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From Technocracy to political voice

A rhetorical analysis of Zuckerberg's Meta ideology

FROM TECHNOCRACY TO POLITICAL VOICE. A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF ZUCKERBERG'S META IDEOLOGY

This article examines the politicisation of Mark Zuckerberg's «Policy Reset» speech, analysing how META's policy changes are publicly legitimised through rhetorical strategies. Combining Rhetorical Political Analysis and Critical Metaphor Analysis, the study reveals that the speech functions as a political intervention, employing narrative, metaphorical, and argumentative devices similar to those used in US institutional political communication. The analysis identifies the reframing of platform governance as a moral struggle, the construction of an antagonistic framework, and the strategic combination of politicisation and depoliticisation as key communicative mechanisms. The study highlights the increasing discursive production of ideological agency by platform leaders and the blurring boundaries between corporate and political communication. It suggests for the inclusion of platform leaders' discourse in the analysis of contemporary political actors and emphasises the importance of studying platforms' construction of symbolic authority and moral legitimacy. It concludes by emphasising the normative implications of depoliticising platform governance and the importance of political control over digital infrastructure in democratic societies.

KEYWORDS *Rhetorical Political Analysis, Critical Metaphor Analysis, Platform, Ideology, Media Society, Meta.*

1. Introduction

Social media are today the main platform for public debate and political discussion. They have grown from mere technological tools to real political actors that shape visibility, participation and democratic communication (Benkler *et al.* 2019). This role strengthens as these services become more widely used, especially during elections. The centrality acquired in the democratic model entails costs and the need to structure corporate strategies: keeping the

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algorithm functional for political content to users; avoiding or justifying accusations of bias and collusion; maintaining standards of freedom of speech. Platform owners today need to be more than mere managers of communication spaces; they must evolve into genuine political actors who can justify their role and claim legitimacy for their actions through their own narrative. This observation now seems obvious if we consider that, according to recent studies, the power of the platform is no longer infrastructural, but increasingly ideological, as platform leaders *interpret or defend* some values in the social or political sphere (Plantin and Punathambekar 2019; van Dijck *et al.* 2018).

Political communication scholarship has accordingly begun to incorporate the mechanisms of platform legitimisation and to examine the growing political visibility of platform leaders and owners. Elon Musk's acquisition and transformation of Twitter into X, his position towards Donald Trump, and his subsequent brief participation in the government have been interpreted as a paradigmatic moment in which a business leader explicitly entered the political arena. Musk behaved like a conventional political leader, shaping the discourse on X's role about free speech, democracy and social future (Broersma, 2023). They no longer confine themselves to technical justifications but increasingly adopt the repertoires of political communication, articulating explicit positions on democracy's quality, national identity, legitimacy and cultural conflict (Creech and Maddox 2024). While the mere political acts and contents of platform owners are now well-documented, less attention has been paid to how the politicisation process takes place: there is a lack of research on the ideological discourse of platform owners and its contents. Research has concentrated on policies, governance structures, and regulation, whereas the rhetorical construction of political legitimacy by platform owners remains comparatively unexplored. This article addresses this emerging field by examining whether and how the discourse of platform owners becomes politicised, to determine the source of the legitimacy invoked for the adoption of new policies. The study asks whether and how platform leaders pursue going-public strategies and, if so, what they mobilise strategic narratives and appeals explicitly connected to a nation's politics.

This paper focuses on Mark Zuckerberg, a figure increasingly involved in explicitly political controversies and in public negotiations over platform governance. The analysis examines the «Policy Reset» speech delivered on 7 January 2025, streamed live to millions of Meta users in the days preceding Donald Trump's second presidency and regarded here as a paradigmatic case of platform-owner communication. Although presented as a technical policy update, the speech raises fundamental questions concerning the role of Meta and the United States, their cooperation, the exercise of free speech, the appropri-

ate model of democracy, and the identification of political enemies. Zuckerberg does not confine himself to content moderation but articulates the policy that his platform will adopt in relation to US democracy. Rather than presupposing that the speech is political, this study treats its politicisation as an empirical question and compares it with classical models of American political communication. The analysis therefore addresses the mode of communication adopted, the rhetorical style, the argumentative structures, and the ideological narratives. The article seeks to identify the elements that constitute Zuckerberg's discourse as political: how he politicises both the discourse and the role of Meta; which rhetorical strategies he employs; which political position he constructs for himself, for political actors, and for citizens; and which discursive references typical of US political discourse he mobilises most frequently. In addressing these questions, we argue that Zuckerberg's discourse operates in two directions simultaneously: it frames the policy as a defence of free speech against censorship, thereby aligning Meta with a wider political world and its conflict and politicising it; on the other hand, Zuckerberg presents the concrete governance decisions as neutral technical adjustments. This interplay between politics and depoliticized technical issues is one of the dimensions the analysis sets out to reconstruct. To this end, the study proposes an integrated discursive methodology. It adopts Rhetorical Political Analysis (Rpa) as a theoretical model and Critical Metaphor Analysis (Cma) as an empirical instrument for tracking rhetorical elements. Through the identification of metaphors and the assessment of their function, meaning, and relevance, the analysis clarifies the structure of the argument and of its rhetorical appeals. The research thereby offers a more empirical and standardised application of rhetorical analysis and demonstrates that discursive legitimisation now constitutes a crucial dimension through which platforms enact significant changes to policies and public discourse.

The next section reconstructs the principal approaches to the relationship between platforms and political communication. The third section presents the methodological models employed, the structure of the reference corpus, and the procedure of analysis. The fourth section describes the results and the characteristics of Zuckerberg's discourse. The conclusions section summarises the findings and the limitations of the research. Furthermore, we highlight how the new role and strategies of platform owners raise new questions and open new avenues of research for political communication and media sociology.

2. Social media and platforms' political communication

In the first decade of the 21st century the shift from the public sphere to the blogosphere was regarded as a positive transformation (Calderaro, 2018). Social networks were viewed as instruments of decentralisation, civic mobilisation, and horizontal communication, capable of revitalising public participation and overcoming the rigidity of traditional broadcasting (Shirky, 2008). The Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street protests appeared to confirm this hypothesis, reinforcing the conception of platforms as infrastructures for grassroots empowerment and as spaces for experimenting with new models of collective action (DeLuca *et al.* 2012). The rise of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube demonstrated that these were not passive infrastructures but instruments of (click)activism and social organisation within the public sphere.

