DIGITAL SPACES AND POLITICAL ANTAGONISM: TOWARDS A NEW ECOSYSTEM OF DISSENT?

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of digital political communication in the processes of public discourse radicalization and social polarization. Through a critical review of the literature and the analysis of recent events coordinated through online platforms, the research highlights how the circulation of emotional and antagonistic language contributes to reinforcing disinformation, eroding trust in institutions and reshaping the forms of political participation. While digital media expand opportunities for expression and collective organization, they also foster the emergence of "self-confirming" environments that intensify symbolic and ideological conflict. The study underscores the need to develop policies and counter-narrative strategies, as well as regulatory frameworks capable of preserving the quality of democratic debate within the digital ecosystem.

Keywords

Digital political communication, online polarization, counter-narratives, democratic debate.

1. Introduction

In the digital age, political communication has undergone a profound transformation through the adoption of the logic of social platforms, characterized by new norms, strategies and dynamics that coexist with the principles of traditional communication (Chadwick, 2017). The latter, defined by Altheide (2015) as a form of communication in which mass media play a central role in constructing the collective agenda and influencing social events and activities, has now hybridized with new media, giving rise to a complex media ecosystem in which informational power is increasingly distributed among multiple actors (Bruns & Highfield, 2016).

This process of hybridization has led to a redefinition of democracy and of the relationships between politics and digital platforms. On one hand, technological innovation has fostered disintermediation, allowing citizens to participate more actively in the public sphere; on the other hand, traditional media continue to exert a decisive influence in shaping the political agenda (Casero-Ripollés, 2021). Within this scenario, crucial transformations have emerged, significantly contributing to the growing volatility of the electorate and to a reconfiguration of the relationship between leaders and citizens, now based on sharing and communicative immediacy (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018). However, this communicative dimension raises critical issues, such as the reinforcement of polarization and online partisanship, as well as the contradictions generated by the coexistence of traditional media and digital networks (Tucker *et al*., 2018). Moreover, new communicative strategies have emerged in this context, grounded in digital heuristics

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that exploit the power of algorithms and the hybrid interaction between mainstream media and social networks (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). The difficult coexistence of these two domains has contributed to the spread of populist communication, which privileges "bottom-up" forms of expression, emphasizing disintermediation and immediacy to narrow the gap between political reality and public perception (Moffitt, 2016). Indeed, social networks have become central tools in political leaders' communication strategies, allowing them to interact directly with an active electorate and to consolidate their agendas (Enli, 2017). Nevertheless, digital presence primarily unfolds in two directions: on one hand, in building a direct and personalized relationship with the electoral base through the monitoring of online reactions and consensus; on the other, in managing political credibility and reputation. Along this trajectory, interactive leadership emerges as a key strategy for managing communicative dynamics on digital platforms. Social media enable leaders to integrate horizontally into the everyday lives of users who are less engaged in polarization dynamics, redefining the relationship between citizens and politics both online and offline. However, the absence of editorial filters and the algorithmic logic of platforms foster the visibility of sensationalist and emotional content, contributing to the radicalization of opinions and the normalization of hostile language (Farkas & Neumayer, 2020). Furthermore, the convergence between political communication and digital participation strategies has increased the persuasive power of leaders, allowing them to shape public discourse through selective and sometimes manipulative communicative practices (Persily & Tucker, 2020). Thus, behind the apparent democratization of access to information lies the proliferation of aggressive and violent content that becomes viral precisely because of its nature (Tufekci, 2017). This refers to all forms of communication that incite hatred, discrimination and violence against individuals or groups based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation. Such a phenomenon represents a growing threat to social cohesion and the functioning of democracy (Hawdon *et al.*, 2017; Benesch, 2021). This article therefore aims to explore the impact of political communication on the spread of violent rhetoric and the trend toward online polarization. Through a critical review of existing literature, the study analyzes how changes in political communication influence the proliferation of dangerous messages and to what extent these phenomena contribute to the deterioration of social and political conditions. Several cases are also discussed to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics underlying political violence and online radicalization.

