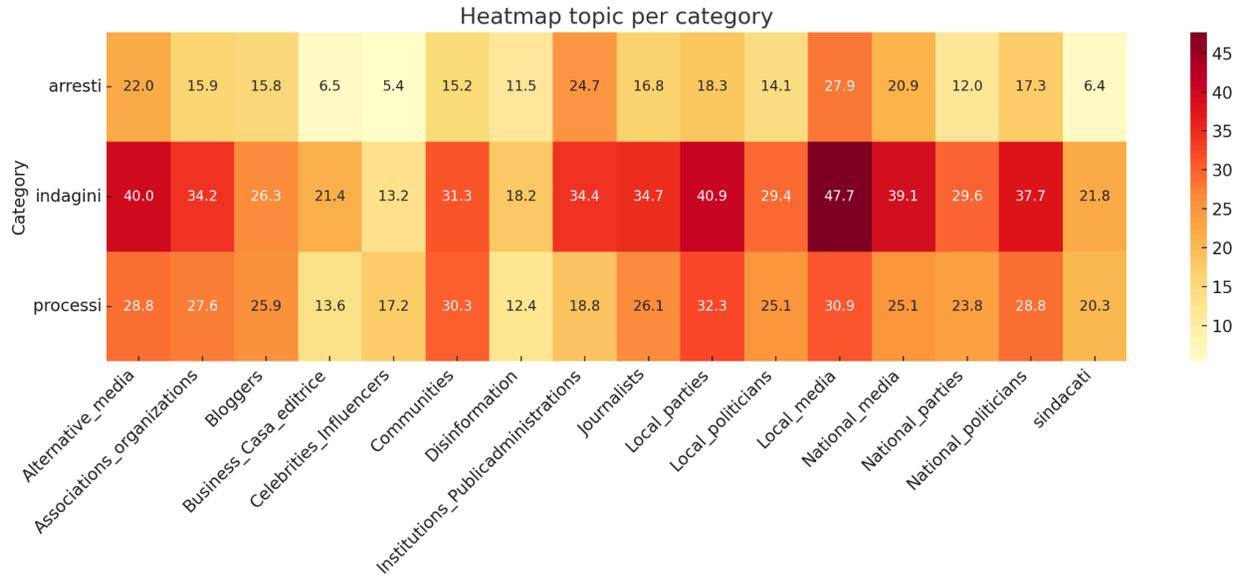
The Communities and Local media / Local politicians categories consistently exhibit high percentages for indagini, processi, and arresti. This indicates that local actors provide strong visibility to judicial developments and daily corruption-related news, often rooted in municipal or regional scandals.

National media and Journalists also show substantial engagement with these general judicial topics, frequently covering investigations and court proceedings. This highlights that professional media actors remain central to shaping public attention to legal and investigative aspects of corruption, often amplifying stories beyond their local context and framing them within national debates.

Alternative media emerge as another significant contributor. While heterogeneous in nature, they are increasingly positioning themselves as information providers and play an important role in circulating judicial news, albeit often blending it with opinionated or activist framings.

**Figure 3.2 Heatmap topic per category - Anticorruption-related topic**

Heatmap: Topic per Category (without Total)
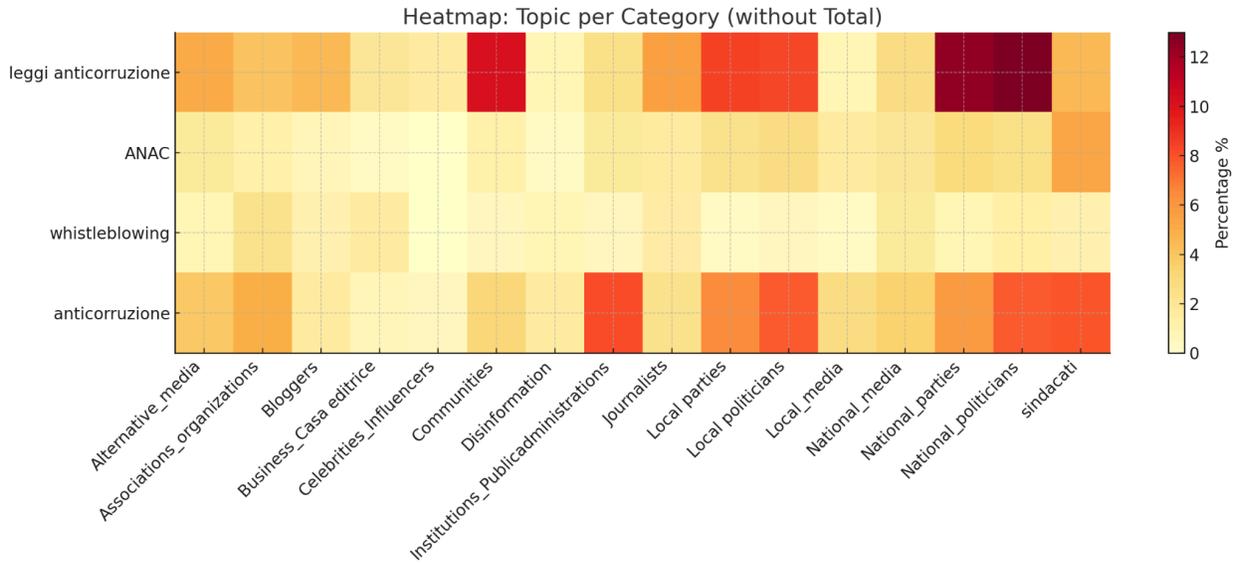
Looking at anticorruption-related discussion domains, four key topics are examined: leggi anticorruzione, ANAC, whistleblowing, and anticorruzione in general.

Leggi anticorruzione emerges as the most discussed topic across almost all actor categories, with particularly high values among Communities, National politicians, and National parties. This indicates that legislative frameworks remain a central reference point in online debates about corruption.

ANAC and whistleblowing register significantly lower percentages across all categories, suggesting that these more technical or specialized themes gain limited traction in the broader public conversation.

The general anticorruzione topic shows notable peaks for Institutions and Public Administrations and National politicians, reflecting the institutional actors' direct involvement in policy measures and public communication on anticorruption issues.

Interestingly, the presence of Communities is consistent across several topics, demonstrating their role in grassroots discussions, while Journalists and National media play a balanced but less dominant role compared to political and institutional actors in these specific domains.

**Figure 3.3 Heatmap topic per category - Specific topic**



Heatmap: Topic per Category
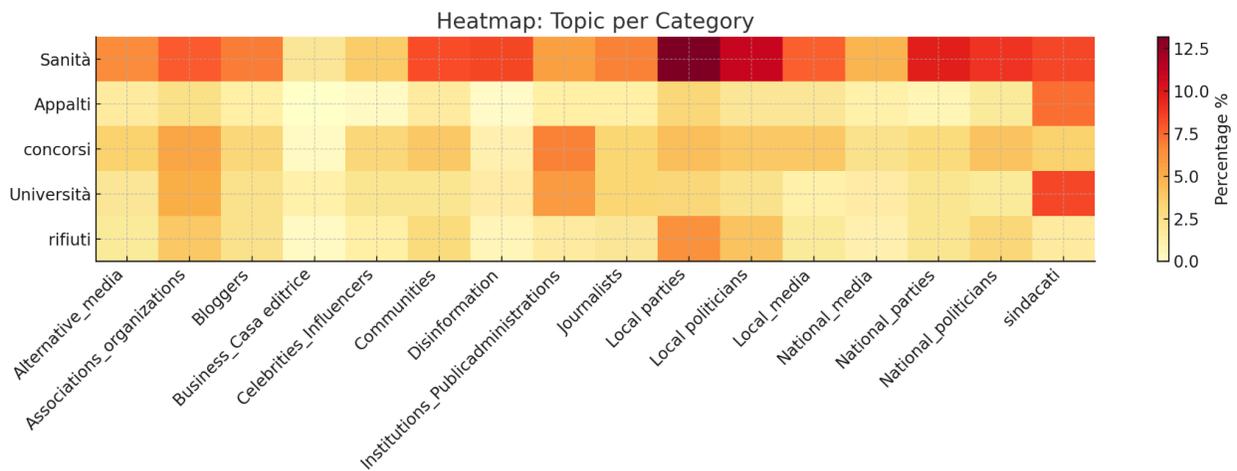
Looking at more specific topic, the topic of Sanità emerges with a cross-cutting distribution, peaking in posts from local parties (13.2%) and local politicians (10.9%), but also showing a notable presence in communities and national politicians. This highlights the importance of the issue at multiple levels, both local and national.

More sector-specific topics such as Appalti and Rifiuti register generally lower percentages, yet stand out in the posts of local parties and trade unions, which address them more frequently than other categories—likely reflecting their direct connection to local territories and administrative matters.

Concorsi and Università show significant presence within associations/organizations and institutions/public administrations, which is consistent with the institutional and organizational nature of these categories. Overall, a clear division emerges between categories that mainly cover current judicial events and those that focus on sectoral or policy-related topics.

