The Political Communication of Italia Viva on Instagram: From its Formation to the COVID-19 Emergency

AGOSTINO STAVOLO & ASSUNTA LUONGO

1. Affiliazione Autore / Authors' information

University of Naples Federico II, Italy

2. Contatti / Authors' contact

Agostino Stavolo: ag.stavolo[at]studenti.unina.it
Assunta Luongo: assu.luongo[at]studenti.unina.it

Informazioni aggiuntive / Additional information

Culture e Studi del Sociale

The Political Communication of Italia Viva on Instagram:
From its Formation to the COVID-19 Emergency[1]

Agostino Stavolo & Assunta Luongo

University of Naples Federico II, Italy
E-mail: ag.stavolo[at]studenti.unina.it; assu.luongo[at]studenti.unina.it

Abstract
On 16th September 2019, Matteo Renzi in live recording announces his exit from PD and the formation of a new party called "Italia Viva". According to these social and political events, the research aims at understanding, through an approach based on *content analysis*, what are the main contents conveyed by the Instagram page of Italia Viva in the initial phase of the birth of the party – from September 16 to February 19 - and if there are any differences in the communication strategy adopted during the COVID-19 emergency – from February 20 until June 3.
The expected results of the study are focused on analyzing the relationship between digital spaces, politics, and the pandemic, offering a detailed analysis of the consequences of the COVID-19 emergency on politics and the use of the media, contextualized in the communication strategies of the Italia Viva party.

Keywords: Content analysis, Political communication, COVID-19.

Introduction

The advent of the Internet and the spasmodic consultation of digital platforms have brought about major changes in mass society. One of the most significant of these is certainly the change in political communication defined as "the exchange and comparison of contents of public interest produced by the political system itself, the mass media system and the citizen, not only in his capacity as a voter" (Mazzoleni, 2013, p. 34).

The relationship between the new media and politics, which has been established during technological development, has led to a change in communication in this field. Among the many salient aspects of the opportunities offered by social media, there is the possibility of communicating directly with potential voters, bypassing the journalistic mediation of the mass media, in a potentially continuous and completely self-managed flow, without limits and filters. Another interesting aspect concerns the transformation of political language, which adapts to the type of media used. Thus, a technical-institutional language will be used if a political leader uses traditional media, such as television and newspapers, and a simpler, non-technical language if he conveys his messages through new media. In the second case, the politician will choose to use language that is more in line with voters who are addicted to media consumption. This last aspect makes it clear that politics, as the prestige and cultural relevance of media companies have grown, has progressively gone from being 'mediated' to being

---

[1] The essay is the result of a joint reflection. Introduction and paragraph 1 are attributed to Assunta Luongo and paragraph 2 and Conclusions to Agostino Stavolo.

'mediatized'[2] (Mazzoleni, Schulz, 1999, p. 251). Focusing on the use of social networks, to achieve the set objectives, which in the political sphere are generally identified with the increase in the number of voters, strategies have been used that concern the targeting of the reference public and the choice of message. This means not only identifying the content to be conveyed but also carefully selecting the words to be used, the form to be used and the media format to be used (images, videos, stories). The social pages of parties and the profiles of political figures require dynamic care and continuous study, ranging from the choice of color to the cover image, to the biographical information, elements that alone can determine a greater number of followers and likes.

From this point of view, emblematic is the case of Italia Viva that is a party founded by the leader Matteo Renzi on 16 September 2019. Italia Viva, as well as representing a novelty in the Italian party scene, presents some characteristics that make it a valid and interesting object of study for the sociology of communication. First, the figure of Matteo Renzi stands out, as he has always relied on the Net to gain consensus; secondly, the communication strategy built around the logo, which was not chosen by the party's internal members but by web users through a voting system, is worthy of attention. The chosen symbol features:

- The tick, which represents the concreteness and the idea of "things are done".
- Two wings in flight, to indicate the idea of not losing the ideal dimension typical of politics
- The V, of Italia Viva.

There is also a precise idea in the choice of colors, preferring a gradient of warm tones, starting with yellow and ending with fuchsia pink, combined with light blue in the word 'Italy' to represent nationalism. The choice of the blue-pink contrast goes to represent one of the party's rules, namely the appointment of a man and a woman to office.

