

THE “INHOSPITABLE PANDEMIC”. LOCAL EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON MIGRATION AND INTERCULTURAL PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

GIACOMO BUONCOMPAGNI

Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Florence, Italy

© 2022 Giacomo Buoncompagni

This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>)

DOI: 10.2478/eras-2022-0010

Abstract

During the period of the blockade, the migrant community experienced a condition of increased hardship, made even more critical by the difficulties related to the possibilities of participating in the social, cultural but also working life of the local community, forcing many of them to stop participating in compulsory labor market insertion programs and to take advantage of educational and training supports. This critical situation has made it even more necessary to address these barriers and support the immigrant population in developing media-digital skills to intercept their needs and accelerate their integration into the community more easily. Digital and institutional forms of communication are crucial in defining the growth prospects of individuals, more so when the objective becomes to create pathways of social and cultural inclusion in contexts of crisis. Without this informational and socio-political ‘care’, the pandemic society risks becoming inhospitable in its local and global dimensions.

Keywords

immigrants, Covid-19, public communication, media, inhospitality, institutions

Introduction

Dealing with the issue of communication in relation to the complex phenomenon of migration during serious crises and emergencies leads one to reflect on how institutions can best implement inclusion initiatives through a more effective comparison with the local media. Integration, especially in the territorial sphere, must be adequately valorized by pursuing new communication strategies that respond to the diversified information needs of the community (Zanfini 2011; Kymlicka 2012).

It is a matter of promoting adequate governance strategies and greater cooperation with communication operators to overcome dichotomous and stereotypical narratives on the topic of migration flows, thus facilitating, on the one hand, the integration processes of foreign citizens, through more effective service communication (counter and reception activities on how to access services, communication campaigns, etc.) and, on the other, supporting social policies and limiting all forms of discrimination (Faccioli 2000; Ducci 2012).

Numerous researches on the subject (Urry 2000; Massey, 2007; Petersson & Tyler 2008; Pogliano 2016; Binotto, Bruno & Lai 2016) have shown how all this takes place mainly through storytelling techniques and tools in which the central event, often a news item, is presented and commented on, but an accurate description of the facts is dispensed with and the existential fear of the stranger is fueled by the media, creating alarmism and concern.

However, several authors (Massey 2007, Belluati 2011; Bennet et al., 2011) have pointed out how public communication and information at the local level can be more qualified and attentive to the diversity and difficulties of immigrants than at the national level (especially in times of crisis and emergency). The local sphere represents, in fact, a fundamental dimension of pluralism; attention to ethnic and cultural diversity seems especially related to a more active presence of institutions and the various social actors in defining integration and reception policies.

Constant contact with the territory, citizenship and institutions make mediation less rigid and fragmented when the migrant and his story are represented in the media.

The study presented here intends to reflect on the relationship between local institutions, the media and foreign communities, paying attention to the communication strategies promoted by public bodies to favor the reception and greater involvement of the immigrant subject in the Italian territory, taking a local case study as a reference. The historical-temporal context is a fundamental element for the analysis, as the research was carried out a few months after the first emergency phase of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This was an uncertain and unexpected scenario in which institutions, minorities, media and communities related in a completely different way, where communications and local public information were often incomprehensible or unsuccessful, where the digital tool, at first 'underestimated' or little used, suddenly became the only useful medium to re-establish a connection with the migrants distributed in the territories affected by the virus.

Methodology

The study was conducted using qualitative methodologies and included 9 focus groups addressed to public communicators and policy practitioners in May-July 2020.

The choice to represent this specific case was made in pursuit of the theoretical objective of ensuring a broad and heterogeneous coverage of services and activities introduced by institutions to support migrant communities.

Indeed, the research presented here does not set out to be representative but aims to be a meaningful account of the main aspects concerning the link between institutional communication and services (digital, in particular) for migrants and the efficiency or otherwise of the latter in the pandemic.

The presence of the virus led to the very interruption of the research work, which was resumed in spring 2020 after the first lockdown. This did, however, make it possible to create a critical comparison between what emerged before and during the health crisis at regional level on the topic under investigation.

The Marche Region case study was specifically studied to identify communication strategies and participatory practices.

The choice of this territorial sphere is justified by several reasons: it is a region that has experienced the phenomenon of emigration in the past, has always defined itself as 'plural' due to its significant tradition of welcoming all forms of human frailty, and in 2019 recorded a significant growth in the number of resident foreigners since 2006. Moreover, it should not be overlooked that during the first emergency phase for Covid-19, Marche was one of the first regions in Italy to record a high number of contagions, thus establishing the first local 'red zones' in Italy, according to ministerial decrees issued in February-March 2020 by former Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and Health Minister Roberto Speranza.

