POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN THE CONSOLIDATION OF PORTUGUESE CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRACY

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THE EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION as a field study and as an area of specialization in the field of communication advisement met a significant change in the last decades as a result of substantial political, institutional, economic and social transformations of the country in the transition for democracy and the years ahead concerning its consolidation. The communication landsacape changed dramatically since 1974 with the end of dictatorship and the beginning of a new political era drives the country to major reforms held by politicians that need to communicate them in a more different way implying the fulfilment of a wide range of expectations. This text explores the main developments of political communication in Portugal as an activity and its links to politicians, media groups and media workers in a close connection to driving forces of our recent history, mainly from the 1980's till the present.

Political and social context

The implementation of a semi-presidential system of government in Portugal has been instilled by military actors. This led to the first direct popular election of the president of the Portuguese Republic and brought a military to power (Ramalho Eanes, in 1976). This fact paved the way for the subordination of the military structure to the president's sphere of influence and its temporary integration in the political process, considering also that until 1982 the president, a military, presided over the Revolutionary Council. The extinction of the Revolutionary Council (1982), after the constitutional amendment, and the transference of legislative powers to the parliament concerning defence issues, as well as the election of the first civilian president (1986), ended this transition period and subordinated the military power to the civil political power. Thus, the direct election of the presdent and the creation of a semi-presidential system of government contributed to the success of the democratic transition and to the consolidation of democracy (Cruz, 1994).

The constitutional amendment of 1982 has decreased the presidential powers and subsequently increased the weight of the parliament within the Portuguese government system, mainly by changing the norm related to the political responsability of the government towards the president. Consequently, the president can only dismiss the executive if the irregular functioning of the democratic institutions proves evident, and not anymore in the case of a simple lack of political trust. In this sense, the political responsibility of the government towards the president gave pace to an institutional responsibility. The constitutuional amendments of

1989, 1992, 1997 and 2001 did not change significantly the real role of the president, the parliament nor the government. The nuclear traits of a system of government that is generally classified as semi-presidential were maintained.

The fact that presidents have interpreted the powers listed in the Constitution by their own suggests that the most important seems to be the new social expectations shared about the role that president should play and not any fundamental change in terms of institutional rules. The dissolution of the Parliament in December 2004 confirms the role of social expectations on the use of presidential powers and not the political and juridical procedures. The legislative vetos and the analyses of some bills by the Constitutional Court may be used as friction against parliamentary majorities with the goal of contaminate public opinion against the government. At the same time, presidents may easily access to media in order to express discontent with the government (other actors can be heard, such as trade unions, military, judges and interest groups) (Serrano, 2002).

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In 1986 Portugal became a member of the European Economic Community (EEC), alongside with Spain, after eight years of intense negotiations in the follow up of the 'European option' doctrine proclaimed by the First Constitutuional Government headed by Mário Soares (1976). From that moment on the country changed in various ways and levels. The political environment between 1986 and 1996 enabled economic convergence supported by three factors: membership to EEC, government stability since 1987 and the constitutional amendment of 1989. This amendment paved the way for the decrease of States' burden in the economy in order to pursue harmonization with other EU members: this is evident by the

liberalization of some economic sectors, such as financial system, bank services, mass media, telecommunications, insurence, refineries, beers, cement and paper.

Royo and Manuel (2005: 27) remember that the integration process has produced significant costs in terms of economic adjustments, loss of sovereignty and cultural homogenization. European integration will continue to produce a profound effect in the Portuguese society. Among other issues, it is significant the impact on national identity, welfare policies and in the adjustment of economic and political structures.

The European financial aid helped some regions to make the transition to the common market (GDP inferior to 75% of the European average). The improvements in infrastructures in Portugal (roads, highways, education) contributed to mitigate the macroeconomic impact of the structural changes for the implementation of the common market (Mateus, 2015).

The Maastricht Treaty (1991) binds a strict calendar for the entry into force of the common currency in 1997, no later than 1999. This political decision towards monetary integration was the common denominator of the economic policies of the majority of EU member states, including Portugal from 1991 to 1996, marking out the process of economic convergence. The nominal convergence has been progressively reached between 1991 and 1996, reflecting the priorities of Portugal as EU member (although losing control of the process). Convergence with Europe is being determined with Maastricht criteria – Economic and Monetary Union dominates the political and economic agenda in Europe (Lobo, 2000: 641).

The EU has became an integral part of the democratic constitution of its member states, and specifically of Portugal (Moreira, 1998). For the 2004 European elections, Lobo (2005: 202) concludes that the two main parties continue to be strongly commited to EU: PS and PSD reached more than 72% of votes since Portugal's membership to EEC, which means that the European cleavage is not significant in the country, despite the election to the European Parliament be considered a second order election in part due to low voter turnout.

