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"Sign and Make Your Mark on the World a Positive One".
A Discourse and Genre Analysis of UK Online Petitions
to Reduce Single-Use Plastics

Abstract: The increased availability of the Internet and its growing interactivity have led to the emergence of new forms of civic engagement. In particular, e-petitions websites have brought into our time the centuries-old right to petition the rulers. The present study analyzes a corpus collecting a selection of online petitions against unnecessary plastic usage published on the British version of Change.org, one of the most popular e-petitioning platforms. The texts were examined by integrating discourse and genre analysis perspectives to uncover the recurring strategies exploited by petitioners to gain support for their environmental causes. The investigation revealed the way organisers appeal to the readers' civic sense and sensitivity by emphasising the severity of damages of marine litter, reporting environmental information from multiple sources, raising awareness about legal loopholes and asking companies and institutions to lead by example.

Keywords: *petitionary discourse, e-petitions, environmental discourse, single-use plastics, discourse analysis, genre analysis*

1. Introduction

1.1 Plastic Pollution

Plastic is a key material in the global economy. Since World War II, plastics have helped our societies tackle various challenges, providing innovative, inexpensive, durable, light and sanitary alternatives for traditional materials, which generated an unblemished optimism about its infinite possibilities. As a result, the global production of plastics has increased twentyfold since the 1960s, reaching 322 million tonnes in 2015, and is expected to double again over the next 20 years.[1] However, since the 1970s, the

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[1] European Commission, "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy" (Brussels: European Commission, 16 January 2018), 2.

longevity of plastic waste in the environment has caused major concerns, leading to the emergence of recycling processes.[2] Nevertheless, inadequate waste collection, disposal and recycling measures are still leading to severe consequences. Large quantities of plastic debris leak into the environment, with 5 to 13 million tonnes littering our seas. For its lightness, plastic waste is easily transported by marine currents, ending up on land, degrading or accumulating in ocean gyres, with negative impacts not only on the environment and human health but also on economic activities such as tourism, fishery and shipping.[3]

The plastics found in our seas comprise macroplastics (larger than 5mm in size) and microplastics (fragments below 5mm in diameter). Entanglement of marine species in plastic debris can cause starvation, suffocation, laceration, infection, reduced reproductive success and increased mortality.[4] Microplastics derive from primary sources, e.g. microbeads included in exfoliating products, and secondary sources, from the decomposition of macroplastics. Due to their small size, microplastics are easily mistakenly eaten by the marine fauna, thus entering the food chain.[5] The increasing amount of plastic pollution is fuelled by the growing consumption of single-use plastics, i.e. plastics conceived to be used once and then discarded, which is commonly not recycled. These include bags, disposable cups, lids, straws, cutlery and cotton buds, for which plastic is often chosen for its lightness, low cost and hygiene.[6]

Pollution from plastics has thus recently been perceived as a major environmental concern by scientists, governments, non-governmental organisations, media and civil society. Across the globe, there is a growing awareness of the need for a sustainable plastic economy, covering the entire value chain, from design, production, consumption to reuse and recycling. Initiatives to reduce or eliminate the over-consumption of plastic goods have been gaining momentum. The European Union, which has reached the world's highest rate of plastic recycling, is currently promoting the development of a circular plastics industry worldwide.[7] The EU had already taken steps in this sense by setting legally binding requirements for its member States to adopt measures to drastically reduce the consumption of

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[2] Science History Institute, "The History and Future of Plastics", https://www.sciencehistory.org/the-history-and-future-of-plastics, last accessed 20 December 2016.

[3] European Commission, "A European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy", brochure, 3, https://ec.europa.eu/environment/circular-economy/pdf/plastics-strategy-brochure.pdf, last accessed 20 March 2018.

[4] Stelios Katsanevakis, "Marine Debris, a Growing Problem: Sources, Distribution, Composition and Impacts", in Tobias N. Hofer, ed., *Marine Pollution: New Research* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2008), 53-100.

[5] Juliana A. Ivar do Sul and Monica F. Costa, "The Present and Future of Microplastic Pollution in the Marine Environment", *Environmental Pollution*, 185 (February 2014), 352-364.

[6] European Commission, "A European Strategy", 4.

[7] Ibid., 16.

plastic bags and to restrict the use of intentionally added microplastics.[8] In particular, under the directive on lightweight plastic carrier bags, national governments must ensure that the annual consumption level does not exceed 90 bags per person by the end of 2019 and 40 bags by the end of 2025. Furthermore, by 31st December 2018, they must guarantee that lightweight plastic carrier bags are not provided free of charge in shops.[9] In May 2018, the European Commission also proposed new rules to reduce marine plastic litter, then approved in October 2018. The measures include: ban on single-use plastic items with available alternatives (namely, cotton buds, cutlery, plates, stirrers, straws, balloon sticks); general reduction targets on items such as beverage cups and food containers; informative campaigns and extended producer responsibility schemes; labelling requirements about appropriate waste disposal; product design measures (especially for caps to remain attached to beverage containers).[10] In June 2018, the European Commission had contextually launched a public communication campaign across its digital media to raise awareness about sustainable alternatives to single-use plastic products.[11]

As a member State, the United Kingdom, object of the present study, has already taken actions to respond to the EU directives. In particular, all of the constituent countries passed legislation to levy a charge of a minimum of 5 pence on each new plastic carrier bag sold. The measure came into force in Wales (2011),[12] Northern Ireland (2013),[13] Scotland (2014),[14] England (2015)[15], in that order. Yet, England limited the measure to big companies, with 250 or more employees.[16] England (2017)[17],

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[8] European Parliament and Council of the European Union, "Directive (EU) 2015/720 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2015 Amending Directive 94/62/EC as Regards Reducing the Consumption of Lightweight Plastic Carrier Bags", *Official Journal of the European Union*, 115 (6 May 2015), 11-15; European Chemicals Agency (ECHA), "Registry of Restriction Intentions: Microplastics" (17 January 2018), https://echa.europa.eu/registry-of-restriction-intentions/-/dislist/details/0b0236e18244cd73, last accessed 20 March 2018.

[9] European Parliament and Council of the European Union, "Directive", 13.

[10] European Commission, "Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the Reduction of the Impact of Certain Plastic Products on the Environment, 340 final 2018/0172" (Brussels: European Commission, 28 May 2018).

[11] European Commission, "Be Ready to Change" (2018), https://www.bereadytochange.eu/en/, last accessed 20 March 2018.

