

CHAPTER 6

LEADERSHIP AND AGENCY IN ALGORITHMIC SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Leadership, as a phenomenon, has a key function in society, mobilising individuals and driving them towards a certain goal. However, it is by now more than clear that leadership has been severely disrupted by digital innovation, not least by the advent of social media, big data, and algorithmic governance. Hence, the aim of this chapter is to explore the changes and to formulate a concept of leadership that is responsive to the modes of mobilisation, new affordances of data analytics, and the irruption of private business logics into the very core of leadership and campaigning strategies. Consequently, the very question of agency in leadership has become straightforward. To that effect, the chapter concludes by finding leadership to be diffused within more-than-human assemblages in which aspiring leaders continue to play a major role but by no means an unquestionably central one. Instead, leadership must constantly be performed, regardless of other considerations and formal conditions.

Keywords: Leadership, big data, algorithm, affect, performativity

The extent to which today's world has been digitised is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that we no longer have the need to distinguish between digital and non-digital – both have become inseparably intertwined into one. Such a fundamental change to everyday life cannot have left leadership – one of the paramount structuring roles in our societies – unchanged. Hence, this chapter sets to explore the changes in and evolving characteristics of today's leadership, primarily focusing on the domain of politics.

To that end, the chapter first delves into some of the arguments characterising changes in contemporary leadership, particularly changing forms of political organisation, the emancipation of publics, and the necessity of a connective function. Subsequently, one of the defining characteristics of today's societies, the abundance of data and the capacity for its algorithmic analysis, is brought into the mix, demonstrating how leaders can build their strategies with advance knowledge of fine-grained audience characteristics, enabling them to embark on a course of action that is almost guaranteed to bring the desired result. These changes are, in turn, seen in the context of an emerging experience age whereby audience members expect tailored and precision-targeted communication that is engaging and intuitively appealing. In this context, it comes as no surprise that affective, rather than information- or ideology-based, publics become the prime domains in which leadership is performed. The emphasis on performance is itself not accidental – in this new environment, leadership can neither be static nor depend on taken-for-granted characteristics. Instead, leadership is always emergent, an aspiration (hence the term 'aspiring leaders' is used throughout the text) rather than a fixed reality even if a formal leadership position is attained. Finally, this chapter concludes with the attempt to locate agency in the contemporary performance of leadership.

1. The Argument of Leadership Change

There is little doubt that the idea and practice of leadership has been significantly affected by the advent of digital communication. In fact, there has been an interesting and somewhat perplexing mix of continuity and change. As Bakardjieva, Felt and Dumitrica (2018) assert, 'leadership does not evaporate, but changes its form and substance' (p. 912). Leadership is becoming increasingly connective: in other words, leaders operate as central nodes whose embeddedness in the broader fabric of networks, information environments, identities, and affiliations becomes key in mobilising support (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011, p. 772). As a result, there are ample opportunities for construction of communities and interactive spaces that are by no means restricted to coalescing around leaders – instead, such spaces are mobilised by shared concerns (Sutkutė, 2016, p. 40).

However, the above does not imply leaderlessness: such movements may not be based on political parties or other organisations but they still necessitate the classical leadership role of helping to bring about a new social reality and steer the processes of mobilisation and informational and affective exchange prior to the individual's immediate environment becoming oversaturated with competing demands (Bielinis, 2018; Zakaraitė, 2016, p. 91). Leadership becomes of crucial importance to the extent that in today's politics 'the burden of mobilization' shifts from large organisations to individuals (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011, p. 772). Enabled through the use of social media, this type of leadership is typically associated with '*inviting, connecting, steering, and stimulating*, rather than *directing, commanding, and proclaiming*' (Poell, Abdulla, Rieder, Woltering & Zack, 2016, p. 1009). Crucially, it is sustained and consistent performance in the connective function that defines leadership.

Certainly, formal attributes, even an official position of power, are trumped by actual performance. In fact, someone can easily lead without formal attributes. Nevertheless, while it might be a truism that 'headship does not necessarily mean leadership' (Teles, 2015, p. 32), it is still necessary to explore the contours of the latter. Indeed, due to the lack or absence of formal structures and procedures, particularly in case of leadership originating in the digital realm, leadership is not attained or elected for but performative as 'the main way to stand out and be recognized as a leader is to continuously produce influential discourse', thereby attracting substantial following and consolidating the identity and collective presence of the group or the public (Bakardjieva et al., 2018, p. 912). In that sense, the line between (political) leaders and social media influencers is beginning to blur.

Online leadership can often be anonymous due to the possibility of several individuals to blend into a single avatar in case of a purely online, or at least online-coordinated, movement: on such occasions, leadership becomes 'polycephalous' (Bakardjieva et al., 2018, p. 912). Nevertheless, the *function* persists: even in movements where official and/or formal organisational structures have been largely absent (such as Occupy), 'strategizing and leadership were still key to protest communication and mobilization' (Poell et al., 2016, p. 997). Hence, continue to 'define objectives and identify directions and means for action; maintain the identity and structure of the movement and connect and mobilize the support base', albeit by different means (Bakardjieva et al., 2018, p. 912). Such roles are carried out by individuals who may not have been formally appointed but are, instead, 'centrally positioned in social media-facilitated networks', thereby becoming leaders if not in name then in function, connecting otherwise disparate participants into publics and framing the

movement or protest (Poell et al., 2016, p. 997). And although polycephalous can perform the above as well, as shown below, personalisation still adds greater efficiency.

