

Editorial

# Research on Digital Political Communication: Electoral Campaigns, Disinformation, and Artificial Intelligence

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## 1. Epistemology and Changes in Political Communication

In recent years, political communication has emerged as one of the most prolific subfields within political science and the social sciences as a whole. This is evidenced by three key indicators: the number of doctoral theses in the field, the volume of scientific articles published, and the incorporation of political communication subjects into the curricula of related programs such as Political Science and Administration, Advertising and Public Relations, and Journalism [1,2]. One significant factor contributing to this trend is the use of digital tools, such as social networks, which provide easy access, data acquisition, and replicability.

Traditionally, political communication has been defined as a public space—albeit rather delimited and limited—where political parties, institutions, media, and citizens interact [1,2]. This space was characterized by specific patterns of behavior, including the State's primacy in constructing the agenda, restricted participation of actors as emitters in political debates, coalitions of topics between parties and analog media [3], and limited citizen participation. As a result, political communication was often non-dialogical, with vertical flows of information prevailing. In contrast, political communication in digital society has taken on a new dimension, with two main aspects being particularly notable.

- Firstly, there has been a theoretical update allowing for the incorporation of concepts such as technopolitics and algorithmic political communication [4–6]. Technopolitics refers to the use of different platforms to develop political/electoral confrontation, while algorithmic political communication is mainly characterized by micro-segmentation and automatic distribution of content. Yépez-Reyes et al. [7] explore in this Special Issue this update and question how discursive interactions can be approached in digital contexts using four different methodologies.
- Secondly, in practice, political parties have modified their principles of mobilization, participation, and organization, affecting the way electoral campaigns are strategized, resourced, and staffed. This Special Issue presents evidence of these changes, with an emphasis on populism on the web [8], as written by Quevedo-Stuva, Tovar-Gil, and Mila-Maldonado, or on institutional campaigns [9,10] in two articles. The first is the paper by Rodríguez-Vázquez, Castellanos-García, and Martínez-Fernández; the second is the article by Vázquez-Gestal, Pérez-Seoane, and Fernández-Souto. The newsmaking process in media has also acquired new behaviors in the production, circulation, and reception of content, resulting in a change in “journalistic cultures.” Finally, citizens have novel mechanisms for participation in electoral debates, as discussed by Fontenla-Pedreira, Maiz-Bar, and Rodríguez-Martelo [11]. However, recent research casts doubt on the potential of social networks for such participation [4–11].



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Another important aspect in recent years has been the relationship between (digital) political communication and electoral behavior, specifically how individuals group themselves and the impact this message has on that group. The article published in this Special Issue of *Societies* by Cazorla-Martín, Montabes-Pereira, and Hernández-Tristán [12] investigates the effects of disaffection by introducing political information consumption as a variable, using a novel study conducted in Latin America. Technologies have contributed to isolating individuals and creating digital communities (or online communities) with users who share similar tastes, ideologies, and preferences. Therefore, the relevant factors are not just the effects on the vote (minimal), but also the effects on agenda-setting, polarization— affective or emotional—and mobilization or activation of a certain part of the party's more connected militancy. Social networks have played a crucial role in this process, sometimes as an extension of the offline competition space, and other times by creating a space of their own.

## 2. Trends in Digital Political Communication Research

### 2.1. Facts and Actors: Disinformation, Electoral Campaigns Online, and the Far-Right

One of the most significant developments in the past few years is that disinformation goes beyond fake news [13]. It has become a complex phenomenon involving the tendentiousness of information, manipulation, strategy, and propaganda, with an explicit or implicit intent to influence political behavior. Consequently, it has become a critical political issue with consequences that affect democracy and its functioning by contaminating the public information space, which is essential for the deliberation process and expression of preferences. Research on political communication and disinformation has been most prolific in electoral campaigns in recent years, threatening electoral security and possibly undermining the results. In this Special Issue, we have three examples. First, the relationship between politicians and media through fake news in Chile is one example of this given by Cárcamo-Ulloa et al. [14]. Similarly, Pérez-Curiel, Rivas-de-Roca, and Domínguez-García [15] introduced the term “polarization” in the context of the US elections. Polarization is a consequence of fake news fueling political divisions on social networks [16]. Another significant area of research has been fact-checking. Finally, Rúas-Araujo, Rodríguez Martelo, and Fontenla-Pedreira [17] analyzed fact-checking strategies and the fight against disinformation of various European news companies, concluding that current verification processes rely more on human efforts than technological tools.

