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Major in Politics, Philosophy and Economics

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POLITICAL COMMUNICATION:

Dumbing Down and *Infotainment*

Thesis Supervisor   Candidate

Prof. Michele Sorice   Vittoria Pioli

                                                     Student ID: 079052

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"The two words information and communication are often used interchangeably, but they signify quite different things. Information is giving out; communication is getting through."

- *Sydney J. Harris[1]*

Introduction

If we come to endorse the Aristotelian concept of the *Zoon politikon* (IV sec. B.C.*)*, that is to say, literally, that man is a "civic" animal, a citizen-animal, we would convey that men (i.e. mankind) cannot live by themselves and it will prove them necessary to interact and, therefore, communicate. The famous expression is sometimes mistakenly translated as a political animal, but the adjective *politikon* is derived from the ancient Greek word *polis*, which actually means city. However, more generally, man is considered a social animal in Aristotelian terms.

In fact, all individuals need to live together in groups, communicate and accept that they (we) are part of the same – shared – world. Thus, we posit communication at the very basis of men's lives and of their survival on earth. Communication is the first tool we have at our disposal to connect with each other, exchanging basic codes of conduct, values, symbols, preferences, opinions, beliefs and so on and so forth. When joining together, people build communities of mutual respect in the interaction of its members. The community will not reduce the essence of all individuals to some homogeneous quality common to all, but the group will highlight every personal characteristic by confronting each of them with the others, establishing relations of natural sociability within its members and efficiently developing everyone's skills and attitudes in order to bring novelty, growth and added value to those given groups and communities.

Once established, larger communities will necessarily need some rules to function properly and the most efficient dialogue in order to set out, develop and pursue a "good life" takes place in politics. Here, the purpose of communication, a purpose assigned to men by nature according to Aristotle, would be to reveal what is advantageous and what is harmful, and consequently to expose what is just and what is unjust. Furthermore, the "good politics" would prefer and follow certain paths and codes of behaviour instead of others in order to achieve the highest level of growth, health, and well-being of given communities. For instance, following David Easton's outlook set out in 1953, Politics decides what is right and what is wrong through the correct interchange of the inputs from the environment and the outputs into the environment. In fact, a political system receives the

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[1] Harris, S. (1975). *The best of Sydney J. Harris*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin., p. 293

demands and the support from outside and then produces and communicates decisions and policies, which, in turn, will additionally accumulate new feedbacks for the well-functioning of the system as a whole.

Thus, the coming together of those two spheres of human nature, sociability, and politics (the private and the public life of each person), would generate a political civil society producing multiple interpretations and representations of a shared reality. In more recent times, this happens also through the work of the media system. In this reality, people – namely, the citizens – have a certain "power to communicate", an expression endorsed in our modern concept of the freedom of expression. The communicative power, in fact, gives the individual the *opportunity* to develop his own opinions, values, and attitudes. Moreover, it sets the *way* through which those opinions can be expressed, and it provides the *place* where the citizens can confront their ideas. Today, this place is the media sphere, and by the use of the latter citizens can reach larger and larger audiences and further influence other people's opinions, beliefs and behaviours (Sinha, 1997).

Nonetheless, and quite sadly, communication is not always transparent nor linear. In fact, globally, individuals face persistent forms of censorship and they receive distorted and misleading information along with stereotyped images of gender and race. Moreover, some of them have restricted access to knowledge and insufficient channels to communicate their ideas and opinions. That is why, remarkably, in this scenario, it has been drafted in 1996 The People's Communication Charter (PCC), one of the most noteworthy, recent and legal examples of the people's struggle for the right to communicate. The People's Communication Charter is an opening step in the development of a permanent movement concerned with the quality of our communication environment. The initiators of the PCC believe it is time for individual citizens and their organisations to take an active role in the shaping of the cultural environment and to focus on the resulting production and distribution of information and culture. However, even though the Charter has been codified at the international level, it still holds only basic consideration worldwide: for instance, shockingly many people do not even know it exists. Along with the creation of some pluralist and sustainable cultural environment, the aim of the Charter is to promote communication in general, since, as its Preamble mentions, being communication *basic to the life of all individuals and communities, people are entitled to participate in it, and to make decisions about it within and between societies.*[2] In this scenario, the Charter points out to the importance of the freedom of expression, specifically free of any interference from public or private interests. It is fundamental

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[2] The People's Communication Charter: An International Covenant of Standards and Rights. Reproduced in Culturelink 19, pp 171-75

for citizens to develop their own communication skills, channels, and institutions through which *they can speak for themselves and tell their own stories.*[3] Furthermore, The People's Communication Charter provides the common framework for all those individuals who share the belief that people should be active and critical participants in their social reality and should be able to communicate their ideas and opinions. But the Charter is not an end in itself. It mainly provides the basis for an enduring critical reflection on those world-wide trends, tendencies, and inclinations that determine the quality of our lives in the third millennium.

Finally, it is true that public systems and national organizations do not always help people in getting proper information, but it should be recalled that, nowadays, public space is increasingly dominated by a varied assortment of uninformed individuals, many of whom are self-deprecating, contemptuous of formal education that tend to minimize the value of experience. It seems that now we are living in an era where disinformation overcomes knowledge. And this is not a good sign at all. A modern society cannot function without a social division of labour and without relying on experts, professionals, and intellectuals. Naturally, nobody is expert about everything. Regardless of our aspirations, we are bound by the undeniable limits of our talent. As a community, we prosper because we specialize and because we develop formal and informal mechanisms that allow us to trust each other for their respective specializations. The great technological development of our era has given us access to an unprecedented amount of information. The result, however, was not the beginning of a new Enlightenment, but the rise of an age of incompetence in which a sort of uninformed egalitarianism seems to prevail over traditional consolidated knowledge.

This thesis explores the political dimension of communication – namely, political communication – through its academic and popular background. Our starting point shall be the presentation and the discussion of the notion of the public sphere as presented by Jürgen Habermas in 1962. Furthermore, we shall observe the structural, ideological and conceptual influence of the media apparatus, particularly during an era known as the Information Age, over this concept.

Afterwards, we shall observe and learn about two relatively new political communication phenomena: the political *dumbing down* and the rise of *infotainment*, presenting and discussing the two communication originalities from a notional perspective and through academic, factual and popular observations. Hereafter, we shall try to understand if, and how far, modern political communication tools have endangered or fortified our comprehension of traditional knowledge.

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[3] *Ibid*.

Finally, we shall witness their conceptual applicability and widespread relevance within today's political framework, especially through political and popular culture, the celebrity-like consideration of modern political actors and the consequential possibility of readdressing the electoral volatility, the latter being a phenomenon characterizing the political scenario of the last decades.

Chapter One

Political Communication

By its origin, communication is the transmission of a particular good – namely, information. It is intrinsically a multi-way traffic of social reciprocal interactions through messages of every kind, therefore acquiring its people-centric character. By definition, the term communication stands for *the imparting or exchanging of information by speaking, writing, or using some other medium* and consequently, *the successful conveying or sharing of ideas and feelings.*[4]

Robert Denton and Gary Woodward (1990) set political communication in terms of the intentions of its senders to influence the political environment. Political communication aids decision-making processes that serve societies' best interests to explain and inform about every decision. It is an ongoing process of horizontal and vertical discussion and feedback which creates social cohesion, especially around legitimate governance. Thus, political communication links the represented to the representatives and helps gain legitimacy among and compliance from the people, who will feel more connected with their State.

There exist two main political communication approaches: the Frankfurt School approach of the 1930s and the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies approach starting from the 1960/70s. Generally, according to the former and to some of its associated theorists such as Max Horkheimer (1895 – 1973) and Theodor Adorno (1903 – 1969), political communication reflects a top-down structure, where social control is more relevant than representation. The position of the latter, whose main representative is Stuart Hall (1932 – 2014), is best embodied in Hall's Encoding/decoding model of communication. This model claims that television and other media audiences present (i.e. *encode*) messages that are interpreted (i.e. *decoded*) in different ways depending on an individual's cultural background, economic standing, and personal experiences. This two-way process is basically the translation of a message that is easily understood: when you decode a message, in fact, you extract its meaning in ways that make sense to you. Hall claims that the decoding subject can assume three different positions towards the encoded message: firstly, a dominant/hegemonic position (the preferred reading, the message is completely understood), then, a negotiated position

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[4] Oxford Dictionaries | English. (2018). communication | Definition of communication in English by Oxford Dictionaries. [online] Available at: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/communication [Accessed 10 Jun. 2018].

(the audience cannot completely share the message but accepts it and adapts it to its own values), and finally an oppositional position (the message is misunderstood by the receiver and rejected).

Moreover, there are two models of political communication: the dialogic model and the media model. In the former, the media apparatus does not represent the public space, but it sure helps to build it. Additionally, the communication process among the social actors, such as the political system, the media system, and the citizens, is dynamic and relation-based. In the latter, instead, the media apparatus and the public space are overlapped and the consequently communication process involving the media system, the political system and the citizens is exclusively framed in the media space.

One of the most famous communication processes is the functionalist model presented by Harold Lasswell (1902 – 1978): here the surveillance of the environment, the correlation to society and the transmission to future generations are ensured by a functional chain of message diffusion. In his 1948 article *"The Structure and Function of Communication in Society",* Lasswell wrote:

[A] convenient way to describe an act of communication is to answer the following questions:

Who

Says What

In Which Channel

To Whom

With What Effect? [5]

Within communication studies, of major relevance is the theory elaborated by Paul Felix Lazarsfeld (1901 – 1976) in 1944: according to his *two-step flow of communication* model, most people within a social group outline their ideas under the influence of opinion leaders, who in turn are influenced by the mass media. In fact, contrary to the one-step flow of the hypodermic needle model, which argues that people are directly influenced by mass media, according to Lazarsfeld's model, ideas flow from mass media to opinion leaders, and from them to a wider population. Opinion leaders pass on their own interpretation of information melted with the actual media content, intrinsically and maybe unconsciously shaping the future public opinion of the electorate.

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[5] Lasswell, Harold (1948). Bryson, L., ed. The Structure and Function of Communication in Society. The Communication of Ideas. New York: Institute for Religious and Social Studies. p. 117.

That is why, even though not exclusive, public communication is a necessary means for the well-functioning of some forms of government, especially democracies. It is the best-offered indicator which can help us measure the potential capability of the electorate stressing to establish better governance. Surely, it is the most effective means used in order to translate and report the concept of citizenship from an abstract idea to a proper social and political practice. Additionally, within the democratic political spectrum, the creativity and originality of public communication lie in its partial unpredictability. Not being a fixed concept, but characterizing the public sphere with its fluidity, flexibility, and volatility, public communication gives people time and space to create and develop their *own* opinions, rather than passively and entirely accept a pre-set of given views.

