

## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION. THE HUMAN MIND AS A BATTLEFIELD.

DOI: 10.7413/18281567298

**di Luigi Di Gregorio**

Università della Tuscia

### *Abstract*

The essay outlines new trends in political communication, starting with two important innovations: political neuromarketing and the explosion of artificial intelligence. The thesis is that mass technologies (GPTs, General Purpose Technology) are by no means neutral: their impact on us as individuals and as communities is enormous. In the case of AI, this impact will be more widespread and powerful than ever before. This implies, in so many areas, the risks always associated with any technology: there will be positive uses, but also very dangerous ones. Political communication is no exception. And the combination with neuromarketing discoveries portends challenging scenarios in many respects.

**Keywords:** Political communication, political marketing, permanent campaign, Artificial Intelligence, cognitive psychology

### **The strength of a GPT and *omni-use* technology**

Few years ago, George Lakoff argued that «the main battlefield of the culture war is the brain and, in particular, the functioning of the brain below the level of consciousness»<sup>1</sup>.

This statement is simultaneously the starting and ending point of this contribution.

Why start with the human mind instead of technological progress and artificial intelligence? In short, because we are interested in the psychological, sociological and political effects of technological innovations. In the words of McLuhan, “the medium is the message” and it is therefore the

---

<sup>1</sup> G. Lakoff, *The Political Mind: Why You Can't Understand 21st-Century American Politics with an 18th-Century Brain*, N.Y., Penguin, 2008.

consequences and effects on us that we need to concern ourselves with. Technological innovations are not good or bad in themselves, it depends on how they are used. But this is truism, which moreover sent McLuhan on a rampage: it is obvious that a pen, atomic energy or the smartphone can be used well or badly, to hurt or even kill, or to produce poetry, energy or connect people. What should interest scholars is the “message” contained in the “medium”, that is, how and how much technological innovations change us, in the way we perceive and conceive the world and in the way we organize communities and collective life.

To give a couple of little-known but paradigmatic examples, today in some cities in the Far East it is possible to see sidewalks divided in two, no longer between bicycle and pedestrian lanes, but between pedestrian paths for those who use smartphones and those who do not... The one should not bother the other: those who walk while always looking at a screen should have their own lane and avoid colliding with those who walk while looking ahead (and not down). And those who walk while always looking down also have their own “customized” traffic lights, which project the red or green light on the ground, so that they can be alerted to the end of the sidewalk without looking up from their “life screen” (and without risking being run over, due to monitor distraction).

That the smartphone completely disrupted our lives was clear from the very beginning. The story of the collapse of *chewing gum* sales following the release of the iPhone is still little known. It may seem like a spurious correlation: what does chewing gum have to do with smartphones? Actually, the correlation is there, and it was discovered by the very manufacturers of the confectionery products. When they thoroughly investigated the sales slump, they noticed that it was not generalized but concentrated in one specific spot: in the shelves placed before the supermarket checkouts (i.e., in other outlets, purchases were stable). Why is it that that is where we stopped buying *chewing gum*? Neuromarketing explains it to us, speaking of the brain as a battleground. Some sweet, small, and very cheap products are placed on those shelves before the supermarket checkouts to elicit impulse buying in us. In short, as we stand in line and have to fill those few moments of waiting, our attention is caught by these little “seducers” and dopamine kicks in, stimulating the impulse to buy. At least, that’s how it was until about 2008, then something got jammed. What specifically? The simple fact that the way we stand in line and fill those moments of waiting has changed. Today, dopamine is provided by a message on WhatsApp, an Instagram notification, a *reel* or any other digital stimulus from our *black mirror*, to quote a well-known British dystopian TV series.

Here, then, is why the medium is the message. The way we walk and stand in line in supermarkets has changed because of a new *medium*. And it is no coincidence that supermarkets are taking action: in many of them there is no longer connection. The goal is to become bored again in those few seconds in line, to be “captured” again by the bulk products placed there to stimulate impulse buying. Clearly, the consequences of smartphone technology go far beyond these two. I have chosen them only because they are a bit outlandish and unexpected. There are many others and far more profound, just read for example the works of Manfred Spitzer<sup>2</sup> and Jonathan Haidt<sup>3</sup>, just to name two works that decided to investigate in depth the effects of the digital on our senses, our behaviors and our psychological resilience.

