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Towards new scenarios of public communication. Considerations on the Italian case

Hacia nuevos escenarios de la comunicación pública. Consideraciones sobre el caso italiano

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Palabras clave

Comunicación; Nuevas tecnologías; Leyes de comunicación pública; Habilidades comunicativas; Administración pública; Cambio organizacional.

Abstract

In recent years, the Italian public communication has gone through a period of great ferment that involved actors, regulations, tools and technologies, skills and expertise.

The article focuses on the development of public communication in little more than ten years after the law 150/2000, in order to identify new challenges and solicitations. In fact, tracing the path of change provide some remarks upon development of communication of public administration and the many professional competence that today move around it and contribute to its re-definition, urging some changes and especially highlighting the need to develop reflexivity and high awareness in acting communicative, more and more called upon to combine transparency, visibility and accountability.

Resumen

En los últimos años, la comunicación pública italiana ha pasado por un período de gran agitación donde se han involucrado actores, regulaciones, herramientas y tecnologías, habilidades y experiencia. Este artículo se centra en el desarrollo de la comunicación pública en poco más de diez años, tras la ley 150/2000, con el fin de identificar nuevos retos y requerimientos. De hecho, el rastreo del camino del cambio proporciona algunas observaciones sobre el desarrollo de la comunicación de la administración pública y la gran competencia profesional que hoy la rodea. Además, contribuye a su redefinición, impulsando algunos cambios y destacando especialmente la necesidad de desarrollar reflexividad y alta conciencia para la actuación comunicativa, a la que cada vez más se les pide combinar transparencia, visibilidad y rendición de cuentas.

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1. Introduction

Sixteen years have gone since the approval of law n.150/2000 on public communication. These years have been very important, since deep processes of social, cultural and technological transformation have accompanied the change of public administrations and gradually fostered an expansion of tasks and communicative functions. Certainly, there have been many driving forces, motivations and *stimuli*, from citizens increasingly demanding for being informed to the regulation, from technological transformations to the consequent need of administrations for relationality, from the obligation of being accountable for their actions to the need to combine increasing transparency and visibility¹.

Within public organizations the role of communication and as a consequence a professional practice, is today much more articulated and complex than the practice regulated by law 150, requiring a more strategic vision and mission. Especially these generate questions not only - or not much - on the future of public communication but, more concretely, on the pathways to be undertaken to re-think and renew the communicative action of public organizations: from the tasks and functions of communication offices provided by the law to the organizational changes imposed by digital media, from professional profiles to the skills and abilities needed to manage and support the many changes taking place. Indeed, on one hand the expansion of communicative functions seems a clear sign of a deep and irreversible rupture with the culture of “closure” and self-reference, that for such a long time has characterized the action of public administrations, on the other hand a strong need to understand how changes really affect the growth of a *communication culture* arises. This culture permeates the entire organization and supports the great challenge of a change capable of affecting working methods and accelerating participation and integration with citizens.

In 2000, the law on Public Communication outlines an organizational model capable of overseeing relations with citizens and the media. In particular, it defines an organizational context where two relevant departments - the Press Office and the Public Relations Office respectively - act upon information and communication with different skills and professionals profiles. These have been long-awaited by insiders and more in general by experts of communication in the public field, since they appeared as the most logical answer to the pressing professional and operational needs arising in those years within organizations.

However, the law implementation process appears crucial since the beginning. To clarify roles and professional functions and, consequently, to identify the proper timing and departments of strategic and functional coordination is of particular importance and relevance. Therefore, the framework law defines the general principles but assigns their implementation to individual organizations;

¹ The articulate and complex pathway of public communication – although related to a short time period - has been investigated by many authors: See: Cavallo 2005; Grandi 2007; Rolando 2010; Rovinetti 2010; Faccioli 2013; Rolando 2014, Solito (2014).

however, over the years, despite its undoubted merits, it has met many organizational, economic and cultural difficulties. A discontinuous, sporadic and mostly heterogeneous application of the law is today still emerging: there have been, and still are, many more or less creative and original solutions - mainly defined by contingency - in the subdivision of tasks and communication responsibilities.