**Figure 3.4 Heatmap topic per category - Specific topic**



Heatmap topic per category: criminalità organizzata
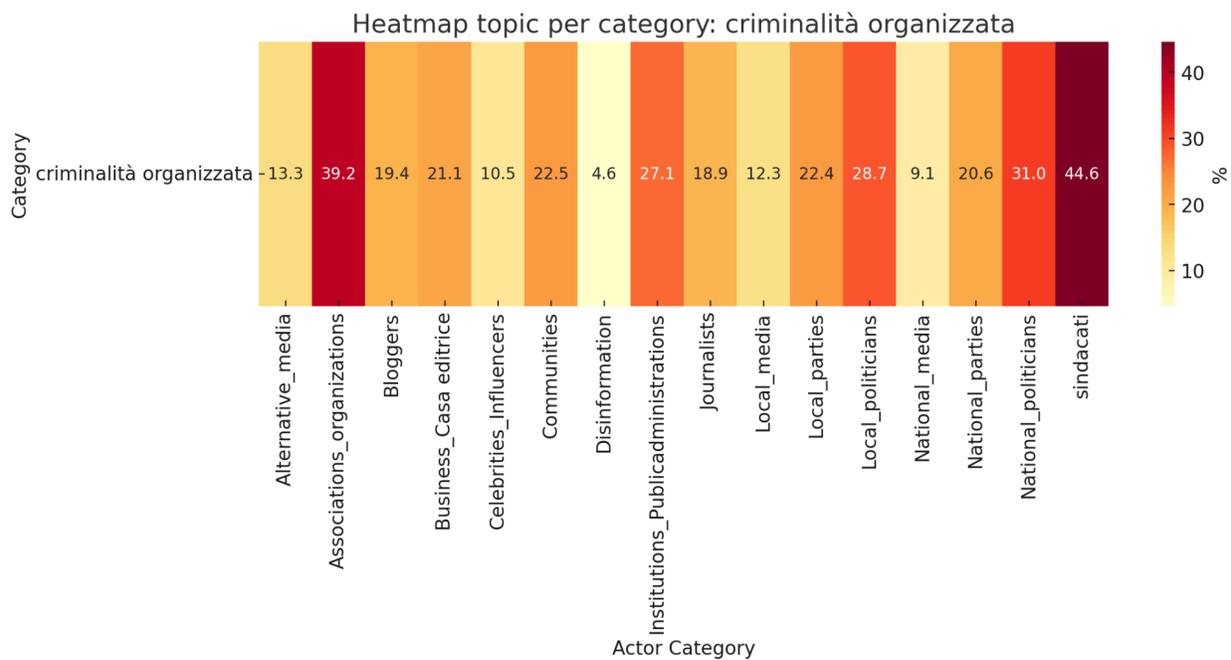
A specific mention should be given to the topic of criminalità organizzata. The heatmap shows that the topic is addressed with particular intensity by trade unions (44.6%) and associations/organizations (39.2%), followed by national politicians (31%) and public institutions (27.1%). This distribution reflects the strong involvement of institutional and collective actors in the discussion, likely linked to awareness campaigns and political initiatives.

Within the associations category, a particularly prominent role is played by Libera – Associazioni, nomi e numeri contro le mafie, one of the most active organizations in the dataset. Libera operates both nationally and through a wide network of local chapters, and its presence is significant not only in discussions about corruption but, even more markedly, in debates concerning organized crime. Its activity

underscores how civil society actors contribute to shaping public narratives on these issues, bridging institutional agendas and grassroots mobilization.

Local politicians (28.7%) and communities (22.5%) also show significant engagement, highlighting the relevance of this topic at both territorial and community levels.

**Figure 3.5 Heatmap topic per category - Controversial topic**
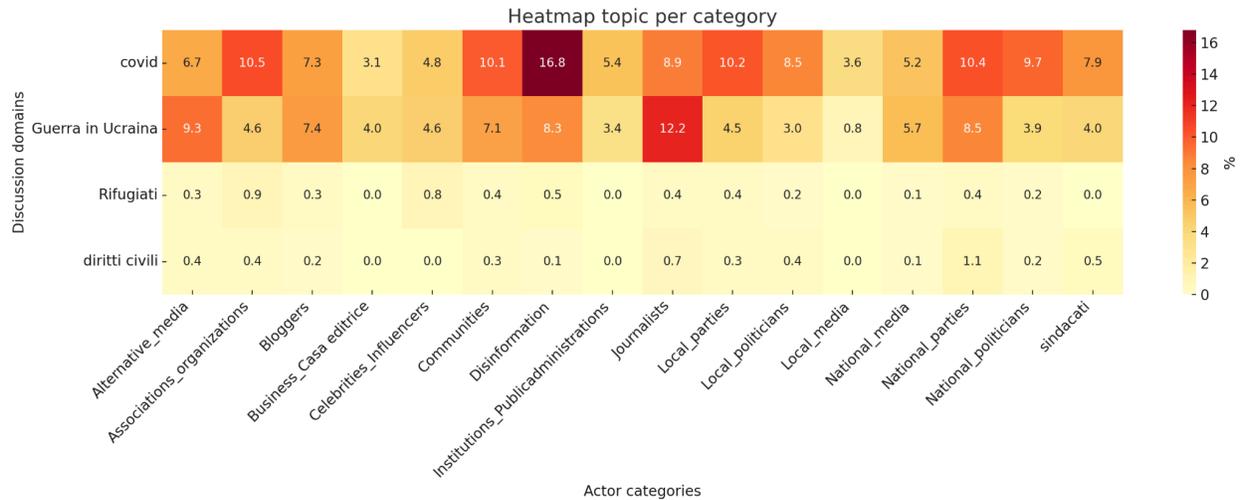


The heatmap shows that, when focusing on more controversial topics — such as covid, war in Ukraine, refugees, and civil rights — which are only partially related to corruption yet strongly polarizing in the public debate, there is a marked presence of disinformation actors and alternative media. These categories emerge as particularly active in framing these issues, often linking them to corruption narratives.

This trend suggests that corruption is sometimes used online as a rhetorical device to reinforce distrust and amplify social and political divisions. Although this does not imply that all actors in these categories deliberately aim to distort the debate, the data indicate that corruption-related narratives can be mobilized to channel broader forms of discontent and polarization.

*Topic per political orientation*

We now turn to an analysis of the topics by the political orientation of the actors. This classification is applied only when the political alignment of the actor is explicit or clearly identifiable, as not all actors included in the corpus display a clear political positioning. Examining topics through this lens allows us to explore how different political areas engage with corruption-related discussions and whether certain themes are more prevalent within specific ideological contexts.

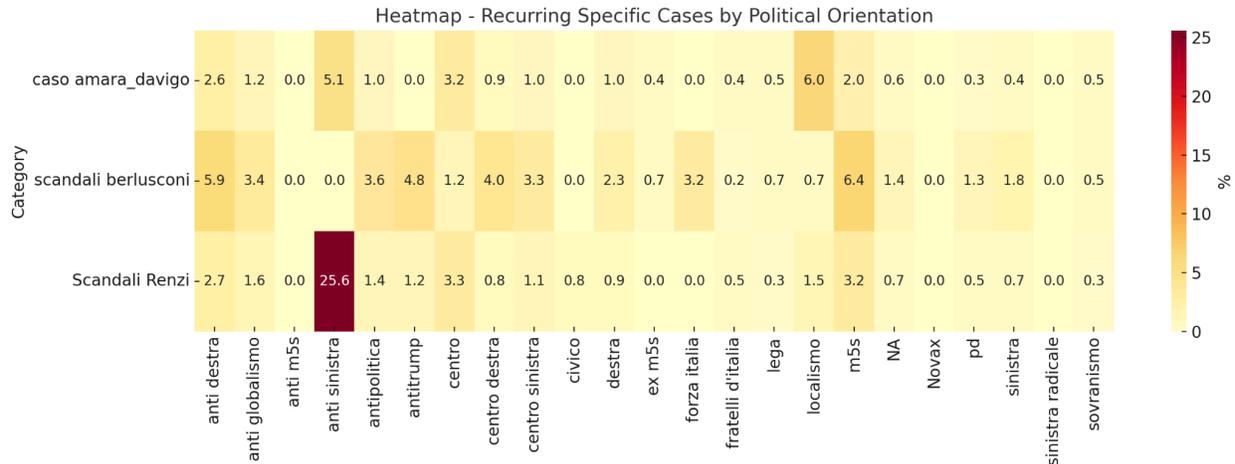**Figure 3.6 Heatmap recurring specific cases by political orientation 1**

Heatmap - Recurring Specific Cases by Political Orientation

| Category | anti destra | anti globalismo | anti m5s | anti sinistra | antipolitica | antitrump | centro | centro destra | centro sinistra | civico | destra | ex m5s | forza italia | fratelli d'italia | lega | localismo | m5s | NA | Novax | pd | sinistra | sinistra radicale | sovranismo |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| caso amara_davigo | 2.6 | 1.2 | 0.0 | 5.1 | 1.0 | 0.0 | 3.2 | 0.9 | 1.0 | 0.0 | 1.0 | 0.4 | 0.0 | 0.4 | 0.5 | 6.0 | 2.0 | 0.6 | 0.0 | 0.3 | 0.4 | 0.0 | 0.5 |
| scandali berlusconi | 5.9 | 3.4 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 3.6 | 4.8 | 1.2 | 4.0 | 3.3 | 0.0 | 2.3 | 0.7 | 3.2 | 0.2 | 0.7 | 0.7 | 6.4 | 1.4 | 0.0 | 1.3 | 1.8 | 0.0 | 0.5 |
| Scandali Renzi | 2.7 | 1.6 | 0.0 | 25.6 | 1.4 | 1.2 | 3.3 | 0.8 | 1.1 | 0.8 | 0.9 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.5 | 0.3 | 1.5 | 3.2 | 0.7 | 0.0 | 0.5 | 0.7 | 0.0 | 0.3 |

**Figure 3.7 Heatmap recurring specific cases by political orientation 2**
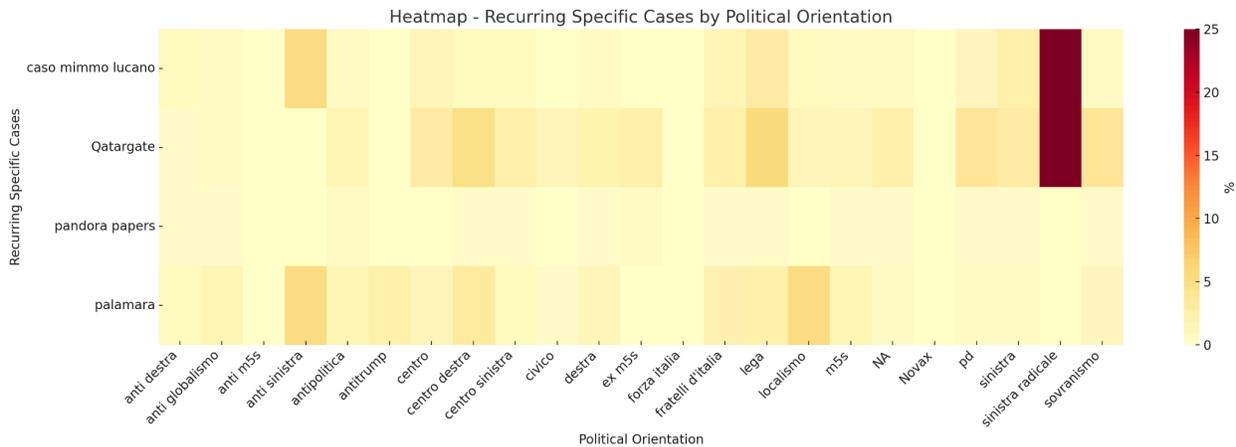


The combined heatmaps reveal how discussions on corruption-related scandals are strongly filtered through partisan identities, providing a clear example of affective polarization in digital environments. Rather than being debated as neutral issues of public accountability, these scandals are often mobilized as symbolic tools to attack political adversaries or defend one's own in-group, with emotional intensity shaping both the framing and the volume of engagement.