As expressed by the party's website, Italia Viva "presents itself as a young and innovative house", which is why Instagram is the most suitable digital platform for reaching many people, mostly young people, and for immediate communication made up of images. In addition to the communicative power of images, however, Instagram has added the importance and strength of online networking typical of social networks. The present work, therefore, aims to analyze the political communication carried out on the Instagram page of the Italia Viva party.

1. Research Design

The research starts from the choice of using content analysis as a reference approach, defined as a rather large and heterogeneous set of "methods that use analytical decomposition and classification procedures, usually for statistical purposes, of texts and other symbolic ensembles" (Rositi, 1988). This definition appears to be consistent with social researchers' use of the method, and especially with its use in the empirical research understudy, as it presupposes three fundamental concepts: inference, texts, and context.

In the wake of what has been explained so far, this research aims to investigate the macro-area of political communication, investigating how it has changed in the new media, in digital environments and how it has been shaped by its main actors, such as parties - in our specific case Italia Viva -, institutions and citizens, who can

---

[2] Mediatization is defined when both the actors and those who narrate it conform their communicative action to the formats and logic of the media system of reference.

act in an increasingly interactive way. This contribution starts from a substantive conceptualization that uses the digital and its contents as the place where the phenomenon, i.e., political communication, develops, takes shape and provokes different reactions.

The first step of the research is the identification of the questions to be answered to deepen the theoretical dimension of the phenomenon we are approaching and subsequently define the empirical aspects to be detected. Consistent with what was said in the initial part of the structuring of the research design, two research hypotheses were formulated:

1. What are the contents conveyed by the posts on the Instagram page of Italia Viva in the initial period of your training?
2. Is there a difference with the contents conveyed by the posts during the period of the COVID-19 emergency?

These hypotheses are the consequence of specific cognitive needs, including the adoption of a perspective linked to small-scale theories in which the researchers let themselves be guided by the suggestions that come from their data, grounded theories that leave more relevance to the work on the 'field'. The study of empirical data leads to the definition of the unit of analysis as a cultural product, corresponding to the set of posts published on the Italia Viva Instagram page.

Therefore, to determine the object of the first cognitive question, the publication period ranging from 16 September 2019, the day of the opening of the Instagram page of the new party, to 19 February 2020 was taken into consideration, for a total of 1182 posts. As previously stated, Italia Viva is an ex-Novo party, and therefore there is a need to know the themes, the topics, the main actors of their proposals, and their communication strategy. More specifically, it is interesting to know the political agenda and the target population it mainly addresses, but also the type of structured online communication.

In February 2020, however, an unprecedented event occurred, with huge consequences on society, the economy, politics, health: the emergence of COVID-19. Given the global scope of the epidemic and the considerable changes linked to it, it was considered interesting to analyze the contents conveyed by Italia Viva in this historical phase to verify if there were any significant changes in the way it communicated and, specifically, which issues were highlighted.

The second question aims to analyze the posts published by the Instagram page of Italia Viva from 20 February 2020 until 3 June 202, for a total of 700 posts.

The beginning of this time frame corresponds to the discovery of the first outbreak in Lombardy, while 3 June 2020 represents the day on which the decree was issued allowing free movement between regions without the need for self-certification. 3 June is therefore an important date that marks the definitive exit from the lockdown, with the opening of the regions and the consequent start of the third phase.

1.1. Content Analysis

The Instagram platform presents a very flexible policy, thanks to which the extraction methods become simpler and more accessible to everyone. In fact, in the present work, data extraction was carried out manually, given the unlimited temporal availability of the posts themselves. Following the collection and extraction of data, a quantitative content analysis was carried out, i.e., a technique

for breaking down the message produced on the Instagram platform into simpler constituent elements, using explicit and standardized criteria to be applied to the entire unit in question. In this regard, a content analysis was chosen as a survey, defined as "a set of semi-standardized and/or standardized data collection techniques for recording the states in which, from case to case, certain properties occur in a set of appropriately selected units of analysis" (Losito, 2007). The aim is to interrogate the objects of research, in this case, the posts on the Instagram page, through a standardized procedure. For this purpose, a standardized coding sheet, consisting of 14 categorical variables, was developed to detect the properties of the post. Each coding sheet was created respecting first the characteristics of the message (e.g., images in the case of posts) and the peculiarities of the medium from which the classification units were analyzed, which, in this case, coincide with the context units, going to outline a case of the third type of Rositi[3].

