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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Re-Connecting Scholars' Voices. An historical review of public communication in Italy and new challenges in the open government framework

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**ABSTRACT:** In an international theoretical framework relating to the challenges of digitalization on public sector communication, the article focuses on the open government process to present a historical review of the public sector communication as it has developed in Italy in the past thirty years. Definitions, reforms and the regulatory framework, structures and competences, different communication approaches and goals are collected here thanks to those "scholars' voices" which have fuelled the scientific debate on communication in public administrations since the 1990s. A diachronic approach is necessary in order to investigate the dynamic nature of the relationship between citizens and public sector organizations in a wider changing context and to further grasp the influence of digital technologies, with their impact on communication strategies and paradigms. The focus of the contribution is on the challenges that communication is facing in the new digital environment and in the contemporary scenario of open government. As the authors underline, the use of digital media is often seen as functional both to promoting a culture of transparency, openness and accessibility and to overcoming the traditional limits of the bureaucratic organizations, but there are some opportunities and risks to consider. So, the final part of the article offers a reflection on the consequences of digitalization. It introduces some key aspects of the contemporary debate on public sector communication in general and specifically in Italy, offering a critical discussion on those topics – new skills and professional profiles, training programmes, internal management, multichannel strategies, etc. – that are revealing their complexity in the new relational and organizational context.

**KEYWORDS:** Public sector communication, open government, digital media, communication models, social media management.

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## **1. Introduction: why is digitalisation a challenge for public sector organizations?**

Recently a renewed attention on public sector communication has emerged among scholars from different countries and different disciplines. Their focus is the strategic role communication plays within the public sector. In a radically different socio-communicative context, public organizations are feeling the urgent need to build a new relationship with citizens, in order to gain their trust (Bessières 2018; Canel, Luoma-aho 2019; Chadwick 2013).

In this scenario, the article examines the characteristics that public sector communication assumed in the past and those it is adopting today in the digital transformation process that involves public organizations. There will be a particular focus on the challenges that communication is currently facing, in a context of open government and with the development of participatory cultures, related to connected citizens' widespread use of social media (Dalghren 2009; Jenkins 2006).

This contribution aims to offer a critical examination of the Italian case, analysing the many interpretations of public sector communication that have been proposed by scholars at different stages in the past thirty years; the aim is to propose a critical discussion on public sector communication, as it has developed in a specific national context, but always reconnected to the wider social, technological and normative changing processes, in order to further push the research agenda on this fields.

### **1.1 An international overview**

The stable integration of new digital technologies in public sector communication practices is a fact, a reality for all to see. Beginning during the 1990s, the trend has since been taken up in numerous countries thanks to stimulation received from both the European institutions and national governments. Monitored constantly, it is a sector bursting forth with new standards and regulations (European Commission 2019<sup>1</sup>; OECD 2014; The Agency for Digital Italy 2019-21<sup>2</sup>).

The adoption of the so-called “information and communication technologies” (ICTs) is not only important in quantitative terms. It is also important because it has accompanied the need to boost public sector efficiency and outline new organizational, management and relational models capable of responding to a situation of growing complexity (Giddens 1990; Thompson 1995).

In parallel, over time scholars have begun to pay more substantial and structured attention to this topic, first focusing on forms of e-government (Moon 2002; Chadwick, May 2003; Tolbert, Mossberger 2006), and later on so-called “Gov 2.0” or “We-gov” (Linders 2012). These last two expressions, linked as can be seen to the birth and spread of social media, emphasize the centrality of participation and collaboration in the use of the digital technologies, the affirmation of citizen relationships based on civic engagement, interactivity and the co-creation of services of general interest (Bovaird 2007). Indeed, as Mergel points out (2013), with Gov 2.0, levels of government-citizen interaction are high, as they jointly create government information following the well-known user-generated content (UGC) paradigm (Boyd, Ellison 2008).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/egovernment-benchmark-2019-trust-government-increasingly-important-people>

<sup>2</sup> <https://pianotriennale-ict.italia.it/assets/pdf/2019-2021/Piano-Triennale-ICT-2019-2021.pdf>

At first, after concentrating on the rate of innovation of the available technological tools, the scholars' main focus was on the positive advantages of the new media, which they dealt with in an enthusiastic and hyper-optimistic manner (Taylor, Lips 2008). This, however, was to the detriment of a more critical as well as theoretical interpretation which, on the contrary, could have grasped the complexity of using the social web in an area such as the public sector. More recently, together with the advantages offered by digital technologies, the tendency has been to assess the risks and strategic potential of their use (Bryer, Zavattaro 2011; Picazo-Vela *et al.* 2012; Mossberger *et al.* 2013); the contextual factors determining their efficacy (Criado *et al.* 2017); the managerial and organizational implications (Zavattaro, Sementelli 2014); and their usefulness in specific areas, such as emergency management or risk communication (Kavanaugh *et al.* 2012), or at specific central or local levels of government (De Widt, Panagiotopoulos 2018; Criado *et al.* 2017; Valentini 2013).

Moreover, it has also been seen that the digital media do not only contribute at a functional-operational level, but that innovation can be an important ally in order to intervene on the structural aspects of the public administrations (Wang, Feeney 2016). In the wake of various forms of "new public management" (Hood 1991) or "new public governance" (Fledderus 2015), the use of the new media is seen as functional to promoting a culture of transparency, openness and accessibility (Bertot *et al.* 2010; Zheng, Zheng 2014) in the passage to managerial management models (Bessières 2009) and in the attempt to overcome the traditional limits of bureaucratic organizations.

Hence, e-government tools, social media, and web-enabled and mobile technologies, together with the citizens' desire for a more transparent and at-hand relationship with the public administration, are fomenting a new age of opportunity, in which social media has great potential to extend government services, solicit new ideas and improve decision-making and problem-solving (Bertot *et al.* 2010).

In short, digitalisation seems to offer an answer to three large areas of public administration requirements:

1. the need to increase levels of trust and legitimation around their action (Fukuyama 1995; Rosanvallon 2006; Bessières 2018);
2. the need to increase the level of citizen satisfaction (Porumbescu 2016; Lev-On, Steinfeld 2015);
3. the need to achieve greater two-way communication (Mergel 2013), crucial for the citizens' involvement in affairs of general interest and for the public administrations to gradually come closer to the citizens' effective needs (Dozier, Grunig, Grunig 1995).