By accumulating economic capital and informational power, platform owners gradually acquired a political role. This became evident in the second half of the 2010s, when social media contributed to the rise of populism: 2016, with the victory of Brexit and Donald Trump's first presidency, has been defined a «populist *momentum*». Trump's use of Twitter – his constant commentary, his attacks on opponents, and his appeals to supporters – inaugurated a new phase in the relationship between political communication and platforms'. Obama's 2008 campaign had already experimented with digital disintermediation, but Trump extended this logic further, bypassing traditional media and mobilising supporters through emotionally charged statements and a personalised leadership style that exploited the speed and virality of social media (Kreis, 2017; Ott 2017). Platforms became arenas in which inter-party conflict intensified, and legitimacy derived not from mediation but from emotional engagement (Valbruzzi 2021). Studies of the 2016 Us elections and of Brexit demonstrated the capacity of these technologies to shape public opinion through micro-targeted advertising and polarised content (Benkler *et al.* 2018). Following the populist surge and the Cambridge Analytica scandal, evaluations of digital platforms became more pessimistic. New strands of research addressed topics such as antitrust policies and economic regulation, aimed at curbing the power of platforms and the arbitrariness of their owners, often focusing on content moderation – probably the most visible dimension of platform activity. At the same time, more accommodating strategies were proposed, including public – private governance regimes, co-regulation, and shared governance (Flew, 2021; Gorwa, 2019a).

Digital platforms pose a challenge for policymakers: they have become the «principal gatekeepers» of news and information (Napoli and Caplan

2017). Corporations such as Google and Facebook constitute a major news source for online users (Iosifidis and Andrews 2020) and capture a growing share of global advertising expenditure, thereby intensifying the existing power imbalance. Furthermore, the global reach of platforms complicates political oversight, since their business models generate transnational problems, such as cyberterrorism, that require inter-state coordination. In the economic sphere, the structure of ostensibly «free» services enables platforms to circumvent traditional antitrust mechanisms (Coyle 2019). Concepts such as «soft law», shared governance, and co-regulation have consequently been proposed as potential solutions (Gillespie 2018), and integrated governance has been described as a «third way» (Gorwa 2019b: 11): a compromise between self-regulation and external oversight regimes such as the Eu's Gdpr. Adopted in 2018, the Gdpr marked the Eu's transition from data protection to the binding regulation of platform conduct. The Digital Services Act (Dsa), in force from 2022 and fully applicable from 2024, imposes graduated obligations regarding content moderation, transparency, and systemic risk, while the parallel Digital Markets Act (Dma) targets the market power of «gatekeepers »[1]. The European model applies to any platform serving Eu citizens, regardless of its place of establishment, contrasting sharply with the Us approach. This contrast is not merely jurisdictional: the supervisory model of the Dsa and Dma represents precisely what Zuckerberg's «Policy Reset» identifies as a threat to freedom of expression (see below). The United States, in fact, has favoured self-regulatory and co-regulatory approaches, from which Facebook Inc. (later Meta) benefited. In 2019, the company established the Oversight Board, the largest experiment in public-private oversight of content moderation. Although presented as a model of self-imposed supervision, the company's capacity to appoint its members – drawn from civil society and academia – granted Facebook a dominant position over policymakers in defining governance models. The pandemic subsequently clarified the role of platforms across multiple social sectors. «Platformisation» denotes the process of power accumulation driven by control over innovation and by the capacity to influence policy to one's own advantage (van Dijck *et al.* 2018): despite sporadic resistance, platform owners have continued to shape political debate through lobbying and communication (Popiel 2018).

While the design of policy solutions has long dominated scholarly and political attention, the explicitly political conduct of platforms has remained

[1] Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on the Single Market for Digital Services (Digital Services Act); Regulation (EU) 2022/1925 of 14 September 2022 on competitive and fair digital markets (Digital Markets Act). See https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act.

comparatively understudied. The theoretical and discursive analysis of platforms and their owners clarify their positioning, strategies, and objectives. Platforms are pursuing to consolidate their dominance across numerous policy areas through intensive lobbying and the recruitment of former public officials via the «revolving door» (Popiel 2020). They have also exploited the inefficiencies of the regulatory system and the progressive weakening of political parties to circumvent antitrust and media regulation, thereby establishing themselves as fully-fledged political actors (Clark 2020). However, they have achieved this by presenting themselves as «platforms» rather than «companies» (Gillespie 2010) and as «neutral channels for others'communication activities» (Flew *et al.* 2019: 45). Understanding the governance models, they favour and the impact of their lobbying remains important; yet it is the ideologies and narratives of platforms that define the substance of their political activity. Dismantling the technocratic label and analysing the political discourse of owners and leaders therefore helps to denaturalise the ideological elements that guide platform action in public debates over their role, their regulation, and their relationship with politics.

Several studies have examined this conduct outside the discursive paradigm. Platform communication frequently echoes classical public relations. An established tradition of research on corporate communication, associated with Corporate Social Responsibility (Csr), has been extended to platforms. For decades, companies have issued public value statements and policy statements to manage their legitimacy before multiple stakeholders (Carroll 2015): this practice is today conducted primarily through social media. Such communication is fundamentally consensual: it reassures consumers that the company is a responsible actor and avoids the political antagonism that might alienate its public. This literature acknowledges that companies may, in specific cases, assume governance functions once reserved for states, which implies a form of politicisation (Scherer *et al.* 2016). However, selling goods and services and defining the terms of public discourse are not equivalent operations, and the CSR framework cannot capture the categories of platform positioning beyond straightforward statements concerning products or uncontroversial issues. A further non-discursive approach is ideological analysis, exemplified by studies on the so-called «Silicon Valley ethos» (Levina and Hasinoff 2017). Described as a fusion of hippie utopianism with libertarian – or sometimes anarcho-capitalist – economic visions, this ethos constitutes a contradictory *pastiche* that cannot readily be extended to different actors. Its principal limitation, beyond its restricted applicability, is its ostentation: technology founders present themselves as champions of a post-human transformation and openly declare highly ambitious political objectives, such as the colonisation of Mars.

The resulting political stance remains superficial and, for the present, largely science fictional. Its core elements are the conception of technology as a universally beneficial source of innovation and of regulation as an obstacle (Popiel 2018).

Zuckerberg's case appears less audacious but more stable and concrete. It aligns with studies that have moved beyond CSR to examine the political communication of platforms, whose objectives are «to shape the public debate [...] taking place in the media sphere [...] in order to structure new forms of contracts (or promises) between the commercial world of corporations and brands and the public» (Cronin 2018: 43, 45) and to maintain legitimacy before multiple stakeholders. Posts, press releases, and editorials are addressed to policymakers, civil society, competitors, and the public, and through them owners and leaders articulate political preferences on contested social issues. Popiel (2020) demonstrates that Facebook has long been the most active communicator and Microsoft the most explicit. Such communication can be traced to two principal themes. The first emphasises the initiatives platforms undertake to improve the public sphere – content policies, hate speech identification, images restrictions – which constitute the majority of communications and express a desire for legitimisation. The second sets out preferences regarding political approaches, including calls for reform and economic measures. Popiel identifies a recurrent pattern of technocratic discourse: engagement with stakeholders, promotion of technical solutions, such as artificial intelligence and machine learning, together with the recruitment plans required to support them, and the implicit or explicit promotion of self-regulation under external oversight.