It seems reasonable to suggest that leadership, despite its performative, connective, and identity-coordinating role, has considerably shrunk in autonomy since '[d]ecision-making, choosing between alternatives [...] is delegated to the collective wisdom of movement participants who can choose to take up, align with, or tweak the directive issued by leaders in their personal and local ways' (Bakardjieva et al., 2018, p. 912). On the other hand, the present analytical turn in leadership, laid out in the subsequent sections of this chapter, and the necessity of campaign planners to employ data analytics in preparation of their strategies (Larsson, 2019) can be seen as pre-empting such audience contestation: if it is possible to know what the audience thinks and expects in advance, then any concerns and building blocks of collective wisdom can be weaved into connective leadership discourse and bent towards the strategic interests of the aspiring leader.

Still, the entire leaderlessness narrative of today's movements can be seen as, above all, a strategic construct: as parties and formal organisations are losing their appeal and traction in favour of progressive individualisation of participation, there is a definite need to transcend traditional alignments with something that allows the individual participant to at least *feel* central and autonomous, even if legacy leadership structures persist behind the surface (Poell et al., 2016, p. 1009). In a similar manner, even when particular figureheads are not pronounced and explicitly visible, 'covert' leadership roles still persist nevertheless, remaining 'unrecognized and, more disturbingly, unaccountable' (Bakardjieva et al., 2018, p. 900). Hence, covert leadership is more potent due to such subterranean operation. Also, it must be argued that it is not impossible for overt connective and covert leadership to coexist, including within the same movement/organisation and, even more paradoxically, within the same person, particularly in case of ostensibly non-political leaders (such as social media influencers) assuming a functionally political role.

Notably, political organisation themselves, parties included, are increasingly drawn into being more connective than prescriptive, relying on 'technology platforms and affordances' that are becoming 'indistinguishable from, and replace, key components of brick and mortar organization and intra-party functions' thus engaging with supporter networks and managing affiliations way beyond the traditional focus on electoral mobilisation (Bennett et al., 2018, pp. 1666–1667). In other words, instead of drawing individuals towards pre-existing structures on the basis of pre-manufactured ideologies, parties and movements are sustained within interactive processes while co-creating their ideological substances with individuals that they

aggregate and connect *within* that process of co-creation. However, much of that co-creation takes the form of data harvesting, which is not necessarily that empowering and possibly less bottom-up than Bennett, Segerberg, and Knüpfer (2018, p. 1667) would imagine – instead, it is more about strategic management and crafting of wishes and expectations.

Certainly, then, tapping into the prevalent concerns and considerations circulating within digital media becomes a must (Mazzoleni, 2017, p. 142), with online flows of affect resonating with every major event and development (Döveling, Harju & Sommer, 2018, p. 1), open for embodiment and making use of it. Once mobilised, moreover, such affective agglomerations give rise to ‘mediated feelings of connectedness’ (Papacharissi, 2016). However, affective flows do not go well with complexity and detailed elaboration. As a result, not only politicians traditionally labelled as ‘populist’ but also mainstream political actors become compelled to resort to simplistic explanations (Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou & Wodak, 2018, p. 7; see also Hannan, 2018, p. 220). That is simultaneously exacerbated by data-informed targeting described below: it is futile to engage in elaboration if one is capable of striking sharp and precise blows where audiences are to be the most impressed.

2. The Data-Algorithmic Turn

While the preceding section has made it clear that aspiring leaders retain a connective function that is crucial for mobilisation and political action, it is yet to be explained how this function is to be filled with substantive content. Indeed, as Bocullo (2016, p. 67) stresses, merely being active does not automatically imply being successful. Pertaining to this problematic, a clear shift in the performance of leadership has been caused by the availability of big data and the increasing role of data-crunching algorithms. For the purposes of this chapter, the key role of algorithms lies in their capacity to ‘plough through an immense quantity and breadth of data to identify patterns and correlations’ in order to determine both the present characteristics and the likely future actions and decisions of the target audiences (Faraj, Pachidi & Sayegh, 2018, p. 64). Their functions involve, among other things, profiling and targeting, system optimisation, management and control of present things and events and predictions of those to come (Sadowski, 2019, pp. 5–6). Effectively, then, identities are ascribed and future actions mapped out as a result of the analysis of big data pertaining to present and past behaviours (Newell & Marabelli, 2015, p. 4). The employment of machine learning techniques enables the production of fine-grained maps of target populations, concerning not only their basic political allegiances but also the most salient issues and corresponding views down to the level of individuals (Sunstein, 2018, p. 4).

The knowledge thus derived allows to build statistical models for the targeting of individuals through messages that are customised and ‘leverage aspects of personality, political leanings, and affective proclivities’ (Faraj et al., 2018, p. 64). As a result, the connective function of leadership is both enhanced and simplified: if it is possible to know in advance what concerns, hopes fears, and affective proclivities have to be addressed in order to attract and mobilise target audiences, it becomes possible to exert influence with great efficiency.

