

**WEB AND SOCIAL MEDIA: A NEW OPPORTUNITY  
FOR THE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN THE RELATIONSHIP  
WITH THE CITIZEN**

**Carla DE IULIIS\***

**Barbara COLONNA\*\***

**Paola DI GIUSEPPE\*\*\***

**Manuel GRAZIANI\*\*\*\***

**Guido MOSCA\*\*\*\*\***

**ABSTRACT:** *The Italian Law of June 7, 2000 No. 150 "Discipline of information and communication activities of public administrations", represents a fundamental moment for communication in the Public Administration: it clears out the "information and communication activities of the Public Administrations", about the principles of transparency and effectiveness of administrative action. In order to communicate in an efficient way, it is fundamental to know how to use suitable tools, techniques and means; but it is also important that the citizen, who play an active role in the processes of the PA, knows how to use these tools effectively. In the last years, technological innovation has modified and risen the communication tools.*

*In fact, communication through social networks has been useful in simplifying and speeding up information, making more transparent the relationship between P.A. and citizens, in compliance with the principle of containing public spending. But the use of the social networks by the PA – which allows the passage from a model of communication "towards" the citizen to a model of communication "with" the citizen - can never be considered as a substitute for the institutional website of the PA itself, which remains the main front office of the Administration, and irreplaceable tool of transparency. (Directive No. 8/2009 of the Department of Public Function).*

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\* Communication Manager PhD., IZSAM "G. Caporale", ITALY.

\*\* Web Master, IZSAM "G. Caporale", ITALY.

\*\*\* Graphic Designer, IZSAM "G. Caporale", ITALY.

\*\*\*\* Publicist, IZSAM "G. Caporale", ITALY.

\*\*\*\*\* Documentalist, IZSAM "G. Caporale", ITALY.

## **1. OVERVIEW OF LEGISLATION CONCERNING THE DISCIPLINE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATIONS: LAW N. 150/2000**

In Italy, Law n. 150 of 7 June 2000<sup>1</sup>, indexed “*discipline of information and communication activities of public administrations*”, institutionalises the area of public communication.

For the first time in Italy, a law of the State acknowledges the Communication in its feature as priority and structural resource by legitimating it and anticipating its dissemination as a sector of the Public Administration, and by distinguishing also its specific nature apart from any other administrative task<sup>2</sup>.

The aforementioned law provides more incisive tools to a key sector for the modernization processes of the public system.

The public authorities, regardless of the type of activity, are called to ensure the transparency of the decision-making processes, making effective the citizens' right of access to documents of public administrations, to inform with completeness and correctness citizens on the decisions adopted, to locate the quality standard of services provided and ensure the broadest communication to the citizens.

From the reading of the law, different specificities emerge both within the activities and purposes of information and in those of communication. The term “*information*” refers to an action aimed more at the vertical transfer of specific items of public interest, which translates into a substantially cognitive function, using criteria of total transparency. At the same time the Act 150/2000 promotes interaction between public administration<sup>3</sup> and citizens: in the concept of “*communication*” is enclosed a necessary element for delivering contents of a more value type that, declined in relation to the different responses coming from citizens, they aim to support the institution's identity and image, favoring consensus on topics of collective interest.

The norm, in fact, defines institutional “Information and communication activities” those aimed to:

- Provide the information to the means of mass communication, through press, audiovisual and telematic instruments;
- Deliver the external communication aimed at citizens, to local authorities and to other bodies through any technical and organizational modality;
- Implement internal communication within each institution.

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1 The Law n. 150 of 7 June 2000 “Framework of information and communication activities of public administrations”, published in the Official Journal of 13 June 2000, n. 136, represents the first law on institutional communication and concludes a decade of regulatory renewal, already begun with the proposals of the 1995, 1996 and 1997.

2 On this basis, the art. 9, paragraph 1 of the Directive dated 7 February 2002 of the [Italian] Department of Public Function, quantifies in 2% the minimum quota to be allocated specifically to the activities of communication and public information as the total resources of the administration.

3 The Art. 1, paragraph 2 of the Law 150/2000 cited, defines “Public Administrations” those indicated in Article 1, paragraph 2 of the Legislative Decree n. 293 of February 1993.

The legislative text also defines in a clear manner, three different operational structures within Public Administrations, with the task of conveying the information and give communication: The Spokesperson, the Office for Relations with the Public (URP) and the Press Office<sup>4</sup>.