The post-Covid period has intensified this tendency. Plantin and Punathambekar (2019) claim a transition from infrastructural power to the ideological operation of discourse, with the owner committed to narrate their role in the future and their vision of democratic politics. Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter – later X – in 2022 exemplifies this shift. Initially presented as a business decision motivated by innovation and efficiency, it soon revealed clear ideological implications. Musk constructed an image of himself as a «defender of free speech», criticising the influence of the mainstream media and reinstating suspended accounts (Haman and Školník 2025); several authors have characterised his defence of specific issues and constituencies as a form of platform populism (Claesson 2025). Zuckerberg's recent positioning likewise centres on the defence of free speech. Although embedded within an update to platform guidelines, it takes an explicit stance within a political conflict and constructs adversaries – the previous administration, the traditional media, and the fact-checking apparatus – interpreting the events of 6 January and the broader climate of censorship as the backdrop against which Meta must reposition itself. His political involvement, however, did not originate in 2025.

For over a decade, the founder of Meta has engaged in public affairs, albeit in a markedly different register. In 2013, he founded Fwd.us, a lobbying group advocating immigration and education reform[2]. This initial politicisation was openly acknowledged, issue-specific, and fundamentally consensual: it supported concrete reforms without constructing political adversaries or contesting the legitimacy of institutions. The turning point came with the Cambridge Analytica scandal. In 2018, it emerged that the consultancy had collected the data of millions of users to construct psychological profiles for targeted political advertising (Berghel 2018). Summoned by Congress, Zuckerberg was questioned about data management, disinformation, and the platform's role in democratic processes (Heawood 2018). This episode marked Meta's transformation from a technological intermediary into a political actor implicated in the presidential election, although political agency was here exercised defensively and reactively (Helles and Lomborg 2024). The shift to a new rhetorical register became apparent only later, as Meta moved from suspending Donald Trump in January 2021[3] to levelling accusations against the Biden administration. In August 2024, Zuckerberg addressed the House Judiciary Committee, asserting that the administration had pressured the company to remove content concerning Covid-19 and announcing that Meta was «ready to push back»[4]. This configuration – a political stance no longer explicitly declared but embedded in the technical form of a policy update – represents the basis of the «Policy Reset» speech and underpins the present analysis. It reflects both the dominant position of Meta's platforms and the transformation of a communicative style that has become progressively less technical. Compelled to defend itself ever more frequently against investigations into its role in elections, disinformation, and content moderation, Meta has developed a discourse that is less flamboyant than Musk's, yet arguably more effective. The rhetorical and ideological analysis of Zuckerberg's speech of 7 January 2025 must be situated within this broader transformation, in which the politicisation of platforms intersects with the interests of digital capitalism and with the

[2] M. Zuckerberg, op-ed announcing the launch of FWD.us, The Washington Post, 11 April 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/technology/why-mark-zuckerberg-cares-about-immigration-reform/2013/04/11/60008490-a2b3-11e2-82bc-511538ae90a4_story.html.

[3] On the suspension of Donald Trump's accounts following the events of 6 January 2021, see Associated Press, https://apnews.com/article/trump-zuckerberg-inaugural-reception-gop-billionaire-donors-bb9663cc352b78d89ec927fe65d334bd.

[4] M. Zuckerberg, letter to the Chair of the House Judiciary Committee, 26 August 2024; see Associated Press / PBS NewsHour, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/zuckerberg-says-the-white-house-pressured-facebook-to-censor-some-covid-19-content-during-the-pandemic.

need to negotiate forms of governance with governments. The expected outcome is a hybrid form of communication in which rhetorical elements become difficult to isolate. In this context, the specific contribution of this article is not to provide a further description of platform governance or of the political role of platform leaders, but to isolate the discursive mechanism – the simultaneous politicisation and depoliticization of governance – through which this role is rhetorically produced. To this end, we employ a replicable procedure based on discourse and metaphor, departing from approaches that treat platform power in infrastructural or regulatory terms, and thereby seeking to address a gap and to advance understanding of the phenomenon.

3. Rhetoric and metaphors in Us political tradition

This study adopts Rhetorical Political Analysis (Rpa) as its analytical framework to examine how discursive and rhetorical elements produce a political positioning. Its aim is to elucidate the legitimation strategies of social actors and the way of their discursive politicization (Howarth *et al.* 2000; Finlayson 2007; 2012; 2022). According to Howarth (2005), theories of discourse do not seek to provide causal explanations of political facts, but rather, they account for how social meanings, the relations between agents, and systems are produced and operate. It clarifies how historically specific situations have emerged in each context. This framework draws from poststructuralist authors such as Foucault (1980), for whom discourse is not a neutral medium but a productive force: it generates the objects, subject positions, and regimes of truth through which power is exercised. Furthermore, the discursive paradigm conceives the social world as subject to radical contingency. Laclau (1990), claims that political action consists in the contingent fixing of meaning – the provisional and always contestable stabilisation of signifiers. Every political agency manifests itself in the attempt to fix the definition of signifiers, articulating narratives that structure the perception of reality. Discourses shape power relations and are simultaneously shaped by them, facilitating the presentation, the comprehension, and the exclusion of alternative perspectives.

We consider platforms' agency; its authority depends not only on its technological infrastructure and corporate decision-making, but, also, increasingly on the discursive construction of its public role, on its legitimisation, and on its alignment with broader political actors and cultural values. Rpa develops this orientation through a systematic focus on rhetoric and on the ways in which arguments are constructed, justified, and rendered persuasive in concrete communicative situations such as speeches and documents. Drawing

on the classical tradition and on speech-act theory (Austin, 1986), it treats rhetoric as a central element of democracy. Rpa seeks to identify the features that structure a political appeal and to clarify its legitimating function and persuasive force, distinguishing between arguments that perform different functions (Finlayson 2007; 2021). Factual arguments establish which events have occurred and under what conditions, defining the ground of what is taken for granted. Definitional arguments operate at the level of meaning-making, assigning to events and concepts the significance favoured by the speaker. Qualitative arguments address responsibility and the evaluation of actions, offering morally justifiable options, whereas delimiting arguments determine what may legitimately be discussed and what must remain outside political debate, thereby exposing ideological presuppositions and power relations. Moreover, RPA identifies the discursive situation and the symbolic relationship constructed between speaker and audience, namely the rhetorical setting. The balance between ethos, pathos, and logos is decisive in structuring this setting. Ethos, as the construction of credibility and moral capital, and pathos, as the mobilisation of emotional identification, have always been central to political discourse, whereas technocratic actors may secure consent by restricting their appeal to logos alone (Whitebrook 2014).