In such a diverse and heterogeneous situation, the common denominator seems to be primarily a communication architecture often lacking flexibility and transversality, and the solutions found by the application of the law often show a sort of override of the provision of the regulation. There is a new front of communicative activity, still small but rapidly growing, in public administrations: the digital turning point and in particular the opportunities offered by the so-called web 2.0. This latter expands and above all speeds up communication flows and the production of contents and at the same time it highlights the need to manage and rule them.

Sixteen years have passed since that law and it is perhaps useful to try to recall what happened in the field of public communication.

During these years, visible changes together with a certainly more opaque immobilism, have accompanied the transformation process of administrations and the role of communication.

However, these have been important years, in which new challenges, many *stimuli* and solicitations, that nowadays require new considerations and even some reconsiderations and changes of direction, were launched.

Without claiming to reconstruct a pathway - which in spite of being concentrated in a rather small period - appears articulated and complex and has recently been investigated by many authors², I will identify three different stages, or I would rather say junctions, in the public communication pathway in these 16 years following the law. These highlight shifts in sensitivity and attention, but also motivations and impulses of different nature, in response to which public communication activity has been produced.

As always happens in any attempt to schematise and abstract, it is unavoidable that the “junctions” here identified may simplify and generalize, but especially combine paths of change that have characterized very different entities and institutions. The following paragraphs try to find for each of them specific features and driving forces:

1. The law is there and the goal is to define the frame
2. The force of attraction (at times impetuous) and certainly more partial technology revolution
3. Boundaries become tight: communication overflows and becomes ubiquitous.

² See Cavallo 2005; Grandi 2007; Rolando 2010; Rovinetti 2010; Faccioli 2013; Rolando 2014.

2. 16 years of communication

Undoubtedly, despite a pathway characterised by accelerations and stops, it is nowadays possible to glimpse new *scenarios* for public communication. Therefore, it is time to begin to reflect on some possible answers to the question on its future - which has always accompanied public communication – beginning from the processes that are displacing some certainties, expanding or redefining roles and expertises but also bringing attention to old and unresolved issues.

Our aim in this paper is to pick from the transformation process that we try to define those topics and *issues* that allow to reflect on the role of public communication. These report and testify achievements, but above all - and this is what is most interesting here – they elicit questions and define *scenarios* in which the communicative action of organizations must be definitely rethought and renewed: from the tasks and functions of communication offices provided by law 150 to organizational changes imposed by digital media, from professional profiles to the skills and abilities needed to manage and support the many changes taking place.

2.1. Applying the law

«The law is yet there!», this was the title of the editorial note by De Rita of the issue of the Italian magazine of public communication, completely focussed on law 150 (De Rita 2000). The law, indeed, is the new and fundamental starting point, but at the same time, it closes an important decade, marking some significant milestones: the explicit recognition of the need for communication between institutions and citizens and, more in general, society; a legitimisation process of communication within institutions and the definition of operational boundaries; the identification of departments and expertises able to act in an increasingly complex and dynamic context; the distinction between information and communication activities, which introduces the important communication task of inter-acting and improving the relationship with citizens. This represents a new phase, where a more strategic role of communication is assumed. Many authors point out indeed the innovation potential of this law that seeks to encourage and lead towards a communication that might become a specialized and widespread function within public administrations (Arena 2001).

In particular, law 150/2000 defines an organizational context where three departments - Press Offices, Public Relations Offices and the Spokesman's Offices - with different skills and professional profiles, act. These have been long-awaited by insiders and more general by experts of communication in the public field, and appeared as the most logical answer to the pressing professional and operational needs that were arising in organizations.

There is a law but it is not enough (Rolando 2000). Indeed, the process of implementation of the law appears from the beginning crucial. A point of par-

ticular relevance and significance is represented by the clarification of roles and professional functions and the consequent identification of organizational and coordination models - according to the size and jurisdictions of every entity - although with more caution of the legislation and an increased effort of the administrations. The attention focuses exactly on these issues. In this first phase, the priority goal - and the work inside public administrations - must bring order, clarity, limiting boundaries, ability and assignments.