The Mimmo Lucano case illustrates this dynamic particularly well. Engagement peaks within the sinistra radicale (25%) and is also visible among PD (1%) and sinistra (2.4%) actors, who defend Lucano's humanitarian migration policies and frame the judicial proceedings against him as politically motivated. In contrast, right-wing actors, especially fratelli d'Italia (1.5%) and lega (2.8%), are also active on this topic but use it to criticize migration reception policies, portraying them as corrupt or exploitative "businesses." This dual framing shows how the same case can serve diametrically opposed narratives in the polarized Italian digital sphere.

A similar polarization appears in Scandali Renzi, which records its highest values among anti‑sinistra (25.6%) and sinistra radicale (0.7%). Here, criticism is twofold: from the right, Renzi's scandals are weaponized against the center-left, while from the radical left, they reflect long-standing hostility toward centrist figures like Renzi, seen as betraying progressive values. This demonstrates that affective polarization can exist not only along a left-right axis but also within ideological camps themselves.

The Scandali Berlusconi case shows broader distribution, with peaks among anti‑destra (5.9%) and m5s (6.4%) clusters. This pattern reflects Berlusconi's enduring symbolic role: as a polarizing figure whose scandals have historically galvanized both critics of the right and anti-establishment audiences. The cross-ideological engagement suggests that Berlusconi remains a touchstone in corruption narratives, transcending purely partisan boundaries.

The Caso Amara_Davigo presents a more evenly spread distribution, with notable activity from anti‑sinistra (5.1%) and localismo (6%). Its focus on judicial corruption and leaks within the magistracy has been leveraged by various ideological groups to attack institutional elites, illustrating how judicial scandals often cut across party lines and feed broader distrust toward institutions.

Qatargate—though an international scandal—generates engagement peaks among sinistra radicale (25%) and sovranismo (3.8%). The left frames it as evidence of EU institutional failure requiring reform, while sovereigntist actors use it to reinforce anti-European narratives, portraying the EU as distant and corrupt. This dual appropriation underscores how transnational scandals are recontextualized through domestic ideological filters.

The Palamara case, revolving around corruption within the judiciary, triggers significant discussion among localismo (5.1%) and m5s (5.1%) actors, reflecting a convergence of populist and local narratives questioning the integrity of magistrates and their political entanglements.

Finally, the Pandora Papers barely register in the Italian context (peaks remain below 0.4% across all orientations) due to the absence of Italian political figures in the leaks. Its marginal impact demonstrates how scandal salience is contingent on national political relevance; without a domestic hook, even globally significant revelations struggle to penetrate polarized local discourse.

Taken together, these cases illustrate how affective polarization shapes online narratives on corruption: scandals are not discussed uniformly, but refracted through partisan identities that dictate which cases matter, how they are framed, and the emotions they evoke. The result is a fragmented public sphere where the same event can serve as both evidence of systemic rot or unjust persecution, depending entirely on the ideological lens through which it is viewed.

**Conclusion**

The results of RA4 illuminate a complex, multi-layered narrative ecosystem surrounding corruption on Facebook. By analyzing topic frequencies, we found that judicial themes—especially indagini (34.3 %), processi (29.4 %), arresti (17.5 %)—dominate the discourse, along with significant focus on criminalità organizzata (20.6 %) and social-policy-related domains such as sanità, reddito di cittadinanza, and PNRR. These patterns underscore that corruption is most visible when intertwined with legal processes or issues of institutional significance.

Our subsequent heatmap analyses revealed distinct actor roles in how these topics are framed. Local actors (Media and Politicians) and Alternative media consistently drive visibility for investigative and procedural themes, while Institutional and national media also play a leading role in framing such narratives at broader levels. Simultaneously, Associations/Organizations—particularly Libera—emerge as central in discussions on organized crime, bridging grassroots activism with public opinion formation.

Heatmaps by political orientation demonstrated that specific cases (Scandali Renzi, Scandali Berlusconi, Caso Amara, Mimmo Lucano, Qatargate, Palamara) are not uniformly discussed but are narratively filtered through partisan lenses. Scandali Renzi provokes high engagement among anti‑sinistra and sinistra radicale identities; Mimmo Lucano becomes a symbolic battleground between left-defensive and

right-critical framings; Scandali Berlusconi cuts across broader ideological lines; while Qatargate and Palamara serve as triggers for European distrust or anti-establishment alliances. The Pandora Papers remain marginal due to the absence of domestic political figures.

Taken together, RA4 demonstrates how corruption discourse on social media is not a neutral reflection of scandal gravity, but rather an arena shaped by affective polarization, where emotional resonance, identity alignment, and ideological opposition determine which narratives gain traction. This layered analysis confirms that understanding corruption narratives requires not just counting topic mentions, but exploring who speaks, how they frame events, and why certain scandals resonate politically and emotionally within specific groups.

# RA5: Analysis of variation in claims-making and neutralization processes

The purpose of this research activity (RA5) is to address SO5 of the SOMMOSSA project: to *explain variation in the practices of anti-corruption claims-making and neutralization within and across levels (individual, organizational, and institutional)*. While RA3 mapped the universe of actors engaging in corruption discourse on Facebook and RA4 examined the narratives and mechanisms through which claims are constructed, RA5 is designed to take a step further by asking how these practices change over time and across actor categories. Therefore, RA5 focuses on the dynamics of variation: which temporal factors explain when corruption discourse expands or contracts, and which organizational logics shape how different types of actors contribute to these shifts.

Understanding this variation is crucial to SOMMOSSA's goals (S05): it allows us to see whether corruption discourse is anchored in democratic rhythms (elections) or in episodic revelations (scandals), and to trace how organizational asymmetries, between elites and grassroots actors, between institutional and non-institutional voices, structure the processes of claims-making.

## 4.1 Introduction

RA5's  analysis of variation in corruption discourse draws on two broad literatures: the study of electoral-cycle bias in legacy media and the study of scandal-driven attention in digital media. In the first tradition, scholars have demonstrated that newspapers and television outlets often calibrate their coverage of corruption around electoral cycles. Le Moglie and Turati (2019) show that Italian newspapers systematically intensified coverage of scandals involving opponents in the weeks before elections, while downplaying cases that did not serve partisan goals. This phenomenon, labelled the "electoral-cycle bias," highlights how elections function as temporal catalysts that shape not only the volume of corruption coverage but also its partisan orientation. Similar dynamics have been observed in other European and Latin American contexts, where media instrumentalization produces predictable cycles of scandalization linked to the approach of the ballot. The second tradition focuses on digital platforms, where attention flows follow a different logic. Scandals erupt suddenly and generate short-lived but intense bursts of online activity. Marchetti et al. (2024) show that in the case of Qatargate, discussions on social media were highly polarized and surged in response to revelations, independent of the electoral calendar. Studies of Twitter networks during elections (Radicioni et al., 2021) also highlight that while discursive communities mobilize around campaigns, corruption salience itself is largely event-driven rather than

cyclical. In this view, scandals, not elections, provide the shocks that trigger large cascades of claims-making and neutralization.

The gap lies at the intersection of these two literatures. While we know that elections structure legacy media coverage and that scandals structure online attention, we do not yet know whether digital corruption discourse still follows electoral cycles or has fully shifted to scandal logics. This is the question RA5 addresses, thereby contributing directly to SO5.

**5.3 Methodology**

RA5 builds directly on the same empirical corpus of Facebook posts analyzed in RA3 and RA4, thereby ensuring continuity across the work packages and allowing us to trace actors, narratives, and their temporal dynamics within a single integrated dataset. The data consist of 369,602 Italian-language posts published between 1 January 2021 and 31 December 2023, all collected via CrowdTangle using a dictionary of corruption-related keywords. As in the previous research activities, only content produced by Facebook Pages and public Groups was included, in line with the monitoring parameters of the platform.

**Actor classification.** As established in RA3, actors were manually coded according to a detailed codebook that distinguishes between institutional and non-institutional entities: national and local politicians, parties, media outlets, journalists, NGOs, associations, institutions, grassroots communities, bloggers, alternative media, and disinformation pages. Each actor was also coded as political or non-political, and where possible assigned a partisan orientation (e.g., M5S, Lega, PD, Fratelli d'Italia). This classification allows us to study variation both across organizational categories and across political camps.

**Temporal windows**. To capture cross-temporal variation, we defined two key types of windows:

- **Scandal window**s, covering the periods in which major revelations dominated public debate, notably the Qatargate scandal (December 2022–January 2023), but also other judicial operations.