Concrete politicisation of discourse, and the depoliticization, constitute a central category of our research hypothesis. However, politicisation is a polysemic term in social and political science. Usually, it denotes the process through which issues «become the subject of deliberation, decision-making and human action» where previously they were not; depoliticization, conversely, refers to the displacement of issues from formal political control towards the public, quasi-public, or market spheres (Hay 2007: 81-82). Discursive studies frame these concepts as dynamic strategies rather than institutional arrangements. Muntigl (2002: 48) considers politicisation the creation of alternative courses of action – one or more statements that open the discursive space to the possible – whereas depoliticization closes that space and frames a given policy or event as inevitable and any alternative as a denial of its necessity. Recently, Kranert (2019: 69-70) integrates this pair as the «tools» for opening and closing a knowledge market (Edmondson and Nullmeier 1997: 214) in social world. A knowledge system is considered a relatively closed structured set of beliefs and social conceptions, and it tends to maintain the *status quo* through rhetorical strategies: usually the burden of proof – that lies with the accuser – or some arguments are excluded or not considered as issues. We consider politicisation and depoliticization as strategies that animate the knowledge market of public discourse: statements that pave the way for a new model of collective action (or that ossify already established models) that are

enacted through argumentation and rhetorical figures, especially metaphor. We analyse the forms and the contents of the metaphors used to open or close a knowledge market: if (de)politicisation operates at the discursive level, then the metaphors and arguments that naturalise (or not) governance choices can be identified as the elements by which platform political intent becomes empirically observable. Thus, analysis of the metaphors used in a knowledge market therefore deepens, rather than merely illustrates, our understanding of platforms as political actors.

From the standpoint of operationalisation, however, methods of discourse analysis have been criticised for their lack of formalism in handling textual data (see Remling 2018). This study situates itself within the tradition of critical discourse analysis, which has long examined how discourse naturalises power relations and sustains ideological domination (Fairclough 2013; Wodak and Meyer 2015), while addressing some of the criticisms directed at it. Cda has frequently been charged with insufficient empirical grounding, since it tends to move directly from textual features to macro-structures of power, relying on the researcher's impressionistic interpretation. To exert greater interpretative control, our analysis introduces an intermediate level between text and power relations: we reconstruct argumentative functions and metaphorical hierarchies before advancing any ideological claim. This intermediate step is the principal methodological safeguard against the fast inference from linguistic detail to ideology, and it renders the analytical procedure more transparent. To extract rigorously the implications relating to the arguments and discursive appeals in a knowledge market we propose a mixed method centred on the basis stage of discourse. This allows us to differentiate distinct levels and move without conceptual stretching along an ideal «scale of abstraction» (Sartori 2011). Most discourse studies consider the metaphor the minimal unit for analysing a textual corpus (Reisigl and Wodak 2005; Wodak and Reisigl 2015). In order to make the theoretical results of Rpa operational, we employ a well-established method: Critical Metaphor Analysis (Cma) (Charteris-Black 2004; 2011). Following Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Charteris-Black (2004: 7) explicitly links metaphor to persuasion: «metaphor is a figure of speech typically used in persuasion; [...] it represents a new way of seeing the world that offers a fresh perspective». This persuasive function is not merely stylistic. In his work on political framing, Lakoff (1993; 2006) demonstrates how conceptual metaphors structure the moral frames through which political issues are understood, so that opposing political positions correspond to different metaphorical mappings of the same reality. In politics, definitional and qualitative arguments are almost always expressed through metaphor. For instance, consistently with our definition of politicisation, the most common way of

closing a knowledge market is considered the metaphors of necessity (Bleses and Rose 1998: 46): such metaphors «replace a normative argument with a descriptive one and are, therefore, very difficult to refute». Also, Cma adopts Lakoff's notion of hierarchical structure of metaphor, understood as the function metaphors perform according to their level of abstraction. We organise our metaphors into a hierarchy of increasing abstraction: surface metaphors (individual linguistic expressions identified in the text); conceptual metaphors (inferences drawn from these expressions that identify relational patterns and reveal deeper meaning); conceptual keys (the highest level of abstraction, which subsumes several conceptual metaphors). By clarifying the coherence of statements, conceptual keys provide the link to Rpa arguments and characterise their themes.

Finally, to classify the devices of politicisation in Zuckerberg's «Policy Reset» speech and to clarify his political positioning, and that of Meta, we draw on a reference corpus that elucidates the features of American political discourse. This allows us to demonstrate the affinities between Zuckerberg's speech and that of declared political actors, and to mark its distance from the discursive models identified by Csr (see Section 2). To identify the characteristic elements of American political discourse, we draw on research in political science and communication studies. Hofstadter (1965) may be regarded a pioneer of a discourse-oriented sociology of Us politics. In his view, the actions of American political movements have always been marked by moral divisions. Cmiel (1991) describes Americanism as an ideology that leads actors to compete for the veneration of middle-class qualities and for their efforts against their adversaries. Kazin (2017; 2022) confirms these conclusions through his analysis of American activism: he describes a mode of self-identification, and of imagining enemies, in terms of the «possession/lack» of American qualities, and identifies a recurrent contradiction at the heart of American rhetoric, which defines enemies as unjust while affirming collective improvement and individual responsibility as fundamental values. Kazin characterises American politics as sentimental and populist, that is, sustained by a dichotomous, morally grounded distinction. Communication studies, in turn, have reconstructed the typical features of institutional discourse, particularly that of presidents. Charteris-Black (2004) showed that presidential communication is highly planned, offering an idealised vision of society and providing direction and leadership; conflict, its management, and unity in the face of crises are recurrent elements, accounting for over 35% of the resonances he analyses, and political life is represented as a struggle for survival or a war against social ills, with extensive reference to symbolic elements such as fire, light, and the triumph of the heroic individual. Dorsey (2008) confirms this view and ex-

tends the sample to specific occasions, highlighting the recurrence of themes such as the common good and community, and the construction of credibility grounded in character: «who I am?» and «what I can do?» constitute the two pillars of successful rhetorical leadership. Savoy (2017), in one of the most systematic analyses of presidential rhetoric, identifies further features, including the evolution of tone across the twentieth century towards greater assertiveness and intimacy, and the increased frequency of pronouns, particularly «we»; he also emphasises that clarity and simplicity have distinguished such speeches since 1951, which increasingly incorporate references to human beings, emotional terms, allusions to God, and symbolic expressions. This corpus shows the themes that a platform owner's speech should include to be regarded as political: the nation, the heroic individual and his struggle, community and nation support, harmful actions of enemies, and the nation's task. The discourse should also adopt a spare, sentimental tone fostering a sense of «us», with extensive metaphorical reference to conflict, society as a building, and journeys, alongside personification, repetition, and moralisation. These studies are not treated as a comparative empirical corpus, but as a framework for identifying rhetorical and ideological patterns in Us political discourse. The aim is to assess the extent to which Zuckerberg's speech activates and rearticulates well-established repertoires of American political communication.

