

Local political leadership: from managerial performances to leaders-hip hop on social media?

Local political
leadership

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Alessandro Sancino

*Department of Public Leadership and Social Enterprise, The Open University,
Milton Keynes, UK and
Department of Business and Law, University of Milan–Bicocca, Milan, Italy*

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper discusses the evolution of leadership practices performed by local political leaders in the last decade (2009–2019, a period which we might call post-global financial crisis and pre-COVID-19). It offers some new theoretical concepts to make sense of emerging contemporary public leadership practices, namely: leaders-hip hop; charismatic followership; and digital fabrication of charisma (digital charisma).

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on a single case study, and it relies on qualitative data coming from multiple sources and collected at different points of time, specifically interviews, participant and non-participant observations from an ethnography conducted in 2009; interviews conducted between 2019 and 2020, and an analysis of the posts made within one Facebook group between February and May 2016.

Findings – The paper focuses on three stories of local political leadership at three different points in time which describe three leadership practices: political managerialism; charismatic followership; and hands-on relational leadership. It highlights the importance of hands-on relational leadership through popular acts of leadership which are performed face to face and/or on social media and the shift in the dominant technologies of local political leadership from the logic of managerialism toward the logic of social media.

Research limitations/implications – The paper is focused on a limited temporal (2009–2019) and sociocultural context (North Italy). Findings are presented as three stories, although other ways of showing qualitative data could have been used.

Practical implications – Practical implications deal with the attempt to enable a reflexive view of local governance and public leadership attentive to soft and sociocultural variables. It is important to consider these implications for the purposes of training and learning.

Originality/value – The paper introduces new concepts to understand contemporary public leadership practices; it combines insights from a decentered theory of governance and collective theories of leadership; and it makes use of storytelling as a method for analyzing and reporting the findings.

Keywords Social media, Leadership, Italy, Local government, Managerialism, Followership

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Leadership is a phenomenon that evolves over different time spans (Dinh *et al.*, 2014). Based on this assumption, in this paper I try to offer an account of the evolution of practices performed by local political leaders in the last decade (2009–2019, a period which might be called post-global financial crisis and pre-COVID-19). Specifically, I focus on leadership practices implemented in pursuit of the institutional role of local political leaders. By institutional role I refer to “the social interpretation of the actual daily working function” [1] (Sundgaard Andersen *et al.*, 1999, p. 10). This concept should be distinguished from the



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formal role (what is written in constitutions and regulations) and the inner role (each leader own perception of a given role).

The main research question that lies behind this paper is the following: how have the leadership practices of local political leaders evolved in the last decade? At a moment when profound technological and socio-cultural changes are impacting democracy (e.g., [Bloom and Sancino, 2019](#)), I believe it is essential to understand the evolving institutional role performed by some of the most important figures of democracy, namely (local) politicians.

In this respect, while acknowledging the cultural polyphony and the multiple practices of local political leadership ([Orr and Vince, 2009](#)), the argument that this paper makes is that there has been a fundamental shift in the dominant technologies of local political leadership from the logic of managerialism towards the logic of social media, with implications as to where the sources of influencing power reside and their related technologies.

This is what I refer to in the title as “from managerial performances to leaders-hip (hop) on social media.” By managerial performances I mean local politicians who exercise leadership and enact followership by acting and talking in a managerial way in the different theatres of local politics, from the city hall to local assemblies with citizens. The word leaders-hip takes inspiration from the work of [Grint \(2005\)](#) who played with the words within leadership by putting an ideal dash between leader and ship to make the point – among others – that we need to understand the ship (i.e., purposes, processes, places and performance, see for example [Jackson and Parry, 2018](#)) of leadership and not only the leader (person) and her/his position. Drawing from empirical observations and reflexive personal reasoning, in this study I place the focus on leaders-hip to illustrate two things: first a leader is one because of the interactions and relations with other leaders (and followers) who legitimize her/him (or not), as in the plural/collective (e.g., [Cristofoli et al., 2020](#); [Denis et al., 2012](#)) and socially networked views of leadership (e.g. [Balkundi and Kilduff, 2006](#)). Second, practices of public leadership ([Hartley, 2018](#)) are now increasingly characterized by an artistic, aesthetic and popular political attitude, something I refer to as the “hip” of leadership. Given the focus on the hip of leadership a link with the musical practices of hip-hop [2] emerges and that is why I added the word “hop” to leaders-hip. I discuss these concepts later in the paper.

