

Transformations of the Political Communication in Social Media Era – from Mediatization to Decentralization

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Abstract: The political communication in media era performs on two dimensions: the horizontal dimension – between political actors and journalists – and on vertical dimension – the media product is decentralized to the consumer public. In Social Media Era, the horizontal dimension completely disappears and the communication is routed by the online opinion leaders in the social groups. Thus, in the new public space, the main communication actors are not journalists and politicians, but public-receptor, which plays the role of opinion leaders. In Social Media, we can talk a lot about “the power of the receptor”, that is decentralizing, without intermediaries, the political message to discuss it in the social groups to which they belong.

Keywords: political communication; social media; mediatization; decentralization

1. The Concept of Political Communication. Definitions

One of the most renowned researchers of the political communication, Jacques Gerstle, admits that this domain is “*difficult to define, since it relies on concepts already overloaded sense, whose relationship can only be problematic and whose manifestations are multidimensional*” (Gerstle, 2002, p. 21). This confusion about the definition of political communication is closely related to conceptual uncertainty “*about communication, on the one hand and politics on the other, leaving much space for semantic maneuver in action of combining them into action*”. (Gerstle, 2002, p. 21)

However, looking at several reference definitions of the concept of political communication, we have identified a number of keywords found in most definitions, such as “*intention to influence the political broadcasters*” (Denton, Woodward, 1990, p. 11), “*heterogeneity that contribute to its occurrence*” and “*interaction*”. Even so, Camelia Beciu (2009, p. 125) points out that we can not summarize political communication through the prism of “*intentionality*” of the political actor, political “*message*” and the strategies of persuasion. Analyzing this

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field only through these components leads to a partial or speculative understanding of this phenomenon.

Political communication, defined in terms of “intentionality”, was characterized as “an oriented programmed action, projected for certain political purposes” (Beciu, 2000, p. 27). Axford believes that the political message can not be considered as an autonomous object, since it involves the way in which the social and political actors are relating to communication systems or by the exercise of the power. Thus, he defined the political communication as an “*intentional, explicit and implicit of some messages with political, initiated by the actors who are acting under an exercise of power.*” (Browning @ Turner, 2002, p. 416)

In a broader approach, Denton and Woodward (1990, p. 20) pointed out three most important aspects of the intentional character of political communication, as follows: (1) all forms of communication in which political actors undertake in order to accomplish the specific objectives, (2) communication between political actors and apolitical people, category in which we can include voters, journalists etc. (3) referential form of communication in which political actors and their activities are topics of discussion in the media space.

Several authors, among which we can mention Joseph Tuman (2007), Dominique Wolton (1998), Pippa Norris (2000) and others have focused on the definition of the political communication through “interaction”. Thus, Dominique Wolton (Beciu, 2011, p. 227) stated in his book, “Penser in communication”, an interaction field of the political communication between actors and/or institutions with different statutes, as politicians, media outlets and public opinion. Pippa Norris (Beciu, 2011, p. 227) characterizes the political communication process as an interactive one on two levels: vertically (from institutions to citizens) and horizontally (among same tier - politicians and institutions). Joseph S. Tuman, in the definition of political communication, also puts emphasis on the interaction between political actors and the public, describing the political communication as a “*discursive process through which political information is distributed and promote awareness, ignorance, manipulation, consensus, disagreement, action or passivity.*” (Tudor, 2008, p. 29)

According to Camelia Beciu, the political communication involves a “*strategic interaction governed by legal rules, rituals, values, symbols, technologies, organizations, networks and practices*” (Beciu, 2009, p. 126). More than that, the strategy reveals the intentionality and the action of the political communication, the frame of the interaction refers to the relations between politicians, between politicians and the electorate, between politicians and political parties and between politicians and the media. The interaction can be achieved through *performance*, i.e. the science and art of staging the political message (“the political theater”) and through deliberative communication, specific to the democratic practices.

The definition of political communication must take into account the political marketing and the expression of a public agenda. Nevertheless Camelia Beciu states that we can not reduce the political communication only to production and circulation of the political message (speech), to political marketing and to communication campaign (the campaign strategies of political communication and election). In defining the political communication, beyond the discursive and strategic dimension, we must take into account the definition of the institutional or systemic dimension. Camelia Beciu in her book, *Communication and media discourse* (2009, p. 125), describes the institutional dimension in terms of three aspects, as: (1) the typology of the political actors (institutions that they represent - eg. Government, parliament, city halls, local and county councils etc.), (2) the specific of the system of exercising political power (legislative and electoral system, standards of the parties, media activities etc.), (3) public culture (practices and conventions accumulated in time regarding the media and public debating formats, ways of protest and participation in public space, political and national rituals, symbols, value systems etc.).

