

## Between Identity, Promotion, and Community: a Comparative Research on the Role of Public Communication in the Activities and Organization of Universities

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### Abstract

The article shows the results of a comparative and qualitative exploratory research conducted on the three generalist public universities in Rome: Sapienza University of Rome, University of Rome "Tor Vergata", and Roma Tre University. The aim of the work is to investigate the topic of communication in universities in order to understand whether it represents a crucial element in the strategic policies of a university or merely a normative requirement in terms of transparency and contrasting corruptive phenomena in public administration. This dual approach is one of the key elements both in the evolution of the conception of PA that is currently widespread in public opinion and in the reformatory process of the public administration system. This transformation – which has been active for more than 30 years - has affected public administrations and their communication actions from the point of view of legislation, processes and management and operational models, leading to a "participatory-collaborative" model of the citizen-PA relationship that sees its concrete realization in the Open Government model.

*Keywords:* communication, university, policies, public administration, PIAO

**Riassunto.** *Tra identità, promozione e comunità: una ricerca comparata sul ruolo della comunicazione pubblica nelle attività e nell'organizzazione delle università*

L'articolo presenta i risultati di una ricerca esplorativa comparativa, di tipo qualitativo, condotta sui tre atenei pubblici generalisti di Roma: Sapienza Università di Roma, Università degli Studi di Roma "Tor Vergata", Università degli Studi Roma Tre. Obiettivo dello studio è indagare il ruolo della comunicazione nell'ambito universitario, al fine di comprendere se essa rappresenti un elemento cardine nelle politiche strategiche di un Ateneo oppure esclusivamente un mero adempimento normativo in termini di trasparenza e di contrasto ai fenomeni corruttivi nella pubblica amministrazione. Questa doppia prospettiva è uno degli elementi cardine sia nell'evoluzione del concetto stesso di PA che è attualmente diffuso nell'opinione pubblica, sia nel processo riformatore attivo da oltre trent'anni, che ha interessato le pubbliche amministrazioni e la loro azione comunicativa dal punto di vista legislativo, dei processi e dei modelli gestionali e operativi, portando ad un modello "partecipativo-collaborativo" della relazione cittadino-PA che vede una sua concreta realizzazione nel modello dell'Open Government.

*Parole chiave:* comunicazione, università, politiche, pubblica amministrazione, PIAO

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### 1. Introduction

The national and international debate around the evolution of the Public Administration from a communicative perspective does not seem to diminish even today, although the introduction of these issues within the prerogatives of the PA has taken place since the end of the last century (Rovinetti, 1994; Rolando, 1995; Faccioli, 2000; Grandi, 2000; Mancini, 2002). Over the last few years, the spread of digital technologies has undoubtedly played a central role in defining a new relation between the Public

Administration and citizens and in giving an unusual “active” role to the last ones (Faccioli, 2016; Solito, 2018). This approach, which can be framed in the context of the so-called *public engagement* (Bartoletti and Faccioli, 2016), has contributed to determining real transformations in citizens’ perception of public administrations, but also in giving rise to the concretization of a drift towards the *informational engagement* (Firmstone and Coleman, 2015) with a return to the self-referentiality, and mere dissemination and access to information. In this context, a cognitive shift occurs, thanks above all to the possibilities offered by innovative modalities and practices of public involvement with the aim of establishing a new model known as “Open Government” (Lathrop and Ruma, 2010; Gascó-Hernández, 2014): an open, participatory, transparent and accountable administration which led to a complete disintermediation process between PA and citizens thanks to the use of open data platforms and social media (Ducci, 2015).

The national university system is fully integrated into the context of public entities called upon to change. The University is the ideal place to find the key elements of this process, because it is not only an institution operating following “public interests”, such as the education of young people and the promotion of scientific research, but it is also social actor which is called to promote the active participation in the democratic life of the country and to contribute to the development of the future society (Polimeni, 2023). Therefore, on the one hand, that university institutions are committed to promoting all those tools useful for complying with legal obligations for the implementation of the principles that govern administrative action in our country, including through information and communication activities; on the other hand, it is necessary for individual universities to put in place specific communication strategies in order to be able to dialogue with their target audience, increase the value of scientific knowledge and enhance the cultural and social heritage of their university community (Brancato, 2020).