Inhospitable institutions and migrants within the health crisis

What emerges from the study can immediately be in one sentence: multiple criticalities in the relationship between public communication, institutions, and immigration in a social, local, 'normality' context. As can be seen from the voices of those interviewed, the need to enhance public communication on immigration issues in synergy with the digital media system and the native and foreign community emerges.

It is possible to highlight, first of all, the difficulty of institutions in managing that set of activities aimed at foreign citizens with the purpose of informing and facilitating the use of public services.

So-called "service communication" for and about immigrants is often hindered by cumbersome administrative procedures, difficulties related to reception activities and the fragmentary nature of public information disseminated (Buoncompagni, 2021).

At the same time, new regional governance models are emerging, that involve not only the institutional level, but also the broader network of relations and actors in the area, with the aim of raising awareness among the local community and promoting the active participation of immigrant citizens.

However, with the beginning of the Coronavirus epidemic, starting at the end of February 2020, some of the initiatives and services described have been suspended, and this has happened in most Italian regions, including the Marche Region, one of the first Italian territories to establish so-called 'red zones'.

In a complex and multicultural society, it is crucial that in emergencies institutions can communicate risks and countermeasures to everyone, natives, and foreigners alike (Lombardi 2005; Giaccardi & Magatti 2020). It is particularly important to communicate with communities with less access to mainstream information or to involve those within the same territory who have important socio-economic, cultural, and digital differences.

To achieve this, it is necessary to plan targeted strategies, adopt prevention tools and institutional channels capable of promoting intercultural policies. Among these, those supported by the digital infrastructure become fundamental, since, in the case examined, they represented the only (and unprecedented) solutions for not leaving migrant communities alone, trying to keep informed those families or individuals, often illiterate in their language of origin, who live in critical urban contexts (Buoncompagni & D'Ambrosi 2020; Buoncompagni, 2021).

It seems clear that the vulnerable conditions in which migrants in Italy often live can constitute a major public health problem during a pandemic emergency. Never more than in similar situations is the protection of each group and sector of society a prerequisite for the protection of all.

This awareness should have led, on the one hand, to the greater protection of the most fragile, with instruments suited to dealing with the emergency. On the other, to adapt risk communication strategies to different contexts. Language differences constitute an important obstacle to the dissemination of information, often combining with situations of objective difficulty in accessing the main information tools.

In this regard, some interviewees state:

"We were also faced with a rather complex situation from the communication-operational point of view (...) The sanitation measures and the main ongoing regulations had to be communicated and updated in a timely manner to the entire citizenry, but emergencies are not experienced by everyone and in all territories with the same disruptive force" (FG3).

With Covid-19, all the vulnerabilities of the local public communication system emerged:

“Through digital and regional and municipal social platforms, we tried to communicate dozens of news and updates, which, however, ultimately created more confusion. They misinformed rather than informed (...) furthermore, it was difficult to understand how many of these communiqués uploaded online were really read correctly by the population, especially by ethnic minorities” (FG8).

The importance of adopting communication strategies oriented towards different communities and socio-cultural contexts are well reiterated by the guidelines on risk communication during health emergencies, drawn up by the World Health Organization, which insist on the importance of focusing on the linguistic, cultural and social barriers to be overcome in order to properly communicate risk during emergencies and ongoing crises (WHO, 2017).

In Italy, these important indications have been largely disregarded by institutions, at least in the first pandemic phase. In this specific case, a major problem concerned the availability of information in foreign languages, aimed at specific host communities, which was difficult to reach on institutional channels and was integrated late.

To cope with the shortcomings of public-institutional communication, the Directorate General for Immigration and the Istituto Superiore di Sanità referred to information produced by associations dealing with migrants (Alfonso & Comin 2020).

In this regard, those involved in the research highlighted some interesting aspects:

“Creating an operational communication ‘network’ to support the entire community between the various institutional actors in the region was rather difficult. This is because, week after week, information from the Ministry of Health, and from individual regional governors, overlapped (...) Even vitally important public offices, such as the Immigration Office of the Questura, started to suspend services in attendance, responding only to a few calls” (FG5).

Municipal and regional offices, but above all the individual third sector associations in the area, have had great communication problems within and outside their institutions:

“In fact, many reported having experienced two main difficulties. One concerning information on where to eat and identifying voluntary organizations accredited to the municipality to access necessities; the other to understand the technical aspects and contents of important portals, such as that of the civil protection, to which to register to get the food contribution” (FG2).