Introducing more political variables, another crucial aspect concerns the far-right's use of disinformation as a political weapon during election campaigns. This is evidenced in literature and in Anglo-Saxon countries, particularly in studies on Donald Trump or the Brexit campaign. In Spanish studies, this has been examined through VOX's discourse [18], while in Latin American research, the focus has been on Jair Bolsonaro's digital strategy during the 2018 elections [19], as well as during his term's end due to COVID or the 2022 elections. Jair Bolsonaro's case is perhaps the most evident, as his campaigns heavily relied on the intensive use of disinformation on social networks through the dissemination and circulation of fake news [18,19].

### 2.2. The Theory: Political Science as a Structuring Axis

Political science has made significant progress in recent years, both academically and epistemologically, in addressing the challenges of political communication in the digital space. These developments have filled gaps in the social sciences, which have focused primarily on producing information from the perspective of media outlets and social networks. Political science has gone further by delving deeper into message production (actors) and its effects (citizenship), analyzing not only the discursive axes but also the sense of power, as theorized decades ago by the Frankfurt School. Political science also evaluates the effects in terms of their impact on political behavior, the construction of the agenda, emotions, polarization, and mobilization [20–24].

Several concepts have emerged in parallel to the development of the information society, but many have little theoretical background and face significant problems. These concepts emerge in a hybrid scenario where the forms of representation of videopolitics [20] coexist with technopolitics [21]. The ideal of cyberactivism [22] has faded due to its questionable influence on political participation. The concept of “algorithmic democracy” is being redefined outside the ideal types of democracy or polyarchy. It is clear that digital public opinion and democracy are, to some extent, incompatible. Other concepts such as “algorithmic governance” are emerging, which apply rationality to data-driven social management based on “critical datafication” [23,24]. These concepts are similar to “democracy 4.0,” where microsegmentation is an ally of political programs.

Finally, one of the most critical challenges faced by political science is undoubtedly related to political participation in a context where a networked society generates hybrid formats of participation and public policy communication. This Special Issue includes a contribution on Chile by Vega-Ramírez, Castro-Duarte, and Quintana-Figueroa, indicating that the type of diffusion of results is a differentiating factor, correlated directly with the digital media used and digital culture [25].

### 2.3. *The Tools: From Social Networks to Artificial Intelligence*

In the past decade, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have become essential allies for political communication research. One reason for this is the ease with which software can extract vast amounts of empirical evidence. Additionally, the existence of performance indicators, including interaction and political commitment, provides multiple opportunities for analysis. For instance, in this Special Issue, Herrero-Solana and Castro-Castro’s study on Telegram and media underscores the issue of verification [26]. Social media also provides a public space for actors to interact, with new features such as gamification. Additionally, Torres-Toukoumidis et al. explored various video games, concluding that those connected to democracy offer an innovative interactive dimension that fosters creativity, freedom, and autonomy for contemporary audiences [27].

The COVID-19 pandemic, social media, and the media have been crucial areas of study in this Special Issue with two papers. García-García and Rodríguez-Díaz conducted an in-depth analysis of the Spanish government’s communication management on social media during the COVID-19 crisis [28]. De la Garza Montemayor, Barredo Ibáñez, and Brosig Rodríguez also researched digital consumption habits and changes in the metropolitan area of Monterrey, Nuevo León, Mexico, during the pandemic [29].

In recent years, political communication research has also focused on artificial intelligence, robotization, or automation, raising questions about the technology’s impact on democracy and political participation, as well as its risks and the need for regulation, particularly during election times [30]. Although some use AI to manipulate public opinion, the technology has also brought significant advances to research in the field. For instance, micro-segmentation, a technique that describes citizens’ structural and emotional profiles, has provided better insights into their behavior on social media and their language and polarization. These advancements have been explored in electoral contexts such as the Cambridge Analytica case during the US elections, highlighting ethical and regulatory issues [30]. Balancing the private interests of corporations with public service is a key challenge.

## 3. **The Future Is Here: Challenges and Obstacles**

This Special Issue of *Societies*, entitled “Political Communication and Public Political Participation in the Digital Societies,” features fourteen articles that, along with this editorial, confirm the growing academic interest in this field, particularly in the Ibero-American region, as well as North America and southern Europe. Apart from the three thematic axes presented in this Special Issue (“the facts and the actors”, “the theory”, and “the instruments”), it is important to highlight the challenges that digital political communication

poses for the future. Among these challenges, the most significant is analyzing the impact that digital communication is having on our democracies. To what extent has the digital space moved away from the ideal of deliberation and participation and instead reinforced polarization and a centrifugal vision of society?

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