The new digital government context is therefore a meeting place and a place for creating relationships. It is not just the site of a quantitatively significant presence of new media, but also of a set of opportunities, risks and challenges. While on one hand these are dictated by the digital technologies, on the other they could be indulged by the strategic use of new media in the public sector modernization programmes (OECD 2014<sup>3</sup>).

Starting from these considerations, we therefore ask ourselves how digitalisation is impacting on communication in the public sector, by "impact" (Bonson *et al.* 2015; Magro 2012) meaning the consequences and effects produced by the new digital technologies in the public sector, that is, the challenges that need to be faced in the debate.

The scholars engage with the implications of digital technologies in two different, yet complementary ways, either seeing them as a working tool, or as a strategic opportunity.

In the first case, they stress the ways that this set of new tools can be integrated in channels traditionally used in the public sector. Starting from consolidated typologies and classifications, proposals have been made for so-called "maturity models" (among others: Lee, Kwak 2012; Fath-Allah *et al.* 2014), that is, models for the progressive evolution and integration of the digital technologies – the social media in particular – in the

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<sup>3</sup> OECD, [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/social-media-use-by-governments\\_5jxrcmgm0s-en#page7](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/social-media-use-by-governments_5jxrcmgm0s-en#page7)

public sector. Favouring an incremental development logic and incrementing interactivity between public administration and citizens, these models of employment strive to achieve supposed maturity, namely maximum integration between technological platforms and the activation of large spaces of e-participation and civic engagement. In this sense, social media represent powerful tools for enhancing public participation, establishing a dialogue and an interaction with citizens. According to this first type of contribution, the digital wave is impacting public communication in terms of content management, level of information/interaction with the citizen-user, listening activities and assessment of the output produced (Lee, Kwak 2012). Hence, it is impacting the professional aspects of communicators as actors of innovation (Mergel, Bretschneider 2013).

In the second case, digital technologies are seen as change agents (Bertot et al. 2010) and a strategic opportunity: they offer countries a new occasion to create transparency and promote efficiency; at the same time, “SM (i.e. Social Media) technologies, like other previous waves of technology innovation, have their own transformational potential, but organizational and contextual factors are also essential to understand their results in public bureaucracies” (Bonson *et al.* 2015:55).

Wang and Feeney (2016) also agree on the relevance of the context, meant both as a structural and a cultural element, in determining the efficacy or inefficacy of the digital performances (Pandey, Garnett 2006). First of all, these factors significantly concern the culture of public organization existing in that particular geographical area.

Unlike countries of Anglo-Saxon origin or in northern Europe for example, well known for the dynamism of their public sector reforms and high levels of civic engagement, the countries of southern Europe, amongst which Italy, “are considered laggards in introducing public sector reforms” (Bonson *et al.* 2015:54).

This does not mean that the adoption of digital tools in these contexts is limited or inefficient, as one might think, because the organizational cultures are more rigid, hierarchical or may be resistant to innovation processes (Bozeman, Bretschneider 1994): on the contrary, the research carried out (Bonson *et al.* 2015) shows that in these very countries of southern Europe the use of the new digital tools has led to surprising rates of civic engagement.

The public dimension characteristic of a particular country does not therefore determine what results will be achieved by innovation in public communication. Instead, it helps to explain the bases from which the evolutionary process will proceed.

So, even though all modern democracies are experiencing these same processes of digital change, some authors dwell on the importance of assessing its impact in relation to the contextual dimension: the environmental variables and the history and patterns of evolution followed by the public sector in a given geographical-cultural context. Drawing inspiration from Gil-Garcia (2012), Criado *et al.* (2016) outline the probabilities of the success of social media according to three orders of intervening factors: organizational, institutional and environmental factors. To these factors other scholars (Bozeman, Bretschneider 1994; Wang, Feeney 2016) add the “human factor”, meant as employees’ behaviours and motivations and their level of professionalization.

Therefore, as specified by the “Working Paper on Public Governance” (OECD 2019), the new technologies have the potential to make policy processes more inclusive and thereby rebuild some confidence between governments and citizens. But there are no ‘one size fits all’ approaches and government strategies need to seriously consider context and demand factors to be effective.

For this reason too, this paper will take care to highlight the specific features of the contexts under examination, linking the digital issue back to the development of the processes of organizational, cultural and communicative change in relations between public administrations and citizens.

## **1.2. Public sector communication and the open government pillars: transparency, participation, collaboration**

Taking account of the above-mentioned theoretical framework, we deem it necessary to dwell specifically on the role that public sector communication plays in the open government perspective.

Open government is an evolution and extension of the e-government and e-democracy processes initiated towards the end of the 1990s in most western democracies. The latter posed a challenge for public administrations, that was only met in part, consisting in a widespread use of digital technologies in the access to public services and in the participation in decision-making processes, using dialogical and two-way methods (the limits and differences between countries are due to different factors, as illustrated above -1.1-).

The open government implemented in and around 2009 represents a new paradigm of local and central governance based on exploiting the potentials offered by the new digital technologies to place the citizen at the centre of the administrative action. The new platforms and digital tools can indeed allow public administrations to become truly “open” and transparent at all levels, fostering more control over their actions and better public accountability. What is more, they can also allow the creation of new forms of citizen involvement in decision-making processes through interaction based on the exchange of knowledge and experiences, sharing and participation, with positive outfall on the institutions’ credibility and the sense of citizens’ trust in them.

Open government tends to strongly impact how the institutions relate to citizens. Its three fundamental pillars – transparency, participation and engagement – are strongly underlined in the Open Government Partnership, an ongoing experience involving various countries in Europe and created as part of the Digital Agenda for Europe (European Commission 2014). These principles are not new for the public administration (Canel, Luoma-aho 2019; Ducci 2017), which has been undergoing modernization and simplification based on ICT (see 1.1) for some time now.

