

Contemporary Politics, Communication, and the Impact on Democracy

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Preface

CONTEMPORARY POLITICS, COMMUNICATION, AND THE IMPACT ON DEMOCRACY: AN INTRODUCTION

This book aims to analyze the relationship between politics and communication in the current context of increasing polarization and their disruptive effects over democracy (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). Taking an interdisciplinary approach, the book intends to offer an overview of the threats faced by traditional and stable democracies in a hybrid communicative scenario (Chadwick, 2017) in which disinformation (Guess, Nyhan & Reifler, 2018) reaches worrying levels.

The loss of credibility in traditional media and democratic institutions points to major challenges for the democratic system. This book endeavors to contribute to the academic debate with an in-depth reflection on how the traditional forms of political representation are being questioned, while polarization and political atomization (Stroud, 2010) undermine consensus over key issues. Crisis of political leadership and populism has deepened divisions. In this vein, the proposal is to explore the interaction between communication and political and social change processes to understand their implications.

In the contemporary hybrid communicative scenario, political news making is still dominated by traditional news media but more inclusive for non-elite media actors (Chadwick, 2017). Social networks allow elite and non-elite actors to disseminate their messages, spread through multiple channels and with an oft-confusing origin (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2020), actively taking part in disinformation processes (Giglietto et al., 2019) and hate speech (Pohjonen, 2019). In this context, far from promoting consensus around democratic values, the present communicative scenario risks contributing to polarization and disintegration (Sunstein, 2019), as well as a greater presence and visibility of political positions that directly confront democratic principles. The emergence and growth of extreme right-wing parties in different countries raises the need to reflect on an interrelated scenario of politics, society and media and its implications on the democratic system (Akkerman, De Lange & Rooduijn, 2016).

Contemporary Politics, Communication, and the Impact on Democracy addresses relevant issues that involve a multidisciplinary approach, including communication and politics and their impact on democracy. Combining both theoretical and applied approaches, this collection of studies reveal how different democracies around the world address similar challenges and confront them.

This book will be of interest for scholars developing research in political communication, political science, and media, particularly those involved in studies dealing with polarization, populism, disinformation, trust in institutions and the effects on democracy. Potential audiences for this book cover critical media scholars involved in mainstream academic organizations, such as the International Communication Association (ICA), the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), the

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European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA), the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) or the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR). Also included in this group would be undergraduate and graduate students, as it will be used as a reference book in areas such as political communication, political sciences, journalism, and communication studies. One of the strongest features of this book is its multinational approach to the topics.

The book includes a collection of international studies that represent leading contemporary research focused on Politics, Communication, and the Impact on Democracy. It involves almost fifty co-authors from 13 countries offering theoretical background and comparative applied research relating to European, American, Asian, and Australian cases. *Contemporary Politics, Communication, and the Impact on Democracy* contains 17 chapters and is organized into four sections addressing several issues. It starts by providing a theoretical approach to the dimensions of political communication and their implications on democracy. It then offers an analytical approach to the dynamics of polarization and selective exposure before giving a set of studies focused on the effects of the current hybrid communication context in electoral processes in several countries. Finally, there is a set of research dealing with the challenges posed by the pandemic and climate change in terms of polarization, disinformation, and trust in institutions.

The first section of “Contemporary Politics, Communication, and the Impact on Democracy” includes three chapters that present an overview of the main questions concerning contemporary politics and communication, such as the need of leadership in connection with social common goals, the enhancement of a true public discussion and the role of populism in the present context.

In Chapter 1, “Proposing a Three-Dimensional Normative Model for Political Communication,” Anastasia Veneti and Darren G. Lilleker reflect on the urgent need for effective leadership and for citizens to come together to achieve collective goals. Considering the deleterious effects on democracy of the current trajectory of political discourse and the calls for a shift toward a more citizen-centric political communication, this chapter proposes a new model for political communication that focuses on three dimensions (3D Model): service ethos, inclusivity, and empathy. The authors conceptualize these dimensions and build a normative model for their application while discussing the relevant shortcomings and current issues as they relate to contemporary political communication.

