

Communicating the Italian recovery and resilience plan through social media: challenges, strategies and practices

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic prompted a significant shift in Italian Public Sector Communication (PSC). Institutions had to rapidly adopt digital communication tools, leading to both acceleration and resistance in technology adoption. This study thoroughly examines the communication strategy surrounding Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) launch in July 2021. Employing a mixed-method approach, it encompasses qualitative interviews with key stakeholders involved in the official NRRP communication project (*Italia Domani*) and a content analysis of *Italia Domani*'s Facebook posts. The research addresses two main questions: (1) What are the key features of NRRP's social media communication? (2) How does hybridization between PSC and political communication (PC) unfold? Findings indicate that despite serving as the government's designated communication channel, *Italia Domani* exhibited a comparatively modest level of social media engagement and a catch-all messaging approach, with limited public awareness of the NRRP. Moreover, it maintains a clear separation between public sector and political communication, reflecting efforts for transparency and accountability amidst complex challenges (e.g., the Covid-19 pandemic). While acknowledging limitations such as data collection constraints due to government updates, the research underscores the importance of tailored communication strategies and the need for clarity and transparency in governmental digital initiatives.

Keywords: public sector communication; Recovery Plan; mixed methods; Facebook; social media

Introduction

Nowadays public sector communication plays a crucial role for governments and public institutions in Western democracies. The OECD (2021) has highlighted how public communication represents a leverage for policymaking and a strategic tool to strengthen open government principles such as transparency, collaboration, and participation (Lathrop & Ruma, 2010). These factors are increasingly important in a current context characterised by low levels of trust in government, declining levels of media freedom, the rapid spread of disinformation (Lovari & Bellauti, 2023), and a growing demand for information and participation opportunities by citizens and strategic stakeholders. For these reasons, public sector communication (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019) or public communication (OECD, 2021) play a key role in fostering trust and inclusive growth, as well as amplifying stakeholder participation and supporting government reforms.

Data de submissão: 2023-10-19. Data de aprovação: 2024-11-15.

Revista Estudos em Comunicação é financiada por Fundos FEDER através do Programa Operacional Factores de Competitividade – COMPETE e por Fundos Nacionais através da FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia no âmbito do projeto *LabCom – Comunicação e Artes*, UIDB/00661/2020.



In this new scenario, scholars at the international level (Bessieres, 2008; Graber, 1992, 2003; Ducci & Lovari, 2021; Luoma-aho & Canel, 2020) have highlighted how the communicative function of public sector organisations has always been characterised by two tensions: a) the controversial relationship between public communication and political communication within government and administrations (Sanders & Canel, 2013), a theme that has been amplified by the presence of institutions and politicians on social media; b) the communicative model adopted by institutions, which tends to be transmissive and unidirectional (one-way), even in the face of opportunities for dialogue, conversation, and participation (two-ways) brought about by digitization and social media institutionalisation (Grunig, 2009; Lovari & Valentini, 2020).

These tensions become crucial and visible in the case of a new and significant communicative challenge for governments and public institutions in Europe: the communication programs adopted for the National Plans related to NextGenerationEU, the European fund for post-pandemic recovery.

In this scenario, this article focuses on the communicative challenges related to the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) (in Italian, PNRR) launched on July 2021, by the Italian government after a complex set of steps at the political, social, and economic levels in Italy and within the European Union's governing bodies. This ambitious reform plan has posed new challenges for public sector communication as it requires specific efforts to communicate complex issues such as a six-year investment program that will change the face of the country, as well as the need for developing interactive and multi-stakeholder communication that allows different social actors to participate inclusively and actively in the opportunities offered by the reform project.

Despite its relevance, the PNRR seems to have not yet received adequate attention at the scientific level, particularly in communicative processes. Currently, research appears to be predominantly focused on economic and industrial dimensions (Pianta, 2021; Bubbico, 2022; Ombuen, 2023), legal aspects (Poggi, 2021; Lupo, 2022), and governance (Profeti & Baldi, 2021; Barone & Manganaro, 2022), while publications dedicated to communicative dimensions are rare (Aragona & Acampa, 2023). In this exploratory article, within the theoretical framework of public sector communication (PSC) and using a mixed methods approach, we focus on the communication activities set up by the Italian government around the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, particularly focusing on the strategies and practices implemented on the official Facebook channel of *Italia Domani*.

