

THE NORMATIVE IMPERATIVE

SOCIOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES
OF STRATEGIC AND ORGANIZATIONAL
COMMUNICATION

EVANDRO OLIVEIRA
GISELA GONÇALVES
(EDS.)



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THE CHALLENGES OF COMMUNICATING THE ITALIAN RECOVERY PLAN: INVESTIGATING MODELS, STRATEGIES, PRACTICES, AND RHETORICS

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Public sector communication in Italy is undergoing intense transformation. The COVID-19 pandemic has opened new challenges in this field, reshaping communication models and practices (Faccioli et al., 2020; Lilleker et al., 2021) and bringing to light or accelerating tensions and innovation processes that had previously gone unnoticed.

Among these, the expansion of digitization processes (van Dijck et al., 2018) is particularly salient (Lovari & Ducci, 2021). As a matter of fact, the national lockdown announced in the spring of 2020 in Italy has forced public administrations to abruptly transition to digital communication in their everyday practices, professional languages, expressive repertoires, technical tools, and organizational arrangements — and to do so quickly in order to provide citizens and the media with timely and clear answers. Public sector communication has thus become ever more strategic for institutions. The pandemic crisis has also accelerated the processes of domestication of digital technologies for public sector communication, underlining the existence of best practices and resilience tactics among many public communicators

(Massa et al., 2022). At the same time, the emergency also highlighted multiple forms of delay in digitization processes, as well as organizational resistance to digital transformation, and short-circuits between public sector and political communication in the online and social media environments overseen by public administrations.

European governments were also faced with another major (communication) challenge. They had to set up and kick-start 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 that interconnect institutions, enterprises, and citizens. Therefore, the establishment of cooperative and concerted communication governance models is required. It is indeed necessary to activate complex processes of multi-stakeholder coordination (Janssen & Estevez, 2013) in order to effectively and inclusively communicate these multilevel plans (OECD, 2021; Lovari & Belluati, 2023), not least for accountability and transparency imperatives. These governance models have to inform both intra-organizational and professional cultures (Massa et al., 2022; Comunello et al., 2021) and the public administration's own governance logics (Johansson & Raunio, 2019). As for Italy, the Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza – PNRR (National Recovery and Resilience Plan) was launched on July 13, 2021, by the Italian Council of Ministers after a complex set of steps on the political, social, and economic levels in post-pandemic Italy. This reform project produced new challenges for public sector communication since it enforces the need for multilevel communication and, therefore, for concerted communication that empowers the actors in the system to engage as active participants in the opportunities brought into play by the reform project.

In these scenarios, communication ecologies are becoming increasingly complex and interconnected while the boundaries between genres, languages and professions are increasingly blurred. In other words, (public) sector communication processes in Italy are becoming ever more 'hybrid' (Rizzuto, 2020; Lovari, 2022). Through this concept, Chadwick (2013)

intends to address the ways in which the disintegration of unitary actors in the political arena and fuzzy organizational frontiers are reshaping the arrangements through which communicative power is distributed in contemporary democracies. This notion thus attempts to move beyond categories that have long governed thinking in social science in order to question boundaries in communication as an organizational issue rather than as something that can be assumed prior to the start of any analysis. In this sense, hybridity is an analytical tool that aims at “capturing and explaining the significance of processes that might be obscured by the dichotomous, essentialist, or simply less flexible orientations” (*ibid.*, p. 6). Three areas can be highlighted in which these aspects of hybridity are particularly evident in the public sector communication arena in Italy (Lovari, 2022): the porosity between public- sector communication and political communication, the hybridization of communicators’ knowledge and professionalism, and the fluidity in communication formats and genres. Regarding the first area, the debate about the relationship between public communication and political communication is still open, with different positions on which of the two would encompass the other (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; Graber, 2003). It has also been noted how the “platformization of public sector communication” (Lovari & Ducci, 2021) has bolstered these processes with detrimental effects on citizens’ perceptions of institutional communication (Materassi & Solito, 2015; Leone & Paoli, 2016; Lovari, 2016). The second area of hybridization concerns communication professionals in Italy. Digital communication has made the distinction between information and communication activities more complex, and it has challenged legitimate knowledge, tasks, and professionalism (Solito & Materassi, 2018). Finally, a further liminal space emerges from the hybridization between communication formats and genres (Sorrentino et al., 2020). The subsumption in public communication of the languages, communicative practices, and expressive codes of corporate communication are of particular interest here. They sometimes coexist with or replace the pomposity that has long characterized public administration communication, and sometimes give rise to new forms of expression (Ducci et al., 2019; Lovari & Righetti, 2020).