2. Theoretical perspectives and changes in the digital age

Political communication plays a crucial role in shaping the collective imagination, as it profoundly influences public perceptions of political phenomena and the formation of consensus. Through the interaction between institutional actors, the media and citizens, it not only transmits information and strategic messages but also actively contributes to structuring public debate and defining dominant narratives within society. In the contemporary context - characterized by the omnipresence of digital technologies and the growing interconnection among media - political communication takes the form of a multidimensional process in which rhetorical and emotional elements intertwine with the algorithmic logic of social platforms (Bossetta, 2018). This evolution has transformed the modes of interaction between political leaders, institutions and public opinion, fostering new forms of participation, mobilization and persuasion (Stromer-Galley, 2019). Political communication goes beyond the mere transmission of information: it helps build

collective identities and legitimize specific power structures (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). In this sense, it represents a device to produce meaning, capable of shaping how citizens interpret political and social reality, influencing not only individual opinions but also collective decision-making processes (Battista, 2023a). It is essential to emphasize that, through language, political leaders convey messages that guide public opinion, shape electoral preferences and influence the perception of institutions. However, political rhetoric is not always neutral or constructive: it can also serve as a vehicle for divisive and aggressive impulses (Rossini *et al.*, 2021). This mechanism raises concerns about the consequences of verbal violence on the social fabric, democratic institutions and civil coexistence. Expressions of linguistic violence may take many forms: not only overtly offensive speech but also more subtle attacks, such as the systematic delegitimization of political opponents, the use of stereotypes and prejudices or the spread of hate rhetoric (Gagliardone *et al.*, 2015). These approaches often aim to dehumanize or criminalize specific social, cultural or political groups, fuelling a sense of threat. A central element of verbal violence in the political sphere is the construction and diffusion of the figure of the "enemy". Assigning blame for economic or political problems to a social group is a common rhetorical practice that can evolve into narratives designed to incite contempt and hostility (Wodak, 2015). This "enemy" may be internal - such as an opposing party - or external, such as an ethnic or religious minority used as a scapegoat. One of the main consequences of violent political language is the polarization of society. This phenomenon occurs when political opinions shift toward extreme positions, reducing the space for dialogue and compromise (Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018). Citizens thus come to identify rigidly with one faction and perceive anyone holding different views as an adversary. Emblematic examples were observed in the United States during and after the 2016 presidential campaign, when the massive use of aggressive and divisive language - amplified by the media and social networks - fueled growing tensions among different communities (Meleo-Erwin *et al.*, 2017). Data show that during this period, incidents of verbal and physical attacks against ethnic, religious and political groups increased significantly (Pew Research Center, 2019). Verbal violence also has negative effects on trust in democratic institutions. The constant delegitimization of opponents - accused of being corrupt, illegitimate or undemocratic without concrete evidence - undermines the credibility of the electoral process and institutional bodies themselves, paving the way for authoritarian drift and political instability. Digital platforms further amplify this problem. Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram and TikTok facilitate the rapid and widespread circulation of polarizing content, fake news and hate speech (Cinelli *et al.*, 2021), as do messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram. Despite attempts at regulation and moderation, algorithmic mechanisms reward the visibility of sensationalist content, making it difficult to contain the spread of aggressive discourse (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). TikTok stands out for its recommendation model based on immediate engagement, which enables the virality of aggressive or manipulative political content, transcending traditional "ideological bubbles" (Medina Serrano *et al.*, 2020). The brevity and audiovisual nature of the format make political messages simple, emotional and highly shareable, encouraging the use of populist and polarizing rhetoric (Zeng & Schäfer, 2021). Moreover, despite moderation efforts, users often bypass control systems by using alternative linguistic codes, symbols or creative editing. The platform has thus become a strategic tool for both political leaders and non-institutional actors, including influencers and coordinated disinformation movements (Herrman, 2021). Overall, as has been repeatedly noted, the logic of social media tends to reward high-impact emotional