This chapter will present the theoretical background of political communication within the public sphere and the media apparatus, especially during our information age.

1.1   Public Sphere

Being a social phenomenon, communication shares a reciprocally valuing relationship with the public sphere. In the first half of the twentieth century, Jürgen Habermas (1929 -) developed the concept of the public sphere studying the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries' bourgeois societies. He presented the new phenomenon as the space between civil society and the state. According to the German sociologist, that *space* can be in any place where debate and communication are public rather than private, but still not under the control of the state. In fact, that institutional space exists outside the state but engages all who are concerned with matters of public interest. The principles of Habermas's view of public opinion in the public sphere are premised on the postulation of rational-critical truthful debate and universal access. Within the public sphere, in fact, public opinion can be formed and expressed when arguments are presented on their own merits rather than on the authority of a speaker and its legitimation comes from the conditions of individuals' active participation. People come together to reflect and critically discuss, in public, on themselves and the practices of the state. Consequently, the norms and values emerging from those debates would be considered valid when gaining the consent of others within the community, promoting cohesion rather than fragmentation. Accordingly, the political task of the public sphere became the regulation of civil society. The sociologist advocated a participatory democracy grounded in the free exchange of ideas in the formation of the will of the sovereign public. Thus, Habermas's reasoning reversed the pessimism brought up by the previous thinkers of the critical

theory, which argued that in modern societies the public opinion was becoming simply the sum of mass individual choices manipulated through marketing strategies extending to politics. Differently, in his central work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* ([1962] 1989), Habermas concluded that although modern politics was changing according to the institutional-based agendas of professional politicians, driven by power and capital, it still maintained the potential to develop separately from state and commercial interests, especially thanks to the *space* of the public sphere, which acted as a positive force keeping authorities within their bounds.

Additionally, the interactions within the public sphere and the public communication may have a wide range of topic variations, but they should always raise curiosity in both the minds and spirits of vigilant audiences. Actually, if public communication is to be constantly reinvigorated, the best way to reach the "take-off" stage is to act at local level when raising citizens' interest in public matters. Dialogues should be based on face-to-face interactions within small group of participants, gathered together when sharing the same political and/or social interests or just because they find themselves living one close to the other, or in alternative non-conventional media, such as folk ballads dealing with political issues, informal multi-perspective chats and so on. As a final remark, one of the most frightening challenge that the public sphere – and by extension the whole sphere of political communication – is facing lies not in the advent of the Media, but in the ever-growing dominant position of the Market. If we let the "almighty dollar" being the true shaper of individuals' values and opinions, then people, when seeing the market setting the rules of the world, will avoid challenging the dominant view professed by the economic mechanisms. This could ultimately lead to a condition of unnecessary public space where to form one's opinion, thus transmuting the public sphere into the ghost of public (and political) communication.

1.2 Media influence

In contemporary societies, public opinion is generally mediated by the mass media, which has come to incorporate the Habermasian concept of the public sphere. Yet, the distribution of information for debate and the media presentation of issues become distorted to gain attention, rather than to provide knowledge. The opinion of the public is no longer created through discussion and negotiation but is constructed through systems of communication, in conflict with political actors, who pursue to hold control of the propagation of information. However, in an era of extended franchise and involvement, mass methods of communication are also necessary to

organise different public debates, conduct contemporary elections and reach the largest number of citizens – the electorate. Critics may argue that even though the media are supposed to facilitate voters' choices by providing them with free and accurate information, thus enabling citizens to engage in debate over political choices, yet the public is not in control of what is presented, and people are usually only able to react to media content and cannot go more in depth when discussing. (Negrine, 1989).

Nonetheless, the rapid growth of the mass media as agents of communication has become for most citizens the primary source of political information and for most political actors the primary source in order to attract guaranteed voters. The strong points of the media apparatus come from two different but coexistent directions: the powerful technological devices and the skilful political actors. On the one hand, within the inanimate resources, different means have historically and successfully dominated the political scene, ranging from common newspapers, the radio, the television and now the internet. On the other hand, skilful political actors have to be competent on the matter, but they also need to be, literally, good *actors*: since politics depends on the arts of persuasion and on the power of emotions, following a Machiavellian line of thought, we can state that politics is a stage, a theatre where actors need to perform appropriately. Thus, politicians and their *entourages* need to be able to seize the moment and follow the flow of current emotional consensus coming from the electorate. For instance, by recognising the relevance of the visual element of communication, parties may seek to construct media events, where political actors may intervene and therefore gain free publicity and more and more political support.

The coming together of those two spheres of communication, the technology and the people, gives us the opportunity to observe two main political phenomena: the important figure of the spin-doctor and the relatively new reality of the personalization of politics. The spin-doctoring is one of the main methods used by parties to attempt to control the message disseminated to the public. This is a communication expert who works as a consultant on behalf of political figures. Its task is to elaborate, through precise strategies of image, an appearance of the appropriate politician to be submitted to the public through the media, in order to obtain electoral consent or more generally to obtain consensus regarding its political mandate. Differently, the personalization of politics at the beginning was only a hypothesis, almost resembling a political myth, but then it came to emphasise especially the personal and psychological relationships between citizens and political leaders. The personalization of politics is characterized by a single, charismatic leader embodying and transmitting the whole political manifesto thanks to his social appeal. Here, the central position played by the parties, in tying the citizens to the political life, from the last decades of the twentieth

century came to be in question, for parties were no longer as solidly anchored in the society as they had been in the past. Additionally, this phenomenon can follow two routes: centralized and decentralized. The former implies that power flows upwards from the group to a single leader, for instance from a political party to a party leader, concentrating political power in the hands of very few individuals; the latter implies that power flows downwards from the group to individual politicians who are not executive leaders, so that even non-leading members of the group gain more personal power. According to this scenario, the balance of power within democracies is constantly changing between individual leaders and political groupings.

The media influence can also be observed through the massive usage of *soundbites* during the 1960s and 1970s, which are short clips of speech or music extracted from a longer piece of audio. In the political coverage, they are used to encapsulate a policy or issue and are specifically designed to catch headlines to attract media attention, a function today almost replaced by the diffused use of *hashtags*. In the most recent internet-based media context, the "hashtag generation" is born with the remarkable spread of Twitter users. This 2006 social network is globally known for its 140 characters messages, therefore the need of being concise, direct and catchy. The hashtags set a tendency, a famous word attracting more and more audience. In fact, because of its widespread use, the word *hashtag* was also added to the Oxford English Dictionary in June 2014: *a word or phrase preceded by a hash sign (#), used on social media websites and applications, especially Twitter, to identify messages on a specific topic.*[6]

As yet relatively outside of state and political party control, the internet represents the best chance to transform political communication systems and the nature of public opinion formation and circulation. Surely, since its advent and diffusion, it had offered the best opportunity for a complete communication revolution in general. Politically speaking, this "new" medium presents signs of fulfilling the normative role as an impartial provider of information to the citizenry, upon which public opinion is formed. Remarkably, communication via the internet can be both top-down and bottom-up, horizontal and vertical, surely a dynamic and interactive two-way process. That is why, from this perspective, the internet embodies the Habermasian ideals of freedom of speech and information as the basis through which public opinion may be shaped. Moreover, thanks to the internet, the geography of political communication is constantly in flux, as the relevance of traditional national borders becomes weakened by transnational and instant contacts. However, this arena of free speech and debate, which is characterised by an unlimited overflow of information,

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[6] Oxford Dictionaries | English. (2018). hashtag | Definition of hashtag in English by Oxford Dictionaries. [online] Available at: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/hashtag [Accessed 3 Apr. 2018].

does not necessarily equate with increased common knowledge. Paradoxically, the nature of the medium itself, boundaryless and unfiltered, may undermine its utility and value as a reliable source of information. Moreover, in some countries, the opportunity to hold elites accountable, to engage in prolonged rational and critical debate, paradoxically decreases because of *fake news,* hoaxes*, clickbait* headlines or misinformation channels in general. Miserably, the quantity of information does not always equate with quality. Additionally, citizen marginalisation may occur, as some individuals have limited, if not any, direct access to this method of communication. For instance, where principally all western democracies have simple and direct access to the Internet, then you may have countries such as the Republic of Cuba where home access to the Internet remains largely inaccessible for the general population, and finally you may have countries where people's lives are not centred at all in internet-based technological devices.

It is of vital importance for contemporary media to not act as media who are the debate, rather than the informers, of a public political opinion.

1.3   The Information Age

Given this media battle for control of the diffused message, public opinion no longer correlates with the normative expectations in Habermas's public sphere, but political actors and parties have tried to dominate the information propagation process, in attempts to shape public opinion, so that it may stay under control both during election times and in the broader context of system legitimacy.

Information has always been an exchangeable and valuable good. As any other type of commodity, knowledge and information help build a fruitful future, first of all, as noted, by shaping people's opinions. We live in the Information Age, an era where information is freely disseminated and received. It deals with the evolution of the electronic information technologies that give us the power to communicate and process information instantaneously. Certainly, this *Age* has a strong connection with the Digital Revolution: society has shifted from an economy based on traditional industry brought by the Industrial Revolution with industrialization, to an economy based on information technology, also defined as the knowledge economy. In fact, originated in the 1960s, the Information Age is defined as *the era in which the retrieval, management, and transmission of*

information, especially by using computer technology, is a principal (commercial) activity.[7] Fundamentally, what is peculiar to the Information Age is its speed: it is the only period in human history being ever-changing, constantly subject to fast evolution processes, impacting large amounts of people. Additionally, the information age is contracting time and space: long-distances and high-risk travels are quite a distant memory, life-changing news no longer take days to arrive and information flows faster, blurring more and more both physical and ideological borders.

Unfortunately, the term information has lost much of its original meaning. Today, as a modern term, *Information* is used primarily by hi-tech supplies salespeople. It no longer equates with knowledge; information means fact. It is not simply understanding or comprehension; it is (especially technologic) data. It is not instruction; it is tables and graphs and statistics. It is not education; it is world rankings and competition. It is not investigation and discovery; it is often superficiality. However, it still is a process of something going into the mind, and coming out again, but different than when it went in - involving judgment, weighing, values, and analogies. The necessary and most efficient use of information, first of all in order to build up a solid background of knowledge, is to hold to a mission of balance. There is the need for intellectual temperance, more sharing values, more skills in effective writing, reading, listening, and speaking, incorporating, but not driven by, computation familiarity and competence; moreover, there is the need to keep in mind wider and deeper historical and ethical perspectives. Together, these constitute a true education and a good use of information.

