

On the Path of Change? When Politics Embraces Innovation but Does Not Neglect Tradition

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Abstract

The current digital landscape has radically transformed the dynamics of political communication, necessitating the redefinition of traditional paradigms to adapt to the needs of an increasingly digitally-oriented audience. This research aims to explore the new ways in which political leaders have embraced and leveraged emerging digital platforms, contributing to the rewriting of political narratives and the redefinition of public participation methods. Specifically, it focuses on the emergence of what is commonly referred to as the "permanent election campaign," a phenomenon characterized by a continuous presence and interaction on online channels, resulting in a sort of ongoing political campaign. The analysis centers on the communication strategies adopted by political leaders in this context, examining how these approaches impact public perception, political participation, and the construction of political figures' images in the contemporary digital landscape.

Despite the evident impact and growing importance of digital media in the contemporary political sphere, it is imperative not to underestimate the crucial role that traditional media continues to play in shaping public opinion and fostering civic engagement. Through an interdisciplinary approach that combines communication theories, political science, and cultural studies, this research aims to contribute to the understanding of evolving dynamics in political communication within the digital context and to critically reflect on the long-term implications of such transformation for democracy and political participation.

Keywords: Political Communication, Digital Transformation, Innovation in Politics, Hybrid Communication Strategies, Balancing Tradition and Technology

Introduction

The interactivity and audience participation in media have experienced significant growth with the adaptation to the digital convergence process, as analyzed by Jenkins in his 2006 work. Digital convergence encompasses the set of technologies, platforms, and modes of media content consumption that merge and overlap, breaking down traditional barriers between different forms of communication. In this context, the dynamics of interaction and audience participation have undergone a radical transformation, with significant impacts on the production, distribution, and consumption of media content. The emergence of interactive digital platforms, social media, and online participation tools has allowed the audience to no longer be mere passive consumers but active participants in the communication process. Digital convergence has dismantled traditional barriers between content producers and consumers, creating spaces for more direct and immediate engagement. Collaborative content creation, real-time discussions, and instant sharing have become norms in digital communication. The fundamental implication of this phenomenon is that the audience is no longer relegated to the role of a simple passive receiver of information but becomes a co-creator and active participant in meaning production. This shift has profound consequences for media production, the political sphere, the formation of public opinion, and the nature of social dialogue. The widespread use of social platforms and the audience's sharing of their content over time have raised a series of new ethical and legal issues that require thoughtful consideration and the adoption of new regulations (Battista & Uva, 2023). The analysis of political communication must necessarily start from a fundamental premise—that over time, there has been a process of desacralization. This phenomenon can be understood as a process by which political communication has undergone a substantial transformation, characterized by the reduction of the sacredness traditionally associated with political discourse. This evolution occurred in parallel with the adaptation of political communication to the prevailing standards in the contemporary media system (Battista, 2023a). The desacralization of political communication can be interpreted as a decline in the sacredness and formality that characterized political discourse in earlier times. This decline can be attributed to several factors, including the advent of mass media, the acceleration of information cycles, and the increased media visibility. In this context, politics has progressively abandoned more ritualized and distant forms of communication to adopt a more immediate, accessible, and often informal language (Giansante, 2014; Battista, 2023b). This process is intrinsically linked to the adaptation of political communication to the standards of the contemporary media system.

The dynamics of modern politics are profoundly influenced by the need to capture the audience's attention in a media environment characterized by speed, fragmentation, and information abundance (Cepernich, 2017). This connotation becomes a communicative strategy through which politicians seek to connect more directly with voters (Bentivegna, 2014), often using accessible media channels such as social media. In summary, starting from this concept inherent in the transformation of political communication provides a theoretical framework for understanding the transformation of politics in the contemporary media context. The increasingly profane and informal nature of political communication reflects a response to the dynamics of contemporary society and underscores the importance of constant adaptation by political practitioners to dominant media standards. In light of these reflections, the intention is to provide a significant contribution to understanding the new landscape of political communication, delineated by the dynamic interplay between innovative tools and adaptation to the standards of the contemporary media system. Such understanding is essential to anticipate, analyze, and respond to the challenges that political communication is called to face in the near future. The current context, characterized by the rapid evolution of digital technologies and increasing global interconnection, presents a series of unique challenges for political communication. This evolutionary pivot, as a key element of this new scenario, requires a more informal, accessible, and interactive approach in political communication, as this paradigm shift demands a reassessment of traditional strategies and greater adaptability from political actors..

