

Political Communication and Social Change. Political Communication and Challenges in the Digital Age

*Comunicación política y cambio social.
Comunicación política y desafíos en la era digital*

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- Guest paper -

Reception date: 20 December 2017

Published: 1 January 2018

To cite this article: Solito, L. & Sorrentino, C. (2018): Political Communication and Social Change. Political Communication and Challenges in the Digital Age, *Icono 14*, volumen 16 (1), pp. 22-41. doi: 10.7195/ri14.v16i1.1161

Abstract

The relationship between political institutions and citizens has been redefined in the digital environment. The aim of this paper is to identify the main circumstances of this transformation. In this regard, individualization has been a key factor. So far, this relationship had been based on collective commitment and a global vision of society. Instead, it now depends on personal commitment and interest in individual issues. The voting process, traditionally based on affiliation, is now conditioned by voters' opinions. Public opinion can no longer be taken for granted. In addition, persuasion as the only strategy to connect with the electorate is insufficient. Therefore, professionals of political communication have been forced to use the logic of marketing and to explore the potential of digital media, to obtain more consensus and visibility in an increasingly competitive context of communication.

Key Words

Political Communication - Citizenship - Public Opinion - Digital Media

Resumen

La relación entre las instituciones políticas y la ciudadanía se ha redefinido en el entorno digital. El objetivo de este artículo es identificar los principales factores que enmarcan esta transformación. La individualización ha sido un factor clave en este sentido. Hasta ahora, los vínculos entre los ciudadanos se sustentaban en el compromiso colectivo y una visión global de la sociedad. En cambio, actualmente se basan en el compromiso personal y el interés por los asuntos individuales. El proceso de votación, tradicionalmente basado en la afiliación, depende ahora de las opiniones de los votantes. La opinión pública ya no puede darse por sentada. Además, la persuasión como única estrategia para conectar con el electorado resulta insuficiente. Por eso, los profesionales de la comunicación política se han visto forzados a emplear la lógica del marketing y a explorar el potencial de los medios digitales, para obtener mayor consenso y visibilidad en un contexto comunicativo cada vez más competitivo.

Palabras clave

Comunicación Política - Ciudadanía - Opinión Pública - Medios Digitales

1. Introduction

Political communication is going to be increasingly relevant to define the relationship between political institutions and citizens; however, its capacity to influence people may be retained only after carefully reflecting on] the many changes that lately have affected both politics and media systems. Nonetheless, these changes should consider another aspect that has influenced our society in the last few decades, but has only partially been inspected by scholars and observers, that is, the individualization process and the subsequent changes affecting both the concept of citizenship and the ways citizens relate themselves to politics.

So far, such development has mainly been seen as the overcoming of unified electorates that speak to very marked classed differences. According to the categories employed by experts in electoral behaviour, such overcomings have long changed the process of voting from an act grounded in affiliation, to one connoted by voters' opinions.

This perspective has outlined the central role played by the analysis of persuasion processes to influence voters in political communication studies. This, in turn, has led progressively researchers, political institutions, and political communication professionals to employ a marketing logic aimed at gaining the an increasingly unstable political assent consensus; in this sense, the political strategies known as *going public* and *permanent campaign* have become crucial.

The volatility of electorates, so evident throughout Europe – with the partial exception of Angela Merkel's steady leadership in Germany – is the logical validation of a politics managed according to such marketing strategies. The same happens in our consumer society, which is characterized by rapidly made, obsolescent products and fashions, and, by extension, candidates and political proposals.

Therefore, there is a pressing need to redefine the relationship between citizens and politics, in order to leave behind that conception according to which public opinion is only an element at stake to be contended for through flattering, indulging or persuading it (Grossi 2004, 2012); in other words, there is a need to go beyond what Manin (1997) defined as "audience democracy".