An accurate analysis of the information age is provided by Liora Salter (1993), who argues that there are four critical perspectives on the new communications and information technologies. The first is that the "information age" is mere rhetoric: it is never determinant of economic and social relations *per se,* but it only hides and/or present what best fits the political scenario at that moment, setting, or not, a social revolution. The second perspective argues that the information age exists, but it only consists of technological capacity: the computers, for instance, do make communication and information available, but they are irrelevant to the type of communication proposed. On the contrary, the third perspective argues for the relevance of technological change within the information age as providing, as such, the possibility of proper interactive (and democratic) communication. In fact, computer networks today place coordination tools in the hands of ordinary people, developing more accurate decision-making processes through their technological skills, empowered only by the available technological devices. In this scenario, everyone is an active

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[7] Oxford Dictionaries | English. (2018). information age | Definition of information age in English by Oxford Dictionaries. [online] Available at: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/information_age [Accessed 6 Apr. 2018].

participant in a renovated democratic process based on the media and on the developments of communication technology. Finally, the last perspective is the inverse of the first one. Here, the communications and information technologies are seen as an agent social revolution, but they do not empower ordinary people, instead, it is the multinational corporations that are being empowered. In fact, informational power is consolidated away from individuals and in the hands of fewer and fewer corporate agents, and the potential for community and democracy, at the basis of the new technologies, is destroyed by the use that dominant entities make of the new technologies.

However, even though some truth lies in each perspective, there are also some problems within the four standpoints: they are sometimes contradictory between each other and the new technologies are not a unitary phenomenon, nor they represent a coherent and unified set of technologies. Moreover, all these perspectives strongly operate at a high level of abstraction and the uneven development of the technologies around the world is not taken into consideration. Other contradictions may be found among the four perspectives, but essentially the message proposed is that technologies are viewed as a package, not considering the significant differences between them. The social and economic relationships within the information age are observed at a high level of abstraction.

The unavoidable – but sometimes superficial – technological determinism, the idea that technology drives history in a prescribed manner, denies the existence of alternative ways of conceiving and talking about the information present era (Kline, 2015). A relevant risk is the possibility of falling into a technological utopianism. It can be described as an ideology based on the belief that scientific and technological progress can lead to a utopia, or at least help to satisfy some desire that is impossible to achieve. Therefore, a techno-utopia is a hypothetical ideal society, in which the work of laws, government, and social conditions aim exclusively at the good and happiness of all its citizens (Natale and Balbi, 2014). In this utopic society, the advanced science and technology allow the existence of an ideal living standard, such as the end of the scarcity of resources or the abolition of suffering and even immortality.

<center>**Chapter Two**</center>

What is Dumbing Down?

By definition, the adjective *dumbed-down* stands for something *simplified so as to be intellectually undemanding and accessible to a wide audience.*[8] Among its synonyms we may find popular, unpretentious, simplistic etc; but the phenomenon of dumbing down is not just an easy-to-understand process of communication, it is much more. Among many other spheres of communication, the singularity of dumbing down is strongly correlated to the media apparatus, to the political discourse and to the modern flow and reception of information in general.

There has been considerable academic debate over the phenomenon of dumbing down, the majority of which considering this process as a negative influence especially within the political environment, specifically through the distorted use of media resources. Even when spelling it, dumbing down presents a strong alliteration commonly reinforced towards a negative direction. As a disparaging term, dumbing down usually presents the procedure of simplifying a subject towards its lowest common denominator. Essentially, the process of dumbing down would necessarily lead to a dumbed-down politics. However, a remarkable analysis of the phenomenon comes from Mick Temple (2006), professor of Journalism and Politics at Staffordshire University, who argues that, basically, the so-called dumbing down of political coverage today is an indispensable and inevitable part of people's engagement in political and public matters, by being able to reach more and more unconventional audiences. Moreover, according to Professor Temple, a public sphere mainly based on the rational and elitist coverage of politics is an insufficient and deceitful representation of how the majority of people receives today political knowledge and makes judgements accordingly. On the contrary, a less elite-driven political agenda, able to reflect a more accurate representation of today's sections of society, recognizes and accounts for the relevance of the emotional, but not necessarily trivial, human sphere. Living today in a system where problems are perceived too hard, people usually give up solving them and prefer to retire into a kind of numbness. Therefore, it has been argued that we live in a *dumbocracy*, the rule of cleverness without wisdom (Mosley, 2000).

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[8] Oxford Dictionaries | English. (2018). dumbed-down | Definition of dumbed-down in English by Oxford Dictionaries. [online] Available at: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/dumbed-down [Accessed 8 Apr. 2018].

As not above, critically, the dumbing down of political coverage refers mainly to the oversimplification and sensationalism of more serious news and events by the journalists and by the commercialization of the media apparatus in general. In fact, the latter phenomenon is seen as the "truly responsible" for both the death of the Habermasian public sphere and for the general dumbing down of political coverage (Street, 2001). However, as previously mentioned, it would be naïve and quite anachronistic to not recognise the inevitable influence of the media on the public sphere today: thus, it is more appropriate to talk about a mediated public sphere (Dahlgren, 1995). Here, it has been critically argued that the role of the rational individual shifts from one of a simple citizen to that of a consumer, and information instead of shaping people's public opinion seems to be shaped by commercial requirements. Consequentially, the implication is that the whole concept of citizenship would fall from the inside, along with its innermost characteristics, such as the civic duty of taking part in public life and engage in political matters (Savigny, 2005).

2.1   Political Participation

The much-debated dumbing down of political coverage is seen by many scholars as one – if not the primary – source of the declining levels of active participation in traditional methods of politics. For critics, which represent the dominant orthodoxy in the matter, this process has a negative influence not only over the shaping of public opinion but also over the authoritative structures of power, made less visible by entertainment, triumphant over measured judgments (Manning, 2001).

However, it may be more appropriated to consider dumbing down as a communicative strategy used by journalists, as well as by politicians, sometimes colluding with broadcasters, to find ways of "doing politics" in a way that might attract greater audiences, usually detached from the traditional political scenario. News has become more democratic: it is presented in such a way to reach more segments of the society and to cover a wider range of public matters, such as bio-ethics, birth technologies, environmental issues, gender policies and so on and so forth. Knowledge is no longer elite-based, something provided for and by experts, but it is shared also among ordinary readers, now informed about certain aspects of popular culture previously out of their daily field of action and interest. Remarkably, the connection between political and popular is strong: politics is a form of popular culture and the popular culture is a form of politics (Street, 1997).

Moreover, Ornebring and Jonsson argue that an appeal to the emotions can stimulate and promote political participation, indicating that sensationalism and simplification are not enemies of the public good (2004). If it is true that *it takes all sorts to make the world,* pluralist societies need to present politics in all possible ways – the more accessible and exciting, the better – to embrace the plenty of emotions faced daily by the ordinary audience – namely, the electorate. News coverage failing to present politics in an interesting way is counterproductive to the whole system: there is the need for a balance between readers educational standards and the presented information, and if this implies even the use of tabloid coverage of politics, it means that some segments of the societies require so.

A key factor determining political participation today is the Net. This interconnection of virtual information is seen both as a positive and negative influence over political communication and, by extension, over political participation. On the one hand, as noted before, in an information era, the Net embodies the new public sphere where freedom of speech is a reality, with the possibility of including more and more people in public discourse thanks to the easier access to public spaces devoted to political debates, enhancing political participation. On the other hand, the Net is believed to provide just an illusion of this new public sphere, since the readers, and therefore the electorate, do not truly control the information presented and take for granted what already exists online and is accessible to all, making rational-critical public debate unlikely to happen since the opinion formation process is strongly tied to and influenced by authoritative information providers.

2.2   Quality *vs*. Quantity

Many critics argue that quality journalism is in crisis because of the media's obsession with personalities (Cohen, 1998): attracting larger quantities of the audience seems more important than providing quality news. However, even though it is undeniable the change in political agendas, privileging more tabloid-based outlines, their coverage of political issues remains in place and extremely accessible to a "more educated" audience, favouring *high-quality* information (Barnett and Gaber, 2000). The dumbing down of political coverage has extended the audience, not restricted it. Sensationalism, which is not a synonym for inferior journalism, does not distort the truth, but rather presents given events in such a way to impact harder the mind of the ordinary reader, commonly busy with his daily tasks, in order to make him understand and hopefully engage in the matter (Marr, 2005).

The real problem is the utopic image political scientists generally have of citizens: it is more common to find a large variety of individuals attracted more by personalities and sensationalism rather than rational-critical actors in public life, enthusiastic to deal with the "hard stuff" of politics. While still acting as rational actors, individuals base their decisions mainly on factors different from ideological consistency, being passionate more of vivacious, dynamic and human issues. Thus, since it is true that the vote is one and the same for all, even those of the electorate generally uninterested or unskilled in formal politics should receive basic information on public matters in order to make judgments. In effect, basic coverage is still coverage. Additionally, it is important to not underestimate the lighter coverage of political matters, since starting from only a little – if not any – interest, the electorate could be encouraged to reach further examination of the given issue and perhaps seek more advanced information, share it and involve more and more citizens.

Acting as a community, the sense of inclusion has a strong influence over the electorate: people are more willing to participate via non-traditional, more individualistic and immediate means, creating new spaces for deliberation within the public sphere, feeling of being included into the public debate even only by answering interactive television polls or commenting over blogs, or sharing political posts and statuses on their social media personal pages (Stanyer, 2004). As Hudson suggested, the online political activity might be the major area of impact on a citizen's sense of efficacy (2005). Moreover, it has to be recognized that, objectively, since society is composed of many publics, it would be natural to find people of all ages and social backgrounds using different and multiple genres – especially entertainment media – to make sense of the current political scenario. This would not consequentially lead to a passive audience, incapable of discussing the serious political issues which are daily raised in non-political programming. Non-traditional is not a synonym for uninterested, popular is not a synonym for disengaged. In this scenario, dumbing down offers an occasion for communication across social partitions (Lunt and Stenner, 2005), and even though there are some media resources dumber than others, it has been argued that so are some people (McNair, 2003), which makes the public sphere the most suitable place to express everyone's opinion.