**Tab. 4.1 Corruption Scandals in Italy (2021–2023)**

| Scandal Name | Location | Date | Status | Proceedings | Specific Sector |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Leonardo – Private corruption | Rome | Jan 2021 | Ongoing | Preliminary investigation on 10 executives | Defense industry |
| Sistema Saronno – Health procurement | Lombardy | Mar 2021 | Ongoing | Several arrests, investigations on executives | Regional public health |
| Sorella Sanità – Mafia and healthcare | Sicily | Mar 2021 | Ongoing | Mafia infiltration, arrests and seizures | Healthcare and mafia infiltration |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Eni/Nigeria Trial – Acquittal of Descalzi and Scaroni | Milan | Mar 2021 | Concluded | End of maxi-bribery trial against Nigerian government | International corruption |
| 'Ndrangheta in Tuscany | Tuscany | Apr 2021 | Ongoing | Arrests in Region, investigations on executives and politicians | Public procurement (waste disposal, road works) and mafia infiltration |
| Loggia Ungheria | Milan, Perugia | Jun 2021 | Ongoing | Investigations started, interrogation of Piero Amara | Judicial corruption and cover-ups |
| Rigged contracts – Salerno (De Luca case) | Salerno | Oct 2021 | Ongoing | Investigations started | Public procurement (Salerno municipality) |
| Open Case – Party financing | Florence | Oct 2021 | Ongoing | Investigations concluded | Party financing |
| Consip – Romeo conviction | Rome | Nov 2022 | Partially concluded | | State public procurement |
| Qatargate – Italian involvement | Brussels/Italy | Dec 2022 | Ongoing | Involvement of former MEPs and Italian officials | European politics and lobbying |
| ATM Milan – Bribes on contracts | Milan | Apr 2021 | Ongoing | Executives under investigation | Public transport procurement |
| Rome – Road maintenance contracts | Rome | Jun 2023 | Ongoing | Arrests among officials and entrepreneurs | Public works (roads) |
| Venice – Bribes for building permits | Venice | Feb 2022 | Ongoing | Officials and technicians arrested | Urban planning and building permits |
| ASP Catania – Director arrested | Catania | Jul 2021 | Ongoing | Arrest for corruption and abuse of office | Local healthcare |
| Milan – Private construction bribes | Milan | Nov 2023 | Ongoing | Technicians and builders under investigation | Private building permits |
| Face mask/Covid-19 procurement inquiry | Rome | Mar 2022 | Ongoing | Investigations started | Public procurement (medical supplies) |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Terzo Valico – Sentences against Salini and Cociv executives | Liguria | Oct 2022 | Concluded | | Public works contracts |
| ANAS Procurement – Systemic corruption | Milan | Dec 2023 | Ongoing | Officials arrested | Public works contracts |
| Arms sales in Colombia – Investigations on D'Alema and Profumo | Naples | Jun 2023 | Ongoing | Investigations started | Defense industry – international corruption |
| Solinas Case | Sardinia | Feb 2023 | Ongoing | Investigations started | Private corruption, degree purchase |
| Financing investigation FI – Abruzzo regional council | Abruzzo | Jun 2023 | Ongoing | Investigations started | Illegal financing, PNRR tenders, public procurement |
| MIUR procurement corruption – Giovanna Boda conviction | Rome | Nov 2023 | Partially concluded | Trial concluded (first instance) | MIUR contracts, education poverty projects |
| Palamara Trial | Rome, Perugia | 2021–2023 | Concluded | Plea bargain (Apr 2023) | Corruption, influence peddling, leaking official secrets |
| Fidanza Case – FdI | Brescia | Jun 2023 | Partially concluded | | Nepotism, sale of public positions |
| Rigged contracts – School canteens | Lombardy | May 2022 | Ongoing | Investigations | Public procurement (school services) |
| Ruby Ter | Milan | Feb 2023 | Partially concluded | Appeal trial concluded | False testimony, corruption in judicial acts |
| Eni/Congo Trial – Plea bargain | Milan | Mar 2021 | Concluded | | International corruption |
| Russian funds to Lega (Metropol case) – dismissed | Milan | Jan 2023 | Concluded | | Party financing, international corruption |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Angelucci Case – Lazio healthcare | Rome | Sep 2022 | Ongoing | Sentence postponed | Instigation to corruption |
| Volonté Case – Azerbaijan | Milan | Jan 2021 | Partially concluded | | International corruption, money laundering |
| Rigged contracts – Fiera Milano | Milan | Aug 2022 | Ongoing | Former managers and entrepreneurs arrested | Logistics and maintenance contracts |
| Saipem Trial | Milan | Sep 2021 | Concluded | | Market manipulation, false accounting |
| Petrobras Case | Milan | Mar 2022 | Ongoing | Prosecution requested convictions for San Faustin executives | International corruption |

- **Electoral windows**, covering the ±40 days around the 2022 snap election (25 September) as well as regional/local contests.

**Tab. 4.2 Elections in Italy (2021–2023)**

| Election Type | City | Region | Date | Main Candidates |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Municipal | Rome | Lazio | 3–4 October 2021 | Roberto Gualtieri (Center-Left), Enrico Michetti (Center-Right), Virginia Raggi (M5S) |
| Municipal | Milan | Lombardy | 3–4 October 2021 | Giuseppe Sala (Center-Left), Luca Bernardo (Center-Right), Layla Pavone (M5S) |
| Municipal | Turin | Piedmont | 3–4 October 2021 | Stefano Lo Russo (Center-Left), Paolo Damilano (Center-Right), Valentina Sganga (M5S) |

| Municipal | Naples | Campania | 3–4 October 2021 | Gaetano Manfredi (Center-Left–M5S), Catello Maresca (Center-Right), Antonio Bassolino (Civic) |
|-----------|--------|----------|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Municipal | Bologna | Emilia-Romagna | 3–4 October 2021 | Matteo Lepore (Center-Left), Fabio Battistini (Center-Right), Marta Collot (Power to the People) |
| Municipal | Trieste | Friuli-Venezia Giulia | 3–4 October 2021 | Roberto Dipiazza (Center-Right), Francesco Russo (Center-Left), Alessandra Richetti (M5S) |
| Municipal | Genoa | Liguria | 12 June 2022 | Marco Bucci (Center-Right), Ariel Dello Strologo (Center-Left–M5S), Mattia Crucioli (Civic) |
| Municipal | Palermo | Sicily | 12 June 2022 | Roberto Lagalla (Center-Right), Franco Miceli (Center-Left–M5S), Fabrizio Ferrandelli (Civic) |
| Municipal | Catanzaro | Calabria | 12 June 2022 | Valerio Donato (Civic), Nicola Fiorita (Center-Left–M5S), Antonello Talerico (Civic) |
| Municipal | L'Aquila | Abruzzo | 12 June 2022 | Pierluigi Biondi (Center-Right), Stefania Pezzopane (Center-Left–M5S), Americo Di Benedetto (Civic) |

| Municipal | Ancona | Marche | 14–15 May 2023 | Daniele Silvetti (Center-Right), Ida Simonella (Center-Left), Francesco Rubini (Left) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Regional | Turin | Piedmont | 8 October 2021 | Alberto Cirio (Center-Right), Sergio Chiamparino (Center-Left), Francesca Frediani (M5S) |
| Regional | Catanzaro | Calabria | 3–4 October 2021 | Roberto Occhiuto (Center-Right), Amalia Bruni (Center-Left–M5S), Luigi De Magistris (Civic) |
| Regional | Palermo | Sicily | 25 September 2022 | Renato Schifani (Center-Right), Cateno De Luca (Civic), Caterina Chinnici (Center-Left) |
| Regional | Trieste | Friuli-Venezia Giulia | 2–3 April 2023 | Massimiliano Fedriga (Center-Right), Massimo Moretuzzo (Center-Left), Alessandro Maran (Third Pole) |
| Regional | Milan | Lombardy | 12–13 February 2023 | Attilio Fontana (Center-Right), Pierfrancesco Majorino (Center-Left–M5S), Letizia Moratti (Third Pole) |
| Regional | Rome | Lazio | 12–13 February 2023 | Francesco Rocca (Center-Right), Alessio D'Amato (Center-Left), Donatella Bianchi (M5S) |

| National Elections (Parliament) | Italy | National | 25 September 2022 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |

This design makes it possible to compare two rival logics: cyclical increases linked to campaigns versus sudden surges linked to scandals. The main indicator used in R05 was frequency (number of posts per day/ week mentioning corruption).

**Econometric strategy**. Beyond descriptive analysis, we estimated fixed-effects Poisson models at the account–day level. This approach is appropriate for non-negative count data with many zeros and controls for unobserved heterogeneity by actor. Models include day-of-week, month, and year dummies to account for seasonality, with standard errors clustered at the account level. Four specifications were tested:
1. Baseline model with electoral vs. scandal windows.
2. Interaction with actor categories.
3. Interaction between scandals and electoral windows.
4. Distinction between political and non-political actors.

This combination of descriptive and statistical evidence allows us to test whether variation is primarily electoral or scandal-driven, and whether it differs across organizational types.

**4.4 Results – Cross-temporal variation**

The first step is to examine whether electoral timing or scandal shocks better explain when corruption discourse expands on Facebook. We begin with descriptive evidence before turning to statistical models.

**Figure 4.1 – Daily corruption posts, original vs. total (2021–2023, 7-day average).**

Original vs total posts per day (7-day average)
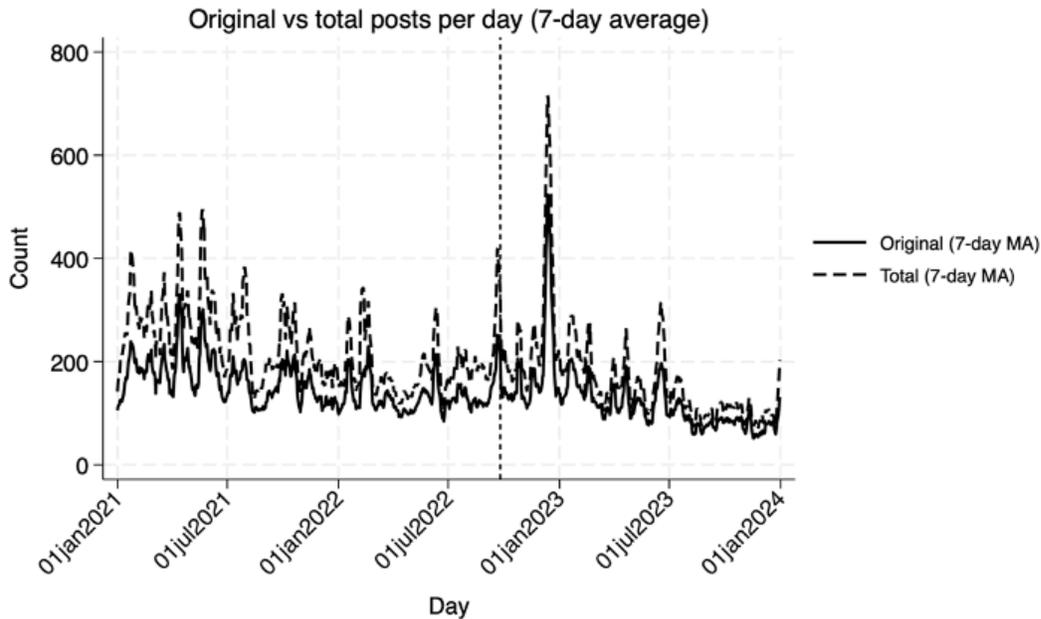
This time series provides an overview of the entire 2021–2023 period. The line for total posts and the line for original posts move closely together for most of the period, showing a relatively stable baseline of activity. Around the 2022 snap election (September), small pulses are visible but they are short-lived and modest in size. By contrast, December 2022 and January 2023 show a dramatic and sustained surge, corresponding to the Qatargate scandal. During this period, both total and original posts increase sharply, with recirculation amplifying the effect. This figure demonstrates that the most important peaks in corruption discourse were not aligned with electoral dates but with scandal revelations.