Politics and communication

To come to power, to exercise it and to inform citizens, politics is communication. Politics has always been spectacle, staging and emotion and, more then ever, the wide range of political actors try to communicate and adapt their messages in order to influence the other protagonists in the public sphere.

Large part of people rarely contact directly with their representatives. Politics is essentially a mediated experience. Shortly, political communication incorporates 1) the different forms of communication undertaken by elected politicians and other political actors (i.e. parties, public organizations and pressure groups) for the purpose of achieving certain objectives, 2) communication about these agents and their activities as contained in news reports and other forms of media discussion of politics and 3) communication addressed to these actors by non-politicians, such as voters (for instance, through online forums and opinion polls). Also, political communication relates not only to political discourse, but also visual elements (i.e. dress, make-up and logo design) that might contribute to constitute a political 'image' or identity (McNair, 1999).

With the end of dictatorship, tensions didn't diminish, especially in the media arena. Party tensions were common in several newsrooms, with reporters and journals associated to political movements affecting the overall view of their work. This same kind of problems were witnessed in public television (RTP) and even during the first years of democracy there were accusations of governmental interference in the selection and treatment of news stories. Despite this issues, after the democratic revolution it was established the Press Law in 1975, which contributed to professional recognition of journalists and access to information sources and the creation of the first Portuguese journalists' deontological code in 1976. Meanwhile, the regulation of the mass media was constitutionally established in 1976. The constitutional amendment in 1982 created the CCS and in 1989 emerged the AACS. In 2005 it was replaced by a new organization, Entidade Reguladora da Comunicação (ERC).

We can point out a significant group of tendencies that changed the media landscape and the whole area of communication in Portugal after the first two decades of democracy (some of them, still ongoing): the end of public television monopoly sustained through the assignment of two licences to private networks in earlier 1990's, with obvious consequences in terms of coverage of the social and political realities (accelerated by European directives and only possible due to the constitutional amendment in 1989); the end of the nationalization of several press titles, a process consolidated during Cavaco Silva's governments; the emergence of a specialized press dedicated to specific groups and tastes (i.e. feminine, fashion and sports magazines); the regulation of the radio sector putting an end to the boom of local and personal radio stations; the advent and setting of media groups (like Catholic Church, Impresa, Lusomundo and Media Capital), establishing corporation management proceedings that reinforces the importance of sales and audience shares; the teaching of communication courses (technical and theoretical), not limited to universities; and the rise of institutional communication, highlighting the role of communication not only in companies but also in social and political organizations (Mesquita, 1994).

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As an European country, Portugal has a tradition of public service media (radio and television) in which we can emphasize a parliamentary model of broadcast governance (strong state intervention), a low newspaper circulation and problems related to the professionalization of the journalistic corpus. All of this, associated with a political context characterized by a late democratization and a significant role of political parties and state in the economy, made some labelled Portugal as part of a Mediterranean or polarized pluralist model of media and politics, common in other southern European countries, and quite different as the one established in north/central Europe and the liberal model seen in Britain, United States and Canada (Hallin and Mancini, 2004).

Facing outside experiences

Portuguese political journalism is forging a new path due to several transformations in media business, as we describe. We can identify changes in journalism patterns similar to those seen in Western countries, like the decreasing of candidate's soundbites on television and the assertion of more pragmatic views of political activities by journalists (Serrano, 2006).

The media activity and media consumption are facing new realities. For instance, there are tremendous problems regarding the sustainability of the press industry and one sign of that is the contraction of advertising market since the beginning of this century. We should also notice the increasing of the cable networks audiences and the rise of other platforms (like streaming), more visible since 2011. And TV viewing is matter that shouldn't be ignored: an average of 5h30 per day in 2012. In the study conducted by ERC about media consumption (*Consumos de Media 2015*), TV is still a dominant medium and seventy percent of Portuguese people accompany regularly news stories on television, followed by press and social media. Eighty percent of Internet users connect to the social media and thirty five percent use it also to consult the news. In Portugal there are at least 5,6 million Facebook users and for young people, after television, social media networks are their second information source.

To fulfil this political representation crisis and to ensure contact with voters, political representatives and parties in Portugal are adapting their communication strategies, particularly during campaign periods, by hiring agencies and external consultants. The first Barack Obama presidential campaign, in 2008, alerted some national political actors to this digital communication apparatus but didn't mobilize citizens to adhere to party projects in the following general election (Cádima, 2010). There isn't also today a political communication industry, as we have in USA, for example. Political representatives rarely communicate online or use other digital tools to get involved with their constituents on a regular basis. Understand the new communication patterns won't solve many problems by itself but will ensure a new way in the relations between those who govern and the citizens, and might guarantee a level of transparency to power proceedings. ■

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