



**Partecipazione e Conflitto**  
<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>  
ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)  
ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)  
PACO, Issue 13(2) 2020: 970-989  
DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v13i2p970

Published in July 15, 2020

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Re-Connecting Voices. The (New) Strategic Role of Public Sector Communication After the Covid-19 crisis

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**Abstract:** This article aims to investigate the evolution of public sector communication before and after the Covid-19 crisis that has strongly impacted governmental institutions, public policy, contemporary society, and media ecologies. After a review of the main characteristics of public sector communication, the article proposes an interpretative and dynamic model to better understand the new challenges for public institutions. The model introduces ethics as the new, primary driver for public sector communication to surround all decisions, pointing out the need for transparent, authentic participation and dialogue to build trust. Focusing on two dimensions (trust/distrust, openness/closedness), the authors investigate the main trajectories of change for public sector communication, conceiving the three pillars of open government (transparency, participation and collaboration) as strategic values for improving the quality and efficacy of communication. In this time of uncertainty, the new trajectories of communication should fully embrace an ethical approach in order to become resilient, able to respond to citizens' needs and expectations, and to maintain responsible relationships with media, varied strategic publics, and a rapidly changing global community.

**KEYWORDS:** public sector communication, ethics, social media, public relations, Covid-19, open government, sociology of communication, transparency

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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary society is characterized by a growing sense of distrust in government and in public institutions (Edelman 2018, Rosanvallon and Goldhammer 2008). The pervasive impact of digital technologies and social media, as well as different activists and interest groups raising their voices to contribute to public policy debates, create a turbulent environment and numerous ethical challenges for communication professionals. These diverse voices seek not only to create new collaboration's opportunities and to contribute to deliver public services, but also to protest or obstruct government actions (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, Coleman and Shane 2011). This plurality of voices is spread and made visible via the Internet and the social web, but it is also portrayed in media coverage, and integrated throughout public sector communication strategies and initiatives (Luoma-aho and Canel 2020). Overall this public discourse creates an ethical responsibility of public sector communicators to operate with honesty, rectitude, authenticity, and obligation to society (Bowen 2010). Ethical behavior is essential because relationships simply cannot exist in a positive, long-term sense without trust, or the reliance on the other party to take right, ethical action. We take these responsibilities to a new level by using this special issue to challenge even our shared understanding of the field with new, innovative, normative, and applied ideas to reset our common gestalt.

Re-connecting voices means intentionally and strategically aiming at creating flows, platforms, and environments where these different voices can meet, invigorate and face each other, enabling learning, participation, and dialogue. These opportunities offer innovative digital communication practices, fostering civic engagement or revitalizing forms of democracy. Many scholars refer to this area of communication as instilling symmetry through ongoing dialogical feedback loops (Grunig 2000). Scholars argue that this form of symmetrical communication (Grunig 1992, 2000), combined with a focus on ethics, helps to build trust in ongoing relationships (Bowen, Hung-Baesecke and Chen 2016).

In this context marked by plural arenas of interactions, public sector communication can have a strategic role to manage voices and relations with citizens, media and collectivity, involving them in different experiences and processes of democratic innovations (e.g., collaborative governance, public debate, territorial co-management) (Bartoletti and Faccioli 2016, D'Ambrosi 2019, De Blasio and Sorice 2016). In relation to these new approaches public sector communication has to be considered "goal-oriented communication inside organizations and between organizations and their stakeholders that enables public sector functions within their specific cultural and/or political settings, with the purpose of building and maintaining the public good and trust between citizens and authorities" (Canel and Luoma-aho 2019, 33). This perspective summarizes a long and rich debate around the apolitical function of communication produced by different public sector organizations (i.e., governments, municipalities, health authorities, universities, etc.) that started to be investigated in the first half of the last century, and then enriched by the contributions of many scholars from different disciplines and backgrounds including sociology of communication, public relations, political science, administrative and organizational studies (Canel 2007, Garnett 1997, Lee 2007, Luoma-aho and Canel 2020, McCamy's 1939).

In this scenario, this special issue aims at critically investigating the plurality of voices and the remediation of communication strategies and practices before and after the Covid-19 crisis that is strongly impacting on contemporary society and media ecologies. From one side, the public sector voice will be taken into consideration, focusing on offline and digital communication implemented by public organizations, investigating ethical, sociological, and political implications. On the other side, this special issue will focus on citizens' voices, investigating grassroots communication practices and dynamics of participation in conventional or unconventional ways. Undoubtedly, the Covid-19 pandemic can represent a turning point for public sector communication in terms of relationships with different publics (citizens, legacy media, civic

society, politics, etc.), responsibility in the face of threat, ethical dialogue, and shared risk that needs to be investigated in its complexity, disruption, and innovativeness.