**Figure 4.2 – Distribution of daily corruption posts (2021–2023).**



Distribution of daily posts about corruption on Facebook
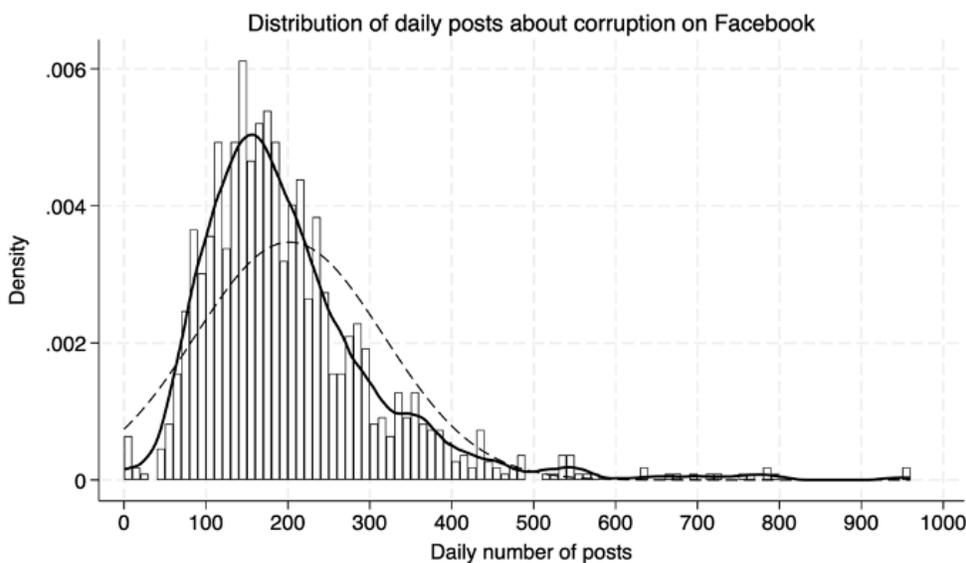
The histogram of daily posting volumes reveals a strongly right-skewed distribution. Most days register fewer than 200 corruption posts, but a small number of days exceed 1,000. These outliers correspond precisely to scandal windows. This pattern indicates that corruption attention on Facebook is not evenly distributed across time but clustered around rare but intense shocks. This empirical distribution supports the hypothesis that scandals, rather than elections, generate observable variation.

**Figure 4.3 – Daily corruption posts within ±40 days of the 2022 general election.**
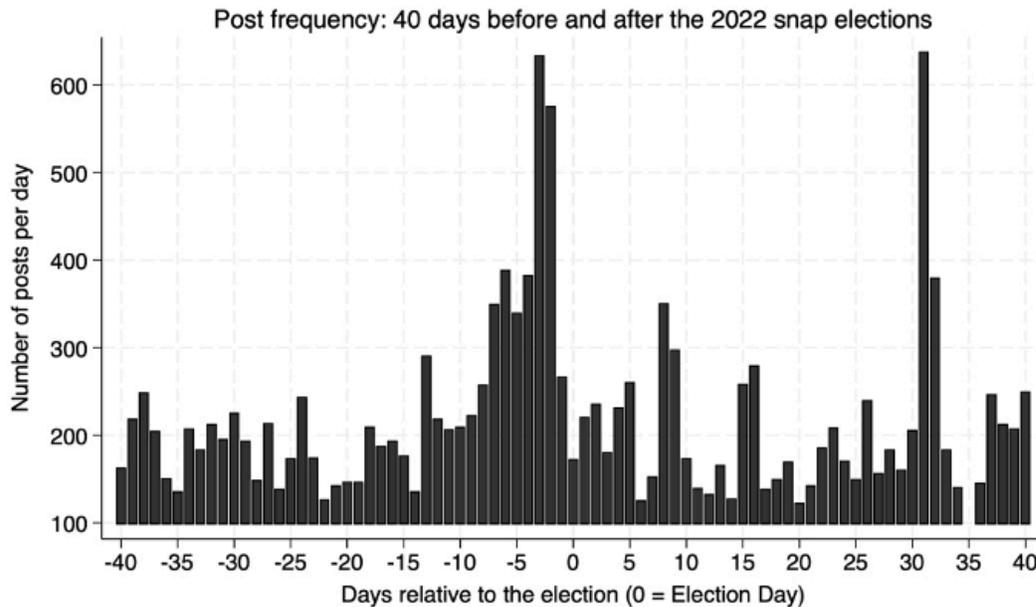


Focusing narrowly on the election window, Figure 4.3 plots daily posting activity from 40 days before to 40 days after election day (marked as day 0). The figure reveals that, aside from a spike on the day of the vote itself, posting levels remain flat. There is no upward trajectory in the weeks before the election, nor a sustained increase afterwards. This is in stark contrast with legacy media evidence, where pre-election periods consistently displayed elevated corruption coverage. In terms of SO5, this figure suggests that cross-temporal variation in the digital arena does not follow the predictable rhythms of electoral cycles.

Together, Figures 4.1–4.3 indicate that temporal variation in corruption discourse is driven by scandal shocks rather than by election cycles. Scandals create sharp discontinuities in activity, while elections leave patterns largely unchanged.

**4.5 Results – Cross-organizational variation**

Variation is not only temporal but also organizational. Do different actor types contribute differently to corruption discourse during elections and scandals?

**Figure 4.4 – Weekly corruption posts within ±6 weeks of the 2022 election, by political vs. non-political actors.**

Weekly posts by actors type: 6 weeks before and after the vote
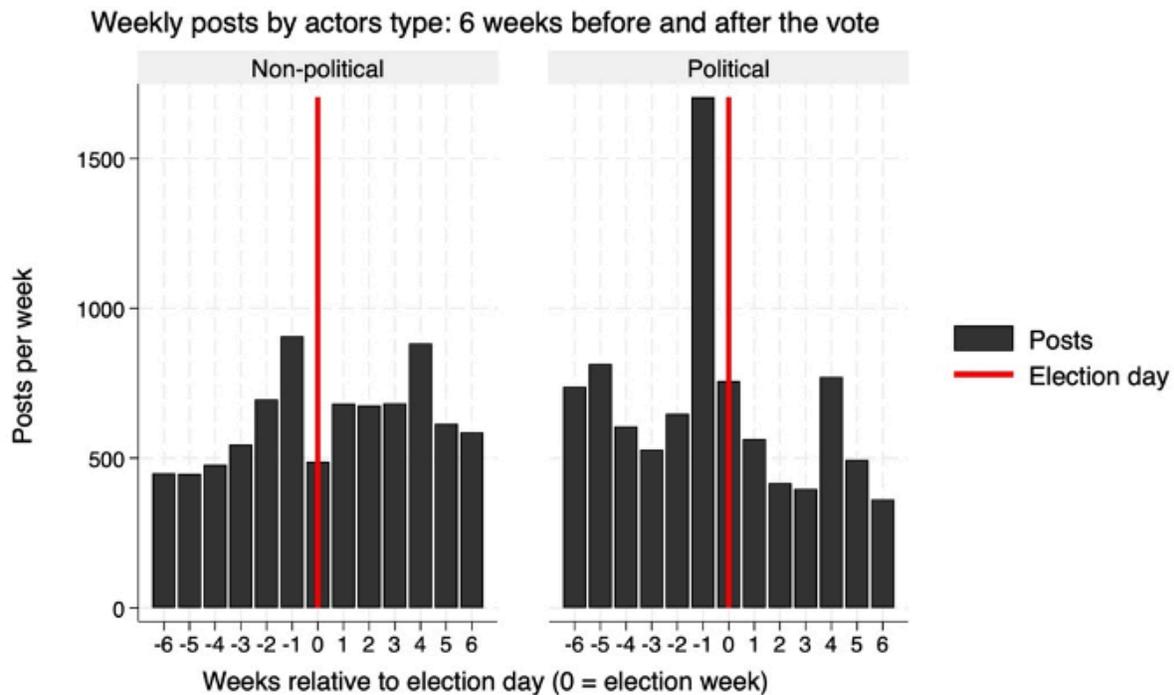
This figure compares the contributions of political and non-political actors in the electoral window. Both categories show roughly parallel patterns: a brief pulse on election day but otherwise stable activity across the pre- and post-election weeks. Political actors do not systematically escalate their corruption discourse in the campaign period, contradicting expectations based on legacy media. Non-political actors (communities, NGOs, alternative media) also remain stable, suggesting that electoral timing alone does not mobilize broader participation.