Nevertheless, in the open government perspective they take on a different shape, finding new impetus and realizational possibilities. As a result, more forcefully than in the past, all of these calls into question the need to take particular attention and care over suitable institutional public sector communication. So, this communication becomes increasingly complex and ubiquitous (Solito 2014), but also more cogent for the connected citizens and institutions, with an effective use of the social and participatory web 2.0 and the constantly evolving digital tools (social media, AI, infographics, messaging systems, etc.).

As far as the transparency principle is concerned, in over a decade, in a large part of western democracies we have gone from a concept of transparency simply meaning access to public administration documents, to an idea of total transparency affecting all of a public administration’s processes. At this point, in many countries it has become a standard obligation to render more transparent all those data and information on the decisions made by the administrations and their actions. But so that it does not just become a simple bureaucratic obligation, particular attention needs to be paid to the way in which the transparency is communicated. Indeed, transparency in itself is not an ethical guarantee or emblem of good communication. Instead, what can guarantee real transparency in public administrations is good communication (Zémor 2013). Taking care over suitable institutional communication must therefore be central to these processes.

In this light, transparency is closely linked to open data which, as known, consists of making public organizations’ data accessible to all on the web, in an open format, so that they can be not only be consulted but also shared, redistributed and reused by citizens.

The purpose of releasing public sector data is indeed not just to make public administrations’ actions more transparent and appraisable (thanks to the diffusion of information relating to their operations), but also to

improve citizens' lives (e.g., through data on the environment and crime) and give a boost to the intangible economy (Belisario 2013). The recent introduction of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in the USA and in many EU countries has led to full recognition that the freedom to access information in the possession of administrations is a fundamental right of every citizen (while nevertheless observing all those restrictions linked to protecting privacy, etc.). In this respect, it is however important to reiterate that it is necessary to arrange for the adoption of effective institutional communication criteria. However, in this regard it is important to repeat the necessity to adopt efficient institutional communication criteria. Suffice it to think of the methods used to facilitate the quick and easy retrieval of materials published online and to enable the simple and correct understanding as well as contextualization of the relative contents; the latter aspect calls into question the importance of the publishing criteria and institutional language used by the public administration to draw up texts (Nuolijärvi, Stickel 2016; Vellutino 2018).

Instead, as far as the participation principle is concerned, it is given new value in the open government sphere and becomes a crucial challenge for the public administrations, which are more and more encouraged to set up processes that see citizens and stakeholders play a proactive role in drawing up public policies. Once again, this principle and goal are not new for the public administrations (Coleman, Blumler 2009; Dahlgren 2009; D'Ambrosi, Giardina 2006), but today they can be achieved more easily thanks to the social and participatory web and digital platforms set up for the purpose in the public sphere. For example, recent years have seen the realization of numerous participatory budgeting projects or other pro-citizen engagement activities (e.g., public consultations for decision-making purposes) guided by local, national or EU public institutions (Dahlgren 2013; Bartoletti, Faccioli 2013) (fostered by European support policies). However, so that these processes may be really effective and inclusive, with widespread participation, it is deemed indispensable to strengthen the capacity to adopt suitable institutional public communication strategies (Canel, Luoma-aho 2019). These are complex strategies that touch on the various phases of the participatory processes (ex-ante, in itinere and ex-post) in a multi-channel approach. An important role is played in this process by the so-called facilitator (Goldsmith, Crawford 2014).

Participation is closely linked to collaboration, the third pillar of open government. This pillar involves the creation of partnerships between the various vertical and horizontal levels of the administration and between the administration and the various public entities/stakeholders. Within this goal, innovative forms of public service co-production and co-design are being tried out in different public sector contexts (e.g., solutions developed in the App Contests promoted by the public administrations) (Bovaird *et al.* 2015). In this case too, the same reflections as above on the strategic role of communication apply.

Therefore, considering the crucial role that public sector communication plays in achieving open government and the importance of the cultural and organizational characteristics of each context (local, national or international) in understanding the impact of the adoption of digital technologies in the public sphere, we shall now analyse a specific case: the Italian context.

### ***1.3. Aims, Methods and Research Questions***

An attempt will be made to review the literature in order to collect those authors' "voices" in the Italian context that have fostered the debate on the specific field of public sector communication. In particular, attention will be paid to the main contributions of those scholars and professionals that have tried to define the

boundaries, aims and operative routines of public sector communication (Arena 2001; Ducci 2007, 2017; Faccioli 2000, 2013; Grandi 2007; Lovari 2013, 2016; Mancini 2002; Materassi 2016, 2017; Rolando 1995, 2014; Rovinetti 1994, 2010; Solito 2004, 2014).

A qualitative and diachronic approach is necessary in order to investigate the dynamic and changing nature of the relationship between citizens and public sector organizations and further grasp the influence and impact of digital technologies on communication strategies and paradigms.

The authors mentioned are those who have helped enrich the scientific reflection since the early 1990s, both by conceptualizing and defining the different aspects making up public sector communication and by making empirical investigations into the different organizational and regional contexts. While doing so in relation to the Italian context, they have placed local specificities within macro-processes of social, institutional and technological change.

Specifically, the texts that were selected and consulted are prevalently monographs owing to the richer and more in-depth contribution that they provide on the topic. The choice was based on the authors' authority on the subject. The authors include:

- Italian scholars deemed to be "top names", "classic" authors who founded (created) the public communication discipline in this country starting in the early 1990s;
- scholars who have also made empirical investigations of specific and variegated aspects of public communication in more recent years, whose publications have gained a high level of recognition in scientific circles (they have become set texts in communication studies degree courses and gained a high level of visibility in the scientific sphere).

The publications thus selected were consulted separately by the researchers in order to pinpoint useful parts of the text and understand the following aspects:

- how public communication has been defined and conceptualized by the scholars and professionals who have significantly dealt with this topic, creating a lively debate in the academic and professional sphere. As such, we analysed the publications produced over a span of around 20 years;
- the second aspect concerns how public sector communication has evolved in Italy. In this case too, an analysis was made of the contributions of different authors who, from different disciplinary perspectives, have proposed a periodization of public sector communication which variously underlines the regulatory, organizational or more strictly cultural dimensions relating to communication theory studies. By comparing know-how from different disciplines, a certain degree of agreement can be seen among scholars on the phases and models into which the history of public sector communication in Italy can be divided. The salient features of this are reported in par. 2.2.