Robert Entman and Lance Bennett (2001, p. 471) identified two approaches to political communication studies: an approach emphasizes the communication process through which political messages and information are constructed by the political actors and the mass-media (producing political communication) and other approach refers to public reactions to persuasive messages and individual choices (the perception of political communication). If we relate strictly to classical communication or media elements, we find that in the process of production political communication, the focusing is more on building the political messages, the selection and operation of media channels and the identifying or creating a context, in which the political actor's image is growing. On the other hand, the perception of political communication focuses strictly on receptors attitudes, on collecting and centralizing the feedback and on finding some solutions which will optimize an answers both quantitatively and especially qualitatively from the target-audience.

2. Mediatization and Decentralization of the Political Communication

In the context of developing the mass-media, the political communication has experienced significant changes, that can be understood in terms of two dimensions, apparently distinct but interdependent: the horizontal dimension (the mediatization) and the vertical dimension (the decentralization) (Brants & Voltmer, 2011, p. 3). The horizontal dimension refers to the relationship between media outlets institutions and the politicians, as leaders of political communication, and the vertical dimension involves sending the political message from main actors of the political communication - journalists and politicians - to ordinary citizens.

Together, the actors of the two dimensions of the political communication form a triangle through which the political message flows, initially horizontally - between political actors and the media - as a final, the media message will reach decentralized the public consumer. The feedback from the public is reflected in audience for media outlets and in votes for political institutions or politicians (Figure 1).

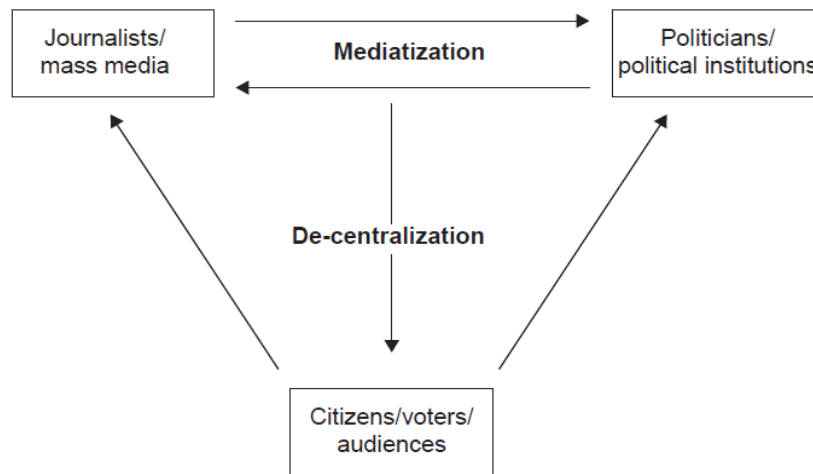


Figure 1. Changes in Political Communication (Brants & Voltmer, 2011, p. 4)

2.1. The Mediatization of the Political Communication

By the horizontal dimension of the political communication we can understand the relationship between the political actors and the journalists, as vectors of the political message. The relationship between the two entities is competitive, but their common goal is to create and disseminate political messages for mass consumption. With other words, the relationship between politicians and the media was characterized by a “high degree of ambivalence that oscillates between complicity and open struggle for power” (Brants & Voltmer, 2011, pp. 3-4). The competition between the two actors involves also negotiating the political agenda, in the sense that journalists want to impose their own media agenda and the political actors are seeking to impose their own agenda.

In the literature there are three different views about the relationship between politicians and journalists to impose political agenda: (1) balanced relationship, (2) media require political agenda and (3) the media are topics defined by the political actors as important for public opinion.

According to Blumler and Gurevitch, as soon as both protagonists of the horizontal dimension use their resources to each other for achieving their goals - politicians and parties need media advertising and the journalists need politicians as authoritative sources of information - they “*shall assumes the balanced power relationship.*” (Brants & Voltmer, 2001, p. 4)

However, some recent studies, among which we can mention Strömbäck Jesper's research from 2008, there are opinions that contradict the assertions of Blumler and Gurevitch, arguing that “*the balance of power is increasingly facing to situations where media have the last control of the public agenda*”. (Strömbäck, 2008, p. 228)

Another opinion about the relationship between journalists and the political actors to set the media agenda is given by “the indexing theory”, presented in 1990 by WL Bennett, in “*Towards a theory of press-state relations in the United States*” (Brants & Voltmer, 2011, p. 4), that the media is following the way in which the government defines political issues that need to be highlighted in the media space.

