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*Political communication*

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## Political communication today: challenges and threats

**Abstract**

Events such as the triumph of Brexit in the United Kingdom, the victory of Donald Trump in the United States or the rise of populism in some European countries have resulted in a significant upheaval in the western political scenario, which had remained stable since the Second World War. These events have opened up new and relevant avenues for political communication. This discipline is facing important challenges and threats, from the academic and political action points of view. New phenomena, such as the loss of credibility of political actors and of the traditional means of communication, the trivialisation of politics, the use of algorithms to understand, anticipate and intervene in the development of communication or the rise of the new media in the public arena are being combined with old acquaintances such as persuasion, propaganda, customisation and mastering emotions. This article explores new lines of work, prospects, strategies and positioning and furthermore reflects on the possibilities offered by them for establishing future theoretical, methodological and action paths within a communicative realm characterised by its ongoing evolution within an increasingly uncertain and changing context.

**Keywords**

**Neuropolitics, elections, algorithmic democracy, metaphor, post-truth, emotions**

### 1. Introduction

In recent years, western democracies have experienced very surprising events that apparently contradict the electoral logic known until then. Situations such as the rejection by referendum of a peace agreement with the FARC guerrillas in Colombia, the victory of Brexit in Great Britain, the unexpected triumph of Donald Trump in the United States or the rise of the populist parties in several European countries, have highlighted the role of political communication and its effect on citizenry. Tension prevails and the current discussion is about the extent to which political communication and media language (as a reflection and expression of reality) can contribute to the necessary democratic dialogue and recovery of confidence, participation and understanding between politicians and voters, governments and citizens.

Most published research indicates that the current political communication, both from professional and academic points of view, and that of interest to candidates, parties, governments and institutions, is geared towards achieving the necessary legitimacy of media and citizenry. Likewise, citizens are seeking authentic traits that will permit them to trust the political establishment. Direct contact between candidates and citizens is not always possible and therefore traditional and new media (to a greater or lesser extent, as reflected in public debate) have a role to play, i.e., get both sides to bridge distances, get closer and empathise with each other rather than move apart and get alienated.

All these issues depend on a number of communication and political variables that we seek to measure and assess in order to gauge how the interaction between the different actors and the public involved contributes to the promotion of public participation and the consolidation of a healthy democracy. Some published research indicates that a new scenario is unfolding in which the old schemes of televised political debate are faced with the need for renewal of formats and narratives and the search for new spaces and modes of expression in order to generate pivotal news and emotional stories. The same is true of social networks, which are like new social factories that test and analyse the ability to listen, and wherein business, the search for recognition and power lie.

## **2. Algorithmic democracy and metrics of emotions**

The loss of political credibility and the lack of trust in politicians indicated by opinion polls ever since the outbreak of the economic crisis, has led to a political and institutional crisis, and has placed political communication on a scenario of rising left-wing and right-wing populism. This circumstance, which already has a strong foothold in Latin American culture (Laclau, 2009), has now raised alarm bells in the United States of America after the presidential elections of last November. This phenomenon threatens to infect different countries and leaders that are more or less radical, and consequently their anti-establishment speeches continue to gain positions in the different countries where the electoral processes are under way.

We are therefore in the age of impolitics (Rosanvallon, 2008) and its alternative ways of conceiving politics as anti-politics (Fair, 2012) and as politically incorrect. This threat extends to traditional means of communication because they are perceived as part of the same system. Moreover, and in the case of the media, an alleged hybridisation with the new media (Chadwick, 2013) may end up in impersonation and the return to the future of the old rules of propaganda, based on exaggeration, simplification, ridicule of adversary, lies, misinformation, dissemination of hoaxes and conspiracy theories (Domenach, 1968; Ellul, 1973).

We are therefore faced with lies as a temporal dimension and deception that is full of false promises and intentions (Durandin, 2008). It finally reaches mediatised politics through the use of language and the communicative methods and techniques that are essential for spotlight in a democracy of audiences (Ortega, 2011), and adapted to the very productive needs of the media, their rhythms, beats and content negotiation (Mazzoleni, 2010).

All of the above leads to trivialisation, political pop (Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009), political entertainment and infotainment (politainment), characteristic of the showbiz society (Debord, 2005), where politicians are forced to act and to go on-stage (Arroyo, 2012) in search of alternative audiences. It also causes an advancing personalisation of politics that is increasingly present in digital media, and that authors such as Bennet (2012) consider as a reflection of the increasing individualisation, social fragmentation and decline of party loyalty, characteristic of post-industrial democracies.