**Figure 4.5 – Weekly corruption posts within ±6 weeks of the 2022 election, by macro actor categories.**
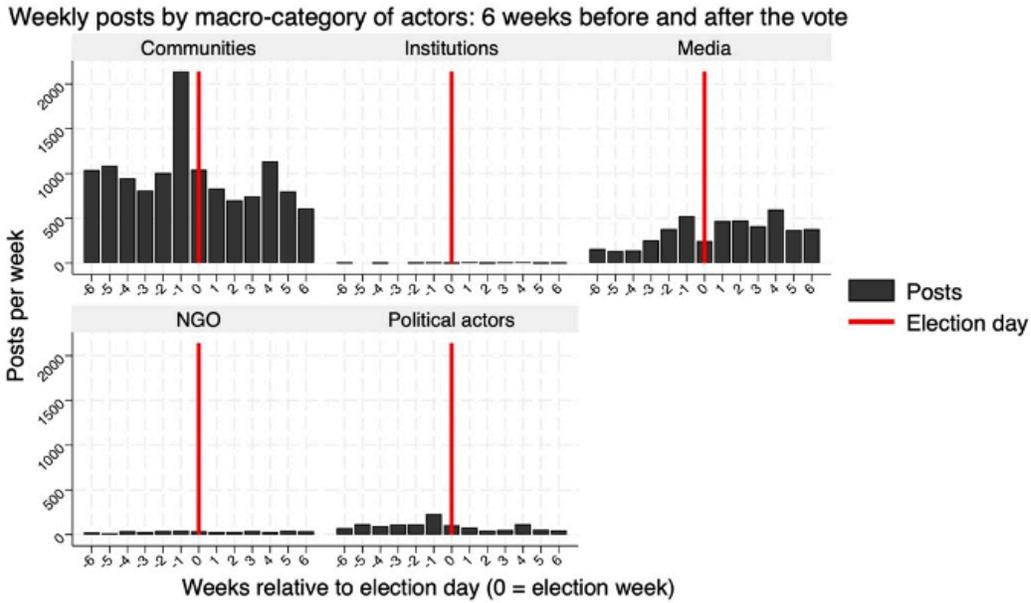
Breaking down by macro categories (political actors, media, NGOs, institutions, communities), the figure shows that politicians and media are consistently the largest contributors to corruption discourse. However, their posting levels do not shift significantly across the election line. NGOs and institutions remain marginal contributors, with little visible change. The absence of escalation among the largest actors reinforces the conclusion that elections do not produce variation.

**Figure 4.6 – Weekly corruption posts within ±6 weeks of the 2022 election, by actor types.**
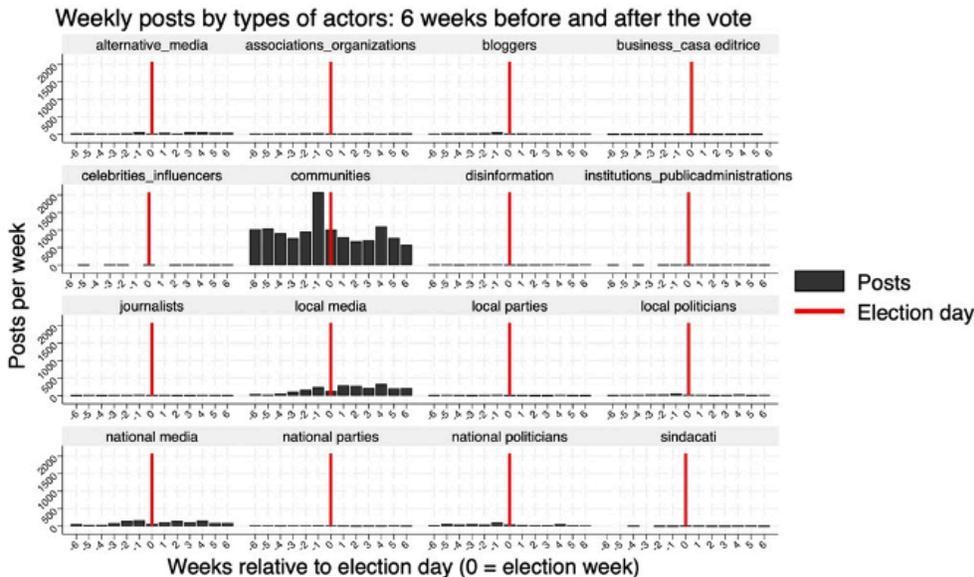


This figure disaggregates by macro-categories. The lines show no coordinated surge among any bloc before the election. Where differences appear, they are scattered and small rather than systematic. No bloc seizes "ownership" of the corruption agenda during the campaign. This contrasts again with legacy media, where partisan outlets intensified corruption coverage against opponents before elections.

These organizational disaggregations highlight a crucial point for SO5: **variation across actor types is minimal in electoral periods, but becomes pronounced during scandals**. As we will see in the econometric models, scandals mobilize political and media actors disproportionately, while NGOs and institutions remain weakly engaged.

### 4.6 Econometric analysis

To formally test these patterns, we estimated fixed-effects Poisson models of corruption posts at the account–day level.

**Table 4.1 – Fixed-effects Poisson models of corruption posts (Italy, 2021–2023).**

| Variables | Model 1: Baseline FE-Poisson | Model 2: FE-Poisson + macro interactions | Model 3: FE-Poisson + Electoral×Scandal | Model 4: FE-Poisson + Political vs Non-political |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Electoral window (±40d) | -0.017** (0.021) | -0.026*** (0.007) | -0.017** (0.020) | -0.010 (0.269) |
| Scandal window | 0.056*** (0.001) | - | 0.056*** (0.001) | 0.080*** (0.001) |
| Scandal window (baseline macro) | - | 0.037*** (0.002) | - | - |
| Electoral × Scandal | - | , | -0.001 (0.972) | - |
| Scandal × Political actors | - | 0.047*** (0.001) | - | -0.041** (0.035) |
| Scandal × Media | - | 0.026** (0.024) | - | - |
| Scandal × NGO | - | -0.006 (0.872) | - | - |
| Scandal × Institutions | - | 0.004 (0.898) | - | - |
| Electoral × Political actors | - | - | - | -0.014 (0.390) |
| Model statistics | | | | |
| N | 166195 | 166195 | 166195 | 144629 |
| Groups | 5087 | 5087 | 5087 | 3354 |
| Log pseudo-L | -191626.1 | -191607.86 | -191626.1 | -172146.98 |
| Wald chi2 | 251.19 | 261.51 | 254.63 | 239.64 |

**Notes:** Conditional FE-Poisson with account fixed effects; robust SEs clustered by account. All models include day-of-week, month, and year dummies (coefficients omitted). Dependent variable: daily number of corruption posts per account. *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.10$.

- **Model 1 (Baseline):** Scandal windows are strongly positive ($\beta = 0.056$, SE = 0.007, $p < 0.001$), corresponding to +5.8% posts per day. Electoral windows are negative ($\beta = -0.017$, SE = 0.007, $p = 0.021$), implying a small decline in posting. This directly falsifies the election-cycle hypothesis in the digital context.

- **Model 2 (Macro interactions):** The scandal effect is concentrated in political actors (+4.7%, p = 0.001) and media (+2.6%, p = 0.024), while NGOs and institutions show no significant response. This confirms that scandal-driven variation is driven by elites.

- **Model 3 (Electoral × Scandal):** When scandals occur during election periods, the interaction is strongly positive (β = 0.056, p < 0.001). Elections alone do not raise attention, but they amplify the impact of shocks.

- **Model 4 (Political vs. Non-political):** Both groups respond strongly to scandals (+8.4%), but neither shows a significant electoral effect.

The models confirm what the descriptive figures suggested: **scandals are the decisive drivers of variation, and political and media elites are the primary amplifiers**. Elections function only as conditional opportunity structures, amplifying shocks when they occur but not generating attention independently.

**5.7 Discussion of RA5**

The evidence presented in RA5 provides a robust and consistent answer to the question posed at the outset: variation in anti-corruption claims-making and neutralization on Facebook is scandal-led, not election-led. Across descriptive trends, disaggregated figures, and econometric tests, a coherent picture emerges in which corruption attention online responds to exogenous shocks rather than to the institutional rhythms of electoral competition. The temporal dynamics observed in the Italian Facebook sphere during 2021–2023 diverge sharply from the legacy media patterns documented by scholars of electoral-cycle bias. In newspapers, as shown by Le Moglie and Turati, the timing of corruption coverage is strongly influenced by the approach of elections, with editors strategically amplifying opponent-damaging stories in the weeks before the ballot and suppressing those that might harm allies. In contrast, on Facebook, the 2022 snap election produced at most a one-day peak on the day of the vote itself, with no evidence of systematic escalation before or after. Indeed, the econometric models reveal that, if anything, election periods were associated with a slight decline in corruption-related posting. This divergence between legacy and digital media highlights a profound transformation in the temporal logic of mediatization: while traditional outlets align corruption salience with campaign calendars, digital platforms appear to be organized around sudden bursts of attention triggered by scandal revelations.

The Qatargate scandal in late 2022 exemplifies this shift. Unlike the muted fluctuations of the election period, the revelations surrounding European Parliament corruption generated the most dramatic and sustained surge of the entire observation period, with daily activity rising by between five and eight percent. The descriptive time series revealed a prolonged wave of posts extending over several weeks, accompanied by sharp increases in recirculation, while the statistical models confirmed a strong and significant scandal effect across specifications. The contrast between the subdued election window and the intense scandal window illustrates the central conclusion of RA5: temporal variation in corruption discourse on Facebook is driven not by cycles but by shocks. This finding has broader implications. It suggests that democratic calendars no longer structure the visibility of corruption online. Instead, accountability depends on the fortuitous timing of revelations, often supplied by judicial processes, leaks, or investigative reporting. If no scandal emerges, the electoral context alone does not guarantee

heightened attention to corruption, even though elections are the moment when voters most need information to hold leaders accountable.

Beyond the temporal dimension, RA5 also demonstrates that variation is shaped by organizational asymmetries. Political actors and media outlets emerge as the principal amplifiers during scandal periods, while NGOs, institutions, and grassroots communities play a comparatively marginal role. The fixed-effects models revealed that scandal effects were concentrated among parties, politicians, and news media, with statistically significant increases in their activity, whereas NGOs and institutions did not register meaningful changes. Communities and grassroots groups, although numerically dominant in the dataset, contributed mostly to baseline continuity rather than to peaks of visibility. This asymmetry points to the resilience of elite dominance in the digital mediatization of corruption. Despite the participatory potential of social media, the decisive drivers of variation remain the political and media elites who have long shaped corruption discourse in Italy.

This pattern resonates with the theoretical framework of claims-making and neutralization. Elites are the primary claim-makers who dramatize scandals, construct narratives of wrongdoing, and mobilize outrage. At the same time, they are also the primary neutralizers, capable of reframing accusations, individualizing responsibility, or shifting blame to opponents. The fact that NGOs and institutions do not significantly alter their behavior during scandals, and that grassroots communities mainly sustain a stable background of discussion, reinforces the idea that the power to set the agenda and frame corruption remains concentrated in elite hands. The impact of scandals thus lies not only in their ability to trigger temporal surges of attention, but also in their capacity to channel visibility through political and media hubs that dominate claims-making and neutralization.

