

Editorial

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Strategic communication can be understood from four perspectives (Zerfass, Verčič, Nothhaft & Werder, 2018): 1) alternative designation to “public relations”; 2) new communication function shifting the focus from tactical-operational support (of integrated communication) to a decisional focus within all kinds of organizations; 3) new label for “marketing communication”, i.e., goal-oriented communication aimed at all kinds of audiences and publics, particularly the ones used by companies; and 4) communication developed in the context of military and national power, thus soft power in the political-military and diplomatic spheres.

Strategic communication involves the intentional efforts of an organization to communicate and establish relationships with its audiences in order to fulfill its mission and goals (Hallahan et al., 2007). It therefore has a relational orientation. Relationships have impacts on the outcomes of organizations and, consequently,

on the structure of civil society, given that organizations operate in a social context (Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2015).

Adopting an interactionist approach, public relations use communicative processes to negotiate meanings and build relationships, assuming that individuals need information to make decisions (Taylor, 2010). Public relations (and strategic communication) are recognized as having a role on a macro scale, as they are fundamental to helping people make sense of their daily lives and the world. By combining functional, action-oriented and operationally focused perspectives with co-creative perspectives, “PR’s role in society is to create (and re-create) the conditions that enact civil society” (Taylor, 2010, p. 7). The concept of civil society explained here is based on Hauser (1998, 2004), who conceives civil society as a discursive structure that requires rhetoric and tolerance of different opinions. Rhetoric is therefore a key asset: “[it] creates the conditions for social capital to emerge as an outcome of the actions of different actors” (Taylor, 2010, p. 9).

Social movements and activism draw from strategic communication the techniques, the focus on the campaign (action planning), and the challenges of impact evaluation (L’Etang, 2016). For critical theorists, the association of communication with activism is fundamental, as its social framework implies its use by those without power, seeking greater control and balance between the movements of the marginalized and the dominant groups (power holders).

Civil society can be seen as “a communicative process grounded in information, communication, and relationships” (Taylor, 2010, p. 7). By adopting this conception, individuals play an active role in sharing information and creating messages: their choices, investments, agendas, and actions determine what is valuable and relevant (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013, p. 21).

Although we live in an increasingly individualistic world (Bauman, 2001; Stevenson, 2003), voluntary associations commonly referred to as “civil society” are decisive for the deepening of democracy. This is because they fulfill functions such as: establishment of bonds of trust among individuals; organization of interests; scrutiny of the authorities’ actions; and promotion of public debate, seeking to address issues in a more inclusive way (Fernandes, 2014). The development of these groups depends on the ability of people to work together in pursuit of common goals and interests. They therefore depend on social capital, sociability, and trust (Fukuyama, 1996). Nothing is achieved in isolation, or in a disorderly fashion, so, in any democracy, interests must be articulated and represented by organized groups.

Civil society groups include associations such as informal networks, semi-formal grassroots organizations, or formal global organizations that compete to represent the interests of civil society in a particular cultural context. They can also have a representative nature and consist of collaborative entities united by funda-

mental social motives and principles. Common interests, ambivalence, and concerns around conflict and techno-scientific issues can be shaped by civil society groups to increase dissent and exert political pressure. When the emphasis is on contestation, advocacy, conflict, transgression and, more broadly, social transformation (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012), these groups are considered activists.

The involvement of these associations is fundamental for the identification and debate of issues specific to their interest. Their access to the public spheres and the possibility of participating in the definition of public policy, or at least, the possibility of influencing, vetoing, and determining decisions that are made, is an indicator of the “quality of the democracy”. Only with a democratic political culture will more voices be included, and the destinies of the *polis* will no longer be in the hands of political, economic, and social elites. Consequently, the scope of interests discussed will be widened, and community ties, solidarity, and trust will be strengthened, as well as the legitimization of the regime (Fernandes, 2014).