Different opinions of experts on changes balance of the power between politicians and the media to impose political agenda do not comply with unidirectional model, but are influenced by several factors, namely: the nature of the problem, events that could favor or damage credibility or authority of one of the two entities, changes in institutional power, changes of opinions, using new media and cultural and political context in which the communication is processing.

Moreover, the transition to the third stage of evolution of the political communication is closely linked to the concept of mediation. However, there must be a conceptual separation between “mediation” and “mediatization”, the distinction that was made first in 1999 by Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Winfried Schulz, in “Coverage policy: A challenge for democracy?” (1999, pp. 247-261). While the mediation refers to the simple dissemination of the information through mass media, the mediatization passes at a higher level than the mediation and presents a situation “in which political institutions are depending more and more and are shaped by the media “ (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999, p. 247). Thomas Meyer (2002) even speaks about media power, calling it “mediacracy”, the political process is “colonized” by the media outlets institutions.

2.2. The Decentralization of the Political Communication

The vertical dimension refers to the interaction between the elite political communication - politicians and the media - and ordinary people, playing the role of citizens, voters or audience, as recipients of the political messages coming from political actors and the media. This communication process, conducted vertically, is called decentralization of political communication.

The citizens play an important role in the mechanism of communication, they have the power to question the legitimacy and credibility of the institutional policy and the traditional media outlets institutions and they can influence the communication process from important issues in politicians and media's opinion, to alternative topics, even outside the political sphere. Moreover, a very important aspect which is challenging the political supremacy in the vertical dimension is partial disappearance of the citizen participation in democratic act. Is evidence that the participation in the elections dropped drastically in the world, as it fell and *engagement* of the ordinary people as members of political parties or trade union groups.

However, we can not necessarily sustain that people gave up political information, but that they have migrated to other media, other newly created public spaces. Thus, new forums of public debate emerged in virtual environments, different from the government political processes that attract specific segments of the population.

The new style of communication offered by new public spaces for debate and focusing the communication on an alternative set of problems, helps citizens to receive information that they consider more relevant to their daily lives than the information provided by news reports or even those offered by the political actors. On this aspect, Pippa Norris believes that while the political parties are losing members, a substantial number of citizens, especially the younger generation, is engaged in "*political action on the subject of specific issues, ranging from local concerns to anti-globalization movement*" (Brants & Voltmer, 2011, pp. 8-9). Thus, we find that, whether living in an era of globalization, where spatial and temporal proximity is no longer a decider factor in the communication process, evens so the citizens are still debating in virtual environments, issues concerning them directly, both them and the community they belong to, and less concern with issues on people from other geographical regions, distant or less distant.

Moreover, the political *engagement* has transformed in to political consumption, which can be described as the transfer of citizens' orientations from "*stable ideologies that have values and policies, as coherent packages, to individual problems and pragmatic solutions*". (Brants & Voltmer, 2011, p. 9). In this regard, several researchers, among which we can mention Bennett (2003, p. 137), Lewis, Inthorn and Wahl-Jorgensen (2005) believes that people are seeing the parties more as "*service providers who provide health care, education, public transport etc, but they are no longer attracted of loyalties and passions to long-term*" (Brants, Voltmer, 2011, p. 9). Thus, consumer daily activities (purchasing some products and denialing others) are used by people as models for events targeting political preferences.

Toward with the development of the Internet and online communication, the decentralization of the political communication has intensified, becoming a

powerful tool for mobilization, in which the political events - spontaneous or organized demonstrations - have been initiated in a short period of time and were able to get not only large national, but international. Because its opening, its interactive structure and its flexibility, the Internet has radically changed the position of the public from ordinary final consumers of the political communication to active, creative and vocal citizens. Taking this context into account, Kees Brants and Katrin Voltmeters (2011, p. 9) have assumed that online information and communication, could accelerate the marginalization of institutionalized policy. Thus, it could be possible to create a new model of mediated political communication, "*the communication from the bottom up*", opposite to the mechanism where the elite of media communication - media institutions and political actors – were transmitted, top-down, unidirectional, the message to the consuming public.