Some of the reasons behind this redefinition will provide a frame for our analysis:

- a. The way individuals experience reality has changed a lot in our modern society, and this change reflects on their relationship with politics: apparently, they show less concern in it, though actually new requests arise by critical citizens (Norris, 1999), whose careful and sceptical surveillance is defined as counter-democracy by Rosanvallon (2006);
- b. From this ensues political actors' need to gain visibility in order to operate in a far more competitive context, in which public opinion cannot be taken for granted and, by contrast, the requests get increasingly complex, calling for an accurate accountability;
- c. James Carey (1989)'s message provides a valid view to ensure that such changes actually take place. As early as thirty years ago, he suggested we move beyond a transmission view of communication based on the production of messages whose sole purpose is to persuade, to influence or to manipulate, embracing instead a ritual – or sharing – view of communication that generates effective interactions between transmitter and receiver;
- d. Such view is also coherent with the horizontal, inclusive and participatory essence of the digital media, which are however not exploited to their fullest, but only as tools that channel concepts and production models typical of traditional communication via new media.

2. Politics and individualized citizens

The citizens' relationship with politics has not weakened; instead, it has been redefined by a personal, rather than a collective commitment, and by the attention to single themes, rather than to a global view of society (Dahlgren, 2009). Several expressions have been coined to describe this evolution: sub-politics; life politics; life-style politics (Beck, Giddens, Lash, 1997; Bennett, 1998). These terms highlight the progressive penetration of everyday themes and issues into institutional

politics. By now, the themes discussed at both local and supranational political level range from the environment we live in, to our affective relationships; from the way one disposes of waste, to the criteria employed in following and stopping medical care, to one's favourite consumption modes.

The following redefinition of the connection between the political dimension and the private, existential one brings about its side effects on the public space, which is now characterised by a variety of arenas (Marini, 2017). In turn, the compelling redefinition of classical key concepts like pluralism forces one to analyse the new forms of interdependence occurring between citizens and political institutions, within a society whose growing wealth exposes citizens to the controversial relation between bonding and bridging. Bonding reinforces solidarity within inclusive and cohesive social groups, which gives a strong sense of belonging to their members, while at the same time it may shut others out. Instead, bridging establishes new connections and activates personal obligations among strangers (Magatti, 2001). Civil society moves between the risks associated to social worlds characterised by steady relationships that often become self-referential, and rapidly increasing relationships that are often superficial – thus easily deteriorated. This is the controversial question between the centrifugal force of individualization processes and the unavoidable centripetal needs imposed by adequate forms of identification.

The individualization process is supported by the quantitative and qualitative expansion of the social worlds inhabited by the majority of people, as well as by the subsequent multiplication of their social associations. The way individuals affect the interaction of such environments defines the path of their peculiar experience of reality, if we follow the definition of experience as “the process by which memory of what has been lived deposits in the subject and is synthesized” (Jedlowski, 1994, 69).

Modern experience is a form of experience that constantly builds itself: it is the outcome of a process of construction, rather than something owned. Such a different process of attribution progressively affects identity formation, even regarding political affiliation, which is distinguished by a diminished sense of belonging and

by many undercurrents. The process of selecting the many opportunities at hand is the quintessential feature of modernity.

Breadth and superficiality thus become two central and contradictory features. They develop the intrinsic ambivalence of modernity, which requires new methods to “shape” acquired and acquirable information in order to manage input surplus. This is exactly what allows making sense of such information, which becomes meaningful and useful for interpersonal relationships and for the definition of the self.

The socialization process thus becomes a constant factor of individual existence that is never definitive but is fundamental to find one’s bearings in life. If one can learn from previous experiences, then one can open up to new ones and make sense out of them. So, experience has a procedural character and requires everyone to select and to reduce complexity in order to locate it within a shared symbolic horizon, that is, through cultural forms of mediation paving the way for a collectively shared perception.

Every experience is fundamental to define individual actions, thanks to the multiplication forms of imagination (Appadurai, 1996), that allow to mentally mix up the great amount of information coming from the variety of social worlds frequented. The great experiential variety arising from the diverse worlds frequented, and the interpretable information that come from these, all enrich what Hannerz (1998) calls the network of an individual’s cultural perspectives, that is, a biographical structure that reflects the entire repertoire of an individual’s social roles and impacts on his/her social actions as well as on the sense attributed to these.

The broadening of individual imagination makes it possible to use acquired information in a more original way. Imaginative possibilities have been further increased by media, whose evolution – from the press to electronic and digital media – brought about a constant expansion of worlds that can be experienced. This means that technology can no longer be considered as a simple producer of new channels of communication; rather, it is an element that actively affects relational modalities and, in turn, people’s perceptions and representations of reality.

