Institutional public communication: function, models and professions in evolution. An analysis of the Italian context

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Abstract

The article begins with a definition of public communication as "institutional public communication". It's a definition that reaffirm this specific disciplinary and professional communication field in a context characterized by the intensive digitalization and a hybrid and convergent media ecosystem. Considering the principal contributions present in the national and international literature of the last 30 years, the article presents the evolutionary stages of institutional public communication in Italy with references to the prevailing communication models in each one. The conclusions discuss the new challenges and professional prospects which are at the heart of the debate on the Italian future of public sector communication, but which could be extended to other national contexts.

Keywords: Institutional public communication, social media, public sector communicators, social media manager, professionalization.

Introduction

In this article a definition of "institutional public communication" is proposed which is considered appropriate to reaffirm this specific disciplinary and professional communication field, in a historical moment characterized by particular socio-political turmoil and by an increasingly hybrid and convergent media ecosystem. This definition makes treasures of the most important contributions present in the Italian and international literature of the last 30 years.

This approach retraces the main evolutionary stages of institutional public communication in Italy with references to the prevailing communication models in each phase.

The conclusion offers an opportunity to discuss the evolving requirements and potential future directions in this field, with a specific focus on the importance of professionalization.

1.   Boundaries and definition of "institutional public communication" in the digital era

Public communication has been recognized at the European level and, in particular, by some French, Belgian, and Italian scholars as a specific discipline and professional field since the early 1990s.

Taking into account the various definitions proposed in the scientific literature over time, as well as the different international perspectives (just think about the possible different meanings of "public communication" in the scholar debate), it would be appropriate to use the expression "institutional public communication." There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the adjective "public" is traditionally used

by professionals (public communicators) and by French and Italian scholars who, since the early 1990s, have shared the view that the themes and purposes of this communication field concern the general interest and the whole community (Arena, 1995; Bessières, 2018; Faccioli, 2000; Rolando, 2004; Rovinetti, 2002, 2010; Zèmor, 1995).

Furthermore, it is public communication because it is promoted by entities and organizations that belong to the public sector, specifically the Public Administration. These entities and organizations engage in communication as actors in the increasingly fragmented, hybrid, and interconnected public sphere which evolves alongside the media ecosystem and transformation of society (Jenkins *et al*., 2013; Van Dijck *et al.*, 2019).

Lastly, the adjective "public" refers to the relationship between the public sector organizations and different internal, external, or boundary audiences (e.g., collaborators and consultants). Managing these relationships falls within the realm of public relations.

In addition to the adjective "public," we believe it is appropriate to add the term "institutional" to better specify that we are referring to communication carried out by institutions, namely organizations within the public sector, and specifically public administrations. This is what Canel and Luoma-aho (2019) define as public sector communication.

This clarification also aims to highlight the specificity of this field of study and professional field compared to political communication (Bessières, 2018, 2019; Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019; Gardère and Bessières 2020; Zémor 2008), from which it distinguishes itself in terms of different purposes and operations. The purposes are purely institutional and correspond to a service-oriented culture based on impartiality and inclusivity, as opposed to political purposes oriented towards persuasion and electoral consensus, which characterize political communication by its nature as "partisan."

Of course it's important to aware that there are many common aspects, not to mention contiguities and, in some cases, even overlaps between institutional public communication and political communication. For example, the hybridization between the two types of communication found in communication about public policies, which is even more evident in today's new digital and social media environments.

In this context it is possible to define what can now be considered institutional public communication as: "the complex, strategic, and integrated communication activities concerning public goods, public rights, and issues of general interest by organizations in the public sector, through the use of information and relationship strategies and tools with citizens, the media, and other stakeholders, based on impartiality and inclusivity, to promote participation in democratic life, build and nurture trust, in the interest of the community".