From a theoretical point of view, the paper builds on the work of traditions in local government practices of Kevin Orr (e.g., [Nicholson and Orr, 2016](#); [Orr, 2005](#)), using an interpretive and reflexive approach to storytelling which is inspired by the work of [Bevir and Rhodes \(2004\)](#) and [Alvesson \(e.g., Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018\)](#). The paper attempts to contribute both to theory and practice. In terms of theory, I offer the concepts of leaders-hip hop and later in the paper of “charismatic followership” to understand and make sense of emerging contemporary public leadership practices. In terms of practice, the paper sheds light on some leadership practices through which local political leaders legitimize and nurture their position of leadership in a given temporal and socio-cultural context. Specifically, the paper highlights the increasing importance of social media and digital leadership (e.g., [Gilani et al., 2020](#); [Gustafsson and Weinryb, 2020](#)). Following [Orr and Vince \(2009\)](#), the managerial implications of this study deal with encouraging and enabling “researchers and practitioners to have a reflexive view of local circumstances . . . [to] help diagnose the ‘softer’ contextual variables in these organizations” ([Orr and Vince, 2009](#), p. 656).

The paper is structured as follows. The second section provides the theoretical backdrop. The third section provides information about the methodology of the research. Findings are presented in the fourth section in the form of three stories of local political leadership, which are discussed in the fifth section. Preliminary conclusions and perspectives for future research are discussed in the sixth and last section.

2. Understanding leadership practices: the importance of relationality and traditions

According to [Alvesson \(2017, p. 67\)](#), “leadership is about a relation and a set of interactions involving people in an asymmetrical relation in a social (organizational) context, where, although there is mutual influencing, one part (‘the leader’) is supposed to have a more far-reaching and goal-directed impact than others (the ‘followers’).” This definition emphasizes the importance of the concept of relationality in order to understand leadership, in line with relational leadership theory ([Uhl-Bien 2006; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012](#)) and, more broadly, with collective leadership theories and approaches (e.g. [Ospina et al., 2020](#)). As [Carroll et al. \(2008, p. 366\)](#) have highlighted, “relationality represents the commitment to understanding individuals or collectives not as separate, isolated or discreet entities but as a ‘field of relationships’ ([Cooper, 2005, p. 1693](#)) or ‘bundles of practices’ ([Schatzki, 2005, p. 12](#)).”

According to [Ospina and Foldy \(2010, p. 293\)](#), “relationality refers to the theoretical understanding that self and other are inseparable and co-evolve in ways that must be accounted for.” Therefore, the source of leadership is “one level up from the individual or the relationship, at the system of relationships” ([Ospina, 2017, p. 281](#)).

A relational perspective to leadership practices is relevant because “meaning-making processes associated with leadership also become visible as practices—recurrent ways of doing things that group members experience as good solutions to their attempts at organizing” ([Ospina, 2017, p. 281](#)). In this paper, I use this definition of leadership practices provided by Ospina. From a relational perspective, it is important to note that leadership practices are intrinsically non-individualistic phenomena as they are performed in relation to some people, contexts, situations, and purposes. Accordingly, it is by investigating the relational (un)intentions of these practices and their effects on who, where, what and why is following that we could get a better understanding on the situated meaning(s) of leadership.

The focus on practices is shared by another important theory, which is the decentered theory of governance proposed by [Bevir \(2013\)](#). With a decentered approach, governance could be understood as a vast array of meaningful actions as they coalesce into contingent, shifting and contestable practices. Within this perspective, governance practices can be seen as situated and dispersed agency which is in a relational tension between historical and conceptual traditions and dilemmas of action generated by contextual and contingent features, including cultural, material, organizational and relational dynamics among people. According to [Carroll et al. \(2008\)](#), the notion of practice is particularly important for “its attentiveness to leadership as discourse, identity and modus operandi” (p. 376). Practices are indeed underpinned by narratives resembling both how actors socialize multiple competing governmental traditions and how they respond to dilemmas ([Bevir et al., 2003](#)).