In 2015, following a major debate hosted by Ipsos MORI, King's College London and the Media Standards Trust, new research revealed that the British public had an ambivalent attitude towards the impact of social media platforms on political debate. Users of social media were much more likely to be positive about the benefits of broadening access to information and breaking down barriers between voters and politicians than non-users, yet some of them were also just as likely to recognise its disadvantages, such as making the debate more divisive and superficial that it used to

be. While social media has broadened access, many Britons were worried that this happened at the cost of the quality of political debate. Of course, social media seems to be complementing and adding to traditional news media, but it does not seem to be replacing it entirely.[9]

Consequentially, as a final remark, it is true that the accessibility and availability of in-depth political writing are higher than ever before, but it should be remarked that some portions of what passes for political information nowadays are mostly superficial. In fact, there is the need for a balanced and dynamic combination between the increasing quantity of electors able to get political information (not always politically informed) and the necessity of keeping information quality in place. Basically, what is needed is a quality dumbed down political coverage, mainly aiming at tabloid markets, which can analyse politics from an informed standpoint, but in such a way and style that might catch the attention of the uninterested sensationalist reader as well, especially because it became extremely relevant to know what citizens like, what they think, and how they would act: basically, to discover *what's hot, and what's not.*

2.3 Dumbing-down: reinventing the political process

By questioning the borders between the political and the popular and the case for thinking creatively about what it means to be politically engaged, Stephen Coleman in 2006 stated that *if politicians really want to reconnect (or, most likely, connect for the first time) with broad sections of the public that have come to regard them as irrelevant, malevolent or worse, they may need to come to terms with approaches to representation that capture the symbolic, dramatic and banal aspects of human experience.*[10] In fact, the new generation of voters is not as incompetent and superficial as it is sometimes portrayed and a strong connection between voters and candidates must be re-established. Naturally, this is a challenging endeavour to the conventional wisdom assuming that politicians should present, as a fait accompli, the policies they believe in. on the contrary, for young people, involvement, especially in the media, is now all about building a conversation.

Thus, we are dealing with a two-way process where the majority of the political material is mutually generated. On online platforms such as *MySpace, Linkedin* or *Facebook* this situation is particularly evident: on the one hand, many political actors, from lower to higher charges, possess a

[9] Ipsos MORI. (2018). A third of young people think social media will influence their vote. [online] Available at: https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/third-young-people-think-social-media-will-influence-their-vote [Accessed 3 Jun. 2018].

[10] Coleman, S. (2006). How the other half votes. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9(4), p. 458

public page where they present, suggest and discuss new ideas, events, and different circumstances; on the other hand, more and more citizens express their views, beliefs and frequent disappointment with given opinions and proposals. The consequences are multiple, which may be regarded both positively and negatively: for instance, by presenting important topics via informal communication media, political actors are *dumbing-down* the enhanced language of politics; at the same time, by being able to freely and publicly express their thoughts, citizens become political experts even when politics is not their main interest. The two particular situations are both negatively criticized and positively appraised. The dumbing-down of politics, seen as a negative phenomenon, denigrates the elitist conception that assumes politics as the highest form of expression; on the contrary, seen as a positive phenomenon, the dumbing-down of politics is the most efficient way to connect a distant political leading group to the average electorate. Likewise, especially through the social media, the citizens have the possibility to freely express their consent or dissent towards political and non-political topics: in negative terms, this opportunity allows ordinary people to present themselves as political experts, but within more positive terms, this is the basis, the highest form and the true essence of democracy itself.

Therefore, Stephen Coleman believes that to restore voter turnouts to their historic levels and involve a larger number of younger voters in the procedure, electoral processes should be re-invented. This is not an easy task, nor a quick one, but there are a few basic steps that could be made: for instance, firstly, it could be introduced online voting as an alternative to the intimidating polling booths. Moreover, it would make the process a lot easier and faster for citizens living abroad, for individuals with double citizenship needing to vote in different countries and in different times, and for all those individuals that sometimes are simply lazier than others. In fact, the use of the web, live digital streaming, mobile telephony and SMS harmonies with the interactive, multimedia environment in which especially young people (voters) feel at home, while traditional political communication sometimes still seems to be trapped in a pre-digital world of unilinear transmission. Secondly, television debates between the party leaders should be promoted, conducted and diffused using an average language, not shabby nor elitist. Dumbing down the language not to be mocked about, but as a simple way to enable people to get closer to political personalities. This leads us to another step, the necessity to find more imaginative ways to scrutinise political candidates so people can judge them more easily for what they truly are and not only they artificially propose.

These observations are not intended to reinforce unresponsive notions, such as that political elections should be replaced by televised game shows, or that voting in a reality TV poll is just as

important as participating in a general election. But they are intended to raise radical questions about the condition of contemporary democracy, the borders between the political and the popular, and the case for thinking creatively about what it means to be politically engaged. In fact, in everyday reality, democratic practice occurs in many spaces beyond the formal political sphere, from ways in which power is negotiated in the home to ways in which young people contest adult expectations; from acts of resistance against cultural snobbery to debates about what constitutes offensive humour; from the subversive lyrics of pop songs to the shared code of open-source software. People do not realise their frequent use of democratic discourses and principles in every aspect of their lives.

The belief that political, democratic participation must be one thing or the other – compliant or pleasurable; committed or superficial; sophisticated or dumbed-down – strongly contrasts with the realistic conception of citizens, and therefore voters, as capable of participating pluralistically and critically. By extension, it contrasts with the modern, basic assumption characterizing people's lives: the intrinsic individuals' rationality. Likewise, we recall that political communication, participation, and success is a two-way process: in fact, enabling the public to know and understand their representatives will make democratic systems more transparent and humane, but the most important link to strengthen in the contemporary political process is that which allows political representatives to know and understand the public. That is why communication phenomena such as dumbing-down and infotainment bring useful novelties to the democratic process: in fact, as politics becomes more technocratic and elitist, it has less to do with common values and becomes more like an ongoing interest-maximizing tool. The public finds this uninspiring. They vote less, watch less and join in less. They are politically disengaged and disillusioned. As we shall later see, the immense popularity of reality TV formats of many kinds (i.e. plebiscitary shows) is linked to the public's desire to observe itself as a central actor in its own drama.

Chapter Three

What is *Infotainment*?

As Bernard Manin argued in 1997, democracy is found on a main idea: the principle of distinction. According to this academic paradigm, *representative government was instituted in full awareness that elected representatives would and should be distinguished citizens, socially different from those who elected them. We shall call this the "principle of distinction", according to which the elected would be of higher social standing than the electorate.*[11] Nonetheless, politics cannot place itself above other areas of public interest, since without the *public* there will be no *politics* in the first place. Therefore, it is counterproductive for political elites to complain about the rise of *infotainment*. Naturally, what we define as "public" only exists in so far as it is active, therefore it needs to be captured and engaged (Warner, 2002). Moreover, since politics barely exists as a reality outside the media today, political performance should embrace the popular culture and that is why politicians tend to adapt their contents to a given audience (Dahlgren, 1995). Additionally, it has been argued that political actors try to reach their audiences also to control and counterproof what the standard media sources tell about them, their actions, their responsibilities, and consequences, constantly observed and judged.

By definition, the term *infotainment* defines any *broadcast material which is intended both to entertain and to inform.*[12] The term has its origins in the United States in the 1980s: it is the blend of two among the most important terms in communication – namely, information and entertainment. Politically speaking, the rise of infotainment gradually entered the scene as a marginal communicative phenomenon and rapidly became an irreplaceable political marketing strategy. There has been considerable academic debate over the rise of infotainment, the majority of which considering this phenomenon as a negative consequence, especially within the political environment, of the distorted use of media and of the *spectacularization* of politics, treating political actors as celebrities aiming at entertaining their audiences instead of informing them. However, a remarkable analysis of this new reality comes from Kees Brants (1998), Director of the MA programme in European Communication studies at the University of Amsterdam, who found

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[11] Manin, B., 1997. The Principles of Representative Government. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. pp. 94-95

[12] Oxford Dictionaries | English. (2018). infotainment | Definition of infotainment in English by Oxford Dictionaries. [online] Available at: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/infotainment [Accessed 12 Apr. 2018].

possible justifications to the scare that infotainment and tabloidization arose in political communities after the 1994 elections in the Netherlands and other Northern European countries.

According to the Professor, one of the basic assumption behind this worrying reality is that the commercialization and competition present in broadcasting would necessarily lead to a downgrading of political communication, where information providers will rely more and more on entertainment, television news, personalities and images rather than traditional resources, such as first-hand newspapers meant to simply inform about issues and points of view. A major exponent of this scary hypothesis is Jay G. Blumer (1992a) who argued that the content of political communication is marked by four main aspects: first, by a degree of depoliticization, where perceptions of policy decisions are more important than the real issues; second, politics is presented as a game, with its short time and space to be presented; third, political personalization is predominant in the social scenario and finally, media seems to promote negative messages about political actors. Nonetheless, Professor Brants argued that in most countries commercial television has not marginalized political content, but it has simply learnt how to adjust public and serious news to the modes of representation generally attributed to commercial channels. One example is provided by the increasing appearance of politicians in talk shows, where they emphasize personal qualities in a non-confrontational manner while subtly presenting their political plan.

3.1 Measuring Infotainment

Professor Kees Brants says it is premature for civic-minded Europeans to succumb totally to panic over infotainment: after content analysis, he says that traditional standards are still those largely in place and that public channels have not moved news to the margins. Evidence comes from a study carried out in the Netherlands prior to the 1994 elections, where Brants investigated 16 TV programmes in order to get a certain idea of the degree to which Dutch politicians oriented their television appearances according to the variety of programmes available to the public. Within the analysis, the amount of attention to political actors was divided into seven television genres, ranging from traditional informative to entertainment programmes: news, heavy information, current affairs, party political broadcasts, talk shows and entertainment (Brants, 1998). Following the study, Brants observes that there is a mixed way of providing information but for sure infotainment is not dominating the scenario: traditional informative programmes still accounted for the majority of the airtime where politicians were present.