Before returning to artificial intelligence, to put a point on the importance of media as a *game changer* in our lives, I want to recall the case of the Amondawa tribe. When we think of technologies, we usually think of innovative objects and in any case the physical world (from electricity to smartphones, via TVs, computers, and so on). However, money, the clock, and the calendar are also technologies, and so are alphabetic writing and Arabic numerals. They are human inventions and conventions, not natural or biological. Well, when some explorers first encountered the Amondawa tribe in the Amazon rainforest (in the 1980s), the most interesting thing they noticed was the following: these people had no concept of time. It made no sense to that people to talk about past, present and future; they simply did not understand it. Time for them had remained perfectly cyclical: sun rises, sun sets. Period. There is no today, just as there is no yesterday or tomorrow. Investigating why this curious anomaly occurred, the researchers determined that this is because the Amondawa had never developed a numerical system; they merely used their fingers and toes. And as a result, they had never developed a calendar, let alone produced clocks. The linear (not cyclical) time of modernity, then, is the by-product of mathematics, calendars and clocks. If there is a past, present and future for us, we owe it to Arabic numerals. Having said that, Albert Einstein said that the distinction between past, present and future is-no matter how stubborn-just an illusion, so to be fair, the anomalous ones may not be the Amondawa...

---

<sup>2</sup> M. Spitzer, *Digitale Demenz: Wie wir uns und unsere Kinder um den Verstand bringen*, München, Droemer TB, 2012; *Cyberkrank! Wie das digitalisierte Leben unsere Gesundheit ruiniert*, München, Droemer Verlag, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> J. Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, N.Y., Penguin, 2024.

So let us return to artificial intelligence and why, to understand it and counter its perverse effects, we need to start with understanding the human mind before the algorithmic mind.

Meanwhile, we need to clarify the concept of GPT, not in the sense used by open AI to name the well-known “smart” chat, i.e., *Generative Pre-trained Transformer*, but *General Purpose Technology*. A *general purpose* technology aims to generate a very broad and diverse impact in society. These are technologies that tend to be *omni-use*, that is, to colonize different sectors of the economy and society. The steam engine, electricity or the Internet are GPTs. Similarly, indeed likely more so, artificial intelligence is and will be, given its virtually unlimited potential range of uses.

Within this infinite number of effects, this paper will try to focus on political communication, starting with what is already in the field and trying to imagine some future developments, always keeping in mind the real focus of current and potential issues, namely the human mind.

### **Cognitive bias and political communication**

We begin the analysis of the relationship between artificial intelligence and political communication as it is shaped today by moving from a recent news item, namely Mark Zuckerberg’s decision not to renew the *policy* of independent *fact checkers* on Meta-owned platforms. This news, hailed – among others – by Elon Musk with jubilation and by Joe Biden as a “shameful” turn of events, was motivated by the group’s founder on the basis of too often politically oriented (*biased*) decisions by the *fact checkers* themselves. In the name of *free speech*, the foundation of Western democracies – and of the United States in particular – Zuckerberg has therefore decided to go back to basics, avoiding recourse to verification of what users post, except through *community notes*, i.e., an option that does not confront “true” and “false”, but rather opinions more or less supported by data, facts and figures, leaving users free to decide what to believe, without banning anyone or branding them as “liars”. This choice has been interpreted both as a political turn-to get closer to the Trump-Musk pairing and not be isolated in the social media world, and as an economic move: social networks are not born as organs of information, but rather as entertainment platforms, which are at their best if they can engage users to the fullest. This means that heated discussions and the most divisive and polarizing topics are a key fuel for that business model. Conversely, ostracizing a “piece of the world” and flattening toward a kind of single-mindedness, zeroing in on discussions and removing “untrue” content, causes those platforms to lose interest, attention, and consequently money.

There is, however, a further, more *data-driven* reading based on what cognitive psychology and neuroscience have shown in recent years: *fact-checking* does not work. Put brutally, it does not change anyone's opinion. On the contrary, the more it is used as a "cudgel" by those who have factual support against those who do not, the more it reinforces the latter's cognitive *biases*: *confirmation bias*, *conservatism*, *backfire effect*, and so on. In other words, what neuroscience has shown in recent years is that we seek information to confirm our beliefs. And if someone confronts us with a *fait accompli*, telling us that we are wrong – and maybe even insulting us – the most likely thing to happen is not humbly changing our minds, but – paradoxically – convincing us even more that we are right (this is the *backfire effect*).