Chapter 2, “Achieving a Representative Democracy in Europe: The Politicization of the European Public Sphere,” by Rubén Rivas-de-Roca and Mar García-Gordillo, discusses the concept of public spheres linked to the European Union and how the deliberative quality is questioned because of its weak connection with citizens. By exploring three categories—political and public communication of the EU; citizen participation through technologies; and the growing politicization and polarization of the European project—this chapter offers an overview of the remaining challenges in research and argues that politicization and the interrelation of digital platforms and legacy media may enhance a true public discussion in Europe.

“Contemporary Populist Representation and its Implications for Democracy: A Theoretical Assessment from a Realist Point of View” (Chapter 3), by Renáta Ryoko Drávucz, analyzes how democracy and populism relate to each other in present-day politics. The author provides a theoretical assessment of contemporary populism and populist representation as an alternative form of political representation to party government or as a corrective of it. The chapter argues that populism is a strategic political style that exploits the gap between the promise and the actual performance of democracies, thus reflecting on democratic reality. Hence, it embodies what realist democratic theory has argued for quite some time now about the nature of politics.

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The second section affords a more in-depth look at the roots of some of the main phenomena that threaten the deliberative and representative idea of democracy, such as polarization and selective exposure. This context also affects the activity of the fact-checking platforms through the weaponization of the verification practices.

In Chapter 4, “The Dynamics of Polarization in Australian Social Media: The Case of Immigration Discourse,” Ehsan Dehghan and Axel Bruns provide a case study of the polarized debate on Twitter about the immigration policies of the Australian government and the detention of asylum seekers in offshore camps. Through a mixed-method investigation of conversations about these topics within the Australian Twittersphere, the authors examine the dynamics of polarization through a discourse-theoretical lens. The chapter argues that the polarization often observed in political debates on social media is not necessarily an effect of the technological structure of the platforms, but rather the result of the strategic engagement of users with the platforms’ affordances. Twitter users in Australia strategically discursify and give meaning to these affordances to make their own political positions more visible, amplify antagonisms and, at times, join each other in forming larger agonistic communities.

Chapter 5 sees Emiliana De Blasio, Rossella Rega, and Michele Valente analyze how the platformization and the growing polarization of news sources in Italy—a country that faces a traditional phenomenon of polarized pluralism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004)—influences the journalistic representation of the topic regarding the regularization of migrant workers in the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. By considering 12 news media sources of different political persuasions, and their articles on Facebook, “Polarization and Platformization of News in Italian Journalism: The Coverage of Migrant Worker Regularization” highlights the persistence of a strong polarization in news frames, prefiguring a highly fragmented public sphere.

In Chapter 6, “What Drives Selective Exposure to Political Information in Spain? Comparing Political Interest and Ideology,” Lidia Valera-Ordaz and María Luisa Humanes Humanes delve into the selective exposure to three media types (digital press, television, and radio) by Spanish citizens during the November 2019 General Election. Through multinomial logistic regressions applied to a representative post-electoral survey, this work shows that ideological-partisan orientations are the most important variables governing selective exposure, especially for the digital press and the radio. Besides confirming ideological selective exposure, the data highlight an important tendency toward selective avoidance of news media perceived as ideologically incongruent. For television, however, both socio-demographic trends and ideological orientations exhibit a similar explanatory weight.

Raquel Tarullo offers qualitative research in Chapter 7 focused on the practices and formats used by young adults for political participation through social media and the significance of these repertoires for public conversation. “Semi-Private Spheres as Safe Spaces for Young Social Media Users’ Political Conversation: Virtual Haven or Digital Bubbles?” explores the digital political participation practices among young people in Argentina. Based on 30 in-depth interviews with people between 18 and 24 years old, the findings of this research note that this segment of the population prefer reduced digital spaces to talk with their close contacts about polarized issues, to avoid the aggression and violence they say they observe in the digital space.