What may have changed, according to Brants, is the range within this "traditional continuum", where the two-opposite visions posit informative programmes as the bearer of rational-based content promoting political participation while entertainment programmes serve only for distraction and pleasure. The novelty lies in the middle, where a whole assortment of subgenres has emerged and daily populates our television screens by mixing programmes providing a certain degree of information with drama or entertainment or those covering human interests with sensationalism. Remarkably, Brants presented an infotainment scale, combining topic content with style and format. On the one side of the scale, we may find all those programmes focusing on hard and serious news, while on the opposite side the emphasis is on taste, preferences, pleasure, and lifestyle. The former is known as the "serious side", while the latter is commonly referred to as the "entertaining side". The serious side privileges factual topics such as party manifestos or policy issues presented from a certain professional distance via traditional means of political communication. On the contrary, the entertaining side is expected to present topics more human-driven in content, highlighting emotional characteristics of politicians, their image, and personal features through an informal and lighter style and an entertaining and sensational format. In this scenario, Infotainment is placed between those two extremes and mixes political informative elements in entertainment programmes as well as entertainment characteristics in traditionally informative programmes (Brants, 1998). The scale provided by Brants applied to the 16 Dutch TV programmes divided in seven genres into 1994 ranges from totally *i* (fully informative) passing through *i/e* (mostly informative), *e/i* (mostly entertainment), to total *e* (fully entertaining). On the whole, from his analysis Brants states that the picture is quite hybrid. In fact, where does the frame of reference for any judgment lie? A talk show may be more *informative* about the qualities (so, the *entertaining* side) of a candidate than a news programme could ever be, it only depends on what kind of information you prefer receiving. Finally, he argues that infotainment would be fully problematic only under three conditions: first, if it became the dominant form in which politics was portrayed; second, if it was used by politicians in order to avoid the professional scrutiny of political journalists and hide something important from the attention of the electorate and third, if it distracted audiences from the hard stuff of politics, leading to a distorted image of the subject.

3.2 Plebiscitary shows as democratic entertainment

Over the last three decades, there has been a proliferation of television genres in which members of the public actively participate in programs such as talk shows, reality TV, and lifestyle

programming. Such participatory programming represents a shift in the relationship between media production and consumption, since the public is no longer simply the audience, the passive receiver of a message, the final point of a chain of mass communication, but instead individuals are a significant part of the production of popular culture distribution. In this scenario, people now have access to a realm previously controlled by a small portion of professionalised experts in the matter. In particular, the talk show genre has been a pivotal forerunner for further discussions of the politics of participatory television from the late 1940s and 1950s onward (Lunt and Lewis, 2008). In fact, the thought that people cannot be persuaded to vote in politically real-world elections but are willing to pay to cast votes in superficial reality TV polls proved that there is a deep flaw in our civic culture.

Along with accounts that see participatory media in terms of the rise of ''*democratainment*'', as John Hartley, Professor of Cultural Science at Curtin University, claimed in 1999, it has been argued that participatory programming has been accompanied by a variety of challenges within media and social theory to reconceptualize civil society and its consequences over citizens' decision-making processes within a mass-mediated society. By providing new rules for living, participatory programming focus both on daily-life matters and on promoting certain models of the good citizenry. This particular connection between lifestyle choices and citizens' responsibility provides a more solid civic structure for the individual, its private life and its daily, more public, community-based life. Therefore, participatory programmes may present and teach processes of self-governance via the common delights of popular entertainment, and at the same time, reality TV may boost public interest in the political process, by making it more interactive and, in so doing, transcending the boundaries between high politics and low culture.

Consequently, television, and especially reality television, becomes at the same time the manifestation and the impulse of the permeability and fluidity of social and civic frontiers, favouring the melding of politics and entertainment. Moreover, Professor Hartley suggests that it is in the very heart of participatory programmes to promote democratic principles: since at the roots of any democracy is the vote, and almost all of the present-day reality shows incorporate the vote into their television formats, plebiscitary shows become a form of democratic entertainment, or as the scholar defines them, *democratainment.* The neologism was coined by Hartley almost two decades ago, making it the title for a chapter in his *Uses of Television* (1999); here, he defined it as *the means by which popular participation in public issues is conducted in the mediasphere.*[13] However, the author presented again the notion in his book *Television Truths* (2008), here referring

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[13] Hartley, J. (1999) *Uses of television*. London and New York: Routledge, p. 209

specifically to plebiscitary formats, which succeed in grasping and inspiring within the population the desire for, and pleasure in, public participation. *Democratainment* has democratized entertainment, but at the same time, it has made democracy itself more entertaining. Reality TV shows, along with the advent of political blogging and "*tweeting*", have proposed an appealing plebiscitary model including competition (campaigning), voting preference and the selection of a winning participant (candidate). Finally, the attractiveness of reality TV shows comes also from their speed and convenience of participation contrasting starkly with the traditional act of voting in election time which entails visiting a designated polling station and making a mark on a ballot paper with a blunt pencil.

Nonetheless, since this outlook turns the television viewers into an actual electorate, making them feel the arbiters and determinants of the decisive, final results of any on-air show, objections have been raised: for instance, this interpretation of *democratainment* appeals to a model of direct democracy, yet not considering the incumbent risks of populist waves intrinsic in this contentious analysis. Moreover, while a direct democracy is based on the egalitarian foundation of "one person, one vote," on the contrary viewers of television reality shows may produce multiple votes on multiple occasions. Additionally, the huge number of viewers of any show is not relatable to the proportion of actual voters of the same show: many people may watch television without paying attention to the voting-time, which is also sometimes linked to a payable service. On the contrary, in a real election-time, this situation would be considered as a disturbing sign of declining voting participation.

3.3 Performance, interactivity and engagement

As previously noted, it is undeniable the increasing amalgamation of reality TV and politics - from politically inflected television shows to news and entertainment hybrid programmes. Likewise, we mention that politicians have become celebrities and vice versa. Additionally, it is becoming common knowledge that commercial television is dependent on economics and public television is dependent on politics, thus creating deviations in journalistic practices and in the relationship between journalists and politicians. This is precisely why, while some may be surprised at the multiple comparisons between TV programming and real-life politics, we are not.

Indeed, by the term "*politicotainment*" Kristina Riegert denoted in 2007 *the ways in which politics and political life are interpreted, negotiated and represented by the entertainment industry, in*

particular by drama series and reality-based TV programming.[14] However, this new term differentiates from our previously mentioned *infotainment,* described by Brian McNair as *journalism in which entertainment values take precedence over information content, presented at an intellectual level low enough to appeal to the mass audiences which comprise the major media markets [...][15].* Thus, in its most negative terms, infotainment highlights people's concerns about *the substance of political debate gradually being replaced by the superficial, entertainment-led spectacle of adversarial game-playing.[16]*

Firstly, it could be observed that popular culture, the private sphere, and the everyday-life have long been political, being all constantly concerned with power and ideology. Secondly, *politicotainment* populates our lives through today's television landscape, where the current trend is to use institutional branches of government as the settings for drama series, such as *"The West Wing"* (NBC, 1999 - 2006*), "Commander in Chief"* (ABC, 2005-06) or the more recent and successful *"House of Cards"* (Netflix, 2013 – present). These television productions provide "unique" opportunities for interaction between institutional agencies and entertainment television, therefore making citizens revaluate their assumptions concerning the boundaries of the political in the media (Jones, 2005). Thirdly, *politicotainment* or the political as the subject of entertainment is nothing new: starting from Aeschylus' tragedy *Agamemnon* (V century B.C.), passing through William Shakespeare's historical play *Richard III* (end of XVI century) and arriving to the most recent Paolo Sorrentino's movie *LORO* (April and May 2018), politics is and always has been drama-interested and drama-influenced.

However, political communication scholars have often complained about the way the media apparatus dramatizes, simplifies and personalizes the political scenario, especially during the 1990s with the rise of talk shows and soft news programming overwhelming "hard politics" interested audiences. Still, we should not focus our attention only on statements about the negative effects of infotainment, but we should trust human rationality and our ability in differentiating fictional from relevant information and influences. Consequently, it could be useful to realize that those new "lower quality" communication strategies – here, in particular, *infotainment* – are extremely powerful tools to be widely and wisely used at their best in order to get successful outcomes benefitting the whole political and social community.

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[14] Riegert, K. (2007). Politicotainment. New York: P. Lang, p. 1

[15] McNair, Brian. 2000. Journalism and Democracy: An evaluation of the political public sphere. London and New York: Routledge, p. 4

[16] Ibid, p. 6

While reality TV may be depreciated as cheap trash television, its ability to engage viewers to test their notions of what is authentic, what is ordinary, what is public and private, what constitutes participation and citizenship is worth mentioning. Moreover, reality TV differs from basic, fictional television programming since there what we observe are real people and not actors, giving us the impression that it could happen to everyone. Therefore, it would be interesting to investigate how our conceptions of what is "entertainment" change when the "real" becomes entertaining, and especially how our notions of what is "real" change when the "real" must also be entertaining. Remarkably, since the packaging of policy, of the image, of trustworthiness, of character, are common to both real and fictional worlds, it is not surprising that political consultants double as screenwriters for media productions about politics and vice versa (Riegert, 2007). Finally, as Liesbet van Zoonen argued, watching popular films and television series may stimulate people to describe, reflect, and fantasize about their current political situation – providing tools, if not the motivation, for citizenship (2005).

Chapter Four

Applicability and Relevance today

The most plausible reason behind political scientists' disbeliefs about the civic attributes of television entertainment, and about any media entertainment in general, is that the whole media apparatus is seen as plain consumption. Even modern scholars were never very comfortable with the individual being regarded within an oppositional outlook confronting the consumer and the citizen. The main idea explaining this dissent is that the identification of the individual as a consumer is negatively perceived as an effect of commercial or political manipulation, while the consideration of the self as a citizen is perceived as a positive cause of the whole political process, despite the fact that consumers and citizens reside within the same corporeal person (Hartley, 2008). Moreover, there has also been a "gender-discrimination problem": the notion of citizen was usually linked to that of active, male participation in politics, caring about tougher issues – namely, the *hard politics*; on the contrary, the notion of consumer was commonly transferred to female individuals, dealing with *softer* matters and being naturally more interested in entertainment.

Remarkably, there is another aspect strongly criticized about modern political communication: the educated coverage of political news is at risk due to the rise of *infotainment* on one side, and to the general dumbing-down of politics on the other. However, it would be anachronistic to not consider those two phenomena within the political communication scenario today: whether scholars praise them or not, the two strategies have become the main resources for every average citizen to get information, understand the news and develop a public opinion accordingly, especially through, for instance, political and popular culture and celebrity-like consideration of political actors. Therefore, the two strategies have helped to readdress the electoral volatility proper of the modern era.