On this, Bevir and Rhodes argued:

people can engage in a practice only because they hold certain beliefs, and that interpretive approaches can help researchers to illuminate how the *beliefs* and *actions* of individuals are shaped by, and in turn shape the social contexts that may be evoked by particular “aggregate concepts” such as traditions or ideologies ([Bevir and Rhodes 2004, p. 131, our italics](#))

The concept of “traditions” is important in order to explore the relationship between *beliefs* and *actions*. Kevin Orr studied traditions in local government organizations by drawing from Bevir and Rhodes who defined them as “a set of connected beliefs and habits that intentionally or unintentionally passed from generation to generation at some point in the past” (2003, p. 34 cited in [Orr and Vince, 2009](#)). As [Orr and Vince \(2009, p. 656\)](#) explained, “traditions can be used in the study and evaluation of political and managerial practices in local government settings. They provide lenses through which the routines, structures and processes of management and politics may be viewed.”

Thus, issues of context, culture, place and power which are blended in traditions are fundamental for the analysis of the beliefs behind social, managerial, and political practices (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003), where realities are “multiple, local-historical constructions” (Van Der Haar and Hosking, 2004, p. 1020).

Summing up, the collective leadership theories and the decentered theory of governance share a relational ontology which decenters leadership from an individual perspective of the leader and governance from the institutionalist perspective of the state (e.g., Bevir, 2020), toward a conception that emphasizes relationality (Sutherland *et al.*, 2014, p. 763), and interactions and practices (Crevani *et al.*, 2010) which take place in a socio-cultural and temporal context characterized by multiple and potentially competing traditions which may originate dilemmas in and for action.

These perspectives help to shed light on the plurality and dispersed nature of the social processes of leadership and governance (e.g., Denis *et al.*, 2012), where leadership practices are enacted because they are perceived and legitimated as such by others in a given temporal, social, and cultural context. This approach has been pursued by other prominent scholars in the field of public administration by researching the working characteristics and the reasoning behind the professional practices of politicians and managers (e.g., Nalbandian, 1994; Rhodes, 2005). In particular, these scholars have emphasized the implications of taking this interpretive and reflexive approach on the types of research methodologies and methods to be used, pointing to the importance of using longitudinal, immersive, and field types of enquiry (on this, see, for example, Sutherland, 2018), a research strategy that I employed for this study and which is outlined in the next paragraph.

3. Methodology

This research is a longitudinal and reflexive analysis of the evolution of the practices performed by local political leaders in the pursuit of their institutional role in the last decade (2009–2019, post-global financial crisis, pre-COVID-19). The paper is based on a single case study and it relies on qualitative data drawn from multiple sources and collected at different points in time, namely: interviews, participant and non-participant observations [3] from an ethnography conducted in 2009; interviews conducted between 2019 and 2020, and an analysis of the posts made within one Facebook group [4] between February and May 2016, akin to a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2015). Data have also been triangulated by consulting other sources (e.g. institutional documents of the municipality, newsletters, local magazines, and local newspapers).

The empirical context of the research is an Italian local authority in North Italy where I had privileged access because of having held local political leadership positions in the region where the municipality is located. Both Copus (2003) and Gains (2011) welcomed this privileged access to the site of the research.

To protect the anonymity of research participants, the local authority has been referred to as Cheese-Town and pseudonyms have been used when research participants have been named. Cheese-Town is a post-industrial center in the north-west of Italy; in terms of size, it has between 15,000 and 100,000 inhabitants. More information on the main features of the Italian local government sector is offered in Box 1.

The units of analysis for our study were the leadership practices of local political leaders who held local political leadership positions during the period between 2009 and 2019 in the municipality which was the empirical setting of the research. Specifically, I focus on the institutional role of executive local political leaders who are members of the cabinet or councilors in charge of executive tasks.

To analyze the data, I took a reflexive approach to qualitative and interpretive research (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2018). Specifically embracing a hermeneutics stance

Box 1. “Some notes on local government system in Italy”

Italy is organized into four levels of government: central government, twenty regions (*Regioni*), namely the intermediate sub-national governments which have strong legislative powers, provinces and metropolitan cities (*Province e Citta' Metropolitane*), and municipalities (*Comuni*). In this configuration, provinces and metropolitan cities (overall, about 110 in total) and municipalities (slightly less than 8,000) make up Italy's two-layer local government system. Each municipality has a *directly elected* mayor, an executive cabinet, a city council, and an administrative body, plus – depending on the size – it might have several municipal bodies (e.g., foundations or agencies) and/or corporations to provide public services. The mayor is the head of the executive branch and is elected directly by the citizens (as are the city councilors) and appoints the members of the cabinet (*Assessori*), who are not necessarily elected by the citizens in municipalities of over 15,000 inhabitants (see on this for example [Sancino and Castellani, 2016](#)).

([Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2018](#)), I used an abductive process and thematic narrative analysis ([Czarniawska, 2004](#)). Some of the ideas contained in this paper have accompanied my personal reasoning and reflection in the last years resulting in the writing of several memos which have been presented to academic colleagues (peer-debriefing) and local politicians beyond the context of Cheese-Town (external check). To accompany this process of reflexive analysis of the qualitative material, I have also employed an iterative – but hierarchical – order of coding to help organize the main themes emerging from the empirical material. As an example, a representation of the coding exercise is offered in [Table 1](#). Coding has been pursued manually following a mix of deductive and inductive codings ([Cappellaro, 2017](#)).

To present the data, I try to follow [Orr and Bennett \(2017\)](#) by using a story-telling method which is informed by an event-centered narrative and an interpretative approach, where, as in the words of [Pors \(2020\)](#) also in this special issue, “[data] is constructed and interpreted in particular manners as part of the complex encounter between researcher and field.” Stories are particularly appropriate in interpretive approaches for offering a decentered account

A representation of the interpretive coding process	Third order codes and themes	Second order codes and themes	Examples of first order codes and themes (selection)
Story 1 Good leadership is good management	Political Managerialism	(1) Accountability (2) Citizen participation (3) Public Innovation (4) Public governance (5) Politics and administration	Social reporting; managerial practices; consultants; innovations; appointments; spoil system; openness; public meetings; participation; inter-governmental relations
Story 2 Facebook changed our lives	Charismatic Followership	(1) Civil society (2) Digital citizen participation (3) Charismatic leadership (4) Populism	De-politicization; anti-government; citizen voice; Facebook; social networks; trust; discontent; mayor; bureaucrats; power
Story 3 Shaking hands at the pub and getting “likes” on Facebook	Hands-on Relational Leadership	(1) Emotions and empathy (2) Social networks (3) Relational leadership	Digital leadership; place; charisma; social status; political parties; social networks; friendship; organizational politics

Source(s): Own elaboration

Table 1.
Analysis of the qualitative data: from first order codes to stories

(Durose, 2009) and to make sense of different contexts. Of course, they have limits because – as Sullivan argued – “as constructions, they are partial and subject to challenge, so different and competing narratives can operate in relation to the same set of events” (Sullivan 2007, p. 144).

4. Findings

4.1 Story no. 1 – *Good political leadership is good management (2009)*

4.1.1 *Premise.* This story is about the permeation of the neoliberal discourse [5] of managerialism (e.g., Bloom and Rhodes, 2018) into micro-behaviors and languages used by local political leaders. A necessary backdrop to understanding this story is a consideration of the institutional structure of local authorities in Italy which gives a key role to executive political leaders (see Box 1). They oversee a policy area and work as *Assessore* (members of a cabinet) appointed by the mayor. This work in Cheese-Town is a part-time job with a decent salary.

End of the premise

4.1.2 *Story.* When you speak to executive political leaders in Cheese-Town, it is all about good management and public sector innovation. For example, while discussing local government with the member of the cabinet in charge of economic affairs, he speaks with me very proudly of having introduced managerial innovations to the local authority, such as the “Social Report.”

We had recently won the elections and, as the leadership of the council changed, we had to stand out and *change managerial processes*. I took my role as *Assessore* responsible for finance very seriously and started doing some research. I found this initiative for introducing a Social Report very interesting and discussed it with the Mayor, who immediately approved the idea. (our underscore)

The same applied for a very different character in Cheese-Town, Mrs. Caliente, a strongly passionate and popular local political leader, who spoke with me about the idea to engage citizens and stakeholders to support the design for the new urban plan as the best achievement in her political term:

Regional law suggests doing participation forums, but we planned the participation process independently, expanding it considerably. All went well and we [the politicians and appointed consultants] *managed* citizen participation forums very well. (Our underscore)

The third character of this story is the deputy Mayor who is responsible for cultural and sport policies. He created local *quangos* in the name of good management, but also to appoint experts in his political network as managers of these *quangos*. Below are the words he used to justify his choice of the creation of a local *quango* (a foundation) to manage the local theatre:

There are some theatres that work very well near here and I noticed that they were run by council-owned foundations. *I prepared a kind of business plan* and I realized that it could work. There is nobody in the municipality who has worked with theatres, and it is reasonable to create a new structure to do a new thing. (Our underscore)