“The Mirage of Truth. The Instrumentalization of Fact-checking to Spread an Ideological Discourse” (Chapter 8), by María Díez-Garrido, Dafne Calvo and Lorena Cano-Orón, reflects on the weaponization of fact-checking practices. The study applies a combined methodology to compare two Spanish fact-checking initiatives: Maldita—internationally recognized—and Bendita, which arose as an imitation of Maldita and lacks recognition and scholarly attention. Conclusions suggest that fact-checking implies

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more complex activities than refuting specific facts, while alt-right positions can instrumentalize fact-checking for political objectives.

The third section is devoted to the institutional moment that represents the ultimate expression of democracy and how populism finds a breeding ground in a hybrid context of communication, by observing both supranational electoral processes—the 2019 European Parliamentary Election—and national presidential elections in the U.S., Taiwan, and Portugal.

Darren G. Lilleker, Márton Bene, Delia Cristina Balaban, Vicente Fenoll, and Simon Kruschinski investigate the populism phenomenon in Chapter 9 through a content analysis of party posts on Facebook during the 2019 European parliamentary elections across 12 countries. The authors of “Populism, Its Prevalence, and Its Negative Influence on Democratic Institutions” rely on the fact that the infectious nature of populism within a system drives a shift in the public mood. Research found that populist appeals are most likely to accompany critiques of labor and social policy, labeling elites or minority groups as causing inequalities that disadvantage ordinary people. Both forms of populism enjoy high levels of user engagement suggesting they gain higher levels of reach on social media platforms.

Chapter 10 focuses on the Twitter activity of the Spanish candidates in the 2019 European Election. “Europe and Euroscepticism on Twitter During the 2019 European Parliament Elections: An Analysis of the Spanish Candidates,” by Guillermo López-García, German Llorca-Abad, Vicente Fenoll, Anastasia Ioana Pop, and Jose Gamir-Ríos is based on a content analysis to observe which topics each candidate spoke about and from which perspective (pro-European or Eurosceptic) and a discourse analysis to further explore the political communication strategies developed. Results show that, unlike previous elections, the issue of Europe was given greater priority in 2019 by the candidates analyzed. Moreover, Euroscepticism has a marginal presence in candidates’ messages.

In Chapter 11, María de los Ángeles Flores offers the research “Intermedia Agenda-Setting Effect of Latino Television in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election: A Comparative Study of Telemundo and Univision.” This research reveals that in the final phase of the election campaign, the ‘horse-race reporting’ effect was stronger and both television newscasts were influencing each other, with the reporting being similar but not identical. However, the predominant flow of influence was from Telemundo to Univision. In terms of Trump’s intermedia agenda setting effect in the initial phase, the correlation was strong and positive between Telemundo and Univision, while in the final phase it was moderate and positive, indicating that Trump’s issues evolved in the second period. The directional flow of influence dynamic was reciprocal between the networks showing that Telemundo and Univision were reporting almost the same electoral issues regarding Trump.

Yowei Kang and Kenneth C.C. Yang analyze how the emergence of live streaming influencers modified Taiwan’s 2020 Presidential Election in Chapter 12. In this case study entitled “Will Live Streaming Platforms and Influencers Consolidate or Disrupt Democracy? A Case Study of Taiwan’s 2020 Presidential Election,” the authors describe and examine the role of live streaming platforms and influencers in generating political participation to account for the success of President Tsai Ing-wen’s 2020 re-election campaign. The study focuses on the roles of live streaming platforms and influencers in contributing to the growing and alarming global phenomenon of populism and polarization associated with politicians’ campaign strategies. It discusses whether the employment of live streaming influencers as a viable political communication tool in this campaign may ultimately contribute to the democratic deepening in Taiwan.