1. Literature review

1.1 The changing scenario of Public Sector Communication in Italy

To better understand the impact of the launch of NRRP from a communication point of view, it is important to highlight the characteristics of PSC in Italy that unfolds in hybrid communication ecologies, shaped by a plurality of actors and flows (Rizzuto et al, 2020). Indeed, contemporary ecologies are becoming increasingly complex and interconnected while the boundaries between languages, genres, and professions are increasingly overlapping and intertwined (Chadwick, 2013). These processes not only concern the media system but also have impacts on the communication of public sector organisations at all levels, from governmental to local administrations. One of the most studied overlaps in the literature has been between public and political communication (PC), a topic also present in international literature. The debate is still open whether PC should be kept separate from PSC within institutions due to its peculiarities of partisanship and controversy (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; Graber, 2003). This is particularly interesting to study in Italy due to the fact that law n.150/2000 obliged public sector organisations to clearly separate political and public sector communication for enhancing transparency and accountability toward citizens and media in an open government framework (Ducci, Solito

& Materassi, 2020). As recently noted (Lovari, 2022), aspects of hybridization between public sector communication and political communication (PC) are particularly visible in the Italian scenario and in digital and social media communication. Indeed, the use of social media for increasing the popularity of elected figures within public organisations (i.e., mayors, governors, ministries, etc.), the adoption of branding strategies for enhancing institutional visibility, and the subsequent disintermediation of communication may have stressed overlapping processes with detrimental effects on citizens' perceptions of institutional communication (Materassi & Solito, 2015; Rizzuto et al., 2020), due to the unclear intertwining between the two communicative flows (Solito, 2018). These factors have been fostered by the platformization of public sector communication (Lovari & Ducci, 2021), a process by which public sector communication flows are visible, filtered and distributed online, according to social media logics, shaped by their algorithms, and influenced by platforms' business models.

1.2 Digital challenges in public sector communication practices

Digitalization processes have strongly expanded after the Covid-19 pandemic that has fostered the use of digital communication in the public sector. As a matter of fact, the national lockdown in the spring of 2020 in Italy has pushed public administrations to abruptly transition to digital communication in their everyday practices, professional languages, expressive repertoires, technical tools, and organisational arrangements, and to do so quickly in order to provide citizens and mass media with timely and clear information. PSC has thus become ever more strategic for governments and public institutions (Lovari, D'Ambrosi & Bowen, 2020). The pandemic crisis has also accelerated the processes of institutionalisation of digital technologies in the public sector, underlining the existence of best practices and resilience tactics among many public communicators, especially at central governmental level (Massa et al., 2022). At the same time, the Covid-19 emergency also highlighted multiple forms of delay in digitization processes, as well as organisational resistance to digital transformation, and overlapping between public sector and political communication in social media environments overseen by public public administrations.

Another factor that has clearly emerged in the processes of digitalization of public sector communication is the tension between transmissive and interactive communication, between unidirectional and bidirectional models. In fact, Italian public sector communication has suffered for many years from a lack of interaction with its stakeholders, favouring models of press agency or public information (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) over more participatory ones able to cultivate relationships with both internal and external strategic publics more effectively than one-way and asymmetrical communication (Grunig, 2009). This process is still present today in a large portion of Italian public communication within social media, with numerous institutions not fully leveraging the potential of digital platforms and their affordances, or not being able to employ adequate strategies to stimulate participation and engagement of digital publics (Agostino, 2013; Ducci & Lovari, 2021), either due to a lack of trained personnel, political choice, or shortage of strategic vision (Lovari & Valentini, 2020).

1.3 The National Recovery and Resilience Plan: a new communication challenge

European governments were also faced with another major challenge that impacts on communication strategies. They had to set up the communication programs for the national qualification Plans for NextGenerationEU, i.e., the European fund for post-pandemic recovery. These are inherently multi-actor projects developed by the single countries that interconnect national governments with a variety of stakeholders including enterprises, associations and citizens. Therefore, the establishment of cooperative and concerted communication governance models is required to promote the objectives, the

opportunities and the potential impacts of these complex plans in an open government perspective. In fact, it is necessary to activate processes of multi-stakeholder coordination (Janssen & Estevez, 2013) in order to effectively inform and inclusively communicate these multilevel plans (OECD, 2021; Lovari & Belluati, 2023), not least for accountability and transparency imperatives toward citizens and the media. These governance models have to inform both intra-organizational and professional cultures and the public administration's own governance logics (Comunello et al., 2021).

The tensions brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the challenges of engaging different stakeholders set by the post-pandemic Recovery Plans and the hybridization's processes in contemporary communication ecologies, have placed public sector communication in Italy at the crossroads of intricate transformations.

The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) was launched on July 13, 2021, by the Italian Council of Ministers, in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. It envisaged a total allocation of 235 billion euros between European resources (to be used in the period 2021-2026) and national funds. The main core of the project revolves around three strategically shared axes at the European level: digitalization and innovation, ecological transition, social inclusion. The NRRP is poised to address the urgent need of fostering a strong recovery through a set of reforms and investments¹ tailored to confront Italy's specific challenges. These endeavours seek to facilitate lasting and sustainable growth, drive the digital and green transition, and bridge social and territorial gaps. All reforms and investments must be executed within a tight timeframe, as prescribed by the NRRP regulation, with completion slated for August 2026. In particular, the Italian Recovery and Resilience Plan is structured around six distinct Missions:

1. Digitalization, innovation, competitiveness, culture and tourism. This mission supports the country's transition to a digitalized landscape by modernising public administration, communication infrastructure, and the production system. Its objectives encompass ensuring nationwide coverage with ultra-wideband networks, enhancing the competitiveness of industrial sectors, and investing in the revitalization of tourism and culture;
2. Green revolution and ecological transition. This mission is crafted to drive the green and ecological transition of society and the economy, with the aim of establishing a sustainable system that ensures competitiveness. It encompasses measures for sustainable agriculture and improvements in waste management capacity, as well as investment programs and research into renewable energy sources, safeguarding and promoting biodiversity;
3. Infrastructure for sustainable mobility. This mission is intended to fortify and expand the national high-speed rail network, with a particular emphasis on the Southern regions. It also advocates for the optimization and digitalization of air traffic, promotes transport services for goods through an intermodal approach in connection with the airport system, and aims to ensure the interoperability for the port network;
4. Education and research. It is designed to address structural gaps in the provision of education services throughout the entire educational cycle. It encompasses provisions for increasing the availability of places in kindergartens, facilitating university access, strengthening orientation tools, and reforming the recruitment of teachers. Furthermore, it includes a significant

1. Italy is the primary beneficiary of the two main instruments of the *NextGeneration EU* (NGEU): the *Recovery and Resilience Facility* (RRF) and the *Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe* (REACT-EU) package. The first allocation utilizes an EU-wide envelope of EUR 50.6 billion in current prices, to be disbursed in two installments (2021 and 2022) to member countries. The second allocation offers resources totaling 191.5 billion euros, designated for utilization between 2021 and 2026, with 68.9 billion euros provided as non-repayable grants. In addition to these allocations, Italy plans to fully leverage its financing capacity through RRF loans, estimated at 122.6 billion euros for the country.

strengthening of research systems and technology transfer;

5. Inclusion and cohesion. This mission leverages social infrastructure, enhances active labor policies, and supports the dual system and female entrepreneurship. It also seeks to improve the protection system for socially and economically vulnerable situations for families and parenthood, as well as promoting the role of sport. Specific attention is devoted to territorial cohesion;
6. Health. This mission outlines provisions for supporting prevention and care within the territory, integrating health and social services, and upgrading the technological equipment of the national health service. It also promotes the development of telemedicine, supports the digital, and managerial skills of health system personnel, and advances scientific research in the biomedical field.

It is evident that the implementation of NRRP has produced an opportunity for public sector communication since it has enforced the need for a multi-stakeholder perspective and, therefore, for a concerted communication strategy that empowers the actors in the system to engage as active participants in the opportunities brought into play by the reform project. Thus, communicating the NRRP requires a strategic communication approach to inform different stakeholders of the activities, tenders, grants, potential impacts and financial opportunities related to the Plan until the end of 2026. Furthermore, the complexity of the topics of the Recovery Plan, as well as the technical languages adopted by the official documents, represent a challenge for Italian public sector communicators at central, regional and local level.

For these reasons, following also European guidelines, the Italian Government created a dedicated task force for PS communication, composed of government staff and professionals hired ad hoc for these activities. In the communicative project, the PNRR has been named *Italia Domani* (Italy Tomorrow), adopting a multichannel strategy (roadshows, campaigns, official website and social media channels, etc.) to foster transparency, participation and accountability. *Italia Domani* represented the central hub for the communication of the NRRP, interconnecting the government, ministries, regions, municipalities, citizens, and enterprises.

3. Research questions and methods

In this context, we decided to investigate the characteristics of the Italian NRRP digital communication, focusing the attention on the *Italia Domani* official social media flows to identify possible tensions between political and public communication, as well as detecting themes and models adopted to inform and engage digital publics about its different missions and activities.

In particular, the two research questions that guided this exploratory study on the social media communication of the PNRR by the Italian government were:

RQ1) What were the main themes of the NRRP on the *Italia Domani* Facebook channel? Did digital communication practices stimulate engagement among online publics?

RQ2) How did the tension between public sector communication and political communication unfold in the official *Italia Domani* Facebook channel?

At the methodological level, we chose to proceed via a triangulation of qualitative interviews with relevant *Italia Domani* actors and quantitative strategies through content analysis on Facebook posts by *Italia Domani*. This mixed-method approach allowed the research team to obtain a richer understanding of the focused phenomena and thereby add depth and breadth to the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

First, two in-depth interviews were carried out with elite publics (Hertz & Imber, 1995; Semenova, 2018) who coordinated the communication strategies of the *Italia Domani* project. Élite interviews are generally conducted with individuals who possess unique knowledge or are in privileged positions, and can thus potentially provide the researcher with information that is hardly—if not at all—obtainable through other sources (Natow, 2020). These interviews have been based on a thematic guide covering professional training, online and offline communication practices in the NRRP project, organisation and coordination between structures and stakeholders, and visions of public communication between normative imperatives and corporate languages. The interviews were transcribed using the transcription capabilities of NVivo 14. A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was then performed with the support of NVivo 14 with the aim of identifying the predominant themes and issues. They have been particularly useful in deducing information about communicative models and specific strategies concerning the tension between public and political communication (Graber, 1992; 2003; Sanders & Canel, 2013; Leone & Delli Paoli, 2016; Solito, 2018; Lovari, 2022)