Institutional public communication in this sense contributes to ensuring that the Public Administration respects and protects citizens' rights to maximum transparency,

access, listening, and participation in the life of the administrations, facilitating the pursuit of what Canel and Luoma-aho (2019) define as intangible assets of the public sector, such as reputation, trust, social capital, and engagement. These intangible assets help public sector organizations become resilient, antifragile, and communication plays a strategic role in the relationships between administrations and citizens, especially in times of crisis, in turbulent and uncertain contexts (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019; Lovari *et al*., 2020).

This definition revitalizes key concepts of modernization and innovation in public administration, such as participation, transparency, simplification, and access (Faccioli, 2000), within a different and technologically advanced socio-technical context (Ducci *et al*., 2020).

To fully comprehend this vision of institutional public communication, it is essential to examine its evolutionary trajectory over time and, most importantly, the transformations and challenges it has faced in the past 15 years. During this period, there has been a widespread adoption of digital media by public administrations to inform and to engage with citizens.

The Italian case study has particular significance in this context. Indeed, Italy stands out as one of the few countries in Europe that has implemented specific legislation on this matter. In recent years, there have been proposed updates to the legislation, including efforts to professionalize the sector.

2. Six-stages evolution and models of institutional public communication in Italy

To understand the evolution that institutional public communication has undergone in Italy, as suggested by several authors (Ducci *et al.*, 2020; Lovari and Ducci, 2022), it is essential to consider at least three fundamental aspects or processes: a) the modernization and innovation of the public sector, meaning the main reforms that have impacted the Italian public administration over time; b) the evolution of regulations that directly (specifically) or indirectly govern the function of communication in institutions and express their level of institutionalization; c) the models of public communication proposed in literature and the approaches characterizing the communicative practices of professionals (i.e., public communicators). These models and approaches are an expression of the culture present within institutions regarding how to understand and manage the relationship with citizens, mass media and internal audiences in different historical phases (Ducci *et al*., 2021; Massa *et al.*, 2022). Based on these criteria, six main stages can be identified, which we report in this article (Lovari and Ducci, 2022).

2.1.   The first three historical stages: from denied information to the two-way model of public communication

The first stage is the so-called "denied information" stage, which covers the period from the birth of the Italian Republic (1946) until the late 1960s. This period is characterized by the persistence of official secrecy in the public sector, and what the public administration communicates to citizens is filtered and often managed using propagandistic methods. The prevailing view of institutional communication reflects a public system that is largely closed off from its operating environment, characterized by a weberian bureaucratic apparatus (Weber, 1904-1905) that is particularly complex in the Italian context. According to an approach based on denied information and propaganda, the relationship between the state and citizens is understood as strongly asymmetric, and the prevalent communicative model is characterized by a lack of messages or at least a top down transmission of information (Grunig and Hunt, 1984).

The second stage spans from the early 1970s, when administrative decentralization intensified with the creation of Regions, until the early 1990s. This stage sees the emergence of a "one-way public information model" (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). With the development of the welfare state, there is an increase in the provision of services by the State, which necessitates greater information dissemination to citizens in order to make them aware of the activities of institutions, existing regulations, and provided services. In the early 1980s, the mass media system (with the emergence of private radios and televisions) and advertising significantly intensified the production of contents related to public administrations and the public interest in general. External actors, primarily information professionals, disseminate information about the work of administrations and topics of collective interest. Institutions started to enhance their overall information system to gain greater visibility in an increasingly complex and articulated public sphere (Faccioli, 2000; Grandi, 2007; Mancini, 2002; Rovinetti, 1994; Sorrentino, 2008). Indeed, many public administrations spontaneously create the first press offices to manage relationships with the media, and they increasingly adopt advertising as a mean of conducting campaigns for public information. The "one-way information" model, based on the dissemination of institutional information and messages unidirectionally from the public administration to citizens, continues throughout the second stage. Towards the end of the 1990s, we faced a new process affirming concepts of information, transparency, and publicity of institutional action, as well as fostering citizen participation and engagement in public policies and civic life.