In other words defining the framework: setting up the structures (that is complying with the current regulation), identifying internal conditions, defining the organizational chart, etc. It is more an organizational phase, since it is focused on internal negotiation. It is, indeed, the stage at which the problem of visibility of the structures themselves arises, with the aim of establishing some fundamental points of law 150: driving the change, that is stimulating and increasing institutional impulses towards communication; overcoming the invisibility of communication, of the units and professionalities; identifying and narrowing perimeters, creating and consolidating habits and practices oriented towards openness, transparency and access.

The plurality of tasks and functions provided by the law but above all the diversity of situations in the different organizational contexts involve, as a matter of fact, a partial and inconsistent application of the law itself, outlining a contradictory *scenario*, which is - in many situations and in the most advanced local contexts - full of lights and shadows.

However, the cultural evaluation of law 150 remains quite positive, in particular on the side of the legitimacy of a function that, in a specific moment in history, had to be built with a more modern and far-sighted vision.

2.2 The digital revolution

Over the years before 2000, some initiatives³ and especially some normative texts (following one another during the 2000s) enrich and expand communication related activities. The digitization and computerization process of public administrations begins.

The debate on the development of public communication - and especially on open operational *scenarios* originated from the implementation of law 150 - identifies from the beginning some relevant issues that point out close connections with organizational processes, both of cultural and procedural nature. One of them, in particular, appears as a herald of the transversal issue of communication in public administrations: «the prospective of communication in public administrations is set in the technological, cultural and methodological revolution - irrespective of the law» (Rolando, 2000: 17).

3 Such as the establishment in 2001 of the Department for Innovation and Technologies.

Especially since 2005 (year of the Legislative Decree n. 82/2005: the Digital Administration Code) many legislative provisions focussing, through debates, on the development of new technologies⁴ have followed one another. These regulations seek to introduce important tools to enhance the institutional action in public organizations, improve organization and management of services and, last but not least, facilitate the relationship with citizens, by strengthening assistance and participation pathways. The computerization process, therefore, should in all respects support and to some extent speed up the modernization of public administrations.

The difficulties related to the spread of new technologies creep and overlap with the open issues of the first phase of implementation of law 150 and begin to intertwine with the already difficult construction and legitimation of professional identities, the reorganization of services and working times, and the new relationality with the citizen.

The field becomes broader, new players and new issues come into play: a great need for relationality and interactivity, new languages, connection between internal and external communication, integration in decision-making processes of governance, a need for a new organizational structure.

The system seems to push for greater reflexivity. However, on the contrary, the attention is dislocated. On the one hand, the need to recover delays, on the other hand the ability of new technology to appear functional to the need of achieving immediate and tangible results, they both lead to focus on technological acquisition, too often ingenuously considered as the solution of many (long-standing!) problems. It follows that the designed and strongly desired close link between digitization and modernization not always seems to take place (Faccioli, 2013).

Thus, limits and restraints emerge within organizations: from the difficulty of accelerating web functions (particularly of the websites) towards interactivity and relationality to the problem of understanding «the network oversight as a new habitat of all functions and expertises» (Rolando, 2014: 86). These limits, difficulties and restraints are shortly destined to arise in their full extent.

At the same time, the existence of an internal front of communication in complex organizations is turning clearer and more urgent. This requires initiatives aimed at training staff, encouraging operators, adapting skills, redesigning the organizational roles in order to promote the culture of a citizen-oriented service⁵.

4 Directive of the Minister for Public Administration and innovation, n. 8 of 2009 (web sites reduction and improvement of online services quality); Legislative Decree n. 150/09 (optimization of productivity, efficiency and transparency of public administrations; guidelines for websites in public administrations (July 2010).

