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## **Political Communication and Political Science: looking for a shared research agenda**

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In a world characterized by the growing conflation of politics and communication, where democracies are experimenting with deep changes and facing challenging innovations, the interest in the field of Political Communication is growing globally. The implications for the paradigms and the scientific research agenda, as well as for the various disciplines, have been far-reaching. The increasing number of academic departments and schools around the world—specialized in this field of study and education, with a strong interdisciplinary feature—mirrors these transformations.

In just a few decades, all around the world, individuals and organizations, social movements and governments have been affected by the opportunities and issues presented by the media environment. The transformation began with the advent of television and rapidly continued with the development of broadcasting in the last decade of the 20th century, when advances in cable and satellite technology brought forth more choices for information and entertainment from around the world than ever before. In the era of communicative abundance that Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) called the “third era” of Political Communication, innovative global news channels such as Al-Jazeera built transnational audiences, while the widespread diffusion of the Internet and the emergence of the more interactive Web 2.0 definitively changed the ecology of communication. Many stories became world news because citizens were empowered by new social media such as Facebook and Twitter or because revelations shared on

the Internet shed light on the dark side of power, as well showed, for example, in the cases of Assange (WikiLeaks) and Snowden (Datagate NSA).

The above-mentioned phenomena let us glimpse at how deep and ambivalent transformations feature our mediated democracies. Growing spaces for horizontal politics and the increasing democratization of many social practices coexist, in fact, with relevant processes of concentration (of power and ownership) while—not infrequently—the center of gravity of political and institutional systems shifts toward non-elective arenas.

A deep and comprehensive knowledge of the dynamics and complexities of politics in the global age requires theories, methodologies, and tools of analysis that take into account the epistemological and conceptual challenges generated by technological innovations and, more generally, by the developments of media systems and communication flows. Therefore, it is necessary to gain a better grasp not only of the theories on politics and communication but also of the rooted systemic relationships on such theoretical and methodological perspectives.

The emergence of a hybrid system of Political Communication (Chadwick, 2013), in which old and new media are integrated, has brought change to political life and challenged Political Science by raising real questions for the foundations of the study of politics—as for all other social sciences. Just as sociologists and economists must look at online behavior, as political scientists we should take a fresh look at our discipline.

This special issue would like to offer a contribution in this direction. Its goal is twofold. First, it examines these emerging challenges that impose us to redefine the boundaries between the disciplines and requirements for knowledge. Second, it starts a debate within Italian Political Science and Sociology on themes and analytical perspectives with a great potential for cultural growth, as well as for strengthening the institutional development and consolidation. More specifically, in this short introduction we intend to contribute to the discussion first by providing few considerations on the main challenges from a theoretical, methodological, and academic perspectives (Margetts, 2010), and second by pointing out how Italian Political Science has responded to these challenges.

## **What are the challenges for Political Science?**

The key challenges for Political Science in the 21st century are varied, and the discipline might respond in different ways. It is neither necessary nor useful to furnish a list that would be necessarily incomplete. To put the question directly, we have to wonder how Political Science, as a discipline, has responded to the challenges posed by “real world” developments (Hay, 2010). Moreover, if we look at the “real world” developments, there is no doubt that one of the most important of these is related to information and communication systems. We can discuss the nature of such developments; however, no one can underestimate them or undervalue the implications with reference to three main dimensions.

### *Theoretical dimension*

Thirty years ago, when Joshua Meyrowitz published *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (1985), the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of assessing the impact of new or any media in isolation from other variables became clear. The developments and widespread diffusion of the computer-mediated technologies of the Internet and social networks are often grafted on to older media formats to produce hybrid forms. As a result of these complexities, it is groundless to present any effort on a simple thesis—such as “Americanization” or “Mediatization” often accompanied by a strong normative position to explain the transformations of politics that we are living. However, we would need more academic and institutional efforts to link the discipline of Political Science and the Communication research.

A politics framed and influenced by media has profound consequences for the characteristics, organization, and goal of political processes, actors, and institutions. Political Communication and the growing use of digital technologies challenge the conceptual frameworks of Political Science. It is doubtful that they affect the basic principles of democracy and the theoretical assumptions; however, they certainly radically reshape the structure of opportunities and constraints of political action and of institutional organizations. Although wireless connectivity, the creation of networks, and the viral diffusion of information have profoundly changed both the political processes—on the macro level—and the individual preferences—on

the micro level—the questions and the key issues at the heart of the investigations remain the same as in the past.