In a scenario marked by a serious scandal that affected the Italian political system (known as Tangentopoli or Clean Hands, which emerged in 1992) and caused a profound crisis of legitimacy in the institutions, a public communication process was initiated to restore credibility and recognition to the State and to give voice to citizens regarding policies and public services.

1990 is called "the year of the 'big bang' of administrative reform" (Sepe, 2010). With two laws, the right of citizens to be informed was established, transforming into a duty of public administrations to provide information to population (Rovinetti, 2002) (Law No. 142 of 1990 on the Organization of Local Autonomies), and the traditional official secrecy is definitively abolished, establishing the obligation of transparency in institutional actions and the right of access to administrative documents (Law No. 241 of 1990 on Administrative Procedures and the Right of Access to Administrative Documents, also known as the "law on administrative transparency").

Subsequently, a third phase started, which spans the entire 1990s, during which public communication is recognized as an autonomous discipline and professional activity, and the ideal model to strive for is considered to be two-way communication (Grunig, 2009). This period is a phase of experimentation and professionalization for practitioners (Faccioli, 2013) in which public communication develops alongside a significant process of modernization of the Italian public sector. This path was based on an increasing redesign of the organizational charts of institutions, and some national regulations provided for the adoption of specific tools to enhance transparency, publicity, communication, and access (Rolando, 2014). In particular, in 1993 (with Legislative Decree No. 29), URPs (Offices for Public Relations) were created and established. These are mandatory communication structures to ensure the proper functioning of public sector communication, which ensures knowledge of norms and institutional activities, but also allows for citizen engagement, listening and monitoring the satisfaction level with services, and identifying their needs to design better services focused on citizens and not only on organizations. Thus, communication is recognized as a fundamental tool for fostering transparency and favouring simplification of the public administration's processes and practices, increasingly linked to the growing digitalization and the initiation of e-government and e-democracy processes.

Despite the theoretical and normative efforts made, and the significant presence of innovative practices characterized by the activation of the first two-way channels (i.e. websites, call centers), a significant portion of public administrations still tend to implement one-way modalities and limit the possibilities of openness and dialogue with citizens and strategic publics. Unfortunately, the mandatory URP structure established by law (Legislative Decree No. 29/93) was mainly employed as an information desk or complaints office rather than a communication and a strategic listening hub.

2.2.   From Two-Way Communication to Relational Model

The fourth phase coincides with the early years of the new millennium, characterized by a real institutionalization of public sector communication, with the adoption of dedicated legislation, its implementation (although sporadic across the country), and the initiation of a significant public sector reform based on new measurement and

evaluation criteria to respond to a managerial culture process that involved the country. This process unfolds in a media system still characterized by Web 1.0 technologies, but with the fast beginnings of experimentations related to Web 2.0 platforms (i.e. blogs and then social networking sites).

In year 2000, a framework law on information and communication activities of public sector organizations (Law No. 150) was approved, which is still valid today. With this law, unique in the European scenario (Rovinetti, 2002), communication is not only legitimized as a strategic function within the public administration but becomes an institutional obligation and is recognized as a fundamental, constant, and no longer episodic activity. The right of citizens is concretely transformed into a duty of public sector organizations to communicate. The relevance of the law is enriched by two subsequent normative texts. The innovative potential of the law lies in recognizing communication as a specialized and widespread function of public administrations (Arena, 2001). The norm highlighted the two main areas in which communication operates, the external and internal dimensions, and the need for an inseparable connection between them; it values the specific skills necessary to manage communication activities and tools and assigns a central role to training's activities. It clearly distinguishes between information and communication activities, dividing them into distinct areas: towards the media (information and media relations), towards citizens (external communication), and towards employees (internal communication). Additionally, a series of channels and tools through which communication can be planned and managed are listed in the law (Art. 2), thus opening the way to an extensive interpretation of the communicative mix available to administrations.