content, often at the expense of moderate and reasoned discussion. The result is an informational environment in which the quality of public debate risks deteriorating, fostering opinion radicalization and the spread of divisive narratives. Digital transformation, therefore, concerns not only technological infrastructures but also the redefinition of the cognitive and affective processes that guide political participation. According to Papacharissi (2015), online platforms generate an "affective public sphere", in which emotion becomes a structuring element of political discourse. Social interaction is thus organized around shared feelings rather than rational arguments, fostering the formation of polarized communities that self-reinforce through emotionally charged content. Furthermore, the growing influence of recommendation algorithms has made public debate dependent on logics of visibility and engagement rather than relevance or truthfulness. Platforms act as choice architectures (Battista, 2024a) that shape the trajectories of collective attention, privileging sensationalism and divisive content. These dynamics contribute to the construction of "affective echo chambers", where the repetition of narrative patterns produces an effect of confirmation and radicalization. Finally, though it may seem less evident at first glance, the professionalization of digital propaganda is also central in this scenario. Coordinated campaigns of astroturfing, bots and personalized microtargeting - as revealed in the Cambridge Analytica case - demonstrate the shift from mass communication to algorithmic communication, in which the interaction among data, emotions and political power becomes strategic (Battista & Salzano, 2022).

3. Multi-level extremism

Extremism can be defined as the tendency to seek a radical transformation of the existing political and social order - potentially using violence - to impose an ideological vision considered "true" or "authentic". In recent years, the evolution of political communication and the increasing use of digital platforms have transformed the ways in which extremism is expressed and disseminated. With the rise of the digital media ecosystem, there has been a shift from forms of extremism primarily associated with violent physical actions to forms of rhetorical and psychological radicalization, enabled by anonymity and the absence of direct confrontation (Winter, 2019). Historically, extremism manifested itself through organized protests, clashes with authorities and acts of destabilization. However, the strengthening of state surveillance and control capabilities has reduced the prevalence of direct physical violence, favoring instead new forms of symbolic and psychological violence that are particularly widespread online (Bartlett & Miller, 2010). Today, phenomena such as hate speech, trolling and the spread of fake news represent key tools through which linguistic violence takes root in the digital public sphere, fueling polarization and radicalization. One of the elements that most facilitates the expansion of online extremism is anonymity. Many digital platforms allow users to express themselves without revealing their identity, often using pseudonyms or accounts without personal identifiers. While this feature can protect freedom of expression, it has also encouraged the uncontrolled dissemination of hate speech and extremist narratives without the authors facing any consequences (Phillips, 2015). The absence of direct accountability lowers social inhibitions and fosters a more aggressive and polarized language (Jane, 2017). A striking example is the strategic use of rhetoric by Donald Trump, who has long used X (formerly Twitter) to attack political opponents, journalists and minorities, contributing to the normalization of aggressive and denigratory language. His constant delegitimization of the media through the expression "fake news",