The individuals' ability to make comparisons has become more effective, as is the way one queries about the reality of things and how these interact with others: "globalisation pluralises and fragments national and local communities, whose after-effect is that less and less individuals in the same location have a shared cultural ground, made up of reading the same books, speaking the same language, defending the same values ... new common spaces are thus created, characterised by a creolisation of ideas, values, knowledges, and institutions" (Breidenbach - Zukrigl, 2000, 184).

Individualisation is a two-fold process inasmuch as it fosters individuals' independence from traditional places of physical and cultural proximity, and from the abovementioned intermediaries, while at the same time it makes them more inter-dependent through their adherence to a wider number of membership communities (Grossi, 2017).

But the complex process of individuals' symbolic enrichment, allowed by ease of access to a variety of social environments – often frequented only through the media, according to the logic of mass culture – puts them in contact with a range of values, norms, and social representations that raise daily, intense and conflicting discussions among them (Riegert, 2007). Talkative society (Dahlgren 2009 and 2013) fosters a proliferation of discourses stemming from private conversations with friends or family members, which give way to what Bakardjieva (2010) defines as subactivism, that is a form of civic participation arising from everyday life, made of negotiations, protests and agreements about the just rules ordering social life, like questions of ethics and morality. At a later stage, such discussions translate into the political dimension, affecting political behaviour and activity.

This citizen is far less linked to his/her communities and far less respectful of the logics of power and legitimation of authority of such communities. At the same time, the expansion of the social space frequented, and the broader comparative look on potential social practices, progressively develop awareness of the impossibility to develop omnicomprehensive competences and knowledges; hence, the need to trust "expert systems" (Giddens, 1990), whose actions and competences can reassure us about the variety of right and legitimate behaviours.

But such trust needs to be held constantly in check, to be “put to the test”, to be discussed and shared by citizens that become more demanding. Schudson (1999) defines them as “monitorial citizens”, whose interests in politics and in the themes defining public life is superficial and discontinuous, yet constant and concerned

3. The need to make oneself visible

The processes described above define a public sphere that is far more crowded with social actors, facts, opinions, and beliefs (Sorrentino, 2008), which makes it difficult to identify the best strategies to make oneself visible. Of course, this is also the case for institutions and political actors, who have to handle their personal communication and to elaborate strategies allowing them both determining a coherent identity that proves successful in such a rich communication flow, and circumscribing the defining discourses of their identity to those deemed acceptable and envisaged. Thus, communicative skills become a negotiable resource through which one may define one’s relationship with their context. Every subject has to define their own visibility grounding it not just on what is said and on the immediate reaction to it, but rather, on the need to accumulate representations of the self aimed at defining a personal reputation that might give them credibility and reliability.

The progressive differentiation of opinions makes the outcomes of the messages sent more and more uncertain, variable, and open. Institutions and political subjects have to face a public sphere that has by now become a sort of sounding board much amplified by media. Thus, they have to try and impose their points of view and their convenience through sophisticated and complex processes, because “the public is beyond the actors’ range” (Privitera, 2001, 103), and eludes any direct and immediate control of the transmitters. As a consequence, the latter can only imagine the public’s reactions, and try to foresee them by turning to surveys and other techniques in order to gather general opinions; this process, however, always produces probabilistic, vague outcomes that are usually indeterminate and, in any case, deferred.

All this requires a logical structuring of one's communicative identity aimed at optimizing results by paying attention to arguments that might justify one's point of view. Similarly, the public is unavoidably involved in themes and issues that do not necessarily affect them first-hand, but nonetheless demand the development of a personal idea, as well as the evaluation of proposals and alternatives posed by the different actors of the process.

The continuous public visibility that political subjects have as their goal requires that the legitimation and validation of their power and social actions happen through what Habermas called communicative power, that is, argumentative strength. Discourse ability thus becomes the main resource, and the media are among the main contexts to show it. Such contexts prove powerful insofar as they connect a vast number of receivers; at the same time, however, they are risky, because they require discourses that can effectively reach manifold subjects. The public sphere becomes the place for the "rational process of public justification and consideration" (Ceppa, 1997); it is an area that demands a constant process of giving an account of one's actions to more critical, vigilant citizens (Rosanvallon 2006).