[12] Welsh Government, "The Single Use Carrier Bags Charge (Wales) Regulations 2010", Welsh Statutory Instruments, Environmental Protection, Wales, 2880.238 (2010), http://www.legislation.gov.uk/wsi/2010/2880/made/data.pdf., last accessed 20 March 2018.

[13] Government of Northern Ireland, "The Single Use Carrier Bags Charge Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013", Statutory Rules of Northern Ireland, Environmental Protection, 4 (2013), http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2013/4/made/data.pdf, last accessed 20 March 2018.

[14] Scottish Government, "The Single Use Carrier Bags Charge (Scotland) Regulations 2014", Scottish Statutory Instruments, Environmental Protection, 161 (2014), https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2014/161/made/data.pdf., last accessed 20 March 2018.

[15] United Kingdom Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, "The Single Use Carrier Bags Charges (England) Order 2015", Statutory Instruments, Environmental Protection, England, 776 (2015), https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2015/776/made/data.pdf, last accessed 20 March 2018.

[16] Ibid., 8.

Scotland (2018)[18] and Wales (2018)[19] also approved regulations to ban the manufacturing and supply of rinse-off personal care products containing plastic microbeads.

Nevertheless, as it is currently negotiating its withdrawal from the European Union, the United Kingdom may choose not to meet the EU's standards on single-use plastics after Brexit.[20] In January 2018, Prime Minister Theresa May launched a *25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment*[21] with the intention to deliver a 'Green Brexit'[22], protecting and improving natural resources and environment and mitigating the effects of climate change. In particular, the project aims at eliminating all avoidable plastic waste by the end of 2042, by adopting measures including:

– extending the 5p carrier bag charge to all retailers in England;
– encouraging supermarkets to introduce plastic-free aisles with loose food;
– pressuring manufacturers to take more responsibility for the environmental impacts of their products;
– injecting new funding into plastics innovation;
– banning problematic materials where suitable alternatives exist;
– promoting the installation of water refill points for people to top up their bottles for free.[23]

1.2 The Construction of Environmental Issues

The 'environment' appears to represent one of the main public and political concerns of our time. Nevertheless, the development of the very concept of environment and environmental discourse, with specific vocabulary, themes and frames, seems to be relatively recent, dating back to the 1960s.[24]

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[17] United Kingdom Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, "The Environmental Protection (Microbeads) (England) Regulations 2017", Statutory Instruments Environmental Protection, England, 1312 (2017), 1312http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2017/1312/made/data.pdf, last accessed 20 March 2018.

[18] Scottish Government, "The Environmental Protection (Microbeads) (Scotland) Regulations 2018", Scottish Statutory Instruments, Environmental Protection, 162 (2018), http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2018/162/made/data.pdf, last accessed 20 March 2018.

[19] Welsh Government, "The Environmental Protection (Microbeads) (Wales) Regulations 2018", Welsh Statutory Instruments, Environmental Protection, Wales, 760.151 (2018), http://www.legislation.gov.uk/wsi/2018/760/made/data.pdf, last accessed 20 March 2018.

[20] Daniel Boffey, "Gove Urged to Follow Europe with Ban on Single-Use Plastic", *The Guardian* (27 May 2018).

[21] Government of the United Kingdom, "A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment" (2018), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/693158/25-year-environment-plan.pdf, last accessed 20 March 2018.

[22] Ibid., 9.

[23] Ibid., 87-89.

[24] Anders Hansen and Robert Cox, "Introduction: Environment and Communication", in Hansen and Cox, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Environment and Communication* (London: Routledge, 2015), 1-10, 1.

Considered from a constructivist perspective, environmental problems are publicly recognised as 'social issues', which require social, political and legislative attention and action, only when someone makes claims about them in a public arena. Environmental issues fade in and out of focus over time, in cycles that seem to have little to do with their actual amelioration or resolution.[25] Concepts may even become buzzwords through the frequency of their media mentions, as shown by the ever-changing public focus from 'pollution' and 'greenhouse effect', to 'global warming' and 'climate change' and to 'sustainable' and 'green' solutions.

In recent times, the media attention has often been devoted to the problem of 'single-use' plastics, with a mounting number of news and campaigns, often attempting to engage the public in taking redressing actions by shocking them, showing images of the detrimental effects of plastic waste, such as marine animals stuck in plastic items or mistaking plastics for food.[26] The issue of plastic waste obtained official recognition as a 'social problem' when "single-use" was named 'Word of the Year 2018' by Collins Dictionary.[27] Collins' records show a four-fold increase in usage of the term since 2013, explained as fostered by its presence in news stories and in the popular *BBC* documentary *Blue Planet II*, hosted by Sir David Attenborough, which contributed to raising public awareness on the problem (see also Paragraph 4.2).

What the common citizens know about the environment and environmental issues is based on the symbolic reality constructed in social institutions and contexts and represented through media of various kinds. Common people tend to acquire environmental information not from scientific literature, but from media communications, both coming from traditional media, such as television, newspapers and radio, and from new media, such as websites, online fora and social media. Science and politics have clearly influenced media coverage of environmental issues. However, news generated by mass media has, in turn, shaped the agenda for the ongoing scientific and political debate and decisions. TV celebrities engaged in environmental conservationism and conservationists turned celebrities have often helped to provide arguments regarding the need for policy changes about environmental issues.[28] Recent technological advances have produced substantive changes in how people access and interact with information, with a fundamental shift from 'one-to-many' broadcasts to 'many-to-many' interactive communication. Various actors and voices battle today in traditional and new media spaces, together with formal climate science and politics, contributing to forming public understanding and

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[25] Hansen, "Communication, Media and the Social Construction of the Environment", in Hansen and Cox, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Environment*, 26-38.

[26] See Laura Parker and Randy Olson, "We Made Plastic. We Depend on It. Now We're Drowning in It", *National Geographic Magazine* (June 2018), https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2018/06/plastic-planet-waste-pollution-trash-crisis/, last accessed 20 March 2018.

[27] Collins Dictionary, "World of the Year 2018", https://www.collinsdictionary.com/woty, last accessed 20 March 2018.

