

## SOCIAL PROSPECTIVE OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

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Motto: "It is our responsibility to amplify the good effects and mitigate the bad - to continue increasing diversity while strengthening our common understanding so our community can create the greatest positive impact on the world.."

Mark Zuckerberg, Building Global Community, February 2017<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *The Internet is a completely different thing from the so-called mass media. It is not a "medium" like the press, the television or the radio. It is an integrated system in which many different things coexist and we pursue very different objectives, from strictly individual communication to all sorts of group activities, from small or large communities, looking for information in something that is not entirely "universal library", but offers a vastness and freedom of choice that no other instrument had ever made possible. What matters, as always, is not technology, but the way people use it. The multiple possibilities of exchange, meeting, dialogue, knowledge, the infinite wealth of relationships, ideas, feelings, similarities and diversity, the possibility for each person to build a "his" custom network and finally the immensity of available resources that would be disorienting if it were not possible - as it is actually - to build a little at a time a system of choices and relationships "on a human scale" in which to move in a pleasant, flowing, stimulating way nothing but cumbersome or tiring. To all this are added the new forms of communication, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn ... in a word, social networks, born to be facilitators in communication processes and today are found to have become a battleground on which governments and other organizations the possibility of manipulating public opinion is played out. But how much did the formation of ideas change or potentially change? Civic participation in political life is allowing a rapid and continuous evolution of the information ecosystem, forever changing the playing field and the rules of electoral competitions. It was 2011 when that movement of people then called by the journalists "Arab Spring", began the use of social networks to report news and report abuses due to corruption of law enforcement. Thanks to the web bloggers have made many people aware and participate in politics by transmitting their indignation and activism. The viral and sudden character of social media has caused police videos, tweets and news about demonstrations and protests to expand at an impressive rate, adding more people to the cause. But the web and social media, these catalysts of opinions and revolts, which effectively accelerate the processes of organization and facilitate the exchange of opinions, can they ever replace traditional means, such as flyers, faxes, meetings, etc.? Is all that glitters gold? Only a few years have passed since the Arab spring, but in reality an era for the compressed times of the Web. Recent reports by the two greatest actors of this great change, Mark Zuckerberg, creator and CEO of Facebook and Evan Williams, co-founder of Twitter, can be considered almost "coming out" compared to results as much desired, as disliked and betrayed by the network towards citizens. Facebook calls it "information operations" and explains that they go beyond the phenomenon of false, inflated news, fake news. Williams is much less diplomatic and speaks openly of the "now broken internet" and apologizes for Trump's recent election as US president, thus admitting a key role that 140-character communication would have in routing consensus. Behind this apparently spontaneous and deregulated phenomenon, complex and well-financed efforts by States and other organizations would be hidden in order to hijack and pilot the consensus. The Internet, our greatest instrument of emancipation seems to have turned into the most dangerous contribution to totalitarianism that has ever been seen. Starting from the description of the current situation of intelligence in the Net, the objective of these pages is to compose the pieces of a puzzle that is as close as possible to the future of the WEB, and therefore to the future of our world. The chosen guideline is consistent with the "wonderful dream" of Tim Berners Lee, who has forged the WEB to date: • sharing knowledge and intelligences enhanced by the use of the Internet; • the possibility that computers will talk, and understand each other, thanks to the development of the Semantic WEB.*

**Keywords:** digital information; Internet; communication

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/building-globalcommunity/10154544292806634>

## 1. THE DIGITAL INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

The convergence between the telecommunications and the audiovisual industry, which has been underway for some time, has now undergone a process of rapid acceleration with the development of the Internet. The European Commission with the Green Paper of 2014 has, for the first time, associated with the term -convergence the adjective -pial to underline the importance of the phenomenon that is changing the connotations of the communications industry and consumption habits and the lifestyles of citizens. The factors of this change must certainly be placed within certain processes such as disintermediation, the possibility of both using content without "institutional" intermediation (file sharing, social network), and creating and distributing own content (user generated content). The implications on the socio-cultural level are also important: the disintermediation of content on the one hand has led to the birth and proliferation of blogs and social networks, also aimed at the non-institutionalized production of content, on the other it refers to the diffusion of the logic of open source. These factors have radically changed the architecture of the markets and the value chain of the communications industry.

