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Cognitive and Psychosocial Factors in Online Political Communication

ABSTRACT

The development of online political communication has profoundly changed the way in which we relate to political reality. Some features of the internet favor the use of fast and intuitive ways of thinking that, despite having various advantages, also come with several drawbacks. These drawbacks are reduced when citizens use slower and more reflective ways of thinking. In this paper, we will see how citizens resort to fast and slow thinking when they use the internet to relate to issues and political actors. In doing this, we will focus on some phenomena that are increasingly investigated by research in the area of political psychology. As for the relationship with political issues, the issue of gullibility, intended as an inclination to believe in unfounded news and from non-authoritative sources. As for the relationship with politicians, the verbal and non-verbal communication dimensions that most and quickly attract the attention of citizens, as well as consensus. The acquisitions of psychological research in these areas could contribute to the formulation of proposals to support citizens to fully use their personal resources, in order to understand and live politics as protagonists.

Keywords: fast thinking, heuristics, slow thinking.

1. Introduction

Psychological research has widely shown that some features of the internet favor the use of fast and intuitive ways of thinking that, despite having various advantages, also come with several drawbacks. These drawbacks are reduced when citizens use slower and more reflective ways of thinking. Focusing on how citizens use online political communication to acquire political news and relate to politicians, this article will show that the exclusive use of fast thinking increases a person's risk of being manipulated. By contrast, the integration of fast thinking with a slower mode of

thought, of which all citizens are in principle capable, increases the likelihood of engaging in online political communication in a more active, conscious, and critical way.

After briefly outlining the differences between fast and slow thinking, we will see how these two ways of thinking are used when people deal with issues and political actors through online communication. We will also see how some of the peculiarities of online communication have already attracted the attention of psychological research and generated the lines of research that we will briefly present here and that will likely have wide development in the coming years.

2. Fast and slow thinking

One of the aspects that most characterizes today's democracies is the disintermediation of the relationship between politics, politicians, and citizens. If, until recently, citizens expressed their political opinions above all through voting, nowadays the opportunities to express their opinions, as well as their support for a specific candidate, have multiplied. Thanks to the internet, everyone can, in a certain sense, feel they are the protagonists of their own political life, spreading information about political events, or interpretations and judgments regarding them. Everyone can win an audience with whom to share opinions and discuss, extending their network beyond family and friends, with limited or no financial investment. At the same time, politicians are increasingly conscientious in promptly gauging the moods and opinions of citizens, as well as in providing answers that (at least in appearance) are in tune with the desires and needs of the citizens who express them. Thus, a new relationship is created between the citizen and politics, a relationship which was simply unthinkable until a few years ago.

What are the consequences for democratic life? Potentially very positive. The possibility of communicating easily and immediately with many people can favor not only the sharing of opinions, but also the introduction of new ideas and the possibility of transforming these ideas into actual change. However, this does not happen often. On the contrary, the increasing use of the internet brings with it increasing risk of manipulation, of people being closed-off to change and developing unreasoned opinions. This is due at least in part to the characteristics of the internet and our way of using it (Alberici and Catellani, 2016; Milesi and Catellani, 2013; Catellani, 2019a; 2019b; in press). Speed, immediacy and limited available time characterize our way of relating to politics online. Online political communication is fast, in real time, and short, both because the accessibility of the internet allows it (at least for an increasing number of people) and because our access to political communication often takes

place while we are simultaneously dedicating ourselves to other activities, such as travelling to work, having a coffee in a café or attending a (boring) meeting. Often, it is not a question of a dedicated and planned portion of time, but rather a «stolen» moment partially overlapping with other activities.