This leads us to a new dimension of political action, based on the concept of post-truth (the truth felt, perceived and accepted as a belief or faith), characteristic of a postfactual democracy, in which facts are less important than the sensations they produce, and in which there is a sort of Orwellian anxiety to gain technological control of the voting market and emotional manipulation, through transformation of Big Data into some kind of *Smart Voters* at the service of algorithmic democracy.

We are thus faced with the advent of Big Data and a new algorithmic culture that goes beyond simple technological bearings and whose datification process brings about new and opaque control regimes, discrimination and exclusion (Van Dijck, 2013; 2014). The above generates a set of tecnopolitical distortions, with new forms of repression and algorithmic resistance by citizens (Treré, 2016).

In this context, citizens become (a type of) affective machines "mapped" by techno-emotions (Belli, Harre & Iñiguez, 2010), as a result of the merger between science and technology, which ties in with the concept of "cyborg" by Donna Haraway (1995) and that of "mutant" by Alessandro Baricco (2008).

An entire mechanism of automated accounts, *bots*, *trolls*, identity and profile thefts on social networks, with the intention of adding emotions to the *trending topic* of feelings shared by a county, state or nation. Hence, computational propaganda is now becoming one of the most important social impacts of innovation in computer science and engineering, as indicated by Woolley and Howard (2016).

The automated dissemination of content and accounts labelled as *bots* accounted for a fifth of the conversations recorded via Twitter (Bessi & Ferrara, 2016) in the recent 2016 US presidential elections and adversely affected democratic discussion. These are actions that endanger the integrity of future electoral processes because of the difficulty (in most cases) of determining who is behind this type of practices (Kollanyi et al., 2016), and there are companies already dedicated to provide a range of services destined for this purpose.

One of the most evident consequences of these practices is the issue of whether one can *hack* the election of a president, which now moves beyond political fiction and into the realm of reality, as has been the case, following allegations by the CIA on Russian intervention in the pirating of messages and accounts during the 2016 US elections or the cautions by Angela Merkel about the dissemination of false propaganda and news through the web (with the consequent fear in Europe of the control exercised by US based Internet giants).

All these aspects are ethically worrying and require urgent action, as suggested by some of the most recent research on the subject (Marechal, Gasthaus Traube, 2016; 2016; Sandvig et al., 2016). This phenomenon is aggravated by the fact that these *botcampaigns* would not have succeeded in manipulating public opinion were it not for the significant amount of social capital, time and money that backs the same (Murthy et al., 2016).

Just as in the case of sending automated messages, a record of high levels of traffic does not necessarily imply bi-directionality and interaction, nor does it represent a genuine dialogic conversation. The same is true for the so-called "social media buttons" present on social networks (like, comment and share), which reflect short (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013) and weak affective states (Guy et al., 2016) and a low-cost commitment and involvement.

Small signs of affection, feelings and moods that do not necessarily correspond with any motivation, but which beyond doubt can act as conductors of pre-existing motivations (Vaccari, 2010) that spread to create opinion trends and are quite similar to those produced through the colonisation of space by diverse species, cells and microorganisms, in accordance with the grouping patterns described by the expert in biomedical and social computational models, Joshua M. Epstein (2006).

Basically, life is information (in the form of an atom, gene or bit) and, consequently, is the vital principle (Gleick, 2012), a system within which are included ideas that circulate in

society (Dawkins, 2000), as transmitters of our cultural heritage and as an expression of our social brain (Gazzaniga, 1993). Under these assumptions, neuroscientists dealing with the physical brain began to realise that they could better understand its operation if they took into account the environment and the processes generated in the different social structures.

Likewise, the development of cognitive psychology and the psychology of the media facilitates the study of human emotions (Frijda, 1986) and its extension to fields such as political science and communication (Lewis et al., 2008). The application of the theory of the mind and neuroscience methods and techniques are especially relevant when analysing the effects in the media and in the entertainment industry (Doveling et al, 2011). The goal is to open the person's "black box" (Lang, 2011) and delve deeper into the study of the predictive models and behaviours (Predictive Behaviour) (Ruas-Araujo, 2017). To this, we must add that media and emotion are connected with the theories on moods (mood management theory (Zillmann, 1983; Knobloch-Westerwick & Alter, 2006) and the selective exposure to content, with the intention of maintaining or restoring positive affects and/or avoiding the negative ones (Konijn and Holt, 2011).