It is important to bear in mind that the tables shown below are the result of a continuous elaboration of the definition of the variables and the methods linked to them. This is because the framing of the study from an exploratory point of view, where there is no need to formulate hypotheses beforehand regarding the relationships between the variables under study, has allowed them to be redefined during fieldwork until the final version shown here is presented. It is necessary, therefore, to consider the willingness to accept empirical results that cannot be predicted a priori.

The encoding card for the Instagram post was elaborated to code the images of the posts published by Italia Viva on its official Instagram profile in the period from its formation until the day before the explosion of the COVID-19 emergency.

Figure 1 – Encoding card

Date of publication	1 – September/October 2 - November 3 – December 4 – January 5 – February
Composition of the picture	1 - Subject 2 - Text 3 – Subject/Text 4 – Video 5 - Other
N° Tags	1 - No tag 2 – One or more tags
Prevalent style	1 - Informative 2 - Complaint 3 - Propagandistic

---

[3] The third type of Rositi is used when no linguistic or extra-linguistic breakdowns are made, and the classification units coincide with the context unit. It is possible to encounter problems during data analysis. This happens especially when it comes to combining the flexibility and heterogeneity of texts and content with the standardization of the survey sheets because the content under analysis is pre-existing and not produced ad hoc for the study conducted. For this reason, the order of the entries must necessarily follow a subdivision into homogeneous thematic areas.

Prevalent scope	1 - Political 2 - Economic 3 - Social
Prevalent Topic	1 – Party 2 - Social and environmental policies 3 - Antagonism 4 - Economy and finance 5- Covid-19 6 - Others
Origin of posts	1 - Published from the page 2 - Repost 3 – Other
Logo	1 - Logo showing 2 - Logo not showing
N° Subject foto	1 – No subject 2 - One 3 – Two or more subjects
Subject gender	1 - Man 2 - Woman 3 – Mixed 4 – No gender
Clothing	1 - Formal 2 - Informal 3 – No clothing
Pose	1 - Posing 2 - Natural 3 – No pose
Subject attitude	1 - Gritty 2 - Serene 3 - Explicative 4 – No attitude

The coding sheet for the posts published by the Instagram page of Italia Viva functional to the analysis of the Coronavirus emergency period is almost identical to the table above, with the addition of a COVID-19 mode within the variable "Prevailing topic". The choice lies in the fact that it was necessary to analyze how much the emergency was central in the political communication of the party and, above all, to visualize it about the variable "Prevailing topic".

At the end of this phase, the data collected are ready to be analyzed

2. Data analysis

Through the analysis of multiple correspondences (ACM), it was possible to analyze the characteristics of the communication of the Italia Viva party. What emerges from the results is reported within this factorial map:
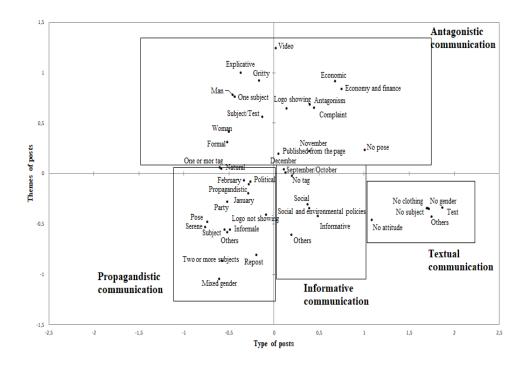
Figure 2 – Factorial axis of Italia Viva communication in the first six months

As regards the "Type of communication" (F1 axis) you can distinguish a right part that prefers a type of communication turned on Instagram through the use of "Texts", dragging with it all the characteristics that follow ("No gender", "No subject", "No clothing", "No pose" and "No attitude"); and a left part of the graph that shows a type of communication turned on "Subjects" and, therefore, *ad personam*. with the consequent proximity of the modalities that indicate the gender of the subjects, clothing, attitude. This lies in the fact that the political communication carried out on social networks today is increasingly personalized and focused on the figure of the leader.