Another significant change in the mediated political communication system, in the vertical dimension, was spreading the populism. Thus, the candidates without great chances in election campaigns resorted to populist speeches, extremist rhetoric, emotional appeals and other techniques from the area of populism, designed to fit in to the context of developing a commercial press.

3. Transformations of the Political Communication in Social Media

Along with the development of the Social Media, also the principles of the media communication have changed. If in traditional media the feedback was delayed or absent, the entire communication focusing on "broadcast" or "unidirectional communication", in Social Media Era, the social networks are working on principles such as "social interaction", "multidirectional communication" and "the public impose the media agenda".

Thus, the scheme of communication mediated by the social networks underwent significant changes from the one shown in the so-called "third phase of development of political communication systems" or "postmodernism".

The novelty of this communication mechanism can be described by decentralizing the communication to social groups of online opinion leaders and eliminating the horizontal dimension, in which mass-media and political actors played fundamental roles in disseminating the political message to the public. In Social Media, the message is decentralized from source (political actor's Facebook page) by some ordinary users, which in time become influential leaders in the online environment.

The political message is discussed in social groups of the "online political citizens" (Institute for Politics, Democracy and Internet, 2004, p. 6) and there are created through interpersonal communication, standard opinions, to which each social groups' members will join. After the deliberation of the political message in social

groups, some users choose to become members (fans) of the source message (political actor's Facebook page), and thus the database of the potential users like "online political citizens" (online opinion leaders), who will redistribute political message to still unreached social groups, will increase. (Figure 2)

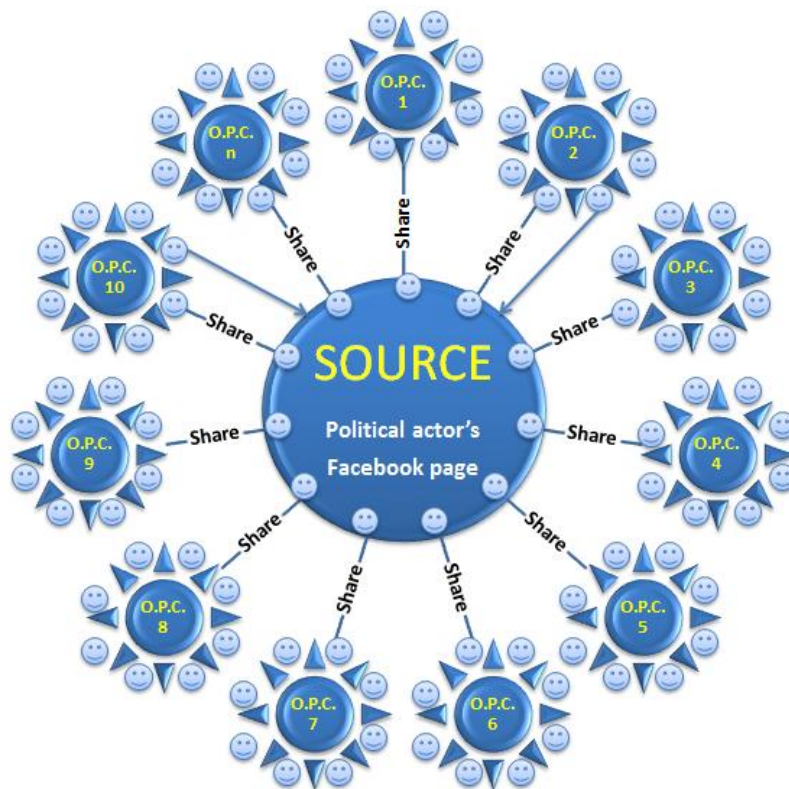


Figure 2. The scheme of decentralized communication in social groups (O.P.C. = Online Political Citizens)

4. Conclusion

The revolution of the political communication mediated by the social networks is given by great power of influence that they have got the regular user, in their role as receptors. If in case of the traditional media, the whole debate was going in the horizontal dimension, the mediatization one, in which the political actors and journalists faced their opinions, to transmit them later, in a decentralized way, to the public, in Social Media, the horizontal dimension completely disappears and the communication is routed by the online opinion leaders in the social groups.

Thus, in the new public space, the main communication actors are not journalists and politicians, but public-receptor, which plays the role of opinion leaders. In Social Media, we can talk a lot about “the power of the receptor”, that is decentralizing, without intermediaries, the political message to discuss it in the social groups to which they belong.

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