As a second step, the Meta CrowdTangle monitoring and analysis tool (2023) was employed to identify and export all the Facebook posts issued by the *Italia Domani* Facebook page in the time range of 14 months from the approval of the NRRP to the establishment of the new government led by Giorgia Meloni (01/09/2022-31/10/2022), which stopped updating the official channel. A *corpus* of 155 Facebook posts was thus constructed, manually coded, and elaborated through content analysis techniques (Krippendorff, 1983). Content analysis is frequently used for online data since it allows for effective elaboration through qualitative and quantitative approaches (McMillan, 2000). Although web content poses inherent challenges mainly related to the instability and multiformity of online texts, content analysis is still broadly used for the investigation of data *corpora* extracted from social network sites (Stemler, 2015). At the operational level, a codebook was constructed to support the detection of thematic and semantic dimensions in our *corpus* (Figure 1): in this phase, we have conceptualised the features to be detected by referring to the communicative style and type of content present in each individual post. Each variable has been encoded according to certain modalities that correspond to numerical values capable of producing outputs through data analysis. Methodological (Carley, 1993; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; McMillan, 2000) and analytical (Gadotti & Bernocchi, 2010; DePaula et al., 2018) insights found in relevant literature were considered in the development of this tool. Several joint sessions have been carried out within the research team in order to ensure maximum inter-coder reliability, ascertain mutual understanding of the codebook and determine the approach (Krippendorff, 1983). The codebook has been further refined through a series of pre-tests conducted by the researchers on a small sample of the available data.

Table 1. Codebook elaborated by the research team for the analysis of the *Crowdtangle corpus*.

Post feature	Modalities	Purpose
Sharing	1. Yes 2. No	Investigating whether the post is native or shared
Text content	1. Yes 2. No	Investigating the text content
Visual content	1. Visual not available 2. Image/Photograph 3. Graphic 4. Video 5. Infographic	Investigating the type of visual content
Type of post	1. Initiative/event 2. Press conference 3. Announcement/opportunity 4. Report 5. Storytelling/testimony	Investigating the type of post
Missions	1. Digitalization, innovation, competitiveness, culture and tourism 2. Green revolution and ecological transition 3. Infrastructure for sustainable mobility 4. Education and research 5. Inclusion and cohesion 6. Health	Investigating NRRP missions
Priorities	1. Young people 2. Gender equality 3. Reducing the citizenship gap 4. Undefined	Investigate NRRP priorities
Aim of the post	1. Transmission of information 2. Requesting input 3. Online dialogue/offline interaction 4. Symbolic presentation	Investigating the purpose of the post (DePaula et al., 2018)
Relationship style	1. Formal 2. Informal	Investigating the communication style
Hashtag & links	1. Yes 2. No	Investigating the hashtags and links

4. Communicating the NRRP: Key findings

This section outlines the results of the exploratory study with special focus on the two research questions that guided this investigation.

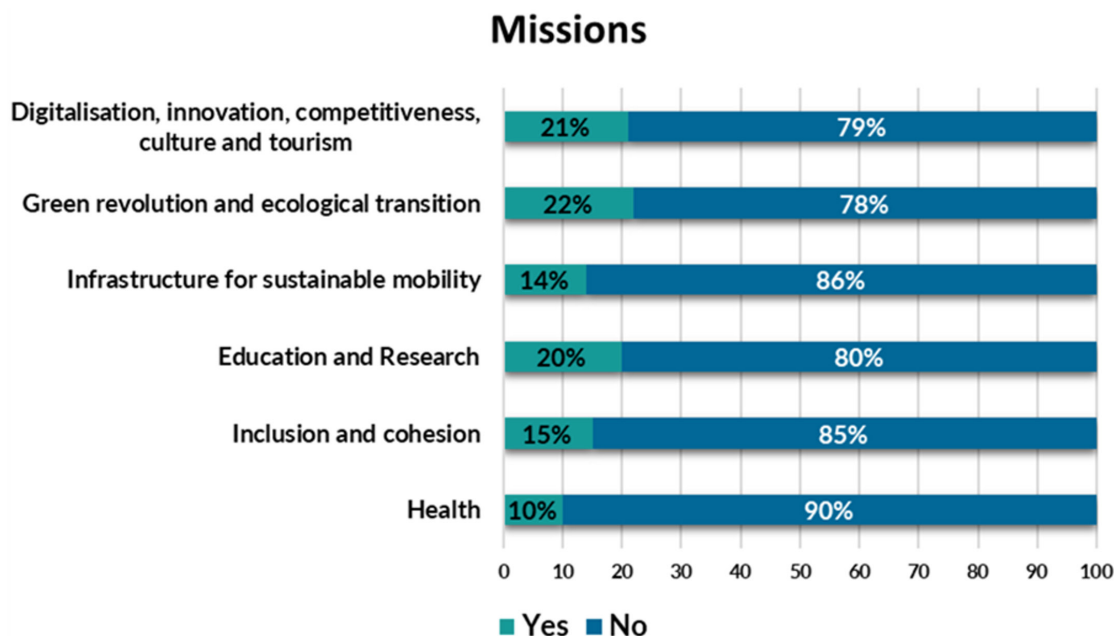
4.1. NRRP’s social media communication: Practices and themes

As previously stated, the first research question of this article deals with the main themes and features in the NRRP’s social media communication. The content analysis carried out on *Italia Domani*’s Facebook posts can help shed light on this issue.