[28] Graham Huggan, *Nature's Saviours: Celebrity Conservationists in the Television Age* (London: Routledge, 2013).

engagement.[29] Digital medias have also reshaped the boundaries between those who constitute authorised and legitimate speakers and claims-makers, so that undue reliance may be placed on 'fauxperts' instead of 'experts'[30] and 'contrarian' views may receive amplified media coverage.[31]

1.3 E-petitioning

The increased availability of the Internet and its growing interactivity have altered the relations between the political system and citizens by offering new channels to communicate with political representatives and other citizens, leading to the emergence of new forms of civic engagement. The cyberspace can nowadays be used to sensitise and mobilise online communities to organise collective action.[32] Today's 'digital democracies' show some essential differences from traditional democratic systems. The success of the Internet as a medium for citizen participation has been undoubtedly fostered by the perceived crisis of representative democracy, so that trust in established institutions and organisations is gradually declining in favour of alternative forms of political activism and engagement.[33] E-democracy tools reveal indeed a potential to empower the individual users, allowing them to bypass organised interests and alter the conventional processes of agenda-setting. The Internet holds a strong appeal for the high degree of interactivity and multiple communicative options it offers, engaging users in both text production and reception, allowing for different degrees of publicity, and relying on multiple types of media contents. Moreover, the costs of Internet-based communication are significantly lower compared to traditional offline media.[34] A variety of information and communication technologies (ICTs) lend themselves to supporting and facilitating political participation in the different stages of governance and decision-making, including, e.g., virtual discussions and fora, e-surveys, e-polls and e-petitions.[35]

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[29] Maxwell T. Boykoff, "Communicating in the Anthropocene: The Cultural Politics of Climate Change News Coverage Around the World", in Hansen and Cox, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Environment*, 221-231.

[30] Alissa Quart, "The Trouble with Experts", *Columbia Journalism Review* (July/August 2010).

[31] Maxwell T. Boykoff, "Public Enemy No. 1? Understanding Media Representations of Outlier Views on Climate Change", *American Behavioural Science*, 57.6 (2013), 796-817.

[32] Steffen Albrecht, "E-Consultations: A Review of Current Practice and a Proposal for Opening Up the Process", in Efthimios Tambouris et al., eds., *Electronic Participation: Proceedings of 4th IFIP WG 8.5 International Conference*, ePart 2012, Kristiansand, Norway, September 3-5, 2012 (Heidelberg, Germany: Springer, 2012), 13-24, 13.

[33] Laura Miller, "E-Petitions at Westminster: The Way Forward for Democracy?", *Parliamentary Affairs*, 62.1 (2009), 162-177.

[34] Ralf Lindner and Georg Aichholzer, "Electronic Democracy in Europe: An Introduction", in Ralf Lindner et al., eds., *Electronic Democracy in Europe: Prospects and Challenges of E-Publics, E-Participation and E-Voting* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016), 1-17, 5-6.

[35] Georg Aichholzer and Stefan Strauß, "Electronic Participation in Europe", in Lindner, et al., eds., *Electronic Democracy in Europe*, 55-132.

Traditionally, petitions were "demands for a favour, or for the redressing of an injustice, directed to some established authority".[36] Popular petitioning has long been used as a form of direct and democratic political participation in which, by collecting a significant number of signatures, advocates acquire the power to express a collective need to a higher authority – generally government agencies and business organisations – and request policy changes.[37] Online petitions bring into our time the centuries-old right to petition Parliament, government or the monarch. E-petitions are petitions which can be signed online, by adding personal details such as name and email.[38] Their usage has become so common that, for instance, the number of petitions created on e-government platforms exceeds today by far the number of those submitted by paper.[39] "E-petitions may be viewed as a natural laboratory for determining subjects of public interest".[40] Online petitions may be used as a vehicle to bring the topics and contents of campaigns into the political system in a formal way.[41] Petitioners are able to express in their own words their policy preferences without the mediation of forces such as pundits, pollsters, political parties, news media and researchers.[42]

The role of e-petitioning as access to a form of digital democracy is, nevertheless, controversial. It is valued for its ability to enhance representative democracy, involving and empowering citizens. Still, e-petitions are often criticised as a form of 'slacktivism' or 'clictivism' with limited, if any, impact on politics.[43] The legitimacy of online petitions may also be compromised as signers may use false names. Moreover, since petitions are easy to initiate, websites may attract frivolous causes.[44]

Numerous official and informal international e-petitioning platforms are found on the web, controlled or sponsored by a wide range of bodies. Platforms can be managed by: national governments and executive branches, such as *We the People* in the US; parliaments, such as the Scottish Parliament; hybrid models combining government and parliament, like the petitions to the UK Government and Parliament; local governments and parliaments, for instance Dover or Brighton; independent platforms

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[36] Lex Heerma van Voss, "Introduction", in van Voss, ed., *Petitions in Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2001), 1-10, 1.

[37] Ann Macintosh, "Using Information and Communication Technologies to Enhance Citizen Engagement in The Policy Process", in Joanne Caddy and Christian Vergez, eds., *Promise and Problems of eDemocracy: Challenges of Online Citizen Engagement* (Paris: OECD, 2003), 19-142, 56.

[38] Aichholzer and Strauß, "Electronic Participation in Europe", 61.

[39] Scott Wright, "E-petitioning", in Stephen Coleman and Deen Freelon, eds., *Handbook of Digital Politics* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgan Publishing, 2015), 136-150, 136.

[40] Loni Hagen et al., "Introducing Textual Analysis Tools for Policy Informatics: A Case Study of E-petitions", *Proceedings of the 16th Annual International Conference on Digital Government Research* (2015), 10-19, 10.

[41] Aichholzer and Strauß, "Electronic Participation in Europe", 93.

[42] See Hagen et al., "Introducing Textual Analysis Tools", 11; Hagen et al., "Understanding Citizens' Direct Policy Suggestions to the Federal Government: A Natural Language Processing and Topic Modeling Approach", 48th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (2015), 2134-2143, 2135.

[43] Wright, "E-petitioning", 136.

[44] Hagen et al., "Understanding Citizens' Direct Policy Suggestions", 2135.

funded through charity, such as the British *38 Degrees*, the American *Avaaz* and the Australian *GetUp!*; commercial platforms relying on advertising, such as *Change.org*.[45]

Change.org, object of the present study, is one of the most popular petition websites in the world, operated by an American for-profit corporation.[46] The platform makes revenues by allowing paid advertising to promote campaigns, which can be bought by advocacy organisations or common petitioners and signatories. *Change.org* is active on questions such as human rights, environmental protection, animals' rights, health, economics and criminal justice. Anyone can start an online campaign through the website, addressing decision-makers to drive solutions to local, national, and global problems and gain supporters through media coverage and online sharing.

