

Political Communication Section Mission Statement

Political Communication is indispensable for any social and organisational activity. It is the ligament of community and the nerves of government. It is a constitutive process intrinsic to every form of organisation. It is strategic. No politics can operate without a fair amount of political information, education, explication and occasion for dispute and exchange of views. Political communication can take both direct and mediated forms and, in our mass, technologically embedded societies it most often combines both. We view political communication as a primary human and civil resource in both immediate and mediated formats, semi-mediated or mass-mediated frameworks. And of course we consider that free, open, rich, transparent and contestable political communication is a *sine qua non* for liberal democracies

The scope of what is and what should be considered as *political* varies and changes from place to place, regime to regime or epoch to epoch. In our time, it is undoubtedly subject to further re-definitions. This in its turn, affects what is, and, normatively, what should count as a minimally acceptable, public political communication. This condition puts us also before epistemological, methodological, but also before contestable political issues and challenges.

A still ongoing major power shift is in motion. From power held within the nation-state in political bodies, we are moving towards extra-political power conglomerations and towards transfers of huge power - and even of policy prerogatives - to private corporations moving in the global terrain. In this vein, media baronies and information-know-how owning entities loom large and prevail in a number of formerly political frameworks and fora. In such a time of change and flux political communication faces multiple challenges and requires solid, perceptive and methodologically innovative research that is theoretically informed and empirically sound. In order to grasp and to contribute to the understanding as well as to the facing up of such complex realities clear-cut and far-sighted research agendas as well as concerted research efforts are in demand.

In order to maintain the balance between continuity and change, we need to broaden the scope of political communication research in terms of:

- [a] a wider spectrum of thematic areas to be addressed
- [b] transcending over to interdisciplinary methods
- [c] addressing 'traditional' issues and modes as well as novel forms of political communication.
- [c] examining the impact of the internet, and the new media more broadly, on control and power relations and on the core function of political communication.

Such impact seems to be quite thoroughgoing, if it is not subversive in the long term. Technological changes and the revolution of interactivity change the balance of power in the formerly triangular constellation of political communication: [1] political protagonists [2] journalists and media organisations and [3] the public in the form of 'receivers', in most cases mute and passive. Members of the public can now emerge as 'speakers' and 'users'. This development entails that the potential for reciprocity and for bi-directional exchanges and synapses is raised considerably. The same chain of developments opens the way for system democratisation and for the empowering of citizens. Yet, we must caution attention against either techno-determinist approaches or

techno-utopian ones. Essential changes may only be citizen- and politically led, and this reminds us of the role of social and political agency and of responsibility.

So, along with classical themes such as: communication control, agenda setting, journalistic codes of ethics, standards of conduct for media operators, embedded journalism, bias and propaganda practices, staged news stories, censorship, self-censorship, political advertising, opinion formation and persuasion— e.g. in view of electoral campaigns - and indeed, the ascendance of the ‘opinion poll’ industry, a host of new areas of political communicative activity emerges before us.

Such novel forms hinge around the possibilities for political dialogue in broader, transnational and more inclusive modes, even over the - now digitally re-generated- traditional electronic media, such as television and radio. The proliferation and the diversification of new real and ‘quasi’ public spheres leads to broad new grounds for political debate and new activism. Hence, it is also providing opportunity for research into the ways and on the effects of citizens’ benefiting from feed-back options, or the articulation of demands over new media such as the internet and the web.

In spite of such beneficial potential, research caution is called on certain intensifying challenges to political communication. Phenomena such as [a] the widening trends of commercialisation in mass media contents, [b] the intensification of competition for audiences and [c] for the control of ‘attention’ combine to render formerly worthwhile forms of political communication obsolete or meaningless. In a number of *mediascapes* infotainment tends to take over and even to substitute informative journalism, current affairs and news bulletins of balanced and fair reporting. These phenomena call for research monitoring.

All in all, the research agenda for political communication is both rich and interesting: We may address political message-output by elites, but also, by grass roots, civic communication experiments, movements and manifestations. We may explore both the vertical line of political communication and the horizontal line of it. That is, political communication in a number of novel manifestations via the new media within and across frontiers and communities. We may opt for addressing the institutional - legal frameworks required for the optimal evolution of political communication. We may also need to not neglect examining the political economy of this formidable sector and the constraints thereof for the agency practice of political communication. Finally, as Europeans we must not neglect to focus on trans-European political communication necessities and options; on the still missing pan-European political fora for communicating our common political affairs and addressing our European citizenship.