In fact, ‘algorithms are everywhere beneath the surface of contemporary life, governing all types of activities imaginable: ‘what songs or films a streaming service will recommend, the price at which a given commodity will be offered to market, where a restaurant will seat its customers, which potential partners will appear in a dating app, and [...] what adds are served to you’ (Greenfield, 2018, p. 212). While at their simplest, algorithms can be seen as mere command structures describing how an input is to be transformed into an output, in today’s practice they typically purport to assist choice (while, in fact, simply *framing* choice) so that only ‘meaningful’ content is encountered and only the most ‘efficient’ choices are being made when buying, voting, or choosing a date (Bucher, 2018, p. 49). In fact, the algorithmic environment is becoming so dense and difficult to disentangle that some even imply refer to it as ‘algorithmic soup’ (Bostrom, 2017, p. 211). And it is this ‘soup’ that aspiring leaders have to navigate in expectation to be matched with target followers in very much the same way in which a purchase might be recommended, either as sponsored content or on a ‘people like you have bought this’ basis.

The raw material for inferring leadership strategies and content – big data – have become relatively abundant: because ‘in a world where surveillance is the norm, merely existing in the world means you are structured into the technologies and systems that structure most of social life today’ (Caplan & Boyd, 2018, p. 4), and data collection is one of the main default principles of today’s technologies. Emergent patterns have to be sought in data that had previously been unstructured, such as ‘a large body of text, a series of images, or indeed a real-time video feed’; that has to be done with an open mind because as big data are being analysed, ‘the patterns themselves begin to suggest the questions that might be asked of them’ (Greenfield, 2018, p. 211). Nevertheless, the predictions construed from such patterns are anything but vague and open-ended. Instead, they are used to instantly and (allegedly) accurately answer questions that would have otherwise necessitated careful thinking and lengthy deliberation to the extent that now we seem to enter ‘a world of constant data-driven predictions where we may not be able to explain the reasons behind our decisions’ (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2017, p. 17). It is thus not surprising that data are now seen as a crucial

form of capital by businesses operating in industries as diverse as technology, manufacturing, energy, or finance (Sadowski, 2019, p. 1). Same applies to data-driven campaigning that combines in-depth knowledge of the audiences with algorithmic determination of topics and channels to render the messaging as impactful as possible (see Stroud & McGregor, 2019).

Algorithms become governance mechanisms on their own right. They do so by structuring the social in terms of (re)arranging groups, predicting (and sometimes pre-empting) human action, and guiding decision-making processes; hence, they become ‘increasingly autonomous actors with power to further political and economic interests on the individual but also on the public/collective level’ (Just & Latzer, 2017, p. 245). Hence, algorithms can be seen as productive of social order and interpersonal realities that bind individuals and therefore significantly shaping behaviours on a large scale through their automated selection of content, key function in communication planning, and framing of the choice environment (Just & Latzer, 2017, p. 254). The influence, however, is not only societal: it is personal as well since algorithms influence ‘not only what we think about (agenda-setting) but also how we think about it (framing) and consequently how we act’ (Just & Latzer, 2017, p. 245). Indeed, it is the algorithmically run platforms and applications that produce and allocate the market of attention, drawing it to some things but not others, shaping the individual consciousness and perceived reality and, through it, social order; as a result, algorithms become highly strategic artefacts (Just & Latzer, 2017, p. 246). Moreover, despite their clear-cut ‘if... then’ nature, algorithms are also implicated in emotional matters, particularly in the ways experiences and feelings are shaped and orchestrated, be it joy or frustration, curiosity or anger (Bucher, 2018, p. 49). The preceding function is also neither coincidental nor easily ignored. Instead, as emotions are indispensable in shaping motivations and behaviours, the influence over such factors gives extra power to algorithmic governance and extra weapons in the arsenal of an algorithmically-rich aspiring leader.

Few users of digital platforms have still retained the illusion of full access to information and an open-ended choice environment – instead, it is by now clear that the companies behind such platforms employ data-intensive systems that are unobtrusive and yet greatly effective in filtering user encounters with media by showing them things they are predisposed to like (Webster, 2017, p. 356). In other words, users are sorted and herded into predetermined information enclaves rather than choosing to immerse themselves in one information environment or another. It is his enclosure-building function that aspiring leaders strive to build upon, because having tapped into existing ones or forming new ones through sustained identity-building and audience-aggregating practices, they can capitalise on audience

self-filtering, whereby group- and opinion-congruent information gets more efficiently and more favourably processed than any competing alternatives (see Kalpokas, 2019).

Moreover, algorithms can be written to easily adapt to a changing or unpredictable environment: that is particularly characteristic of machine learning algorithms that trawl large data sets in order to discover novel patterns that had not been foreseen by the code writer (Etter, Colleoni, Illia, Meggiorin, & D'Eugenio, 2018, p. 74). That gives algorithm-wielding actors increased flexibility: they can plan their campaigns in real time without the need to identify key themes or variables in advance. A key element here is the capacity for opinion mining, i.e. the extraction of opinions and sentiments from text that can even be unstructured and/or constantly evolving, such as online comments (Balazs & Velásquez, 2016, p. 96). Clearly, successful employment of this technique enables an aspiring leader to discover important themes to be included into communication as well as to track the performance of current and past communicative acts. More broadly, its applications may involve, among other things, 'enhancing sales and improving a company's marketing strategies [...], identifying ideological shifts and analysing trends in political strategy planning' or even determining momentum in both stock markets and political campaigns (Giatsoglou et al., 2017, p. 214).