1. The Most Important Aspects of Contemporary Political Communication

Contemporary political communication is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by the dynamics of the digital age and the constant evolution of communication technologies. This section will explore the most significant aspects of modern political communication, highlighting the challenges and opportunities that have emerged in this complex landscape. It is now more than evident that social media plays a predominant role in today's political communication. In fact, the times when political leaders were indecisive about investing time and resources in these platforms seem distant (Bentivegna, 2014). Online portals such as X, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok provide fertile ground for the dissemination of political messages, enabling politicians to reach voters directly without intermediaries. However, this increased visibility also poses challenges related to information management, privacy, and data security. The personalization of the media experience through algorithms becomes another significant aspect. Algorithms determine what we see online, influencing our opinions and creating potential "filter bubbles" (Barberá, 2020). This personalization raises ethical questions and requires a balance between freedom of choice and the need to expose individuals to different perspectives. Substantially, with the centrality of online communication, we are witnessing the end of the distinction between the ordinary scheduled political cycle and the period of election campaigns, which once represented a surge and acceleration in communication. A constant intertwining is established, and communicative dynamics resemble an uninterrupted campaign, where the time of elections embraces and surpasses that of current politics, persisting. It is evident that online political communication, understood in this sense, aims at gaining consensus. We observe not only the "spectacularization" of political information but also the prevalence of the "need to communicate" with the public regarding the well-thought-out drafting of programs, seeking approval in terms of votes. Another aspect not to be underestimated lies in the fact that online political communication is managed and organized by the Media management system and the new figures of influencers and professional Spin Doctors (spindoctoring) operating in news management. This ranges from the proactivity of techniques to the more extreme forms of public opinion control. These now codified and sophisticated techniques aim to ensure maximum visibility to political figures or groups, even through language simplification and message popularization. Furthermore, a set of rules celebrates what is called the aestheticization of politics, not of its content but of its actors. The ongoing process in political communication transforms the professional politician into a media character, taking care of the telegenic aspect and appeal like a showbiz celebrity in an increasingly popular version (Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009; Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2019). This trend has inevitably led to new forms of communication, branding, and political marketing. In other words, it is about the identification between the candidate and the product, or better yet: the product is the candidate, adopting the same market logic and aiming to direct sales towards the product. It essentially represents the communicative strategy of "selling" a product (the politician), gaining consensus, visibility, and legitimacy, based on the "disintermediation" of political communication. The latter is oriented toward the direct relationship between the political subject and the citizen, the potential voter, without the "filter" of party affiliation or an established institutional reality. Political marketing becomes electoral marketing coinciding with electoral rounds, even though, as mentioned, the perception of the "permanent campaign" surpasses the distinction between political marketing and electoral marketing. It follows that the use of social media has become an indispensable necessity for any form of communication and relationship. It is an essential link to create an immediate connection between the customer and the seller, the influencer and the follower, and even between the "demand and supply." Moreover, political communication has inevitably adapted to the logics of branding and political-electoral marketing. Social media offers a dynamic and interactive platform that allows for direct and instantaneous communication. This digital environment has transformed how political actors present themselves to the public and interact with voters. The strategic use of social media enables reaching a broad audience, shaping public image, and engaging users directly.