After a critical review of the definition, understanding, and characteristics of public sector communication, this article proposes an interpretative, dynamic model and some trajectories for research to understand the new challenges for public institutions to face the pandemic crisis and other future crises. The last part of this manuscript presents the different articles that compose this special issue, reconnecting topics, differing sensibilities, social contexts, and academic backgrounds.

## **2. Public Sector Communication: reconnecting models and practices**

To better understand the changes and challenges brought by the Covid-19 pandemic, it is important to briefly summarize the main characteristics of public sector communication, traversing the scholarly literature that addresses this theme.

Historically, communication was conceived as a mere transmitting function within public sector organizations, mainly oriented towards a vertical, bipolar, hierarchical, and unidirectional relationship between administrations and citizens, often passive recipients of the messages produced by institutions (Andersen and Dawes 1991, Graber 1992, Kass and Catron 1990). Its value relied on the transfer of information between the different sectors or departments of public institutions, as well as in pushing out messages in ordinary and specific situations (eg., events, access to services, elections, etc.), without integrated communication strategies or attention to citizens' needs (Coye 2004, Zemor 2008). Communication and public relations offices were often not officially recognized or institutionalized in organizational charts, and communication was a function embedded in the political leadership or absorbed and weakened by bureaucratic powers (Bessières 2018, Cheung 1996, Sanders and Canel 2013, Solito and Sorrentino 2018). In this perspective public sector organizations have been communicated exclusively by political leaders or through the media coverage that very often was based on newsmaking criteria that emphasized scandals, disservices and bad management of public money. This mediatization process, reinforced by the production of movies and tv-series that stereotyped institutions and public administrations routines and practices, have developed a relationship of love and hate between media and public organizations (Graber 2003, Lovari 2020b, Sorrentino 2008).

This model started to slowly evolve and change under the pressure by several socio-technical factors, by the growing impact of mass media in public opinion (Lipman 1992, Thompson 1995), and by progressive reforms of public sector organizations in Western societies toward a new public management approach (Christensen and Lègreid 2011, Hood 1991, Cordella and Bonina 2012), that obliged administrations to be "more responsive to society's needs and demands" (Thijs and States 2008, 8). This different asset of managing public sector organizations, typical of private sector and market economics, has oriented institutions to be more efficient, transparent, and customer oriented (Hood and Lodge 2006, Osborne and Gaebler 1992). Moreover, this process has been corroborated by the digital revolution with knowledge, software and technical structures and support, aiming at modernizing bureaucratic organizations (West 2005). Lanzara and Contini (2009) define this process of integration as an "assembled mix of technical and institutional components that are in part an evolutionary outcome and in part a product of human intervention and design" (2009, 4). Although this new approach has been difficult to implement in some public organizations, requiring new skills and professional competencies also in communication management, a new citizen's oriented culture has gradually expanded in the public sector.

At the same time these changes have stimulated the development of new approaches in the relationships with citizens, both in terms of publics' expectations than in terms of innovative communication practices, with different speeds of adoption and implementation (Rogers 1962), according to the diverse organizational cultures and resistances to changes. Communication started to become central in order to build and nurture

relations between public organizations and their publics, as well as a strategic function not only to give visibility of public services and political leaders, but to manage intangible assets (such as trust, reputation and participation) to “become more antifragile” (Canel and Luoma-aho 2019, 65).

In this scenario some keywords have represented the trajectories of change and the principles of good governance: quality, transparency, responsiveness, simplification, accountability (Faccioli 2000, Graber 2003, Lathrop and Ruma 2010) and ethical communication: authenticity or virtue, frankness, honesty, prioritized values, and contextual full disclosure (Bowen 2016).

Transparency is not enough alone (Bowen 2010) for ethical communication, but was considered an essential driver for defining the relationship between administrators and citizens according to a more democratic approach and a pluralistic cooperation (Mulgan 2000). Its value has been appreciated over the years as an indicator to guarantee higher levels of institutional performance and trustworthiness (Hood 2006, O'Neill 2019). The greater attention to transparency and access to documents by citizens has redefined the characteristics of the communication, its styles and media mix towards more openness and permeability, trust and collaboration (Canel and Luoma-aho 2019, Christensen and Langer 2009, Kent and Taylor 2002). The pressures towards a democratization of relations between public sector organizations and citizens have set as a horizon the centrality of communication function (Delli Carpini 2020). This activity has become more visible not only through the initiatives directly carried out by the institutions, but also in the mediatization process and in digital activism and mobilization by citizens (Firmstone and Coleman 2015, Schulz 2004, Thompson 1995).