Why does this happen? Because, to quote a phrase never written but frequently attributed to neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, we "are not rational machines that get emotional, but emotional machines that think".

In summary, as Kahneman and Tversky put it, our mind has two engines that these authors refer to as System 1 and System 2.

System 1 is an automatic (unconscious) engine that is always running at full speed and is what enables us to make quick and immediate decisions based on intuition. In fact, Kahneman calls it "intuitive thinking". It is the realm of perceptions, intuitions and impulses and is fast, automatic, associative (works by association of images and concepts). System 2, on the other hand, normally idles and is activated when System 1 is faced with a difficulty, a problem it cannot solve. In fact, it is "logical-reflective thinking", a more powerful but slower engine that needs more energy and attention. It is the realm of reasoning, concepts, abstract thinking and logic and is slow, sequential, causal and tiring.<sup>4</sup>

So, what happens when we are confronted with the *fait accompli* by *fact checkers*? What happens is that unconsciously the neural areas of discomfort are activated, it bothers us a lot, it literally makes us feel bad (who hasn't experienced discomfort even from a critical comment to one's own social

---

<sup>4</sup> L. Di Gregorio, *War Room. Attori, strutture e processi della politica in campagna permanente*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2024, p. 128.

network post?). At that point we have two paths: 1. Accept that we are wrong, tell the “world” that we were wrong and continue to feel that discomfort – amplified by the fact that we have admitted the mistake in public and thus have worsened our reputation; 2. Look for all possible arguments in our favor (activating System 2) to prove that we are right anyway. In 90% of cases, option 2 wins. How many people do you know who, after writing a blunder on social media, admitted the mistake and changed their minds? It is much more likely that they cherry-picked, that is, carefully selected of all the “evidence” to support their belief and became even more convinced that they were right.

To better understand how the *backfire effect* works, let us take a well-known, really happened example. The president of the United States must be a natural-born American citizen, that is, he must have been born on American soil. During the 2008 presidential election campaign, rumors began to spread that Barack Obama was born in Kenya and not in Hawaii as the future president claimed.

After years of controversy (fueled by Donald Trump, among others), in April 2011, the then-president decided to post his complete birth certificate, in pdf, on the White House home page. On paper, this is *fact checking* in purity: “there are those who claim I was born in Kenya, here are the official papers to restore the truth”. At that point, if we were – as we believe and tell ourselves – rational guided beings, 100 percent of the skeptics should have recognized the error and changed their minds. Instead, here’s what happened, roughly: before the birth certificate was published online, about 45 percent of U.S. citizens believed the president was lying about their country of birth. Immediately after the publication, 33% still remained of that idea. And, a few days later, the “deniers” came back to settle around 41%...Why didn’t *fact checking* work? What happened in the minds of those 4 out of 10 Americans who continue to believe that Obama was not born in the United States? What happened is that the certificate created a strong discomfort in those who strongly believed that Obama was born in Kenya. To “turn off” that discomfort, most of them turned on (unconsciously and immediately, via System 1) the cognitive *biases* mentioned earlier: *confirmation bias*, *conservatism* and *backfire effect*. And that immediately turned on System 2 to find footholds to support their belief. In other words, if I don’t trust Obama because I am sure he is a liar, when I see the certificate online, after initial discomfort, I begin to think: “He is such a liar that he even forged the certificate! It’s definitely retouched with Photoshop!”, something like that in short.

This is how the backfire effect sets in: faced with evidence of the untenability of my belief, I become even more convinced that I am right. Because System 1 drives and conditions System 2, far more often than we imagine and can realize. We are emotionally driven beings, and we have to deal with

that. We have evolved this way, and it is good because it has allowed us to survive and evolve as a species. The price of this is a series of immediate, intuitive behaviors that get in the way of who we think we are. And these behaviors have always been the basis of political communication (and propaganda). In the contemporary digital infosphere, characterized by speed, superficiality and oversimplification, these traits are even more central and emphasized.

That is why, as we deal with artificial intelligence, we must ask ourselves above all the question of how we react and will react to “post-human” communication, so to speak.