The new forms of communicating what has changed or potentially can change the formation of ideas? Civic participation in political life is allowing a rapid and continuous evolution of the information ecosystem, forever changing the playing field and the rules of electoral competitions. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn ... in a word, social networks, born to be facilitators in communication processes, risk becoming a battleground on which governments and other organizations play the possibility of manipulating public opinion. The amplification of the dissemination of messages made by the professionals of political communication 2.0, employees of governments or other professionals, like coordinated to make relevance to certain posts, the creation of groups that disguise the propaganda putting it together with real information and spreading material racist often through false accounts, seem to have taken unfortunately in the landscape of political debate. To say it is precisely the inventor of the most widespread and used social in the world, today CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg with a study published in a 13-page report, announcing he wants to take new measures

to cope with this phenomenon (Weedon *et al.*, 2017).

The Facebook report, with the announcement of new measures that include the suspension or cancellation of fake accounts after identifying them, reflects a change of perspective compared to when, at the end of 2016, Zuckerberg called "a crazy idea" the fact that the fake news transmitted through the social network could have influenced the outcome of the presidential elections in the United States. And the US presidential elections were chosen as a case study: in the report we read that false characters on Facebook have spread stolen e-mails and other documents in the context of coordinated efforts, efforts that US intelligence agencies have attributed to Russia; and other false characters then pushed those stories forward by expanding that material.

Facebook calls them "information operations" and explains that they go beyond the phenomenon of false, inflated news, fake news. Behind this apparently spontaneous and deregulated phenomenon, complex and well-financed efforts by States and other organizations would be hidden in order to hijack and pilot the consensus. This is how the Zuckerberg staff concludes this report, to be considered a "coming out" of the Net and its ability to influence the minds: We recognize that, in today's information environment, social media plays a role in facilitating communications - not only in times of civic events, such as elections, but in everyday expression. In some circumstances, however, we recognize that the risk of malicious actors seeking to use Facebook to mislead people or otherwise promote inauthentic communications can be higher. For our part, we are taking a multifaceted approach to help mitigate these risks:

- Continually studying and monitoring the efforts of those who try to negatively manipulate civic discourse on Facebook;
- Innovating in the areas of account access and account integrity, including identifying fake accounts and expanding our security and privacy settings and options;
- Participating in multi-stakeholder efforts to notify and educate at-risk people of the ways they can best keep their information safe;
- Supporting civil society programs around media literacy.

Just as the information ecosystem in which these dynamics are playing out is a shared resource and a set of common spaces. We have made concerted efforts to collaborate with peers both within the technology sector and in other areas, including governments, journalists and news organizations, and we will be working together

support strong, informed, and civically engaged communities.

In political communication 3.0 is the "amplification" effect or the "denigration" effect of the adversary more productive? According to Giovanni Sasso, spin doctor among the most popular of the moment, criticizing political opponents is not a taboo. Indeed, it is a duty, under certain circumstances. The problem is that often all the political debate focuses on a constant rebound of mutual accusations, and in this deafening noise the *pars construens*, or the political proposal, ends up getting lost. Sasso believes this is one of the causes of Italians' growing disaffection with politics. "I turn on the TV and watch two hours of talk show in which everyone is committed exclusively to denigrate the opponent, without proposing anything, fatally I will consider politics a clumsy imitation of bar fights between fans, Monday morning. And at that point, I'll choose the original".