In this scenario particular attention was devoted to the framework of open government as a new model of governance to increase transparency and hinder corruption in activities carried out by institutions (Islam, 2003, Lathrop and Ruma 2010). According to the OECD (2005), the definition of open government is related to “the transparency of government actions, the accessibility of government services and information and the responsiveness of government to new ideas, demands and needs”. In a wider concept it includes different practices and functions that cut across all government policy areas as “open data initiatives, access to information laws, political rights, whistleblower protections, public consultation and engagement processes” (Council of Europe 2018, 11). According to scholarly literature, open government is based on three pillars: transparency, participation, and collaboration (De Blasio and Sorice 2016, Lathrop and Ruma 2010). In order to achieve these pillars, the communication function holds a central role, able to inform, connect, and stimulate understanding among different publics. In such a perspective, it is important to focus on the way data is produced and disseminated, to ensure that the effective voices from citizens have been integrated in public policies and can influence the institutional process with ideas and expertise (Harris and Fleisher 2017). At the same time, some authors have pointed out how increased transparency could foster digital surveillance where administrations and administrators can become omnipresent in controlling citizens' tracks and in orientating the dialogue with the organization (Zavattaro and Sementelli 2014, 262). Indeed, the production of communication enabled by digital platforms makes everything more visible and controlled, evolving in a digital panopticon in which everyone can be observed and monitored (Han 2015).

These critical aspects are strongly connected to participation, another central keyword in the process of change related to public sector organizations and their communication function. To support this growing process over the past few years, public sector organizations have fostered citizens to get involved in the public policies, providing them not only with relevant information but also adopting specific communication strategies in order to facilitate the access to experiences and initiatives, such as integrated policies, area plans, programme agreements, and service conferences.

This change has favored the development of a more symmetrical approach in communication (Grunig 1992, 2000) where citizens increasingly ask to be, not only informed, but also involved in public engagement (Osborne 2004). Symmetry involves the give-and-take of dialogue and integrative negotiation as an ongoing process rather than an equal balance (Grunig 2006). The different presence of citizens in public space (offline and digital) has given importance not only to the civic and social associative part, but also to public

organization and to its ability to formalize and plan in time actions of confrontation, debate and deliberative procedures (Massoli and D'Ambrosi 2014). Moreover, public sector organizations must act with responsibility and rectitude toward citizens and publics. This perspective is based on normative moral philosophy, obligating rational decision-makers to act with deliberation and obligation to uphold moral norms in all decisions. It is also based on the lack of trust in modern government and the demands publics place upon public sector organizations for responsible operations. In studying organization-public relationship variables, ethical behavior was found to be a precursor that must exist before deeper positive relationships can form (Bowen, Hung-Baesecke and Chen 2016).

The main attention to increase citizens' influence on decisions and to build civic capacity is closely connected to the impulse of the social and participatory web that have profoundly changed the public sector communication and its models and practices toward citizens and media (Lovari and Valentini 2020, Ducci, D'Ambrosi and Lovari 2019). Indeed, the development and penetration of web 2.0 and social media has enabled citizens not only to have access to public information but to contribute and participate in policies, services, and communication activities. Due to the engaging and participative nature of these platforms, Linders (2012) defines this shift "we-government", a new phase in which administrations abandon the top-down logic typical of the e-government, and consider citizens as partners, rather than clients, giving them trust and an active role in delivering services and modernizing the administration.

In this scenario, social media, and in particular social networking sites (boyd and Ellison 2007), can have a strategic role since they represent the connective tissue of communities of engaged individuals (Goldsmith and Crawford 2014), as well as a channel to disintermediate communication, and an environment to innovate public sector communication, reconnecting different voices and practices (Lovari and Valentini, 2020; Lovari et al 2011, Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018; Warren et al., 2014). The participatory potential of every citizen/user is constantly increasing, so as the opportunities of inclusion and listening of digital and traditional publics for public administrations are wider and often unexplored (Bowen 2013, Macnamara 2016). Nowadays, social media represents one of the most important areas to experiment and improve new forms and models of public sector communication (Canel and Luoma-aho 2019, Ducci 2015, Kent 2013). Institutions mostly use digital channels and social media to interact with citizens, engage the public, create innovative communication campaigns, or participate in issue conversations and network with stakeholders (Dahlgren 2009, Mergel 2013). At the same time, social media brought a number of challenges; for instance, issues of privacy, security, ethics, engagement, and participation (Bertot et al. 2012, Lovari and Bowen 2019). For instance, Taylor and Kent (2014) call for a healthy scepticism in studying social media, and for a more detailed understanding of these digital platforms also for improving and reviving democracy. Moreover, many scholars pointed out how organizations are not familiar with platforms, algorithms and social media logic (Boccia Artieri and Marinelli 2018, Van Dijck and Poell 2013). This factor contributes to unstrategic use of these platforms in the public sector (Grunig 2009, Lovari and Parisi 2015, Valentini 2015, Zheng and Zheng 2014). Moreover, a large number of public sector organizations (e.g., municipalities, public health authorities) are still reluctant to fully adopt and institutionalize social media for their institutional communication, enabling dialogic communication with strategic publics (Mergel and Bretschneider 2013, Solito, Pezzoli and Materassi 2019). Indeed, all across the globe, public sector organizations appear to favor one-way broadcasting strategies despite the potentialities these digital platforms can offer for communicating with citizens in a bidirectional way (Lovari and Valentini 2020). In this perspective, the use of social media is often rudimentary, with these platforms seen merely as "additional channels for pushing information out to the public or to recycle content already disseminated through the organizations' websites or other communication channels" (Mergel 2015, 462).