These features of online political communication increase the likelihood of engaging in this activity by resorting to a *fast thinking mode* (the so-called *System 1*; Kahneman, 2011). Fast thinking requires limited mental commitment, it is intuitive, automatic, and strongly influenced by emotions and context. Such a mode of reasoning is, in many instances of life, extremely useful, especially when approaching tasks that are already familiar and repetitive or that require an immediate decision (e.g. escaping from a dangerous situation). However, this modality of reasoning masks the risks of error when facing new, non-trivial, multifaceted, or multi-causal issues, or those that require a long-term action plan rather than immediate action. Many political issues are of this type. To address these issues, it is appropriate to use another mode of thinking, *slow thinking* (the so-called *System 2*; Kahneman, 2011). Unlike fast thinking, slow thinking requires high mental commitment. It is logical, voluntary, based on rules and abstraction. The employment of slow thinking is useful when facing new or complex questions for which we have not already formed routines or automatisms.

Our mind works by resorting to both fast and slow thinking. Both are functional in helping us understand and master reality, if used in the right conditions. However, as already mentioned above, the characteristics of speed, immediacy, and the large amount of information accessible on the internet very often lead us to resort especially to fast thinking. In these cases, the risk that online political communication becomes a tool for manipulating us instead of sharing what involves us as active parties increases (Catellani, 2019a; in press). To illustrate what has been said here so far, I will examine two areas of political life that are not only increasingly mediated by the internet, but that take on particular forms precisely because they are built through online communication: the use and dissemination of political news and the relationships that politicians establish with citizens.

3. Online political news

Potentially, the internet offers us the possibility of obtaining an enormous amount of information from multiple and differentiated sources quickly and easily. This could be regarded as an apparently ideal situation in which to gain an in-depth idea of a theme or actor in the political world. However, we know that Google, Face-

book, LinkedIn, and the various applications we download on our mobile phones all record every navigation we make online, and on this basis offer us content which may be new, but which is also in harmony with what we have already read. The underlying (and often correct) hypothesis is that our interest will be drawn to this content precisely because it is similar to what has interested us in the past.

The selection we make ourselves is added to the selection of information made by the internet. The overabundance of accessible information, combined with our speed in moving from one item to another and the limited amount of time we devote to seeking information, leads us to having a strong bias in our selection process, and usually in this activity we make extensive use of fast instead of slow thinking. We proceed quickly, intuitively and automatically, and we adopt a series of shortcuts or *heuristics*, that is, simplified reasoning paths that allow us quickly to arrive at an evaluation or a choice, although not necessarily the best one. The main heuristics we use in selecting information is the *confirmation heuristic*: we tend to focus our attention on what is consistent with what we already think and interpret new information in a way that confirms our expectations or hypotheses. This tendency can be particularly strong when dealing with the sphere of politics, a sphere in which we are naturally induced to take a position, to take sides with passion, opposing our point of view to other possible ones. To get political news, we tend to always choose the same sources (newspapers, websites, blogs or others), which deal with or present the news in a setting known to us and shared by us. In this way we tend to find further confirmation of our ideas and find new evidence to support a vision we have formed over time.

This prevailing recourse to fast thinking, and the saving of mental energy this affords, leads us not only to choose sources of information consistent with what we already think, but also to a certain superficiality in verifying the reliability of these sources. It is often difficult to identify and trace the actual origin of information on the internet, and in cases where it is possible it is similarly challenging to ascertain the authority of the source. Furthermore, the cascading process of sharing information often creates a «wireless phone» effect that can lead to a progressive modification of the content in question. If we add to this the superficiality mentioned above in assessing the reliability of the sources, it becomes clear that, in the world of the internet, distinguishing the true from the false can be particularly difficult. This is confirmed by the considerable persuasive capacity and online penetration of so-called fake news, which we can define as disinformation produced and spread by social media in order to divert the public and obtain political and/or financial gain (Lazer *et al.*, 2018).

The penetration of fake news is facilitated by three different heuristics, that are typical of our use of fast rather than slow thinking: in addition to the aforementioned confirmation heuristic, there is also the persistence heuristic and the emo-

tional heuristic. Let us examine them one by one, using as an example a scenario employed by Effron (2018) in research on this topic. At the inauguration ceremony of Donald Trump's presidential term, there were fewer people than at Barack Obama's. However, in the days following the ceremony the news spread that the opposite was true. Who was most convinced by this? The data collected by Effron's team showed that Donald Trump's voters were significantly more likely than Hillary Clinton's to evaluate this news as true, consistent with our frequent inclination to believe that what we wish to be true simply *is* true (the confirmation heuristic).