In the light of what has been described so far, the paper aims to investigate the role of communication in the university context, giving the results of an exploratory research conducted on the three major public universities of Rome (Sapienza University of Rome, University of Rome “Tor Vergata”, Roma Tre University) with the aim of understanding if

and how communication activity has a central role in the strategic policy of above-mentioned universities.

## **2. Background**

The communication plays a central role in the evolution of the relationship between PA and citizens, which started in Italy at the beginning of the Nineties (Rolando 2010; Ducci, Materassi and Solito, 2020). Alongside issues such as “transparency” and “accountability”, it is a strategic element in the evolution of public administration, with a view to both the adoption of measures to prevent and combat corruption and the implementation of strategies of “openness” of institutions towards citizens (Borgonovi, Fattore and Longo, 2009). This process is based on specific principles such as the need for Public Administrations to provide correct information on issues of public interest – i.e. citizens’ rights and duties, laws, regulations, etc. – and the promotion of transparency and accountability, placing themselves at the service of the community (Faccioli, 2000; Ducci, 2013) thus limiting, as far as possible, the distrust of institutions that characterizes contemporary society (Rosanvallon, 2006; Bessières, 2018; Brancato, 2023; Edelman Trust Institute, 2024). Through clear and accessible communication, the public administration can ensure that information reaches the public effectively and also that citizens know and are aware of the *res publica*. It plays an important role in spreading the shared participation of citizens in the country’s public life (OECD, 2022). As we will discuss later, the PA has increasingly involved the public in its activities after the advent of Internet and social media, and the spread of new digital communication channels such as SNS, websites and online forums (Lee and Kwak, 2012).

The communication has acquired a strategic position within the PA activities thanks to to specific regulatory. In this scenario, the real turning point can be identified with the approval of Law no. 150 of 7 June 2000, containing provisions on the regulation of information and communication activities within public administrations, where the

Legislator has enshrined the centrality of communication and information in the context of the activities of the Public Administration for the first time, placing it in direct connection with the principles of transparency and effectiveness of administrative action. In addition, the legislator includes some specifications related to the type of activities that the PA will have to put in charge, the actors involved and the tools that can be used (Solito, 2017).

Since Article 1 of that law, in fact, the legislator clears the field of possible thematic-conceptual overlaps by clearly defining the purposes and scopes of application of that organic law on public communication. He indicates the public subjects to whom the intervention is addressed and recalls the issue of the discipline relating to the legal or mandatory publication of public documents. Another aspect related to the object of this legislative action is the division between “information” and “communication”, and to the purposes of the communication activities. First of all, it clarifies not only the relevance of the issue of the PA’s relations with the media system, but also those with citizens, as well as those with its employees and the organization of its organizational structure. Secondly, the main functions to which the communication activities of public bodies must aim are summarized clarifying the strategic value of communication and information for the functioning of the administrative machine to its stakeholders in an indisputable way. Moreover, the Law no. 150/2000 focuses on the professionals involved in the communication and information activities of public administrations and the organizational structure that they require. Specifically, the legislator refers to the importance of professional training for the personnel who will be involved in these activities, providing in art. 4 also the planning by public administrations of specific training courses for employees involved in these activities. Further to this is the identification of the peculiarities of the Public Relations Office (URP) and the Press Office. While the former will deal with communication activities, whether external or internal, the second will mainly deal with relations with the press and media. In addition, there is the optional role of the spokesperson who, like the Press Office, is in contact with the media system but will be closely connected with the top management of the Governance of the institution to which he belongs or in which he serves. Finally, the Law indicates the possibility for PAs to provide for the

broadcasting of messages deemed to be of social utility and public interest through the concessionaire of the public radio and television service, which can transmit them free of charge. Public administrations are also required annually to draw up a communication programme containing the communication initiatives they intend to carry out during the following year, including advertising communication projects, on the basis of which the Department for Information and Publishing of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers will prepare the annual communication plan<sup>1</sup>.

As mentioned above the media, and in particular social media have become quite important to the daily life of each individual and his/her relationship with the PA (Lovari, 2013). The recent pandemic emergency has certainly represented a vivid example, also highlighting how necessary it is for the communication action of Public Administrations to be rapid, feasible and flexible (Lovari and Righetti, 2020; Faccioli *et al.*, 2020; Ducci and Lovari, 2021; Ducci 2021). If, on the one hand, public communication concerns the dissemination by public institutions of information on regulatory acts, administrative procedures, public procedures, etc., to citizens; on the other hand, it concerns the promotion of values and principles, such as democracy, transparency, accountability and civic participation, thus supporting the building of a trust-based relationship between citizens and public administration and encouraging citizens' participation in the public life of the country (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019). However, we should not forget the possibility of active listening that the Web offers to PAs, through the use of blogs, social networks and online participatory platforms, allowing the transition to a relationship characterized by the centrality of the “participatory-collaborative” model due to the achievement of the “Open Government” (Masini, Lovari and Benenati, 2013; Ducci, Materassi and Solito, 2020).