4.1.3 *Moral.* This story includes excerpts about some “key events” that happened in Cheese-Town. In conducting my ethnographic research in 2009, I was impressed by how the local political leaders whom I have spoken with were all using a managerial vocabulary and referring to public sector managerial innovations to legitimize what was done during their administrative term. This was part of a broader trend at that time in Italian local government politics to bring in professionals to replace a cadre of local politicians perceived to be as inefficient, and of an even bigger international ideology characterized by the adoption of New Public Management ideas, which arrived in Italy in the 1990s. The moral of this story is that local political leaders were supposed to be custodians and agents of democratic wishes expressed by citizens. However, almost all of the main democratic appeals which animated

the electoral campaign in Cheese-Town disappeared after the elections. Local political leaders were talking and acting as managers. However, if the local political leaders had become like managers, who then performed the role and institutional tasks of local politicians?

4.2 Story no. 2 – Facebook changed our lives (2014–2016)

4.2.1 *Premise.* This story is about how social networks changed the dynamics of political leadership and public administration. Given the historical moment of the story please consider it in the context of austerity and cuts in funding from central government, and their effects on public services which Italian local authorities experienced.

End of the premise

4.2.2 *Story.* In 2014, a group of Cheese-Town citizens started a new virtual social group on Facebook. The aim was to be the official group for collecting all the information and news related to Cheese-Town. The group was a success and in less than one year a third of the adult population living in Cheese-Town was part of it. However, nobody could have realized that virtual group would lead to the resignation of the Mayor. In 2015, several citizens started to post queries on the group about public administration issues, such as public works for example. Many people also complained about rising unemployment and the fact that many local firms were closing down (issues which were technically beyond the scope of the local authority). I spoke informally with a young local political leader whom I had known since I was young and who had executive responsibilities in education and social care at that time. He described that period as:

All the negative energy present in our community was channeled into that group. All of the people posting something were blaming the Mayor for not doing this and that.

Another local political leader whom I interviewed described the personal dynamics of having to deal with that group and more generally with Facebook:

You make a post out there and then wait compulsively for likes and comments. You are in an important meeting, but you cannot resist checking your i-phone to look at what is happening below your post.

In another interview, conducted while we were getting a coffee together in the local bar located just in front of the town hall, a public manager in charge of public works was speaking about the member of the cabinet (*Assessore*) he was working with, and in a moment of quiet he broke the silence by telling me:

No doubt. Facebook has changed our lives.

I asked how.

You go to sleep thinking about groups of citizens blaming you on Facebook. You wake up and see what it is going on Facebook to see if everything is ok/

Then, I enter the office and my plans change because the Assessore saw something on Facebook and asks me to go and sort that out.

The Mayor was not immune from the temptation to go on Facebook to post something in the “Cheese-Town Facebook official group.” All political leaders want likes. However, it was actually an high risk exercise which spurred opposite effects. Criticism on Facebook rose at the end of 2015 and at the beginning of 2016; what was supposed to be just a social group became full of political comments opposing the Mayor and the local authority. One of the most popular posts was the one below which adopted an angry and direct tone toward the Mayor:

Make yourself available to the citizens, accept and listen to the criticisms and the proposal and above all GIVE THE REPLIES concretely, looking at us. . . (Post on Facebook, February 25, 2016).

Due to the high activism of people with time to spend criticizing the local administration on Facebook, the discontent spread and was so extensive and widespread that the Mayor decided to resign. However, in Cheese-Town many silent followers watching what was going on in this group are now regretful of what happened. Nevertheless, they were silent on Facebook while they were passively watching others blame the Mayor.

4.2.3 Moral. This story is centered around real-life events and documents how social media became a central arena for local politics to such a point that some local political leaders of Cheese-Town commented that there was more political debate during the day on Facebook than in city council meetings held in the late afternoons and evenings. However, Facebook might appear to make things more transparent, but it also created distortions of local opinions [6]. Using the words of Gabriel (2005), it may seem to be a glass palace, but it is actually a glass cage, where being visible in the public sphere influences the type and contents of leadership practice. For example, the possibility of tracking citizens preferences can result in fabricating types of leadership according to specific tastes and preferences, the so called “wall effect” where you see on social media only what you want to see according to your previous behaviors. Thus, there is a risk, as Gabriel wrote prophetically fifteen years ago, that “today’s organizations resort to far subtler, yet deeper, controls, controls that are pervasive and invasive, that do not merely constrain a person but define a person” (Gabriel, 2005, p. 17). These may include cultural and ideological controls, continuous measurement, electronic surveillance, and so on. Social media have undoubtedly had great impacts on politicians, managers, and citizens both in terms of what people do and where the influencing power resides. However, what are the democratic implications of this?