A fundamental part of the Law No. 150 concerns the structures for institutional communication and the fundamental role attributed to digital technologies. The press office (Art. 9) and URP (Office for Public Relations) (Art. 8) have been identified as the key structures of the entire institutional communication system, as they are responsible for organizing and managing information activities for the former and communication activities for the latter. Specific professional figures are provided for both (Head of the press office and press officer for the Media Relation Office; Head of the communication structure, Officer for public relations and documentalist for the URP), emphasizing the importance of qualified training and the possession of specific universities' degrees. The law also urges public administrations to take care of external and internal communication, according to an integrated communication approach, and it distinguishes between political and institutional communication, assigning political-institutional information activities (partisan) to the Spokesperson's Office (Art. 7) - and attributing purely institutional information activities (apolitical, non-partisan) to the press office (Ducci *et al.*, 2020; Rovinetti, 2010). External communication activities and, for the first time, internal communication activities are expanded and assigned to the URP as well as similar structures such as citizen service desks, unified public administration service desks, multifunctional desks, and business service desks (Art. 8).

It can be said that with the adoption of Law 150/2000, the Italian public sector showed, at least formally, a certain level of awareness of being a "relational" actor in the public sphere. It has initiated a process of reflexivity (Giddens, 1990) in terms of understanding the relationship with citizens, placing them at the center of their activities, with a perspective of greater communicative symmetry. In this sense, the communication model to refer to is not only two-way but also "relational" (Ducci, 2017; Watzlawick *et al.*, 1967).

Unfortunately, the recognition and valorization of the professions involved were not fully achieved in the following years, and Law 150 is not still properly applied in all country. In general, there is a significant development of public communication culture, which unfortunately is not homogeneous across different central and peripheral administrations in the country. At the territorial level, there are cases of excellence, but also contexts where the law is poorly applied and communication not strategically implemented (Ducci, 2017; Faccioli, 2013; Lovari, 2013; Materassi, 2017; Rolando, 2014; Solito, 2014).

Around 2009, new measures were adopted to reform the Italian public sector, focusing on measurement and evaluation criteria and introducing a vision of the public sector organization as a reality oriented towards achieving performance goals (Faccioli, 2013). Simultaneously, the digitization of services and administrative processes increased, inevitably impacting public communication activities and daily practices. Unfortunately, in this new attempt to modernize public administrations, the role of public institutional communication no longer seems to be a central topic in the public debate (Ducci *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, several public communicators risked not being sufficiently involved in the digital innovation process intensified in the Italian public sector due to the trigger of European digitization projects (Lovari, 2013).

2.3. The model of relational, conversational, and shared communication in the era of social media (fifth phase)

With the revolution brought about by Web 2.0, a fifth phase began in 2009, characterized by the penetration of social and participatory media, as well as the launch of open data and open government programs at national level. The communication needs of public administrations increased significantly with the growth of available digital communication tools and platforms. The need for visibility and citizen engagement within administrations growed (Ducci, 2017; Faccioli, 2016; Lovari, 2017; Materassi, 2017), leading to a public communication "overflowing" from traditional organizational boundaries and becoming increasingly "ubiquitous" (Solito, 2014, 2018) within and outside institutions.

In an increasingly hybrid and convergent media ecosystem (Jenkins *et al.*, 2013), the possibilities for self-produced communication flows by public administrations has increased. Digital communication interfaces has allowed public administrations

to reach and engage in conversation with citizens, fostering greater proximity. Institutional websites represented the focal point of online public communication, supplemented by the opening of official channels and pages on social media (i.e. mostly Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter) and the use of web 2.0 applications and instant messaging platforms (such as WhatsApp and Messanger) (Lovari and Piredda, 2017). This process has involved digital PR activities that enable continuous listening and constructive relationships with citizens in these new digital environments.