In the context of political communication, approaching the logics of branding and political-electoral marketing implies special care in the image of the politician or party. Building an authentic and engaging online presence becomes crucial to positively influence public opinion. The tools offered by social media allow conveying messages, presenting programs, and engaging voters more directly and effectively than traditional forms of political communication. In summary, the use of social media has become a key element for communication in various contexts, including politics. Their ubiquity and the ability to create immediate connections have transformed how we interact, communicate, and participate in public discourse. It should be noted at this point that different strategies are employed to achieve the set objectives in the context of communication. First and foremost, the target audience to whom the information is intended is defined, followed by planning on how to capture attention, increase appreciation, and potentially gain consensus. A primary role in this process is played by sponsorship, outlined according to specific criteria such as age, gender, interests, consumption, and geographical area. Targeting, including microtargeting with audience segmentation, along with the study of contextualized data, represents fundamental steps to ensure the best result and broaden the audience of followers or sympathizers. In the context of the "Global Village" we live in, the dichotomy between "medium" and "message" - a concept prophesied by the Canadian sociologist Marshall McLuhan with the famous statement "The medium is the message" - has become the predominant challenge of communication, with the medium's preeminence over the message. The Social Media manager is tasked with processing information and news concisely, instantly, and captivatingly. Long texts are replaced by images and videos or synthesized into a few characters. Keywords, hashtags, and tags become the most understandable language for a wide and varied range of viewers. In a landscape where communication is evolving rapidly, the ability to adapt to these dynamics and effectively leverage means of communication becomes crucial. The Social Media manager must balance the use of new technologies with the ability to convey clear and persuasive messages, always keeping in mind the importance of the medium in conveying the message itself.

2. The Transformation of Political Communication in the Digital Age Is Not Completed: Various Cases in Comparison.

The evolution of the digital landscape has compelled political leaders to reassess and adapt their communication strategies to maintain direct contact with the public. In this context, the use of emerging digital platforms has become crucial. Political leaders, once confined to official speeches and press conferences, have now transformed into active online figures. An analysis of online communication tactics reveals a wide spectrum of approaches, ranging from the creative use of multimedia content to active participation in online debates. The adoption of platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram has allowed politicians to reach their audience directly, bypassing traditional media channels. Some have experimented with innovative formats, such as live broadcasts and interactive question-and-answer sessions, creating a more authentic and accessible image. It is particularly interesting to observe how political leaders use digital platforms to shape political narratives, establish emotional connections with voters, and influence public opinion in the context of an always-on society (Susca, 2022). Indeed, the ambiguity between online and offline spaces has become increasingly blurred in contemporary society (Boccia Artieri, 2012). Many people now experience a reality where online and offline experiences intricately intersect, making it challenging to delineate clear boundaries between these two worlds (Floridi, 2014). The growing ubiquity of internet connectivity and the pervasiveness of digital devices have integrated the online dimension into everyday life, influencing communication, personal relationships, and the perception of time. The entry of digitalization into the political sphere has revolutionized how world leaders engage with the public through innovative use of digital platforms. A paradigmatic example of this transformation is former U.S. President Barack Obama during his 2008 election campaign. At that time, Obama remarkably capitalized on digital tools, especially Facebook and Twitter, to mobilize a broad base of young voters. Through his dynamic online presence, Obama transformed his image from a simple candidate to an icon of progress and innovation. His campaign demonstrated that digitalization was not just a communication tool but also a powerful means to directly engage voters, especially the youth, in ways previously unthinkable. One innovative action implemented by Obama was the effective use of online fundraising campaigns. Through his website and email, he encouraged supporters to make small donations, contributing to the creation of a large and diversified financial base. This strategy showed that political campaigns could effectively raise funds through online micro-donations. Moreover, Obama launched an interactive platform called "My.BarackObama.com," serving as an online hub for volunteer mobilization. Supporters could organize local events, participate in discussions, and collaborate on volunteer projects. This initiative demonstrated how technology could be used to create a virtual community of engaged supporters, constantly involved in live broadcasts and interactive videos. Similarly, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau emerged as a global leader who innovatively embraced digital strategies to communicate with the public. His consistent and active presence on social media significantly reshaped how politicians engage with voters. Trudeau maintained a vibrant presence on various social platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. His regular activity allowed for direct connections with the public, sharing updates on political activities, government initiatives, and more personal aspects of his life, creating an image of transparency and authenticity in line with the "politicization of the public figure" concept (Codeluppi, 2007).