The PPAA Communication Plan, which represents the instrument for planning and coordinating the institutional communication actions of public administrations, assumes relevance within the aforementioned Law.

The Plan indicates the objectives, the tools, the actors, the reference targets and the methods for obtaining the resources. Its objective is to logically correlate the above variables to each other, allowing the administration to supervise communication in a professional manner and with a strategic vision of the whole.

The Plan represents one of the tools with which the organization declares and enhances the choices and initiatives put in place by the Public Administration, as well as periodically defines and updates the objectives, contents, tools, implementation times and methods for verifying the related initiatives in communication.

In compliance with Law 150/2000, therefore, all information and communication activities carried out in an institutional way by the PA are encompassed in a coordinated and integrated manner in the "Communication Plan".

## **2. EVOLUTION IN LEGISLATION ON INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES OF PPAA**

With the regulation for the implementation of the Law 150/2000, referred to the [Italian] Presidential Decree of 21 September 2001, n. 422 and with the subsequent Directive of 7 February 2002 "*Public Administrations have a new and indispensable tool to develop their relations with citizens, enhance and harmonize the information flows within them and contribute to affirm the right of citizens to an effective communication. The public communication ceases to be an additional segment and of the residual action of the public administrations, becoming an integral part of it...*".<sup>5</sup>

The main objective is to develop all the activities related to communication and information in the public administration, through the involvement of internal operators and citizens.

The use of new information technologies and databases, the training and enhancement of the personnel involved in these activities, such as the related planning, even economic, can certainly contribute to improving the visibility and the corporate image with the full involvement of the whole productive process.

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<sup>4</sup> The Art. 6 of the Law 150/2000 defines clearly the three "operational" subjects with the task of giving information and communication both within the PA and outside, towards citizens. The "Spokesperson" (art. 7) deals with political-institutional relations with the other organs of information and can also be external; the Public Relations Office (URP) is in charge of guaranteeing the exercise of rights to information and access also through the illustration of the various regulations of reference (Article 8) The Press Office (art. 9), consisting of staff registered in the National Register of Journalists, has the task of managing relations between the institution and the mass media.

<sup>5</sup> See "Directive on the activities of communication for public administrations" of 7 February 2002 issued by the Minister for the Civil Service and for the coordination of information and security services.

The Public Administrations, through the Spokespersons, the Urp and the Press Offices, must guarantee transparent and complete information on their work, publicize and allow access to the services by promoting new relationships with the citizens and optimizing the efficiency and effectiveness of products-services through system of internal communication. In the carrying out of information and communication activities administrations “*must consider the interactive tools of online communication (internet and intranet) as central and decisive*”.

For the purpose of good internal communication, based on a wide circulation of information on activities and work processes, the full involvement of the staff allows to better build the identity of an administration, encouraging the growth of a sense of positive belonging to the dimension of public work and helping to put the image of the public sphere on new foundations. (Touraine, 2005)

The communication thus becomes a process with steps and actors: a relation in which the interlocutors and the moments of participation which feed the continuity are identified. The stakeholders (citizens, companies, associations etc.) mix and integrate in administrative processes, defining a report that generates participation and allows you to draw useful elements to the improvement of the administrative machinery.

### **3. COMMUNICATION THROUGH THE WEB AND SOCIAL MEDIA: A NEW WAY TO COMMUNICATE**

In the recent perspective of modernization of Public Administrations, over the years they have assumed particular relevance, “*tools and initiatives of transparency, relationship, communication and information aimed at building an open and fruitful relationship with citizens and users*”.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, with the Directive n. 8 of 26 November 2009, the then Minister for Public Administration and Innovation has provided to all Public Administrations referred to in art. 1, co. 2 of Italian Legislative decree. 165/2001 rules and criteria for the realization of “institutional” web sites , recognizing the importance and validity of such instruments to convey information and services provided to citizens. With the aforementioned Directive, at the same time, enters in force the obligation for the PPAA to make identifiable their institutional sites, eliminating the countless registered sites, activated and no longer updated, and therefore no longer reachable by citizens, according to specific guidelines to be drawn up by the Ministerial Departments with the support of Formez PA (Service Center, assistance, studies and training for the modernization of PA) and CNIPA (National Center for information technology in the public administration, now DigitPA (Agency for the Digital Italy).