The researchers made an independent and attentive reading of parts of the selected texts, which they then compared, sharing the points considered salient in order to come to an agreed critical vision.

So, by historically reviewing the field of public sector communication in Italy, through a critical reading of Italian literature and research, the present contribution tries to address the following two main questions:

RQ1: How has public sector communication been conceptualized and promoted in the last thirty years in Italy and how is it defined in relation to a deeply changed context?

RQ2: What challenges does public sector communication have to face in order to manage the new digital environment?

Starting from these questions, with reference to the Italian literature, we will reflect on how principles and models of public sector communication drawn up over time can be brought up to date with the new digital context.

## **2. Public communication in Italy: definitions and models of interpretation**

### ***2.1. Definitions of "public communication" in the Italian literature***

Over around fifteen years, starting from the end of the 1980s, in Italy, France and also at EU level, an interesting and fruitful debate developed between scholars and professionals on the recognition of what is defined as "public communication" as an independent discipline and specific professional field. It is a debate that accompanied and took account of the reform and modernization processes aimed at creating a more efficient bureaucratic apparatus and overcoming the public sector's traditional self-referentiality towards citizens, enterprises, stakeholders and employees.

In particular, leading scholars shared a very wide vision of public communication as "communication of general interest" (Arena 1995; Faccioli 2000; Mancini 2002; Rovinetti 1994; Zémor 1995), a definition which includes the communication activities implemented by various subjects (public organizations, no-profit organizations, political parties) concerning topics, services and activities that affect the collectivity, namely of public utility and not of specific interest (Rolando 1995, 2004). In particular, they felt the need to distinguish public communication from market communication, underlining how the public area obliges certainty, impartiality, reliability and assumption of responsibility (Rolando 1995).

From a sociological perspective, while taking account of the growing complexity of society, Franca Faccioli defines public communication in all as «[...] the context and tool that permits the various actors that intervene in the public sphere to create relations, compare points of view and values in order to aim towards the shared goal of achieving the interests of the collectivity [...]. In particular, public communication deals with activating the relationship between state and citizens by implementing a process of interaction and exchange, creating spaces where citizens can be listened to while encouraging their participation in the choices behind the public policies» (2000:43-44). Seen in this light, public sector communication corresponds to a service culture on the part of the public employee oriented towards implementing those keywords in the modernization of public administrations: transparency, listening, simplification, participation, efficiency/efficacy and subsidiarity (Faccioli 2000), all of which are principles linked to a wider vision of shared and participatory administration (Arena 2001).

According to Italian scholars, public communication is divided into three large areas or types: political, institutional and social communication (Grandi 2000; Faccioli 2000; Mancini 2002; Rolando 1995; Rovinetti 1994). Political communication aims to create electoral consensus and is promoted by parties, movements and pressure groups, as well as the political representatives of the administration (political leaders, single elected directors) when they communicate their, often one-sided, point of view on the public policies (this is why it is often characterized by propaganda logics). Instead, institutional communication concerns all communication that aims to make the administration, its activities, services and choices known to the public. It also seeks to listen, engage and foster participation, according to impartial and democratic criteria, among external public (citizens, enterprises, stakeholders and other institutions) and internal public (employees) (Faccioli 2000; Grandi 2007; Rolando 2001; Rovinetti 2002, 2010). The third area identified, social communication, concerns communication activities to inform, raise awareness and stimulate ideas, behaviours or values on topics considered socially significant for the population, or so-called social problems (e.g., environment, health, safety, integration, etc.). This kind of communication is promoted by public administrations but also by no-profit organizations and profit-oriented enterprises (Gadotti 2005; Tamborini 1992).

The scholars' shared desire to underline the difference between political and institutional communication is due to the fact that these two dimensions of public communication often present areas and moments of overlap. In Italy, like in a large part of countries in the world, political communication is more prevalent than institutional communication, and this is to a large extent due to a climate of permanent electoral campaigning (Blumenthal 1982; Solito 2018).

The definitions indicated above and the distinction between the political and institutional dimensions are also found in the international literature. For example, the Italian author's definition of public communication by public organizations is very close to the following definition of "public sector communication" proposed by Canel and Luoma-aho "[...] 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" (2019). Furthermore, recognition of the non-partisan nature of institutional communication, especially in the case of government communication, has also been underlined by Graber who, at the same time, investigates the political pressures and environmental factors that shape administrative communication, highlighting the difficulties faced by organizations in making a clear separation between political and administrative communication (1992). Now, with the growth of the digital and social media at the disposal of administrations, elected politicians and citizens, the hybridization or fluidity between the two main elements of public sector communication is tending to become increasingly complex (as we will see in par. 3).

The attempt by Italian scholars to define public communication and outline its boundaries has created a certain cultural breeding ground which is substantially shared with French scholars.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, it is developing in parallel to the European institutions' valorisation<sup>5</sup> of the strategic role of communication in public administrations (D'Ambrosi 2019; Rolando 2004; Rovinetti 2002).

## ***2.2 Periodization of public sector communication in Italy: key public sector reforms and prevalent communication approaches***

As well as their efforts to make definitions, the authors in question also proposed a phased division of the evolution of public sector communication in Italy which takes account of important reform interventions to simplify and modernize the public administration as well as the main transformations that have taken place in the information and media system in general.

The period from the birth of the Italian Republic (1946) to the end of the 1960s is deemed by all to be a phase of "denied information", when professional secrecy was still in force and what the public administrations communicated to citizens was very filtered and often supplied in the manner of propaganda. As of 1970, the charters of the new-born regional governments for the first time asserted the right to access the information in the possession of the public administrations and entitled the regions' citizens to participate in the administrative choices (Vignudelli 1992; Faccioli 1994). Furthermore, in the first half of the 1980s, exponential growth was

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<sup>4</sup> Thanks to the close connection that formed between professional associations from the respective countries which were very active in the 1990s and the creation of the European Federation of Public Communication Associations.