The next question is: what if we learn that a certain piece of news, a story we initially believed, was false? In this case, we may perhaps admit that the original story is not true, but still hold that it *could have been true* and therefore continue to give it a certain level of credibility. In the research described above, the researchers later revealed to participants the actual numbers of attendance at Trump's inauguration ceremony, but a sub-group of participants were also supplied with the following statement: «If the security system had been less rigid, many more people would have attended the ceremony». Trump's voters were much more inclined to share the fake news correction when it was accompanied by the above sentence, which essentially justified the reduced attendance compared to what had been initially communicated. The conclusion to draw, therefore, is that once we have a certain idea about a specific event or person, knowing that the idea was wrong does not bring us back to the *status quo ante*. There remains a sort of echo of the previous belief (Thorson, 2016). This is an example of resorting to a *persistence heuristic*, that is, continuing to include information initially considered and later found to be incorrect in our assessments. This is why fake news fixes often do not have the same effectiveness as fake news itself. The persistence heuristic can have devastating effects when fake news affects a person's reputation. This is the case when the news includes accusations against someone who is blamed for negative events or who is accused of immoral or corrupt behavior. Even if elements emerge subsequently that can clearly disprove these accusations, it is unlikely that the person will fully regain their lost reputation, and a shadow will remain over them.

In addition to being generally formulated with simple and cutting language, fake news largely plays to our emotions. For example, news on vaccines, chem-trails or plots often include references to tragic consequences related to the described phenomenon, consequences that easily arouse strong negative emotions such as anger or fear. We also know that resorting to strong emotional language, whether in words or images, promotes greater sharing of news online. To return to the example given above, suppose a person attended the inauguration ceremony for President Trump and experienced the emotional involvement related to the ceremony and the

large number of people present. This person could be further induced to believe the fake news concerning the ceremony's attendance level by recourse to an *emotional heuristic*, that is, the tendency to base one's own evaluation towards given news mainly on the emotion it arouses. In other words, the emotional heuristic encourages the spread of fake news because the strong emotion aroused by such news leads us to increase the perceived level of truthfulness we attach to it.

Is it possible to correct or steer against the heuristics just described? The answer is yes, provided that slow thinking intervenes to moderate our preference for fast thinking (Bronstein *et al.*, 2019). Errors due to our natural tendency to process information heuristically can be corrected by moving to more systematic processing of the same. For example, people exposed to false and then rectified news are more inclined to review their judgment based on the correction if they have a high cognitive ability, a characteristic often correlated with educational level. In addition to being dependent on this ability, the inclination to process information in a systematic rather than a heuristic manner depends on the degree of knowledge of the specific subject being analyzed, on interest in the topic and on contingent factors that may lead us to dedicate more time and energy to it. Knowing that there is something important in play for us, or that we will at a later point be asked to account for our reasoning and evaluations, will also induce us to more systematic processing.

The researches cited so far exemplify one of the research lines that are presently being developed by political psychology to better understand citizens' relationship with online political news or information. In general, more and more attention is paid to understanding what are the psychosocial characteristics that induce a citizen to be more «credulous» or more oriented to give credit to conspiracy hypotheses (Forgas and Baumeister, 2019). Thus, research has been carried out on psychosocial factors that lead citizens to believe in conspiracy theories or in statements on scientific and economic data made by unofficial sources. An in-depth understanding of the processes that induce citizens not to critically sift through the news that is proposed to them is certainly an essential starting point in order to develop education programs that can support citizens. These programs can make people more able to search independently and competently online news, however carefully examining both the credibility of the sources and the consistency of the contents proposed.