The analysis was conducted by applying the procedure described above in four progressive stages: the identification of metaphors in the text, the reconstruction of their conceptual organisation, the identification of conceptual keys, and the integration of the results into the RPA framework to determine the arguments and the type of appeal. First, for an initial non-interpretative thematic segmentation, the speech was subjected to distant reading (Moretti, 2013) and divided into rhetorical sequences with thematic coherence. Within each segment, metaphors in the strict sense were identified by comparing the literal meaning of the lemmas with the Oxford Dictionary. To increase the reliability of identification, a double-coding procedure was adopted: both authors independently annotated the metaphorical expressions in the corpus and subsequently resolved disagreements in joint sessions until full agreement was reached on the final set of surface metaphors. For each metaphor, the literal meaning, the metaphorical term, the discursive context, and the semantic function within the segment were recorded. Individual metaphors were then grouped according to semantic proximity and consistency of use to construct conceptual metaphors (Charteris-Black, 2004: 243-251), which were in turn organised into the frames, or conceptual keys, to which they refer. Comparison with the reference corpus made it possible to assess the degree of alignment between Zuckerberg's text and Us political rhetoric and to determine which narratives recur most frequently.

Based on these themes, the conceptual keys were assigned to the four RPA categories to show which concepts represent facts and which characterise agents and situations, thereby answering the question of how positioning is constructed. The predominance of certain themes and the frequency of group-membership strategies allow the nature of the appeal and of the scenarios to be inferred.

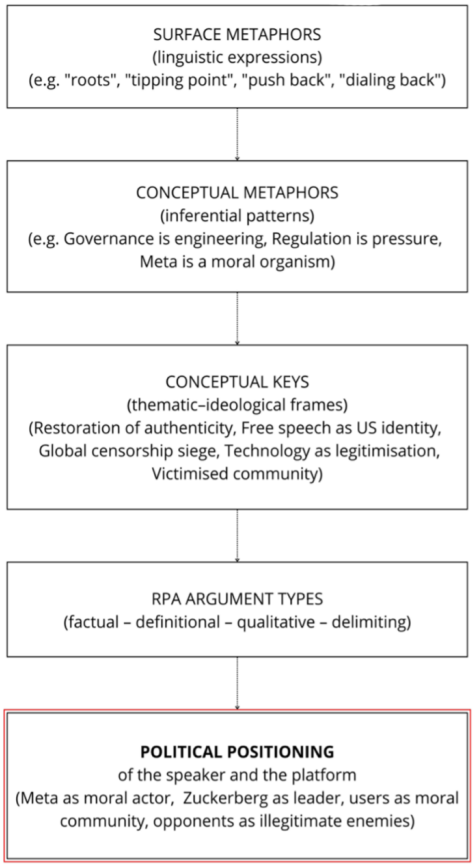


Fig. 1. Methodological development of the analysis.
Source: Authors' elaboration.

4. Analysis and results

From a generic point of view, the «Policy Reset» speech does not conform to the conventional definition of a corporate communication text, such as a press release or an address to shareholders. It can be understood instead as a hybrid of the public-justification genre, incorporating elements of corporate

policy communication, the leadership address, and the political speech. Its performative features – live streaming, direct address to users, and the invocation of public controversy and government actors – position the speaker simultaneously as a corporate leader and a public authority engaging in a broader political discourse. The following analysis applies the methodology outlined in the previous section to Mark Zuckerberg's Policy Reset speech, delivered on 7 January 2025 and transcribed in full from the official video. Our question concerns the discursive and rhetorical devices of politicisation employed by platforms and their representatives; the analysis therefore seeks to identify elements similar in form and content to the political-communication corpus of other US political actors. Our hypothesis is that the rhetorical and metaphorical strategies required to construct Meta's political positioning through its founder can be deployed within the folds of a speech ostensibly devoted to a policy update, given the role of platforms and the impact of content moderation on public debate. Following CMA, the minimal unit of analysis is the metaphorical expression, considered as a cognitive and persuasive tool capable of structuring inferences, guiding moral evaluations, and contributing to the construction of ideological frameworks. The metaphors identified were analysed in their discursive context, aggregated into conceptual metaphors, and then traced back to Conceptual Keys, which link the empirical results to the main types of argument identified by Rpa.

A first «distant» reading (Moretti 2013) divided the speech into seven rhetorical sequences, each characterised by thematic coherence and a specific persuasive function, and this segmentation provides the analytical bridge between the levels of the study. The rhetorical sequences constitute the contextual units within which surface metaphors were identified and interpreted: rather than analysing isolated expressions, metaphors were examined in relation to the argumentative function performed within each sequence, allowing the transition from linguistic evidence to conceptual metaphors and, subsequently, to broader Conceptual Keys. The first sequence has an introductory and foundational function. Zuckerberg opens by explicitly stating that it is time to «get back to our roots around free expression» and recalls that he originally built social media «to give people a voice». These expressions are not merely descriptive: they activate an organic and moral imagery centred on origins, authenticity, and mission, constructing a foundational ethos in which Meta appears not primarily as a corporation but as a civic project temporarily diverted from its original purpose. The speaker thus presents himself as the initiator of an enterprise guided by civic rather than economic objectives.