1.3.1 Previous genre studies on petitionary and fundraising discourse

Historical petitionary discourse has been the object of multiple studies, most of which highlighting the submissive stance assumed by the writer and the deferential portrayal of the addressee.[47] Petitions have been viewed as a hybrid genre, exploiting features from more than one domain, and as members of a "genre colony"[48] consisting of different petitionary genres, e.g. legislative, epistolary and judicial.[49] Traditional petitions relied on a highly formulaic language and, also considering their repetitiveness, several studies have identified their rhetorical structure. In particular, based on previous studies on medieval English parliamentary petitioning by Fisher et al. and Dodd, Peikola investigated petitions written in the context of the Salem witch-trials in 1692, in which he distinguished a four-move structure, comprising:[50]

1. Introductory move, enacted through
    i. Address, which respectfully named the addressee;

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ii.   Identification of the petitioner/text, which identified the text, e.g. by defining it as a "petition", "request" or "address", and the petitioner, by stating his/her name and location;

2. Statement of grievance or difficulty, the *narratio*, which described the nature of the problem that the petitioners wished the addressee to redress;

3. Request for redress, the *petitio*, in which, as a consequence, petitioners explicitly pleaded/supplicated the addressee to solve the problem;

4. Appeal for remedy, a conclusion in which petitioners invoked the grace and charity of the ruler.

From being a highly formalised text type during the Early Modern English period, petitions later acquired features more typical of administrative prose.[51] Studies on both paper and online petitions have regarded them as instances of persuasive writing and as a special kind of epistolary texts.[52] Several previous studies have focused on the factors – including linguistic and semantic features – which influence the e-petition popularity.[53] For instance, Hagen et al. analysed the US platform *We the People*, which organises the text of the petition in a short title and a detailed description.[54] E-petition texts are viewed as supposedly constructed with the aim of enhancing endorsement by other citizens through a series of discursive strategies, e.g. by suggesting the need for urgent action, by exploiting emotional appeals and by providing detailed supporting data.[55] Petition texts may indeed be particularly informative, by offering documentation, facts, explanations and justifications and including materials such as website links, videos, photographs or articles.[56]

The genre of contemporary online petitions also bears several similarities with the discourse of fundraising letters, which has the related purpose of informing the recipient about a problematic issue and persuading him/her to financially support the good cause introduced. A number of studies have

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[51] Thomas Kohnen, "On Defining Text Types within Historical Linguistics: The Case of Petitions/Statutes", *European Journal of English Studies*, 5.2 (2001), 197-203, 199-200.

[52] Loni Hagen et al., "E-Petition Popularity: Do Linguistic and Semantic Factors Matter?", *Government Information Quarterly* (2016), 1-13; See Anna Vladimirovna Kurjanovich, "Multiparadigmatic Character of the Petition Genre in the Mirror of Modern Linguistics (An Analysis of Online-Petitions as a Special Kind of Epistolary Texts)", *Novosibirsk State Pedagogical University Bulletin*, 2 (2016) 150-159; Yan Chen et al., "A Multi-appeal Model of Persuasion for Online Petition Success: A Linguistic Cue-Based Approach", *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, 20.2 (2019), 105-131.

[53] See Hagen et al., "Understanding Citizens' Direct Policy Suggestions", Hagen et al., "Introducing Textual Analysis Tools"; Hagen et al., "E-Petition Popularity"; Ahmed El Noshokaty et al., "Success Factors of Online Petitions: Evidence from Change.org", in Tung X. Bui and Ralph H. Sprague, eds., *2016 49th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (Koloa, HI: IEEE, Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, 2016), 1979-1985.

[54] Hagen et al., "E-Petition Popularity".

[55] Ibid.

[56] See Helen Briassoulis, "Online Petitions: New Tools of Secondary Analysis?", *Qualitative Research*, 10.6 (2010), 715-727, 716, and Hagen et al., "E-Petition Popularity".

analysed fundraising discourse form a genre perspective.[57] In particular, Biber et al. investigated a corpus of direct mail letters for non-profit fundraising,[58] identifying the following move scheme:

1. Getting attention, attracting the reader by means of
    i. General pleasantries and/or
    ii. Quotation, story or shocking/unexpected statement;
2. Introducing the cause and/or establishing credentials of the organisation by
    i. Indicating a general problem or need;
    ii. Highlighting a specific problem or need;
    iii. Highlighting the successes of past organisation efforts;
    iv. Outlining the mission of the organisation;
3. Soliciting response;
    i. Soliciting financial support, by
        a. Stating the benefit of support to the need/problem, and/or
        b. Asking directly for pledge/donation, and/or
        c. Reminding of past support to encourage future support, and/or
    ii. Soliciting other response, such as volunteering;
4. Offering incentives, by
    i. Offering tangible incentive, and/or
    ii. Offering intangible incentive;
5. Referencing insert materials;
6. Expressing gratitude by
    i. Thanking for past financial or other support, and/or
    ii. Thanking for current and future financial or other support;
7. Concluding with pleasantries, to bring the letter to a pleasant close.

2. Aims and Purposes

The present paper explores the discourse of e-petitioning about single-use plastic reduction in the United Kingdom. The study aims at uncovering the recurring rhetorical and discursive strategies exploited by petitioners to gain support for their causes. In particular, the investigation focuses on the

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[57] See Bhatia, "Generic Patterns in Fundraising Discourse", *New Directions for Philanthropic Fundraising*, 22 (1998), 95-110.

[58] Douglas Biber et al., *Discourse on the Move: Using Corpus Analysis to Describe Discourse Structure* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007), 43-73.

way e-petitioners raise public awareness about environmental issues and regulative needs and appeal to the readers' civic sense and sensitivity.

3. Methods and Data

The research is carried out on a corpus collecting a selection of online petitions against unnecessary plastic usage published on the British version of *Change.org*. The texts were retrieved by using the search function of the website, with the search words "plastic" and "UK". Petitions focusing on other related issues, such as improving recycling processes or promoting hemp cultivation to obtain bio-materials, were discarded in order to obtain a thematically coherent corpus.