The side of the " Topics" (axis F2), on the other hand, highlights the topics covered by the party Italy Viva contextualized in the period. In the lower part, it is possible to observe a communication that prefers themes related to the "Party" and "Social and Environmental Policies" while in the upper part themes related to Economy and Finance and Antagonism.

From the intersection between the two axes, it is possible to determine different types of communication adopted by the new party.

In the initial phase of Italia Viva, corresponding to September/October, and informative communication was privileged, mainly focused on social and environmental policies (19%) concerning education, gender differences, and environmental protection and safeguard. The choice lies in the will of Matteo Renzi's party to define the key points of the electoral program and the political positions taken to inform the electorate. Among these is the redevelopment of infrastructure that shows tangible signs of precariousness following the flood that hit Venice on 12 - 13 November. This leads politicians to redefine the agenda-setting and change the flow of communication, focusing on the controversy surrounding the functioning of the Mose. Therefore, in this period, the use of video

media (18.5%) and text media preceded by the image of the leader or other members of parliament (22.5%) is privileged, where the central subjects are the members of the party, both men (36%) and women (22%), aiming to explain what the economic and financial maneuvers of Italia Viva will be. In summary, the preferred topics in this phase of the communication are the economic proposals made explicit through some decrees, including the DL simplifications "Italy Shock" where we highlight the future opportunities produced by the unblocking of construction sites and the streamlined bureaucratic procedures. (10%). And it is especially this theme to be declined as "attack" and denunciation against the opposition leader Matteo Salvini, harshly criticizing the maneuvers legislated during the previous government.

In the period between January and February the communication flow evolves again and becomes propagandistic (62%). Noticeably, it turns out to be the preferred mode of communication for the party: although in the first four months of its formation, communication forms focused on the social and economic sphere have been preferred, the propaganda element is always central. This is because being an *ex-novo* formation, with a leader within it who had previously been at the center of turbulent political issues, it was necessary to make the party known to the electorate and highlight the element of novelty, which is what distinguishes Italia Viva first from the Democratic Party and, secondly, from other political actors. This objective was achieved through the promotion of initiatives, conferences, and interviews of the parliamentarians of Italia Viva themselves. It is important to note that in dealing with issues of the internal organization of the party (46%) it was chosen to use single subjects, portraits strictly posed (23%), with expressions of serenity (31%), and with a purely informal attire (18%). This political strategy resides in the awareness that carving out an online space means not only outlining the profile of one or more individuals - in this case of a leader and other prominent members of the party - but also eliminating barriers and distances between a subject and/or a party configuration and all other voters. To do this, the strategies put in place are a non-technical language, greater interaction of political actors with citizens through comments, likes, and reactions, but also photographs depicting informally dressed party representatives and ordinary people. Added to this are the strategy of publishing photos and videos of young boys and girls who express the expectations they have of Italian politics and in Italia Viva. Figure 3 shows a second factorial level, related to the second research question.

The denomination of the axes is equal to the previous factorial plan because the researchers intended to make a comparison between the content conveyed in the two moments that separate the political activity of the party to highlight similarities or differences.

When, in the first days of January, the Coronavirus epidemic began to spread in China, the attitude that the Italian public institutions, and in particular the politicians, took was to inform the citizens of the situation, using calm tones and avoiding alarmism. Nevertheless, some politicians were beginning to discuss possible political decisions to be taken to avoid contagion in Italy as well. At first, there was the closure of direct flights from China to Italy, which did not raise concerns because the "contagion spread" situation seemed still far away. Yet when the first outbreak occurred in Lombardy, on February 20, 2020, there began to be an escalation of contagion that resulted in a redundant communication of risk by political institutions and then became persuading from March 9, the day on which the lockdown begins. Therefore, any television channel, newspaper, and party conveyed information about the contagion, the preventive measures to be taken, the