along with his statements labelling immigrants as "criminals" or "rapists", intensified polarization and fuelled the radicalization of segments of the electorate (Ott, 2017). The analysis of other international contexts helps to reveal the transnational nature of digital radicalization processes. The *Gilets Jaunes* movement in France, for example, demonstrates how digital platforms can serve as catalysts for horizontal and spontaneous mobilization. Through Facebook and Telegram, the movement built a collective identity rooted in feelings of exclusion and distrust toward the elites, using memes, livestreams and viral videos as tools for protest and organization (Auriemma *et al*., 2023). Although it did not initially assume explicitly violent traits, the logic of emotional polarization contributed to making the conflict increasingly identity based. In Italy, the *No Green Pass* mobilization represented a paradigmatic case of convergence between health disinformation, conspiracy theories and digital populism. Through Telegram channels and Facebook groups, informal leaders of the movement disseminated narratives of resistance against the so-called "authoritarian state" and "health dictatorship", exploiting the "us versus them" logic typical of populist discourse (Gallo *et al*., 2022). Here too, the hybridization between online activism and offline protest revealed the permeability between digital rhetoric and concrete political behaviour. Another instance of digital insurgency can be found in the 2019 Hong Kong protests. In this context, the strategic use of platforms such as Telegram, LIHKG and AirDrop enabled fluid and decentralized mobilization, characterized by distributed leadership and creative use of anonymity (Baltezarević & Battista, 2025). However, the subsequent digital repression and algorithmic surveillance implemented by the Chinese government demonstrate how the media ecosystem can easily be converted into a tool of social control. Similar dynamics are evident in Myanmar, where Facebook served both as a means of civic mobilization and as a vehicle for spreading ethnic hatred - particularly against the Rohingya minority (Mozur, 2018). The case highlights the dual nature of platforms: both agents of empowerment and channels of propaganda and disinformation. In India, the intersection of political communication and religion has become a powerful vehicle of radicalization. The use of WhatsApp and YouTube by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has contributed to the construction of a form of digital nationalism rooted in identity-based opposition and the manipulation of religious symbols (Battista, 2024b). Taken together, these examples confirm that verbal violence and polarization are not limited to specific contexts but represent global patterns of an algorithmic and affective political culture. As Paasonen (2021) notes, the emotional infrastructure of social media - based on visibility, instant reaction and competition for attention - creates an environment in which anger, indignation and fear become strategic communicative resources. The algorithmization of political discourse not only filters content but also selects and amplifies emotions that sustain engagement. In this context, verbal violence should not be understood merely as a collateral effect but as an integral part of platform logic. Digital polarization thus takes the form of a transnational affective economy, in which the language of hatred and antagonistic rhetoric are locally reconfigured yet follow global dynamics of visibility. According to Zuboff (2019), surveillance capitalism transforms political interaction into a measurable data flow, generating incentives for the expression of extreme positions, which become symbolic currency in the attention economy. Hatred, in this sense, is not merely content but a communicative asset that sustains the digital economy. Recent research on "platform populism" (Maly, 2020) highlights how leaders and movements consciously exploit the technical affordances of social networks -hashtags, memes, short videos - to construct forms of antagonistic identity that strengthen feelings of belonging

and opposition. These dynamics converge in what Moreiras (2021) calls "digital infra-politics": an informal, fluid and often subterranean political sphere where participation is measured more by reactions and shares than by rational deliberation. Furthermore, the diffusion of hostile language and its ability to cross cultural boundaries reveal the existence of global isomorphic communication models, in which the mediatization of politics follows similar rhetorical patterns - from Latin America to Asia, from Europe to Africa - while adapting to local specificities. Algorithmic communication thus functions as a device of cultural homogenization, producing a shared grammar of hostility manifested through recurring forms of disinformation, delegitimization and the spectacularization of conflict. Considering this, online verbal violence can no longer be understood merely as an expression of social discontent or a crisis of representation, but rather as the result of a media ecosystem that rewards polarization as a visibility strategy (Battista, 2023b). From this perspective, understanding the systemic dimension of digital political language requires analysing not only human actors but also the technical infrastructures, algorithms and economic logics that sustain its reproduction.

4. Attempts at constructive dialogue

It is evident that the problem of verbal violence cannot be analysed in isolation, but rather as part of a broader dynamic linked to informational disorder and the crisis of public debate, in which the boundaries between truth and falsehood are increasingly eroded (Lewandowsky *et al*., 2017). This generates a communicative space where offensive and aggressive content intertwines with personal threats, undermining the stability and quality of democratic dialogue. In this scenario, a vicious cycle emerges in which disinformation not only distorts reality but also provides fertile ground for verbal attacks and aggression (Wardle, 2018). At the same time, fake news amplifies toxic narratives and fuels polarization (Tandoc *et al*., 2021). To address these challenges, it is necessary to develop an integrated regulatory framework that recognizes the interdependence between verbal violence, disinformation and the degradation of public debate, while promoting a culture of respect and constructive dialogue. The education of critical and informed citizens thus becomes a fundamental objective for safeguarding the quality of the public sphere and strengthening democratic resilience (Livingstone, 2021). A crucial tool in this context is counter-speech: a communication strategy that does not simply aim to censor hate speech but seeks to promote alternative narratives grounded in empathy and inclusivity (Benesch, 2021). Empirical studies have shown that empathy-based approaches can reduce the intensity of violent discourse, albeit with limited and long-term effects (Hangartner *et al*., 2021). Applied to the present, this perspective invites a transformation of political discourse - from a tool of confrontation into a means of mediation and social cohesion (Habermas, 1996). Ultimately, promoting responsible debate does not mean limiting freedom of expression, but rather preserving it, by creating digital spaces where pluralism does not degenerate into permanent conflict. However, an effective approach to reducing verbal violence necessarily requires a multilevel intervention combining regulation, education and participatory governance. The European Union, with the Digital Services Act (2022), has introduced a regulatory framework that requires platforms to be more transparent about algorithms and content moderation processes, thus promoting the accountability of digital intermediaries (European Commission, 2022). At the same time, international initiatives such as UNESCO's media and information literacy cities program aim to integrate media education into school curricula and urban policies, emphasizing the role of local