The second sequence introduces the problems and identifies the responsible, with recurring references to censorship, to pressure from governments and traditional media, and to the complexity of moderation systems. Responsibility

for past decisions is attributed to fallible technical systems and to a coercive external context, through a combination of factual arguments and mitigating factors of a moral nature. The third sequence follows logically from this diagnosis and establishes the irreversibility of the situation, constituting a narrative turning point in which the expression «cultural tipping point» is decisive. The expression originates in scientific and policy-oriented discourse on climate change and social systems, where it conventionally denotes irreversible transitions triggered by cumulative processes. The metaphor is significant because it transforms a contingent political decision into an apparently objective historical necessity: by claiming that recent elections represent a cultural tipping point, Zuckerberg frames policy change as a response to broader historical forces rather than as a strategic corporate choice. This move anticipates the conceptual metaphor History is a Turning Point (CM6), which later contributes to the Conceptual Key of restoration and return. Drawing on semantic fields such as climatology and ecology, which have succeeded in discursively constructing the salience of environmental problems, the speech suggests that the cultural and value system is likewise collapsing and compelled to reconfigure itself. Policy change is thus presented as historically inevitable and temporally necessary, legitimising the beginning of a new phase focused on «restoring» freedom of expression. In terms of the theoretical framework outlined above, this passage performs a depoliticising function: the metaphor of the cultural tipping point presents the policy shift not as one possible course of action among others, but as the necessary response to a transformation already under way, thereby narrowing the space of the political alternatives and framing reform as an unavoidable adaptation to a changed historical context (Muntigl 2002; Kranert 2019). The fourth sequence is devoted to concrete measures, in particular the abandonment of fact-checkers and their replacement with community-note systems. Here Zuckerberg advances definitional arguments centred on the role of truth, political bias, and so-called «mainstream discourse». The fifth sequence explores further governance measures, focusing on the enforcement of rules, the trade-offs between security and freedom, and the politically and legally significant decision to relocate the moderation teams from California to Texas; governance is here narrated primarily as technical regulation and system optimisation. The sixth sequence exposes and reinforces a national and geopolitical dimension of opposition: the alliance with President Trump is emphasised, and the previous administration is denounced for «polluting» the debate, again drawing on ecology. The discourse further constructs an antagonistic framework in which foreign governments – particularly European, Latin American, and Chinese – are represented as censors threatening American freedom of expression. Finally, the seventh sequence acknowledges the structural limitations of technical systems while reaffirming a moral

commitment and projecting Meta into a «new chapter», according to a clear narrative of redemption and vindication.

Tab. 1. *Surface metaphors (linguistic level). Source domains were assigned by identifying the conventional experiential or semantic field from which each metaphorical expression draws its literal meaning (e.g. biology, mechanics, space, construction, bodily experience).*

Code	Textual expression	Literal meaning	Source domain	Discursive function
A1	Get back to our roots	Roots of an organism	Biological	Legitimises a return to an original identity
A2	Give people a voice	Physical voice	Corporeal	Free speech as a natural right
A3	Pushed to censor	Physical thrust	Force/pressure	Attributes coercion to govern-ments/media
A4	Complex systems	Complex machines	Engineering	Depoliticises decisions
A5	Systems make mistakes	Human error	Technical agency	Mitigates moral responsibility
A6	Cultural tipping point	Physical overturning	Mechanics	Historical necessity for change
A7	Restore free expression	Material restoration	Repair	Narrative of redemption
A8	Arbiter of truth	Sports referee	Judgement	Delegitimises fact-checkers
A9	Out of touch	Loss of contact	Corporeal	Policy distant from the mainstream
A10	Shut down opinions	Physical closure	Space	Censorship as exclusion
A11	Dialing back	Knob adjustment	Mechanics	Moderation as technical regulation
A12	Trade-off	Economic exchange	Market	Morality as balance
A13	Build trust	Construction	Architecture	Trust as capital
A14	Push back	Physical resistance	Conflict	Geopolitical antagonism
A15	Secret courts	Concealment	Space/opacity	Construction of the insidious enemy
A16	Next chapter	Book/story	Narration	Meta as historical project
A17	Going after American companies	Pursuit/ hunting	Conflict	Constructing foreign governments as aggressors
A18	Strongest constitu-tional protections	Protection as shield	Defence/law	Links free speech to American identity
A19	Require much higher confidence	Quantitative threshold	Measurement	Frames decisions as technical calibration

Source: Authors' elaboration

Within these sequences, the use of linguistic metaphors is extensive and systematic, and these metaphors play a central role in constructing meaning. Expressions such as «get back to our roots», «give people a voice», or «next chapter» place Meta within an organic and historical narrative, in which the platform appears as a subject endowed with an identity, an origin, and a moral trajectory. Censorship and regulation are described through metaphors of pressure, attack, and invasion («pushed to censor», «push back», «going after American companies»), which transform regulatory conflict into a physical dynamic of aggression and defence and allow negative action to be attributed to governments and the media, reinforcing the construction of political antagonism. A further semantic field to which Zuckerberg makes extensive reference is that of technical engineering: moderation systems are described as «complex machines» equipped with filters, thresholds, and knobs to be adjusted. Through expressions such as «dialing them back» or «require much higher confidence», the most politically controversial decisions are represented as technical-maintenance operations, mitigating their regulatory dimension. Trust is conceptualised as material capital to be built or destroyed, while history is represented as a succession of turning points, eras, and global trends that render change not merely desirable but necessary.

Tab. 2. *Conceptual metaphors (inferential level).*

Code	Conceptual metaphor	Related surface metaphors	Main inference
CM1	Politics is a space with boundaries	A1, A9, A10	There is a legitimate field of discourse
CM2	Regulation is pressure	A3, A14, A17	Censorship is coercion
CM3	Meta is a moral organism	A1, A2, A16	The platform has an ethical mission
CM4	Governance is engineering	A4, A5, A11, A19	Choices are technical, not political
CM5	Censorship is demolition	A10, A13	Moderation destroys trust
CM6	History is turning point	A6, A7, A16	Change is inevitable
CM7	Enemies are opaque apparatuses	A15	The adversary acts in secret

Source: Authors' elaboration.

The aggregation of individual metaphors allows us to reconstruct recurring semantic patterns that extend across several rhetorical sequences. Rather than emerging from isolated lexical choices, the conceptual metaphors report-

ed in Table 2 derive from the repetition of metaphorical expressions belonging to the same semantic domains. Expressions such as «pushed to censor», «push back», «going after American companies», and «emboldened other governments» consistently frame regulation as a dynamic of physical pressure and conflict, while references to «roots», «voice», and the «next chapter» of Meta contribute to the representation of the platform as a moral and historical actor. The recurrence of these patterns provides the empirical basis for the construction of the broader Conceptual Keys. From them emerge the idea of politics as a space delimited by legitimate boundaries, that of regulation as external pressure, the representation of Meta as a moral organism, and the conception of governance as engineering. These recurring inferential structures constitute the intermediate analytical level between surface metaphors and the broader ideological frames discussed below.