Trudeau also used his digital platform to support social causes and promote charitable initiatives. Sharing content related to social issues contributed to portraying him as a leader committed and sensitive to society's concerns, gaining consensus and support from various segments of the population. In essence, he demonstrated how the strategic use of digital platforms can significantly contribute to consolidating public support, transparency, and effectiveness in political communication. Trudeau's digital leadership positioned Canada as an example of how politicians can capitalize on the opportunities offered by the digital revolution to connect more deeply with voters. Importantly, during his political campaigns, Trudeau adopted a "door-to-door" strategy as a central element to reach voters directly and personally. This traditional tactic, integrated with modern and digital approaches, played a key role in building his image as a leader close to the people and engaged in dialogue with the citizenry. His campaign was characterized by physical presence in local communities, visiting homes, neighborhoods, and cities, establishing direct contact with voters. This proximity created a sense of closeness and allowed citizens to express their concerns and expectations directly to the leader. In addition, during his visits, Trudeau did not limit himself to a unilateral approach but promoted active dialogue with voters. He listened to their concerns, answered questions, and discussed local issues. This direct exchange contributed to creating an emotional connection and demonstrating authentic commitment to the community's needs. It allowed personalizing his message based on the specific needs and interests of each voter. This customization contributed to making individuals feel heard and showed a specific commitment to addressing local issues. Trudeau thus integrated digital approaches into the "door-to-door" campaign. Activists had electronic devices to collect real-time data, allowing more efficient management of information gathered during visits. This combination of traditional and modern strategies contributed to a more synergistic and coordinated campaign. This strategy was not only aimed at collecting votes but had a lasting impact on the electorate's perception. It helped build an image of Trudeau as an accessible, committed leader interested in citizens' daily concerns and embodied a humanized approach to politics. It demonstrated that even in a digital era, direct contact with voters remains a powerful element for building meaningful connections and gaining public approval. In France, Emmanuel Macron redefined the European political landscape through the implementation of an innovative digital strategy, with the political movement "En Marche!" as its central focus. His skillful management of digital tools has contributed to changing the way politics is communicated and shared, demonstrating how a well-orchestrated digital strategy can be crucial in catalyzing popular consensus. Macron founded the "En Marche!" movement with the aim of presenting a political alternative and attracting a broad spectrum of voters. The driving force behind this movement was its online presence, offering a digital platform where citizens could actively participate, share ideas, and contribute to policy formation. Understanding the importance of a marked and continuous online presence, through the use of various platforms including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, Macron maintained constant communication with the public. He shared regular updates, speeches, and behind-the-scenes moments, creating a direct and authentic relationship with voters. One key to Macron's success was the direct engagement of voters through digital platforms. He encouraged active participation, seeking feedback, answering questions, and fostering online discussions. This direct interaction transformed politics from a distant process into a continuous and bidirectional dialogue. Moreover, he shared engaging videos, interviews, and live broadcasts, providing citizens with a more intimate perspective of his leadership (Stanyer, 2013). This approach helped create a visual narrative that went beyond traditional political speeches. Macron's digital strategy involved online thematic campaigns, focusing on issues relevant to the electorate. He used hashtags and viral initiatives to mobilize support around specific themes, harnessing the power of social networks to spread his message. By using a series of strategic hashtags during his campaign and presidency, each aimed at emphasizing specific themes, he promoted initiatives and connected with his audience in different ways. In addition to the emblematic #Ensemble, embodying the idea of unity and collaboration, there are other significant hashtags used. During the "Grand Débat National" (the Grand National Debate), a series of public discussions organized in response to the yellow vests protests, the hashtag #GrandDebatNational was used to encourage participation and provide an online space for discussion on key issues. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the adopted economic measures, Macron used #PlanDeRelance to share details about the economic recovery plan and engage the population in discussing proposed solutions. With #ConventionLaREM, used for conventions organized by the La République En Marche! (LaREM) party, he involved party members and the public in debates and key decisions. Each of these hashtags was designed to amplify key messages, connect online communities, and provide an effective way to monitor and participate in ongoing political conversations. The targeted use of hashtags helped create a coherent and engaging narrative around Emmanuel Macron's leadership. In contrast, former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro adopted an unprecedented strategy in the use of social media, especially Twitter, to build and maintain a direct connection with his electorate. This strategy redefined how politicians communicate in Brazil, demonstrating how it is possible to bypass traditional media channels and establish an immediate dialogue with the public. Bolsonaro leveraged Twitter to communicate instantly with millions of followers. This platform allowed him to post statements, respond to criticisms, and share real-time updates, bypassing the timelines and filters associated with traditional media. Using social media, Bolsonaro sought to project an image of transparency and accessibility. He shared details of his agenda, policies, and personal opinions, offering citizens direct access to the president's activities and reflections.