<sup>5</sup> Among the various documents, the Green Book on Public-Sector Information in the Information Society (European Commission 1998); White Book on a European Communication Policy (COM (2006) 35 def.)

seen in the media and publicity system, hence the public administrations tried to “equip themselves” by expanding their information system to obtain greater visibility in an increasingly intricate and complex public sphere (Mancini 2002; Rovinetti 1994; Faccioli 2000; Grandi 2000).

The authors believe that in this stage, from the 1970s to the mid-1980s, a way of understanding communication with the citizen as a transmission of information, in a unidirectional sense (one-way communication), prevails among public administrations. This approach consists of setting up press offices and using advertising to carry out public utility information campaigns; citizens were still seen as passive recipients of information (Rolando 2014; Grandi 2007; Ducci 207, 2017; Rovinetti 2010; Solito 2004).

As of the second half of the 1980s and in the early 1990s, as the political system was being rocked by the scandal known as “Bribesville” (“Tangentopoli”), a public sector communication process began to restore the state’s name and credibility (Faccioli 2013). Two laws from 1990 ratified the citizens’ right to be informed, a right that was transformed into the administrations’ *duty* to inform (Rovinetti 2002).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, it was resolved once and for all to abolish the traditional professional secrecy, and so every administration was obliged to guarantee transparency and access to documents.<sup>7</sup> From this moment onwards, it was compulsory for the administration to become visible, to say what it did and the results that it achieved, so that the citizens could assess its conduct (Faccioli 2000; Grandi 2007). In parallel, legislation on publishing and the public and private radio and television system provides for specific spaces and budgets to allocate to the use of such tools by State institutions.<sup>8</sup>

According to Faccioli, this period outlined was a “preparation phase” (2013), when the bases were cast for the process to strengthen and enhance the concepts of information, transparency, listening and participation. This was followed by a “phase of experimentation and professionalization” which extended until the year 2000 (*ibidem*). The 1990s were characterized by growing plans for a new organization of the public administration. Some regulations from the period envisaged the adoption of specific tools to make the concepts of transparency, publicity, communication and access into exercisable functions (Rolando 2001, 2014). Public Relations Offices (*Uffici per le Relazioni con il Pubblico - URP*) were established and made obligatory.<sup>9</sup> These facilities were allotted to take care of the administration’s relationships with the citizens and stakeholders, not only to provide them with information on services and access procedures, but also to listen and dialogue with them (*citizen satisfaction*). A community of professionals and scholars was put together across Italy, meeting periodically to exchange opinions. These meetings were organized by the *Associazione Italiana della Comunicazione Pubblica e Istituzionale*, which works alongside other international and EU entities (e.g., the French *Association Publique* and the European Federation of Public Communication Associations). Communication is also considered an indispensable tool in two standards from 1997 on the decentralization of administration and simplification of the public administration, which also make reference to the use of new technologies (laws no. 59 and no. 127, 1997). In this context, a two-way communication (bidirectional) has represented an ideal to strive for (Mancini 2002), according to which the citizen was considered an active part of the communication

<sup>6</sup> Italian law no. 142 of 1990 on the reform of local autonomy.

<sup>7</sup> Italian law no. 241 of 1990, known as the “Law on Transparency”.

<sup>8</sup> Italian law on publishing no. 67 of 25 February 1987 and law no. 223 of 1990 “Regulations on the Public and Private Radio Broadcasting Sector”.

<sup>9</sup> The Public Relations Offices were established under legislative decree no. 29 of 1993, which then converged into legislative decree no. 165 of 2001; the directive of the President of the Council of Ministers of 11 October 1994 defines their organization and operations.

process (Ducci 2007; Rovinetti 2002; Grandi 2007; Solito 2004). The asymmetry between institutions and citizens is reduced (Arena 2001). More emphasis is given to the promotion of communication that was direct and self-produced by the public administration (Mancini 2002), as well as to the capacity to establish an ongoing relationship with the information bodies. This communication approach is also associated with the capacity to control and verify communication produced by other sources - “hetero-produced communication” (ibidem) - (in large part by the action of the mass media) and to increase listening and participation (Arena 2001; Faccioli 2000), also with back-up from new technologies (citizen satisfaction surveys, institutional websites and portals; civic networks; platforms designed for participation, web 1.0 digital interactive systems).

This new communication culture, albeit perceived more within the administrations, by the workers, than on the outside, by the media or by the citizens themselves (Faccioli 2013), culminated in 2000 with the adoption of a framework law on the “Information and Communication Activities of the Public Administrations” (Italian law no. 150/2000), the only one of its kind in the European panorama (Rovinetti 2002): the communication is not only legitimized, but becomes an institutional obligation and is seen as an activity for the institutions to carry out on an ongoing and not episodic basis. The law makes a distinction between information and communication activities, which both have specific structures of reference. It invites the public administration to take care of external and internal communication, according to an integrated communication approach, and outlines the difference between political and institutional communication, making a distinction between political-institutional information (partisan) entrusted to the spokesperson’s office and strictly institutional information activities (apolitical, non-partisan) attributed to the press office. External and international communication activities are expanded and assigned to the communication structure (*URP* or similar facilities, which have been obligatory since 1993). A great deal of attention is also placed on the topic of professionalization, hence giving rise to a “phase of semi-institutionalization of public communication” which began in 2000 (Faccioli 2013). In this phase, important regulations were adopted on one hand, while on the other it emerged that some issues remained unsolved, amongst which the full recognition of the profession of public communicator and inclusion of a system of checks/sanctions in the event of the failure to apply the regulations. Despite the efforts made by professional associations in the years following 2000, these professions did not acquire full recognition or valorization. Law no. 150 was not always applied as it should have been, hence there was a significant but uneven development in public sector communication in the various central and local administrations. At local level, while there were some outstanding cases, there were also examples of scant application of the law. Hence, the situation throughout the country was patchy (Ducci 2017; Faccioli 2013 and 2016; Lovari 2013; Rolando 2014; Solito 2014).