Tab. 3. *Conceptual Keys (thematic-ideological level).*

Conceptual Key	Conceptual metaphors included	Ideological meaning
CK1 – Restoration of authenticity	CM1, CM3, CM6	Return to original values
CK2 – Free speech as US identity	CM2, CM6	Constitutional exceptionalism
CK3 – Global censorship siege	CM2, CM7	Internal and external enemies
CK4 – Technology as legitimisation	CM4, CM5	Strategic depoliticisation
CK5 – Victimised community	CM3, CM5	Construction of the moral «we»

Source: Authors' elaboration.

The first Conceptual Key is the restoration of goodness and the return to authenticity: it structures the entire discourse as a process of purification and recovery of origins, in line with other themes in US politics (Liberman 2005). The second concerns freedom of expression as a defining feature of the American nation, guaranteed by its «strongest constitutional protections». The third is threat, in particular censorship fuelled by internal and external actors on a global scale (Kazin 2017). These first three Conceptual Keys perform a politicising function, since they expand the discursive space around platform governance: moderation is no longer framed merely as an administrative issue but as a conflict over origins, national identity, freedom of expression, and external threats. The fourth Conceptual Key concerns the naturalisation of governance choices: through expressions such as «complex machines», «dialing them back», and «require much higher confidence», controversial moderation decisions are framed as technical adjustments rather than political alternatives. This key therefore performs a depoliticising function, closing the discursive space by

presenting specific governance choices as reasonable, necessary, and technically appropriate responses to existing problems (Muntigl, 2002; Kranert, 2019). The fifth, finally, is linked to the construction of a moral community of innocent users, victims of systemic errors and deserving of protection after years of abuse.

Integrating these results into the framework of Rhetorical Political Analysis, we observe a predominance of factual and, above all, definitional arguments. The Conceptual Keys provide the interpretative bridge between metaphorical organisation and rhetorical argumentation, making it possible to reconstruct how recurring metaphorical patterns support specific factual, definitional, qualitative, and delimiting arguments within the speech. Zuckerberg's discourse is geared towards redefining the issues of freedom of expression and censorship in their recent historical progression in the US, and towards retroactively constructing a beatific and freer vision of Meta in its early years. Rather than discussing operational measures, the speech retraces the events of recent years and the conditions that made them possible, fostering a common-sense understanding of the influence of the previous administration. Qualitative arguments are evident when previous policies are described as unintentional or imposed errors and future ones as morally necessary. The use of delimiting arguments to close the discursive market is less marked, though it may be inferred from the list of behaviours to be maintained at the national and international level. Zuckerberg thereby constructs a multifaceted position for the speaker: combining different registers, he represents himself at the helm of Meta as a missionary founder, a responsible engineer, and an owner whose policy is aligned with the American administration and its values. This attribution is supported by various appeals to pathos, logos, and ethos. The reference to different administrations, the origin of the policies, and the international enemies invoked at the close, combined with qualitative strategies for the new technical measures, reveal a recourse to ethos and pathos typical of the discourse of other political actors. Representative of this is the pronoun «we», which appears 33 times, especially in the conclusion, alongside the claimed empathy for the millions of innocent users unfairly affected by unjust policies. Opponents, by contrast, are both delegitimised internal actors (traditional media, fact-checkers) and opaque, aggressive external enemies.

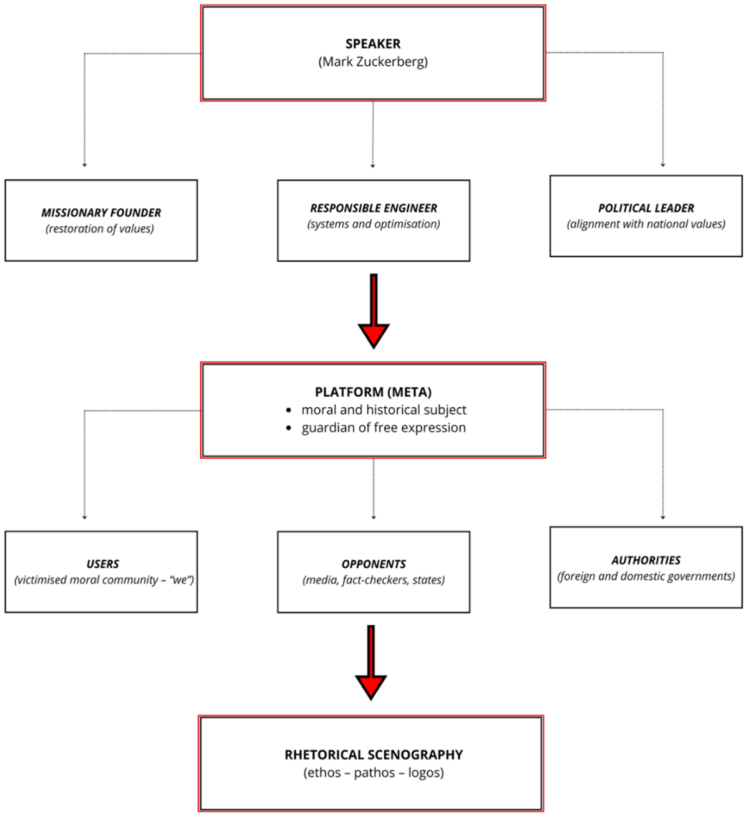


FIG.2. Rhetorical scenography of Zuckerberg's Policy Reset speech.
Source: Authors' elaboration.

Tables 1, 2, and 3 summarise the three levels of metaphor analysis. Table 1 reports the surface metaphors retained after coding for their argumentative relevance and their contribution to the construction of higher-order conceptual patterns, specifying for each expression the literal meaning, the source domain, and the discursive function within the speech. Table 2 groups these expressions into conceptual metaphors according to semantic affinity and consistency of use, while Table 3 presents the Conceptual Keys that emerge from the recurrent interaction between conceptual metaphors. Read together, the three tables clarify the progression from linguistic evidence to conceptual organisation and, finally, to ideological interpretation.