4.1 Politics and Popular Culture

As noted above, it has been argued that traditional, political and social coverage of different issues has moved towards treating readers as consumers rather than citizens. However, the constantly-changing times of political communication objectively require some shifts in their broadcasting *repertoires*. In fact, as Liesbet van Zoonen stated, especially in modern times it is

important for politics *to be connected to the everyday culture of its citizens; otherwise it becomes an alien sphere, occupied by strangers no one cares or bothers about.*[17]

Popular culture should not be seen as an enemy of *pure* politics, but rather it provides an interactive arena where politicians, citizens and scholars are engaged, given that every type of matter on political agendas can be displayed and discussed. In fact, for instance, television series are the best springboard for different topic considerations: visual contents provided by series are at the core of daily debates among people, and the more we can find even public matters to discuss, the better. Moreover, it is also of massive relevance the role played by those ideas and visual narratives within the lives of the majority of people around the globe, who *consume* those stories: presented as simple images, those communicative notions tend to contribute in the building of cultural concepts and personal identities, also by integrating unexpected concepts within traditional norms (Goren, 2016). What we see, what we receive and what we perceive has a major communicative influence on our senses and consequently on our understanding of who we are – namely, our existence. However, those perceptions can change from individual to individual, because of their different background and they also shift according to the medium through which they are presented. Therefore, for instance, in safer and sheltered societies perceptions about crime and delinquency issues would change from those perceived in problematic civilisations, and the perception would be different also when the topic is debated on a public base through fully accessible media rather than within an elite-based audience.

Additionally, contemporarily speaking, daily political dynamics all over the world depend on consumers, hence popular culture is the base for political communication, where industrialized outlooks of modern ways of living are exploited in order to connect individuals to their social backgrounds and to get feedbacks about policies perceptions. Moreover, since popular culture determines the narratives that are accessible to the *populi* – basically, to the majority of people – within democratic systems it represents a fundamental aspect of political communication. In fact, it would be the *demos* that would designate what they find to be popular and consequently of interest to them. A further implication lies in our common conception of politics, a scenario in which plenty of information is available every day to more and more individuals, thus expanding the *demos*. Furthermore, it can be argued that popular culture is intrinsically political since it is based on widespread understandings of common ideas and beliefs, influencing the heart of a nation, its society, its economy and any other potentially political aspects of interactive and civilized lives. In

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[17] Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), p. 3.

this manner, popular culture becomes at the same time the medium and the message of political communication (Goren, 2016). In fact, it should be noted that even though it is entertaining by nature, popular culture still represents the main information provider even about harder political topics.

4.2 Celebrity Politicians and Political Communication

It was 1996 when U.S. President Ronald Reagan said to his aide Stuart Spencer some famous words: *Politics is just like show business.*[18] It is incredible how today this sentence is truer than ever. The world of celebrity politicians is almost taking over our daily considerations about politics, becoming an actual political communication strategy under the protection of entertainment. However, what has been argued among scholars is to what extent this phenomenon endangers or strengthen the very nature of (democratic) representation. When traditional political actors wear the guise of celebrities, are they deriding the important role of a politician or are they actually establishing stronger contacts with the popular electorate? There may be some critical answers considering politicians substituting appearance to principles, but we are not forced to see it that way: it is at least accepted that political projects within the world of popular culture are a necessary part of the multifaceted ways in which political representation functions especially in modern democracies, strongly influenced by the presence of the media apparatus (Street, 2004).

By definition, the status enjoyed by a celebrity is a *state of being well known.*[19] This applies to multiple categories, such as entertainment, sport, movie industry and so on. As noted above, today this status covers also the political sphere, where political actors come to be well known especially because of their personal and family backgrounds, because of the scandals involving their personalities or maybe thanks to their skilful political performances. Political actors, then, are regarded as remarkable people even because the role they cover is elitist and noteworthy by nature.

However, as we are living in Italy, it should be noted that politicians may be considered as celebrities even before getting to cover that important position: for instance, when former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi run for Government in 1994 for the first time he was already a celebrity. The fact itself that such a famous man could run for that central position was destined to attract

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[18] Ronald Reagan, quoted in Postman 1987, 128
[19] Oxford Dictionaries | English. (2018). celebrity | Definition of celebrity in English by Oxford Dictionaries. [online] Available at: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/celebrity [Accessed 28 Apr. 2018].

maximum media and popular coverage. In contrast to most political leaders at the beginning of their career, Silvio Berlusconi did not need to become "recognizable" (Campus, 2010). Moreover, and above all, the real key to success of the three-times Italian Prime Minister came by his own and his collaborators' skilfulness: in fact, *by politicizing the antipolitics, Berlusconi was able to involve parts of society in public life that very few people had been able to reach.*[20]

Among these categories, according to John Street (2004), there are two main variants of the celebrity politician. On the one hand, the former refers to the traditional, legitimately elected politician who engages with the world of popular culture in order to enhance or ameliorate their expected political functions and goals. This is the celebrity politician who skilfully uses elements of "celebrityhood" to establish their claim to better represent the population – namely, the electorate. On the other hand, the latter refers to the "already-famous" celebrity, that is to say, the star of popular culture, who advantageously uses its popularity to speak for the common popular opinion. The peculiarity of this second type, however, lies in the reasons moving celebrities to go political: here, the celebrity politician acts without seeking or obtaining elected office. Their engagement tends to be displayed through public gestures or statements aimed at promoting or altering specific public policy decisions.

The phenomenon of celebrity politics is an inevitable effect of modern, social and political transformation. Particularly, contemporarily speaking, celebrity politics, and the worship of the personality that it symbolises, can be seen as a consequence of the revolution of the political communication sphere. Here, in a consumer-based society, even politics became subject to the laws of the "almighty dollar"; everything has to be pleasurable enough to be sold and therefore gain importance among consumers. Political communication and political marketing become the two sides of the same coin, dispensing messages while appealing to the largest numbers of voters, and this is the main reason why the new approaches within political communication – in particular, the political dumbing-down and the *infotainment* phenomena – are consistent appendix of this reality.

4.3 Readdressing the electoral volatility

Why do voters shift their voting preferences in the first place? The main reason behind this phenomenon is the rise of strategic voting behaviour within the field of political communication. In fact, by shaping their political preferences on strategic coverage, voters might decide to vote for a

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[20] Orsina, G. (2014). *Berlusconism and Italy*. Palgrave Macmillan. p. 109

party other than another, which could be the one they would normally vote for given their personal interests and issue preferences. By strategic coverage, we mean the tactical way and calculated means through which news is presented and diffused among the population, especially in order to reach a targeted audience. For instance, when promoting educational policies, it would be very common to find a multitude of news, often correlated to an appealing *hashtag*, across the Internet, the most employed communication tool among young voters. Additionally, it is very common among competing parties to take strategic issue positions by changing their issue positions during election campaigns once observed the support and/or criticism received by other parties' issue stances.

People's shifting preferences generate a certain level of electoral volatility, which on the one hand could be essential for the active participation of citizens required in democratic systems, for instance by holding parties accountable for past performances, while on the other hand, when it comes in too high levels, electoral volatility may lead to an unstable democracy and to a more difficult governability given a progressively fragmented party system. In the worst scenario, volatile voters are uninformed about and uninterested in politics, but in more positive terms the volatility consists of an emancipated electorate of informed voters, who make their own judgments instead of relying on given, common opinions. Certainly, electoral volatility is a consequence of declining party loyalty, a weakening relationship between parties and voters. This phenomenon is due to the diminishing impact of social and political cleavages and therefore of a lower attachment to traditional party identification. Those effects naturally stem from structural changes in our economic, social, religious, educational and media systems, which provide multiple accessible sources of information. Geographical mobility also speeded up the process of social modernization. In fact, in recent times, the majority of voters get relevant data especially during election campaigns via the mass media, their primary source of information, and not from the traditional party associations.

Given the decreasing impact of long-term, classical cleavages on voting behaviour, individual factors influencing political activities have become more important, factors such as age, personality traits, ethnicity, gender and so on. For instance, a younger voter may switch his or her political preference more easily than an older voter, just like an open-minded citizen may consider comparing political alternatives as an enriching personal experience rather than a threat to the stability of democracy. Therefore, by assuming that voters increasingly make choices on the basis of individual evaluations of issues and candidates, it is fundamental to understand how issues and

political contenders are presented in the media sphere and how this influences voters' decisions as the Election Day draws near (Geers, 2017).

As noted, the nature of media coverage during election campaigns has changed especially over the last thirty years due to an intense process of mediatization. This is a phenomenon which recognises media as more and more integrated into almost every aspect of modern, social life and where news providers expertly take advantage of the mediums at their disposal and adjust the content and the format according to the situation they are presenting and to the audience they are targeting. Therefore, the presence of strategic, mediatized and entertaining coverage in the media has increased almost eclipsing substantive, traditional and thoughtful issue news. Contemporarily, also political actors had to adjust their professional performances: especially with the rise of television as the main mass medium of communication, they were required to improve their different skills and qualities, such as physical appearance and strong debating competences. Direct confrontation on screen between opponents became more appealing, conflict coverage became more relevant than other substantial issues and the increasing level of commercialization, leading to political dumbing-down and the rise of infotainment, eclipsed the boundaries between politics and entertainment. Subsequently, the two strategies became the most efficient way to reach the electorate's minds and consciences, by skimming over policy details. The massive use of the Internet has further intensified these changes by offering politicians a means to bypass journalists' opinion and communicate directly with the electorate without any social filter.

Concluding, it can be critically argued that the revolution occurred in the last decades in the field of political communication may have altered and endangered the elitist nature of politics, but it should be recognized that the new communication strategies – in particular, the political dumbing down and the infotainment phenomena – have enabled political actors to reach wider audiences, i.e. voters.

"Our democracy is broken. [...] Voters have lost faith in their representatives and the systems that select them. But there is an opportunity to revitalise politics – if we are brave enough to take it."

- *Manuel Arriaga[21]*

Conclusion

In today's world, the term political culture still sparks controversial debates in the field of political science. In fact, it is hard to reach an academic consensus in the sense of definitions and paradigms of political culture. Remarkably, the way people define a given word is largely determined by the beliefs which they hold about the thing referred to by this word and true communication takes place only if individuals can share meanings of the words they use. In this perspective, the political culture of a society results from the mutual work of a political community, as well as that of other political agencies such as the state, political parties, the government, public administration and so on and so forth. Moreover, such debates on the role played by culture in the political scene have an undeniable significance, each shaped and fostered according to the situation encountered within the country observed.

At the basis of political culture – and of human life itself – there is communication: men need to share their thoughts, beliefs, and values in order to live appropriately, justly and harmoniously. Thus, since important decisions that will influence and impact citizens' lives are commonly known as policies, that is why we focus on political communication. The term attempts to highlight and mitigate the everchanging relationship between governmental processes and the citizens – the voters. Political messages are created, diffused and received each time in different ways. Moreover, we presented the main performers of political communication which are the media apparatus, different political actors and the often-disenchanted voters. It is worth recalling the mutual influence that these political actors play on each other, especially in order to make the political communication effective and successful.