### **AI and political communication today**

One of the most common mistakes people make when talking about artificial intelligence is to talk about it in the future, rather than the present. Our lives are already largely affected by interventions and mechanisms related to artificial intelligence, starting with everything that is in some way related to algorithmic logic.

Specifically, in the area of political communication, there are already at least 10 types of activities in which artificial intelligence is used extensively.

#### *1. Use of chatbots to manage online interactions with citizens.*

Often unbeknownst to us – especially if the system is well thought out – responding to users’ questions and comments on social networks and official websites of political leaders are artificial intelligence-based chatbots. If well trained, these systems provide quick answers to frequently asked questions, perfectly simulating human conversations in order to improve voter and citizen *engagement*.

Especially during election campaigns, by training these systems it is possible to obtain immediate and quality responses to questions posed by users, as well as to automatically collect and analyze the kind of feedback that comes from citizens. Clearly, already this activity generates misperception, that is, the impression (and belief) that one is conversing with the candidate, while is interacting with an automated, albeit in its own way anthropomorphic, mechanism.

#### *2. Automatic moderation of content on social platforms.*

Along the lines of the previous activity, it is possible to use artificial intelligence algorithms on the social platforms of politicians and institutions to identify and remove offensive or otherwise

suspicious content, thus relieving the workload for human resources who can devote themselves to other tasks.

3. *Automated content creation.*

Artificial intelligence is already capable of generating text for social media posts, personalized emails, press releases, and any other written content as well as graphic or audio-video content, adapting the language and style to the type of target audience or election target, thus increasing the effectiveness of the message. Again, *misperception* is generated in the sense that citizen-voters may perceive these messages as personally crafted by the candidate or his or her team, ignoring AI intervention.

4. *Real-time monitoring and analysis of opinions.*

AI-based *sentiment analysis* tools analyze social media comments, content found in forums, and written news stories to assess public *sentiment* toward a politician or *policy* proposal, thereby identifying any emerging trends and adjusting communication strategies accordingly.

5. *Digital advertising optimization.*

Artificial intelligence can manage the distribution of digital and paid election ads, identifying and selecting the most receptive target audience based on demographics, interests, and online behaviors, and maximizing the impact of the campaign through this user profiling activity.

6. *Amplification of the emotional impact of multimedia content.*

Artificial intelligence tools can optimize media content to elicit specific emotions by blending music, images, and narratives designed to influence voters' perceptions. This is, in effect, election neuromarketing, which I will discuss in more detail below.

7. *Bots aimed at influencing public conversations.*

How many times have we heard about Russian or Chinese bots being used to wage “hybrid warfare”, destabilizing the electoral mood of Western democracies on the ballot? As one example, among many, a Carnegie Mellon University study analyzed more than 200 million tweets on COVID-19 during the first U.S. lockdown. Eighty-two percent of the users who advocated for ending the lockdown and “reopening America” were bots. Therefore, there have long existed several bots powered by artificial intelligence and designed precisely to participate

in – or better inflame – online discussions, intervening in comment *threads* to polarize, influence perceptions on specific *topics*, and so on. Of course, almost no one knows for sure that their interlocutors are bots, and normally the perception is that they are arguing with flesh-and-blood users, thus increasing generalized polarization and destabilization, but also providing a non-real picture of opinions to those who analyze them (including politicians).

8. *Support activities in candidate preparation.*

Here we are projected more into the near future than the present. However, there are already apps and software aimed at improving public speaking. Algorithms are already able to analyze, by viewing a video, body language, tone of voice, facial expressions, voice usage and speech content, providing detailed feedback and suggestions to improve overall communication and refine the message. Appropriately trained, artificial intelligence can also help candidates to predict possible uncomfortable questions or attacks from opponents, while also formulating hypotheses for convincing and credible answers.

9. *Predictive analytics for strategic planning.*

By feeding algorithms with election data, polls and *web analytics*, it is possible to predict the results of a campaign and the effectiveness of an election strategy. The advantage of these artificial intelligence systems is the ability to blend disparate and heterogeneous data together, while also saving a lot of resources.