An initial examination approached the data from a semantic perspective. The posts often incorporate text (92%), images (89%), hashtags (89%), and external links (92%). An informal relational style is often adopted (80%), incorporating elements like emojis, hashtags, and various forms of call-to-action for online publics. The language employed is primarily informative and descriptive (Gadotti & Bernocchi, 2010).

Another element of interest pertains to the communication strategies with reference to the NRRP. In fact, *Italia Domani*’s communication flow is seemingly partially misaligned with the NRRP priorities. In fact, a large share of posts cannot be attributed to any priority (87%). Roughly equal salience is attributed to the various NRRP Missions in *Italia Domani*’s Facebook posting, although the ‘Health Mission’ is seemingly the least communicated (Figure 3). The various Missions received roughly equal average likes (between 10 and 12) by *Italia Domani*’s page fans.

Figure 3. Analysis of NRRP Missions within *Italia Domani* Facebook posts.



Lastly, *Italia Domani*’s communication on Facebook has been analysed in terms of social media engagement. The *corpus* has initially been examined using the following descriptive statistics (Table 2): a) lowest and highest reaction value for each individual post; b) total of each reaction on all posts; c) average value of each reaction on each post; d) indices of variation and dispersion on the total number of posts. As of the article’s writing, *Italia Domani*’s Facebook page features 4195 followers in total.

Table 2. Analysis of the interactions of *Italia Domani*'s posts on Facebook. Source: Elaboration by the authors on CrowdTangle Team (2024).

	Number of posts	Min.	Max.	Sum	Mean	Std. Dev.
Likes	155	1	62	1812	11.69	8.014
Shares	155	0	120	1086	5.93	12.488
Comments	155	0	904	919	7.01	72.57
Love	155	0	3	41	0.26	0.5
Wow	155	0	1	3	0.02	0.1
Haha	155	0	5	20	0.13	0.5
Sad	155	0	0	0	0	0
Angry	155	0	83	92	0.59	6.6
Care	155	0	2	11	0.07	0.2
Total interactions	155	1	1009	3984	25.7	82.159

Notably, the vast majority of social media interaction on the *Italia Domani* page was the result of an organised effort involving a ‘message bombing’ endeavour against a specific *Italia Domani* post featuring the hashtag #Agenda2030 which generated a number of negative remarks. This post garnered over 25% (N=1009) of the total interactions, comprising 98% of the total comments (N=904) and 57% of the reactions (N=96), with the maximum values for angry reactions and comments in particular significantly exceeding their respective means (Table 2). While every post has at least one ‘like’ reaction, the minimum values for shares and comments drop to zero showing scarce interactions and engagement of the fans with the NRRP’s digital communication.

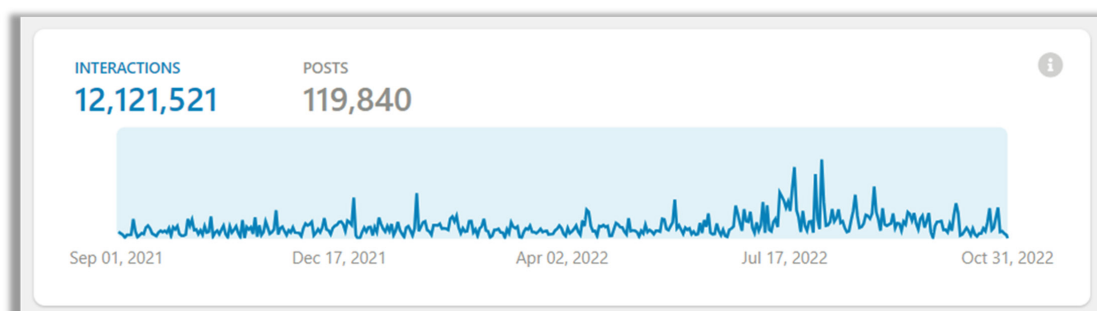
This limited engagement capacity of *Italia Domani* page is further substantiated when comparing the level of interactions centered around the keyword “NRRP” within Facebook posts overall (Figure 1 and Figure 2) during the timeframe of the study.

Figure 1. Mentions of the keyword “NRRP” within *Italia Domani*’s Facebook page from 09-01-2021 to 10-31-2022.



Source: CrowdTangle Team (2024).

Figure 2. Mentions of the keyword “NRRP” on Italian Facebook posts from 09-01-2021 to 10-31-2022



Source: CrowdTangle Team (2024).

Significant positive correlations may also be observed between the users’ reactions, and in particular between *likes & shares* and between *angry & comments* (Table 3): as one reaction increases, so does the other. In particular, the strongest relationship is between ‘*angry*’ and ‘*comments*’, as illustrated by the message bombing case discussed above.

