

Political communication in (times of) crisis

Conference of the Italian Association of Political Communication (AssoComPol)

Bologna, 30 June - 1 July 2022

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As early as the 1990s, leading figures in the discipline contended that political communication has entered a prolonged phase of crisis. Jay Blumler (1997) defined this crisis as the awareness that practices of political communication had to change radically in order to maintain the fundamental function of "communication for citizenship".

At the dawn of the new millennium, the increasing centrality of digital platforms in the "ecosystems of political communication" (Esser and Pfetsch 2020) gave further impetus to the perception of a mounting crisis hitting the field and discipline; and such crisis was understood in term of instability, heterogeneity, and "chaos" (McNair 2006). This idea can be found also in Andrew Chadwick's theory (2013) concerning "hybrid" reconfigurations of media systems. In fact, Chadwick, while highlighting some dysfunctionalities of the hybrid media system, rejected an exclusively negative understanding of the "permanent crisis" characterizing political communication.

The second half of the 2010s was instead characterized by a new phase of pessimism, which led researchers to search tools and frameworks to study political communication in "times of crisis" (Davis 2019). Indeed, these years saw a final collapse of trust in political and media elites, a new rise of nationalism and populism, mounting information overloads for citizens, and a multiplication in existing "regimes of truth" (Waisbord 2018).

Finally, the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world. The health crisis turned political, economic, and social, providing a new framework to the idea of crisis. The emergence of an unprecedented overlap between political and crisis communication produced a generalized shock that has directly affected our field of study. All actors in political and institutional communication had to face and directly manage the structural uncertainty characterizing the second modernity (Beck 1986).

Therefore, the global experience of the pandemic forces scholars and practitioners in political communication to deal with a renewed concept of crisis. In this historical moment it is even more important to resist the temptation to simply choose between optimism and pessimism. On the contrary, addressing responsibly the crisis of political communication means interpreting it as a challenge and trying to provide new theoretical lenses, to develop new methods for research, and to elaborate new and renovated knowledge. The pandemic has highlighted a widespread difficulty in elaborating solid theories and concepts based on empirical evidence. At the same time, it has shown the urgency of sound research contributing to our understanding of contemporary political and social phenomena without relying exclusively on the quantity of data collected, but also on their capacity to answer relevant questions.

Starting from these premises, we encourage the submission of papers that engage with the idea of crisis to address challenges faced by political communication research in the pandemic age. We are interested both in theoretical essays and empirical studies and we welcome different methodological approaches and research designs (quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods). Issues of interest include (but are not limited to):

- the nature of attention economies and dynamics of agenda building in contemporary media ecosystems, with particular reference to the pandemic period;

- the organization of election campaigns in moments of exceptionality for democratic norms and practices (e.g. lockdowns, physical distancing);
- trends in communication and political leadership styles during the pandemic and their implications in the relationship with other actors in the public sphere;
- new forms of extra-institutional political communication related to protests, social movements, and civil society actors during the pandemic;
- politicization of science, health and of their communication in the public sphere, with particular reference to the relationship between democracy, freedom of expression, collective interest and public health;
- transformations and degenerations of public debate in different media arenas with particular reference to incivility and polarization;
- the role of data, platforms, algorithms in processes of political communication and journalism by institutional and extra-institutional actors;
- transformations in political journalism, with particular attention to the boundaries between journalism and other forms of information;
- the impact of AI on the transformations of political communication and journalism;
- methodological and theoretical proposals dealing with the transformations of political communication emerged as a result of the pandemic experience, also in comparative perspective.

Although the conference focuses on the multiple interpretations of the "crisis" in political communication, papers addressing other aspects of the relationship between media and politics are also welcome. Papers by PhD students and young researchers are warmly encouraged.

Paper proposals should include name, affiliation and email address, a title, an extended abstract (600/800 words excluding references), and bibliographical references. Authors should also explicitly indicate whether they request the paper to be considered for publication (after the conference) in "Comunicazione Politica", the flagship journal of the Italian Association of Political Communication. In the case of ex aequo in the evaluations provided by referees, priority will be given to authors who have expressed interest for publication on Comunicazione Politica.

Useful information on how to write an abstract for AssoComPol conferences can be found in the section "Abstract instructions" of the AssoComPol website:

<https://www.compol.it/eventi/convegno/convegno-2022/>

- Paper proposals must include: Title, Name of authors, Affiliation with email, extended abstract of 600/800 words excluding bibliography, 3 keywords, and bibliographical references.
- Deadline for submission of proposals: **March 13** to <https://www.compol.it/call-for-abstracts-convegno-2022/>
- Notification of acceptance: **May 1**.
- Full papers must be submitted by **June 15** in the conference paper room (accessible by login)

Scientific Committee: Francesco Amoretti, Cristopher Cepernich, Alice Fubini, Alice Mattoni, Melissa Mongiardo, Gianpietro Mazzoleni, Marco Mazzoni, Augusto Valeriani.

Local organizers: Alice Fubini, Alice Mattoni, Augusto Valeriani.