Furthermore, one of the most distinctive aspects of his strategy was the ability to respond directly to criticism through Twitter. He used the platform to counterattack journalists, political opponents, and critics, turning Twitter into an open and often controversial space for confrontation. Unlike Macron, the former Brazilian president adopted the use of hashtags and symbols to create a distinctive online identity, thus cementing the bond with his supporters. These elements became recognizable brands associated with his government and initiatives, contributing to consolidating the presidential image in the digital realm. This innovative approach demonstrated how social media can be used not only as communication tools but also as vehicles for direct engagement and political mobilization. However, it has also raised questions about polarization and information management in such an open and immediate context. His digital strategy remains a significant case study in the global political landscape. Online activity plays a fundamental role in contemporary political communication. In an era where digital presence is increasingly ubiquitous, those who neglect online dynamics risk losing crucial opportunities to connect with the public and actively participate in public discourse. The lack of an effective online presence can indeed make a politician or political organization seem to "not exist" in the digital arena. The strategic use of social media, blogs, websites, and other online platforms allows politicians to reach a broad audience, share their vision, respond to criticisms, and mobilize supporters. Online communication provides an immediate and direct channel of interaction, allowing the shaping of public image, dissemination of key messages, and maintaining constant engagement with the electorate. In summary, while it is essential to recognize the importance of offline activities, we cannot ignore the fact that the lack of an effective online presence could significantly limit the impact of a politician or political movement in the public arena (Battista, 2023c). The challenge lies in skillfully balancing both aspects, acknowledging the value of direct human interactions but leveraging the immense opportunities offered by digital communication.

3. Conclusion

In the face of this revolution, unresolved questions emerge as warning bells, bringing with them the difficulty in interpreting their implications. The series of changes triggered by this digital transformation could have a significant impact on the functioning of democracy itself. While current reality seems to have reduced aversion to new means of communication, an open issue persists regarding the relationship between media consumption and civic engagement. In other words, the crucial question arises: does politics, as represented through the spectacularized communication of politicians, primarily aim to generate interest, attraction, and active participation of citizens? Or does the pop culture of politics entertain without informing, solicit emotions but not necessarily translate into concrete civic engagement? The challenge facing politicians is to find the right balance between the use of innovative technological tools and the provision of quality content capable of informing, engaging, and educating the public. The central issue is whether the current spectacularization of politics, fueled by digital media, is effectively contributing to a more participatory and informed democracy, or if it is turning into a form of entertainment that risks alienating the public from the substance of political issues. In an era where public attention is fragmented, and the competition to capture interest is fierce, the responsibility of politicians is to navigate this new media landscape wisely, ensuring that political communication does not sacrifice depth for form. What emerges is that despite the ever-growing importance of online activity in political communication, it is crucial to emphasize the impact and relevance of offline interactions. A illuminating example of this perspective emerged during Justin Trudeau's leadership in Canada. While Trudeau significantly embraced digital dynamics to reach the public, it is important to note that he did not neglect the value of face-to-face interactions and offline activities. Trudeau recognized that, despite the digital age, direct contact with voters through "door-to-door" and other offline means remains intrinsically relevant. This approach allowed for deeper connections with voters, overcoming the limitations of digital communication. Direct interaction, in-person discussions, and participation in local events contributed to building a more authentic and tangible relationship with the community, highlighting the importance of a balanced approach that embraces both the online and offline worlds in political communication. Ultimately, the lesson from Trudeau is that, while embracing the digital age, we should not overlook the potential of human connections and traditional dynamics in building lasting political bonds. The universal challenge for politicians is to recognize the complementarity between traditional and digital means. A holistic approach that integrates both communication modes can maximize impact and ensure that the political message reaches the widest and most diverse audience possible. Ignoring traditional means could result in a loss of opportunities to communicate with specific segments of society and reduce the diversity of perspectives involved in public discourse. In conclusion, wisdom lies in finding a dynamic balance between tradition and innovation in political communication.

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