The result is a "rhetoric of technological innovation" that often disappoints citizens and reduces their trust in these organizations that are not able to change perspective and use these platforms dialogically for communication.

This special issue shows the new centrality for ethics in public sector organizations, not only because of the all-time-low levels of trust in government, but because of the governmental role in managing pandemic crisis response, as discussed below. In moral philosophy, and likewise in applied ethics, conducting a rational analysis of ethical decisions provides a firmer footing for communication than does operating on a basis of a speculative, future mutual benefit, supposition, instinct, or experience (Bowen 2004b). Ethical drive as a basis for public sector communication can also handle the logical impossibility of finding a mutual benefit in zero-sum situations and can allow an organization to be not only ethical but also strategically competitive based on a rational analysis. A rational analysis is thought by philosophers to be morally superior to any of less rigorous options because it leads to thorough and rigorously calculated decisions. This ethical perspective is deontological, or based on duty (Kant 1785/1964).

Our assessment of the field and current situation with Covid-19 place an increased responsibility on public sector communicators for honest and ethical communication, often in a complex, digital, and rapidly paced environment. Principle-based deontological ethics is well suited to assisting communicators in these types of conditions. The deontological philosophical tradition believes that preferential treatment of consequences (even a supposed “mutually beneficial” outcome) would bias the decision making process, leading to a loss of impartial rationality and an inherent biasing of decisions. Again, this approach is based on a rational decision making process, equally considering all moral principles involved in the decision and equally considering all stakeholders, including governments, stakeholders, citizens, private organizations, and so on. Deontology is non-consequential in that the consequences are understood to be a part of the decision but are not the basis from which an alternative is judged to be ethical or not (Bowen 2004a). Rather, deontology uses duty to uphold moral principles as the measure by which the ethical worth of a decision is evaluated (Kant 1785/1964). All rational beings are equally obligated to consider the moral principle in operation rather than personal desires or biases (Baron 1995).

### **3. Reconceptualizing public sector communication after Covid-19**

The main characteristics of public sector communication have been put under pressure by the Covid-19 pandemic and by its consequences on socio-political variables at global, national and local level. Indeed, in less than three months an unknown virus, discovered in Wuhan (China) in late December 2019, has obliged the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare Covid-19 as a pandemic, the first caused by a coronavirus and the first entrenched on digital and social media. The epidemic of the virus has been accompanied by an epidemic of information, an “infodemic” characterized by a mix of facts, fears, rumors and speculations, that have strongly impacted on public sector communication activities, on media systems and on citizens’ information seeking practices.

Governments and public sector organizations have thus faced unexpected challenges that have stressed some critical aspects of institutional communication, already present in the previous phase (Faccioli 2000, Solito 2017, Zemor 2008). At the same time they have highlighted the resilience of institutions to provide fast and reliable information to citizens and the media to counter the infodemic and the spread of misinformation (Nielsen et al. 2020, Salaverría et al. 2020). The diffusion of fake news has also involved governments and public organizations’ activities during the pandemic. For instance, an international study, showed how the most recurrent claim concerned interventions or policies taken by public authorities to stop the spread of Covid-19, alleging that governments and health organizations had not fully succeeded in offering reliable information in response to growing demands from different publics (Brennen et al. 2020).

In many countries, the uncertainty surrounding Covid-19, exacerbated by social and economic consequences and implications, gave rise to a cacophony of voices, in which government and institutional communication was often misaligned with mass media that have tended to spectacularize the virus, also embedding discordant medical and scientific voices in their coverage. All these voices have become spreadable content on digital platforms, often politicized or associated with misinformation and conspiracy theories, thus increasing distrust among connected publics (Allington and Nayana 2020, EEAS 2020). The gravity of the situation has led the WHO, European Commission and the health ministries of several countries across the world, to collaborate with digital companies (like Facebook, Twitter or Google) to limit the spread of misinformation, to promote fact checking practices, and to give visibility to official institutional channels, especially on Internet and social media (D'Ambrosi 2019, European Commission 2020, Lovari 2020a).

Many questions arise in this challenging and disruptive context caused by the pandemic. Will the function and the value of public sector communication change after the pandemic? How will the relationships with citizens and strategic publics be reconfigured after the Covid-19 crisis? What might be the (new) keywords for public sector communication in the medium long term? How can rumor and misinformation spread be quelled by public sector communicators (Lovari and Bowen 2019) in a rapid and digital environment?