With the same digital channels, public administration started also communicating with mass media and the new opinion leaders in the social web (bloggers and digital influencers), expanding the scope and impact of media relations. At the same time, journalists and media in general have more tools and possibilities to act as a "watchdog" for the activities carried out by public administrations, being able to monitor, frame and comment on the content produced by institutions on digital platforms (Entman, 2008). In addition to the mass media, every citizen connected on the Web can generate and share online content related to public sector organizations and their services. This shift requires public administration to have monitoring and control capabilities that are much higher than in the previous phase, thus impacting on organizational routines and practices.

As a result, a greater culture of digital public communication is spreading in Italian public administration. Although there is still a prevailing unidirectional use of social media platforms, there is an increasing number of significant cases where relational and participatory modes are adopted, aimed at effective citizen engagement (Ducci *et al.*, 2019; Lovari, 2017; Materassi, 2017; Solito, 2016, 2018).

However, the fluidity of the new communication processes is not always easily managed by public communication professionals who often face difficulties in coordinating various offline and online communication activities (Ducci, 2016) and in identifying specific responsibilities and competencies within administrations (Ducci and Lovari, 2021; Lovari and Ducci, 2022).

Furthermore, in the last years of this phase, a new regulatory framework for public sector reform in Italy (from 2015 to 2018) introduced the concept of total transparency, which is broader than the one approved in 1990. This includes the generalized civic access related to the introduction of the Italian Freedom of Information Act (called FOIA), in a perspective of open government. This path presents new challenges for institutional public communication and brings back the strategic role of communication in promoting transparency and public accountability.

The model of relational public communication in this phase can be defined as "conversational" (Lovari, 2013, 2017) and "shared" (Ducci, 2017), considering the potential for increased interactions, dialogue, and content sharing between institutions and citizens in these new digital environments.

In this phase, there is also a new reflection on how all of these changes require an increase in digital public communication's skills and the use of new resources (such as new professional roles, including social media managers, videomakers and digital

specialists). A lively debate among public communicators ignites, a debate which is still ongoing. Alongside associations like Compubblica (identified as the only authorized associational entity to recognize training credits for public communicators, according to Law No. 4/2013), a new association called PASocial emerges, aiming to promote the growth of skills and professional figures dedicated to managing social media communication and, more broadly, digital communication within Italian public sector organizations.

Furthermore, this fifth phase concludes with a further recognition in 2017-2018 of specific professional profiles, as explicitly stated in the new National Collective Labor Agreement (CCNL) and in various levels of the public sector: a) Local Functions, b) Central Functions, c) Health, d) Education and Research. The reference profiles are indicated as follows: for communication area, the specialist in institutional communication; for the information area, the specialist in media relations and the public journalist (the requirements to perform these roles remain valid under Legislative Decree No. 422/2001, related to the framework law No. 150/2000).

3. A pluridirectional and multilevel model for institutional public communication to face contemporary challenges

The contemporary phase is complex and marked by a progressive loss of trust in institutions (Edelman, 2018) and numerous crises and turbulences of a social, economic, and political nature that have had, and continue to have, a significant impact on public institutional communication both at a national and international level.

A key moment was undoubtedly the "Facebook-Cambridge Analytica" scandal in 2018, which brought to the attention of the media and the public the pervasive and manipulative role of digital platforms in public discourse, with significant impacts on social and political life at national and international levels. This turbulence, highlighted by research activities on the American presidential elections (2017, 2021) and the European Parliament elections (2019), as well as the referendum on the so-called "Brexit" in the United Kingdom (2016), is accompanied by an awareness of the presence of toxicity and detrimental practices in digital spaces. For example, the role of "trolls," online users often aggregated, anonymous, and automated (bots) who hinder public discussions by sending provocative, irritating, offensive, or off-topic messages. The so-called "troll farms" begin to demonstrate their role by interfering with decision-making processes, shaping public opinion, and creating strong polarizations on numerous topics of public debate online (such as vaccinations, migration, climate change, elections, basic income, etc.). All of this inevitably has repercussions on the quality of democratic processes, often accompanied by phenomena of incivility (Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri, 2019) and the emergence of partisanship mechanisms

and communicative hate campaigns towards opposing groups, treated publicly as enemies.