10. *Creation and dissemination of deepfakes.*

Already the most controversial and in some ways disturbing use of artificial intelligence in political-election communication is that relating to so-called *deepfakes*. That is, these systems are sometimes used to create totally fake (invented) videos or images that reproduce attitudes or behavior in an extremely realistic way. These tools, of course, aim to arouse strong emotions, to activate System 1 at the expense of the logical-rational mind, spreading disinformation or discrediting political opponents. As we have already seen, even after discovering that these are made-up videos or images, no one can guarantee that users will change their minds about what they have seen. In many cases, “seeing to believe” becomes “believing to see” especially in politics, an area in which the biases we mentioned earlier are heavily activated. In other words, often the average voter is a fan. And fans see what they want to see. Think of a doubtful penalty

in a football match: for fans, the doubts will not be there...for those of one team it will be 100 percent penalty, for others it will not be 100 percent penalty. Roughly speaking, in politics the logic is the same.

This 10-point list is by no means exhaustive. Theoretically, very soon artificial intelligence systems could supplant many of the professionals used in political-election communication today. From marketing and integrated communications agencies, to press officers and research institutes, to spin doctors and *campaign strategists*, they are all potentially at risk. Then again, this is the extent of the challenge of artificial intelligence: the machine is no longer designed to replace our arms, but our minds. And this implies a quantum leap from any technology of the past. To date, however, this replacement does not seem at the doorstep, and artificial intelligence stands primarily as a tool to support communication teams.

Before long, however, we will be dealing with real “synthetic media”, fully automated, capable of simulating anything in a lifelike manner that cannot be distinguished by the human eye. As Suleyman and Bhaskar write:

the advent of large-scale, cost-neutral synthetic media amplifies both disinformation (false and intentionally misleading information) and misinformation (more extensive and more intentional pollution of information). Let us prepare for an “infoapocalypse”, that is, the point at which society will no longer be able to handle an overflowing river of suspect material, where the ecosystem the information ecosystem based on knowledge, trust and social cohesion, the very glue that holds the community together, will shatter.<sup>5</sup>

And they add, citing a Brookings Institution Report, that the dangers posed by generalized synthetic media are as follows: distorting democratic debate; manipulating elections; eroding trust in institutions; weakening journalism; exacerbating social divisions; undermining public safety; and

---

<sup>5</sup> M. Bhaskar and M. Suleyman, *L'onda che verrà. Intelligenza artificiale e potere nel XXI secolo*, Milano, Garzanti, 2024, versione Kindle, cap. 10, par. 5, my translation.

inflicting irreparable damage to the reputations of prominent figures, including elected officials and election candidates.<sup>6</sup>

### **Neuropolitics and political-electoral neuromarketing**

Thus, let us return to the starting point, namely, the human mind as a battleground. The applications of artificial intelligence in political communication and recent findings in cognitive psychology and neuroscience open up scenarios and reflections in which the interaction between technology and the human mind takes on an increasingly central role. This requires us to recognize, study and deepen the dynamics that govern the emotional and cognitive influence on individuals' political choices. In other words, neuropolitics, or rather neuromarketing applied to the political-electoral context, becomes central.

It has become inevitable to focus on the study of the human mind in order to thoroughly understand how voters perceive, evaluate and respond to political messages.

Several techniques are already being used by commercial neuromarketing and are also beginning to make their way into political psychology and political communication scholars.

Among these, the best known are the following:

#### **1. *Functional neuroimaging.***

Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) is already being used to observe brain activity while – for example – individuals watch election ads, debates, rallies, or television interviews. The goal is to understand what is going on in our brains, which areas are “switching on” and how we react to feed certain feelings or try to remove them.

#### **2. *Electroencephalography (EEG).***

EEG measures the electrical activity of the brain and is used to analyze immediate reactions to political messages. It is particularly useful for detecting sudden changes in emotional state related to a specific stimulus, such as an image, a catchphrase, etc.

#### **3. *Eye-tracking and pupillometry.***

---

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Techniques such as *eye-tracking* and pupillometry (pupil dilation analysis) help to understand which visual elements capture voters' attention the most. They are already used to test posters, slogans, logos, video spots, social media accounts or websites.