However, the question remains at the center of the debate: Can the use of social media be enough to win people's consent? Sasso says no and adds: - but not only, I would be much more drastic. To win people's consent, not even the other traditional media are enough. In essence, political-electoral communication, by itself, even if done in the best possible way, is never enough. Communication, and therefore also the correct and strategic use of social media, works only when it is based on a solid base made up of convincing political proposals, put in place by credible people and movements. I always say that there is no good advertising for a poor product. Or better, it can give some results in the short term, but then in the medium-long it turns into a boomerang.

Referring back to the international system, before winning the Florida and Pennsylvania elections, Donald Trump had already won them on Facebook and Twitter. He has had double Hillary Clinton fans for the last six months of the campaign. It would therefore be wrong to say that who-wins "on social networks wins in the country?"

In planning communication strategies, a candidate or a party must necessarily rely on the Net to maximize the impact of a statement or slogan or fundraising and must be prepared to respond adequately to the attacks and counter-offenses of the adversaries. Candidates must invest substantial financial and human resources to keep control of flows via social, employing many experts.

Italy, like the whole planet has been colonized by the social networks with stars and stripes.

Obama, in 2008 won big thanks to an intelligent use of Facebook. Trump has won this year, but it is still difficult to say how much of the success is due to the social and how much to the huge media coverage combined with his undeniable ability to speak to the belly of the American middle class. In Italy, despite Renzi being a social leader, the constitutional referendum has lost. But even here communication is not everything. In 2013 and the last municipal M5S has certainly not won because he knows how to use the Internet, but because he has intercepted the anger and antipolitics that characterize the current Italian political phase.

To compete in the new media ecosystem, even Italian parties have long since been in power on social media. But with reaction times and different weights. If the M5S is a case apart, Renzi and the PD have invested increasing resources until relying on the last referendum, without success, to Obama's guru, Jim Messina. While other parties such as the NCD, but also the Lega Nord and Forza Italia, count more on the movement or presidentialism of their respective leaders than on the widespread management of communication on the Net: they still rely on old memberships refreshed by new slogans or new proclamations. According to a recent study conducted in seven countries including Italy, 72.5% of politicians have not really taken the social step yet. The universe of Big Data collected on the internet has opened up vast and disturbing spaces for the "profiling" of users and voters. Through the crossover of social surveys with public or payable personal data and applying psychometry (which measures the psychological characteristics of an individual), a Big Data giant like Cambridge Analytica is able to offer a sort of search engine for people, capable of identifying, for example, all undecided democratic voters, who may become the target of a political communication - on a measure. It is microtargeting, based on the measurement of voters' personality based on their digital traces.

Of course, in Italy, television is still the main source for political information. The Net is the place where everyone expresses his opinion in a chaotic, irresponsible way. One wonders, however, if thanks to their interactivity, social media are not also the virtual agora where voters change opinion more easily than with old one-way media. In part yes, at least in the United States. According to a survey by the Pew Research Center in Washington, overall 20% of social media users say they have changed their position on a political or social issue due to material seen on social media and 17% say social media have contributed to change their opinion on a specific political candidate. At the

same time there are also phenomena of rejection, electors frustrated and dissatisfied by the quarrelsome and insulting tone of the political debate on social platforms. The primary information that feeds the web is still derived from traditional sources on the Internet (newspapers, magazines, etc.) but today the most used site to learn is Google and Facebook is the fifth. This shows that there is certainly a radical change in the way in which information is offered, enjoyed and shared. The Network generally tends to amplify, radicalize and propagate processes, dynamics and effects generated within the media ecosystem. Then there is the question of the so-called Troll, provocateurs who poison the debates distracting attention on the subject matter and find fertile ground in the field of political debate on the Net. All these actions of using social tools are used by political leaders just to guaranteeing the legitimacy of the media and thus acquiring - media capital" (De Blasio *et al.*, 2012).

The Net is a crossroads of relationships, a flow of communications, an ever-changing arena and within which horizontal relationships are established and one often follows a leader who exercises increasing influence over habits and decisions.

