

Abstract

Institutional communication has been a controversial issue for many years now in Italy; at least as concerns the difficult challenge of putting effective communication on a national scale between the citizenship and the State in place. Most likely what is lacking is a well defined policy of strategic planning to rectify in part what Rolando (1998) sees as “institutional communication activities conceived as random initiatives rarely destined for structured balance sheets or as part of constituted professional nuclei” and which Faccioli considers “no longer the exception but still not the rule”(F. Faccioli, 2001).

We are not yet on the verge of a communicational revolution although over ten years have passed since Italian Legislation (the so-called Bassanini, Law no.59 /97, Law no. 241/1990 and Law no. 150/2000 which specifically regulates Public Communication and is considered both the point of arrival and at the same time, departure point of the transformation process.) was passed with the aim of putting communication at the core of the evolution in act in the public administration (PA), communication considered as “a strategic resource capable of drastically redirecting the pathway in evolution of the PA in order to build a tight network of relations with the community of reference, based above all on trust and consensus” (Cuomo et al, in Metallo et Al, 2009). For the Authors, this process starting at the beginning of the 1990s, has still not reached full completion. During this period there was an attempt to adapt and transfer operative models characterizing the private industry sector to the PA in order to put in place more efficiently the public mission and to improve the level of deliverables in terms of services. In other words, the basic aim of the legislative decrees was to simplify excessively bureaucratic procedures ensconced firmly in the Public Administration system “and to favour communication and citizen-rapport, by abandoning the traditional, hierarchical and strictly self-referential models implemented by the State and substituting them with more productive and efficient organizations, sensitive towards creating relations with its different stakeholders (in the first place the citizens)”. The new remit of the PA was in essence, the sanctioning, implicitly or explicitly, of new democratic principles (transparency, participation simplified language addressed to the subjects involved

and “the separation between policy and administration, subsidiarity, etc., flanked and/or substituted by traditional values, thus giving life to new models of governance and management of the *res publica*“ (Cuomo et al, 2009). By reducing the complexity of the information the State intends to convey to its citizens, if only in terms of bridging gaps and in making them feel slightly more closer to the State; “citizens are currently called upon, in the light of processes of modernization in act, to take a more active part in public service and in exercising their rights by means of new managerial models that render the delivery of public services more visible and transparent and the information conveyed, clearer and more exhaustive “ (Cuomo et al, 2009). Citizens have always found themselves at a distinct disadvantage in this respect: the State with its top-down impositions, high up in its ivory tower of bureaucratic jargon ; its subjects at best, passively submitting to public dictates or at worse, lost in the j ganglions of incomprehensible detail, . Clearly what has been lacking to date, is this relational aspect (Cuomo et al, 2009), linked to institutional inter and intra communication. As in any other complex system the latter is part of a much wider process inserted within the dynamics of a context of social relations and involving different stakeholders and scenarios.

With the advent of Law 150/2000, there was an attempt to regulate the complex scenario of Public Communication in Italy. The Law had the remit of re-organizing information and communication activities, concentrating on the structures that implement communication, the training of human resources and the definition of communication projects/plans/programmes. In other words, informing the citizens and communicating with them are currently “no longer discretionary and extemporaneous activities but an ‘institutional obligation: ceasing to be incidental and becoming a proper, legitimate and acknowledged function” (Cuomo et al, 2009)

A key factor lies in the building both of the sense of the State and the sense of citizenship. In other words, new spaces for institution-client/citizen communication imply new behavioural models and models of meaning geared to enhancing an individual’s sense of belonging to the State. At the same time, the new emphasis put on relational exchanges seeing as “they foster innovation and modify the organization of institutional work itself, changing ways of working and even relationships with citizens and the other institutions of the State” (Faccioli, 2001)..

This means that as a consequence, institutional communication should be in the throes of “being interwoven with a process of cultural change investing the institutions and the citizens and being pivoted on the enhancement of public service in terms of the result of processes of interaction, communication and confrontation between the parties on issues and resolutions of collective interest” (Faccioli, 2001).

Building a sense of the State however, is not easy, the pillar of the State is its reliability and authority, while recent years have seen the institutions become more and more delegitimized.