The final corpus includes 108 petitions created between 4th January 2016 and 20th November 2018. The collected texts include: the name/s of addressee/s; the name/nickname and location of the creator; the number of supporters (to date, 30th November 2018); the date of creation; the text of the petition; if present, the titles of embedded videos and the captions in the pictures included. The final corpus comprises a total of 29,364 tokens and 3,862 types. The length of petitions is extremely variable, ranging from 70 to 1,098 words.

E-petitions were examined from a genre analysis perspective, attempting to define a move scheme for the emerging genre. Being online petitions a recently developed genre, performing a new form of citizen-State interaction, this preliminary investigation attempted at devising the appropriate analytical categories by deriving them from previous scientific literature and adjusting them to the specific elements and purposes of the online texts under study. In particular, traditional petitions and fundraising letters were taken into consideration as genres showing similar features to e-petitions in terms of aims and conventions, although applied in different contexts and cases.[59] More specifically (as shown in Paragraph 1.3.1) extensive genre studies on petitions date back to several centuries ago and focus on events of completely different nature, namely Salem witch-trials. As for fundraising letters, it has to be noticed that the collection of funds is not the primary goal of online petitions. Nevertheless, the analytical tools designed for such diverse genres proved to be particularly convenient for the present study. Their rhetorical moves were thus adapted to the analysis of the digital and hybrid genre of e-petitions by combining them with the interactive, multimodal and intertextual features identified in online genres such as coupon advertising (see Paragraph 4.1).[60]

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[59] Peikola, "Supplicatory Voices"; Biber et al., *Discourse on the Move*.
[60] See Maria Cristina Aiezza, "Go Before They're Gone: A Comparative Analysis of Online Travel Coupons Advertising", in Maurizio Gotti et al., eds., *Ways of Seeing, Ways of Being: Representing the Voices of Tourism* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2017), 102-129.

The corpus was also investigated from a discourse analysis perspective, in order to identify emerging discourses in the new forms of petitionary and environmental activism.[61] Moreover, considering the high relevance of video testimonies and scientific documentaries in the development of the British sensitivity to the issue of single-use plastic, a specific section (see Paragraph 4.2) was devoted to the recontextualisation of multimedia references in the petitions.

4. Analysis

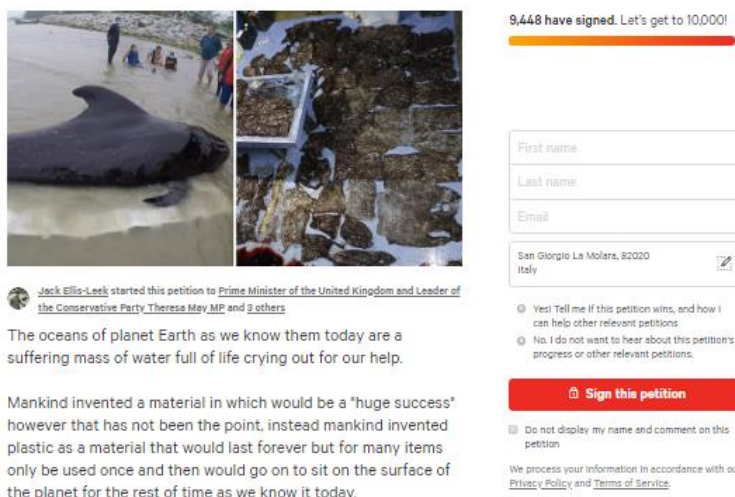### 4.1 Generic and Discursive Trends in Environmental E-petitions

Petitions created on *Change.org* follow a fixed scheme provided by the website, while leaving users a great amount of freedom when detailing textual contents. By way of example, Fig. 1 shows a section of an e-petition from the corpus.

The following paragraphs describe and exemplify the main structural units retrieved in the texts under analysis and the discursive tendencies identified. It is necessary to bear in mind that petitions are generally written by citizens from all cultural backgrounds, especially in response to some piece of news or distressing life event. It is therefore not surprising that some texts include incorrect information – although inserted in good faith – or reveal low language proficiency and/or features of impulsive writing lacking review, typical elements of user-generated contents. Poorly constructed sentences, typos, punctuation and spelling mistakes (e.g. "it's" instead of "its" or "there" for "their") are thus to be found in the present corpus.

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[61] See Hansen and Cox, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Environment*.

Fig. 1. Example of e-petition on Change.org. Jack Ellis-Leek, "Ban Single Use Plastics and Provide Aid to the Oceans", Change.org, United Kingdom (11 June 2019). © 2019, Change.org, PBC

Attracting attention. In the vast amount of petitions available on the website, appellants need to persuade web users to continue reading and to share their own cause. This function is enacted primarily by choosing an incisive title and representative multimedia. As suggested in *Change.org* guidelines, the title of a petition should be short, direct and focused on the desired solution.[62] Titles in the corpus clearly specify the issues addressed, in this case expressing an opposition to the usage of plastics in several kinds of products: packaging (21 petitions), bags (17), plastics in general (16), single-use plastics in general (11), bottles (13), straws (8), cutlery (5), menstrual tampons (3), balloons (3), tea bags (2), and cigarette filters (1). *Change.org* guidelines also suggest that titles should communicate a sense of urgency, which is achieved through the use of 'shouty' capitalisations (in 17 cases, see e.g. Fig. 1), the insertion of the adverb "NOW" (4 instances) and imperative sentences (69 petitions). Requests are addressed to decision-makers, both aiming at a regulative change, expressed by the verb "ban" (in 26 titles, see e.g. Fig. 1), at a national level, such as "Ban plastic bags in the UK", at a company/retailer level, as in "Ban disposable plastic straws in Morrisons" or at a local and even site-specific level, like "Ban plastic water bottles at Kingston University". The imperative mood in petitions can also call for a behavioural change, such as "ditch" (4) or "stop" (13 petitions), as in "Stop wasting plastic packaging!". In 8 petitions, the aim of the cause is stated through elliptical sentences, such as

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[62] Change.org, "Start a Petition", https://www.change.org/start-a-petition, last accessed 20 March 2018.

"All UK Supermarkets To Stop Selling Plastic Bags", with the initial omission of expressions such as "In order for" or "I am calling for". Other structures found in titles comprise appeals directed to readers, engaging them to "get" (2), "tell" (2) companies or institutions to avoid some practice which is harmful for the environment, such as "Get Diageo, Carlsberg, Heineken & more to swap their 6-pack plastic rings with eco ones", or to "stop" (2) supermarkets from using unnecessary plastics.