situation in hospitals and nursing homes. Following the above, it is possible to notice in the first quadrant of the factorial plan that in March Italy Viva adopted a propaganda communication on issues concerning Covid-19 (50%).
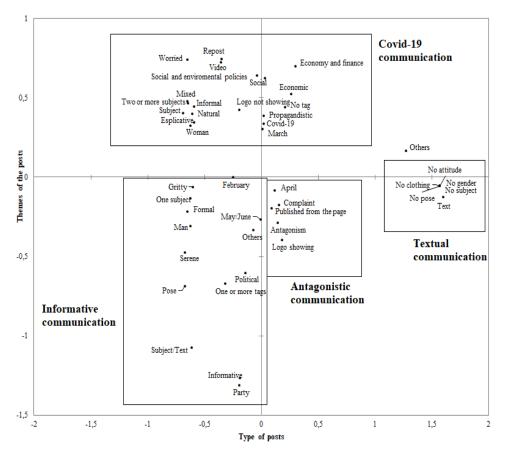
Figure 3 – Factorial axis of Italia Viva communication during COVID-19 emergency

The propaganda set in motion by the party focused, in this first phase, on issues related to both the social and economic spheres. As far as social issues are concerned, numerous posts have been published on the Instagram page of Italia Viva in which health workers - such as doctors and nurses - and voluntary workers, such as the Red Cross, were portrayed. In fact, in this historical period, the party uses mainly videos (17%) and photographs (33%) in which the subjects depicted are always presented in groups (18%) and in a mixed form (11%), i.e., there are both male and female. Yet the propaganda operated by Italia Viva on social policies is also focused on the role adopted by parliamentarians within this political movement: in fact, it is mainly female subjects (23%) who are present in the videos (16%) that aim to illustrate and present the main solutions to the health emergency and the closure of schools. As far as the economic dimension is concerned, it is necessary to broaden the focus on what is part of the consequences of the Coronavirus. Inevitably, closure of businesses, except for agri-foodstuffs and those deemed necessary, and the suspension of work activities that cannot be carried out in a smart working model will have repercussions on the economy of the country. In this regard, billions of euros have been allocated for the maintenance of these families that, in addition to the money paid for citizenship income, have led to live a complex economic phase. This issue has not escaped the attention of Italia Viva,

which in this period post on Instagram has conveyed the economic sphere (23%), focusing on financial proposals (6%).

In pursuit of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte's Decrees, the lockdown extended beyond the March period and the protests by commercial operators for the delays in financial subsidies, Italia Viva takes a clear and precise position: it is on the side of companies and workers. All this is visible in the lower part of the factorial plan, in which it is clearly explained that the party in April adopts a communication of antagonism, especially about the release of the bosses allowed by the Minister of Justice, Alfonso Bonafede, because of the COVID emergency. In fact, in this period the communication strategy aims to denounce the ally in government, the Movimento 5Stelle, both for the violations of constitutional freedoms and for the work and income situation in which Italy was in the period of closure. After this first phase of denunciation against the political authorities in government, accused of acting late, a partial opening of activities gradually began in May. On May 4, begins the so-called "Phase 2" where visits to relatives, take-away service for catering activities, and the opening of public parks are allowed. From here on, a phase of "normality" begins for Italy where it is necessary to respect the anti-accounting measures and the obligation to wear the mask. At the same time as the Coronavirus emergency changes, the tone of political communication is further modified: the information element, expressed through personal communication, returns to be central. Posts on Instagram focused on subjects where it is recommended to respect safety distances, the use of personal protective equipment, and frequent hand washing are privileged. Very often it is audiovisual content, accompanied by textual support that makes immediate reading and understanding of the rules. The COVID-19 emergency, despite the escape from the lockdown sanctioned by the decree of June 4 that allows free movement between regions, remains the central issue for Italy Viva throughout the pandemic period, however, declined through a political approach that considers the proposals made by the party for the resolution of the problems and that focuses on improving public health.