In December 2011, the "Guidelines for web sites of PA" were issued by Formez PA, in line with what is contained in the said Directive and in the conviction that now the spaces of social networking represent a great opportunity for the PA (not only to inform and

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<sup>6</sup> The Directive n. 8/2009 of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, the Department of Public Function, establishes criteria of recognizability and updating, usability and accessibility of web sites and portals of PP.AA. with the aim to develop, promote and disseminate a process of direct and simplified access for the citizen to the relevant services, improving the usability in Public Administrations.

communicate effectively, but also to build a relationship of trust, to listen and to monitor the level of satisfaction among the citizens).

Through the “web”, in fact, develop and create new opportunities for relations between people, information is born, circulates and spreads, following brand new paths; “*the institutional websites*”, is read in the premise of the Guidelines, “*are no longer the main point of access to information. Citizens increasingly search the web for their problems, seek direct dialogue with their interlocutor, whether a company or public body, within spaces designed for a two-way communication*”.<sup>7</sup>

So today, simply being online is no longer enough. The institutional site or public portal are necessary tools but are no longer sufficient if the goal of a public administration is to reach its users. Today, in addition to the posts on the walls it is necessary to guard the digital squares with appropriate instruments. In line with these new changes in the context, many public bodies have adapted over time, developing social networking sites internally, making it possible for a real PPAA listening activity with the citizen and their staff.

Being present and active in social networking sites is a choice for the Public Administration, since at the moment there are no regulations to this extent. However, choosing to be present on social networks, contributes to the PA to elevate the ratio of efficiency/effectiveness of performances and, for the citizen, represents a fast and dynamic way to interface with the PA.

The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs also moved in this direction and with the “Guidelines on the use of social media”, drawn up in July 2014, states that “*the channels shared telematics communication (Social Media) assume increasing significance for the understanding of civil society and in this context of international relations, in Italy and abroad*”.<sup>8</sup>

For Public Administrations, being present in social networking today is an effective way to reach citizens more easily than could be done using traditional communication channels, while improving the relationship between efficiency and effectiveness in relation to costs of communication.

#### **4. USE OF INSTITUTIONAL WEBSITE AND OF SOCIAL MEDIA: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE IZS DELL’ABRUZZO AND MOLISE “G.CAPORALE”**

The attention to the new frontiers of technology has always been a prerogative of the Istituto Zooprofilattico dell’Abruzzo e del Molise “G. Caporale” (IZSAM), the first of the ten Italian IIZZSS to design and display online its website since 1995. Today, a good part of the communication of the Istituto passes through the web, an instrument capable of combining the dissemination of clear, simple synthetic messages and with the dimension of the relationship but also the accessibility and the usability, which means supplying

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7 See. “Guidelines for PA websites” - Vademecum Public administration and social media - Formez PA, December 2011.

8 The point 3 of the afore mentioned Guidelines, indexed as “security aspects”, provides that “Social media, despite their informality and their vulnerability to cyber-attacks, are a source of information to which users attribute great value and credibility”. For this reason, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs lists some recommendations for the correct management of the credentials for access to “official” profiles and the precise rules for the correct use of social networks within the Public Administrations.

information to anyone: to the disabled, to those who use different technologies, to those with a different ethnic-cultural affiliation.

At the beginning of 2009, hand in hand with the creation of an internal operating Unit of Institutional Communication, the Istituto has equipped itself with a modern Internet portal with proprietary Content Manager System (CMS), or with a management software for content that meets the requirement of computer security, facilitating the implementation of the same contents to staff who do not have IT skills. The web communication passes *tout court* through “news” posted almost daily on-site home page to provide immediate news and multimedia contents (audio-video) about the numerous activities made by the Institute Italy and in the World. With the aim of retaining the citizen-navigator, an e-mail notification service was activated to automatically view the newest news.

To express only partially the online activity carried out by the Institutional Communication Sector, between 2010 and 2017, it may be useful to report the creation and publication of 1,328 communication contents on the website: news, press releases, videos, photo galleries etc. Contents published every day for the last 2 years. In relation to the communication via web, it should be noted that between 2007 and 2016, despite the value of the total consumption of the Italians suffered a significant fall, the household expenditure for the purchase of computers and smartphones increased significantly. These latter have recorded a +190%, as reported in the 14th Report CENSIS-UCSI on communication of 2017. Elisabetta Gola, an expert in Theory of Languages and Communication, noted that in this short period Italians have used the Internet to: get information, book trips, listen to music, watch TV channels (streaming programs etc.), buy goods and services, “... but also to get in touch with the public administrations”<sup>9</sup>.

