
Special issue
*Political communication in
Uncertain Times*

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Introduction

Political Communication in Uncertain Times. Digital Technologies, Citizen Participation and Open Governance

The unexpected British exit from the European Union, the migration crisis, the rise of Isis, conflicts in countries as Syria, the emergence of populism and unpredicted citizens' reactions (such as the rejection of Colombia Peace Plan or the election of President Trump) are only some of the events that are taking place nowadays; they all have in common the uncertainty that brings with them and that characterize the current era.

Aspects such as new challenges for journalism and communication in a digital society, the role played by the media in this overabundance of information context we live, the loss of credibility of traditional and well established sources from citizens, the wider gap between representatives and represented, are submitted into debate nowadays more than ever, among others. The implications of digital technologies, demands for more participation from citizens and an open model of governance seem to be central axes to look at in order to monitor the main changes in the field of political communication.

New voices, a multiplicity of agents in the public sphere

In the last years, we have witnessed unpredictable events in the political and the communicational realm, events that simply we could have never imagined just one decade ago. Social and political developments after the Great Recession in 2008 have boosted new demands and the consequent supporting organizations. Most of the consolidated two-party systems in Western Europe have been threatened by the emergence of ideologically diverse political parties. In Spain, Podemos have altered the political traditional balance, even contributing recently to the defeat of conservative government after having supported social democrats' motion of censure; in Italy, two different antiestablishment parties (5 Star Movement and Lega Nord) have been forced to understand to each other and negotiate the formation of a government under a very unstable and sensitive political situation; in Greece, Syriza (a coalition of more than ten parties of relatively recent foundation) has the control of the government; in the UK, David Cameron resigned after the result of a referendum called by himself but effectively capitalised by the UKIP, a party whose first representative in the House of Commons was elected in 2014. Those are some European examples of these new political developments, that can be also found in France, The Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Hungary or Poland. Hence, new anti-establishment forces on the left and other ideologically ambiguous spaces have emerged, mostly (but not exclusively) in the Western world.

Beyond the arrival of those new parties, we also have observed different groundbreaking actions that have arisen out of particular political, social and communicational conditions. Petitions, occupations, strikes, vanguard movements, affinity groups, trade unions and some other expressions have located the new (social) media in the center of the scene, not only as a mean of communication but also as an efficient organizational tool. Precisely, in the last decade, we could recognise many examples in this line. The Tahrir revolution, the outraged movement, the women's March and “#MeToo”, the native American's water rights, unarmed black people demonstrations, the anti-gun movements, the “Queer” activism, or the anti-austerity mobilization are good representation of this. From Arab Spring to Parkland students, teenagers and young adults have a chronicle of pushing social change forward, using the potential of social media in an internationalized and digitized world. All those experiences share something in common given their “unlimited” diffusion power: they have been very successful uniting disparate groups across cultures with similar grievances against common and, mostly, globalized enemies or threats.

Therefore, none of those more or less organized -more or less spontaneous- movements could have been possible neither without the new repertoire of mass media, nor with the enormous capacity of adaptation to the new communicational reality demonstrated by most of them. Following Zeynep Tufekci (2018), we can note that modern networked movements can scale up quickly and take care of all sorts of logistical tasks without building any substantial organization cavity before the first protest or march. We cannot however forget the other side of the coin: given their structural reality, there is a clear difficulty when trying to persist in their long-term quests for change. This dynamic reflects the power and the weaknesses of using new technologies in order to mobilize large numbers of people in one direction.

Although the real potentiality of the new described political scenarios is still unexplored and their consequences are somehow unforeseen, there is no precedent in the history of social sciences where we had more available information, databases, informational sources and computerized techniques, to research the mentioned dynamic and draw stable patterns of the forthcoming political communication.

The digital context: challenges and opportunities

We have stepped in the times of profound changes in all communication spheres and internet and social media sites are accelerators of these changes. Social media platforms are becoming more and more important tool of social interaction and communication in all communication spheres. In this sense, Maireder et al. (2017) explain that social media have changed the way citizens, journalists, institutions, and activists communicate about social and political issues. On the one hand, communication has never been so interactive, fast and immediate. On the other hand, it has never been more uncertain: the trust in authorities: government and media is in constant decline (Eurobarometer, 2017) and the trust in other online users is increasing (Nielsen, 2015). Communication environment today is more massive and more dynamic than ever before and we are witnessing the rise of the new communication paradigm. These changes are evident in all communication spheres and also in political communication. Recent events like Trump's election for the US president and the Brexit have risen the role of social media, role of media and the role of users in this new communication paradigm. Rise and popularization of social media platforms open new channels for political parties worldwide to engage with users and share their messages and ideologies. Social media platforms brought more personalized and more individual approaches to the voters which is evident in politician communication worldwide. As Johnson (2011) explained, the potential for political parties to connect, communicate,

mobilize, fundraise, and affect the news agenda through social media are some of the strategic reasons why political parties are increasingly performing online politics. This trend became obvious in most Western democracies and today we witness that social media is becoming political communication strategy channel for parties, politicians and governments worldwide.