Conclusion

In the final phase of the work, the focus was on the relationship between politics, digital spaces, and the pandemic. In this regard, it is important to stress that the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on international relations and affected the political systems of several countries, as it caused the suspension of legislative activities, led to the isolation of several political actors and forced the rescheduling of electoral appointments. "The impossibility of occupying physical space has also reduced the channels of political participation and the opportunities for expressing dissent, limiting them, also in this case, to the virtual space of the new media" (Bordignon, Diamanti, Turato 2020, p.392).

In the political communication carried out online by the party, the textual element is always central. This means that Italia Viva does not only use proprietary content, i.e., photos and videos created directly by the social communication team but also user-generated content, i.e., content created by other users, such as screens from newspapers or tweets produced on Twitter and then posted on Instagram. This is an interesting aspect as it highlights, on the one hand, the impossibility for a party configuration to communicate only through images and/or videos, to the detriment of the affordances (Hjavard, 2008, p. 119) of the digital platform; on the

other hand, it provides an input aimed at highlighting how the society of immediacy and speed manifests itself precisely through the propensity to use short and concise text-images.

Thus, on the one hand, digital evolution pushes politicians to do politics online and, on the other hand, political actors transform the affordances of one or more social platforms for the sole purpose of being able to continue to reiterate their habitus over time. For example, the politician's habitus is to communicate comprehensively about a state's issues. However, faced with the obstacles posed by some social networks, such as Instagram, which is a social network where only photos and videos are published, there is a need to acquire new dispositions that allow one to communicate concisely even through photographs by proposing the form of Image + Text. And so, thanks to mediatization there is a 'symbiotic relationship' in which the logic and purposes of media and politics interpenetrate (Mazzoleni, Schulz 1999, p. 252). Beyond these events, which show the cumulative effect of the virus' impacts on politics and communication, the pandemic represents "a symbolic terrain on which to build a discursive field for politics, and in terms of research, it constitutes an opportunity to focus on some of the problems of the relationship between politics and citizenship" (Boccia Artieri 2020, p.443). A particularly delicate issue inevitably concerned the relationship between political power and the media. Communication in emergencies involves striking a balance between transparency and control: between the citizens' right to be informed and the need to limit the proliferation of alarmist content and fake news. In this regard, the role of technical expertise has become central in the flow of communication, but also the unexpected effects that this has entailed. Virologists and epidemiologists have been called upon to support political decisions, sucking them almost automatically into the media circuit: infected, in turn, by the logic that characterizes it, made up of spectacle and immediacy. From the Civil Protection press conference at 6 p.m. to social networks and talk shows, science has been called upon to compare its own (often divergent) 'opinions' with those of commentators, politicians, and ordinary people. In this key, there was talk of a connection between pandemic and infodemia[4] (Bordignon, Diamanti, Turato 2020, p.392).

References

Boccia Artieri, G. (2020). A Voce Alta. Pandemic politics: un nuovo campo discorsivo per la ricerca sulla politica. *Comunicazione politica, Quadrimestrale dell'Associazione Italiana di Comunicazione Politica*, 3/2020, pp. 443-449.

Bordignon F., Diamanti I., Turato F., (2020) *Il contagio delle opinioni. Cittadini e democrazia ai tempi del Coronavirus*, in "Comunicazione politica, Quadrimestrale dell'Associazione Italiana di Comunicazione Politica" 3/2020, pp. 389-418.

Hjarvard, S. (2008). The Mediatization of Society. A theory of the media as agents of social and cultural change. *Nordicom Review*, 29, pp. 105-134.

Losito G. (2007), *L'analisi del contenuto nella ricerca sociale*, Milano: Franco Angeli

Mazzoleni G. (2013), *La comunicazione politica*, Bologna: Il Mulino.

Mazzoleni, G.; Schulz, W. (1999). Mediatization of Politics: a challenge for democracy. *Political Communication*, vol.16, n.3, pp. 247-261.

Rositi, F. (1988). L'analisi del contenuto, in Rositi, F., Livolsi, M. (a cura di), *La ricerca sull'industria culturale*. Roma: La Nuova Italia Scientifica.

---

[4] Excessive circulation of contradictory information. Often unscreened, unverified, making it difficult to find one's way around a particular theme, topic, or choice because of the difficulty of identifying not only reliable but also reliable sources.