To try to respond to these questions, we propose an analytical and dynamic model that considers the new trajectories of public sector communication, considering the social, technological, and political implications that the emergency situation has produced in contemporary communication ecologies. We offer the proposed model in figure 1 to begin a discussion of how to accomplish this goal in a global environment of complex challenges, digital change, and competing understandings of truth and responsibility.

Ethics surrounds all decisions. Two central dimensions should be considered to investigate and imagine these trajectories of change (see fig. 1). These dimensions represent the two axes in which public sector communication can be strategically placed and positioned after the Covid-19 pandemic (see fig. n.1). The axes are: a) the level of trust/distrust in the public institutions; b) the condition of openness/closedness of public sector organizations in relationship with local, national, and global scenarios.

Regarding the first dimension, several studies have shown how the pandemic had a significant impact on trust and mistrust toward governments, media, health experts and scientists and public institutions influencing the level of confidence with citizens, and the ability to (re)build networks of relationships (e.g., Edelman 2020, Nielsen et al. 2020, Pew Research Center 2020). In an age of distrust (Edelman 2018, Ermisch and Gambetta 2016), failure of trust in public sector organizations can lead to loss of credibility, bad reputation, unmanageable complaints, and civic disaffection (Warren et al. 2014). The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the processes of distrust in some countries, but at the same time it has shown interesting paths of trust reconnection toward specific institutions, according to the different phases of the pandemic and the governmental interventions (Anderson 2020). Empowering trust helps to reduce complexity, enhance participation, and legitimate public bureaucracy's performances, favour cooperative behaviors, and organizational commitment (Canel and Luoma-aho 2019, Giddens 1990).

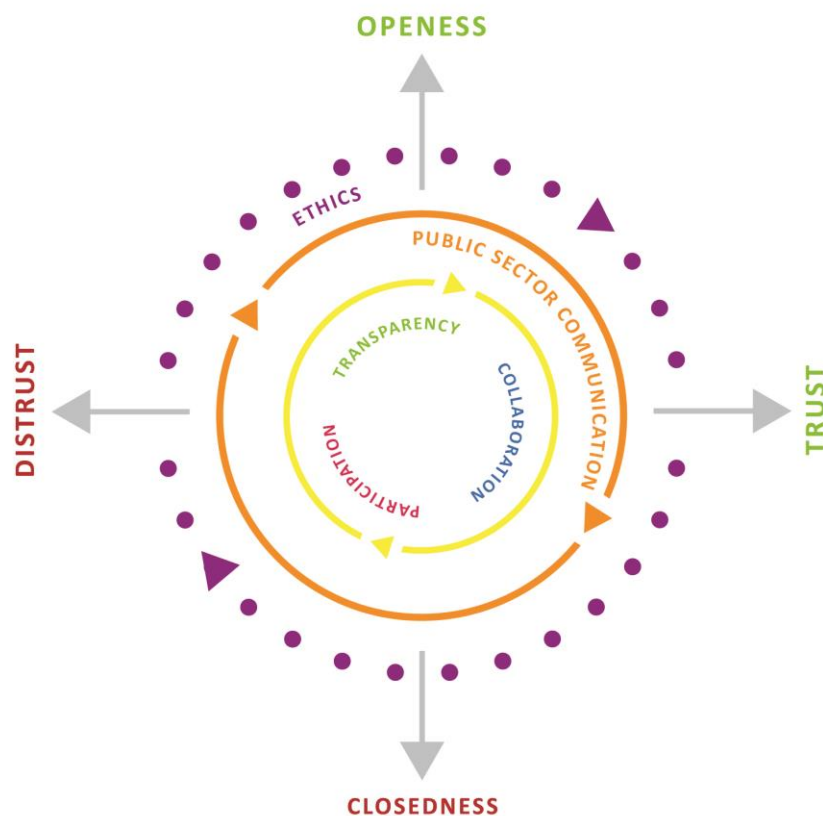
The second dimension (open/closedness) is related to the attitude to collaborate with different publics, outside of the local/regional dimensions in which public sector organizations are located, deliver their services and define their policies. This means working in an open and inclusive way, both in political and social contexts, or, conversely, in a closed sense in which collaboration is not sought.

Openness means flexibility in facing the changes and challenging contexts, listening to the voices of different social, political and economic stakeholders (Macnamara 2016). It means to be inclined to start

strategic partnerships at local, national and global level to overcome the crisis, confronting and engaging with different publics, including legacy media and new digital players (influencers, bloggers, ect.).