In 2012 the IZSAM has embraced the “social network world” by opening a channel on YouTube, (1.5 billion users in the world) (Gola, 2018), which at the time (Gola, 2018) collects 134 videos about TV specials, journalist services and interviews to researchers. Since 2014 the Institute is present on the photographic “social network” Flickr where there are loaded over 2,200 photos of conferences, events and meetings (410 photos only in the first 6 months of 2018). Remaining in this context, at the end of 2017, was also activated a channel on Vimeo, social “authoritative” in the audiovisual field that allows the loading of high-definition video, where the IZSAM loads historic videos or videos of longer duration. Always in 2017, following a long negotiation with the Management, the Institutional Communication of the IZSAM has started to handle Facebook page institutional, the “social” par excellence which records 2,2 billion users worldwide<sup>11</sup>, of which more than 30 million in Italy.

The active presence of the IZSAM on Facebook is dictated by the awareness that a public administration should be close to the citizens, easily reachable, “at hand”, therefore, “at smartphone reach”. In this regard, the fact that for Italians Facebook represents the second tool to inform, as highlights the latest report CENSIS deserves a reflection. The institutional FB Page is not limited to providing or relaunching information on the activities of the Body but proposes original contents, both textual and iconographic, scientific information coming from International Organisms, curiosities and events of interest that, by virtue of the rapid and immediate sharing in the network, allow

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to create relationships with citizens, other institutions and with researchers from around the world. A particular attention is also given to staff in the context of the double track external /internal communication, through the construction of the post with photos and text of the operating units that open the work week with a creative and *sui generis* “Good morning”. Hand in hand with the Facebook Page was created the institutional Page on LinkedIn to be present also in the “social” dedicated to professionals in the scientific world: from 1 January to 20 July 2018 they were published 190 post on Facebook, 100 on LinkedIn.

As Francesco Di Costanzo writes in the *incipit* of his essay on Public Administration Social (Di Costanzo, 2017): “*The tools of public communicator today are the web and social networks, the relationship with the citizen is direct and the supply of information and services is in real-time*”. There is no doubt that “... *in fact the social networks are also entered in the public administration, especially in the logic of the multichannel access*” and “... *in their more innovative development can potentially be instruments of e-democracy, virtual places of participation and expression of necessity, opinions and interests*”<sup>10</sup>.

However, the use of the web and increasingly social media is not a panacea, nor a *passé-partout* of communication, public or private. If it is true that online multimedia communication has represented the true and perhaps the only revolution between the two centuries, it is equally true that liquid communication, especially that which travels on “social” must be handled with care due to the presence of some critical issues. Among these: dysfunctional behaviors, fluid identity, digital illiteracy; in addition to the fact that in these virtual reality hide unwanted behaviors are not always immediately visible, ranging from the change of identity to aggressive attitudes (troll and stalking), to violation by the abuse of the information (Porcu, 2018).

Given the immediacy, democracy and participation without limitations, guaranteed by the social media, a careless and unprofessional management of them, driven by their bi-directional nature, can produce boomerang effects coming into conflict with the institutional role of the administrations they represent. Furthermore, we must avoid the risk that the activity on “social” cannibalizes the communication flow of the corporate website. The way forward, therefore, can only be that of the integration of the communicative messages, exploiting the multichannel logic and the rapidity with which it can convey the information content of public interest in order to reach the maximum possible number of users. In this regard it should also be noted that the contents disseminated via Facebook, YouTube, etc. could disappear due to the closure of the relative “social network” without the user, private or public, being able to avoid it (emblematic the case of the zeroing of Myspace profiles) unlike a company web platform, usually owned, where the contents and all the work for their creation are protected.

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<sup>10</sup> The Department of Public Function, How to “network” through the web, [Http://qualitapa.gov.it/relazioni-con-i-cittadini/open-government/multicanalita/social-network/](http://qualitapa.gov.it/relazioni-con-i-cittadini/open-government/multicanalita/social-network/) (website consulted on 10 July 2018).

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Data reported in the search Global Digital 2018 conducted by We Are Social in collaboration with Hootsuite, platform of social media management among the most used in the world.

The numerical data relating to the communication activities of the IZSAM are counted at the date of 20 July 2018.

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