## **2. THE INTEGRATIVE GOVERNMENT AND THE CITIZEN**

Promoting citizen participation in a democratic society is also possible thanks to the interactive government; they can participate in political affairs at local, regional, national and even international levels. The Network can respond to this need, putting itself at the service of the State to reform it, making it more efficient, closer to the needs of the population, and from the public sector expects the same quality of services offered by the private sector. The right of citizens to be informed of what happens in the palaces of power, has been amplified thanks to the Internet. In fact, in traditional media, service information is almost absent, while it is easier to access it through the websites of the Municipalities, Regions, Ministries and Parliament, through numerous portals. At the base there must be greater transparency of information, procedures and decisions.

By transparency we mean less corruption and more trust in institutions; the citizen, therefore, participates in the choices of the government, thanks to the consultation and access to information, previously only accessible through paper material. But the pioneering phase of P.A. it has already been completed for some time, so it is

no longer enough to automate and digitize the processes, but we need to think about the contents both from the point of view of the internal organization, and in the methods to interface with the public. It is a question of accelerating a process that has already begun to create real virtual service environments, destined for both citizens and businesses, to replace or integrate the traditional public office, so as to change the face of the PA, streamlining the bureaucracy through the adoption of digital technologies. European States must now guarantee digital access to all public services and facilitate the various forms of electronic commerce. This is a strategic choice, to increase efficiency and transparency, reduce costs, speed up administrative procedures to favor citizens and businesses. Generalized electronic access is the engine of the transition to digital citizenship. Electronic democracy could therefore be a reality, but often in the administrative dimension there are trends that can lead to the use of technological opportunities that endanger individual and collective liberties, and therefore democracy itself.

In fact, there are also some who report some critical aspects regarding network communication: some think that computer-mediated communication could reinforce existing modules of interaction, instead of creating new ones. In addition, the introduction of new technologies could be a win-win situation only for those who already have good skills in this area. For this reason, the presence of more information can not always lead to an increase in citizen participation.

Consequently, the body that chooses to activate a civic network must take into account these problems and take responsibility for ensuring that those who access the network have access to the necessary information to participate concretely in the planned activities, freeing themselves from the role of passive spectator.

## **3. WEB USABILITY AND INFORMATION ON THE WEB**

On the theme of usability of websites we must also dwell on the recent guidelines provided by the usability guru, J. Nielsen. There are aspects that would come in handy with a view to SEO13, because now the search engines tend to standardize the indexing criteria to the behavior of users, then to usability. It would also be very useful to consider, also in light of some advertising campaigns, the considerations made by Nielsen on the welcome pages (homepage).

These are some of the words used by the authors (J. Nielsen - H. Loranger) of the volume "Web usability 2.0, The usability that counts, Apogeo, Milan 2006 (page 111) on the subject: 1)The welcome pages were among the first sins of a web design that despised its users to the point of preventing them from having what they came for [...] but there are still sites that insist on slowing down users with this technique imbecile. 2)The new sites of small and medium-sized businesses seem particularly sensitive to the charm of the welcome pages, perhaps because the owners insist on wanting to take the stage instead of taking care of the customers and their needs. 3)The welcome pages must disappear. The user immediately gets the impression that a site is more interested in its image than in solving its problems. It is true that a homepage must immediately communicate the purpose of the site and what the user offers, but must also communicate respect for the visitor's time, or the visitor will leave. 4)For a site a visual design is useful, but it is also one that assigns the right priority to information and guides the user's eye towards the main functionalities.

From an SEO perspective, search engine algorithms aim to assimilate searches to the main characteristics of user behavior; so if on 10 links only 1 only then actually falls on the page of the product you are searching for, it means that the latter will have a weight in the indexing of 1/10 compared to the whole of all links.

The other limit that can be underlined is the weight of the texts in the Index. The trend of the engines goes towards a prominence of the function of the index; GG (Google), in particular, is favoring index-oriented indexing on indexes, which can lead the latter to inherit indexing scores on internal pages, unless the indexes re-propose the fulcrum elements (keywords and links) of internal pages. Therefore, depriving ourselves of the text in the index, as well as contravene usability logics, is equivalent to strongly limiting the text indexing.