Decision guidance techniques enabled by data-crunching algorithms, in the form of either recommendations or targeted content delivery, 'can be understood as a design-based instrument of control', dynamically configuring the choice environment that individuals find themselves in and doing so in ways that are highly personalised, 'affecting individual user's behaviour and perceptions by subtly moulding the networked user's understanding of the surrounding world' (Yeung, 2017, p. 130). Certainly, such activity is not without manipulative undertones – after all, the aim is to achieve decisions, at both individual and collective levels, that are preferred by the choice architect. From an audience perspective, it is extremely difficult to resist such decision guidance as it operates through subtle persuasion and provision of what is desired instead of through blunt coercion, offering 'bespoke, highly personalised services that are algorithmically designed to respond rapidly, dynamically and as unobtrusively and seamlessly as possible' (Yeung, 2017, p. 131). Hence, by using psychological data about the target individuals and groups, actors are capable of triggering the necessary responses and nudging people towards predetermined action, the two being largely inseparable (Williamson, 2017, p. 271).

3. Bringing Experience into the Mix

Ever since the widespread adoption of the internet, it has been commonplace to talk about the coming of the Information Age – one in which every piece of information is immediately

available at one's fingertips. However, it appears that the latter era has proved to be self-defeating: the ever-increasing amount of information has undermined its own accessibility. Hence, the key point of reference is no longer the information that is being consumed (and taken as a given) but, instead, 'how we choose to consume this information' (Schaap, 2017). In the current era characterised by overabundance of information, we are unavoidably passing from the Information Age to the Experience Age in which attention acts as the basic exchange currency (Wadhera, 2016; see also Kalpokas, 2019).

Indeed, it can be confidently stated that 'the density of the web environment in the contemporary media landscape results in an intense and incessant competition for attention', resulting in the dominance of entertaining and easy-to-consume content that has much more to do with popular culture than a well-informed public sphere, even when ostensibly pertaining to the latter (Dahlgren & Alvares, 2013, p. 54). Such a shift is further reinforced by today's media environment, defined by abundance, interactivity, and mobility (Mazzoleni, 2017, pp. 140–141). The key challenge for any aspiring leader is, therefore, the necessity to attract audience attention at any cost at a time when almost any target group is spoilt for choice. The emphasis on attention is further underscored by the characteristics of modern media that offer 'intense experiential immersions with strong affective valences' (Dahlgren & Alvares, 2013, p. 54). Therefore, it is both natural and easier to offer audiences content in which they can lose themselves. Nevertheless, competitive stakes are simultaneously increased: if every communicator (or, at least, the majority of them) invests in creating strongly immersive experiences, then the only way to compete is to create something even more immersive than any of the competition.

The communicative affordances of today's media and aspiring leaders' usage thereof also causes a corresponding expectation on behalf of the audience. As Newman (2016) states, 'we live in an age where people want to *experience* everything'; in other words, 'we want to be immersed in the story, feel like we are "living" the story, not just reading it' while simultaneously being entertained. Hence, audiences cannot be merely left to consume information – they must get involved in fashioning and curating it as well (Ricchio, 2017). The involvement and entertainment aspects are only further strengthened by the broader trend towards gamification of most areas of life (Papsdorf, 2015), meaning that consumers expect satisfaction and entertainment even in traditionally mundane aspects of life. Crucially, therefore, the current stage in the development of communication practices can be aptly labelled 'the me-age' – one in which 'the best content is the kind that makes the reader the star' (Newman, 2016), typically through content that is 'relevant, contextual, and engaging'

(Abramovich, 2017), in other words, personalised. And for the latter, one needs significant amounts of data to be analysed and put to good use, potentially (and, for better-funded campaigns, unavoidably) adding machine learning to the mix in order to ‘continually refine and personalise customer experiences as consumers interact with them’ (Colvin & Kingston, 2017) thereby effectively structuring both individual and societal realities (Just & Latzer, 2017, p. 254).

Me-centricity also implies a further shift: one towards intuitive adaptation of the environment (including the information environment) to audience expectations. Indeed, in an incessant stream of information, whereby everything is happening and changing quickly, verifying and thinking might easily seem like just a waste of time: instead, intuitive connection with what is being offered acts as an apparently good enough substitute. Hence, it becomes clear that consumer experience has become ‘a key competitive differentiator’, necessitating the feeling of being ‘uniquely understood and important’ (Wladawsky-Berger, 2018). In other words, not the quality of the offering (informational or otherwise) but the *experience* of it becomes the key determinant of success.