Instead, closedness is related to the attitude to face different situations, ordinary and extraordinary, alone and independently, limiting the relationships with the different publics (Gelders, Bouckaert and van Ruler 2007). A closed approach impacts also on communication activities, favouring one-way and asymmetrical communication, top-down persuasion and propaganda (Cathcart 1981, Grunig 2000, 2009). Listening is often substituted by hearing, since governments and public sector organizations ask citizens and other publics to express their opinions according to organizational needs, without really integrating their requests, expectations, and concerns. In this perspective, Macnamara (2018) highlighted the collapse of public communication into post-communication that favours an architecture of speaking, designed to influence and coerce publics into acquiescence and compliance, rather than debate, dialogue and negotiation.

**Figure 1 - Ethics as the driver of public sector communication dynamics**



The Covid-19 pandemic has shown how crises can produce openness or activate closedness at a local, national, and international levels. For instance, several governments have started to collaborate with digital



companies, mass media and civic society in order to flatten the curve of misinformation about the virus, emphasizing the need to share actions and the responsibility in the fight against dangerous information and fake news (Donovan 2020, Lovari 2020a, Tasnim, Hossain and Mazumder 2020). In several countries, including Italy, some institutions have provided forms of digital solidarity in partnership with private companies to offer free online services and to facilitate the access to the internet during the lockdown. The emergency has also stimulated new practices among municipalities, public health authorities, and non-profit organizations, favoring the creation of joint communication campaigns and actions, especially on social media, reconnecting the creativity of different voices (Carelli and Vittadini 2020).

On the other side, fear, uncertainty, and emerging political turbulence have pushed several governments and public sector organizations to choose a different approach, justified for reasons such as state security, safeguard of national sovereignty in which openness or shared decisions have been discouraged, also degrading in new forms of discrimination and racism. Closedness means also opacity in communication toward mass media about the numbers of infected people or deaths, or the scarcity of credible and effective responses to different publics' demands (i.e., other institutions, private organizations, citizens, etc.). To adopt a closed approach can be also related to the development of technologies for mapping and tracing the spread of the virus, as well as adopting specific policies for citizens' data management in times of emergencies. Surveillance of digital publics in spite of privacy concerns and data collection and manipulation are related problems. In some European countries for example, governments and regions have adopted individual specific strategies in the implementation of mobile applications for contact tracing, without a national or supranational coordination on data management. In Spain, for instance, different and competitive mobile tools were launched at the regional level without following an integrated national policy. In Italy the controversial debate around the government app "Immuni" has caused a relevant delay in launching the application, fueled by the resistances shown by several regions, political parties, and the media. All these issues are also ethical concerns and represent a real challenge for public sector organizations, as well as can constitute varied threats for citizens (Lyon 2018, Zavattaro and Sementelli 2014).

In this challenging and uncertain context, considering also the two axes/dimensions, public sector communication should conceive the three pillars of the open government (transparency, participation and collaboration) as strategic values (see fig. 1) in order, not only to increase the quantity of the messages produced, but also for improving the quality and the efficacy of communication.

These values should represent the driver to navigate the uncertainty of contemporary scenarios, moving public sector communication toward openness, and instilling and reinforcing a sense of trust in government and in institutions (Canel and Luoma-aho 2019, Goldsmith and Crawford 2014). Reconnecting the value of transparency, collaboration, and participation with that for principled, unbiased decisions is the key to rebuilding trust in government, as well as surmounting the enormous challenges of a crisis such as Covid-19. Increased accountability, principled decision making, and a more strategic and important role for public sector communications should result and be visible especially on digital platforms and social media.

In this sense public sector communication can play a strategic role to widespread and to reinforce the systemic institutional trust (Belardinelli and Gili 2020, Offe 1999, Giddens 1990), encouraging a greater openness in the development of bridging relations and stimulating public engagement and social capital (Bartoletti and Faccioli 2016, D'Ambrosi and Massoli 2012, Putnam 2000). In this regard, Gruning et al (2009) highlight the importance of converting public relations from a buffering to a bridging role designed to build relationships with stakeholders, rather than a set of messaging activities designed to buffer the organization from them. This different function of public relations in strategic decision making (Van den

Bosch and Van Riel 1998) is a necessary driver in communication management between public sector organizations and their publics after Covid-19.

To move toward openness, public sector organizations need to further develop their digital presence, but they should also continue to invest in a multichannel approach considering the various specificities and competence of their different publics, and the ethical ramifications of the unequal impact Covid-19 is having on lay persons. Excluding parts of the population from public sector communication flows can increase digital inequalities and social disparities. Instead public sector organizations should inform and listen to all publics equally and give space to all voices, especially minority ones.

Conversely, a closed and rigid communication, only organizational-oriented and lacking active and responsive listening to publics' needs, risks to reiterate the rhetoric of post-communication and propaganda (Macnamara 2018), contributing to the collapse of trust. Erosion of trust damages the credibility, breaks social cohesion and the balance on which relations within society are based; it may also instill among its institutions a closed attitude towards citizens.