The previous guidelines on the homepage, from my point of view, are even more true if we consider the different attitude taken by the user depending on whether its origin is direct (already know the site URL) or indirect, if search engines or from other reference sites, through banners or hypertext links. The user who comes from the search engines has an exclusive orientation to the content: therefore seeks immediate answers exclusively in textual descriptions and, at most, in the detail of the images (especially if he is looking for products). This makes it more demanding from

the point of view of seeking an answer to his questions.

The structure of a site will increasingly condition long-term indexing. The structural interventions, therefore, are also those for which there are more needs for spending, economic (for those who support it) and time (for those who make them). As for the speech of acceleration of the intervention phases, it is obvious that the greater the indexing intentions, the greater attention must be paid to technical interventions and since only the first page will guarantee visibility (93% of users find on the first page, between Adwords<sup>15</sup> and SERP<sup>16</sup>) this reasoning will become even more relevant, also in light of the exponential proliferation of sites.

Information on the Internet is everywhere, because it is present in large quantities and is continuously created and modified. This information embraces a wide variety of genres (facts, opinions, stories, interpretations, statistics) and is created for different purposes (to inform, to persuade, to sell, to present a point of view, to create or change an attitude or a belief, etc.).

For each of these genres and purposes, information has various levels of credibility, oscillates between good and bad, and includes every nuance in the middle. It is essential to ask initial questions such as: - Which source or type of source would be the most reliable to obtain information on this particular case? Or: Which sources are more likely to be correct, objective, without ulterior motives and qualitatively verified? It is important to keep these considerations in mind, not to simply accept the opinion of the first source you meet. Keeping these things in mind during the research, you will be able to expose suspicious or questionable sources faster. Since there are so many sources to choose from in one search, there is no reason to dwell on unreliable material.

You should choose sources that offer as many of the following information as possible: Author's name; Title and position of the author; Affiliation of the author to some organization; Date of creation or modification of the page. Information, practically synonymous with culture, serves as a basis for: beliefs, decisions, choices, and the understanding of our world. If decisions are made based on wrong or unreliable information, one does not receive a power, but a defeat. If we eat something dangerous that we believe is safe for us, we can get sick; if instead we avoid something good because we believe it to be harmful, we would have done nothing but limit the enjoyment

of our life without any reason. The same thing can be applied to every choice: traveling, buying and carrying out an action, and every attempt to understand. The lack of trust in a source puts the individual in a situation of stalemate, from which he will be able to go out only when he finds a - guide or someone, or something, that has reliable information. The circle closes on itself.

#### **4. THE INTERNET, THIS STRANGER. THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION**

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 10 December 1948 states that each individual has: - the right to seek, receive and disseminate information and ideas through every means and without regard to frontiers. In terms of access, therefore, it will be necessary to distinguish between -access and -accessibility. The first term refers to inequalities in access to and use of the so-called "information society" technologies (the so-called Digital Divide); the second term instead refers to the possibility of making universal Internet access (usability). The big, age-old problem of the Internet is given by the "conflict of interests" between the need for leadership and the attempts of "dictatorship" by political states and economic forces. The Internet being a structure with a high degree of organizational complexity, can only work if there are precise rules to be respected and bodies that oversee their respect.

The central apparatus of the Internet is located in the United States: it is formed by some organisms responsible for various functions necessary for the development and maintenance of the Net. Then there is a territorial apparatus with a hierarchical pyramidal organization (similar to a feudal model), and at the base of the pyramid are the intermediaries who cooperate to allow access to cyberspace by the individual user.

