ANTONIO MOMOC, *POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND THE INTERNET. POPULISM AND CRISIS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY*, BUCHAREST, TRITONIC PUBLISHING HOUSE, 2023, 232 PAGES

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Sometimes under the pressure of the context we find ourselves in, other times as a result of social dynamics, and in some other situations as a natural outcome of technological evolution and transformations, communication, in all its forms, undergoes multiple changes. Viewed synchronically or diachronically, communication, especially political communication, stands out for its effervescent and fervent nature, for its rhetorical play, and for the persuasive style that (not rarely) turns the transmission of information into a spectacle.

The perpetual changes and technological progress in recent decades require a thorough understanding of how political information reaches the public, influences them, and compels them to act. Thus, Antonio Momoc's research is a detailed analysis, conducted with exceptional rigor, of the current political communication context. It is an exploration of how online resources, social networks, and artificial intelligence operate, which frequently aim solely at manipulating the general public.

Published in 2023, the work is of current interest as it is anchored in the reality of our times, addressing "contemporary issues and phenomena in communication studies, political science, online communication, political communication, media education, and journalism"[1] (p. 17), as the author himself states in the "Introduction". The research presents, in an explanatory manner and with an objective tone,

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[1] Original quote: „problematici și fenomene de actualitate din știinţe ale comunicării, știinţe politice, comunicare online, comunicare politică, educaţie media și jurnalism" (p. 17).

the transformation of political journalism from being an informer and servant of the public interest into an "opinion distorter" and manipulator. Against the backdrop of the digital revolution, where the main means of communication is the internet, the author observes that profit has become the driving force of political life, which is why political communication is turning into a manifestation of populism, disinformation, and bias, assisted by algorithms — factors that contradict and threaten the very notion of democracy and the free market. Following a coherent and demonstrative approach, the work is structured into three chapters that address "the functions and effects of communication in the socio-political domain during communication campaigns in parliamentary or presidential elections, viewed in relation to the mass media system and democratic political institutions"[2] (p. 17). Each chapter contains four subchapters, highlighting key elements of each topic.

The beginning of the research provides a comprehensive overview of the concept of political communication, the relationship established between it and its medium — the internet —, and the gradual replacement of traditional media with digital alternatives, which will lead to an alarming transformation of the actors involved, their ideas, and their desire to control the masses. The author highlights that this "pairing" of political communication and the internet generates worrying effects, as the goal is to embellish reality to influence public opinion. Since the author's approach is practical and rooted in reality, the value of the presented data is enhanced by the examples provided: political communication in the United States from the late 20th century to the 21st century, as well as the "Americanization and digitalization of political life in post-communist Romania"[3] (p. 29), and the impact of the pandemic on internet and television consumption.

The impact of the data presented in the first chapter is elaborated upon in the second chapter, titled "Populism" which addresses the "deviations" introduced by the online environment: "disinformation, propaganda, polarization and hate speech, strategies of informational and

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[2] Original quote: „funcţiile şi efectele comunicării în domeniul social-politic în campanii de comunicare în alegeri parlamentare sau prezidenţiale, privite în relaţie cu sistemul mass-media şi cu instituţiile politice democratice” (p. 17) .
[3] Original quote: „americanizarea şi digitalizarea vieţii politice din România post-comunistă” (p. 29).

asymmetric warfare"[4] (p. 29), the use of bots, algorithms, and trolls, particularly among vulnerable populations who are easily influenced, lack mastery of the mechanisms of the virtual world, and struggle to distinguish real information from fake news. In this context, political communication acquires negative and threatening connotations for liberal democracy, pushing contemporary society into a post-truth crisis.

The novelty of this work lies in its approach to populism not only as a political discourse strategy but also as a form of illiberalism that has gained traction among political actors in Romania: "with the intrigues and suspicion that the powerful, the elites, are conspiring against the many and the weak" [...] "the people want justice, and the populists promise to deliver swift justice"[5] (p. 117). This is a method of seducing the public, as populists exploit emotion, and the digital environment provides the ideal space for amplifying feelings of frustration, for exaggerating reality, and for highlighting the disparity between "us and them" (p. 120). This leads to misinformation, prioritizing emotion over reason, and thus to "the emergence of a disinformation society" (p. 125) and a crisis in the media.

Thus, the third chapter, "The Crisis of Liberal Democracy," brings to the forefront the effects that online political communication has on a fragile society, one that has gone through the financial crisis (2008-2012), the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war with Ukraine. This has led to the transformation of traditional media, where objectivity, impartiality, and ethics have been replaced by subjectivity, political partisanship, lack of ethics, the emergence of propagandists, citizen journalists, and compromises made for higher ratings and greater profit. Additionally, the chapter provides a detailed explanation of "algorithmic practices, new trends in online journalism and media production, the intersection of content production with new media technologies, including social media, civic media, alternative media, digital storytelling platforms, technological advances in artificial intelligences", all contributing to a crisis of liberal

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[4] Original quote: „dezinformare, propagandă, polarizare și discursul urii, strategii ale războiului informațional și asimetric" (p. 29).
[5] Original quote: „cu intrigile și suspiciunea că cei puternici, elitele, conspiră împotriva celor mulți și slabi" [...] „poporul vrea să se facă dreptate, iar populiștii promit că vor face justiție sumară" (p. 117).

democracy, a "crisis of dialogue turned into a cultural war on the internet and in daily digital and social life"[6] (p. 32).

The quality of the work also lies in the explanatory approach the author takes, offering clarifying and illustrative examples of new trends, such as the negative attitude in the 2004 campaign of the parties: the Right Alliance, Truth D. A., PNL-PD, the 2004 presidential campaign, Barack Obama's campaign and the virtual "friendship" that excited voters, the use of bots in Donald Trump's campaign, the Cambridge Analytica case, the campaign for the 2007 presidential impeachment referendum, where the "guerrilla strategy" (p. 52) was used, the 2009 presidential elections when candidates used Facebook, the 2014 and 2016 elections, the #rezist protests, the 2019 European Parliament elections, the development of software like AI AlphaGo, AlphaZero, the launch of ChatGPT in 2022 etc. All these have inevitably changed the world, reshaped how information reaches the target audience, and rendered reality more vulnerable.

In this context, through his research, Antonio Momoc advocates for the preservation of indissoluble values in journalism, such as truth and objectivity, which he, of course, balances against the level of culture of both the mediators and the target audience.

Antonio Momoc's book is a comprehensive presentation of a changing world — a change that must be analyzed impartially, considering all perspectives of a problem, in which the journalist plays a significant role in both preserving and threatening liberal democracy. With a vast conceptual framework and a good command of communication and media fields, using accessible language and a clear, demonstrative approach, the author essentially constructs a guide to the new political reality, intended for all those who wish to understand the power of the online environment, as it reflects the social environment.

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[6] Original quote: „criză a dialogului transformat în război cultural pe internet și în viața digitală și socilă de zi cu zi" (p. 32).