Nearly all of the petitions (102 over 108) attract the reader's attention also through the use of visual media. More specifically, 97 represent the theme of the petitions with a picture, while 6 through a video. Most of the images aim at shocking and moving the viewer by showing the results of plastic pollution on the seas and shores (26 petitions) and on marine animals (17), such as turtles, dolphins, whales, birds entangled in or feeding on plastics (see e.g. Fig. 1). Another section of the pictures simply shows the plastic items the petitioner wishes to eliminate (21 petitions, see e.g. Fig. 2) or their sustainable alternatives (9). Among the embedded videos, two represent the entry films created by two primary schools for the *LitFilmFest*, a festival for young pupils which champions English literacy, creativity, digital skills and attention for global issues. The children involved aimed therefore at spreading environmental-friendly behaviours by setting the example. Another inspiring video embedded in the petitions is a call for environmental stewardship by natural historian Sir David Attenborough, a key figure in the fight to reduce plastic consumption (see also Paragraphs 1.2 and 4.2).

Establishing a discourse community. The platform enables signatories to subscribe to news alerts to be informed about the progress of the petition.

Using pressure tactics. The site shows the current number of signatories and invites the reader to help reach a specific amount of signatures.

Identifying the petitioner. Only subscribed users can start a petition. In the petition format, petitioners are presented though a name and surname/name of organisation/nickname and, if present, a personal picture.

Addressing decision-makers. Petitions are generally directed to the relevant authorities. The website suggests the petitioner should choose addressees who could actually respond to the request, starting from lower levels instead of aiming at higher offices. Nevertheless, among the 61 campaigns appealing to political figures and bodies, many are directed to international and national institutions, including the EU Parliament and the whole UK Government, Prime Minister Theresa May, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Michael Gove and local governments. Other petitions also

address London Mayor Sadiq Khan and specific city councils. In 5 cases, e-petitions aim at changing the plastics policies of local schools or universities and of their facilities, such as "Bill Bryson library café" or the "Bistro at Milngavie". Another section of texts (21 petitions) confronts manufacturing companies, such as Carlsberg or Coca Cola and supermarkets/shops (30 instances), calling into question all retailers in general and/or specific chains such as Tesco or Sainsbury's. Petitioners seem to aim, therefore, both at a larger political and social change and at making an impact at a smaller and local level.

Establishing credentials. All petitioners clearly show their care for our planet by the fact itself of starting a petition to reduce plastic waste. Yet, on some occasions (22 petitions), writers explicitly present themselves as responsible citizens, especially when the story is told from a young activist's perspective, as in "My name is Oscar, I'm 15 years old and I'm passionate about saving our environment from plastic waste.... When I'm not at school, I'm an environmental blogger". These petitioners tend to highlight their efforts for environmental protection or declare they gained awareness of the detrimental effects of some human actions.

Change.org platform itself publishes constant 'Updates' on the number of signatures and on the external coverage the petition has obtained. The platform also allows signatories to endorse the petition by commenting on their 'Reasons for signing'. In one case, the author herself also refers in her text to the support already obtained by the current petition – against plastics in menstrual products – and to its presence in well-known women's magazines such as *Vogue* and *Glamour*.

Indicating a problem. In this fundamental part, present in all of the texts in the corpus, the petitioners describe the nature of the general or specific problem that they wish the addressee to help redress by relying on different appeals.

In most cases (in 62 texts), the problem is detailed by reporting scientific information, which is devoted a varying amount of space. This section may be even physically demarcated in the text in a separate paragraph, such as "PLASTIC POLLUTION FACTS AND STATS". Generally, writers gained awareness of the issue after being exposed to some piece of news – especially if of the shocking type – (see also Paragraph 4.2). As a consequence, when starting their own petitions, they tend to include more detailed information retrieved from different media, such as online news articles, environmental activism websites, Wikipedia entries, official regulations, etc. Users may tend to copy and paste these relevant data or, more often, they may re-narrate and re-contextualise scientific information without even specifying their references. For instance, 9 petitions report the gloomy estimation according to which "by 2050 there will be more plastic than fish in the sea", yet, just one of

the petitioners attributes this piece of information to the appropriate source by adding the phrase "according to research by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation". Authors show therefore a tendency to engage in scientific popularisation, by explaining, in their own words, the consequences of plastic waste, as in "PLASTIC BAGS are often ingested by animals because they cannot distinguish whether it is food or not. As a result, it clogs their intestines which results in death by starvation".

The problem of plastic pollution may also be expressed through an emotional appeal (41 texts), attempting at moving readers both through the memories of catastrophic marine damages (see also Paragraph 4.2) and through severe statements, such as "We are drowning in a sea of plastic", "This plastic is becoming a deadly toy to dolphins and seals" or "Balloons don't go to heaven".

The issue may be also presented by simply narrating a personal experience which awakened the writer's environmental conscience (38 petitions), as in "Recently I have visited topshop in London and I noticed that they use paper bags.... if they can use paper bags in London, why can't they use paper bags in all of their shops?" or "I, a full-time self-employed jeweller, place about 20 (if not more) orders with CG every year. If I receive 20 plastic bags per order, that is 400 PER YEAR".

All of the digital campaigns under study clearly aim at obtaining a regulative and/or behavioural change. Nevertheless, some e-petitions (31) emphasise the presence of legal loopholes needing political attention. In particular, some texts state that companies should be subject to stricter laws, otherwise they might tend to prefer cheaper solutions, disregarding their environmental responsibilities, as in "the lack of regulation ... is allowing every company to choose the easier option of using these paper/plastic cups". Some petitions openly stress the fact that the burden of plastic waste reduction should not be left on customers alone, as in "The consumer is not simply going to stop buying plastic packaged goods. Therefore the change needs to come from higher up in the chain". Other petitions point to some single-use plastic items which have not been the object of sufficient public attention or regulations, as in "the UK is holding a consultation on the banning of plastic drinking straws and plastic stemmed cotton buds. But there is one glaring omission from this consultation and that is tampons with plastic applicators". Several petitions also stress the limits of the 5 pence levy on plastic bags, which should be further discouraged until a total ban is reached.

Requesting redress. This section represents a central part of a petition, in which authors appeal rulers for action. This section tends to be inserted as a direct consequence of the circumstances narrated in the previous move, even though a set of authors (23) start their texts by stating the result they wish to obtain through the petition and then motivate their plea.