Indeed, the challenge is not that some messages can be heard while others cannot; in fact, that is precisely the problem – as each message, as well as its own distinct meaning, *can* be heard but simply cannot be *attended to*, the result being the need to ‘drastically *select from* the environment with which we must interact in order to make it more manageable’ (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, pp. 112–113). And as we select in a piecemeal fashion and without taking time for reflection and interpretation, we, quite literally, lack the sense of what is happening (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 114), leaving ourselves open to prefabricated attention-grabbing narratives and content offerings that simply have an emotional, or gut, sense of being correct. Crucially, the role of emotion cannot be underestimated, particularly in the Experience Age. Even under normal circumstances, ‘it is the behavioural impulses generated by emotions that give or deny humans the energy to act on their perceptions’ (Markwica, 2018, p. 87). Notably, emotions can be seen to ‘aid decision-making, learning, communication, and situation awareness’ (Poria, Cambria, Bajpai, & Hussain, 2017, p. 98), providing individuals with the capacity for quick and decisive action when it is at its most necessary. An in the experience age the emotional aspect is given even greater primacy, particularly because aiming to create the most pleasurable experiences possible, the sellers (of goods, services, information, or ideas) have to submit themselves to the centrality of the ‘me’, striving to ensure that each and every consumer of their offering receives the highest degree of personal(ised) satisfaction as possible, thereby further challenging anyone aiming to exert influence on others.

In the above environment, even the most evidence-based proposition becomes less of a buck-stopping argument and an appeal to *the* truth than merely one more contender operating within a competitive marketplace in which no factual but experience value exerts the strongest influence upon the audience (McIntyre, 2018, pp. 19–20). In other words, if one is striving to prove something, it also matters what counts as proof in the eyes of the target audience in an environment generally characterised by ‘the selective use of facts that prop up one’s position, and the complete rejection of facts that do not’ (McIntyre, 2018, p. 34). In search for reasons, one has to again return to the issue of attention. Here one needs to refer to the standard economic model of supply and demand which predicts an increase in value of something the demand for which exceeds supply, with attention functioning as the exchange item in this case (Léveillé Gauvin, 2018, p. 293). Moreover, attention can potentially be seen as even scarcer than previously thought because ‘advances in neuroscience, particularly in brain imaging, have dismissed the notion of multitasking’: as the brain can only deal with one task at a time, merely alternating between demands with an unavoidable cognitive cost involved in every switch, forcing communicators to deal with ‘the challenge of gaining attention, and having influence on consumers in the face of constant distraction/task switching’ (Romaniuk & Nguyen, 2017, p. 911). Hence, if attention can more easily be won by attending to the audience’s wishes, fears, and biases, regardless of their factual value, then that can only mean a more efficient return on investment. The necessary factor, then, is a pre-cognitive ‘click’, grabbing audience attention straight away and maximising pleasurable emotions (Léveillé Gauvin, 2018, pp. 293–294). Since in the social media attention ecosystem ‘ability to attract attention’ becomes the main source of admiration, it simply has to be acknowledged that (almost) everything that is efficient becomes not only justifiable but even necessary (Marwick, 2015, p. 149).

4. Affect and the Performance of Leadership

The next major issue to be tackled is the prevailing mode of public mobilisation in the current era dominated by digital(ised) interaction. In this context, one must side with Papacharissi (2016, p. 310), for whom publics that are ‘activated and sustained by feelings of belonging and solidarity, however evanescent those feelings may be’. The key element here is that of *feeling*: publics being mobilised on an emotional-affective basis. Papacharissi (2016, p. 311) aptly defines affect as ‘a form of pre-emotive intensity subjectively experienced and connected to’. Similarly, for Döveling et al. (2018, p. 2), ‘affect is something people engage in, a practice of relational nature’. Affect is also foundational to engagement on social

media, ultimately prompting ‘a feeling of cultural and social belonging’ for digital individuals (Döveling et al., 2018, p. 4; see also Giaxoglou & Döveling, 2018, p. 2). As a result, then, affective publics, characteristic of today’s politics, are such that ‘are mobilized and connected, identified and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment’ (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 311). Such emotion-based narration of life usually breaks prevalent conventions, disrupting dominant narratives, and thus allowing fresh perspectives with which target audiences find it easier to identify (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 131). The idea that feelings and emotions are crucial in today’s mobilisation has also been expressed in other related contexts, such as discussing post-truth, but typically in a pejorative sense (see, notably, McIntyre, 2018, p. 13). In contrast, it must be stressed that affective formation of publics should be understood in a value-neutral sense, as simply the default form of bringing followers together in which today’s aspiring leaders must engage.

Certainly, when a group (however ephemeral and affective) is formed, its shared (and thus collectively reinforced) beliefs will start shaping its members’ perceptions of the world, motivating individuals to perceive the world in group-congruent ways, and members may well feel an urge to defend collective perceptions, even at the expense of verifiable facts (McIntyre, 2018, p. 45; see also Post, 2019, p. 232). However, the same could have been said about traditional groups as well. The difference may likely be one of quality and not one of kind: as the solidarity of the new publics is affective, the urge to believe and to stick with those who jointly partake in affective flows would perhaps more likely operate on the level of gut feeling or intuitive sense. That, in turn, opens up opportunities for data-rich aspiring leaders to act on affective triggers that are known in advance to nudge target audiences towards the expected action or affiliation.