communities in fostering a critical digital culture. Examples of good practices also emerge from grassroots initiatives. Collaborative fact-checking projects such as *First Draft News, Pagella Politica and BoomLive* India demonstrate how participatory information verification can counter the virality of disinformation and promote more responsible dialogue. Similarly, the use of counter-speech strategies by civic organizations - such as #IchBinHier in Germany or the *Centro per la Cooperazione Civica Digitale* in Italy - shows that the response to hate speech does not rely solely on censorship, but on the production of empathetic, fact-based counter-narratives.

5. Conclusion

The growing use of incendiary and polarizing language has contributed to fuelling social tensions and political conflict, reducing the space for constructive and pluralistic dialogue. Political language no longer appears as a mere reflection of social dynamics but as a performative agent capable of shaping behaviours, attitudes and collective perceptions (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). From this perspective, language becomes a device of symbolic power that produces social realities, legitimizes collective emotions and organizes the field of political experience (Wodak, 2021). The radicalization of language undermines trust in institutions, impoverishes public debate and reinforces disinformation, generating a communicative environment in which conflict prevails over dialogue and indignation becomes a form of political capital (Papacharissi, 2021). Digital platforms, while introducing innovative forms of participation, have intensified ideological division and the spectacularization of politics, fostering the rise of leaders who favour emotional, antagonistic and immediate communication over programmatic and deliberative content (Gerbaudo, 2018). For these reasons, digital political communication cannot be interpreted merely as a mirror of the times, but as one of the structural factors shaping contemporary political culture. It influences electoral behaviour, impacts social cohesion and redefines the very boundaries of democratic discourse (Benkler *et al*., 2018). The hybridization of algorithms, populist rhetoric and engagement logics has produced a new regime of visibility in which virality replaces deliberation and popularity becomes a criterion of political legitimacy. Faced with this scenario, it becomes urgent to reconcile political language with the social dimension, recovering the mediating function of speech as a tool of dialogue, discussion and collective construction. Such reconciliation requires a twofold effort: on one hand, to regulate the digital sphere by ensuring algorithmic transparency, platform accountability and the protection of communicative rights; on the other, to strengthen media and digital literacy so that citizens can exercise their participation consciously. In this direction, the European Union, through the Digital Services Act (2022) and the European Democracy Action Plan (2023), has laid the groundwork for a new governance of online communication, oriented toward transparency and the protection of the digital public sphere. However, regulation alone is not enough. It is necessary to promote a culture of empathy and dialogue in which diversity of opinion is perceived as a resource rather than a threat. Counter-speech and narrative correction strategies, already tested in various contexts (Benesch, 2021; Hangartner *et al*., 2021), demonstrate that responding to verbal violence with fact-based and respectful arguments can, albeit gradually, reduce hostility and rebuild trust. The cases mentioned illustrate how polarizing language and incendiary rhetoric can translate into concrete actions of political and social destabilization, serving as catalysts for democratic crises. These are not isolated episodes but systemic signals of the structural fragility of democracy in the age of the platformization of politics (Tufekci,

2021). Ultimately, the task of political communication in the 21st century should not be to erect identity-based walls but to build discursive bridges capable of restoring meaning to pluralism and regenerating public trust. As Habermas suggests, the future of democracy will depend on the collective ability to reinvent the public sphere as a space of shared argumentation and mutual responsibility. Promoting a responsible political debate does not mean limiting freedom of expression but ensuring its sustainability over time - preserving language as a common good.

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