In this new scenario, as discussed above and reported in figure 1, ethics represents the new, primary driver for public sector communication. Knowing whom to trust or distrust can literally mean the difference between life and death in a pandemic crisis as we saw with Covid-19. Being trustworthy is no longer optional for public sector organizations, as their responsibility to citizens could not be higher. We place ethics at the center of and around public sector communication to highlight this responsibility, as well as the need for honest, transparent, authentic participation and dialogue to build trust. In this manner, public sector organizations can fulfill a heightened sense of ethical responsibility in an ever-more challenging world of pandemics, crises, and upheavals because decisions are examined with logic. By obligating all people equally, this approach can be extended to the universal level meaning that it should apply similarly across national borders, institutions, cultures, types of crises, and so on. Decisions made under this paradigm should be consistent regardless of who is the decision maker. Therefore, using this approach would benefit public sector organizations with regard to maintaining responsible relationships with citizens, stakeholders, publics, and the global community.

Moreover, relationships cannot flourish without a foundation of ethical behavior upon which longer-term trust can grow. Conducting a rational analysis of ethical decisions provides a firmer footing for communication than does operating on a basis of a speculative, future mutual benefit, supposition, instinct, or experience (Bowen 2004b). Ethical drive as a basis for public sector communication can also handle the logical impossibility of finding a mutual benefit in zero-sum situations and can allow an organization to be not only ethical and responsive to stakeholders and publics, but also strategically competitive based on a rational analysis. A rational analysis is thought by philosophers to be morally superior to any of less rigorous options because it leads to thorough and rigorously calculated decisions. This ethical perspective is deontological, or based on duty (Kant 1785/1964).

In conclusion, the model highlights how public sector communication should have a strategic role in this time of uncertainty, characterized by the spread of misinformation and by economic and social crisis. Founded on transparency, participation and collaboration, the new trajectories of communication should fully embrace an ethical approach in order to become resilient and antifragile, able to respond to citizens' expectations about the role public sector organizations should play in overcoming the emergency.

Today there is the need to integrate the previous vocabulary of public sector communication with new keywords: openness and flexibility, resilience and reliability, authenticity and frankness, interdependencies and dialogue. In this perspective it is important that communication can play a central and strategic role in

the organizations, outside of political interference, and being able to respond in an ethical and responsible way to the increasingly complex societies. Furthermore, communication professionals should be empowered in their function, inside and outside of the institutions, also in their perception of being trusted by top management, journalists and general publics (Zerfass et al. 2019). This requires a strong investment in new competences and skills, that are not only technical and technological but also managerial and strategic to face these new challenges.

#### **4. The contribution of this special issue**

In this perspective, the special issue re-connects different voices, theoretical backgrounds, and diverse methodological approaches to focus on and investigate the challenges of communication in public sector organizations in our contemporary society. Indeed, to have a better picture of the complexity and richness of public sector communication we have decided to listen to and fertilize the voices of international scholars from sociology of communication, public relations, government studies, journalism and political science. Such scholars have used different methods and data collection tools, such as in-depth interviews, online surveys, social media analysis, focus groups, experiments, and case studies.

The value and the role of public sector communication's strategies and practices have been analysed considering managerial and ethical implications in dealing with legacy media and in using digital platforms and social media to connect with online publics and to enhance and stimulate trust and citizens' participation. The interdisciplinary approach is meaningful to investigate the value of communication as function and discipline in Western democracies before and after the Covid-19 emergency.

This special issue is composed of nine research articles and two research notes. The Coronavirus pandemic was the opportunity to enrich the special issue with the presence of new research streams dealing with communication implications of Covid-19, starting an ongoing critical conversation about the impact of pandemic crises that we hope could be extended to future publications.

The article by W. Timothy Coombs reflects upon the communicative demands Covid-19 applied to the management of crises. By understanding the major communicative demands on public health crisis communicators (anxiety, empathy, efficacy, fatigue, reach, and threat) public sector organizations will be able to enhance constituent resilience in future crisis communication. The conclusion reviews the realizations Covid-19 has created for those tasked with managing communication in public health crises, facing misinformation and new challenges.

Considering this special framework, the public sector was analysed focusing on offline and digital communication implemented by public organizations, investigating ethical, sociological, and political implications. Shannon A. Bowen and Robert L. Heath focus on a meta-discussion of how the field is defined - and if the current definitions are up to meet new and more complex issues than ever before. They address the question: is it possible for public relations to be defined as "seeking mutually beneficial relationships?" They explored it through a case analysis of the climate change issue. Bowen and Heath conclude that not only is it impossible to define the field as seeking "mutually beneficial relationships," it is also undesirable, limiting, nonstrategic, and most problematically, unethical. Basing decisions on moral obligation and rational deliberation, competition for the best ethical result, and using integrative strategies and research for problem resolution ensures benefit to both organizations and citizens. Further, this perspective allows the participation of public relations in the strategic management of an organization by seeking optimal issue resolution rather than a predefined outcome.