There is, clearly, a further aspect of the current information environment that can be operationalised by aspiring leaders, namely, the dependence of many users on influential information content. Crucially, with the proliferation of multiple entertainment options coexisting with information media not only on the same devices but also on the same platforms, the time and attention dedicated to news content is naturally restricted. Notably, as ‘news today is ubiquitous, pervasive, and constantly around us’ (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017, p. 106), despite audience willingness (and often even perceived necessity) to be informed, the very ubiquity of content may give rise to so-called ‘news-finds-me’ perception whereby individuals forfeit following news from dedicated sources in expectation to be kept informed by means of ‘general Internet use, information received from peers, and connections within online social networks’ (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017, pp. 106–107). As a result, users

become more reliant on information entrepreneurs, which could be friends and family but also external opinion leaders or influencers, to receive information about the political and/or social environment (Anspach, 2017, p. 590). And as social media in particular facilitate influence through sharing, discussion, and endorsement, the effect might not be ‘dampening partisan selectivity’, as Anspach (2017, p. 591) suggests, but quite the contrary: enclosure of individuals into influencer-led information silos, particularly if the architects of such silos have advance knowledge of what framing or emotional load is more than likely to leave individuals with no other option but to follow the lead. And with the capacity on behalf of campaign strategists to ‘scrutinize the relative success of each individual post, tweet, image or video’, which marks the advent of the so-called ‘analytics turn’ in political communication and leadership (Larsson, 2019, p. 15), every attempt at herding can be continuously recalibrated and refined.

A further shift with notable influence on leadership is a redefinition of the political domain as such, strongly related with the me-centrism of the experience age. Traditionally, politics was seen as a public domain, concerned with the public goods and interest that transcend those of the individual. More recently, however, political engagement has become ‘an expression of personal hopes, lifestyles, and grievances’ (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 743): in other words, ‘the personal becomes political’ (Papacharissi, 2015). Even though individuals continue aligning themselves with organisations, movements, or some less-formal groups, such as followers of a particular leadership figure, self-expression, and not ideological identification, appears to be the key driving factor (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 744). Hence, collective action – the typical logic of movements – has become *connective* action, whereby shared partaking and association become key organisational resources (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 752). Such movements may first seem to conform to the leaderlessness argument outlined above, not least because their assembling tends to be based on individual affective engagement rather than centralised authority; nevertheless, central signifiers around which publics must coalesce remain vital (Papacharissi, 2015, pp. 71–72), and the treasured prize of any leadership struggle is the control of such signifiers.

The availability of analytics is not only in line with but also strengthens what Cooren (2012, p. 5) calls the ‘ventriloquism’ of leadership figures, understood as ‘the activity that consists of making someone or something say or do something’. In this case, analytics-enabled leaders bring about the collective voice in a similar way in which a ventriloquist brings about the voice of the dummy (see, generally, Clifton, 2017; Kavada, 2015, p. 881). In this context, Hauser’s (2018) concept of the metapopulist stands out as a crucial analytical

tool. Whereas the traditional populist leader stands as a clear embodiment of, say, ‘the common man’, the metapopulist ‘is not the name that identifies the unity of an equivalential chain with a hegemonic segment, but he or she is a signifier that has to hold the parological incoherence of the significations of communities’ (Hauser, 2018, p. 67). Notably, therefore, ‘the essence of the metapopulist leader is thus persistent incoherence as a precondition for being a transcendent singularity that addresses the society as the totality of heterogenous communities and singularities’ (Hauser, 2018, p. 67). A single leadership figure can then enable diverse audiences to feel uniquely understood.

The detailed knowledge of audience expectations and the capacity to personalise communication allows the data-rich metapopulist to be all things to all people as different segments of the population can project their desires and their sensibilities onto such a leader without the necessity for these projections to coalesce into some larger picture. In this respect, ‘the full subject of the metapopulist leader vanishes and his or her subject has no being other than as cleavages in a chain of signification that represents him or her for others’ (Hauser, 2018, p. 68) – the figure (and, indeed, the person) of the leader becomes that which is represented or, rather, deemed to be relevant for representation by the algorithmic analysis of data at the expense of being alienated from the actual physical person of the leader (see Zakaraitė, 2016, p. 93). Hence, the aspiring leader can also be seen as ‘an empty set – a set which has no elements such as beliefs, ideas, values, or feelings that could be attributed to the metapopulist leader him or herself’ but is, instead, a protean projection of the concrete public in question (Hauser, 2018, p. 68). One can say that the leader *performs the public back to itself*.

5. Towards a Theory of Social-Mediated Leadership

In earlier analyses of mediatisation and leadership, it was not uncommon to stress agency-enhancing effects, for example, in expanding the audience that can potentially be reached and mobilised as well as giving the opportunity to produce influential discourse to a broader set of individuals without support structures or capacity and/or aptitude to produce formally authoritative discourse associated with traditional leadership figures, thereby resulting in actively performed ‘freedom of expression, democratic participation, and the creation of culture’ (Peters & Johnson, 2016, pp. 27–28). Nevertheless, the more critical voices have always contended that instead of great liberation and empowerment, social media platforms should more adequately be seen as replicating the already prevalent paradigms and hierarchies of communication, including those separating users into producers and consumers of content, the latter being better equipped for ‘accepting and amplifying messages rather than contesting

or co-creating them’ (Swann & Husted, 2017, p. 201). Nevertheless, the nature of content still needs to be taken stock of by aspiring leaders, prioritising the types that can be noticed, taken up, and shared by audience with particular ease.