Thus, decision-making goes far beyond mere evaluation and rational calculation of possibilities, as stated by Ledoux (1996), who was one of the first scholars to study emotion. Its power acts even below the threshold of consciousness and intentionality (Connolly, 2002), and in a conflict, can result in emotion, thereby clearly overriding reasoning, as stated by Westen (2008), after analysing the Democrat and Republican votes, who concluded the clear emotional advantage of the latter over the former in several electoral processes.

And likewise, through cognitive linguistics, of which Chomsky is one of its greatest exponents, one begins to understand the connections between language and the mind, by studying for example the metaphors and conceptual frameworks present in the brain synapses (Lakoff, 2007).

Metaphors are key communication tools that confer persuasive capacity to the different ideological positions present in the social definition processes of public issues. Within the above context, which has a predominant emotional component, their capacity is greater because various social actors - media and political actors- struggle in the public arena, to impose their own points of view and political definitions of the different key issues (Cammaerts, 2012). In the latest theoretical debates, metaphor seems to play a dual 'cognitive' and 'persuasive' role in the process of delimitation of reality. As Charteris-Black (2004) states, metaphor is used persuasively to provide cognitive frameworks in the different perspectives present in the definition of social issues.

The cognitive role of metaphor, formulated by Lakoff and Johnson in the 1980s, states that this is a way of knowing reality "perceived" in a certain way. In fact, metaphor plays a major role in the construction of social reality and politics through discourse, because it helps us understand the world in which we live by allowing us to grasp a new reality - the *target domain*- from already known realities -*source domain*- (Mio, 1997; Musolff, 2004).

The persuasive role of metaphor, attributed to Aristotle and predominant throughout history (Kövecses, 2009), is based on two aspects: focussing attention on certain aspects of reality (Eco, 1993) at the expense of others (Mine, 1997) and the type of link established between the pooled realities. Firstly, metaphor is persuasive because metaphorical grouping and targeting are *scenarios*, characterised by a set of assumptions made by competent members of a discourse community on "typical" aspects of a situation (Musolff, 2006). The use of the concept *scenario* enables us to determine which aspects of the metaphorical map can be considered as dominant in public discourse on a particular topic, and therefore allows greater freedom of interpretation. Hence, certain features of the conceptualised entities that may be relevant to a particular line of argumentation are strategically emphasised (Olza, 2008). Therefore, the argumentative and persuasive ability of metaphor is

directly related to *scenarios*, because they capture the argumentative and attitudinal trends of the different interpretative communities (Musolff, 2004).

Secondly, the persuasiveness of metaphor lies in the type of link established between the *source domain* and the “target domain”. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1994), relying on the classical rhetoric tradition, establish that metaphor is based on the analogy struck between the concept that one wants to explain and the concept that is used to explain it. According to these authors, if a particular view is accepted and shared by the *source domain*, it will also be true for the *target domain* without there being a need to develop profound arguments. That is to say, given that the elements of the *scenarios* are presupposed rather than logically deduced, their authority is automatically transmitted onto the *target domains* by adding a certain evaluative connotation (Ferrari, 2007).

Politicians act and climb onto the stage, therefore political communication has an undoubted dramatic and rhetorical component and rhetoric is precisely the language of argument and persuasion, the balance between the Aristotelian *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos*, the reason, the personality, the character and history of the orator and his/her ability to arouse emotions, which facilitates the connection and dialogue in collective decision-making.

On the other hand, the incorporation of new classical text analysis technologies has led to the advent of computerised content analysis (Jurafsky & Martin, 2008), as a step further to the traditional method of text analysis. This method allows us to automate the coding process and facilitates analysis of latent variables by reducing error margins associated with manual analysis.

Another step in the fusion of new technologies with semiotic interpretation is the presence of programs for indexing and searching natural language that track semantic equivalence and categories and word clouds. In this line, there is also an attempt at analysing the emotional burden of texts, through the use of multiple software programs for content analysis, and referenced from the beginning of the century up to present time (Neuendorf, 2002; Ruas & Perez, 2015). These have increased exponentially over the last few years.

### 3. Conclusion: political communication from the heart and soul

The publication by Forbes magazine of an interview with US President Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, in which he states that they had mapped the fundamental campaign issues linked to audience profiles of TV series such as “The Walking Dead” or “NCIS”, to respectively detect opponents of immigration and health policies, indicates that the reification of politics also falls within the parameters of the Internet of things and simultaneously points to the dangers of tracking the trail and route of zombies that do not have conscience or mind or feelings described in the popular TV series.