Civil society groups, therefore, play a significant political role, as they ensure the existence of divergent voices in public spheres. Civic culture is related to civil society as well. Initially defined by Almond and Verba (1963, 1980), civic culture is presented as a set of practices and rituals associated with citizen participation in the life of their community. It can be considered as the set of cultural conditions that enable citizens’ political participation, and may include the following: mastery of digital tools for organizing information, the ability to engage in political affairs, valuing participation in local political and cultural institutions, civic cooperation, and trust.

In the context of a participatory civic culture, Jenkins (2006) calls the active individual the “monitorial citizen” to designate the person who develops new critical capacities to evaluate information. This citizen becomes an information watcher, rather than just a collector. The author states that the “monitorial citizen”, as an information checker, can easily perceive when he or she is faced with propaganda and misinformation; and can engage in discussion on political topics and contribute to critical discourse on civic and social life, outside the mass media spectrum.

Several authors (e.g., Banaji & Buckingham, 2013; Bessant, Farthing, & Watts, 2016; Jenkins et al., 2016; Smith & Thompson, 2015) consider that citizens are becoming less and less engaged in civic and political life. Citizens are less inclined to vote or participate in political parties, and they trust the political process less and less. There are fewer and fewer “active citizens” in a sustained or meaningful way. However, in a global context, and with the development of information and communication technologies, digital communities are understood to offer the individual numerous opportunities for education, learning, interaction, participation, self-expression, and civic engagement.

Projects using these media address a range of concerns, including voting, volunteering, local community involvement, identity politics, global issues, tolerance and diversity, equity, and activism. A civic culture is thus manifested, understood as a continuum that ranges from organized public activities and associations of various kinds (which may include groups with musical, sports, or other cultural interests), through “para-political” activities such as campaigning, volunteering, and community activism (Dahlgren, 2009); to political activities in the more formal and official sense, developed by political parties and governments. Civic cultures — therefore broader than political ones — depend on processes of public information sharing and a commitment to reciprocity and mutual support (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013).

Political and civic engagements are not only related to technological means; they are also — and perhaps above all — conditioned by citizens’ attitudes and behaviors, that is, by participatory cultures to which greater autonomy is associated. The autonomy of the individual is associated with the conscious and effective use of communication and public relations tools. For Munshi and Kurian (2017), issues such as climate change and inequalities in access to the world’s resources are pressing issues for a conscious global citizenship. Within these issues and their amplification, it is possible to find strategic communication that is becoming an instrument of a “sustainable citizenship,” constituting itself as a “platform of resistance” against dominant powers and narratives, contributing to a “transnational public sphere of resistance” (Munshi & Kurian, 2017, p. 405).

Sustainable citizenship is a concept and a process, grounded in the idea of active citizenship with a long-term, holistic, ethical commitment to social justice that explicitly recognizes and addresses power differences, and the marginalized (Munshi & Kurian, 2017). Sustainable citizenship involves developing active relationships among varied publics to empower the dis-empowered, thereby broadening civic participation.

With the development of alternative media infrastructures that emerge online and use digital language, new conditions arise that are conducive to the expression of new voices and the amplification of existing, but little “heard”, voices. The media are the source for finding voices and amplifying values (Couldry, 2010). It is not certain, however, that the “new media” allow the expression of different voices or the emergence of new voices, in view of the phenomenon of naturalization used by the individual to simplify his or her life and options in a scenario of multiplicity of media and messages (Couldry, 2012). Questions remain as to whether these means do not serve only those who were already mobilizing against the established powers, now in a more amplified form.

By deciding to participate, citizens collectively engage in processes of research, analysis, evaluation, and information sharing. Active publics are motivated by issues of common interest, aiming at the well-being of the community to which they belong, seeking dialogue, are aware of the diversity of voices existing in public spheres, and are motivated to use communication tools to obtain information, communicate, and act (Mihailidis, 2014). Various forms of current activism tend to reject organized and politicized ways to make their voices heard, arguing that party lines are not representative of the diversity of “wills” of participants in movements. Decentralized, non-politicized networks, however, require horizontal mobilization and coordination efforts that ensure autonomy and diversity, but these are not always legitimate.