Most recent trends in Political Communication Research have been dictated by the tectonic shifts in how politics is communicated and many of the big questions that we face as the society requires answers that transcend the boundaries of a single field or discipline. Dynamics of election campaigns and the mutations that have occurred to the traditional forms of policy debate are on the ground of more relevant changes: so, for example, in recent years, interdisciplinary research has also analyzed emerging issues such as climate change, economic crisis, and biotechnologies.

Extending the analysis and discussion beyond the usual perspective that has informed, but limited, the study of Political Communication over the years is a challenge for Political Science to better understand the democratic and non-democratic processes and institutions. When society's biggest questions are defined by the news media and acted upon by the public and decision-makers, it is not surprising that one of the most challenging fields in academe is Political Communication.

### *Methodological dimension*

The challenges to Political Science generated by new theoretical issues and by the large amount of empirical data available will perform an innovative research agenda only if the discipline faces another challenge—this time, methodological.

The Internet has become a rich source of empirical data about political behavior, organizations, and institutions, offering the possibility to obtain data information in addition to those provided, for example, by opinion surveys. This means that Political Science cannot hope to preserve methodological integrity without developing new methods to understand the emerging political phenomena. Now that digital technologies have moved center-stage in government policy-making and activities, any analysis of governmental organizations needs to consider their information system. New ways of collecting information and data present a further challenge to Political Science, involving technical skills and expertise not only from other social science disciplines but also from computer sciences that have

contributed the most to design and to study the structure of the Internet and World Wide Web.

However, the opportunities offered by those developments cannot overshadow the obstacles and risks. Some are related to the possibility of obtaining and using such data. First, the richest collections of such data are conducted by search engine companies. Second, even if such data is available, political activities form a somewhat small percentage of the overall life online, so it can be difficult to analyze the aggregated data. Finally, there is a growing disparity between national scientific communities to collect or obtain such data.

The future of Political Science will be increasingly determined by the institutional capacity building to produce new knowledge. In this perspective, the strategic aim will be developing and coordinating databases, promoting more cooperation between research centers, and participating in international networks to obtain resources for strategic investments.

### *Academic dimension*

The way in which international Political Science answered the theoretical and methodological challenges generated by technological innovations and, more generally, by the developments of media systems and communication flows, reflected on academic and scientific institutions, departments and teaching activities. Moreover, the communication revolution is at the center of important research programs and initiatives. A few examples can be provided to show, internationally, how long the issues of Political Communication have been fully penetrated in the agenda of social science research and how deep the efforts continue to work in this direction:

1. Based on a workshop sponsored by The National Science Foundation, Jane Fountain (John Kennedy School of Government, University of Harvard) directed a project called "*Information, Institutions, and Governance: Advancing a Basic Social Science Research Program for Digital Government*" (2003) to build international research capacity at the intersection of information technology, governance, and organization. A primary goal was the application and

extension of the social and applied social sciences to strengthen digital government research.

2. In 2015, the APSA Congress dedicated great attention to the influence of digital technologies on conventional modes of communication and representation around the world. Political scientists were invited to discuss how the development of digital technologies has transformed policy-making and evaluation; and, generally, how the abundance of data and digital tools are transforming states' power for surveillance and citizens' capacity to bypass traditional channels of Political Communication.
3. In 2015, a conference was held in Croatia, organized by a committee formed by IPSA RC10 (Electronic Democracy), RC22 (Political Communication), and RC34 (Quality of Democracy). Very meaningfully, from our perspective, the call for papers read as follows:

*The conference theme focuses on the intersection between the work of three strands of political science, all of which ask questions of vital importance for the well-being of democracy globally. These questions revolve around measures, standards, and analyses of the quality of democracy, the role of political communication in enhancing democracy, and the extent that information and communication technology offers potential for a richer, interactive, and co-created politics.*

On the whole, we can say that at the international level—and above all in the US<sup>1</sup>—there has been a relevant effort devoted to making explicit links between three areas of research that have rarely cooperated until now. The increasing number of academic departments and schools around the world—specialized in this field of study and education, with a strong *interdisciplinary* feature—mirrors these transformations. Instead of distinguishing and separating the Political Science into sub-fields, the challenge to the discipline is to review the theoretical, empirical, and methodological perspectives and approaches. The academic field of Political Communication is really a broad defined set of interdisciplinary efforts at the intersection of Communication Research, Political Science, Sociology, and a host of other disciplines. In recent years, this list of disciplines has grown. As explained by Holli Semetko and Margaret Scammell in their introduction to *The Sage Handbook of Political Communication* (2012), the expansion of the field is evidenced by the growth of publications in a wide array of journals around the world. Often, they

add, innovative findings and researches can be found in reviews, such as *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, which are away from the mainstream outlets.