4.3 Story no. 3 – Shaking hands at the pub and getting likes on Facebook (2017–2019)

In Cheese-Town it was time to decide who was going to run as a mayoral candidate. The decision was quite important as the most important local political party in Cheese-Town was pretty sure to win the election. There were several potential leaders suitable for the job, but at the end Mr. Bag was chosen. All the key local political leaders of Mr. Bag’s party that I spoke with agreed on the reasons, which were threefold. First, because he was supported by other relevant leaders within Cheese-Town; in other words, he was well positioned in the network of relevant local leaders. He had good relationships with everybody. Second, because he used to attend local pubs and cafes and shook hands with people attending them. Third, he had a good reputation on the web too. He was used to interacting quite a lot with other citizens of Cheese-Town on Facebook, by liking their posts and sending them good wishes and congratulations for their achievements shared on Facebook.

4.3.1 Moral. This is another story centered on a real-life event that happened in Cheese-Town. In the first instance, my analysis of this story pointed me to the notion of charisma. In the end, charisma could explain why Mr. Bag was chosen. However, a more careful analysis of the leadership practices performed by Mr. Bag suggested a connection with the practice of hands-on relational leadership which is described in Ayres (2019). According to Sarah Ayres, hands-on relational leadership brings the leader into closer contact with network participants based on face-to-face inter-personal connections, something which I refer to as “shaking hands at the pub.” Another concept emerged as important after discussing this story in an academic presentation at the International Studying Leadership Conference held in Bristol in 2019. This is the concept of digital charisma. By digital charisma I refer more precisely to the digital fabrication of charisma, which is the professional management in the digital sphere of the charisma of the leader(s) which is created in an automated and/or professional way (for

example through managed hands-on relational leadership by Facebook “liking” and writing birthday wishes, making positive replies to other comments, writing messages that connect with the popular mood of the moment on topical events according to analyses of the web sentiment, and so on). All these activities could be interpreted as digital hands-on relational leadership. Summing up, this story seems to point to the importance of exercising charisma through hands-on relational leadership (see on this for example [Antonakis et al., 2012](#)). However, we now also have digital charisma.

5. Discussion

In this paper I took as focus for analysis a positional view of local political leadership (on the six lenses of leadership see [Jackson and Parry, 2018](#)), but I studied it through a relational ontology and using a longitudinal research strategy, investigating leadership practices enacted in a given temporal and socio-cultural context (2009–2019 in North Italy). The idea was to understand the leadership practices that were implemented by executive local political leaders and perceived by other local leaders and followers as creating and legitimizing their local political leadership role. The findings shed light on one fundamental pattern of change and on one pattern of persistence. The change refers to the disruptive impact of social media which has turned political managerialism into what I call charismatic followership. Political managerialism (e.g., [Seal and Ball, 2005](#)) refers to practices where local political leaders talk about managerial issues to conform with the discourse of managerialism (e.g., [Parker, 2002](#)), but still with a very fundamental political aim – often pursued in a hidden, deviant, or deliberately ignorant way (see also [Teasdale and Dey, 2019](#)) – of increasing their political consensus and interests. This was clearly epitomized in the three characters of the first story who were all making sense of their political role by narrating how they successfully implemented what were perceived at that time to be public sector managerial innovations, namely a social report, a new urban plan, and a local quango. These situated accounts match with a broader trend of managerialization in Italian local politics. In other words, 10 years ago in North Italy, local political leaders were considered as such because of their highly regarded professional credentials and because they were acting and talking as a manager able to save the local authority from public sector inefficiencies. Clearly, these situated accounts powerfully touch on many important topics within the field of public administration, such as the blurring of relationships between politicians and managers in local government, for example (e.g., [Sancino et al., 2018](#); [Svara, 1999](#)), and the role of politicians in public innovation ([Hartley et al., 2013](#); [Sørensen and Torfing, 2019](#)).