The main bodies that are placed at the top of the hierarchy and which currently govern the Internet are: ISOC (Internet Society): is based in the United States and has purposes aimed at encouraging the international development of the Internet, ensuring the establishment and functioning of the necessary bodies; IAB (Internet Architecture Board): is an ISOC organization that is responsible for the general organization of the Internet. It is composed of 13 members with voting rights. For many years he was president Vint Cerf, one of the founding fathers of the Internet;

IANA (Internet Assigned Numbers Authority): is the central coordinating body for the assignment of the parameters for the Internet protocols, for the

determination of the rules with which IP addresses are assigned and for the determination of the rules for the assignment of domain names. It is based at the University of Southern California; ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Number and Names): founded in 1998, it is a private non-profit corporation subject to the laws of the state of California. It has the task to register the DNS and develop new standards for Internet protocols. ICANN is administered by a Board composed of 18 directors and a president; of these nine are appointed directly by the institution, the other nine should be elected by the world community of the Internet. In reality, only five of the nine members are actually in charge, following the first elections held, among many controversies, in 2000.

Among the polemics against the repression of freedom of expression in Tunisia ended the world summit of the information society organized by the UN. A Tunis Agenda was also adopted that envisages a strategy to bridge the digital gap between rich and developing countries to enable them to get on the information and ICT (Information Communication Technology) train. But no commitment wanted to take the "rich" countries to contribute to the Digital Solidarity Fund launched in Geneva in 2003, during the first phase of the summit, by Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade.

Access to the Internet and information technologies, and to the social, economic and cultural development that follows, is still a dream for over 80% of the world's population. Wade said he put a lot of hope in the \$ 23 laptop computer for the children of developing countries invented by Nicholas Negroponte, who presented it to Smsi along with the UN Secretary-General. However, the road ahead is still long to reduce ICT costs - which, according to Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General, depends only on the political will of the industrialized countries - because the 800,000 villages that are still lacking appeal can become part of the "planetary information village" by 2015, as the UN secretary general wishes. Up to now the Internet has been managed, and governed, exclusively by the American company ICANN. During these months many proposals have been put forward to give the network an international control, reducing the American influence in the control of the new technology.

In this regard, a long negotiation was conducted to find a satisfactory solution to the evolution of the network government. In fact, there are various currents of thought to delineate the future of Internet users. On the one hand, ICANN

wants to continue its role of control and supervision. On the other hand, the users themselves, individuals, associations and companies are wary of any kind of external intervention, political or administrative, in the world of the Net and delineate a self-regulation of the online world.

One of the most reliable hypotheses is the establishment of a completely international government, presided over by a body in the UN. The effort was to collect and analyze all the proposals, to consider the needs of users and to harmonize the opposing positions. Finally, it was decided to set up a 5-year forum, naturally on-line, managed directly by the staff of the UN Secretary-General. The forum will be open and all the issues of the Net will be discussed, from spam to pornography, to user rights, etc. Once the solutions have been shared, a more and more international supervisory body, Icann, will take care to control the applications of the defined rules.

### **5. RETURN TO AGORA**

The digital revolution determines risks and opportunities. When digital technology breaks into communication, it changes both search method in the Web, both the language of its representation and this transition to digital communication produces another mutation of cybernauts enhancing their experiences and emotions. One risk is the deterioration of the quality of professional information due to the difficulty of publishers to remunerate the productive factors and a structural crisis of the publishing industry that could lead to concentration phenomena and a lower level of pluralism in information.

On the opportunities side, digital technologies offer an extraordinary tool for disseminating information and enriching it thanks to multimedia contents. All of this is a great business opportunity for companies that are able to better interpret change. The technology is neither good nor bad nor neutral, says the first law of technology of the American historian Melvin Kranzberg (1986), only three years before Tim Berners Lee's launch of the World Wide Web. Technology is and will continue to be an instrument in our hands. Political marketing on the social network can also provide tools to multiply fake news, the infamous post-

truth and replace with political automata the political supporters in the flesh, thus doping the numbers of political consensus. The problem is intertwined with that of hacking for political purposes, brought to the fore with the recent Russian-American cyber war.

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