This special issue

According to many sociologists, including Bauman (2001), contemporary society — also called postmodern — is seen as more dynamic and volatile, where human relationships are less permanent and less marked by the ethical standards of modernity. The contingency of today’s society favors the emergence of new organizational networks and social movements based on increased citizen participation.

In this context, dominant and marginalized groups use communication strategically to gain voice and legitimacy in public spheres. While sustaining civic engagement, strategic communication can be used by activist movements to gain balance of power, and challenge dominant groups.

The main objectives of this special issue are to study and reflect on the following: the various roles that strategic communication can play to enable social change, while contributing to the construction and development of democratic practices; the use and importance of communication tools in civic participation, the performance of civic movements and the empowerment of civic dynamics; the diplomatic practice by non-governmental actors and with the increasing participation of citizens.

In the article “Citizen Diplomacy in the covid-19 pandemic: between sharp power and soft power”, Niedja Santos argues that the challenge imposed by the covid-19 pandemic forced countries to intensify actions related to citizens’ safety on the one hand, and created conditions for citizens to engage in actions with international repercussions on the other hand. Using case studies focusing on the fight against the covid-19 pandemic in China, Portugal, and Brazil, the article aims to identify how citizens’ diplomacy is positioned in terms of acting between soft power and sharp power.

André Tropiano and Neiva Cunha, in turn, dissertate on the “Public Arena on the Internet in defense of the public university in Brazil”. The article reflects on the

importance of social movements in the network to conquer space and foster public debate in their favor. Through the study of the #UERJResiste case on Facebook, in defense of the State University of Rio de Janeiro, the article seeks to understand the movement's communication strategies by identifying four categories: media politics, discourses of resisting, educational sharing and poetics of identity. The civic movement #UERJResiste is assumed as the protagonist of a narrative to be disseminated, reflected, and discussed in defense of the Brazilian public university, countering discourses on privatization of Education in Brazil and attacks on its autonomy and its professionals.

Clésio Admar Teixeira analyzes the media representation of environmental disasters in Brazil, specifically the cases of Mariana and Brumadinho. Content analysis of over 3,000 front pages, using framing theory, highlights human concern and the presence of local populations in the news. The results of this study provide local communities with information on how the press welcomed their demands and mobilizations, and represented them on their front pages. The article also provides elements for discussion and use of communication tools in mobilizing local populations and repairing damage to the image of the organizations involved.

Using a mixed method approach, Israel Bionyi Nyoh explores how energy initiatives can draw on communication models to facilitate the transition, acceptance, and integration of renewable energy in rural Africa. The article "Communicating climate change and energy in rural Africa: a case analysis to explain how participatory communication can support transition to renewables and adoption of solar technologies in rural Africa" highlights rural stakeholders' attitudes towards solar renewable technologies that depend on the communicative approach used to engage them. The article also demonstrates the importance of using rural voices, close to the community, in the communicative process.

Naíde Müller presents the case of PAN (People-Animals-Nature), a Portuguese political party that in 2015 entered parliament by electing one MP. The article is rooted in the discourse analysis of elements of public relations' positioning in the original manifesto of the grassroots movement that gave rise to PAN – "From grassroots movement to parliament: strategic communication and achieving public legitimacy". It highlights the role of a strategic approach to communication influencing the transformation of a civic movement into a formal parliamentary party.

The five articles included in this special issue highlight the growing concern of the academic community with the importance of citizen participation in political, civic, and economic processes and how the use of communication in different forms and platforms has contributed to their empowerment. Consequently,

there are now voices in the public arenas of individuals and groups of individuals who mobilize around issues that affect their daily lives, therefore demonstrating changes in the way of doing politics and political participation. There are several communication strategies and tactics that can be used by individuals, organizations, and states, to attract, assist, and confront established powers. It is certain, however, that without communication, interpersonal or mediated, there is no power. We dare to challenge Foucault's conception by transforming the binomial Knowledge/Power into a trinomial: Communication/Knowledge/Power.