The power of digital platforms to activate or limit the visibility of information of general interest, the non-transparent management of data and the algorithms connected to them (Boccia Artieri and Marinelli, 2018), as well as the development of toxic communicative practices in the spaces of the social web, will further demonstrate their effects with the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, leading the World Health Organization to declare the Covid-19 pandemic on March 11, 2020. This pandemic will be accompanied by the emergence of "fake news" as a public problem. In fact, alongside the health crisis, a communication crisis will develop, linked to processes defined as an "infodemic," which is a condition of "an overabundance of information - some accurate and some not - that makes it difficult for people to find reliable sources and guidance when they need it" (PAHO 2020). The spread of false and manipulative news during the different phases of the pandemic crisis (2020-2022) and the effects caused by these practices on citizens' trust (Edelman, 2021) and the quality of contemporary communicative ecologies will prompt governments and public administrations to take specific initiatives in digital spaces to combat these phenomena, which have also been observed in the recent Russo-Ukrainian conflict (Lovari and Belluati, 2023).

During the pandemic crisis, profound reforms involving the public sector have been implemented in Italy, accelerated by the crisis itself and building upon ongoing processes initiated by previous governments. In particular, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (in Italian called PNRR), approved on July 13, 2021, by the European Council, included the reform of the Public Administration within the mission "Digitalization, Innovation, Competitiveness, Culture, and Tourism." The objective was to simplify public administration for citizens (in terms of regulations, organization, and services) and strengthen the digital infrastructure of the public sector by implementing key projects in the field of digital administration. As stated in the Plan this is a horizontal reform aimed at improving equity, efficiency, the economic climate, and the overall competitiveness of the country.

The pandemic crisis also brought the reform of Law No. 150/2000 to the forefront of the government's debate. This became particularly evident during the first national lockdown in the spring of 2020, which highlighted not only the importance of health communication but also the broader role of communication within Italian public administrations. Additionally, the emergency caused by the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus demonstrated the quality and resilience of Italian public communicators, influencing communication models and cultures in response to the unprecedented and strategic use of the internet and social media platforms.

In this context, driven by digital activism from various associations, events and initiatives emerged aiming to propose an update to Law No. 150/2000 to account for the impact of the digital transformation on institutional communication, accelerated by the pandemic crisis and the increasing reliance of Italian citizens on internet and

social media. In 2020, a ministerial working group was established, which produced specific operational proposals for the reform of Law 150/2000. However, due to changes in the government during the pandemic, these proposals remained largely on hold.

In this fluid context, there is the need to have a new communication model to face the multiple internal and external challenges that administrations have to deal with. We propose a 'multidirectional and multilevel institutional public communication model', built upon a communication approach that incorporates a strong ethical component to address the challenges and complexities of the current socio-technological landscape.
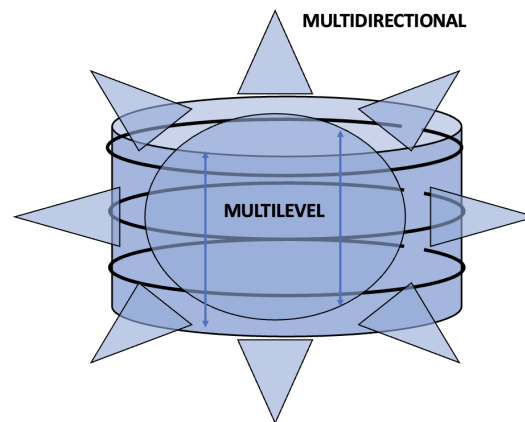

Figure. n°1. Multidirectional and multilevel institutional public communication model