In the context of the increasing speed and experientialisation of communication, increased attention is deservedly turned to memes. Memes as the means of communication have become the new normal, to the extent that a news story or an ongoing development almost naturally is reacted to by the means of a ‘quick-fire mocking-up of a meme or a gif’ which, in turn, can be seen as performing ‘an *interpellative* function’, hailing to user to identify with them, either positively (agreeing) or negatively (disagreeing), with the effect that ‘the circulation of digital visual media often serves to shore up political identities, affiliations and the antagonisms associated with them’ (Dean, 2018, p. 5). Again, such meme-circulation can be seen as a further indicator of me-centric connective action, whereby associative and affective identity-performing content becomes key to political association and an attractive form of political action.

In order to establish a connection with the audience, communication unavoidably becomes not only more me-centric from the audience member’s side more personalised, even intimate, from the aspiring leader’s side (i.e. there is double personalisation), focussing not only on the agenda but also on personal and family life of the aspiring leader and ever more firmly leaving the organisation to which (s)he belongs (if there is one) behind. The drive is to demonstrate the ‘real’ and ‘ordinary’ person behind the leadership position (or ambition), their individual qualities and individual takes on the task at hand as well as the proximate emotional characteristics (Metz, Kruikmeier, & Lecheler, 2019, p. 2). The preceding naturally follows from the basic tenets of social media, not least the bypassing of the traditional communication channels that may have been somewhat reluctant to include highly personalised messages into e.g. their news bulletins (tabloids, of course, may be an entirely different matter altogether) and the interactive nature of social media that might give the simulated impression of a quasi-personal conversation with the aspiring leader, driving communicators to ‘self-personalise’ (Metz et al., 2019, p. 4).

Clearly, the leadership of today necessitates a ‘post-heroic’ reinterpretation: it is no longer correct (if it ever was) to concentrate on individual figures and their exceptional traits and deeds – instead, leadership must be seen as a dynamic and relational *process* (Collinson, 2018, p. 364). Likewise, an interpretation of leadership as *practice* emphasises ‘a world that is continuously on the move, where stuff does most certainly appear, but only ever as a transient phase that provides temporary structuring in the ongoing flow of action’; hence, leadership would be located in the ability to change, or at least affect, the directions of such

an all-encompassing flow (Simpson, Buchan, & Sillince, 2018, p. 647). The aim of a leader should perhaps even be less ambitious than establishing a single direction of that flow (i.e. total agreement among followers); instead, ‘leadership work’ should be conceived as a ‘never-ending-story’, captivating, enthralling, and carrying followers in its own flow (Crevani, 2018, p. 89). A similar pattern of thought could be seen in metapopulist politics.

6. Leadership, Agency, and the Transformation of Politics

A key question thereby becomes one of agency. Is agency still with aspiring leaders, is it overtaken by algorithms as autonomous actors or is it with the industry that writes and employs them? It is certainly not unreasonable to claim that should the power of data be seen as emanating from the insights produced, then ‘data analytics industry is powerful in shaping what is said, made visible or known through data’ (Beer, 2018, p. 466). But also, by ‘data’ we can never mean a complete and infinite entity, regardless how ‘big’ the data are – instead, reference is always made to the ‘subset of the world’s infinite aspects that have been captured by some instrument or process of measurement’ (Greenfield, 2018, p. 210). Hence, data is not objective or neutral – instead, it is dependent on decisions (typically by corporate actors) on what is to be measured and how, opening up new avenues for examining agency. Moreover, an oft-repeated feature that deserves attention in this context is that the governance of information and the structuration of experience is based not on the public interest but in line with ‘commodified, consumer-oriented logics’ that shapes the writing of algorithms (Boler & Davis, 2018, p. 83). In this sense, the strategizing for and performance of leadership should be seen as not governed by its own logic but by the commercial logic of those harvesting and analysing data.

No less importantly, ‘algorithms increasingly define the spaces of our information encounters, encounters with others, and the status of knowledge as it is produced and circulates in digitally-mediated contexts’ (Boler & Davis, 2018, pp. 82–83). Structures composed of data and algorithm work to shape political engagement, not only opening up new avenues but also determining how people engage in and perceive politicians and policies; hence, programmes, messages, slogans, and public appearances may well matter less than the underlying backend structure that allocates access to information, thereby framing ambient (and hence more salient) views (Flyverbom & Murray, 2018, p. 7). Hence, leadership clearly becomes contingent upon the code writers and the semi-autonomous operation of (particularly machine learning) algorithms.