However, according to the longitudinal analysis conducted, “political managerialism” has now evolved from the management of the local authority with a language characterized by issues such as innovation, efficiency and effectiveness toward the management of citizens’ emotions on social media. We introduce the concept of “charismatic followership” here to explain this evolving follower-driven leadership practice. Specifically, charismatic followership refers to practices of local political leadership characterized by the deployment of an emotional language to please and appeal to followers; this term also denotes how the most active and vocal followers can influence the type of leadership enacted by local political leaders. In other words, being able to communicate effectively on social networks today, rather than expressing a managerial orientation and using a managerial vocabulary, is perceived by other leaders (e.g., city councilors and public managers) and/or followers (e.g., citizens) as well as by the local political leaders themselves, as a more important technology of leadership. However, as described by [Kellerman \(2008\)](#), this leadership is actually very often a followership, where languages and contents are co-produced by leaders and followers with a shift of power from the leader toward the followers with “potentially tilting information asymmetries in favour of the follower” ([Gilani et al., 2020](#), p. 343).

Some of these dynamics are present in the second and third story, which describe a paradigmatic shift both in what local political leaders do (spending time on social networks) and in what was driving their actions and words (the logic of social media). The discourse of local political leaders has thus evolved from a technocratic stance infused with a managerial vocabulary toward a populist stance infused with emotional underpinnings. The links between charisma, populism, and leadership on social media were also noticed by [Gustafsson and Weinryb \(2020\)](#) who highlighted that “this self-infatuated imperative to show, tell, and cheer engagement online may be labeled as charismatic: its individuality entails the boom and bust cycle of digital enthusiasm ([Gerbaudo, 2016](#)), and it peddles populist beliefs in the power of the individual in opposition to the elite” ([Gustafsson and Weinryb, 2020](#), p. 434).

On this issue [Gilani et al. \(2020\)](#) have pointed out that “the social media context raises important questions about power dynamics that leaders cannot exist without followers, but that followers can co-create their leaders, sometimes with nurturing, sometimes with toxifying effects” ([Gilani et al., 2020](#), p. 345). According again to [Gustafsson and Weinryb \(2020, p. 432\)](#), “social media platforms to organize mass action contributes to a networked individualism driven by an emotional vocabulary, which promotes populism, and potentially undermines the legitimacy of the bureaucratic organizational structures that uphold liberal democracies.”

As anticipated above, findings also shed light on patterns of persistence in the practices of local political leaders. Here, I refer to the centrality of the ties and relationships of the local leaders (e.g., [Ayres, 2019](#)). The third story presented above highlights the importance of personal contact between the leaders and their ties (something described as “hands-on meta-governance” by [Ayres \(2019\)](#)) and of performing charismatic and popular acts of leadership. Working with the components of the word leadership and using the metaphor of performers of hip-hop music, as [Grint \(2005\)](#) emphasized the role of ship in leadership, I point to the role of hip – intended as artistic and popular acts of leadership – enacted by the leader within their patterns of relationships (the leaders in leaders-hip). Thus, going to the pub and shaking hands, sharing messages and videos on social networks, participating in and convening informal meetings with key actors, keeping close contacts through intense communications with other key leaders, and persistently walking in the piazzas greeting people, these were all acts of leaders-hip hop that constructed the institutional role of the most successful local political leaders in Cheese-Town.

6. Concluding remarks

Local political leadership is a field of study which investigates the behaviors, roles, and contexts (institutional, organizational, and social) in which local politicians exercise their leadership role (e.g., [Lowndes and Leach, 2004](#); [Stoker, 2003](#); [Torfing et al., 2019](#)). This field of study can be considered as relatively new and emerging, given the recent trends of reforms which assigned a more relevant role to local governments in and across regions, nations, and countries (e.g., [Beer et al., 2019](#); [Budd and Sancino, 2016](#); [Hambleton, 2014](#); [Heinelt et al., 2018](#); [Sancino and Hudson, 2020](#)).

This paper adopts an interpretive and reflexive approach and connects with other similar studies of local political leadership that try to enhance our cultural, social, and organizational understanding of the evolving role of local politicians in contemporary democratic governance and in society overall (e.g. [Karsten and Hendriks, 2017](#); [Magnier, 2004](#); [Sørensen, 2006, 2020](#); [Sweeting, 2002](#)). The study highlights the changing social technologies of leadership, and points to the increasing (but at the same time problematic) role of social media logic.