From 2000 to 2009, new measures were adopted to reform the public administrations, centred around the adoption of criteria to measure and appraise the accomplishment of the organization and staff’s performance goals. In this “measurement and assessment phase” (Faccioli 2013), the process to digitalize the services and administrative processes continued to develop in parallel, inevitably impacting on the public sector communication activities.<sup>10</sup> But, as various authors observe, the role of institutional communication in the public administration modernization process no longer seems to be so central in the public debate. Digital innovation is often not connected to the activities of the public sector communicators, who hence risk not being sufficiently involved. Obviously, this does not mean that public communication is not based, in theory at least, on a two-way, relational and interactive communication approach, thanks to the use of new digital communication tools (Lovari 2013; Ducci 2017; Materassi 2017; Solito 2014).

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<sup>10</sup> For example, the adoption of the Digital Administration code from 2005; the start of European and Italian e-government and e-democracy programmes.

The following table sums up the phases in the evolution of public communication in Italy outlined hitherto (from 1946 to circa 2009) with regard to the main public sector reforms and communicative approaches characterizing each phase.

**Table 1: Historical phases of public sector communication in Italy (from 1946 to 2009)**

<i>Period/Phase</i>	<i>Key Public Sector Reforms</i>	<i>Communication Approach</i>
1946 (Foundation of the Republic) – end of 1960s	Public sector based on “professional secrecy”	Denied information (propaganda style)
1970 (birth of the regions) – Mid-1980s	Regional charters: right to access information; regional citizens given right to participate in administrative choices	One-way communication (e.g., press office activities - public utility information campaigns)
Second half of 1980s – Early 1990s “Preparation phase” (Faccioli 2013)	Local authority reform + transparency (law no. 142 and law no. 241). Citizens’ right to be informed, duty of public organizations to inform (obligation to become more visible)	One-way communication
1993 - 2000 “Experimentation and professionalization phase” (ibidem)	Administrative decentralisation and simplification. Adoption of specific tool for information, transparency, publicity, communication and access: URP (decree no. 29/1993). New culture of communication	Two-way/relational communication. Increase in direct and self-produced communication
2000-Early 2000s “Semi-institutionalization phase” (ibidem)	<u>Law no. 150/2000</u> on “Public Administration Information and Communication Activities”: Communication as an institutional obligation and permanent activity. Structures and professional figures for information and communication activities. Distinction between political and institutional communication. Integrated communication and new technologies. Some questions unresolved: full recognition of professions; system to check application of the law	Two-way/relational communication
Early 2000s – 2009 “Performance measuring and assessing phase” (ibidem)	Digitalization processes (e.g., CAD 2005). New criteria for measuring and assessing achievement of the public sector organizations’ performance objectives.	Two-way, relational and interactive communication

At the end of this historical reconstruction, it is important to underline how the distinguishing features of the Italian case can be traced back to two main elements: 1) unlike the Anglo-Saxon countries and those of the central and northern areas of western Europe, the Italian public administration has long had a limited culture of communication at the citizens’ service. The perception of the citizens as “subjects” and the propaganda logic also dominated in the republican era, probably legacy of the twenty years of Fascist dictatorship. As a result, the 1990s were a sort of cultural revolution, promoted by a movement of innovators who sought to give rise to a new communication culture in the public administrations, making a break from the past. In other contexts, public communication evolved in a more linear and natural manner. 2) Despite suffering from a certain delay in innovating the public sector and its way of communication, Italy now has legislation on the topic (Law No. 150/2000). In all likelihood, this came to be because it was felt necessary to counter those holding back change. This is a significant distinction, because it is only by taking account of a specific legislative framework (and not just habit) that reflections can be put forward on the impact that use of the digital media has had in communication between the Public Administration and citizens in an open government context in Italy. This impact is dealt with in the next paragraph, which is dedicated to the last, ongoing phase.

### **2.3. The two-way public communication model in the era of digital media**

A new phase began in around 2009 with the revolution caused by web 2.0. Still continuing to date, this phase saw the advent of social and participatory media, as well as the start of open data and open government programmes (par. 1.2). In Italy, as at the international level (par. 1.1), various scholars have analysed the administrations' domestication of the social media. They recognize that, like in other countries (Mergel and Bretschneider 2013), Italy experienced a first spontaneous phase of "enterprise and experimentation", with the informal use of the social platforms by creative employees (Lovari 2013; Ducci 2016; Materassi 2017). This led to a range of different versions of institutional presence on the main social networks which has been effectively defined by the expression "wild west" (Mergel and Bretschneider 2013). Subsequently, the public administrations went into a phase of *Order from Chaos*, in which attempts were made to streamline the management of their presence on the social networks, reducing the nonconformities and levelling and standardizing the behaviour adopted by the different sectors of the same administration. The scholars recognize that many Italian administrations have now entered this phase. However, some more advanced realities are already in the more mature, third phase 3 of "Institutionalization", in which the social media are included in the institution's communication strategy and specific policies are adopted for their use (Lovari 2013, 2016; Ducci 2017; Materassi 2017; Solito, Pezzoli, and Materassi 2019).

Even though a culture of digital public communication is becoming more common among the public administrations (thanks to the recent drive of a group of professionals very active all over Italy), today the use of the social platforms is still mainly one-way. At the same time, in some realities we are seeing the emergence of relational and participatory methods directed towards the citizens' effective engagement (Ducci, Lovari, D'Ambrosi 2019; Lovari 2016, 2018; Materassi 2017; Solito 2018).

Therefore, in Italy too, the growth of the available digital communication tools has led to an enormous increase in the communication needs of the public administrations. The authors under consideration highlight how visibility and citizen engagement requirements are expanding within the administrations (Ducci 2017; Faccioli 2016; Lovari 2016, 2018; Materassi 2017). Hence, public communication is "bursting out" of its traditional boundaries and becoming increasingly "ubiquitous" (Solito 2014, 2018). The fluidity of the new communication processes, however, cannot always be "governed" by the communication professionals at the institutions as they frequently find themselves in difficulty in coordinating the various off- and online communication activities (Ducci 2016), and in identifying the specific responsibilities/skills within the administrations. A problem is also the failure to fully implement Law no. 150/2000.