Furthermore, we saw that the relationship between media and political parties has an incontrovertible impact in terms of political communication. Starting from an academic background which observed the public sphere and the media influence in the political context during an era known as the information age, we tried to understand if, and how far, modern political communication tools have endangered or fortified our traditional knowledge. Among those recent

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[21] Arriaga, M. (2014). *Rebooting democracy. A Citizen's Guide to Reinventing Politics*. Thistle Publishing

instruments, we have come to appreciate two communication phenomena – namely, political dumbing down and the rise of infotainment. The two realities, together often defined as communication strategies, even though of massive weight on communication in general, have not escaped various criticism. However, in the end, we have concluded that the two phenomena may have adjusted the quality of political communication to its modern audience while amplifying its reach and not lowered its excellence.

It could be made one further remark on this issue: it is commonly said that quantity is the enemy of quality. Nevertheless, as a matter of fact, lowering the quality of communication is not always a negative lapel when it comes to politics. Actually, given that the opportunity to vote and the freedom of expression are the central sources and proper essence of democracy itself, when we encounter new communication strategies that succeed in reaching wider audiences and give individuals the possibility to publicly express their thoughts, we should, by logic, consider them as positive innovations.

However, in this critical scenario, as we have observed throughout this work, the dumbing-down of politics, seen as a negative phenomenon, denigrates the elitist conception that assumes politics as the highest form of expression; on the contrary, though, seen as a positive phenomenon, the dumbing-down of politics is the most efficient way to connect a distant political leading group to the average audience and electorate. Likewise, especially through the recent and frequent use of social media, citizens have the possibility to receive a huge amount of new information through softer channels – *infotainment* – and freely express their consent or dissent towards both political and non-political topics. Within negative terms, this opportunity allows ordinary people to present themselves as political experts, even when politics is not their main area of interest, but within more positive terms, this is the basis, the highest form and the true essence of democracy itself.

Additionally, in a subject in continuous transformation such as that of communication, and especially that of political communication, drawing academic or popular conclusions does not mean finding a static and firm point, but it simply implies the effort to identify trends for the near future and to express ideas to positively govern this tumultuous and continuous change. The new communication strategies observed here, due to their notional flexibility, revolutionary nature, and popular attractiveness, are destined to be the backbone of any future political communication analysis and an instrument of growing importance for the democratic, political participation of citizens.

The most widespread illusion remaining in place is that implying that it is sufficient to lower the language, open sites, pages, and accounts, appear on television shows, invest economic and human resources on such media instruments, to effectively use these communication tools and obtain political, winning results. Those strategies mainly serve to amplify and share the intelligence of a message and the credibility of the narration that a political actor can make of itself, but they do not always set the message in the first place. It is fundamental to remember that communication is a two-way process where both the senders and the receivers of those (political) messages actively engage in discussion, leaving to the means of communication the passive role of instruments. Above all, communication is created among living individuals, both at higher or lower levels and it is diffused both through harder or softer channels. Consequently, all that remains is an extremely powerful tool to be widely used at its best in order to get successful outcomes benefitting the whole community.

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Abstract

La comunicazione politica

Il Dumbing-down e l'Infotainment

Introduzione

Nel IV secolo a.C, il filosofo Aristotele nella sua *Politica* scrisse una frase destinata a segnare profondamente il pensiero occidentale: l'uomo è un animale sociale. Secondo lo Stagirita, infatti, gli esseri viventi non possono vivere da soli, e diverranno, pertanto, condizione necessaria interagire e comunicare tra loro. Conseguentemente, poniamo la comunicazione alla base stessa della vita degli uomini e della loro sopravvivenza sulla terra. Una volta stabilite interazioni reciproche, le comunità più grandi, formate da diversi individui, avranno necessariamente bisogno di alcune regole per funzionare correttamente, e il dialogo più efficiente per definire, sviluppare e perseguire una "buona vita" ha luogo in politica. Dunque, l'unione di quelle due sfere della natura umana, della socievolezza e della politica (la vita privata e la vita pubblica di ogni persona), genererebbe una società civile politica producendo molteplici interpretazioni e rappresentazioni di una realtà condivisa. In tempi più recenti, ciò avviene anche attraverso il lavoro del sistema dei media. Il potere comunicativo, infatti, offre all'individuo l'opportunità di sviluppare le proprie opinioni, valori e atteggiamenti. Inoltre, definisce il modo in cui tali opinioni possono essere espresse e fornisce il luogo in cui i cittadini possono confrontare le loro idee. Infine, è vero che i sistemi pubblici e le organizzazioni nazionali non sempre aiutano le persone a ottenere informazioni corrette, ma va ricordato che, oggigiorno, lo spazio pubblico è sempre più dominato da un vasto assortimento di individui disinformati, molti dei quali autoironici, sprezzanti dell'educazione formale che tende a minimizzare il valore dell'esperienza. Tuttavia, il grande sviluppo tecnologico della nostra era ha dato accesso a una quantità di informazioni senza precedenti a tutti i cittadini.

Questa tesi esplora la sfera della comunicazione politica attraverso il suo background accademico e popolare. In seguito, osserveremo due fenomeni comunicativi relativamente nuovi: il *dumbing-down* politico e l'ascesa dell'*infotainment*. Dunque, cercheremo di capire se e in che misura i moderni strumenti di comunicazione politica hanno messo in pericolo o fortificato la nostra comprensione della conoscenza tradizionale. Infine, vedremo la loro applicabilità concettuale e la loro ampia rilevanza nel quadro politico odierno.

Capitolo Uno: La Comunicazione Politica

Nel primo capitolo abbiamo analizzato la sfera politica della comunicazione, la quale è studiata principalmente secondo due approcci, quello della Scuola di Francoforte e quello della Scuola di Birmingham. Il primo vede la comunicazione politica come un processo scaturito "dall'alto", dove il controllo sociale è più importante della rappresentazione politica; il secondo approccio, invece, vede la comunicazione come un processo reciproco a due fasi, dove i messaggi politici sono presentati dagli attori politici ed interpretati dai riceventi a seconda del loro background sociale. Inoltre, tra gli studi sulla comunicazione, di grande rilevanza è la teoria elaborata da Paul Felix Lazarsfeld (1901 - 1976) nel 1944: secondo la teoria del flusso a due fasi di comunicazione, la maggior parte delle persone all'interno di un gruppo sociale delinea le loro idee sotto l'influenza di *opinion leader*, che a loro volta sono influenzati dai mass media.

In secondo luogo, l'analisi si focalizza sulla sfera pubblica, cosi presentata dallo studioso Jürgen Habermas nel 1962: essa è l'area tra la società civile e lo stato. Quest'area si sviluppa ovunque il dibattito e la comunicazione siano pubblici piuttosto che privati, ma non ancora sotto il controllo dello Stato. Conseguentemente, le norme e i valori che emergono da quei dibattiti saranno considerati validi quando si otterrà il consenso di altri membri all'interno della comunità, promuovendone la coesione piuttosto che la frammentazione.

Successivamente, abbiamo affrontato la questione dell'influenza mediatica e di come essa abbia cambiato la comunicazione politica. La rapida crescita dei mass media come agenti di comunicazione è diventata per la maggior parte dei cittadini la principale fonte di informazione politica e per la maggior parte degli attori politici il principale bacino dove ottenere facilmente voti. Inoltre, l'unione di queste due sfere comunicative, la tecnologia e le persone, ci dà l'opportunità di osservare due principali fenomeni politici: l'importante figura dello *spin-doctor* e la relativamente nuova realtà della personalizzazione della politica. Il primo è un esperto di comunicazione che lavora come consulente per conto di figure politiche, mentre la seconda è caratterizzata da un unico leader carismatico che incarna e trasmette l'intero manifesto politico grazie al suo appeal sociale. Contemporaneamente, ricordiamo l'avvento di Internet che, sin dalla sua diffusione, ha offerto la migliore opportunità per una completa rivoluzione della comunicazione in generale. Dal punto di vista politico, questo "nuovo" mezzo adempie al ruolo normativo di fornitore imparziale di informazioni ai cittadini, sulla cui base si formerà l'opinione pubblica.

Infine, il primo capitolo si conclude con la presentazione di una nuova era tecnologica, anche definita Età dell'Informazione. Fondamentalmente, peculiare dell'era dell'informazione è la sua velocità. Quest'era sta contraendo tempo e spazio: le lunghe distanze ed i viaggi ad alto rischio sono

un ricordo lontano, le notizie non impiegano più giorni per arrivare e le informazioni fluiscono più velocemente, confondendo sempre di più i confini sia fisici che ideologici tra i paesi. Tuttavia, un rischio correlato è la possibilità di cadere in un utopismo tecnologico, ovvero un'ipotetica società ideale in cui la scienza, la tecnologia avanzata, l'opera delle leggi e del governo mirano esclusivamente al bene e alla felicità di tutti i suoi cittadini.

Capitolo Due: Cos'è il _Dumbing-down_?

Nel secondo capitolo abbiamo osservato un nuovo fenomeno nell'ambito comunicativo: il dumbing-down politico. Per definizione, il fenomeno del _dumbing-down_ delinea un concetto di norma semplificato in modo da essere intellettualmente non impegnativo e accessibile ad un vasto pubblico. Vi sono molteplici dibattiti accademici sulla realtà del _dumbing-down_, la maggior parte dei quali considera questo processo come un'influenza negativa soprattutto all'interno dell'ambiente politico, in particolare attraverso l'uso distorto delle risorse mediatiche. Tuttavia, una notevole analisi del fenomeno viene dal Professor Mick Temple (2006), il quale afferma che una sfera pubblica basata principalmente sulla divulgazione razionale ed elitaria della politica è una rappresentazione insufficiente ed ingannevole di come la maggioranza delle persone riceve oggi informazioni ed emette giudizi a riguardo.

In primo luogo, abbiamo considerato questo nuovo fenomeno comunicativo nell'ambito della partecipazione politica, giungendo alla conclusione che non presentare notizie politiche in modo interessante è controproducente per l'intero sistema: c'è bisogno di un equilibrio tra i livelli educativi dei lettori e le informazioni presentate, e se ciò implica anche l'uso dei _tabloid_ in politica, significa che alcuni segmenti della società lo richiedono.