Taken together, these findings fulfill the mandate of SO5 by specifying both the cross-temporal and cross-organizational sources of variation in anti-corruption discourse. Temporally, variation is explained by shocks rather than cycles, confirming the primacy of scandal revelations over electoral calendars. Organizationally, variation is explained by elite amplification rather than grassroots mobilization, with political and media actors seizing scandal opportunities while NGOs and communities remain largely peripheral. The Italian case therefore illustrates how digital platforms, far from democratizing the mediatization of corruption, reproduce and even intensify long-standing asymmetries of power. Variation in corruption discourse is episodic, exogenous, and elite-led. These features have significant implications for accountability: rather than being a continuous process aligned with democratic competition, attention to corruption in the digital arena is contingent on revelations and filtered through the strategic interventions of those who already dominate the political and media landscape.

# RA6: Evaluation of the impact of claims-making and neutralization processes

### 5.1 Introduction

RA6 addresses SO6 of the SOMMOSSA project: to *evaluate and assess the impact of anti-corruption claims-making and neutralization*. Whereas RA5 examined the sources of variation in corruption discourse,  when activity increases and which actors drive it,  RA6 focuses on the effects and consequences of these dynamics.

In the digital environment, the "impact" of claims-making cannot be reduced to formal policy change or judicial outcomes. Instead, it manifests through two key processes:

1. **Extension of participation** – whether corruption discourse involves a broader set of actors beyond the usual core. If only a small and stable set of actors speaks, impact is limited; if new voices are mobilized, discourse reaches wider publics and potentially affects accountability.

2. **Diffusion dynamics** – whether claims spread widely across the platform. Original posts may circulate with little traction, or they may generate massive recirculation cascades. When diffusion occurs, a small number of claims can dominate the public agenda and shape perceptions of corruption.

By examining these two dimensions, RA6 asks whether elections or scandals are the moments when corruption discourse has real impact. Elections are expected to provide opportunities for politicization, potentially mobilizing more actors; scandals are expected to provide shocks that activate diffusion and broaden participation.

## 5.2 Methodology

RA6 draws directly on the corpus of Facebook data already described in RA3 and RA4, thereby ensuring full comparability across research activities and exploiting the interdisciplinary intersection of actor analysis, narrative analysis, and temporal dynamics. The dataset consists of 369,602 Italian-language posts published between January 2021 and December 2023, collected via CrowdTangle through a dictionary of corruption-related keywords. This corpus has already been the basis for the mapping of actors (RA3) and the coding of narratives and mechanisms (RA4); in RA6, the same data are re-analyzed to assess the *impact* of anti-corruption claims-making and neutralization in terms of participation and diffusion.

By re-using the same dataset, RA6 benefits from the systematic actor classification and political orientation coding elaborated in RA3, as well as from the discursive categories developed in RA4. This continuity strengthens the reliability of findings, while also illustrating the interdisciplinary intersection of the SOMMOSSA project: content analysis, political communication studies, and quantitative modeling converge on a single shared empirical foundation.

For RA6, two specific indicators are operationalized to capture the impact dimension:

- **Extension of participation**: measured by the number of unique accounts actively posting about corruption within defined time windows, disaggregated by actor type and political orientation.

- **Diffusion dynamics**: measured by the ratio of original to recirculated posts. Declines in originality indicate the emergence of diffusion cascades, whereby a small number of posts are amplified widely.

As in RA5, we compare electoral windows (±40 days around the September 2022 general election) and scandal windows (most notably Qatargate, Dec 2022–Jan 2023). This design allows us to identify whether impact, in terms of breadth and visibility, is shaped by the rhythms of campaigns or by the shocks of scandals.

## 5.3 Results – Extension of participation

**Figure 5.1 – Active accounts by periods (2021–2023).**



Active accounts by periods: Electoral (±40 days) vs Non-electoral (2021–2023)
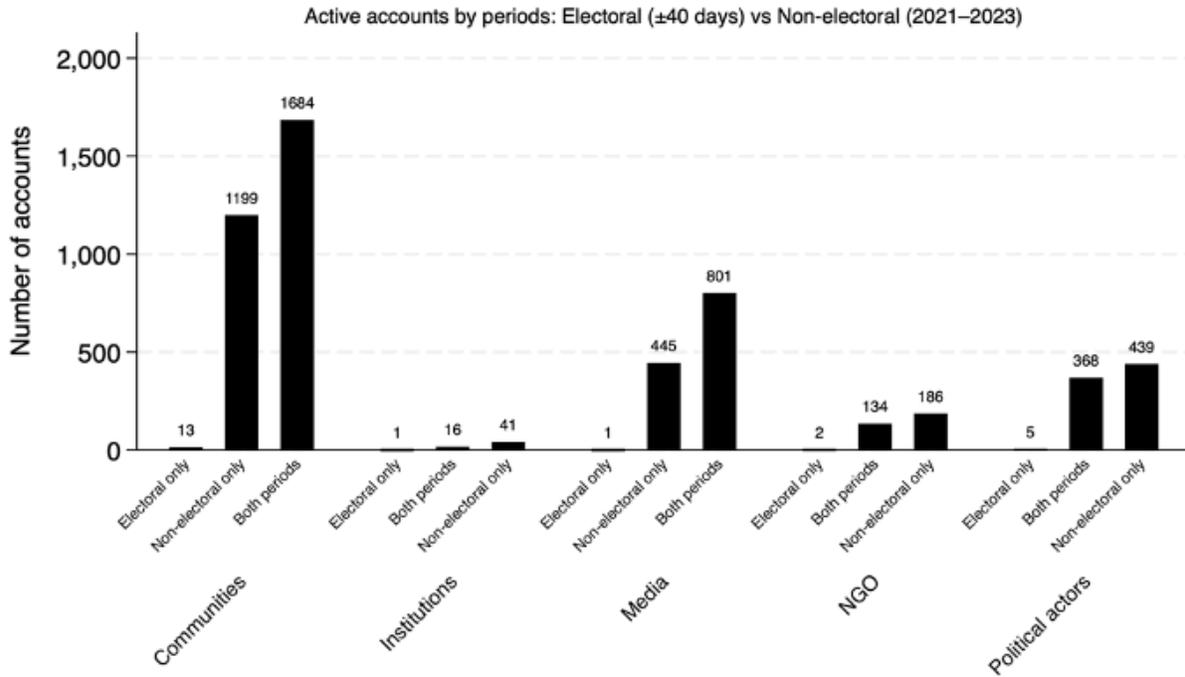
This figure provides a structural overview of actor participation across the entire dataset. It divides accounts into three categories: "electoral-only" (active exclusively in election windows), "non-electoral-only" (active outside campaigns), and "both periods" (active across time). The distribution is dominated by the "both periods" group, which constitutes the bulk of actors engaged in corruption discourse. The "non-electoral-only" group is larger than the "electoral-only" group, confirming that many actors intervene on corruption outside campaigns, while very few appear exclusively in electoral contexts. This pattern indicates that corruption discourse is not election-dependent. The actors who shape it are present regardless of campaign timing, forming a stable core of narrators. Impact in terms of participation is therefore limited in elections: campaigns do not mobilize new entrants. Instead, the wider participation observed in some periods is explained by scandals, which trigger sudden mobilization of otherwise dormant accounts.

**Figure 5.2 – Active accounts by macro actor categories, pre- vs. post-election (±40 days, 2022).**
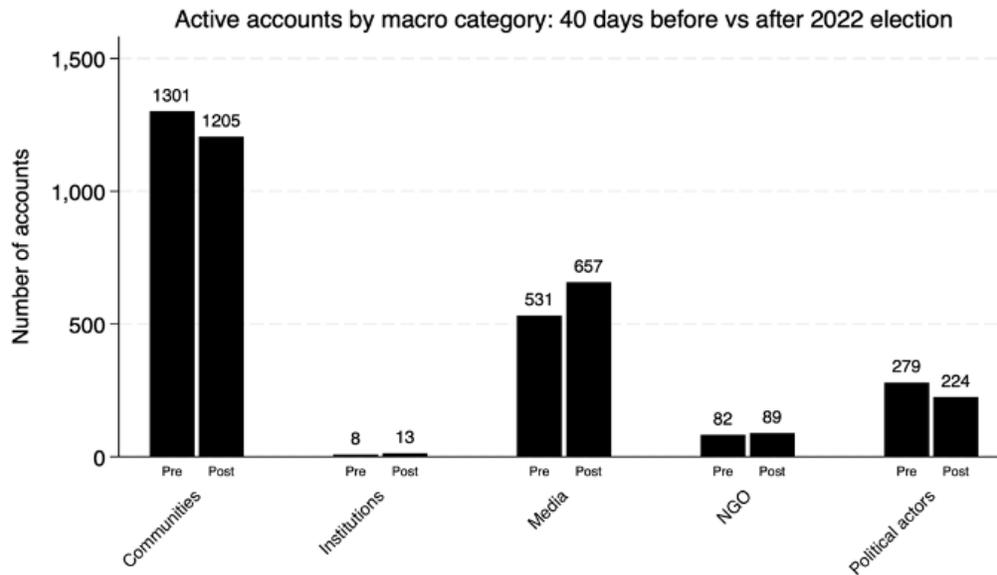


Here we look specifically at the 2022 snap election, disaggregating active accounts into macro categories (political actors, media, NGOs, institutions, communities). The figure shows that the number of distinct accounts in each category remains broadly stable before and after election day. Political actors and media dominate in both windows, while NGOs, institutions, and communities remain stable in their smaller shares.

This suggests that elections do not significantly change the composition of participants. The same actors who were engaged before continue afterwards, and no category shows a sudden influx. The "impact" of elections on extension is therefore negligible: they neither broaden participation across categories nor shift the balance of actor types.