Decision-makers are generally referred to indirectly, by stating, for instance "the purpose of this petition is to make it a mandatory legal requirement for all manufacturers to include on their plastic

packaging a warning label" or through a direct exhortation as in "Simply.. BAN PLASTIC DRINK BOTTLES FROM THE MEAL DEAL. Come on Boots, let's do this".

Several petitioners (36) point to other companies/institutions which have already taken steps to reduce their plastic footprint. These are shown as examples of positive behaviour or legislation, as in "catch up with retailers across the globe who are ditching single-use plastic". Others (14 petitions) refer to the advances already obtained in other or similar sectors, as a proof of the human possibility to intervene also in the field of plastic policies, as in "We can get gluten-free and dairy-free but we unfortunately can't get plastic-free products".

Some petitions (17) also contain a critique against the governmental bodies or companies addressed, accused especially for their tendency to talk about environmental friendliness in abstract terms instead of taking concrete and prompt action. For instance, (in 6 cases) the petitioners refer to the companies' sustainability reports or statements in order to urge them to practise what they preach, as in "I am calling on Boots to care as much about our planet as they claim to". Theresa May's *25 Year Plan* (see also Paragraph 1.1) is also criticised (in 5 texts) for its lack of urgency, as it establishes long-term reduction goals, while plastic pollution would require immediate action, e.g. "25years is unacceptable and passes the responsibility to a future government instead of the current one". Moreover, uncertainty about plastic policies in a post-Brexit Britain is expressed, as in "There is growing concern about the loss of European environmental standards once the UK leaves the EU".

Offering incentives. Petitioners may persuade their twofold audience, which comprises both decision-makers and citizens, by referring to intangible rewards. Rulers may be invited to implement environmental-friendly practices and norms, to demonstrate their good citizenship and thus be rightfully considered as leaders and inspire the others by example (in 17 cases), as in "Brands like Costa Coffee need to lead the way and show Coca-Cola, and the world, the proof of concept that going plastic-free is achievable for large companies across the globe".

Readers are also offered incentives for signing (in 40 texts), by indicating the benefits which a victorious petition may bring, especially relying on the personal satisfaction that contributing to a good cause may generate, such as "future generations of women will thank you for standing up for our planet" or "Let's save the planet for our children!".

Referencing other materials. Petitions may link to external sources to provide the reader with further information about the problematic issue or the campaign presented. In particular, 18 of the petitions embed hyperlinks redirecting the user to YouTube videos, online newspaper articles or to websites, Facebook pages, Twitter hashtags and accounts of activist groups.

Inviting to support the cause. Common citizens appear to be the primary recipients of the petitions. The website structure itself urges the reader to "Sign the petition" and insert his/her personal data to validate the signature. Nevertheless, in 28 texts, the writer explicitly requires the readers to "sign" or "support" the petition and in 20 cases he/she urges them to "share" the petition online. One of the petitioners also requests readers to financially sponsor the petition, so that it will be shown to other potential supporters on *Change.org* or on its distribution channels:[63] "You can also contribute anything upwards of £3 with a few clicks, this shows our petition to a much wider audience".

Expressing gratitude. In 20 instances, petitioners end their texts by thanking readers for their time and support, e.g. "Thanks for reading, and for caring".

Concluding with pleasantries. In 3 cases, references to epistolary genres are particularly evident, as the authors end their texts with salutations typical of formal letters, such as "Sincerely, Clare", "Best Regards, David" or of informal messages, as "Ros x".

4.2 The 'Blue Planet effect'

Many of the petitions call on the British audience for action by relying on common visual memories, shocking videos showing the consequences of marine pollution. In several cases, the video news referred to had been circulated on websites and social media. In particular, two petitions recall "a cringe-inducing video that's gone viral, where a team of scientists pull an entire plastic straw from the nostril of a sea turtle whilst it winces in pain and bleeds".[64] Two other petitions refer to a video showing a whale sadly found dead in Indonesia with six kilos of plastic in its stomach.[65]

Apart from such testimonies from the web, petitions also refer to three official documentaries: one text alludes to the film *A Plastic Ocean*;[66] three causes mention the episode *A Plastic Tide*[67] from the *Sky* series *Ocean Rescue 2*; but, most significantly, nine petitions quote *BBC Blue Planet II* and six name its host, Sir David Attenborough.

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[63] Change.org, "Promoted Petitions FAQs", (11 July 2018), https://help.change.org/s/article/Promoted-Petitions-FAQs?language=en_UK, last accessed 20 March 2018.

[64] See Jane J. Lee, "How Did Sea Turtle Get a Straw Up Its Nose?", *National Geographic* (5 June 2018).

[65] See Laura Parker, "Sperm Whale Found Dead with 13 Pounds of Plastic in Its Stomach", *National Geographic* (21 November 2018).

[66] Craig Leeson, *A Plastic Ocean*, film (U.S.A.: Plastic Oceans International, 2016).

[67] Sky International, "A Plastic Tide", Ocean Rescue 2.7, video (2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D35YnZ7_WxM&feature=youtu.be, last accessed 20 March 2018.

On 10th December 2017, the seventh episode of *Blue Planet II*, its season finale *Our Blue Planet*, was aired on *BBC1*.[68] The documentary examined the role of anthropogenic activity on the seas, also showing the results of some redressing actions. The British audience seemed to be particularly affected by the section denouncing the vast amount of plastic waste found in our oceans worldwide, causing the intoxication and death of marine fauna. Some of the most heart-breaking scenes are mentioned in one of the petitions, which, nevertheless, does not quote their source: "Recent shocking footage shows albatrosses unwittingly feeding their chicks pieces of plastic. Whale calves are dying because they are drinking their mothers' milk that has been contaminated by plastic".

In an age which discredits experts, spreads fake news, denies climate change, Attenborough appears nevertheless to be still regarded as a reliable reference. In his long career at the BBC, Attenborough has become "an avatar of scientific authority within natural history broadcasting",[69] respected for his knowledge and institutional role but also able to mobilise sentiments and feelings of the British people. Attenborough's "windswept hair, the whispering voice, and the simultaneously authoritative and self-effacing demeanour"[70] and his quintessential Englishness have contributed to constructing his unique television persona. He has been closely identified with the corporation for which he has worked for more than half a century and has always supported the goal of public service broadcasting to democratise knowledge.[71] As evidenced in the memories recalled in another petition, already before *Blue Planet II* was aired, Attenborough had long been considered a defender of nature, whose conservationist ideals the author wishes to be now put into practice:

> I grew up being educated by the programmes of Sir David Attenborough. I want my children to grow up in a better, cleaner world. I want them to see a less polluted world, the world shown to us in the wildlife documentaries I've watched my entire life.... I want them to see the wishes of Sir Attenborough and like minded people, yourselves included, come true.[72]

The *Blue Planet II* series had an unforeseen impact, raising awareness about plastic pollution, contributing to 'constructing' plastic waste as a 'social problem', engaging people to tackle the issue of single-use plastic and influencing the UK environmental policy.[73] The effect of the series is also

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[68] David Attenborough, "Our Blue Planet", *Blue Planet II* 1.7, video (U.K.: BBC Earth, 2017), https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b09jbn5f/blue-planet-ii-series-1-7-our-blue-planet, last accessed 20 March 2018.