Another line of research that appears extremely promising regards the framing effects in political and public policy communication. As has been said, thanks to the diffusion of the internet, many citizens can and want to access independently a whole series of information relating to issues of political relevance, personally choosing sources, times and methods. It is therefore evident that on one hand it becomes difficult to capture the attention of citizens, on the other those who manage to frame

the message in a way that is in harmony with a series of psychological characteristics and ways of functioning of the people are more likely to succeed. For example, to acquire citizens' consent for sustainable mobility policies, is it better to talk about the benefit (gain) that can derive from the use of ecological means of transport or the damage (loss) that can derive from the fact of not using them? And is it the case that a certain framing of the message is more effective with certain citizens rather than others? It is therefore necessary to carry out new research to understand what are the crucial features of framing messages that affect the attention of citizens, and at the same time to understand how messages can be tailored to the characteristics of citizens (Bertolotti, 2014; 2015a; Carfora, Catellani, Caso and Conner, 2019).

In essence, if online communication makes it possible for each citizen to carve out a personal and peculiar way of relating to politics, it becomes increasingly necessary to understand these peculiarities, to build targeted, i.e. highly personalized political messages. Experiences such as those of Cambridge Analytica have shown that sometimes this personalization based on the psychological characteristics of citizens can be used in a subtle way to reach consensus (Kaiser, 2019). It must be said, however, that the same knowledge could instead be used in public communication to communicate to citizens the objectives of change in the direction of pro-environmental behavior or other purposes that are of collective interest (e.g. Di Massimo, Carfora, Catellani and Piastra, 2019).

4. Politicians online

The development of the internet and social media has increased the opportunities through which each of us can build and share our opinions and political decisions with others, reaching a wide audience. Institutional policy is rapidly adapting to this change and politicians have begun fully to exploit the potential of this new and more direct way of communicating with citizens. Politicians therefore adopt new formats and communication strategies through which to influence citizens' perception and judgment (Catellani and Covelli, 2013; Bertolotti and Catellani 2015b; 2018). For their part, citizens are increasingly relying on their attitudes towards candidates and leaders to make political decisions, rather than on ideological or party considerations (Catellani and Alberici, 2012). In other words, citizens are increasingly turning to the *politician heuristic* (Caprara and Vecchione, 2017): they form an opinion of political candidates and this opinion becomes a sort of shortcut through which to arrive at their voting decision, without examining the available information in further depth. In these cases, the voter enters as little as possible into the merits

of the various political questions presented, and essentially chooses to trust a given candidate fully, delegating their political participation entirely to that candidate. The decision-making process is therefore simplified (consistent with the demands of fast thinking), and the in-depth analysis of policies is suspended while support for that politician remains active.

Investigating how politicians, through their online presence and communication, manage the process through which citizens form impressions of them is crucial to understanding the emerging dynamics in the relationship between citizens and politics. Taking advantage of citizens' tendency to resort to fast thinking in their reasoning processes (a tendency which is supported, if not encouraged by, the internet's characteristics mentioned above), politicians often communicate with the intention of activating a series of cognitive, psychosocial and emotional processes that can benefit them and increase the probability that citizens form an opinion on the basis of politician heuristics, rather than a more in-depth analysis of political issues.

For example, by using «social» channels on a daily basis to communicate not only about their public life (meetings, interviews, etc.) but also their private life (at home, in a restaurant, on vacation, etc.), politicians have the extraordinary opportunity to show certain aspects of themselves that can seem very similar to those of any normal citizen, thus accentuating the perception of similarity that certain citizens may have of them, and therefore the possibility of building a sense of shared social identity with those citizens. In this case, politicians rely on an *assimilation heuristic* (frequent when resorting to fast thinking), in which a person who detects the presence of certain similarities between themselves and others is often led to believe that these other people are more similar to them than they actually are, neglecting the elements of difference. This perception of similarity and shared identity with certain politicians in turn increases the likelihood that citizens will trust those politicians, rather than perceiving them as a social category different from their own, and ultimately adopt them as a point of reference for their own political opinions.

If the strategies adopted by a politician for approaching citizens and winning their trust are often consistent with the use of fast thinking, what corrective measures might intervene when a citizen resorts not only to fast but also slow thinking when confronted with the communication of said politician? In this case, the citizen could evaluate not only what the politician openly tells them, and the immediate impression aroused by this, but also consider what the politician's communicative intention is, why they are telling precisely this story and not something else, or whether there might be reasons other than those overtly stated behind their choice.