According to the Ducci's work on “conscious relationality” (2007; 2017), institutions are called today more than ever to become aware of the importance of nurturing deep relationships with citizens, also through the tools offered by the digital transition. They have

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<sup>1</sup> For more details on the subject, please refer to the web page *Communication and institutional information* published by the Department for Information and Publishing of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, available at the web address: <https://informazioneeditoria.gov.it/it/attivita/comunicazione-e-informazione-istituzionale/> (20/03/2024).

to govern the change that is taking place in the current, complex and constantly evolving media and information scenario, overcoming the merely propagandistic and self-referential dimension that has characterized the top-down approach in citizen-PA relations for decades, and ensuring more and more transparency and accountability.

Public Administrations must be open to continuous dialogue and exchange with citizens, collecting their opinions in order to be able to integrate them into the decision-making process by providing an increasingly participatory, fair and inclusive democracy. In this context, Internet takes a role in the “civic involvement” of citizens offering new practices of participation and access to getting information about the activities of public institutions (Rovinetti, 2002, 2010; Solito, 2004; Grandi, 2007; Ducci, 2013; Faccioli, 2013). Public communication is, therefore, a key element for the PA. Its digital evolution over the last few years, presents numerous new and unprecedented opportunities for public institutions; but, at the same time, it requires strategic, careful, and conscious management in order to fully exploit the advantages that they can bring to the action of public administration (Mergel, 2013; Lovari and Valentini, 2020). In this direction moves the policy paper drafted by the ministerial working group on public communication reform and national social media policy (GdL, 2020), containing a series of proposals that emphasize the need for a regulatory update of Law no. 150 of June 7, 2000 at multiple levels, from recruitment to training.

Although the Law no. 150 of 2000 may certainly represent an attempt, albeit incomplete, it nowadays risks being partially inadequate not only with respect to the current state of the communication and media system, but also and above all with respect to an increasingly digital, shared, and open idea of PA (Rolando, 2000; Solito, 2017; Comunello *et al.*, 2021).

### **3. Research design and methodology**

The communication activity of universities is an element of absolute importance for many reasons. First of all, universities are called upon as public bodies to comply with the

indications that come from the Legislator. Although in full respect of the autonomy that the law recognizes them in terms of teaching and scientific research, as well as from an organizational, financial and accounting point of view, allowing them to self-regulate with autonomous systems through their own regulations and statutes. In fact, universities are called upon to comply with the provisions of the law (Law no. 168/1989) as part of their activities. There is also what concerns national legislation in terms of communication and information of public administrations, in implementation of those principles that govern administrative action, including transparency, effectiveness, etc. (Law no. 241/1990). Secondly, universities are faced with the constant challenge of having the need to engage in dialogue with their main stakeholders, i.e. those young people who were born and are living today in the so-called “information age” (Castells, 1996). Moreover, there is the need to have a dialogue with the various media that populate the complex contemporary media system (Chadwick, 2013) as well as to get in touch with the territory and its actors – bodies, institutions, businesses, citizens – in order to promote their social function and develop the so-called “Third Mission” (Boffo and Moscati, 2015) and “Fourth Mission” (Polimeni, 2023).

This paper will present the results of a qualitative exploratory analysis that aims to analyse the role of communication within the strategic-political plan of the three public universities of Rome: Sapienza University of Rome, University of Rome “Tor Vergata” and Roma Tre University<sup>2</sup>. The attention was paid to the reference, or not, to the topic of communication in the current Governance of the three Universities and in the articulation of the related central administrative organizations, and to the identification of the presence, or not, of the theme of communication within the strategic planning documents of the universities under study. The work shows the results of the analysis of the Integrated Activity and Organisation Plan of the three universities (Ministerial Decree no. 132/2022). In this regard, it should be noted that each university has carried out three different PIAOs up to the time of writing this contribution: 2022-2024, 2023-2025 2024-2026.