Table 3. Correlation analysis (Pearson coefficient) of user interactions in *Italia Domani* posts on Facebook.

	Likes	Shares	Comments	Love	Wow	Haha	Angry	Care
Likes	1	0.723**	0.025	0.388**	0.07	0.314**	0.02	-0.013
	155	0.000	0.759	0.000	0.387	0.000	0.805	0.870
		155	155	155	155	155	155	155
Shares	0.723**	1	0.034	0.242**	0.095	0.323**	0.022	0.009
	0.000	155	0.672	0.002	0.240	0.000	0.785	0.913
	155		155	155	155	155	155	155
Comments	0.025	0.034	1	-0.032	-0.008	0.000	0.999**	-0.02
	0.759	0.672	155	0.692	0.917	0.995	0.000	0.808
	155	155		155	155	155	155	155
Love	0.388**	0.242**	-0.032	1	-0.073	0.274**	-0.037	-0.041
	0.000	0.002	0.692	155	0.367	0.001	0.649	0.612
	155	155	155		155	155	155	155
Wow	0.07	0.095	-0.008	-0.073	1	-0.033	-0.013	-0.036
	0.387	0.240	0.917	0.367	155	0.679	0.877	0.661
	155	155	155	155		155	155	155
Haha	0.314**	0.323**	0.000	0.274**	-0.033	1	-0.009	-0.06
	0.000	0.000	0.995	0.001	0.679	155	0.914	0.456
	155	155	155	155	155		155	155
Angry	0.02	0.022	0.999**	-0.037	-0.013	-0.009	1	-0.023
	0.805	0.785	0.000	0.649	0.877	0.914	155	0.780
	155	155	155	155	155	155		155
Care	-0.013	0.009	-0.02	-0.041	-0.036	-0.06	-0.023	1
	0.870	0.913	0.808	0.612	0.661	0.456	0.780	155
	155	155	155	155	155	155	155	

Source: Elaboration by the authors on CrowdTangle Team (2024).

Overall, the content analysis carried out reveals a limited level of engagement on *Italia Domani*'s Facebook page. Despite its designation as the official channel for PNRR communication, it seems to have struggled in garnering significant users' attention and interaction. These insights have been further explored through an in-depth examination employing qualitative research techniques.

4.2. Communicating the NRRP: In-between public and political communication

The second research question has further examined shifting boundaries between public sector and political communication (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019) in the empirical case considered.

The elite publics interviewed claim that *Italia Domani* has introduced in Italian institutions a strategy of decoupling between PSC and PC. This resulted in a major transition with respect to previous experiences of institutional communication in Italy, which they characterise referring to self-branding and personalistic rhetoric:

“I find it inappropriate that the institution which is called upon to speak in terms of PSC to everybody is addressing a particular audience in an extemporaneous way as is the case of the sudden Facebook or Twitter live broadcasts—I can say: I do a live broadcast, I sing my own praises, and whoever is there is there. And then we measure the effectiveness of this communication through interactions.” (Int. A)

“They used the potential of social media in a season when there had been a whole effervescence of live broadcasts—of Facebook live broadcasts, of Twitter live broadcasts—in favour of the leader’s personal accounts.” (Int. A)

According to the interviewees, in the construction of *Italia Domani*’s communicative strategy the withdrawal of political agendas from public sector communication was encouraged through the selection of skills, channels, and tones of communication to be mobilised also on social media channels:

“Those who were politically engaged left the office with the establishment of the Draghi government.” (Int. A)

“PSC can only be supported by the existence of (...) official institutional communication channels.” (Int. A)

To ensure the separation between PC and PSC, transparency, accountability, and no-partisanship were reportedly adopted as a guiding principles for the NRRP communication:

“In data communication and information I see certified, valid communication.” (Int. A)

“Communication is (...) understandable, measurable through evidence (...) transparent, pragmatic, based on facts.” (Int. B)

“This involves always following a criterion of transparency (...) and no-partisanship towards the recipients.” (Int. A)

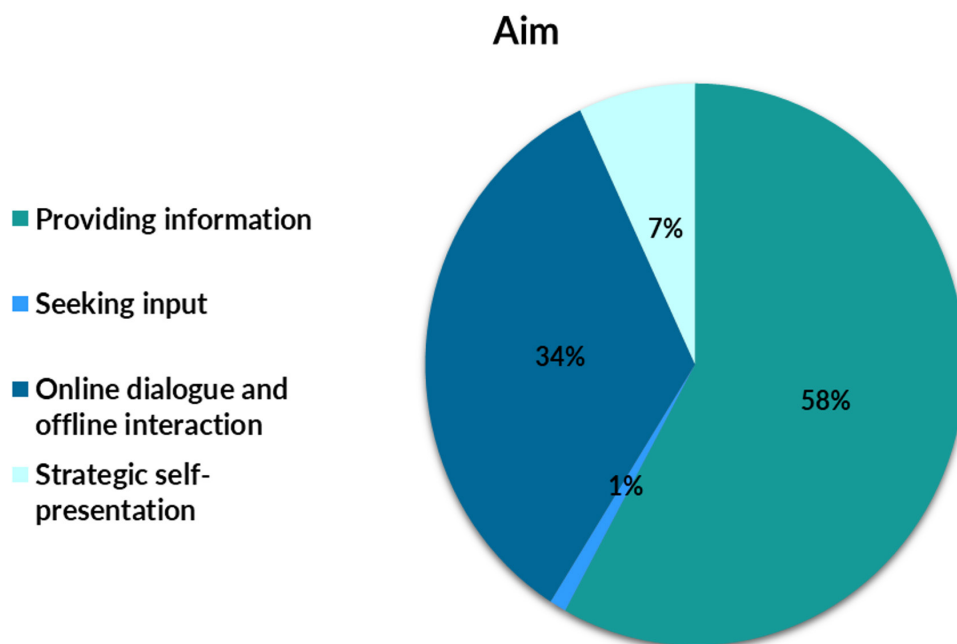
In the interviewees’ narratives, this communication strategy was inspired by the very character of the bipartisan technical government headed by Premier Mario Draghi (February 2021-October 2022):