The tensions brought about by COVID-19, as well as the challenges of multilevel communication set by the post-pandemic recovery plans and the hybridization in contemporary communication ecologies, puts public sector communication in Italy in-between complex transformation processes. Caught amidst this transition, it moves in a liminal terrain that could lead to technocratic or managerial drifts as well as to the unfolding of creative potential and experimentation.

Research questions

Against this background, this contribution focuses on the strategic and organizational communication set up by the Italian government around the Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza – National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), i.e., the Italian plan to qualify for the NextGenerationEU fund for post-pandemic recovery. In particular, we investigate which communicative innovations the PNRR has brought and what are the existing vulnerabilities that it is perpetuating. To this end, we inquire into the communication governance models and into the hybridization processes that are embedded in and (re)produced through the PNRR project in Italy.

Specifically, through a multi-method analysis via in-depth interviews with élite publics and content analysis on institutional Facebook posts, we elaborate on the following research questions:

- RQ 1: Which communication governance model has been adopted for the PNRR? Has any multi-stakeholder and multilevel model been embedded, and with what local articulations?
- RQ 2: Which forms of hybridization can be found in languages, genres, rhetoric figures, narratives, themes, identities, etc., among public sector, political and corporate communication?

This contribution is based on a larger triennial research project that is currently ongoing.

Methodological steps

At the methodological level, we chose to proceed by setting our analysis on the PNRR official communication project launched by the Italian government, that is, Italia Domani. Italia Domani was assigned the task of promoting the allocation of the funds granted by NextGenerationEU. Therefore, it served as an important articulation hub for the PNRR communication, interconnecting government, ministries, regions, municipalities, citizens, and companies. Italia Domani, which was created in July 2022 with the approval of the PNRR project in Bruxelles, was formed by a task force of communication professionals appointed by the Italian government.

We proceeded through a combination of qualitative and quantitative research techniques. First, we conducted two in-depth interviews with élite publics who coordinated the Italia Domani project. The interview was based on a thematic guide based on professional training, online and offline communication practices in the PNRR project, organization and coordination between structures and stakeholders, and visions of public communication between normative imperatives and corporate languages.

As a second step, the Meta Crowdtangle monitoring and analysis tool was employed to extract all the posts issued by the Italia Domani Facebook page in the time range spanning from the approval of the PNRR to the installation of the new government, which decided to stop updating the channel (14/07/2022-17/10/2022). Specifically, data referring to the keywords “National Recovery and Resilience Plan” and “PNRR” were extracted, cleaned and consolidated. These data were elaborated through a content analysis technique (Krippendorff, 1983) and examined through interpretive and statistical analysis. Content analysis is frequently used for online data since it allows for effective elaboration through qualitative and quantitative approaches. Although web content poses inherent challenges mainly related to the instability and multiformity of texts (McMillan, 2000), content analysis is broadly used for the investigation of data corpora extracted from social network sites (Stemler, 2015).

At the operational level, a codebook was constructed that aimed at detecting thematic and semantic dimensions in the data extracted. 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. In order to ensure maximum inter-coder reliability (Krippendorff, 1983) and address the aforementioned challenges posed by web content, several joint sessions were conducted among the researchers to define the sample, ascertain mutual understanding of the codebook, and determine the approach. The codebook was refined through a series of pre-tests conducted by the researchers on a small sample of the available data.

Triangulation of qualitative data collected through interviews and data collected through content analysis on Facebook posts allowed the research team to obtain a richer picture of the object of study and thereby add depth and breadth to the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

Preliminary results

Interviews and content analysis on Facebook posts yielded useful preliminary results. In particular, they allowed to obtain ‘thick’ data and evidence regarding communication governance models and processes of hybridization between public sector, political, and corporate communication.

The qualitative data outline relevant information about the governance of communication in the PNRR. Notably, the lack of shared standards on communication both in the NextGenerationUE program (on the European level) and in the PNRR (on the Italian level) resulted in the Italia Domani agency having wide margins of discretionality when designing and implementing communication strategies for the PNRR project and its stakeholders. A fluid and networked communication model thus emerged that intertwined different actors – ministries, municipalities, citizens, businesses – across a variety of communication tools: the official website, the official Facebook page, an Instagram page, a newsletter, and a roadshow in several Italian municipalities.

The content analysis on Facebook posts also yielded useful evidence regarding the semantics of public communication and its forms of hybridization with political and corporate communication. Content analysis has focused on subjects, purposes, genres, modes of engagement and languages of the posts, and highlighted the presence and characteristics of references to 'authoritative' political figures in textual or iconographic form. Complete research data will be presented at the conference.

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