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<sup>2</sup> In this work, the University of Rome “Foro Italico” has not been examined because, although it is a public Roman university too, it is characterized by an educational offer dedicated exclusively to motor and sports sciences, unlike the other three universities analysed which have a generalist vocation.

#### **4. Results and discussion**

The first analysis is focused on the identification of the presence of the topic of communication within the political and administrative governance of the three selected universities. It represents a valid indicator of the significance recognized to this area by each university thus focusing on the organization and management of resources, including human resources, necessary for the conception, design and implementation of communication activities carried out within the universities analysed. Through the analysis of the data collected from the official website of each university, it emerged that Sapienza University of Rome is present within its 2022-2024 University Governance, confirming what was already present in the governance team of the previous two years, a specific area of communication that has 48 members the presence of 2 Deputy Rectors dedicated to two key aspects of university public communication: Prof. Alberto Marinelli, Deputy Rector for Innovative technologies for communications, and Prof. Stefania Basili, Deputy Rector for Communications and scientific dissemination<sup>3</sup>. Whereas the central administrative structure dedicated to the theme of communication has recently undergone a substantial change. Following the reorganization of the central administration offices that took place during 2023, the “Press and Communication Unit” was included in the Rector’s Office<sup>4</sup>. In addition, a new structure has been created within the “Strategic Planning Area”, the “Promotion and Public Relations Office”, which includes two administrative sectors: “Public Relations and Information Office”, already present in the previous organization of the central administration, and the new “Image Promotion and Dissemination Unit”<sup>5</sup>. Overall, the Sapienza staff dedicated to communication is made up of 15 units, divided as follows: no. 5 in “Press and communication”, no. 3 in “Image promotion and dissemination”, no. 6 in “URP Public relations”, and no. 1 Head of the “Promotion and

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<sup>3</sup> Available at the web address: <https://www.uniroma1.it/it/pagina/prorettori-e-delegati> (20/03/2024).

<sup>4</sup> Available at the web address <https://www.uniroma1.it/it/pagina/ufficio-della-rettrice> (20/03/2024).

<sup>5</sup> Available at the web address: <https://www.uniroma1.it/it/pagina/ufficio-promozione-e-relazioni-esterne> (20/03/2024).



external relations” Office.

The data on the official website of the University of Rome “Tor Vergata” provide some system peculiarities. First, within the University Governance appointed by the current Rector, Prof. Nathan Levialdi Ghiron, in office since 2022, there is one member with delegation on the subject among the 29 deputy rectors and delegates appointed: Prof. Lucia Ceci, Deputy Rector for Communications<sup>6</sup>. With respect to the organization of the central administration, the University of Rome “Tor Vergata” has three administrative structures dedicated: “Central Communication Office”<sup>7</sup> – divided into “Social Area” and “Visual Area” –, “Press Office”<sup>8</sup>, and “Public Relations Office-URP”<sup>9</sup>. In terms of assigned staff, the Central Communication Office is composed of 6 units, the University Press Office of 4 units, while the URP of 2 units to which are added 3 units appointed to the “Call Tor Vergata” telephone service for students. Overall, the communication activities of the University of Rome “Tor Vergata” involve 15 staff units.

The University of Roma Tre has a Governance made up of 33 members including pro-rectors and delegates. Among the latter, the current Rector, Prof. Massimiliano Fiorucci, has appointed Prof. Marta Perrotta as Delegate to the rectoral function for Communications and institutional promotion.<sup>10</sup> The central administrative structure of the University has a large fragmentation of offices dedicated to communication. In fact, from the data published on the official website, it is possible to identify a structure dedicated to the communication, “Technological Support Area for Communications and Media Relations”, belonging to the Directorate 5 and composed of three substructures: the “Digital Editorial Coordination Office”, the “Graphic Design Office”, and the “Communication Technological Tools Office”<sup>11</sup>. In addition, there is the “Public Relations Office (URP)” within Directorate 9 and

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<sup>6</sup> Available at the web address: <https://web.uniroma2.it/it/contenuto/prorettori-e-delegati> (20/03/2024).

<sup>7</sup> Available at the web address: [https://web.uniroma2.it/it/percorso/footer\\_1/sezione/ufficio-comunicazione-centrale](https://web.uniroma2.it/it/percorso/footer_1/sezione/ufficio-comunicazione-centrale) (20/03/2024).