Definitely, the agency of individuals, both aspiring leaders and their followers, tends to be further complicated by their *personal* dependence on algorithmic infrastructure not only for

their choices but also for the development of the aptitudes, ideas, and affective proclivities that *give rise to* choices pertaining to leadership and followership. That, in turn, leads some to even postulate the coming of ‘*infrastructural subjectivation*’, i.e. the establishment of ‘a set of relationships that mobilize and aggregate users and non-users with non-human data points’, giving rise to ‘a data economy which is no longer constrained or otherwise limited to a person’ (Langlois & Elmer, 2019, p. 238). Clearly, to talk of meaningful choice in this environment is hardly possible, particularly as ‘the user is fed personalized findings which functionally determines one’s windows on the info-world’ (Boler & Davis, 2018, p. 83). Effectively, the person is torn into pieces, i.e. elements and sets of data that are assembled, reassembled, and disassembled as necessary (Lazzarato, 2014, p. 27). That applies to the leaders and the followers alike: not only every follower is turned to analysable data that informs how to nudge them most efficiently but also the leader and their communication is dissected into minute details and shaped in accordance with task-specific aims and in line with the predicted consequences of every specific act.

It is clearly the element of decision and choice, not only on behalf of the audience but also on behalf of the aspiring leaders that unavoidably becomes problematised in an algorithmic environment. Crucially, the question becomes whether we can still talk of a human decision, individual or collective, or is it more about decisions and outcomes being *chosen for humans* within the meshwork of humans, data, algorithms, and digital technologies. Effectively, then, we encounter a two-tier world, comprised of ‘a frontend (the world we see and navigate) and a backend (the largely invisible computational architecture that sustains and informs the frontend)’ (Hildebrand, 2016, p. 5). Therefore, the world can no longer be conceived as passive – it is, instead, acting underneath the surface, sustaining the interface with which we interact (Choat, 2018, p. 1030). To that effect, agency becomes dissolved within the algorithmic structure of everyday, weaved into the fabric of data-algorithm-world relations.

Moreover, the self ultimately becomes disentangled from the physical body and, instead, ‘becomes conceivable as an assemblage – a distributed, networked self that constantly emerges at various intersections between humans, non-humans, objects, materials and energy flows’, thereby rendering identities ‘fluid, hybrid and constantly evolving’, inconceivable without their broader algorithmically animated assemblages (Pöttsch, 2018, p. 3314). Acknowledging this shift would also necessitate ‘overcoming the ontological, epistemological, and ethical coordinates of anthropocentrism’ focusing, instead, on ‘the relationship between human and non-human’, i.e. engaging in a truly post-humanist study (Ferrante & Sartori, 2016, p. 177). Hence, instead of humans using the environment and their own creations in a merely

instrumental fashion, humans can only be seen as co-authors of interactions (Zatarain, 2017, p. 91). Hence, instead of projecting their leadership ambitions onto the environment, humans (as sources as well as nodes within the utilisation of data) become parts of a larger, more-than-human, agglomeration. Leadership, therefore, again seen as relational, conceivable only in relation to the aspiring leaders, their target audiences, data intermediaries, and the algorithms themselves, only emerging from the interrelationship between humans and their (mostly technological) environment.

Clearly, then, instead of sticking with either of the more clear-cut alternatives indicated above, the agency of leadership must be seen as embedded in assemblages composed of both the social and the technical elements that simply cannot be reduced to mere constituent parts—in effect, leadership becomes relational and performative (see, generally, Bucher, 2018, p. 50). Leadership is based on performance in both senses of the word: both as an act of staging a show, a play, or any other type of entertainment and as an action of carrying out a given function. It is performative in the latter sense because such leadership is a constant process of pulling publics together and directing them and performative in the former sense as necessarily based on staged entertainment that attracts and retains attention in a highly competitive and attention-scarce environment. This is why leaders beyond institutional confines and not fitting the prevalent mould (i.e. so-called ‘anti-systemic’ leaders) tend to perform well: they can perform a personally connective function while automatically standing out by almost by definition performing against the grain.

The focus on leadership as performance within diverse agglomerations both builds upon and reframes the arguments of the alleged leaderlessness of contemporary political action, the connective dimension of leadership activity, and datafication and algorithmisation of mobilisation. The agglomerated (and agglomerative) performance focus integrates these perspectives to give a more balanced account of factors both hindering and enabling leadership in today’s world. Nevertheless, the key takeaway should be the dissolution of agency of both the aspiring leaders and the audiences within the broader agglomerations that are, fundamentally, more-than-human. Hence, leadership in a digital age is truly a qualitatively new phenomenon that cannot be fully pinned to persons engaging in leadership-focused performance. As a result, such a shift of agency should also imply a necessity to rethink the broader concepts of politics and public action as well as of group dynamics within any entity – these should be the focus of future research.

7. Conclusion

Leadership has undergone significant change in the face of digitisation. First, it might seem to have been dislodged from its privileged position by the connective empowerment of ordinary individuals that can mobilise bypassing traditional movements, parties, and other entities. Simultaneously, though, the connective work of aspiring leaders has been simplified by the availability of data and their algorithmic analysis which offer ways to understand the target audience in great detail and refine audience-specific campaigns that individuals are simply bound to fall for. Meanwhile, both digital empowerment and the ever-growing expectation that any communicators will tailor and target their messages in increasingly granular detail have triggered the formation of a me-centric attitude of audiences, necessitating intuitive affective mobilisation. Hence, leadership becomes non-stop performance in which aspiring leaders constantly compete to audience attention. Finally, there is the issue of agency: as the proper domain of analysis becomes agglomerations composed of human and non-human actors, including algorithms, it is unclear which element is the active mover. The answer is that they all are, in their own distinct ways that come together within the performance of leadership.

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