5 On the role of communications in the organizational change, see: Weick 1997; Invernizzi 2000; Czarniawska 2000; Bonazzi 2002; Mazzei, 2004, Invernizzi, Mazzei 2006; Cocco 2008; Invernizzi, Romenti 2012

These years, although characterized by a race against time to meet technological expectations and the new emerging needs, have made more visible that communication need of administrations that law 150 had tried to stimulate and regulate. At the same time, however, they have relegated to second place the value and the ultimate meaning of communication, that is looking at communication as a real tool for relations and work re-design within public administrations, closely related to knowledge, to new emerging professional needs and - not last - to resources.

However, the process revolutionizing the pathway of public communication has now started: the communication in administrations overflows, multiplies, is fragmented and has different forms. Clearly, with significant effects that generate new issues and above all require public communication the ability to relocate its role and responsibilities.

2.3 Communication becomes *ubiquitous*

Ubiquitous refers to someone/something that can be simultaneously in several places. This feature lately seems to characterize communication within organizations, especially public ones.

Communication in public organizations seems to acquire the gift of ubiquity. Although attributed for some time now to departments and professionals profiles, nowadays, communication deals with an often unclear placement, acting in an increasingly complex environment, and it is found in several organization areas and sectors. There are many reasons that explain the growth of this condition:

- The increased request for information of more and more demanding citizens and the related need of organizations and their single components to respond to their requests;
- The increased complexity of the tasks and functions of the organizations, as well as the growth of initiatives and projects directed to citizens that often require and provide the involvement of more actors and especially the activation of multiple parts and departments within organizations;
- The consequent need for each part or sector to legitimize and account for its own action and introduce and communicate what is done to achieve visibility and recognition, in a context of information abundance, which is, at times, even redundant.

The information and communication activities, although assigned by the law to structures and specific professional profiles, seem to permeate the organization. In everyday actions and organizational work, everyone can face the urgency of responding to the citizen's demand, with the need to use tools and communication channels (from flyers to the use of websites), finally, with the need to produce, exchange and process data and contents.

While on one hand this explosion of communication and its ramp are evident signs of a deep and irreversible rupture with the culture of closure and self-reference, that for too long has characterized the actions of public administrations; on the other hand the escape from the narrow confines of departments and offices in charge of it, can be a source of difficulties, discontinuities, inconsistencies, or even confusion and fragmentation.

To make this *scenario* even more complex, social media, which open up new and extraordinary possibilities of service for citizens, take over. This turn out to be places and environments for paths and experiences of new forms of participation and citizens' experience⁶. The demand for information, received by citizens, and the need of the administrations themselves to communicate, seem to further expand. On one hand increasingly demanding citizens, who have for a long time identified more efficient *voice* strategies (the creation of committees, constitution of associations, but above all the use of digital media as a tool for dialogue, for the organization of protests and demands) (Lovari - Parisi, 2013); on the other hand, the importance of being visible and the need, especially of administrators, to relate and get in touch more and more directly and continuously, in order to ensure transparency but also the immediacy through which we try to prevent the crisis of trust in politicians and institutions, confirmed by latest research data and that has now become a common sense in the Italian reality.

There are new opportunities and possibilities of both affecting relations between citizens and institutions, and taking action on organizational aspects and even eradicating difficulties of public administrations that have been present since the beginning, by innovating times, procedures, languages and communication formats.

However, as is inevitably the case, also risks and concerns show up: bringing into play the credibility of institutional actors in the management of web relations becomes a fundamental issue. There are still few citizens fully involved in the processes within the social web; however, this represents a growing trend that has considerable repercussions on the meaning and scope of public communication: public administrations that more and more undertake the social media pathway, must now redirect their attention to the quality of their presence online; such quality is embodied in the unavoidable capacity for dialogue, for response to citizens' requests and demands, and for response time; but also in the intelligence to embrace their voice and incorporate the inputs produced in the improvement process of services, transparency, capability of accountability.

The social media turning point recalls under other forms precisely the assistance and dialogue capacity included in law 150, too often trivialized by techno-

⁶ Topics of civic engagement and new forms of participation are indeed currently internationally debated and investigated by many scholars.

logical revolution. This latter has changed communication relationship from the understanding and construction of meaning between the citizen and the public administration to a mere possibility of connection.