### ***How Italian Political Science has responded to these developments?***

While a number of Italian scholars have made grand claims regarding the possibilities of the media communication having a deep effect on political life, we must admit that with some important exceptions our discipline has been reluctant on the subject of Political Communication. At the first glance, no one denies that the growing conflation of politics and communication characterized our world. No one denies that communication matters; but what is the impact on the scientific community and mainstream paradigms? Actually, it is very small. Certainly, if compared to 30 years ago, an increasing number of political scientists are involved in the study of Political Communication, as seen by the growing number of books and articles on the topic. Even more scholars are participating in international meetings. Despite this development, the overall impact on the discipline seems to be marginal in Italy. This statement can be sustained if we look at two significant areas of institutionalization of the discipline: the introductory textbooks on politics and the experience of the *Italian Political Science Review*.

### ***The Handbooks***

A glance at the list of about 20 volumes published in recent years (2007–2014) on various aspects of politics—public policy, international relations, and public administration—illustrates the point. Two handbooks of Political Science out of eight have one chapter on “Political Communication” (Cotta, Della Porta, and Morlino, 2008 and Hague and Harrop, 2011), while another two have some paragraphs in the chapters on “Public opinion, participation, and communication” and on “Political participation” (Capano, Raniolo, Piattoni, and Verzichelli, 2014), or in the part on “What are political parties?” (Della Porta, 2008). The other handbooks make no mention of Political Communication at all. If we look at an Internet search, the scenario is even poorer: only a few pages are devoted to digital technologies!

Sub-fields of Political Science where you might expect to see research into communication-based change are also substantially silent. In particular, mainstream public policy (three handbooks published in 2008, 2010, and 2011) and international relations (two handbooks published in 2012 and 2013) ignored the subject. The two handbooks of Administration Science (published in 2007 and 2011) and the four books dedicated to public administrations and to management of public institutions (published in 2008, 2009, 2011, and 2015) offer one chapter on Public Communication and two chapters on e-government. While hundreds of reports have been produced by international organizations and global consultancies, this research area is largely ignored by the academic mainstream.

The development of Political Communication and, in particular, the changes generated by the diffusion of digital technologies have opened up the market to practitioners. The role of pollsters is the best known but it is not the only one. Today, many political scientists solely work on issues related to Political Communication, but the discipline has not really taken up the challenge. As Helen Margetts (2010, 67) said, “within each sub-field of Political Science there has been a tendency towards ghettoization; the ‘ghettos’ have produced some useful work”—from monographs to handbooks—however, without entering the mainstream. This evidence is also confirmed by the analysis of the Italian Political Science Review.

### *Italian Political Science Review*

The survey carried out on the articles hosted by the review in the last ten years (33 from 2004 to 2014) tells us that only ten contributions among the many published by the journal have been devoted to exploring topics in the field of Political Communication. The analysis corroborates what we have previously said: over the years, our discipline has remained mostly impermeable to the new issues and challenges raised by the communication revolution. The articles are indeed focused mostly on electoral campaigning strategies or on party strategies and programs.<sup>2</sup> Even more significant, no article is dedicated to digital policies and the Internet. Till date, in the Italian Political Science Review, only one article which dates back to 2003, authored by Calise and De Rosa, explored the issue of e-government plans and policies.



More than 20 years later, the General Italian Election of March 1994, which decreed Berlusconi's first victory, and after the diffusion of the Internet which has transformed Italian politics radically, the mainstream discipline has been changed slowly. The research agenda has been shaped by the development of Political Communication as a *sub-field* of Political Science, as demonstrated above all by *ComPol*, the *Italian Political Communication Journal*, and by the growing number of scholars and practitioners who jointly contribute to the *Italian Political Communication Association* and to the *Standing Group* on Political Communication of SISP. However, the institutionalization of the Political Communication community has remained on the margins of the Political Science paradigms and methodologies. If RISP tells the history of the discipline, then we can say that the discipline has not examined the challenge.