Communication -institutional “divides”

Despite the commitment of the associations, there remains, as partly mentioned, a problem of accessibility to primary information, provided mainly on the online sites of local institutions. This factor is added to the obstacles related to language differences and literacy cases involving foreign groups.

As was already the case before the pandemic, the role of mediators was fundamental, and at times, even strategic in the pandemic emergency. The latter have offered direct assistance to foreign nationals. For example, they helped them to access procedures for the various forms of economic support provided by the local and national government.

This is an essential part of crisis management, especially when the less well-off (those with precarious or undeclared work, or with small businesses of their own) become even more vulnerable in the face of sudden lockdown and lack of forms of income.

Interesting was the 'communication-action bridge' that was created between local institutions and social and health workers who provided information online and through printed prevention and hygiene material and visited those who showed symptoms related to the Covid-19 virus.

Valuable initiatives and fundamental presence/approach of third sector organizations, but limited due mainly to the scarcity of financial support:

"The contents of the communications updated in the platforms of the municipalities and the Region were then "distributed" and put into practice by the voice and actions of the operators/volunteers present in the foreign community (...) A true "communication bridge" of a social and institutional nature was created, either using electronic means such as the telephone or audio voice or, when possible, by physical presence" (FG8)

The often overly bureaucratic language was 'translated', for ethnic communities in difficulty, through the actions of associations and volunteers, who, depending on the type of need, provided hygiene and health material and information on the safest route to take in that particular pandemic.

The 'translation' of health indications into support actions in the field, of a psycho-social nature, which immigrants and natives should have followed, understanding the complex language of the institutions, helps us to reflect on two issues.

First, there is still a language problem, as much of the information published on portals or social channels of the institutions is in Italian.

Other voices give some social workers and communicators:

"It is not always the case that the person who needs certain services is a person who knows Italian well (...) Very few are those times that everything is resolved with a simple literal translation of the communications sent" (FG5)

"Very often the information from the various offices or service centres does not seem to be intended for those who should really need it. They are partial, fragmented, poorly translated, and too general in their content to be of any real use to the various segments of the foreign population" (FG1).

A particularly interesting aspect that emerges in the post-pandemic research phase is the massive use of digital technologies and the immigrants' constant search for relationships and confrontation with institutions.

Unlike in the pre-Covid phase, during the pandemic the use of social media allowed the helping relationships to survive and strengthen during the months of lockdown despite all the difficulties highlighted.

In addition to the institutions' use of digital described above, it is particularly interesting to highlight how the digital platforms and services offered and used by many social workers became tools of comfort and concrete help for migrant communities, despite the physical distancing and containment measures.

Cultural and educational activities for migrants were immediately suspended with the activation of the many restrictions and procedures imposed by the health emergency. It was at

this point that digital technology made it possible to recover that suspended relational time and to reconstruct forms of solidarity at a distance in the crisis, with the aim of creating a sense of community overwhelmed by that of loss:

“With the first closures, we immediately understood that something was going to change in our work and in our relationships with others. We immediately adapted with new communication technologies, even though we were obviously used to managing community relations and information sharing also through face-to-face communication” (FG3)

It is precisely for this reason that some Immigration Service Centre managers have immediately sought to recover old computers from old offices/warehouses or have been asked to borrow various digital devices to make them available to employees and operators who had little computer equipment or poor connectivity, as well as to the same foreign families and reception facilities completely lacking in any technological support.

Specifically:

“The formation of small online counters/groups on WhatsApp, between migrants and operators, unlike a few months ago, was much more successful during the emergency. Many migrants joined, using the online group as a service medium to inform themselves and manage major work or family issues (sending money, renewing residence permits)” (FG5).

“The platforms Facebook, Skype and YouTube were the most used by migrants. The first two to communicate with distant friends and family members, also closed within the borders of their own country due to the virus and the suspension of international travel; the second had mainly a recreational or educational function” (FG2).

“The Muslim community and its religious leader decided to use a private YouTube channel as a space to meet, discuss, pray and celebrate Ramadan. Which unfortunately coincided with the month of April 2020, the period of the first and long lockdown” (FG).

The technological readiness of the operators, institutions and migrants allowed them to build a sufficiently solid network to structure their daily/professional life in the online space. Messaging chats, social networks and multilingual platforms were the most used media environments to continue training and in-forming migrants, and to recover specific cultural-religious practices typical of each ethnic group.