Essentially, the word “investigate” (*uestigo*) means following the trail and footprint of a prey, not only by capturing the body but also the soul and feelings, aspects historically addressed by the philosophy of the mind, from the point of view of dualism, behaviourism and functionalism, with the intention of ascertaining the nature of mental states beyond the physicalist thesis.

Hence, it remains to be seen whether such location, quantification and metrics of emotions without triangulation, interpretation or qualitative contrast, will convert the study of political communication into a practice of unconscious zombies that mechanically measure the valence and polarity of speeches, in stark contrast to the reality of the conscious mind as referred to by Chalmers (1999).

In this respect, we must bear in mind that the brain tells us about the what and where of things, however, the explanation of why can be multi-causal and qualitative, and

responds to a neurosurgeon's confession, namely; that he has still to discover the first thoughts in the hundreds of patients that he has operated throughout his life.

Erik Kandel (2010), the Nobel Prize winner in Medicine, points out that our senses process about 11 million bits of information per second and, at best, our conscious brain can process 40 bits of information per second. At the same time, our brain is able to perform around 200 thousand trillion calculations per second, with its more than 150,000 kilometres of wiring, nerves, and blood vessels, enough data to downplay any study of a region or isolated part of the brain without putting it into context.

We obviously cannot dismiss the results and objective measurements provided by neuroscience techniques and tools such as functional magnetic resonance imaging, electroencephalogram, measurement of skin conductance or heart rate, but the interdisciplinarity of the sciences should not be interpreted as a one way path, i.e., from neuroscience and medical sciences to the social sciences, but also be considered as a path in the opposite direction, through the necessary interpretation provided by the latter to the former, taking into account the context of each test or experiment and the historical, economic or socio-cultural conditions involved.

Therefore, we are not zombies with a damaged prefrontal cortex that are unable to communicate. And neither are we beings that do not feel or suffer, whose bodies can be isolated from the mind or the environment. We cannot likewise isolate ourselves from spatial emotions and society, or from the persons affected and the places where emotions occur (Roelvink, 2010). The very relationship and connection between mind and body contributes to the development of new thoughts, through testimony and dialogue between people and cultures, thanks to emotional contagion (affective isomorphism) and collective intelligence (Levy, 2004), as a fundamental anthropological trait that defines us as individual and collective beings. As pointed out by Latour (2004), for a body to be alive in the world, it must be moved by its relationship with the world and learn to be affected by the collective body and sense. This is an affection game which is vital for the generation of creative thinking, language and ideas.

If not construed in this manner, we risk distorting the very nature of governance and the administration of good governance at the service of humanity, as well as that of human heritage and capital of a nation or society, of which both natives and immigrants are a part. We also risk not understanding liberalism as part of Biopolitics (Foucault, 2009), of control not just through ideology but by also controlling the body and the life of human beings. In other words, the exercise of biopower by managing the biological processes of the population, technology, analysis of individuals, their bodies and behaviours, with the intention of producing docile and fragmented bodies.

We therefore face a commercialisation of emotions and appropriation of affections characteristic of emotional capitalism (Illouz, 2007), where economic and emotional discourse is configured mutually and emotional life follows the logic of trade and economic relations, until it reaches a regime of affective domain and government based on the sentimentalisation of public conversation (Arias-Maldonado, 2016). Its application, taken to the extreme, would lead us to misgovernment and tyranny of emotions, instincts and passions like those that fed many of the wars and dictatorships of the past. This is a resource that can also be used in the opposite direction, to justify the rationality of purely technocratic governments, where politics and ideas are hidden under the false pretext of science or technology, as if the study of politics and persuasive communication were done without scientific rigor.

This is the capacity of emotional manipulation of the audiences, reflected nowadays through the neurothriller genre (Pisters, 2014), but already initiated from the TV reality of Trump's "Apprentice", until it reaches the "Trumptastic Voyage" dreamed by Fox and the

Simpson<sup>1</sup> through the White House blond haired candidate and current President, thereby confirming the old saying that reality mimics cinema.

Therefore, we must stay alert, in view of the possibility that the computer will rise against its creators, like in the film *Odyssey* by Kubrick, creating metal souls like those of *Westworld*, *Homunculi* and *Golems* in cinema and even zombies in dreams or nightmares of a Night of the Living Dead of late autumn, November 2016.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0z7\\_JP7ROvA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0z7_JP7ROvA)

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