This model acknowledges the increasing need for public administrations to strategically manage and oversee a diverse range of information and communication flows, both internally and externally. These flows originate from various stakeholders in the public sphere, such as media, citizens, businesses, associations, influencers and movements, who actively engage in digital and media environments. If not properly monitored, listened to, and strategically managed, these flows can negatively impact citizens' perception of public administrations, leading to a lack of trust in institutions and highlighting deficiencies in institutional communication within digital environments. Multidirectionality also entails the strategic and responsible management of the available channels and tools to extend the reach and visibility of institutional messages and to address possible communication inequalities. For example, it involves utilizing online platforms while considering the digital divide and ensuring inclusivity for older population segments. Moreover, this approach should embrace contemporary challenges such as social inclusion, gender equality, sustainability, and the principles of the United Nation 2030 Agenda (SDGs), which the public sector must integrate into its communication and information practices.

Moreover, the multilevel dimension of this model relates to the need for generating communicative exchanges through ongoing dialogue with various actors both within and outside the administration. This inter-institutional dimension should extend to other stakeholders involved in complex contemporary challenges. For instance, the Covid-19 pandemic has prompted governments and supranational organizations like the World Health Organization to collaborate with major digital platforms to tackle the spread of misinformation online. This collaborative process emphasizes the importance of public sources as authoritative and credible, while also fostering a sense of responsibility among digital companies. Specialized areas of public communication, such as crisis and emergency communication, communication for participatory processes, data communication (data storytelling), and public diplomacy, further contribute to the multilevel aspect. These areas require diverse knowledge and complex communication relationships with stakeholders both within and outside public sector organizations.

Adopting a multidirectional and multilevel model necessitates updated skills not only in communication but also in management, technology, law, and organizational studies. It represents a significant step forward that could result in greater formal and substantive recognition of the strategic role of communicators and the communication function within the Italian public organizations.

Conclusions: new challenges and professionals in public institutional communication

This new context poses new challenges and profoundly influences the role and practices of institutional public communication professions. Already in a issue published by the journal "Problems of Information" (Problemi dell'Informazione), Solito and Splendore (2016) reported the need and the emergence of new professionalisms within the Italian public sector, both in the communication and information activities, driven by the technological revolution, the pervasive impact of social media, the push of national associationism, and the growth of public administrations' communication needs. These factors have led institutional public communication professionals to practice increasingly broad and borderline territories (including the evolution of journalism and the impact of open and big data) that show the adaptations-as well as misalignments-of the public sector in the face of the changing media ecology and its innovative hybrid practices (Bessières, 2018, 2021).

Indeed, as Faccioli and Mazza (2017) argued, professions are not rigid and unchanging entities, but must naturally confront on a continuous and repeated basis a plurality of changes and transformations involving both the sociocultural and organizational contexts within which they are embedded. These transformations sometimes lead to the redefinition of existing professional figures in order to align them with the expectations of the professional work market; at other times, however,

they lead to the emergence and development of specific professions in response to specific needs and requirements. Professions that, especially in the public sector, find their primary recognition in the arena of public opinion, driven by media coverage of the topic, but not in the legal arena and in the workplace (Comunello *et al.*, 2021).

Numerous empirical researches, carried out both at the Italian and international level, have reported this process, through quantitative and qualitative surveys (Ducci, 2016; Lovari and Materassi, 2020; Zerfass *et al.*, 2017), which have shown more articulated public communication activities, with more complex and multifaceted communication tasks than those indicated by Law 150/2000, the use of a toolkit including visual and video repertoires (digital graphics, animatic, social cards, video editing, video making, etc.) as well as in the emerging impact of artificial intelligence solutions (Zerfass *et al.*, 2017).

The differentiation of the public sector's communication needs has also led to an update of the interface toward citizens, also following the evolution of media consumption patterns, which are increasingly directed toward digital platforms as channels for searching for information, including public sector information. The emergence of institutional chats, podcasts, and public service apps, alongside the management of social media channels, requires professionals able to manage digital communication flows with awareness, competencies and new skills (Ducci, 2017; Bessières, 2019; Lovari and Valentini, 2020). Communicative environments and channels that in addition to requiring interpretive, communicative, and relational skills, necessitate technical skills aimed at a strategic use of methodologies and technological tools applied to digital public communication.