However, it is precisely the social media turning point that requires to resume that complex task of building relationships that affects the working method, the mentality, the organizational culture and professional skills.

Therefore, the ubiquity of communication - favoured by technologies - is a matter that has to be addressed and managed. Faced with the potential, the opportunities and possibilities offered by the new media, the need to combine technical changes with the growth of the *culture of communication* strongly emerges. This permeates the entire organization and supports the great challenge of a change that can really have an impact on the ways of working, not to fall - or perpetuate! - those mechanisms of «institutional innovation rhetoric» (Faccioli, 2010; 2013). These latter have so far accompanied and characterized many initiatives related to the introduction and the use of digital technologies in public administrations.

Paradoxically, communication seems nowadays to live a slowdown moment, in a more general climate of mistrust and questioned credibility of institutions and drastic resource cuts.

3. Food for thought and research trajectories

The public communication pathway provides important insights and suggests questions and research trajectories on new and old unsolved problems. Today interesting perspectives are opening up in the analysis of the relationship between the technological impact and organizational structure, paths and management practices of information and communication activities within organizations, the dedicated expertise, the expected contents and strategic objectives.

In 2000, the great and ambitious goal was to bring out, make visible and, at the same time, strengthen a resource becoming known and recognised, and around which expertise had to be built or consolidated. The task of the law was to drive the change by focusing on objectives, tasks and functions, facilities, departments, tools and channels.

In recent years, the increased and, in some respects, new needs of all social subjects - even public ones - to gain visibility, recognition, affirmation and legitimacy, have made communication an increasingly attractive and exploited resource. Digital media have gradually supported, strengthened and amplified that need to communicate with administrations that law 150 had tried to stimulate and regulate. This has taken place in a strongly contradictory *scenario*, through difficulties encountered in applying the law and the race against time to meet technological expectations and the new needs arising from the digital turning point.

Faced with this evidence, what happened in the last few years leads to evaluate and reconsider - or at least problematize - some fundamental points that inspired law 150, to understand the rupture with the past - albeit the recent past - favoured by the latest transformation processes, and the actual changes introduced in the organizations.

Below, we merely identify some areas and issues that new communication *scenarios* within public organizations seem to outline. On those issues, hypotheses and research paths can be developed, in order to seek - and find - some answer.

- *Information and communication: distinction or recomposition?*

Law 150/2000, driven by the goal of making communication an internal function of public organizations, was strongly inspired by the need to define the boundaries of the departments that had to deal with communication issues in the public sector. These boundaries were “anchored” in a dual and interrelated need: the need to distinguish between information and communication offices, also according to a different audience (media and citizens) and “anchor” departments in the identification of specific professions and knowledge, journalists and public relations officers, for press offices and public relations offices respectively. Today such distinction, problematic from a conceptual and theoretical point of view in itself, is ill-suited to the web that seems to reassemble contents and relationality, information and dialogue capability but also the ability to respond to the citizens’ requests and demands.

The social media turning point has put the spotlight back on that ability to listen and to relate included in law 150, of such difficult implementation in public administrations. Not only, somehow it inextricably connects such ability to the activities aimed at providing information and ensuring transparency of actions and processes. Attributed in 2000 to the Public Relations Offices and the Public Relations Communicator, today it seems to call in other figures and professional skills, journalists but also new and not officially recognized professional profiles (such as for instance the community manager). The ability to listen and relate, too often trivialized by the “technological revolution”, has declined the meaning of the communicative relationship from the understanding and construction of meaning between citizens and the public administration to a mere possibility of connection.

- *Political and institutional communication: separation or a new overlap?*

Scholars and practitioners of the field - in years immediately following law 150 - emphasized the undoubted merit of the legislation of returning the communicative field, until then relegated in our country to the only political function, to the administrations (Rolando, 2014). The law, indeed, attempted to separate political communication and institutional

communication by outlining structures, tasks and functions, and especially making a distinction between press offices and the spokesman. This represents a complex separation that digital media can emphasize if their tendential communication horizontality will be exploited, based on the effective existence of greater possibilities of interaction between institutions and citizens, which may be included in more organic participatory processes; however, at present, it rather seems to put the political dimension at the centre, for the will of many administrators to use them not only for the legitimate political function, but also to shorten the distance with their voters through the immediacy and personalization of digital communication. The risk is, however, to propose once again overlaps and interferences between political and institutional communication (Materassi&Solito, 2015).