In the context of political communication, the usage of social media is more obvious in election campaigns. When we discuss about the usage of social media in political communication the first association mostly is the 2008 electoral campaign of Barack Obama. Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumler (2009: 3) explain “in the United States, Barack Obama’s presidential campaign relied heavily on the viral capabilities of social networking sites as a way of overcoming perceived mass media obstacles. Today, the possibilities of internet and social media help in the popularity and rise of “cyber parties” (Margetts, 2001) and therefore, they are changing political landscape in Europe. In this line, Chadwick and Stromer-Galley (2016) mention that the role of digital media practices in reshaping political parties and election campaigns is driven by a tension between control and interactivity. The role of internet is becoming more and more emphasized in mobilizing voters and to the impact on users and election outcomes (Shah et al., 2001; Johnson & Kaye, 2003; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Xenos & Moy, 2007; Shah et al., 2007).

However, besides the impact on political communication, social platforms brought the change in media ecosystem. The dynamic of contemporary communication field is presented in annual Reuters Institute Digital News Report which tracks changes in media usage and trust in news. Data for 2018 indicates that trust in media remains worryingly low in most countries, often linked to high levels of media polarization, and the perception of undue political influence but also that social media platforms and chat applications like Viber and Whatsapp are becoming most used platforms for informing (Reuters Institute Digital News Report, 2018).

We have stepped in a dynamic, fast evolving and interactive communication times and we are witnessing new communication paradigm in all communication spheres. That is why there is a tension for re-defining and re-conceptualizing renowned communication practices. This debates will continue, but we have responsibility to monitor, explain and track the development of new communication paradigm.

Structure of the special issue

The present issue of *Communication & Society* addresses the situation of uncertainty and constant changes in the political communication sphere from different perspectives. Firstly, from the political actors’ standpoint, Laura Alonso-Muñoz and Andreu Casero-Ripollés, both from Jaume I University (Spain), propose an analysis of the use of Twitter by Spanish political actors during the Spanish general election in 2016. In this study, they focus on how the political leaders and the different parties build their agenda and which themes are more prominent.

From this same political perspective and placing again social media networks at the center of the discussion, Cristina Zurutuza-Muñoz, from San Jorge University (Spain) and Darren G. Lilleker, from Bournemouth University (United Kingdom), discuss and analyse how Spanish politicians use in this case Facebook and the type of conversation established through citizens’ comments. In the context of the Spanish 2016 general election, these researchers conduct a quantitative content analysis focusing on aspects such as the tone, style, structure of comments coming from citizens on politicians’ Facebook posts.

In their research, Domagoj Bebić and Marija Volarević, both from University of Zagreb (Croatia), focus on the role and use of Internet memes in political communication. These authors analyse a series of memes taking as case study Ivo Sanader, a former Croatian

prime minister, in the period in which this political figure released from prison. The influence of this viral tool for propaganda on the way the media covered news about Sanader is a noteworthy aspect Bebić and Volarević discuss about it.

Two next studies deal with the phenomenon of populism from different angles. In the first study, Belén Fernández-García and Óscar G. Luengo, both from University of Granada (Spain), aim to contribute to the conceptualization of populism, due to the existent confusion on the term. The authors describe the core elements of populism through a content analysis of electoral manifestos from eight political parties. In order to determine what populism is, populist and non-populist parties are included in the analysis.

The second study, conducted by Norbert Kersting (University of Münster, Germany), Abel Reiberg (Freie Universität Berlin, Germany) and Phillip Hocks (University of Münster, Germany), explores the influence of the populism on the quality of political debates in parliaments. Taking the political German context as the scenario for the research, especially paradigmatic due to the rise of the right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), these researchers analyse concretely debates on immigration policy in the German parliament, applying the concept of Cognitive Complexity, a linguistic approach based on the LIWC dictionary.

Below, we find other contributions paying attention to citizens' participation in the field of political communication. Pedro Fierro Zamora, from Adolfo Ibáñez University (Chile) and Frederic Guerrero-Solé, from Pompeu Fabra University (Spain), explore different attitudes from citizens towards politics taking as case study Chile. These authors present a deep research of internal efficacy, external efficacy, and political interest, as variables for explaining people's disaffection. Ana Azurmendi and Mercedes Muñoz Saldaña, from University of Navarra (Spain), and Félix Ortega from University of Salamanca (Spain), present a research on the Public Service Broadcasters in Spain concerning the necessity for being independent from political power. This study aims to provide evidences of the opportunities citizens have to participate in public media, as well as their demands regarding its independence, among others.

The next part of this issue is devoted to the relevance of mediatization analyzed from different perspectives and circumstances. Beatriz Herrero-Jiménez, Adolfo Carratalá and Rosa Berganza, researchers from Rey Juan Carlos University (Spain), examine to what extent social media have influence on the European Parliamentary agenda, in the context of the Syrian civil war. In order to reach their research objectives, they conduct a quantitative and quality content analysis of debates from British, German, French, Spanish and European parliaments. Sarah Bishop, from City University of New York (United States), looks at the contrast of the portrayals of undocumented immigrants in United States discourse conveyed through the media and the narratives provided by the immigrants themselves. In her research, the author conducted forty oral interviews with immigrants who have lived as undocumented immigrants in New York City.

Finally, Javier García-Marín and Adolfo Calatrava, researchers from University of Granada and Antonio Nebrija University (Spain), provide a remarkably research on media frames. These authors defend an appealing way of locating frames in order to solve usual problems researchers face while conducting studies related to framing. Their proposal is based on the use of information cataloging algorithms. The refugee crisis in Europe in 2015 is taken here as a case study for applying their contribution.

The present issue of *Communication & Society* comprises high quality pieces of research dealing with recent changes and an uncertain context in political communication. Without a doubt, all these contributions from researchers from different countries involved in this issue help for clarifying the complex current panorama and their insights become useful for forthcoming research.

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