[69] Michael Jeffries, "BBC Natural History Versus Science Paradigms", *Science as Culture*, 12.4 (2003), 527-545, 527.

[70] Huggan, *Nature's Saviours*, 21.

[71] Ibid., 25.

[72] Moyn AlIslam, "Supermarkets: Stop using Plastic Bags, Reduce Waste, Protect Our Environment & Wildlife", Change.org, United Kingdom (3 October 2016), https://www.change.org/p/supermarkets-stop-using-plastic-bags-reduce-waste-protect-our-environment-wildlife?lang=en-GB, last accessed 20 March 2018.

[73] See BBC, "Attenborough 'Astonished' by Blue Planet Impact", *BBC Newsround* (25 June 2018).

evident in the increasing amount of petitions against the excessive use of plastic initiated in the UK after the episode. Of all the petitions in the corpus, 24 were started before 10th December 2017 and 86 after that date. British petitioners seem to have accepted the call for action launched by Sir Attenborough at the end of the season finale video. His message was also embedded as a 40 seconds video extract in one petition[74] (see also Paragraph 4.1) and quoted in another:

> Never before have we had such an awareness of what we are doing to the planet and never before have we had the power to do something about that. Surely we have a responsibility to care for our blue planet. The future of humanity, and indeed all life on earth, now depends on us.[75]

Another petition, demanding the supermarket Waitrose to stop using non-recyclable cups to offer its customers complimentary coffees, also had a 'real-life' counterpart, documented in the image uploaded in the petition (see Fig. 2) and in online news.[76] Protesters, guided by the petitioner, campaigned outside Chichester's Waitrose dressed as marine animals and brandishing a poster of David Attenborough, with the sea in the background, which read "Come on Waitrose Ditch this cup" and used the hashtag "#doitforDavid". Whereas the retailer may disregard a humble citizen's request, it might instead feel pressured to respond to Sir Attenborough's plea.

Fig. 2. Kay Mawer, "Waitrose - Stop Using Disposable and Non-Recyclable Coffee Cups NOW!", *Change.org*, *United Kingdom* (5 February 2018). © 2019, Change.org, PBC.

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[74] David Attenborough, "Our Blue Planet", video embedded in Clare Forbes, "Remove Single Use Plastic Bottles from Milngavie Primary School", *Change.org*, United Kingdom (26 January 2018), https://www.change.org/p/clare-forbes-remove-single-use-plastic-bottles-from-milngavie-primary-school?lang=en-GB, last accessed 20 March 2018.

[75] David Attenborough, "Our Blue Planet", cit. in Monir El Moudden, "Act on Cutting Plastic Waste NOW by Introducing a New Act of Parliament Post Brexit", *Change.org*, United Kingdom (12 January 2018), https://www.change.org/p/theresa-may-mp-act-on-cutting-plastic-waste-in-2018-by-introducing-a-new-act-of-parliament-post-brexit?lang=en-GB, last accessed 20 March 2018.

[76] See Johnston Press Staff, "Protesters Take to Fancy Dress in Plea for Supermarket to Ban Use of Non-Recyclable Coffee Cups", *INews* (7 February 2018), https://inews.co.uk/news/environment/protesters-take-fancy-dress-plea-supermarket-ban-use-non-recyclable-coffee-cups, last accessed 20 March 2018.

5. Conclusions

The recent developments of the Internet have enabled the emergence of new forms of digital activism, involving the interaction of citizens with State and businesses through ICTs. Online petitioning platforms, in particular, have allowed users, even with limited digital skills, to publicly express their stance on a variety of issues and conflicts affecting their rights and lives. Public opinion has been deeply affected by the revelation of the enormous damages caused by anthropogenic activity on our planet. Out of the many environmental campaigns examined in the present study, only a small minority have reached the desired aim – at the time of writing this paper, only 4 over 108 petitions ended up in a victory. Nevertheless, their very creation and multiplication has certainly contributed to touching consciences and establishing the overconsumption of plastics as a 'social issue' requiring immediate solutions.

The present study applied a genre-based perspective to the analysis of e-petitions, aiming to provide a novel contribution to the research in political discourse. The analysis revealed that the fixed scheme and guidelines on how to write a petition provided by *Change.org* did not prevent users from personalising their texts. A recurring number of optional rhetorical sequences was identified, notably a mixture of features from different genres, from petitions to fundraising letters, imbued with the interactive capabilities of the web. Nevertheless, as in the traditional petitioning discourse, the *narratio* and *petitio* components still form the core parts of contemporary e-petitions.

A great amount of petitioners attempt at persuading their readers about the negative impacts of plastics on marine life by quoting scientific data retrieved from multiple sources, including newspaper articles and websites, and referring to shocking images shown in viral videos and documentaries. In particular, the study confirmed the key and authoritative role that natural historian David Attenborough and his programmes have had in the construction of British environmental conservationism. Attenborough's plea for the reduction of plastic consumption for the sake of our survival on this planet seems to have fallen on fertile ground. Especially after seeing the devastation that humans have caused in his *Blue Planet II*, many citizens decided not only to change their lives but also to exploit the power of the Internet to prompt others, starting from the smallest shops and ultimately reaching companies and governments, in an effort to change their consumption habits and norms.

The study also evidenced a change in the contemporary practices of consumption of news and specialised knowledge. In an age in which citizens often come across and scan information which was shared by their ties on social media, the boundaries between hearsay and official documents are becoming blurred. All sources seem to become part of a shared knowledge and to be equally contributing to opinion formation. It would therefore appear particularly interesting to further explore

the transformation and recontextualisation processes that media news and specialised texts undergo in user-generated messages.