“Placing Portuguese Right-wing Populism into Context: Analogies with France, Italy, and Spain” (Chapter 13), by Afonso Biscaia and Susana Salgado, examines the discourse of the Portuguese right-

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wing populist André Ventura and compares it with close European counterparts, such as Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini, and Santiago Abascal. The empirical analysis focuses on the 2021 presidential campaign on Twitter and YouTube as part of the integrated political communication strategy. Results show that André Ventura appropriates the features of right-wing populism but adapts those to the Portuguese specific context as a strategy to gain both wider media visibility and popular support.

The fourth section of this book includes several studies that analyze how political leaders and citizens deal with the challenges of the pandemic, as well as climate change and vaccination in a context of polarization and instrumentalized disinformation.

Chapter 14, by Dolors Palau-Sampio and Adolfo Carratalá, focuses on the institutional speeches of six European leaders when explaining the measures implemented to address the first wave of the pandemic. “Emotional and Rational Frames Contained in Institutional Speeches: Six European Leaders Managing the COVID-19 Crisis” shows the importance of combining emotional and rational frames by political leaders, who sought to give speeches that would provoke a feeling of security in citizens—rounded off with a rational approach based on science and economics—without refusing emotionality, built on values such as protection, gratitude, social sacrifice, and citizen unity. With none of the leaders being populist, their heterogeneous personalities clearly influence the vocation and tone of their discourses.

Chapter 15 addresses the creation of political conflict on Twitter dealing with the health crisis, in a comparative study between Brazil and Spain. “Discourse and Disinformation on COVID-19 Vaccination in Spain and Brazil: A Case Study on the Twitter Debate,” by Claudio Luis de Camargo Penteadó, Eva Campos-Domínguez, Patrícia Dias dos Santos, Denise Hideko Goya, Mario Mangas Núñez and Mónica Melero Lázaro, analyzes the most retweeted messages published during the first week of vaccinations in these two countries. Although governmental positions in both countries are opposed, the results of the online debate on the immunization of COVID-19 allow common patterns of polarized profiles to be established in Spain and Brazil that question the management of the pandemic and it can be seen how political polarization is shaped as a characteristic of disinformation in both countries. This reveals that, after the health crisis, there is a crisis of democratic institutions that affect public health actions, specifically in combating COVID-19.

Laura Iannelli, Giada Marino, Danilo Serani, and Augusto Valeriani use Chapter 16, “Citizens, Polarization, and the Pandemic in the Italian Hybrid News Media System,” to offer a longitudinal study developed during the first phases of the pandemic, when Italy experienced the first mass lockdown activated in Western democracies in response to COVID-19. The study investigates Italian citizens’ positions on an issue that lies at the very heart of democracy: the balance between public health and individual freedoms. Despite the increasing divergence between government and opposition regarding restrictions on personal freedoms, findings indicate that citizens’ opinions did not polarize between extreme communitarian and libertarian stances. On the contrary, a significant majority of citizens expressed strong beliefs in the primacy of public health over their freedoms. Extreme libertarians were only a minority, albeit a minority that took up a position far from the average and radically opposed to the mainstream debate. Extreme libertarians’ positions were driven by a completely different vision of the news reliability of “older” and “newer” media arenas, different attitudes toward the “official truth,” and different levels of trust in the government to those of extreme communitarians.

Chapter 17, entitled “Citizens’ Political Discourses on Climate Change and Vaccines: A Comparative Study Between Spain and Poland,” compares the political discourses of citizens on science issues such as vaccines and climate change, after public consultations held in Poland and Spain in 2019—very close to general elections in both countries. The results of the exploratory study carried out by Carolina

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Moreno-Castro, Małgorzata Dzimińska, Aneta Krzewińska, Izabela Warwas, and Ana Serra-Perales show that more political opinions were expressed in the debates on climate change than on vaccines. Moreover, the citizens' views on the science-politics dichotomy were mainly negative, with men mixing science with politics more than women.

This book offers an overview of the burning topics in areas of political communication, political sciences, and communication studies. It constitutes a valuable contribution regarding the current threats faced by traditional and stable democracies while disinformation, polarization and populism have a main role in the present hybrid communicative scenario.

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