Considering the far-reaching transformations in the media ecosystem, it can be thought that the two-way public communication model proposed by Mancini (2002) can be updated to this most recent phase, as highlighted by Lovari and Piredda (2017). Indeed, on one hand, the administrations have more possibilities to produce their own communication. The digital communication interfaces are growing and enable the public administrations to reach and dialogue with the citizens: institutional sites and portals are the fulcrum of online communication, added to which are the official channels and pages on social media and the use of instant messaging apps and platforms (such as whatsapp). This leads to digital PR activity that can provide a continual listening service for citizens and a constructive relationship in the new digital environments too (ibidem).

With the same digital tools, the public administrations also communicate with the mass media and new Internet opinion leaders (digital influencers), hence increasing the area of "media relations". At the same time, the mass media have more tools at hand to perform the action of watchdog over the public administration

activities, as they can consult and comment the contents produced by the public administrations on the digital platforms (*ibidem*) according to their own common-sense frameworks (Bentivegna, Boccia Artieri 2019; McCombs 2005). Therefore, in turn, communication produced by other sources, is also experiencing huge growth: as well as the mass media, on the Internet every citizen can generate and share contents that concern the administration. On the part of the public administration, all of this requires a much greater monitoring and control ability than in the past.

In recent years, a new corpus of regulations to reform the public administrations in Italy (from 2015 to 2018) has resulted in the introduction of the concept of total transparency. Wider than the 1990 concept and linked to the introduction of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), this involves generalized civic access from an open government perspective. It is a trend that is creating new challenges for public communication today (par. 1.2) and that is regaining a central, strategic role in fostering processes of transparency and public accountability.

### **3. Conclusive reflections: new challenging questions**

By identifying the processes of the birth and development of public communication we can remark on some key passages that describe the distinct features of the Italian case; issues which first came to the attention of the scholars in the early 1990s and which we now relate to the innovation and open government processes indicated in the text.

Transparency, participation and collaboration – the pillars of open gov – seem to acquire further meanings and renewed centrality in light of the digital turn: on one hand the web (and the social web) should make them easier to accomplish, but on the other hand it causes the complexities to come to the surface. New questions arise to challenge the public administrations on key aspects of public sector communication, management and organizational culture (Solito 2010; Faccioli 2013; Ducci 2017) which, as we have seen (par. 1.2), are at the same time impacted by the digital media.

Considered the panacea for all the limits and fragilities of the Italian public sector since the early 2000s, the new technologies have not been long in presenting their most complex face, in the swift realization that techno-enthusiasm has a cost (Lovari 2013; Masini, Lovari, Benenati 2013). The digital wave requires governance and public administrations must equip themselves in order to manage, rather than suffer their variegated impact on the institutional identities involved.

In a recent past the distinctions made by the regulations – between communication and information, public and political communication, professional figures and employment structures, content production and PR management – served to legitimate and define public sector communication (Solito 2014). Not only that, they also gave the sensation of being able to produce innovation by progressively intervening on the single sectors in a segmented way: first on internal communication, and then on external communication; first regarding politics and then institutional communication, etc.

Today, on the other hand, the digital wave seems to mould these separations back together and make them much more fluid and tangible, highlighting new overlaps and interconnections between the phenomena, actors, spheres and ends of the communication (*ibidem*). Hence, the same goes for the interventions. This is why in this paper we are dealing with some topics of the contemporary debate that is developing around public communication and linking the macro-processes of change analysed up to the issues felt to be central and challenging in the governance of the new digital relations.

**Two-way communication.** By adopting a dialogical and two-way paradigm, the attention and production of communication is shifted from the issuer to the receiver, giving rise to a more symmetrical and equal relationship.

Considered a necessary condition to spark expanded governance and effective collaboration between public administrations and the citizenry, the digital media give further opportunity for symmetrical relations. Reciprocity, symmetry and interdependence are fundamental elements on the Internet and social media are tools designed for and centred around interaction (Zheng, Zheng 2014), not only for dissemination; nevertheless, they require flexible organization, which is something that the public administration struggles with (Ducci 2017; Materassi 2017). Therefore, in the experience of many institutions, from ministries to the smallest municipalities, we can see social media pages which are closed and do not enable comments or interactions from citizens, or employees who cannot connect to the social networking platforms from their work stations (Lovari, Parisi 2015; Solito, Pezzoli, Materassi 2019); at the same time, advanced experiences of 3.0 multipurpose help desks, apps and smart technologies are flourishing around Italy (Ducci 2017). Therefore, on one hand, the administrations continue to display a rigid organizational structure, which is typical of traditional bureaucracies, but on the other are trying out new relational methods and languages. The challenge that is emerging from the public sector hence consists of reconciling the opportunities offered by the digital technologies with an openness towards citizens' productivity, at the cultural prior to the strictly operational level of the organization. If the interlocutors – the citizens – are at the centre of the communicative relationship, how can the public administration “equip itself” to make the most of their contributions, welcome their motions and recognize their role as an ally in the construction and not just the consumption of the public services? Indeed, even when interactivity, meant as productivity on the part of the citizens, does not seem possible, owing to the specific aspects of some services or contents provided (e.g., in the field of health and social services or emergency communication), the two-way model can be pursued all the same, both by listening to the interlocutor's needs and identity, and through customization of the information in the contents.

**Between information and communication.** As we have seen, the distinction between information and communication activities made at regulatory level concerns the identification of the structures, interlocutors and specific skills in the two spheres. So, information is entrusted to the journalistic work of the press offices, while communication is entrusted to public relations and the work of the public sector communicators. Now that the social web is becoming affirmed but there are no regulations that outline its organizational or management procedures, the information and communication segments seem to slot together and intersect. This is the case both at the level of definitions – Does the management of a social page relate to information or communication? Is it producing contents or managing relations? – and, as consequence, at the operational and professional level – Who has to manage it? When? During working hours or office opening hours or also at the weekend? From their own offices or at home? These questions challenge both the traditional segmented and compartmentalized set-up of Italian bureaucracy, and the job descriptions of the staff, who no longer deal with either information or communication, but are capable of recognizing and promoting the areas of overlap.

