

# Beyond digital political communication: platforms, algorithm and automation

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Political communication is going through a phase of deep transformation. Communicative environments have reached full digitalization, and this new paradigm brings new challenges. The platformization of society and the web through its constitutive elements – data, algorithms, automations, and interfaces (Van Dijk et al., 2018) – has affected the public value of communication and information.

Datafication affects different areas of society, and it is becoming increasingly relevant for both the production and communication of public policies. It changes the relationship between actors and processes. The development of information technologies has enabled the application of new analytical methodologies for investigating social phenomena by monitoring behaviours that would otherwise be difficult to detect (Theocharis & Jungherr, 2020). However, data produced by citizens/users and their interactions are not easily and/or fully accessible, mainly due to the convergence of proprietary platform logic and privacy protection. Access to these data have become increasingly difficult, even for academic institutions (Persily & Tucker, 2020).

While data fuel platforms, algorithms allow and rule their functioning. From a communication point of view, algorithms represent the manifestations and outcomes of media logic and how subjects perceive and interpret the latter, contributing to the development and deployment of algorithms (Klinger & Svensson, 2018). In this context, the development of increasingly advanced generative technologies such as Chat GPT raises questions from an ethical perspective and regarding the uses of platforms in relation to AI technologies as well.

Algorithms have consistently raised the attention of social research on risks and possible consequences, such as the polarization and radicalization of public debate. However, successful concepts such as echo chambers (Sunstein, 2002) and filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011) seem fewer adequate to explain the complexity of the relationship between platforms and users. Indeed, polarization dynamics appear to be more related to the heterogeneity of opinions encountered on platforms than to the action of echo chambers (Tucker et al., 2018). Moreover, platforms driven by algorithms seem to widen the range of information sources to which citizens/users are exposed (Barberá, 2020) instead of "locking them up" in self-referential bubbles. Against this background, the success of Tik Tok, based on the algorithmic logic of #foryou selection (Newman, 2022), raises new and additional questions for main actors in political communication.

Linked to polarization dynamics are also expressions of intolerance, hate, and incivility (Mason, 2018) that reinforce dimensions such as structural inequalities and biases based on gender, religion, ethnicity. These processes appear increasingly present in online public debate, especially during specific political events and controversial policies (Theocharis et al., 2022). In this case, the prominent role of platforms

contributes to amplifying their visibility, but also the possibilities for detection and analysis through the use of computational methods (Theocharis & Jungherr, 2020).

The spread of mis/disinformation is also often linked to the centrality assumed by platforms although, among its main causes is the way this is "packaged" (Vosoughi & Aral, 2018) beyond the support of coordinated online campaigns (Keller et al., 2019). Moreover, the ability to influence attitudes and behaviors depends primarily on alignment with pre-existing political, moral, beliefs (Freelon & Wells, 2020) and the citizens'/users' level of partisanship (Druckman et al., 2021). Within the hybrid media ecosystem, even legacy media are not immune to these processes, considering that they are often forced to chase an increasingly faster flow of information that is difficult to verify.

Platformization of communication has also affected information production and the journalistic profession. The dominance of platforms, in fact, has changed the ways through which users find information (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2020). However, news shared on social media are generally considered less credible, affecting trust in the media in the long run (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2021). Furthermore, the processes of adapting information to algorithmic logic play a relevant role in growing news avoidance (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2019) and are increasingly changing newsmaking and publishing, including legacy media trying to remain competitive (Newman, 2023).

Finally, all these processes take place in a scenario that has radically changed due to recent dramatic events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The scale of these events, on the one hand, has accelerated the digitization of the information ecosystem (Newman, 2022). On the other hand, it has provided the opportunity for outsider actors and new information channels to compete with traditional elites by further challenging roles and power relations (Van Aelst & Blumler, 2022).

Starting from this framework, we encourage the submission of papers investigating the impact of platformization processes on the fields of political communication, journalism, and all other forms of communication. Research that focuses on digital native phenomena and forms of communication, but also on traditional ones and their adaptation to the new platformed environments, are welcome. We are interested in both 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):

- new communication scenarios in the increasingly close and complex relationship between political communication and platforms;
- political and government communication strategies, election campaigns, and voting in national and international contexts;
- the role of data, platforms, algorithms, and automation (AI, bots, etc.) in the processes of political communication and news reporting by institutional and non-institutional actors;
- data access policies for purposes of research, campaigning, and profiling of the communication message; transparency of platforms and related tensions with the privacy paradigm;
- the trends that have emerged in the communication styles of leaders and parties in a hybrid and platformized communication ecosystem;
- the technological infrastructure of political participation (digital parties, networks, influencers, memes, UGC);
- new repertoires of extra-institutional political communication related to protests, social movements, and civil society actors;

- the transformations and controversies of public debate concerning processes of ideological and affective polarization, incivility, and online and offline forms of discrimination;
- changes in contemporary journalism, with a particular focus on the growth of the phenomenon of news avoidance;
- techniques of (computational) propaganda and mis/dis-information in conflict scenarios and transformations of news coverage in war contexts;
- methodological proposals and theoretical elaborations to approach the transformations of political communication generated in the intersection of platform use and communication datafication.

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 “ComPol - 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 ComPol - Comunicazione Politica.

**Useful information on how to write an abstract for AssoComPol conferences can be found in the section “Abstract instructions” on <https://www.compol.it/eventi/convegno/convegno-2023/>**

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: **April 4** at <https://www.compol.it/call-for-abstracts-convegno-2023/>

Notification of acceptance: **April 27**

Full papers must be submitted by **June 1** in the conference paper room (accessible by login)

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