### **Concluding remarks**

Despite the fact that the importance of rethinking the social sciences from a holistic and interdisciplinary perspective was stressed 20 years ago (Wallerstein, 1996), and although this awareness is now supported by important international scientific organizations, such as ISSC and UNESCO (UNESCO, 2010, ISSC and UNESCO, 2013), an extreme fragmentation of knowledge has prevailed. New scientific domains consolidate themselves like a sub-field of the mainstream discipline more than by challenging it at the borders. Perhaps the vanishing of the political theory from the Italian Political Science community, as outlined by Pasquino, Regalia and Valbruzzi in *Quarant'anni di scienza politica in Italia* (2013), helps us to understand why our discipline has focused more on some Political Communication issues than on others, preferring the empirically more manageable but theoretically less relevant ones (see also Campus and Mazzoleni, 2013). Moreover, 25 years ago, the report on the Italian Political Science coordinated by Leonardo Morlino (1989) had devoted a rich chapter to *Theory and Macro-politics*. What happened since then? Maybe John Brever's book, *The Public Value of the Social Science* (2013), can help us answer this question and critically understand the debate on the role of our disciplines that is occurring in Western countries. Indeed, he outlines that the power and influence of the social science have been undermined by their Balkanization. His crucial argument is that "at a time when the big issues facing the future of humankind are multifaceted and require post-disciplinary,

the social science disciplines remain separated into their own silos” (48).

This tendency looks more relevant in some countries, perhaps those where other cultural and institutional changes work in the same direction. That might be the case in Italy, where the last reform of the university system (2010) and the introduction of the evaluation paradigm have favored a consolidation of the disciplinary boundaries of mainstream Political Science, weakening the opportunities for a still not-fully legitimized sub-field as Political Communication, especially in its qualitative declinations at an academic and cultural level. A starting analysis of the Political Communication courses offered by the Italian Universities highlights some consequences at the academic level and in the teaching, showing a general trend towards the drastic resizing of the discipline. Needless to say, this trend would be even clearer if we compare this new scenario with the pre-Gelmini scenario.

All this said, evidence still remains for the first stage. Even though the national policies in the University and evaluation field are very important variables, the bunker mentality of most disciplines is primarily the result of practices by the subjects themselves. It is “practitioners who practise disciplinarity” (Brever, 2013, 49). This means that each of us—as a scientific community—is responsible for what happens.

A first step was made towards a more focused and integrated approach to the relationship between Political Science and Political Communication with the International Conference on “Media, politics, and democracy: A challenging topic for Social Sciences” (Rome, May 21–22, 2015) organized by the *Standing Group* on Political Communication of the *Italian Association of Political Science* (SISP) and LUISS Guido Carli Free International University for Social Studies.<sup>3</sup> Several national and international scholars (Matthew Hibberd, Darren Lilleker, Thierry Vedel and Jan Zielonka among the others) contributed to the debate by offering deep analysis and seminal suggestions.

This special issue of IPS is aimed at moving one more step forward, with the help of four eminent scholars. Our fear is that the current trends will induce the Political Science community to a farsighted response to the challenges. We strongly believe, in the words of Helen

Margetts (2010, 67), that *the time is ripe for theoretical development, methodological innovation and new empirical investigation to enter the mainstream.*

For sure, *failure to innovate is not an option* (Semetko and Scammell 2012, 4).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In some European countries the situation looks different and it should be explored further from this point of view. When looking at Negrine's analysis, for example, one might ask why both Italian and English Political Sciences seem to have experienced a similar distrust in Political communication. A first hypothesis, which however should be verified, might find at least a partial explanation in the fact that both countries have experienced an intense and, to an extent, a sudden growth of political marketing (even though in two very different frames and for different reasons).

<sup>2</sup> Except one, of a theoretical nature (Memoli and Splendore, 2014), three of the articles are focused on a general issue of the discipline (Campus, 2009; Borghetto and Carammia, 2010; Gasperoni, 2013), and two are devoted to political discourse (Conti and Manca, 2008; Conti and De Giorgi, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> We would like to especially thank our colleagues Leonardo Morlino and Michele Sorice for making the meeting possible.

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