4. From transmission to sharing

The increased visibility required in order to assert one's views of the situation, but also to account for citizens' new requests and demands for new materialisations of the political system, makes it difficult to locate adequate forms of legitimation. This is due to the prevailing transmission approach to communicative processes – both in theory and in the practice of political communication – and its trivialisation of the public sphere, which is no longer seen as the collective space of confrontation between civil society and State, of discursive rhetoric, of negotiation and of identity disagreement (Pizzorno, 1997). Rather, the public sphere is downgraded to mere struggle between cognitive and symbolic competition aimed at gaining the hegemony of shared feeling (Hall, 2008).

The transmission view prioritizes the role of the transmitter, highlighted in its ability to devise strategies to persuade the receiver that a certain political proposal is generous. Within this paradigm, communication is "a process of transmitting

messages at a distance for the purpose of control. The archetypal case of communication, then, is persuasion; attitude change; behaviour modification ... influence, or conditioning" (Carey, 1989, 42).

It is no coincidence that the degree and the forms of influence have been and still are considered as the key issue at stake in defining the processes of political communication. These assumptions give birth to a successful political marketing.

A transmission view is opposed to the ritualistic, or sharing, view premised on one's ability to produce a communicative tuning of transmitter and receiver (Carey, 1989). In the ritualistic view, "communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed" (Carey, 1989, 23).

According to a transmission view, communication takes place through a medium conceived as mere channel that is controlled strategically to "bombard" public opinion, which, in turn, receives connoted, manipulated information units aimed at building a knowledge that is proportionally functional to the transmitters' communicative force. Within the sharing paradigm, the media define a socio-cultural environment, and new contexts emerge for the interaction between subjects. The process of appropriation carried out by the receiver also plays a central role.

According to a transmission approach communicative processes bear evidence of the tensions in a given social context – a zero-sum game. The greater the transmitter's chances to communicate the greater its power to condition and to reach its aims effectively. Conversely, a sharing approach highlights that social reality is remade – more than unveiled – through communicative processes, based on the negotiation among the different social subjects, with their own individual interests.

In the first case, it is important to transmit the widest possible number of information that may reach receivers, thereby to influence their perceptions and definitions of what is real. What matters in the second case is one's ability to produce interpretive frameworks that can be translated into signs, opinions, and events each individual user may employ to discern the different social contexts in which they are called to think, to decide, and to act (Solito, 2002).

Manin (1997)'s fortunate conceptualisation of the "audience democracy" partly responds to the transmission view's privileged position, where the citizen-voter is seen as someone to persuade in support to one's cause. This may no longer take place through the mediation of parties, but rather, through the compressed time offered by the media, thereby through subscribing to their celebratory discourse about personalisation and popularisation (Calise, 2007; Mazzoleni-Sfardini, 2009; Mancini, 2015).

A different perspective is offered by the sharing paradigm, aimed at defining a new communicative environment with overlapping and newly emerged relationships among social actors. Within this approach, not only are media a location of transmission, but they also function like a cognitive passage towards a much more spread visibility – shifting between fields and contexts of action – in which the struggle for acknowledgment, for "making oneself seen or heard" can no longer involve the separation of the different fields of discourse. The role of media, in turn, is to assist in the creation of a multifarious arena where institutions and movements co-exist alongside centuries-old parties, associations, and NGOs. Taken together, they reshape the formation processes of public opinion, while articulating different abilities in order to have a space of their own. They become places of interconnection, instead of mere channels of communication through which information is transmitted from an active transmitter-centre to a passive, atomised receiver-periphery. They provide a new environment where the logic employed to acquire visibility, that is, to reach the centre, is more diverse and, above all, less regulated from the centre.

