
Communication Flows in the European Elections: Amid Populism and Euroscepticism

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Within the field of communication studies, political communication is unquestionably one of the most prolific pillars on which academic discussion has historically been based. Since *communication* began to emerge in its own right as an independent field of study, researchers have focused on understanding its mechanisms and analysing its effects on public opinion. It is of considerable interest that the most compelling developments in this field have occurred in the last decade. The consolidation of the primitive *cybermedia* into mass dissemination tools, the irruption of social networks and the appearance of new communication uses and customs among citizens have disrupted the political communication scene.

We can safely say that as citizens and academics we find ourselves in an era of complexity. The lines separating information producers and consumers have been blurred into non-existence. The progressive impartiality between opinions and facts and the obscuring of the boundaries between information and entertainment, has resulted in ever-changing circumstances, where the traditional rules of political communication are no longer valid. The shifting of the public political space towards an overlap with the personal field leads to confusion between the public and private spaces. This supposes a prevalence of an 'emotional public sphere' in a new type of 'emotional regime' in political communication.

The members of the research group *Mediaflows* (CSO2016-77331-C2-1-R) bring together more than a decade of analysis in the field of political communication, specifically focused on digital communication environments. In addition to a personal interest in the field, the organisation has continuously held specialised congresses since 2009 and collaborated closely with the Menéndez Pelayo International University (UIMP) in organising a variety of academic and training projects. Fruit of this cooperation included the 2019 international congress *The European Elections 2019: Populism & Euroscepticism*, which was held in Valencia. The participation of different specialists in the field was the seed from which this special edition grew.

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The rise of populist movements from different ideologies, often linked to Eurosceptical positions, coincides with a context of uncertainty in the European project. From a political perspective, public debate focuses on addressing the European Union project itself. Similarly, the institutional crisis within the EU, whose epicentre now focuses on Brexit, paralyses advances in integration policies. The political fragility of the Paris-Berlin axis, a slowdown in economic growth and the problems emerging from the mismanagement of migratory flows, contribute to fostering nationalist, ethnocentric and rejectionist discourses. Taken as a whole, all these issues suggest the loss or decline of the EU's capacity for advocacy in the context of globalisation.

With such a context, it is appropriate to analyse whether the media and digital communication reflection of the discussions taking place contributes to its clarification, or on the contrary, increase tension. The role of mediation and mediatisation of crucial messages is key when it comes to defining, firstly, their interdependence and, secondly, the extent of their influence on public opinion, the construction of collective stereotypes and the impact on the electoral processes. Thus, the purpose of this special issue is to analyse the presence and dissemination of these discourses through social media, social networks and other digital communication spaces, as well as their impact on political discourse and electoral results.

THE CONTENTS OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The objectives of this special issue were designed following certain guidelines, such as: *a)* defining the scope of populist discourses; *b)* the resilience of the EU's inclusive discourse within the context of neoliberal globalisation and to address populist discourses; *c)* the influence of national electoral processes in certain EU countries; *d)* the extent of citizens' trust in the media; *e)* the influence of new communication methods and recent phenomena such as fake-news; and *f)* the persistence of the ability of the traditional media to build the news agenda. From this selection process, eight articles emerged to comprise this special issue.

From complementary perspectives, the first two articles explore the radicalisation process of the right in the context of Italian politics. Selcen Öner analyses the relationship between populism and Euroscepticism by comparing the different strategic approaches employed by the Northern League and the Five Star Movement. Based on a significant body of evidence, the author outlines the most significant milestones in the introduction of the populist and Eurosceptic axes into nationalist discourses, typical of these parties. The researcher Sara García-Santamaría hypothesises on how Matteo Salvini has used food as a political tool on his Instagram profile. The use of culinary references to articulate populist and nationalist discourses has long been established, but it takes on a new meaning in the context of social networks.

Following the analysis of the role played by social networks in this context, this special edition also includes four articles that explore the impact of new

ways of communicating on political communication. Two texts analyse how the informative agenda is established in social networks. The first, by researcher Mārtiņš Pričiņš, focuses on the role Facebook plays in defining the topics explored and narratives used during the campaign. The second, by researchers Rubén Rivas-de-Roca and Mar García-Gordillo, explores the agenda in the context of the social network Twitter, specifically in regard to the different ways the national candidates and the *spitzenkandidaten* (leading candidates) are presented.

Also dedicated to understanding the role played by social networks, this special issue includes two studies that have analysed certain topics that repeatedly appear in populist discourses. In the first, Blanca Nicasio-Varea, Marta Pérez-Gabaldón and Manuel Chávez investigate the treatment of anti-immigration sentiments by the US Republican Party under Trump's mandate. Their article examines how such treatment has influenced global politics and, specifically, European politics. In the second, Celia Belim carries out two comparative analyses of the management of online communication by two far-right parties: the Basta party in Portugal and Vox in Spain. The result of both analyses provides much data on how to instrumentalise populist communication.

Closing the circle of contributions, the next two articles focus on the role that television and audiovisual discourses have historically had in the politics of the 20th and, in particular, the 21st centuries. Regarding the traditional format of televised political communication, the 2019 election debates captured the attention of the authors Sebastián Sánchez-Castillo, Esteban Galán and Arnau Gifreu-Castells, who summarise the characteristics and evolution of the current representation of televised communication. Finally, professors Àlvar Peris-Blanes and Javier Pérez-Sánchez analyse the concepts of polarisation and television spectacle in the *La Sexta Noche* talk show in Spain, as examples of the emotional regime of political communication.

IN CONCLUSION

It is worth noting here the impossibility of covering the entirety of a field as large as political communication in the European context. It is a complex scenario, in which the general territorial and communicative scope is sometimes diluted between national or local issues. We must also consider its changing nature. Its transformations are due to technological and social issues, whose evolution and prospects are difficult to establish. Despite this, the effort made by academics and researchers to find any patterns in these new scenarios can be seen in a particularly effective way in this special edition. We are certain that this edition will shed light on these emerging patterns, and it is our intention to continue contributing to building knowledge in this area.

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This project, fruit of the convergence of the two aforementioned research areas, focused on the analysis of communication flows among political parties, the media and citizens in processes of political mobilization. He heads the academic journal *Dígitos*, founded in 2015. He has authored or edited 12 books and numerous articles and book chapters in various scientific publications.