“The institution discouraged it [the politicization of PSC] precisely because it was committed to national unity” (Int. B).

The quantitative analysis on *Italia Domani*'s Facebook posts confirms the interviewees' narrative about the separation of the public and political domains in the NRRP communication (Figure 4). Indeed, the vast majority of posts' aims may be ascribed to PSC functions (such as 'providing information' and 'seeking input'), while only a rare part (7%) tend toward PC purposes such as strategic 'self-presentation' (DePaula et al., 2018) of 'authoritative' figures in the Italian and international political arena - for the vast majority, the ruling prime minister Mario Draghi:

“📅 February 9, 2022 📍 Genoa 🇮🇹 Official visit of Prime Minister Mario Draghi. 🗣️ “Last year we achieved all the planned targets. The same will happen again this year. It is a matter of seriousness - to the citizens, and to our European partners. And it is a matter of reliability - because sustained, equitable, sustainable growth is the best guardian of stability,” the premier's words during the visit to St. George's Palace. 📺 Check out the full speech: <https://youtu.be/qAuDZHLvzps> :=<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qAuDZHLvzps> #italiadomani #pnrr #future #innovation Palazzo Chigi - Presidency of the Council of Ministers” (@ItaliaDomaniGov, 09/02/2022).

Figure 4. Aim of the *Italia Domani* Facebook posts.

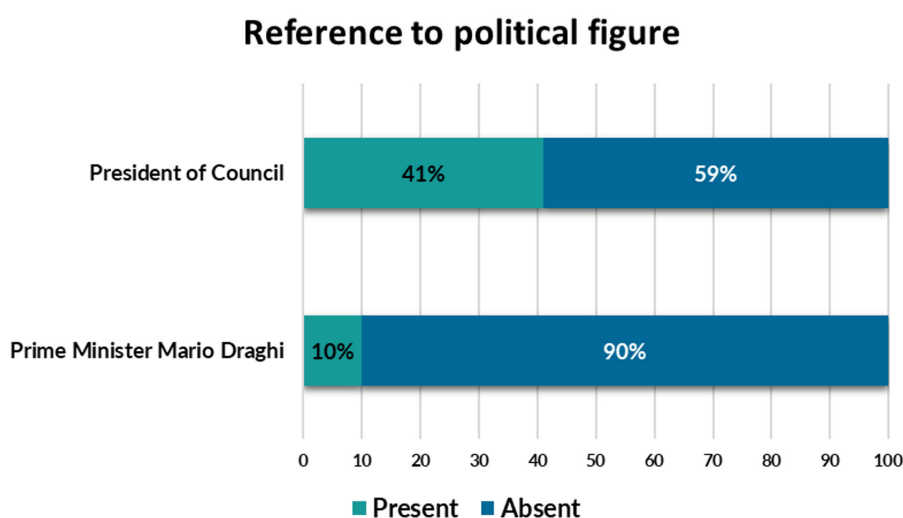


Source: Elaboration by the authors on CrowdTangle Team (2024).

Interestingly, Mario Draghi is most often evoked in Facebook posts as an institutional figure (90% of the posts) and only rarely as a political figure (10% of the posts). This is evident, for example, in the following excerpt as well as in Figure 5, which provides a perspective at the qualitative level:

“📢 ”*Italia Domani* for Municipalities and Metropolitan Cities” is the initiative of Palazzo Chigi - Presidency of the Council of Ministers in collaboration with Anci, to share communication activities on #NRRP projects related to the territories of the 14 Metropolitan Cities, recipients of more than 12 billion euros of already allocated funds. (...) Find out more: <https://bit.ly/3yvQonC> (...) #ItaliaDomani #Anci #Comuni #CittàMetropolitane” (@ItaliaDomaniGov, 12/10/2022).

Figure 5. Reference to a political figure in the *Italia Domani* Facebook posts.



Source: Elaboration by the authors on CrowdTangle Team (2024).