In summary, the politicisation of Zuckerberg's discourse and of the role of Meta is evidenced by several significant affinities with the reference corpus on US political communication. A moral and dichotomous worldview emerges, together with the aspiration to represent a platform and a leadership that appeal

to everyone. This vision, centred on conflict and victory, is accompanied by its customary corollaries: the virtuous hero, community support, internal and external obstacles, and the political-platform alliance that will redeem the situation. Particularly important is the attempt to depoliticise technical choices and their regulatory implications. Crucially, politicisation and depoliticization do not emerge as separate or sequential strategies, but as mutually reinforcing rhetorical moves enacted within the same discursive configuration: while the speech constructs a moralised conflict and a collective identity typical of political mobilisation, it simultaneously neutralises institutional responsibility by framing concrete governance interventions as technical adjustments and system optimisation. This occurs, first, because politicisation and depoliticization are enacted by political actors precisely through argumentation and metaphor (Kranert, 2019: 69–70): politicisation emerges through the construction of antagonisms, collective identities, and alternative political futures, while depoliticization emerges through the representation of governance interventions as historically necessary or technically unavoidable. The same discourse therefore opens the knowledge market around values, identities, and enemies, while closing it around the concrete range of governance options regarded as legitimate. It occurs, secondly, because – as noted in other studies of political discourse (Chalozin-Dovrat, 2013: 92) – defining a situation as a crisis is often a strategy for obscuring responsibilities and producing depoliticization by foreclosing the issue. Through these forms, the compatibility of Zuckerberg's discourse with the features of US political communication, and with the rhetorical and discursive strategies that the literature has identified in actors who pursue and seek consensus through political ideologies, clearly emerges.

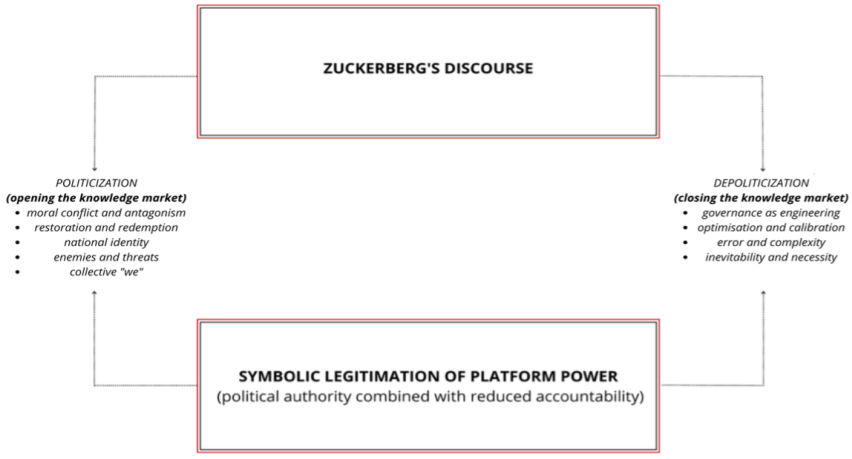


Fig. 3. Politicisation, depoliticisation and symbolic legitimation of platform power. *Source:* Authors' elaboration.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the politicisation of Zuckerberg's «Policy Reset» speech by combining Rhetorical Political Analysis and Critical Metaphor Analysis, with the aim of reconstructing the discursive mechanisms through which Meta's policy change is publicly legitimised. Our guiding hypothesis was that the rhetorical strategies needed to construct the political positioning of a platform and its owner could be deployed within a speech ostensibly devoted to a technical update. The analysis confirms this hypothesis: the «Policy Reset» cannot be reduced to an announcement on platform governance, but operates as a fully-fledged political intervention, structured through narrative, metaphorical, and argumentative devices that closely resemble those of US institutional political communication.

Three empirical findings stand out. First, Zuckerberg's discourse reframes platform governance as a moral and historical struggle, casting Meta as an actor with an ethical mission and presenting policy change as a necessary turning point rather than a managerial decision. Second, the speech constructs an antagonistic framework in which censorship is attributed to governments, traditional media, and foreign actors, while freedom of expression is articulated as a core feature of American political identity. Third, and most importantly, politicisation and depoliticisation operate simultaneously: the speech mobilises emotional appeals, moral dichotomies, and collective identities to construct political agency, while recasting controversial governance decisions as neutral technical adjustments that mitigate responsibility. The political significance of platform governance therefore does not reside solely in the content of specific moderation decisions; it emerges from a discursive configuration in which governance is at once politicised and depoliticised, and in which political communication becomes part of the governance process itself, functioning as a mechanism through which authority, also against some parties or government, is justified, contested, and stabilised. Our contribution is therefore both theoretical and methodological. Theoretically, it advances current debates on platform power by demonstrating that ideological authority is increasingly produced discursively rather than only infrastructurally. While recent scholarship has argued that platform leaders are becoming interpreters of political values and norms, this study shows empirically how that transformation is enacted, through identifiable rhetorical and metaphorical strategies rather than through diffuse cultural influence. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of integrating Rpa and Cma: by reconstructing the progression from surface metaphors to conceptual metaphors, Conceptual Keys, and argumentative functions, the proposed framework moves systematically from linguistic

evidence to ideological interpretation and offers a more transparent and replicable procedure than approaches that pass directly from textual observation to ideological claims. In doing so, the article responds to a long-standing demand to render rhetorical analysis more rigorous and empirically grounded.

These results carry distinct implications for two fields. For political communication studies, establish the necessity to incorporate in a stable way platform leaders' discourse into the analysis of political actors: founders and CEOs can no longer be treated as background stakeholders or neutral technocrats, since their public interventions actively shape narratives about democracy, legitimacy, and governance. For the sociology of media communication, they underline the importance of examining how platforms construct symbolic authority and moral legitimacy not only through algorithmic design or institutional arrangements, but also through narrative positioning, identity construction, and emotional appeals addressed to users. The analysis suggests that the boundary between corporate and political communication is becoming increasingly blurred, unsettling the conventional distinction between economic actors and political elites within the public sphere. However, this contribution should be read considering some limitations. The most significant concerns the corpus: the analysis rests on a single speech within a specific national context. Although the case is paradigmatic, we cannot be sure that all platform leaders adopt identical strategies, since Zuckerberg's discourse is shaped by Meta's institutional role, by the American political context, and by the controversies surrounding content moderation; comparative research across leaders and political cultures is therefore needed. A second issue is that the approach privileges discursive structures over reception. Future work should integrate audience and user-reception data to assess how these strategies are interpreted, contested, or appropriated. Another one is that metaphor analysis, however robust as an entry point into ideological framing, would benefit from multimodal approaches such as attention to visual elements, platform affordances, and the paratextual features of digital communication.

Beyond its analytical interest, the discursive configuration we have described has normative implications. By consistently framing contested governance decisions as technical and historical necessities, platform leaders may erode the space for contestation and democratic accountability: the depoliticisation of governance, combined with highly moralised and polarising narratives, risks reinforcing symbolic leadership while weakening the basis for scrutiny the private power of digital infrastructure. Reconstructing the bidirectional relationship between governments and platforms, and the forms of trust required within the platforms – government – citizens triangle, should accordingly become a central concern for political communication. As plat-

form leaders intervene ever more directly in debates over democracy and collective values, understanding how they construct political legitimacy, and its consequences, becomes as important as analysing the technological infrastructures they govern.

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