Conclusions

The main task of institutions, especially during a crisis, remains to promote and manage more coordinated communication involving not only the institutional level, but also the wider network of relations and actors in the area, with the aim of raising awareness among the local community and promoting the active participation of immigrant citizens.

However, we must be clear on one issue. Immigrants, understood as ‘new’ citizens, are no longer passive subjects of communication dynamics, but ‘immigrant-actors’: in the digital public space they are now able to exercise a more articulate right to communication.

The need to be informed and to maintain a link with their origins, translated, for foreign communities, into useful strategies to try to come out of invisibility, participate in collective life and communicate with institutions, supported, even if often with unsatisfactory results.

With fragmented public communication and an obvious difficulty on the part of local institutions, the web and online channels have enabled migrants to find out both about the health situation in their country of origin and how to access vaccines. As well as Italian language and music independently through free videos or virtually celebrating religious services.

Some service centers have even tried to create a virtual room through the google meet platform to recreate the environment of a virtual school at a distance, but with poor results.

In any case, the digital has in many situations allowed Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined community' to be surpassed: the sense of identity is reconstructed with connectivity and the web even allowing different media and time spaces to share different religious cultural practices.

It is no longer a matter of imagining, but of starting to live and share even in crises constructive experiences and real cultural relations, supported by new technologies, thus reconstructing affective ties, information processes and social inclusion strategies at the local level.

Ultimately, public communication in emergencies aimed especially at foreign communities has largely been delegated to associations, volunteers, and NGOs.

The institutions, on the other hand, were very deficient. It would have been crucial, in fact, to define at an early stage the subjects to whom communication was addressed, adapting strategies, languages and tools.

Equally crucial would have been to identify their differences and peculiarities, an indispensable prerequisite for choosing the best ways and means to reach the most contexts, where there are already material difficulties in complying with health regulations and the absence of proper communication could represent an enormous damage.

Moreover, the partial effectiveness of a 'top-down' communication model, without effective interaction and involvement of stakeholders, should not be overlooked. This lack of effectiveness is exacerbated by the difficulties that can be encountered when interfacing with foreign communities.

With respect to this, the contribution of the associations that worked in the field was very important, acting as 'solidarity translators' of the measures dictated by local and national governments, not limiting themselves to providing information, but making themselves available. The support network that was created at the local level was able to generate a relationship of continuity with native and foreign communities.

In the absence of a substantial institutional commitment, it would have been essential to promptly identify economic and logistical resources to support the third sector, which was already in difficulty due to the pandemic emergency. If good communication and welcome are in fact an index of humanity and inclusion, they become, during a crisis, relational-media forms of help and care for the Other.

REFERENCES

- Belluati B. (2011). I media locali di fronte alla sfida dell'immigrazione. *Libertà civili*, 2, 58-62.
- Bennett J. (2015). *Principi di comunicazione interculturale. Paradigmi e pratiche*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Bennett, S., Walter, J., Lipinski, A., Fabiszak, M., & Krzyzanowski, M. (2011). *Media for diversity. Media for integration*. Mediva thematic report: Media Content.
- Binotto B., Bruno B., Lai V. (2016). *Tracciare confini. L'immigrazione nei media italiani*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Brevini F. (2017). *Così vicini, così lontani. Il sentimento dell'altro fra viaggi social, tecnologie e migrazioni*. Milano: Baldini & Castoldi.
- Buoncompagni G., D'Ambrosi (2020). Hate Speech Towards Migrants: The Risks and Consequences of Using social media. In La Rocca G. Torvisco J.M., (a cura di). *Technological and digital risk: research issues*. Bern: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Buoncompagni G. (2021). *Cybermigration. La dimensione digitale dell'immigrazione*. Varazze: PM edizioni.