The NRRP communication strategy thus strategically prioritized the institutional role of the Prime Minister over political aspects. While underpinned by a dedication to national unity, public sector communication is then effectively distinct from political discourse, also on *Italia Domani* Facebook page.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

We are aware that this study has some limitations. The choice to analyse the content of the *Italia Domani* Facebook page may not provide a comprehensive picture of government digital strategies. Additionally, the decision by the Meloni government to stop updating the *Italia Domani* Facebook channel in October 2022, hindered the opportunity to collect a more substantial amount of data. Moreover, more in-depth insights may have become available as the research progresses over the final two years of the NRRP implementation. Future research may take these aspects into account and consider the communicative evolution of the Italian Plan in an integrated manner, as well as to compare National Recovery Plans’ digital communication strategies in different European countries.

At the same time, this article represents one of the first studies aimed to investigate the management of PS communication related to the Italian Recovery and Resilience Plan, during the first two years of its implementation, employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. *Italia Domani* was envisioned to serve as the focal point for disseminating information to various stakeholders and engaging them in participating in various grants, funding opportunities, and events.

The content analysis on Facebook posts yielded useful evidence regarding the semantics of public communication and its entanglement with political communication. Content analysis has focused on themes, practices, visuals, types of engagement and posts' languages, and highlighted the presence and characteristics of 'authoritative' political figures in textual or iconographic form. Then, the qualitative data outlined relevant information about the NRRP communication governance. Notably, the lack of shared standards on communication both in the NextGenerationEU program (on the European level) and in the NRRP (on the Italian level) resulted in the *Italia Domani* agency having wide margins of discretionality when designing and implementing communication strategies for the project and its stakeholders. A fluid and networked communication model thus emerged that intertwined different actors – ministries, municipalities, citizens, companies – across a variety of communication tools.

In relation to the two research questions, it is interesting to consider the possible factors behind the low interaction and engagement rates for the Facebook content of *Italia Domani* Page. One contributing factor could be the complexity of the themes and interventions discussed in the NRRP posts. Despite efforts by the communication team to improve the clarity and quality of the content with emojis, visuals, and infographics, the topics remain often challenging for a large portion of the population, especially in a context of uncertainty and crisis induced by the pandemic. Some posts are technical in nature, such as the publication of tenders and grants, which may not be of interest to citizens more concerned with the concrete impact of measures that require several years to become visible.

Furthermore, our analysis suggests that *Italia Domani* exhibited a tendency towards 'catch-all' messaging, displaying a degree of redundancy and a standardised approach to content management, rather than tailoring its communication to specific stakeholders and actively involving them in NRRP initiatives. This phenomenon may be attributed to the challenges of conveying a complex and articulated Plan with a high level of technicality, which may not have resonated with the general public. This could lead to variations in the visibility of certain institutional organic content influenced by Facebook's algorithm and by the general processes of platformization of public sector communication (Ducci & Lovari, 2021). From a strategic perspective, beyond European guidelines, social media may therefore not represent a primary tool in PSC strategies on complex topics such as Recovery and Resilience Plans.

In this sense, it appears that *Italia Domani* may lack a distinct digital strategy for engaging online publics, potentially adhering to a more traditional one-way communication model (Grunig, 2009) often adopted by government and public sector organisations (Lovari & Valentini, 2020). At the same time the attempt to include several calls to action within the NRRP Facebook posts does not seem to achieve results in terms of engagement, which remains limited. This outcome may also be attributed to the limited awareness of what the NRRP is among Italian citizens. Indeed, according to a study commissioned by Italia Digitale Foundation (2022), only 37% of Italians consider themselves informed about the NRRP, with 38% of the population completely unaware of its existence. The report also highlights that only 26% of the sample are satisfied with the communication about the NRRP, a percentage that increases up to 28% only among the age group over 55 years, which represents the segment of the Italian population less present on social media. Thus, despite the potentiality of its pivotal role, the *Italia Domani* page has displayed a limited ability to shape the social media agenda, remaining a peripheral actor unable to stimulate NRRP visibility and engagement on digital avenues as it would have been expected.

The study also qualitatively explored the forms of possible overlapping between public sector communication and political communication (Canel & Louma-aho, 2019; Graber, 2003; Lovari, 2022) in the *Italia Domani* social media storytelling. Empirical findings highlighted a narrative in the NRRP communication strategy emphasising the clear distinction between PSC and PC. The NRRP communication managers uphold the perspective that public sector communication should remain distinct and independent from political communication in offline and digital strategies. Indeed, the Draghi government, being a bipartisan and 'technical' government, made a clear effort to keep NRRP communication free from political undertones in order to be more transparent, accountable and more resilient to disinforma-

tion (OECD, 2021). Overall, the analyses offered valuable insights suggesting that public sector communication should fundamentally differ from the practices and language of political communication, even on social media platforms and amid complex national situations such as the Covid-19 pandemic that require a clear sense of ethics and responsibility (Lovari, D'Ambrosi & Bowen, 2020).

Acknowledgments

This work stems from the research project *Quality of Public Sector Communication – QCPS*, which has received financial support from the Italian Ministry of Economic Development - DGTCSE-ISCTI.

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