5. Conclusions: Finding new connections

Digital media make this process more visible through their radicalisation of a pre-existing trend in electronic media like radio and TV, namely, their combination of several previously distinct social situations, thereby to blur the divide between public and private behaviours (Meyrowitz, 1985), while also bridging the gap between those who produce and those who consume information (Chadwick, 2013). The process of appropriation – that is, the hermeneutic process each individual carries out in their interpretation and attribution of meaning to the information they receive – becomes a discursive reworking with increasingly frequent swapping

between roles. Suffice it to think the ways social networking highlight information and comments from political characters, media representatives, influencers that were born and grown up inside the web. The differences between roles thus become less marked, and new, necessary contextualisations emerge, that are needed to position each new piece of information within its own interpretive framework.

Not only does the digital sphere allow consuming information, but also and primarily it allows reproducing, sharing, assessing and subjecting it to evaluation. Castells has just this in mind for his definition of this complex process as “mass self-communication” (2009). As the possibilities for multiple discourses are activated, the time required to respond promptly is dilated, so is the number of available references, as well as the public’s potential first-hand involvement, in that the latter is now able to access productive processes and conversational logics typical of convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006).

Therefore, digital media potentially enhance the tension towards a broadened participation (Paccagnella, Vellar, 2016). Via the Web it is possible to provide and to receive support, to contribute money and information to issues we consider cogent. Simply put, the gap between those who produce and those who consume information is lessened. Communicative processes become more horizontal.

Practices “from above” and “from below” co-exist across a wide variety of connections and access nodes, giving way to a hybrid process that blends formal and informal situations and shortens the distances and differences between the private and the public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002). However, other communicative dimensions are far from erased – neither face-to-face interactions, not the nearly mediated ones, the latter referring to what Thompson (1995) defines as the relational experience in electronic media, where symbolic clues are not co-existent and without limitations, and above all, where the number of addresses is potentially unlimited.

Nevertheless, for those who work in politics or in the media, operations are carried out based on a transmission logic, in the attempt to capitalise as much as possible the procedures aimed at developing basic and catchy communicative

messages able to dismiss any intermediary role between leaders and citizens that lies at the heart of communication efficacy. In this way, however, citizens are turned into publics, into audiences watching politics. The ensuing disillusionment and distrust is merely a result of their awareness of the divide between a social and a political reality crafted interactively within the social practices of everyday life – which is growingly complex and elaborate – and the reality mediated without intermediaries from the political-media system, which is often simplified and trivialised. In other words, it is the outcome of the political-media circus, as it has been called by its very protagonists in politics and in the media.

In both political and institutional communication, professionalization reinforces the tendency to persuade, rather than involve. Thus, paradoxically, digital communication prevents the setting of a participatory usage of the web (Fuchs, 2008); rather, it strengthens the transmitters' capacity to provide information whose main purpose is to legitimate their own political action (Sorice, 2014), thereby refusing to exploit the pre-eminently relational character of social networks (Bentivegna, 2015) and sticking to a vertical form of communication (Materassi and Solito, 2015). More open and intense debate with citizens through new participatory and collaborative actions are infrequent; conversely, what persists is a range of modalities aimed to promote or to inform, without really giving voice to citizens (Leone, Delli Paoli, 2016).

We record the difficult achievement of an actual collaborative production based on "thinking together" (Leadbeater, 2008) which may be deemed worthy by collectivities (Norval, 2007). In this way, however, those entitled to manage, select, assess and build a hierarchy of information run the risk of being supplanted by the assumed transparency of the Web, where "everything is found" and everything is discussed. This happens in a spread sociability (Colombo 2013) in which acquiring information and building hierarchies of relevance are typical of each individual group of practices, and where, above all, the processes required to build the validity of sources and legitimate their functioning have not been defined yet.

Intermediation processes – defined as "a set of devices, formats, professional skills and dedicated fields governing the circulation of information, interests, and

values" (Grossi, 2012, 39) – that have worked for a long time are now wavering. They used to be managed according to a linear development, characterised by the channelling of instances by the parties, as well as by their promotion through means of mass communication delivering their message to the public. Undoubtedly, means of communication played a fundamental role in this process, both in terms of their definition of new themes, and in their advancements and adjustments; yet this always occurred in the presence of substantial agreement about the facts and issues that were considered relevant.