The paper focuses on three stories of local political leadership at three different points of time describing three specific leadership practices: political managerialism, charismatic followership and hands-on relational leadership. A pattern of persistence as well as a pattern of change

emerges from the analysis. Persistence refers to the importance of hands-on relational leadership through popular acts of leadership, performed face to face and/or on social media. Change refers to a fundamental shift in the dominant technologies of local political leadership from the logic of managerialism toward the logic of social media. Drawing from [Orr and Vince \(2009\)](#) I argue that social media logic is a new tradition in local government practices.

This paper comes with several limitations: it is focused on a limited temporal (2009–2019) and socio-cultural context (North Italy). The findings are presented as three stories, whereas other ways of showing qualitative data could have been used. Moreover, this study was conducted in the empirical context of a small to medium size city; this is a limitation as big cities might have different social dynamics of leadership even in the same temporal and socio-cultural context.

As a final note I would like to share some reflections on ways forward for studying, researching, and developing public leadership (see also [Crosby and Bryson, 2018](#)). Being invited to, and participating at, the Berkeley Workshop on “Decentering Local Leadership” was an eye-opener event for me. As it was accompanied by the legitimate possibility of using storytelling as a method for studying, researching, developing and disseminating public leadership knowledge, this gave me the opportunity to make better sense of several empirical research and professional experiences that I have had in local government politics in Italy.

In writing this paper I have tried to create an ideal bridge between the works on storytelling in public administration and governance (e.g. [Bevir, 2011](#); [Orr and Bennet, 2017](#)) and on collective and critical leadership studies (e.g., [Alvesson and Spicer, 2012](#); [Collinson, 2011](#); [Ospina et al., 2020](#)). It seems to me there is and/or could be a strong possibility for cross-fertilization by interpretive and critical approaches, the latter being mentioned here to better understand the political, sociocultural and power-related dimensions which are inherently embedded in the practices of leadership in its situated temporal and material settings. In my view, the use of stories of situated accounts of leadership and governance is a great common terrain where the interpretive can meet and link with the critical, which in some ways is my take on the tension among beliefs, actions, and traditions and ideologies described by Bevir.

However, I wonder how what has been for me an eye-opening experience can be shared with other scholars to further develop an academically sound and reliable use of storytelling, which – from a knowledge transfer and dissemination perspective – could also potentially and usefully contribute to building an archive of evolving public administration and leadership practices. In this respect, I believe there could be more attention and a collective effort to developing shared research protocols for using storytelling as a method and epistemology for investigating and explaining practices of leadership and governance. For example, there are issues about who should contribute to writing these stories and about how different morals of stories on a similar topic relate to each other, calling into questions on the one hand new ways of generating knowledge based on a closer collaboration between scholars and communities of practice, and on the other hand issues related to enabling and fostering more reflexivity, debate, and comparison among scholars, especially those located in different cultural contexts. The notion of the moral of a story seems to me particularly powerful for co-producing generalizable knowledge relevant across contexts and times, as well as being very important for training, debate, and learning purposes.

I genuinely hope that this special issue can represent the first of a renewed endeavor of a broader movement aimed at using storytelling in leadership and governance studies to advance social science research, teaching, development and dissemination within and across different communities.

Notes

1. “A role represents the construction of a standardized form of action – of that which is done, the means by which it is done, and the actor who is responsible for the action in question. The role has an

internal and an external side. The external side is the socially institutionalized interpretation of a role's context and its substance. The role is the basis for institutionalization. The sustainability of an institution depends upon the actors fulfilling their roles." (Sundgaard Andersen *et al.*, 1999, p. 9).

2. Drawing from several definitions reported in the Cambridge Dictionary, hip-hop can be defined as a type of popular African-American music and dance, with songs about politics and society using words that are spoken rather than sung, and often performed by a group of people (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).
3. Participant observations consisted of meetings with other local political leaders, and with public managers. Non-participant observations consisted of formal (e.g. public hearings with citizens) and informal meetings held in different locations (from the local authority to cafés and pubs).
4. This analysis was done as a result of the interviews conducted in the second round, which highlighted the importance of the Facebook group to understand changing local political leadership practices. Unexpected opportunities are typical and part of good qualitative research (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019).
5. Discourses can be defined as "ideas and practices which condition our ways or relating to, and acting upon, particular phenomena" (Knights and Morgan, 1991, p. 253).
6. I am indebted to one of the reviewers for this point.

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Corresponding author

Alessandro Sancino can be contacted at: alessandro.sancino@open.ac.uk

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