In a series of experiments (Bertolotti, Catellani, Douglas and Sutton, 2013; Catellani and Bertolotti, 2014), the effects of different types of defense that a politi-

cian can use when attacked in various ways have been investigated. The aim was to see whether some types of defense are more effective than others when politicians have to defend their reputation in terms of competence or morality. A strategy widely used by politicians in these cases is to discharge the responsibility for negative events onto other actors (e.g. «Had the opposition accepted our proposals, the situation would be better now»). A much less frequented strategy involves taking on the responsibility of an unsatisfactory result (e.g. «Had I insisted on our proposals, the situation would be better now»). The research results suggest that the relative effectiveness of these two defenses varies depending on the citizen's level of competence and interest in politics. When listening to the first type of defense, the discharge of responsibility onto others, citizens with a low interest in politics tend to give a more positive judgment of the politician and reduce the responsibility they attribute to them for the negative event. This does not happen in the case of citizens with a high interest in politics, who are more suspicious of politicians who use this type of defense. Compared with less interested citizens, more interested ones tend to evaluate the politician who uses the second type of defense more favorably, considering them to be more honest and morally superior. It is therefore possible to have a critical and active attitude toward the communication of politicians, and such attitude is more likely in citizens who, through interest or political competence, appear to be more inclined to resort not only to fast thinking but also to slow thinking.

What said so far describes some of the lines of research in which psychology is committed today to understand how online political communication is changing the relationship between citizens and politicians. The «intriguing» themes, which will surely see research engaged in the near future, are manifold. First of all, we know that we form an impression of a politician very quickly, as well as of a person in general. However, in an era in which the protagonists of politics become such quickly and sometimes just as quickly disappear, it becomes particularly important to understand what immediately affects us in a positive or negative sense. And since online communication is made up largely of images and videos, it is evident that the face, clothing, tone of voice and other aspects of non-verbal communication are of particular importance and are an important point of reference for citizens who want to evaluate the competence, morality or other characteristics considered important in a politician (e.g. Olivola, Tingley and Todorov, 2018).

In addition to presenting a certain image of themselves, trying to direct citizens' impressions, politicians often attack other politicians, or defend themselves against attacks from others. As already mentioned, strong, emotional and conflicting tones are, at least to this day, particularly present in online political communication, and reputation can quickly form but also be destroyed on the net. It is therefore

not surprising that political psychology has dedicated itself for some time, and will continue to do so, to study which attack and defense strategies are most effective in achieving their respective objectives, considering that often this effectiveness also depends on the expectations that citizens have already formed. It can therefore be diminished by the strong resistance to being convinced by messages that we do not feel «in tune» with our way of being (Bertolotti and Catellani, 2015).

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I proposed that two different modes of thinking, one faster and more intuitive, the other slower and more reflective, can come into play when a citizen absorbs or interacts with online political communication.

Both modes are potentially useful for building an active relationship between the citizen and the world of politics, if used appropriately and consistently in relation to the degree of novelty, complexity, and relevance of the topics addressed. However, some features of the internet, as well as the way it is used, often lead citizens to resort mainly to fast thinking when they engage in online political life. This exposes citizens to certain risks, the main one being the risk of becoming rigid and reluctant to change, much influenced by emotions or prejudice. These risks are reduced if citizens engage in online political communication using the slow thinking approach, and this is more likely when they have adequate time, knowledge, and motivation. When using slow thinking, citizens are more able to evaluate political news and politicians critically, to detect contradictions or inconsistencies, and to reflect not only on what is being said but also on the underlying communicative intentions.

We have seen how psychological research helps to explain what are the factors that make the use of fast or slow thinking more likely when citizens relate to the themes and actors of online politics. From the results of this research, application proposals can arise on how to intervene to support citizens so that they can make the best use of their personal resources to understand and live politics as protagonists.

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