- Canel M., Luoma-aho V. (2018). *Public sector communication. Closing gaps between citizens and public organizations*. Hooboken, US: Wiley and Sons.
- Cesareo V. (2001). *Per un dialogo interculturale*. Milano: Vita&Pensiero.
- Corte M. (2016). *Giornalismo interculturale e comunicazione nell'era digitale*. Padova: CEDAM.
- D'Ambrosi L. (2019). L'identità europea nel nuovo millennio: strategie comunicative e processi partecipativi. In *Problemi dell'informazione*, 1, 199–214.
- Dal Lago A. (2004). *Non persone. L'esclusione dei migranti in una società globale*. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- Ducci G. (2012). *La comunicazione pubblica e la sfida dell'interculturalità*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Faccioli F. (2000). *La comunicazione pubblica e cultura del servizio*. Roma: Carocci.
- Giaccardi C. (2012). *La comunicazione interculturale nell'era digitale*. Bologna: il Mulino.
- Giorgi A., Raffini L. (2020). *Mobilità e migrazioni*. Milano: Mondadori.
- Grossi, G. (1995). *Ritratto di una società poco razzista. Immigrazione e comunità locale tra coesistenza interetnica e risposta istituzionale*. Anabasi: Milano.
- Gui M. (2009). *Le competenze digitali. Le complesse capacità d'uso dei nuovi media e le disparità nel loro possesso*. Napoli: Scriptaweb.
- Heidenreich T., Jakob-Moritz E., Lind, F. Boomgaarden. H. (2019). Political migration discourses on social media: a comparative perspective on visibility and sentiment across political Facebook accounts in Europe. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 1-20.
- Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2020). *COVID-19: Unblock Voice Over IP Platforms in Gulf*. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/08/covid-19-unblock-voice-over-ip-platforms-gulf>.
- IOM (2020). *World Migration Report*. Retrieved from: <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2020>.
- Kelly, A., H. Grant and L. Tondo (2020). NGOs raise alarm as coronavirus strips support from EU refugees. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/mar/18/ngos-raise-alarm-as-coronavirus-strips-support-from-eu-refugees>.
- Koopmans, R., Statham, P. (2000). *Challenging Immigration and Ethnic Relations Politics: Comparative European Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kymlicka W. (2012). *Multiculturalism: Success, Failure, and the Future*. Washington DC: Migration Policy Institute.
- Lovari A. (2013). *Networked Citizens. Comunicazione pubblica e amministrazioni digitali*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Lovari A., D'Ambrosi, L., Bowen S. (2020). Re-Connecting Voices. The (New) Strategic Role of Public Sector Communication After the Covid-19 Crisis. In *Partecipazione e conflitto*, North America, 13, jul. 2020. Retrieved from: <http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco/article/view/22497>.
- Lewis, P.M. (2008). *Promoting Social Cohesion. The role of Community Media*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Mangone E. (2018). Migrations in the Mediterranean between Cultural Pluralism, Innovation, and Social Policies. In Mangone, E., Masullo, G., Gallego, M. (eds), *Gender and Sexuality in the Migration Trajectories. Studies Between the Northern and Southern Mediterranean Shores* (pp. 11-19). Charlotte: Information Age Publishing Inc.
- Marini R., Altheide D., Snow R. (2017). *Media Logic. La logica dei media*. Roma: Armando ed.
- Massey D. (2007). *World city*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Moore R., Murray M., Farrel M., Youm K. (2017). *Media Law and Ethics*. UK: Routledge.
- Musarò P., Parmiggiani P. (2014). *Media e migrazioni. Etica, estetica e politica del discorso umanitario*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Nederveen Pieterse J. (2007). *Ethnicities and Global Multiculture: Pants for an Octopus*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Nora Theorin. (2019). Maintainers of Ethnic Hierarchies? Investigating the Relationship Between Media Use and Attitudes Toward Perceived Remote Versus Perceived Close Immigration. *Mass Communication and Society* 22(6), 827-885.
- Palidda S. (2011). *Racial Criminalization of Migrants in the 21st Century*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Pelizza A., Lausberg Y., Milan S. (2020). *Come e perché rendere visibili i migranti nei dati della pandemia*: <https://www.internazionale.it/opinione/annalisa-pelizza/2020/05/14/migranti-dati-pandemia>.
- Peterson, Tyler K. (2008). *Majority Cultures and the Everyday Politics of Ethnic Difference*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pogliano A. (2016). *News Media and Immigration in the EU: Where and How the Local Dimension Matters*. Cham: Springer.
- Rodríguez-Wangüemert C., Martínez-Torvisco J. (2017). Human rights through the paradigm changes of the social communication theories. *International Review of Sociology*, 27 (2), 230-240.
- Silverstone R. (2009). *Mediapolis. La responsabilità dei media nella civiltà globale*. Milano: Vita e Pensiero.
- Tamburini P. (2017). *La comunicazione di cittadinanza, in Il ruolo della Comunicazione Pubblica di fronte alle*

- sfide dell'immigrazione*. Bologna: COSPE Onlus.
- Urry J. (2000). *Sociology beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-first century*. London: Routledge.
- Wessendorf S. (2010). *The multiculturalism backlash: European discourses, policies, and practices*. New York: Routledge.
- Zanfrini L. (2007). *Sociologia delle migrazioni*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.