The proliferation of facts, issues, and points of view put in the spotlight diverge from type, also due to the birth of digital communication that changed the forms of intermediation among the three actors involved in communicative negotiation. Those who produce events (the so-called sources: companies, parties, associations, institutions) gain increased awareness of communication and entrust themselves to professionals skilled at shaping suitable narratives (Fenton, 2010). Journalistic intermediaries carry out their work within a field of production and distribution of news that has been entirely redefined by exuberant communicative forms allowed by digital communications (Chadwick, 2013). Citizens are able to get in touch – and thereby potentially interact – both with each other and with the other two actors of communicative negotiation mentioned previously, namely, the sources and intermediaries of information (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Boccia Artieri, 2012).

In other words, the distinction between the time needed to produce facts, to circulate and analyse them, and to make them accessible by the public is blurred. The ensuing collective building of information, however, and paradoxically, is characterised by a lessening of the number of fields for sharing communicative practices and by extension, public agendas; this is the case because of the proliferation of what can actually be said and told. The information considered relevant by the collectivity is thus significantly reduced.

The processes of diversification and fragmentation of interests and perspectives reduce the efficacy of the shared sense, conceived of as the social need to make intelligible and familiar what is not (Santambrogio, 2006), which structured for a long time the sharing of "universe[s] of tacit presuppositions" typical of jour-

nalism (Benson e Neveu, 2005). And yet, the correct functioning of a society is incidental to the capacity to contain dispersion and to provide new grounds for sharing. Consequently, the role of a mediator – including mediators of information – consists in their development of legitimised syntheses grounded in shared principles. When, instead, the “common perception” grows dim, it is required to invest in a “putting in common” through innovative actions that may turn the current tools of communication into more open and horizontal spaces of confrontation, which could produce a diverse and plural kind of public discourse (Benkler, 2006; Juris, 2008). This is the only possible strategy to facilitate a participatory use of the Web (Fuchs, 2008), with feasible and significant impact on both the shaping of public agendas, and the gathering and articulation of news and their interpretation, as shown by the recent growth of open journalism (Rusbridger, 2012). Different and more interconnected flows of communication that may stimulate citizens to design, discuss, and maybe determine policies would allow them to build new alliances with the political system (Arena, 2006; Sorice, 2016).

A more active role would facilitate the citizen-receiver’s gaining of a previously unforeseen visibility, while also fostering a broadened public sphere and its democratisation, due to a more relevant interaction and cooperation: “democracy functions ... only if we begin to think that the actions carried out by citizens and governments is part of the same field of action” (Couldry, 2010-13, 270).

A different mediatisation of the public sphere would emerge, that could support a “democracy of individualised citizens” (Grossi, 2012). In this case, individualized collective actions (Micheletti-McFarland, 2011) are assembled from less hierarchical and institutionalised models of actions (Ceccarini, 2015), from renewed forms of representation, as well as from organisational and discursive intermediation that may define a horizontal subsidiarity (Cotturri, 2001) characterised by “a decentralisation of power and a bond of mutual solidarity between private (and collective) initiative and the State” (Sorice, 2014, 153). This would allow to establish networks that may be able to develop “new ways of political intervention marked by manifold, cross-party levels of action, that would be extremely fast and would grant a respectful approach to the diversity of the individual with respect to that granted by party membership” (Couldry 2010-13, 199).

The above is a long and complex path to follow; yet it is necessary in order to keep back the climate of disaffection and diffidence nurturing the opacity of post-truth – conceived of as the difficult task of measuring the reasonable distance between what may be verified and what seems true, what *is* shared and what *can* be shared – that could lead citizens towards apathy and disillusionment.

However, such processes require particular forms of re-intermediation to develop new requirements and criteria regarding quality and public interest that are acknowledged and shared. They would be based on an effective alliance – achieved through original and innovative means – that would meet the requests and issues raised by watchful citizens, and this would allow critical awareness to reinvigorate civil society, and promote its functioning as a drive belt in the triangular model made up of the political, the media, and the voting systems. Such is what Rosanvalon (2006) envisages through his conceptualisation of positive counter-democracy.

In this way, the monitoring, controlling, vigilant, and critical citizens could put to good use the new intensities of listening dealt with in Couldry (2010), which force us all, and above all institutions “to take into account a rather enriched group of public cries ... [which] ... governments can no longer pretend they cannot not hear” (Couldry, 2013, 263).

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