<sup>8</sup> Available at the web address: [https://web.uniroma2.it/it/percorso/footer\\_1/sezione/ufficio\\_stampa\\_di\\_ateneo](https://web.uniroma2.it/it/percorso/footer_1/sezione/ufficio_stampa_di_ateneo) (20/03/2024).

<sup>9</sup> Available at the web address: [https://web.uniroma2.it/it/percorso/amministrazione/sezione/ufficio\\_relazioni\\_publico](https://web.uniroma2.it/it/percorso/amministrazione/sezione/ufficio_relazioni_publico) (20/03/2024).

<sup>10</sup> Available at the web address: <https://www.uniroma3.it/ateneo/organi/deleghe-e-incarichi-rettoriali/> (20/03/2024).

<sup>11</sup> Available at the web address: <https://www.uniroma3.it/ateneo/uffici/area-di-sostegno-tecnologico-alla-comunicazione-e-alle-relazioni-con-i-media/> (20/03/2024).

the “Communication Office” in Directorate 7<sup>12</sup>. The staff of the above-mentioned administrative structures is made up of 15 units, divided as follows: 5 staff units in the “Technological Support Area for Communication and Media Relations”, 3 in the “Digital Editorial Coordination Office”, 1 in the “Graphic Design Office”, 2 in the “Communication Technological Tools Office”, 4 in the “Public Relations Office (URP)” and 1 in the “Communication Office”.

Subsequently, the investigation shifted to the study of the PIAOs of the three universities. Specifically, the Integrated Activity and Organisation Plan. is a single three-year governance and planning document that Public Administrations are called upon to update on an annual basis and in which six plans that were previously provided for by national legislation (Presidential Decree no. 81/2022) converge. The analysis carried out on the 2022-2024 Integrated Plan of Activities and Organization of Sapienza University of Rome clearly shows that the University is paying attention to the communication activity as reflected in the specific section “Priorities and prospects for the development of Sapienza’s communication”. In particular, Sapienza underlines the central role of “emergency” communication during the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular with regard to the University-Student information flow and in relations with the media, also with regard to the need to hold remote events.

Sapienza’s communication activities are constantly developing to adapt to the different information content to be disseminated, to the evolution of communication channels, to external scenarios that impose new priorities. In the two-year period 2020-2021, the pandemic required a particular commitment to communicate to students how to use teaching and related activities, including those for orientation. [...] The two years of pandemic, probably accelerating processes already underway and above all thanks to the development of video communication methods, have therefore consolidated a highly digitized communication system, where the online channel (chat, videoconferencing, website or social media) has become a habit for the University's various audiences, often even a first choice over physical channels (go to the counter, follow the press conference or event in person) (Sapienza University of Rome, 2022, pp. 30-31).

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<sup>12</sup> Available at the web address: <https://www.uniroma3.it/ateneo/uffici/> (20/03/2024).

Sapienza attributes a strategic role to the institutional communication, the so-called “internal” communication, aimed at members of its community. In fact, considerable coverage is allocated to the activities in progress and those planned over the next few years, deriving from the high media coverage of Sapienza compared to other universities. The “Communicative centrality”, as it is defined in the PIAO, which has led Sapienza to play a crucial role in the relationship between universities and media, even more so following, firstly, the election of the current Rector, Prof. Antonella Polimeni, in 2020, and, secondly, with the awarding of the Nobel Prize in Physics 2021 to Prof. Giorgio Parisi and with the advancement of Sapienza’s positioning in international rankings, with the confirmation of the world leadership in classical studies. In addition, it is important to communicate in the ‘third mission’ sphere: the social impact of the university on the enhancement of research and on the production of public goods.

On the occasion of the drafting of the 2023-2025 and 2024-2026 PIAOs, Sapienza dedicates a part of the document to the communication, clearly confirming its strategic role and placing it on a par with other central issues in the management and organization of the university, such as transparency, human capital, etc. Specifically, the 2023-2025 PIAO focuses both on the reporting of the activities indicated in the 2022 programming, such as the implementation of orientation events, i.e. “(Re)Open Doors to Sapienza 2022” which marks the return to presence of this main event among the University’s incoming orientation activities, and on the ideas and proposals contained in the 2023 Communication Plan. These include the transition of the institutional website to a new version of Drupal, the reorganization of the students’ web portal “Infostud”, the design of communication products and events related to the activities carried out as part of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), and the implementation of the signage already present within the University City and the various branch offices of the University in accordance with the numerous redevelopment activities of the spaces that are currently under construction.