Effects and Implications on ethics and moral decision-making are examined by Marta N. Lukacovic with a special focus on peace journalism. The author analyses the potentials and limitations of conflict-sensitive communication in peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts, selecting particular frame elements that are employed in news stories and user-generated comments.

Cary Greenwood presents findings from a qualitative study of government whistleblowers in the United States gathered with the snowball method and analyzed using multi-step coding. Recurring themes of institutionalized wrongdoing, normalization of corruption, injustice, and the negative impact of whistleblowing on relationships supported relationship management, resource dependence, justice, and normalization of corruption theories.

The specific Italian context is examined by Gea Ducci, Laura Solito and Letizia Materassi. The authors review the main literature of public sector communication in order to collect those “voices” that have fostered the debate in Italy. The authors follow a diachronic approach in order to investigate the dynamic and changing nature of the relationship between citizens and public sector organizations and further to seize the digital’s influence and impact on communication strategies and paradigms.

The particular role of social media communication in the public sector is considered in the contribution of Stefania Leone and Miriam della Mura. The authors investigate the institutional social media accounts for young Italians by providing an analysis of Instagram flows and comparing the results that emerged from previous research on Facebook and Twitter. The research shows the limits of institutional Instagram accounts compared to the other social networks sites in terms of youth engagement, public-service information, semantic autonomy and emotional impact.

Another side of the special issue focuses on citizens’ voices, investigating grassroots communication practices and dynamics of participation promoted by Institutions. The article of Myoung-Gi Chon, Hyelim Lee and Jeong-Nam Kim investigate the conditions which increase voluntary citizen attention and actions using the situational theory of problem solving (STOPS) and government-citizen relationships (GCRs). The findings illustrate strategic values in government-citizen relationships on public engagement, empowerment, and serenity to enable participatory democracy. A special focus on “public engagement” performed by both public and private platforms and recent changes in citizen’s participation is examined by Roberta Bartoletti and Franca Faccioli. Presenting the results of an empirical study regarding policies of “collaborative governance” of urban commons, the authors analyse the case of Bologna, a city in the North of Italy famous for its communication biography. They wondered whether, and how, civic collaboration is also changing citizen participation in local public policies.

Further empirical elements to sustain the impact on the practices of participation are provided by Emiliana De Blasio, Cecilia Colasanti and Donatella Selva. The article considers the role played by public communication in implementing open government in local settings, focusing on the main barriers to civic participation. Authors analyze the case of the municipality of Rome from an open government perspective in order to highlight the tactics and tools used by the administration to overcome those barriers and promote participatory projects through on and offline communication outlets.

Specific aspects of public sector communication debate are addressed in the two research notes. Alberto Marinelli and Stefania Parisi present a first attempt to reconstruct the role of citizens in the smartcity paradigm, facing the challenge that the so-called Big Techs move to the ideal of an engaged “smart community.” Then, they present two emerging participation paradigms concerning Data Activism and Cooperativism, which seem to represent relevant fields for experiencing (and observing) the agency of a future and networked citizenship.

The research note of T. Makana Chock and Se Jung Kim, argue how political ideology and political party affiliation influences beliefs about the Covid-19 pandemic. Those on the left side of political ideology used more liberal media sources and took steps against Covid-19, believing that they were at risk of illness, whereas those on the right of the political spectrum regarded Covid-19 news with more skepticism regardless of source. The authors used a small sample of conservatives, but these limited findings indicate a provocative difference in media trust in public health crises for future study.

The idea of this special issue is the result and the hybridization of the different voices that animated a scientific panel we organized for the International Communication Association conference held in Prague in 2018. In this sense we would like to thank the editor of this journal who accepted the challenge to dedicate a special issue to the problems of public sector communication at international level. We would like also to thank all of the authors who invested their energies and competence in crafting their manuscripts, as well as the reviewers who contributed expertise to make this issue a valuable resource for scholars doing research on sociology of communication, public relations and political studies. Last, but not least, we express our gratitude to Manuela Aru for her precious collaboration, and Giorgia Cadeddu for designing the figure that has enriched our contribution.

In the future, pandemics will not be new issues. As a global society, we will face similar and even more dire sorts of threats - and we have seen that ethics is the moist central part of a governmental role in communication. Public sector communicators are on the front lines of the challenges and crises that will define our future, and we must have more ethical, sophisticated, and advanced understandings of this complex confluence of factors to handle this new environment. The scholarship that informs that complexity starts today, in this issue, and we hope it extends into a future with greater levels of responsibility, ethics, and trust in government.

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