The European Union is undergoing the same kind of pressure on a larger scale. Their White Paper on Communication published in February 2006, talks about placing communication at the service of its citizens with the Commission launching what it calls a Plan ‘D’ for democracy, dialogue and debate. These recommendations can also be filtered down at a national institutional level. They stipulate the need for transparency on the part of institutions towards their stakeholders, and invoke other key concepts such as: targeted attention, participation, efficiency and efficacy, key constructs of the Viable Systems Approach (VSA) which has recently been linked with the Italian National Health Service System (see Saviano, Bassano et al, 2010). In this context, in Italy with Law no.15 dated 4th March 2009, the Ministry of Public Affairs/Administration recently delineated guidelines for reforming the PA sector in areas of :performance, assessment/evaluation, transparency, incentives and sanctions. Furthermore, the Law currently regulates: planning, the transparency of acts, control and disciplinary sanctions and focuses specifically on integrity in the PA. In particular, Art. 4 of the said Law stipulates that citizens are to be guaranteed efficient services and transparency in public administration acts and if these goals are not met, then citizens may take up Class Action against the Public Administration involved. However, even if the business-like dimension of the State both in its central and peripheral form has become much more relevant compared to the past, (the 1990s) it cannot be said that all the differences between the State-enterprise can be eliminated. As Cuomo et al point out “the mission of the State, in fact, is not only that (as is so often simplistically declared) that of guaranteeing efficiency, and reduction of costs, (economic aspect), but also that of equity, transparency, legitimacy and management/control of social consensus. Citizens in effect, should be

considered protagonists in the achieving of their personal needs together with the PA and even if the PA is still called upon “to satisfy in a dynamic way, the needs of the community in a logic of correct/appropriate management of resources, it cannot be separated from the social purpose it represents. Consequently, it is fundamental in this perspective, to attribute growing value to the relations with the community , with the proviso that in order to resolve problems afflicting the community, active and aware citizens rather than administered subjects are needed”, Cuomo et al, 2009). In the same direction, in the UK The Government has set itself the aim of public services for all that are efficient, effective, excellent, equitable and empowering – with the citizen always and everywhere at the heart of public service provision. With this in mind the initiative Customer Service Excellence was developed to offer public services a practical tool for driving customer-focused change within their organisations. The foundation of this tool is the Customer Service Excellence standard which tests in great depth those areas that research has indicated are a priority for customers, with particular focus on delivery, timeliness, information, professionalism and staff attitude. There is also emphasis placed on developing customer insight, understanding the user’s experience and robust measurement of service satisfaction.

Although much has been done to align Italy with other European Countries in terms of standards and quality benchmarks, we are still in the initial phase of systemizing the process. A start has been made with the CAF and the CRUI models and the right direction has been undertaken. What is needed above all however, is a change in mentality. Objective analyses not tempered by subjective misconceptions, feelings, creative interpretations etc., in other words, transparent, inclusive procedures that indicate clearly what should be on the public agenda are an integral part of the process. Furthermore, much research needs to be done on the public sector in terms of customer satisfaction and the means and tools available or to be devised, for attaining this milestone. More efficiency, more efficacy, more transparency, more equity, add up to total quality management and customer satisfaction, no mean achievement for any democratic Country on the European scenario today.

Public Sector innovation is a key contributor to national growth and the welfare of individual citizens. Yet as Paul Windrum points out: “precious little research has been conducted on public sector innovation”. Windrum attributes this to the “legacy of the old view that held manufacturing as the ‘sole’ source of productivity, growth and economic wealth, while services are unproductive and technology backward”. Naturally, the opposite is true in the private sector where abundant research has been carried out and which has had far reaching consequences for the public sector. Currently, research on the public sector provides only partial understanding of the Drivers, Dynamics and Impacts of services and does not address the role of public sector organizations within the innovation process or factors that stimulate and shape new service innovations. Windrum maintains furthermore, that public sector entrepreneurship has been under discussion since the 1960s and 1970s and that it is a “common (mis)conception in many developed countries that the public sector is not entrepreneurial and does not innovate” Windrum et al., (2008). Public sector institutions are considered furthermore, conservative, bureaucratic and slow moving and it is supposed that given the presumed superior innovative potential, characteristic of the private sector, policy should focus on the following considerations:

- a) whether public services innovate
- b) under what conditions
- c) the form innovation takes
- d) the role of entrepreneurship and management reform in the innovation process
- e) how the evolving policy context influences innovation
- f) the link between public sector innovation and private sector innovation

For Windrum, the objective of innovation studies “is to understand the processes that drive innovation and the link between innovation and social and economic change”. By neglecting public sector innovation he adds, “the innovation literature has omitted important dimensions of the innovation process and has failed to address the impact of public sector innovation on productivity, growth and employment. Windrum in his

taxonomy of Public Sector Innovation (Windrum, 2008) has placed the emphasis on:

1. service innovation
2. service delivery innovation
3. administrative and organizational innovation (the subject of the present study)
4. conceptual innovation
5. policy innovation
6. systemic innovation.

The field is vast and requires in depth research from these 6 perspectives. The present study has attempted to examine one of the indicators in the taxonomy i.e. administrative and organizational innovation from the point of view of transparent and insightful *communication* to fully involve the citizenship in the search for high quality standards and excellence on the part of the Public Administration. Naturally, this is only a first step; a long journey waits ahead but if the first steps aren't taken, then it goes without saying, the destination will never ever be reached.