**Figure 5.3 – Active accounts by political orientations, pre- vs. post-election (±40 days, 2022).**
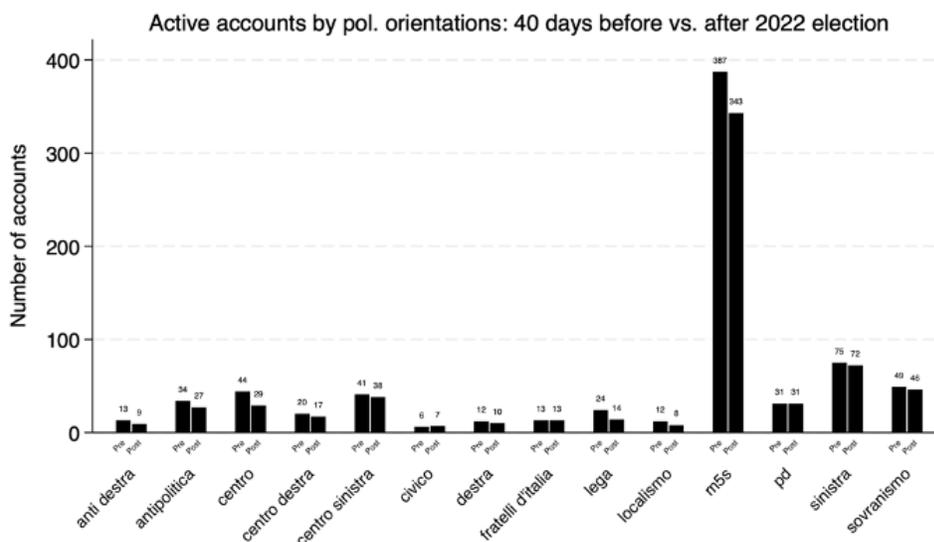
Breaking down by partisan orientation (M5S, Lega, PD, FdI, etc.), the number of active accounts is almost identical before and after the vote. No partisan bloc shows a coordinated increase in participation in the run-up to the election. Minor variations exist but they are scattered and not systematic.

The absence of partisan surges is important: it demonstrates that no bloc "seized ownership" of the corruption agenda during the election. In legacy media, parties often weaponize corruption narratives against opponents in campaign periods. On Facebook, however, the data show continuity, not escalation. Together, these figures reveal that elections have little impact on extension of participation. Most actors are present across time, and no new wave of accounts is mobilized during campaigns. The implication is that electoral calendars do not structure the breadth of corruption discourse on Facebook. By contrast, descriptive evidence from scandal windows shows broader mobilization: during Qatargate, many accounts that were normally inactive posted about corruption, widening the actor base. Scandals therefore have greater impact than elections in extending participation.

## 5.4 Results – Diffusion dynamics

**Figure 5.4 – Original vs. total posts, pre- vs. post-election (±40 days, 2022).**
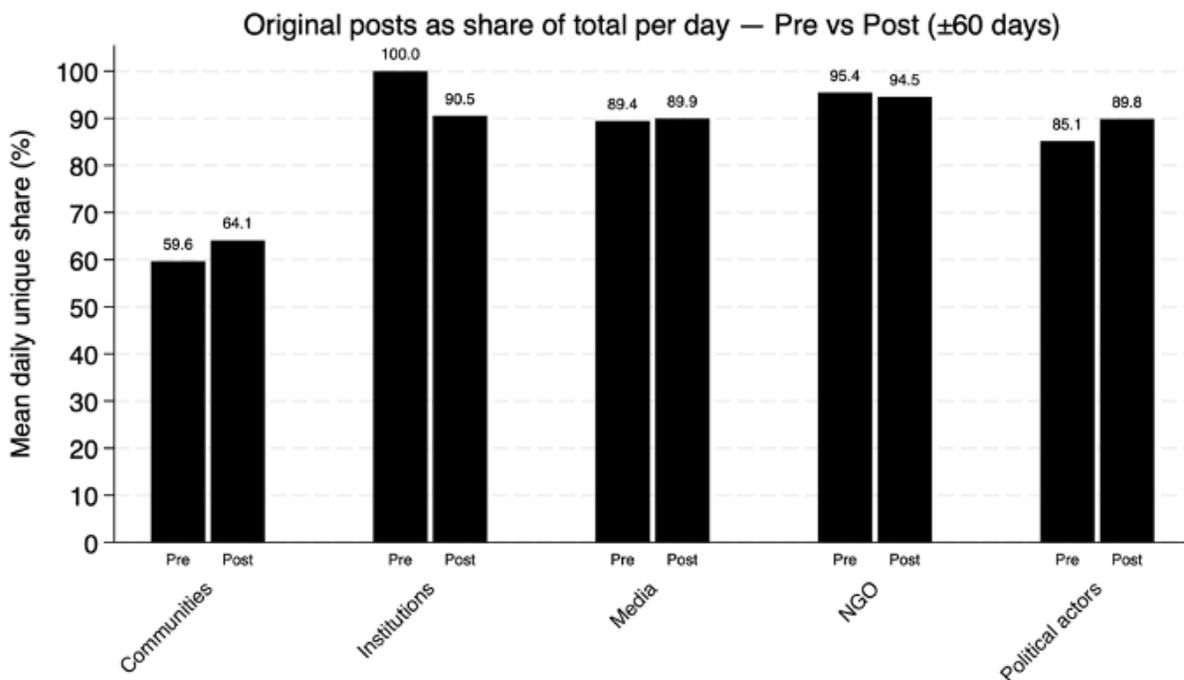


This figure examines the originality of posts around the 2022 election. The share of original content remains essentially flat before and after election day. There is no significant change in the balance between new messages and recirculated ones. This indicates that elections do not alter diffusion dynamics: they do not produce amplification cascades, and originality remains constant.

By contrast, scandal periods produce a strikingly different pattern. Returning to Figure 5.1 in RA5, the December 2022–January 2023 Qatargate surge was characterized by a sharp increase in recirculation. Originality declined as a small number of posts from political leaders and media outlets

were shared thousands of times. These diffusion cascades amplified elite voices while muting alternative perspectives.

The difference is crucial: whereas elections leave diffusion unchanged, scandals reshape the circulation of corruption discourse. They create amplification cascades in which a few initial claims dominate the agenda. This evidence suggests that the impact of scandals on diffusion is far greater than that of elections. Scandals trigger recirculation cascades, reducing originality and amplifying selected narratives. Elections do not generate such cascades, meaning their impact on visibility is negligible.

This has important implications: diffusion cascades can dramatically shape public perceptions by privileging certain claims over others. But because these cascades are driven by scandals, not elections, accountability depends on exogenous revelations rather than routine democratic processes.


## 5.5 Discussion of RA6

The results presented in RA6 demonstrate that the impact of anti-corruption claims-making and neutralization in the Italian Facebook arena is overwhelmingly shaped by scandal shocks rather than by electoral cycles. Whereas RA5 clarified the sources of variation — showing that surges of attention follow exogenous revelations and are amplified by elites — RA6 has revealed that the consequences of these surges, in terms of participation and diffusion, are equally tied to shocks. In this sense, the findings offer a clear and consistent picture: the impact of corruption discourse on visibility and accountability is episodic, contingent, and elite-driven, rather than cyclical, institutional, and broadly participatory.

The analysis of the extension of participation shows that elections do not broaden the set of actors who take part in the corruption debate. Most accounts that post about corruption are active across both electoral and non-electoral periods, forming a stable core of narrators. The number of "electoral-only" actors is minimal, while "non-electoral-only" actors are far more numerous. This distribution demonstrates that elections fail to mobilize new voices into the conversation. Figures comparing the pre- and post-election windows reinforce this conclusion: across both macro categories and partisan blocs, the number of active accounts remains essentially unchanged. There is no evidence of parties seizing ownership of the corruption agenda by mobilizing new accounts in the run-up to the ballot. By contrast, descriptive evidence from the Qatargate scandal shows that participation widens dramatically when shocking revelations emerge, as many otherwise dormant accounts temporarily intervene in the debate. Scandals, not elections, have the capacity to extend participation and thereby increase the inclusiveness of the discourse, even if only temporarily.

The diffusion dimension paints an equally telling picture. Around the 2022 election, the balance between original and recirculated posts remains stable. There is no systematic decline in originality, no amplification cascades, and no indication that campaigns intensify the circulation of corruption-related content. Elections therefore appear inert in terms of diffusion dynamics: they provide a background stage but not the triggers of virality. Scandal periods, in contrast, radically alter the structure of diffusion. During Qatargate, the share of originality fell sharply as a handful of posts from political leaders and media outlets were shared thousands of times. These recirculation cascades amplified elite claims far beyond their original reach, creating a wave of attention that spread rapidly across the platform. The impact of scandals on diffusion is thus decisive: they transform isolated claims into dominant narratives, giving disproportionate visibility to the voices of those who are already central in the political and media field.

Together, the extension and diffusion results highlight the conditional and asymmetric nature of impact. On one hand, scandals do broaden participation and generate cascades, showing that shocks can expand the range and visibility of corruption discourse. On the other hand, these expansions are neither sustained nor evenly distributed. Once the shock passes, participation contracts back to the stable core, and diffusion returns to routine levels. Moreover, the very actors whose posts dominate recirculation cascades are political elites and news media, confirming that while the number of voices may temporarily grow, the framing power remains concentrated in a few hands. The impact of scandals is therefore double-edged: it raises visibility and mobilizes new voices, but it also privileges elite narratives, often partisan and instrumental, over systemic and structural understandings of corruption.

In relation to SO6, the findings of RA6 underscore that the impact of anti-corruption claims-making and neutralization on accountability, transparency, and integrity is fragile and episodic. Elections, which should in principle provide regular opportunities for scrutiny and debate, fail to mobilize broader participation or intensify diffusion. Scandals, by contrast, create short-lived windows of heightened attention. These windows can pressure institutions, force responses, and temporarily raise awareness, but they do not guarantee sustained accountability. The dependence on scandal shocks means that transparency is contingent on the timing and availability of revelations, while integrity remains vulnerable to partisan instrumentalization. In practical terms, the impact of corruption discourse online is conditional, selective, and uneven, shaped less by the rhythms of democratic competition than by the disruptive force of unexpected events.

RA6 thus complements RA5 by showing that the same scandal-led dynamics which drive variation also condition impact. Together, these two research activities confirm that the mediatization of corruption in Italy's digital arena is episodic and elite-centered. Elections provide a background context, but the decisive moments of visibility and accountability are triggered by scandals, whose impact is magnified by the amplification of political and media elites. This configuration raises important questions about the capacity of digital platforms to sustain continuous transparency and accountability, suggesting that their contribution remains tied to shocks rather than to the regular rhythms of democratic life.