- *Communication offices: separation or intersection?*

Another issue, which it is worth examining, concerns the departments and their borders provided for by law.

The progressive expansion of increasingly faster and widespread communication flows within organizations, the need to manage them and produce contents rapidly, the plurality of channels and communication tools used, make the rigidity of the distinctions introduced by law 150 between the different communication offices poorly suited to interpret the new communication needs. In consideration of the features of digital media, in fact, the “weight” of borders established by law inevitably emerges. Social media, in particular, are not appropriate tools for rigid and segmented organizational models; on the contrary, they base their essence on openness: the openness of those who communicate (to their interlocutor), of the texts, contents and rights; therefore, also the openness of the organization and the departments in charge of communication. Openness is naturally interpreted as transversality, integration, fluidity of processes and internal relations, the intersection between the departments. Social media, in particular, emphasize the importance of integration of back office and front office and between the different offices or areas, and flexibility, two well-known dimensions of great weakness in public administrations.

The more communication becomes - as already said - an attractive resource used in organizations, the more requirements of consistency, strategic and operational integration and planning, emerge, in order to address unavoidable risks of fragmentation and discontinuity. Teamwork and synergy are, therefore, necessary and distinctive features of every communication strategy.

Those concepts that fifteen years ago emerged as problematic in the application of the law are recalled again: planning and coordination of communication flows and actions. These are indeed closely related to the need to maintain and spread

in public administrations a vision and especially a *modus operandi* that tends to recompose the different communication “hearts” and tries to contain the fragmentation and especially the risk of bureaucratization, with the consequent separation between the different components of the organization.

How is all of this being faced in the light of the on going change and its acceleration? Which are the organizational pathways, practices and even daily routines implemented in organizational contexts to make departments, functions, tasks and channels permeable and fluid; to ensure continuity between the use of the web and daily habits and behaviours of the organization; to give unity to a variety of initiatives and projects, avoiding their dispersion and dissolution?

Finally, the elements so far mentioned bring attention to the issue of professionalism and the skills needed to manage the change taking place.

The expansion of tasks and communication functions repeatedly highlighted and defined in the present work as inescapable consequences of the processes of social, cultural and technological change of the last decade, outline, in fact, a much more detailed and complex professional practice, compared to the practise that law 150 intended to regulate.

The change concerns the role, tasks and functions: communication professionals, born as facilitators of disclosure to information and communication of public administrations, are nowadays facing situations that would rather require them to select projects, information, data and contents, as well as to connect the different parts of the organization, areas and activities, the objectives and their implementation. However, the change also concerns the knowledge and skills: today the communication activity requires professionals - even in public entities - to cross increasingly wide and border areas: from the information activity to the management of assistance and the front line, from the relationship with the media to the web oversight, from the communication campaigns on specific and sectoral issues to crisis and emergency related communication, from identity and image to the marketing and - no last - the management of internal communication⁷. This does not imply a loss in specificity or interchangeability of skills; on the contrary, even professional profiles that help implement this performance are more complex and above all, they are distributed among different expertises and types of knowledge. However, these present a “negotiating intelligence”, i.e., capable of operational and contextual adaptation, giving solidity, legitimacy and recognition in organizational and work settings.

In conclusion, the re-definition of professionalism mediating, in several respects, the relationship between public organizations and the external environment, was highly debated and discussed in the early years 2000s, and it is nowadays more than ever cause for reflection.

⁷ On this subject see Rolando (2014)

Processes of change taking place – especially technological ones – seem to reassemble what fifteen years ago was defined and somehow “separated” by the law, through hybridisations that require more intersections and interactions.

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