Also, in the last PIAO analysed, namely the one relating to the period 2024-2026, Sapienza University of Rome continues to focus on the issue of communication mainly through two meanings: one relating to the University’s Communication and Dissemination

Activities Plan, the other concerning the actions within the prevention of corruption and the transparency, in compliance with current legislation and the indications of the National Anti-Corruption Authority (ANAC).

The purpose of the Annual Communication Plan is to indicate the direction in which this articulated Sapienza communication machine intends to move, focusing on objectives and actions to be carried out during the year, starting from the results of the previous year, in a coordinated and synergistic manner. Objectives and actions represent a process of continuous improvement that considers the news to be communicated, the development of technological tools, changes in the context and strategic priorities. For Sapienza's communication, 2024 represents a year of consolidation of some projects already launched in 2023 involving important technological components. At the same time, the dissemination activity towards the various audiences of Sapienza will continue, through the media and in usual channels, to which the University magazine Sapienza Magazine has been added (Sapienza University of Rome, 2024, p. 40).

Specifically, with regard to the aspect of communication and dissemination activities within Sapienza's PIAO 2024-2026, almost all of the planned actions seem to be directed toward a "service communication" directed primarily to the components of its community, and in particular to students. Special attention is paid to issues such as the renewal of the website dedicated to degree programs, the reorganization of the University web portal dedicated to student careers, the adaptation of the departmental and faculty structure websites according to the guidelines of the Agency for Digital Italy, the prosecution of the publishing activities related to the university magazine and, finally, the rearrangement of the visual identity manual in light of the new digital communication tools. Finally, it should be noted that in the policy document, the emphasis is also placed, albeit only marginally, on the importance of outward-facing communication, i.e. on strengthening relations with the media and external stakeholders.

In the PIAOs of the University of Rome "Tor Vergata" emerges a less "organic" attention to the issue compared to the Sapienza Plan. The attention to the communication activity is at large related to the privacy and the corruption risks within the performance of the University's administrative activities; therefore, it is considered as a useful and necessary

tool in terms of transparency to not compromise the trust-based relationship with its internal and external stakeholders. In addition, communication is considered as a useful tool for the internal community. The “Agora and communication activities” does not refer to institutional communication activities and to relations with the media, but rather to the adoption of a new web portal, “Agora”, dedicated to the training, well-being and professional orientation of the University’s staff.

The pandemic has brought out even more the need for people to continue to maintain bonds of union, through which they feel, even in the difficulty of the historical moment, a united community capable of working and collaborating in new ways. Created in record time, the Agorà collaborative platform represents the ‘virtual’ home, where you can meet to collect ideas, discuss, develop skills and feel part of the ‘Tor Vergata’ community (University of Rome “Tor Vergata”, 2022, pp. 130-131; University of Rome “Tor Vergata”, 2023, pp. 159-160).

In this context, it is interesting to highlight a new element present in the PIAO 2024-2026 as compared to the two documents previously analysed. In fact, in the last PIAO, the publication of specific guidelines addressed to the university’s staff, entitled “Una scrittura correttamente Vergata”, and the implementation of training and dissemination courses about the diversity and inclusion issues, was included as part of the activities already completed, which have as their purpose the creation of public value.

Through the words we use and that are addressed to us, we construct reality and knowledge, but also, involuntarily, prejudices and stereotypes. Aware of the central role that language and communication play in society and of how much a work of care and education aimed at language can contribute in a tangible way to the improvement of the life of each individual, our University has issued guidelines for an inclusive and gender-sensitive use of the Italian language. A handbook that aims to be a support tool for the use of correct and inclusive language and which was presented and illustrated within a training and dissemination course (two editions of 4 hours each) aimed at University staff. The dissemination of the guidelines and the related course are aimed at describing linguistic processes and uses, demonstrating how language and its languages are always the result of choices, more or less conscious, to combat discriminatory situations and to ensure greater symmetry in institutional communication environments. In this way, the University of Rome ‘Tor

Vergata' takes a further step forward in achieving Goal 5 of the 2030 Agenda and, as set out in the Gender Budget, demonstrates how the construction of a language that respects gender and represents the actual communicative reality is one of the ways to achieve true social equality, institutional, educational and cultural (University of Rome "Tor Vergata", 2024, p. 169).