In this context, a professional role that started to be very popular and slowly be hired in some Italian public administrations, even with specific contracts and dedicated positions: it is the social media manager. Often the social media manager coincides with what in other contexts is referred to as the community manager: indeed these are figures in charge of publishing content in social media, articulating institutional storytelling and interacting with the digital audiences both synchronously than asynchronously. Previous studies in the Italian public sphere, however, shows that managing social media and conversations with connected audiences is an activity in addition to those of professional figures already in charge of other tasks (i.e. press office chief, public communicator) (Ducci *et al.*, 2019; Lovari, 2017; Lovari and Materassi, 2020; Solito *et al.*, 2020).

The social media manager is a figure that over the years has managed to make inroads into the public discourse around institutional public communication professionals, and it had a central role during the Covid-19 pandemic and related lockdowns, showing the importance of having a strategic presidium of social media channels in ordinary as well as emergency or crisis situations (Solito and Materassi 2021). In a study conducted by the Piepoli Institute (2020), the social media manager appears to be present in 76 percent of the survey sample, with an estimated 9500 professionals working in Italian public sector organizations. The research's identikit

shows that he or she is a permanent employee (41%), or fixed-term collaborator (35%), generally male (61%), an expert in digital communication and information not member of specific professional associations (70%), under 44 years of age (84%), with a university degree in only four out of ten cases.

In addition to social media managers, the debate on digital communication has brought into focus the presence of other professionals in the public sector, proposed in the face of a reform process of Law N. 150/2000 (Ducci and Lovari, 2021). These are professional figures that hybridize public sector knowledge with the skills and practices of marketing and business communication (such as search engine optimization, e-reputation, big data, branding). We refer in particular to the "PA brand expert" a multidisciplinary figure, expert in digital, marketing and transparency, who must learn to manage the complexity of communication, recognizing that he or she is always in a beta version of constant experimentation, in a permanent state of definition (D'Errico and Bonanomi, 2021). Beyond names and labels, it must be reiterated that all professional figures in the public sector have had to update their knowledge and skills to cope with the impact of digital transformations, new organizational models and platform logics (Van Dijck *et al.*, 2019).

This article has reported the main evolutionary stages of institutional public communication as an organizational function within the Italian public sector. This is an interesting case because it condenses and hybridizes regulatory and legislative changes, peculiar in their uniqueness in the international arena, with technological and organizational transformations that have led to accelerations toward open and participatory governance models, challenging bureaucratic resistance and obstacles to change. The digital transformation process driven by the NPRR and the Next Generation EU Program also requires public sector communicators to be able to dialogue with IT colleagues and those human resources working in the organizations' technology back office and logistics. Moreover, new skills and professional roles will be crucial for the public sector, taking into account the additional challenges brought by artificial intelligence and the process of platformization of institutional public communication that is shaping not only the private sector but also the public one (Ducci and Lovari, 2021; Van Dijck, 2020).

At the end of this article we can say that numerous trajectories of institutional public communication development in Italy, can be found also at the European and international level, at least in Western democracies, characterized by global processes and local turbulence that find immediate visibility and impacts thanks to social media and digital platforms.

The various changes and mutations in public sector communication with related transformations of professions and organizational models are also taking place in other countries at central and peripheral levels of administrations. In a recent report, the OECD (2021) points out that to have effective public communication it needs to be based on institutional and governance prerequisites (like having a clear mandate, the presence of specialized structures and resources, etc.), and it has developed elements

of strategic communication like strategies and planning, data and insights tools, evaluation processes. Moreover, as also highlighted for the Italian case, strategically managing communication today requires the possession of innovative skills in digital tools, social media management and audience insights, as well as skills to respond to emerging challenges posed by contemporary media systems and digital active publics. Only with these pillars can public communicators be empowered in their role and public institutional communication can play a strategic role in the face of the transformations of contemporary society.

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