In secondo luogo, abbiamo osservato come l'ampliamento della partecipazione politica da parte dei cittadini meno inclini alla vita elettorale, secondo alcuni, abbia abbassato la qualità delle notizie presentate. Tuttavia, come è stato osservato, il _dumbing-down_ polito ha ampliato l'audience piuttosto che restringerlo. Il conseguente sensazionalismo politico, che non è sinonimo di giornalismo di qualità inferiore, non distorce la verità, ma piuttosto presenta gli eventi in modo tale da influenzare la mente del lettore ordinario, comunemente impegnato nei suoi compiti quotidiani, al fine di fargli capire meglio e impegnarsi nella questione politica che a lui si presenta.

Infine, il capitolo si conclude con la considerazione che vede il _dumbing-down_ politico come un'opportunità per reinventare (e migliorare) il processo politico. Seguendo il ragionamento di Stephen Coleman (2006), se i politici vogliono veramente riconnettersi (o, molto probabilmente, collegarsi per la prima volta) con ampie fasce del pubblico, che sempre più li considera irrilevanti,

essi potrebbero aver bisogno di venire a patti con quegli approcci alla rappresentazione politica che catturano gli aspetti simbolici, drammatici e banali dell'esperienza umana. Secondo lo studioso, infatti, per ampliare il raggio elettorale, ad esempio, si potrebbero trovare metodi più fantasiosi per esaminare i candidati politici in modo che le persone possano giudicarli più facilmente per quello che sono veramente e non solo per quello che propongono artificialmente.

Capito Tre: Cos'è *l'Infotainment*?

Il terzo capitolo indaga l'ascesa di un nuovo fenomeno comunicativo, *l'infotainment*. Per definizione, il termine *infotainment* indica qualsiasi materiale di trasmissione che è inteso sia per intrattenere che per informare il pubblico. Dal punto di vista politico, l'ascesa dell'*infotainment* è entrata gradualmente in scena come un fenomeno comunicativo marginale e rapidamente è diventata una strategia insostituibile per il marketing politico. Il Professor Kees Brants (1998) ha sostenuto che nella maggior parte dei paesi occidentali la televisione commerciale non ha marginalizzato i contenuti politici, ma ha semplicemente imparato come adeguare le notizie pubbliche alle modalità di rappresentazione generalmente attribuite ai canali commerciali. Un esempio è dato dalla crescente apparizione dei politici nei talk show, in cui si enfatizzano le qualità personali degli attori politici in modo non conflittuale mentre si presentano sottilmente i loro piani politici.

In primo luogo, ci siamo soffermati su una scala proposta dal Professor Brants utilizzata in una sua ricerca per misurare *l'infotainment*, ovvero identificare diversi programmi televisivi (olandesi) e classificarli come tendenti più alla diffusione d'informazione o di entertainment. Nel complesso, dalla sua analisi Brants deduce che il risultato è piuttosto ibrido. In effetti, dove si trova il quadro di riferimento per ogni giudizio? Un talk show può essere più *informativo* sulle qualità (quindi, il lato *entertaining*) di un candidato di quanto un programma di notizie potrebbe mai essere: il giudizio dipende solo dal tipo di informazioni che si preferisce ricevere.

In secondo luogo, nel capitolo abbiamo osservato un fenomeno definito *democratainment* dal Professor John Hartley (1999), il quale identifica gli show plebiscitari come forma di intrattenimento democratico, dove gli individui sono una parte integrante della produzione e della distribuzione della cultura popolare attraverso il sistema di televoto. Conseguentemente, il *democratainment* ha democratizzato l'intrattenimento, ma allo stesso tempo ha reso la democrazia stessa più *entertaining*. Infine, questa interpretazione della democratizzazione dell'intrattenimento fa appello a un modello di democrazia diretta, senza tuttavia considerare le differenze con un vero sistema democratico. L'enorme numero di spettatori non è riconducibile alla percentuale di votanti effettivi dello stesso programma: molte persone possono seguire la trasmissione senza prestare

attenzione al televoto, che a volte è anche legato a un servizio pagabile. Al contrario, in un vero periodo elettorale, questa situazione sarebbe considerata un segnale inquietante del calo della partecipazione politica dei cittadini.

Infine, il capitolo si conclude con un terzo fenomeno legato tanto all'ambito politico che a quello dell'intrattenimento: il *politicotainment.* Con questo termine, Kristina Riegert (2007) definisce i modi in cui la politica e la vita politica sono interpretati, negoziati e rappresentati dall'industria dello spettacolo, in particolare dalle serie drammatiche e dalla programmazione televisiva basata sulla realtà. Si potrebbe osservare che la cultura popolare, la sfera privata e la vita quotidiana siano state a lungo politiche, essendo tutte costantemente focalizzate sul potere e sull'ideologia. Inoltre, il *politicotainment* popola le nostre vite attraverso il panorama televisivo di oggi, in cui la tendenza attuale è quella di utilizzare i rami istituzionali del governo come scenari per le serie drammatiche. Infine, mentre la Reality TV può essere disprezzata come televisione-spazzatura a basso costo, la sua capacità di coinvolgere gli spettatori per testare le loro nozioni di ciò che costituisce partecipazione e cittadinanza è degna di menzione.

Capitolo Quattro: applicabilità e rilevanza odierna

L'ultimo capitolo si apre con una considerazione oggettiva: nonostante le molteplici critiche da parte degli studiosi nel campo della comunicazione politica nei confronti del *dumbing-down* politico e dell'ascesa dell'*infotainment,* colpevoli dell'abbassamento del livello educativo delle notizie diffuse, sarebbe anacronistico non riconoscere questi due fenomeni come fondamentali nel processo di *decision-making*. Le due strategie comunicative sono diventate le risorse principali per ogni cittadino medio per ottenere informazioni, comprendere le notizie e conseguentemente sviluppare un'opinione pubblica a riguardo.

In primo luogo, ci siamo soffermati sull'importanza insita nella relazione tra politica e cultura popolare. Infatti, i tempi in costante cambiamento della comunicazione politica richiedono obiettivamente alcuni cambiamenti nel loro repertorio di trasmissione: Liesbet van Zoonen (2005) ha affermato che, soprattutto nei tempi moderni, è importante che la politica sia collegata alla cultura quotidiana dei suoi cittadini, altrimenti essa diventa una sfera aliena al suo elettorato, occupata da estranei di cui nessuno si preoccupa. Di conseguenza, la cultura popolare non deve essere vista come un nemico della politica pura, ma piuttosto essa può fornire un'arena interattiva in cui sono reciprocamente impegnati politici, cittadini e studiosi. Inoltre, si può sostenere che la cultura popolare è intrinsecamente politica poiché si basa su una comprensione di idee e convinzioni comuni, influenzando una nazione, la sua società, la sua economia e ogni altro aspetto

potenzialmente politico. In questo modo, la cultura popolare diventa allo stesso tempo il mezzo e il messaggio della comunicazione politica, come osservato da Liran Goren nel 2016.

In secondo luogo, abbiamo osservato la transizione dell'individuo come attore politico verso una sua considerazione al pari di una celebrità. Oggi lo status della celebrità nella sfera politica avvicina l'elettorato agli attori politici, in quanto essi vengono conosciuti soprattutto per il loro background personale e familiare, per gli scandali che coinvolgono le loro personalità o forse grazie alle loro abili prestazioni politiche. Il culto della personalità, quindi, può essere visto come una conseguenza della rivoluzione della sfera della comunicazione politica. Qui, in una società basata sul consumo, anche la politica è stata soggetta alle leggi del "dio denaro": tutto deve essere abbastanza piacevole da essere venduto. La comunicazione politica e il marketing politico diventano così le due facce della stessa medaglia, dispensando messaggi mentre si cerca di raggiungere il maggior numero di elettori, e per questo i nuovi approcci nella comunicazione politica - in particolare, il *dumbing-down e l'infotainment* - sono appendici coerenti di questa condizione.

Infine, il capitolo si conclude con la possibilità di reindirizzare la recente volatilità elettorale grazie alle nuove strategie comunicative. Questo fenomeno è dovuto alla diminuzione dell'impatto delle leve sociali e politiche (*social and political cleavages*) e quindi di un minore attaccamento all'identificazione tradizionale con il partito. Infatti, gli elettori prendono decisioni sempre più sulla base di valutazioni individuali tanto di problemi che di candidati. Conseguentemente, gli attori politici hanno modificato le loro prestazioni professionali: in particolare con l'ascesa della televisione come principale mezzo di comunicazione di massa, essi dovevano migliorare le loro diverse abilità e qualità. Infine, si può osservare criticamente che la rivoluzione avvenuta negli ultimi decenni nel campo della comunicazione politica possa aver alterato e messo in pericolo la natura elitaria della politica stessa, ma dovrebbe essere riconosciuto che le nuove strategie di comunicazione - in particolare, il *dumbing-down* e *l'infotainment* - hanno permesso agli attori politici di raggiungere un pubblico più ampio, cioè gli elettori.

Conclusione

Concludendo, nel corso della tesi abbiamo visto come il rapporto tra media e partiti politici abbia un impatto incontrovertibile in termini di comunicazione politica. Partendo da un background accademico che osservava la sfera pubblica, l'influenza dei media nel contesto politico durante un'era conosciuta come l'Era dell'informazione, abbiamo cercato di capire se e fino a che punto i moderni strumenti di comunicazione politica hanno messo in pericolo o rafforzato la conoscenza tradizionale. Tra questi strumenti recenti, siamo giunti ad apprezzare due fenomeni di comunicazione, il *dumbing-down* e *l'infotainment*. Le due realtà non sono sfuggite a varie critiche.

Tuttavia, alla fine, abbiamo concluso che i due fenomeni possono aver adattato la qualità della comunicazione politica alle richieste del pubblico moderno, amplificando al contempo la sua portata. Si dice comunemente che la quantità è il nemico della qualità. Tuttavia, in realtà, abbassare la qualità della comunicazione non è sempre un risvolto negativo quando si parla di politica. In realtà, dato che l'opportunità di votare e la libertà di espressione sono le fonti centrali e la vera essenza della democrazia stessa, quando incontriamo nuove strategie di comunicazione che riescono a raggiungere un pubblico più vasto e danno agli individui la possibilità di esprimere pubblicamente i loro pensieri, dovremmo, per logica, considerali come innovazioni positive. Infine, è fondamentale ricordare che la comunicazione è un processo "a doppio senso" in cui sia i mittenti che i destinatari di questi messaggi (politici) si impegnano attivamente nella discussione, lasciando ai mezzi di comunicazione il ruolo passivo di strumenti. In particolare, la comunicazione viene creata tra individui viventi, i quali intelligentemente utilizzano un mezzo estremamente potente da dover essere utilizzato al suo meglio al fine di ottenere esiti positivi a beneficio dell'intera comunità.