Finally, it was possible to trace in the three documents few references to the theme of the relevance of communication in the context of the third mission ("Investing in the external communication of the skills generated and the results of research"), the student services ("Improving communication with all our students, increasingly exploiting multimedia tools and social media in a way appropriate to an academic context"), and the organisation of labour and working environment. The analysis of the three PIAOs (2022-2024, 2023-2025, 2024-2026) of Roma Tre University shows an increasing awareness of the strategic role of communication and the function it plays in the promotion of both the University in general and its activities. First of all, in line with previous cases, Roma Tre also dedicates a part of the document, entitled "Transparency communication initiatives", to the communication activity in close relation with the privacy issue.

Roma Tre has planned to organize, as in previous years, the Transparency Day, an event dedicated to the presentation of the Performance Plan and the Transparency Program which, in accordance with the provisions of Legislative Decree no. 150/2009, is an opportunity to personally involve the University's stakeholders together with the teaching and technical, administrative and library staff with the aim of extending the discussion to the issues of the fight against corruption and respect for the privacy legislation (Roma Tre University, 2022, p. 44; Roma Tre University, 2023, p. 47; Roma Tre University, 2024, p. 59).

Communication is also discussed in other sections of the analysed document. Although this occurs only with some mentions, the relevance of the topic is expressed specifically regarding the University development itself, linking it to issues such as teaching, research, the third mission, the library system, and as well as the topic of enhancing the image and reputation of the University. Since the drafting of the 2023-2025 Integrated Plan of Activities and Organization, Roma Tre has presented a part of the PIAO dedicated to the

University's Communication Plan emphasising more strongly the centrality of communication in its strategic activities. In this regard, it is important to underline that the 30th anniversary of the University's foundation, celebrated in the 2022-2023 academic year, has played a central role in defining the communication strategies to be adopted in recent years.

The year 2023 marked a real watershed for Roma Tre. The celebrations of the thirtieth anniversary were in fact an opportunity to renew not only the spirit of belonging of its members to the academic community, but also to reaffirm and root the need to undertake a series of actions aimed mainly at strengthening the reputation and image of the University (Roma Tre University, 2024, p. 24).

As indicated, this occasion required a greater effort from the university in terms of communication, and consequently it was necessary the involvement of an external communication agency to support the visibility on media and social networks, and to enhance the appeal of the University and its educational offer, through the creation of public events aimed both at members of the university community and external bodies and companies, schools and civil society for developing the University's third mission and promoting the research activities carried out by its scientific community.

## **5. Conclusions**

The research conducted has clearly highlighted the great importance acquired by communication over the last few years in the context of the strategic lines of the three universities, albeit with some specificities that characterize the communicative action of the three case studies. From the analysis of the data collected, it emerged that there was mostly total homogeneity among the universities under study in the management and organization of communication, and in particular with regard to the presence of both administrative structures dedicated to the topic and the consequent commitment in terms of human

resources assigned and members of the University governance. Although some characterizations seem to emerge from the analysis of the PIAO of the three universities. Specifically, if in the case of Sapienza University of Rome and Roma Tre University the reference to the strategic role of the University's Communication Plan in the development of their university community and in the promotion of the identity and reputation of the universities seems to be clear, the same scenario does not seem to occur from the PIAO of the University of Rome "Tor Vergata". In this last case, the communication looks as a meta-tool necessary to achieve specific objectives, rather than a pivotal factor in the development of the strategic line of the inter-universities.

As highlighted in this paper, communication represents a fundamental strategic lever for the innovation of public administrations and the processes that characterize the performance of their functions in an increasingly hyper-connected and hypermedia-oriented society, but at the same time marked by a high degree of disaffection of citizens towards the *res publica*. In this context, public communication inevitably plays a decisive role.

Today, the Public Administration is experiencing a new phase in which the focus of the debate is on issues such as the use of algorithms and artificial intelligence and their possible future applications in the performance of the administrative functions of PAs. Although they represent two issues of absolute relevance in the contemporary debate and, at the same time, very controversial mainly for their ethical repercussions, it is indisputable the need to understand how – if properly governed – they can become useful tools in the future in the field of communication with the aim of promoting in a virtuous way an increasingly active and lasting relationship between public institutions and citizens, offering more efficient services that are able to promote renewed trust in the PA.

Therefore, now more than ever public institutions, and universities in view of the object of this paper, have to consider communication, in particular on new media and social network sites, as an integral part of the administrative action, using it as an instrument of transparency and accountability of their work in compliance with the principles of public administration activity, as well as an asset for promoting the institution itself and serving the members of their community.



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