**From traditional know-how to the new professional skills.** The question of the recognition and legitimation of the roles and professional figures engaged in public communication has accompanied the discipline right from the start in Italy and in other countries too (Bessières 2018; Grunig, Jaatineen 1999). The goal at the start of the 2000s was to cast light on and specify the communicators' profiles as far as possible, according to specific regulations. As soon as the professions are detailed, outlined and given a name, some coordinates are fixed so that they can be recognized. Nevertheless, while this was the desirable route in the recent past, when the public sector communication actors could be slotted into traditional categories – journalists, press

secretaries, political communicators, PR agents, etc. – and legitimated by fitting into known containers, today this tendency seems to have changed. Social complexity and change seem to require a much more fluid classification of the skills suited to dealing with the consequences of these trends. In relation to an area of work in turn immensely more complex and “dense” (Sorrentino 2008), in which the social actors, information flows, tools and contents multiply, the know-how relating to the communicative sphere multiplies too and the existing categories become hybridized (Solito, Materassi 2017; Pezzoli 2016). And new profiles - social media manager, digital strategist, etc. – must be added as they become necessary to strategically deal with the institutional presence on the new digital platforms. However, to date they do not have either a clear outline in the public administration or a guaranteed presence in all the administrations. So how can the “old” and “new” be blended together? How can the traditional know-how and the new professional skills be redefined and separated out, updated and a new place be found in order to deal with the institutions and citizens’ new communication needs?

**The relationship between institutional and political communication.** Today the opportunities offered by the digital era once again call into question the work to specify the two spheres by identifying distinctive factors. In the digital age, it is more difficult to separate the forms of interaction between institutions, communication professionals and common citizens and to distinguish when the interlocutors hold the role of citizen-elector or citizen-user. Unlike the tendency during the 1990s, today it seems that the two areas must not be read in a dyadic and contrasting key, but as complementing each other and at times converging, while nevertheless accepting the important, unyielding elements of separation. The “balkanization of roles and pluralization of functions” (Lovari 2016: 68) favoured by the digital wave lead to an increasingly less clear distinction between political and institutional communication (Solito 2018), particularly in those contexts where few employees manage both political and institutional information and communication activities. So, what new management models can there be within the various activities? What relations of mutual autonomy, but also of strategic convergence?

**The heart of the debate.** For the reasons set out herein, in connected society some topics of reflection which to some extent have always accompanied the evolution of public communication in Italy – also in terms of its regulation – now become inevitable challenges and priorities. The topics that have been dealt with in this contribution, principally at the level of theoretical reflection, and read in a historical-evolutionary key, are today at the centre of operations developing in the country.<sup>11</sup> The following are the aspects and short-term actions under attention in the public communication review process under debate:

- Regulations: urgent need for an update capable of intervening in those “voids” that have been created in the organization of public sector communication following the social and technological changes brought about since Law no. 150/2000. In the early 2000s, no one could predict the evolution of the web and web 2.0 hence the law made no reference to the need for new professional figures who, instead, have now become indispensable. Nevertheless, instead of reiterating the factors of specification and separation between different offices and increasing internal fragmentation, it is becoming necessary to promote greater integration between the know-how and structures which deal with communication, including the skills needed for management of the institution’s social media channels;

- Competences: more flexibility in identifying the professions and communicative know-how and in identifying much more complex and composite areas of competence than in the past, including new digital skills. This reveals the evident need for two important steps to be taken: boosting the collaboration between the public

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<sup>11</sup> On 9 January 2020, a work group was put together by the Ministry of Public Administration as part of the fourth Open Government Partnership action plan. Its purpose is to provide indications on the reform of Law no. 150/2000 and on drawing up a national social media policy.

administration and educational institutions – schools and universities – to train personnel who are updated and qualified in all aspects of public communication; matching the forms of access to public employment, working hours and internal procedures to the communication requirements and the speed required to deal with and update the communicated content in the new digital environment;

- Training: identification of training and ongoing learning programmes for those professional figures who find themselves having to deal with a continually changing communicative environment, with its different logics and production methods. It seems to be an indispensable condition to involve the professional categories and schools and higher education institutions in assessing the efficacy of the training currently on offer and to update the skills of long-serving public administration employees involved in communication;

- Coordination: establishment of coordination structures – once called “control rooms” – capable of connecting the work carried out by the different actors in the communication-relational system and identifying the tools for strategically planning the communication activities. Now that communication goals are more numerous and complex compared to the past and communication is becoming a ubiquitous resource spread throughout the organization, all those who deal with communication in the institution must be given the opportunity to discuss, exchange opinions and schedule the actions that need to be taken. As communication manager is not an executive role in Italy, ways need to be devised to legitimize these professional figures so that their planning and coordination is followed and respected by all the offices;

- Listening: use of the opportunities offered by the digital technologies to build relations that set value by the citizens and the various stakeholders – other administrations, enterprises, no-profit associations, schools and universities, media, etc. – but also listening within the public administration itself. Furthermore, listening is also a tool that can prepare for the activity of assessing one’s own performances, in view of continual improvement and alignment with the demand to thus achieve citizen satisfaction;

- Languages: expansion of the processes to progressively simplify the language used, both in terms of clarity, accessibility and effective transparency of the contents and suitability for the different channels. The use of different channels becomes strategic when their distinct features can be exploited; for example, in the case of social media contents, it is essential to use fitting language and modes of communication (texts, audio content, videos, images, links, metadata, etc.).

These aspects, at the centre of the debate in recent months, can offer cues for reflection in future research and studies, not only to look at how the single organizations in Italy have responded, informally or formally, to the new communication requirements in the absence of an updated legislative framework. They can also provide the basis for comparative research projects between different countries, such as Spain and France which have significant historical and cultural similarities to Italy.

The topics that we have listed are directly linked to those factors that Criado *et al.* (2016) had already proposed (par. 1.2). Indeed, the advent of the digital era seems to have impacted the Italian context in three ways: organizational – from the viewpoint of the facilities and the competences involved; institutional – concerning standards, regulations and behaviours; and, lastly, environmental – namely, consideration of the role of public communication in the more general organizational and cultural context.

They are three aspects which, while separated in the literature for analytical and theoretical reflection purposes, now intersect again in everyday practice. Every review action that concerns them must consider them together, from an outlook of total transparency.

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