As mentioned earlier, political neuromarketing uses neuroscientific knowledge to create content capable of affecting voters' emotions and decisions. Techniques such as *framing*, storytelling and *priming* make direct reference to this knowledge. *Framing* involves constructing political messages in such a way as to activate specific emotional responses (e.g., fear, pride, hope or outrage). It is widely used in the most divisive and polarizing issues because it immediately stimulates the "us vs. them" attitude typical of politics. For example, if the right in Italy tends to define surrogacy as "womb for rent" and the left as "gestation for others" it is exactly to generate two different *frames* and consequently two different emotional reactions. We live in a society where image reigns supreme, but words still count, especially in the case of the most divisive issues.

*Storytelling* is used to emotionally connect leaders and people, taking advantage of its many qualities now recognized by neuroscience. Our brains are in a sense "wired", built to tell stories. We tell stories all the time – we do it even to ourselves. And each story allows for greater empathy and emotional involvement, activation of endorphins, and better memorization of the message.

Finally, *priming* consists of a sensory stimulus (verbal, auditory or visual) that can influence future decisions in an unconscious way. It is based on so-called "implicit memory" and causes certain symbols to trigger positive responses toward the current message by fishing in memory.

### **The future: toward a *data-driven* , algorithmic and neuro-centric policy**

Thus, the future of political communication will not only be technological but deeply neuro-centric. The integration of artificial intelligence, neuromarketing, and neuropolitics will lead to new challenges, both for research and for professionals employed in election war rooms and political communication staffs. Some of the techniques now used almost exclusively in commercial neuromarketing – such as neural helmets – will increasingly be used by political psychology and strategic political-election communication teams as well, supporting the tools already employed today such as polls and *focus groups*. The advantage of neuromarketing tools over surveys and focus groups is that they investigate the responses of System 1 (our unconscious engine), and since 90 percent of our decisions occur below the level of awareness and consciousness, the contribution of these

techniques can be of great significance. In the words of David Ogilvy – a well-known advertising pioneer – “people don’t say what they think, and they don’t do what they say”. That’s why the added value of surveys that dig deep into our limbic system (the realm of emotions, perceptions and intuitions), rather than our frontal lobes (the seat of our more rational, logical and deductive engine), can be invaluable with respect to what we can know today about the choices, behavior and preferences of citizens and voters.

Of course, the inevitable rise of political-electoral neuromarketing brings with it some ethical challenges: how far can one go in manipulating choices? How far can one push hyper-emotional politics at the expense of more logical-rational politics? How much and how should the use of artificial intelligence aimed at persuasion and propaganda be regulated in order to prevent the human brain from becoming an unregulated battlefield?

### ***Citizen-centricity: the citizen at the center of political communication***

The evolution of political communication is increasingly adopting a *citizen-centric* approach, just as in business marketing we talk about *customer-centricity*. That is, in the business world, the customer is at the heart of all strategies: companies seek to understand their desires, behaviors, and needs to offer them personalized experiences. As an example: several airports are changing the rationale behind the departure and arrival list on digital monitors. Until now, logic has rewarded order by time, but let’s face it, we have often gotten lost and confused, if only because we read from left to right, and often the departure or arrival time is the last piece of information on the right. Today, some airports are favoring the alphabetical order of destinations, which is the first thing we read from left to right. A shrewdness that greatly helps the traveler, as well as those waiting for someone to arrive at the airport.

This transition from product-centrality to consumer-centricity is summarized in the recent formula for which we have moved from *make people want things* to *make things people want*. A transition then from product-centrality to user-centricity. This is also happening because of the progressive de-institutionalization, individualization and personalization of society, in which the individual is becoming more and more of a protagonist and “free” from the solid communities and memberships we were used to in the past. Similarly, citizen-centricity focuses on the citizen-voter, aiming to create a deep and personalized connection between the individual and the political brand, which is also increasingly represented by one person: the leader.

What will *citizen-centricity* concretely consist of? In a series of activities, such as the following:

1. *Listening to and analyzing audiences*

Just as in commercial marketing personal consumer data is analyzed to profile market segments, in political communication voter data is studied through: a) Big data analytics: analysis of large volumes of data from social media, digital interactions, and polls; b) Sentiment analysis: tools that measure the emotional tone of online conversations to identify people's priorities and fears.

2. *Message customization*

Exactly as the world of commerce uses microtargeting to send personalized offers, similarly, politics will increasingly leverage artificial intelligence to create messages tailored to specific citizen-voter targets.

3. *Loyalty through storytelling*

In commercial marketing, stories are crafted around a brand to create a deep and lasting emotional connection. Similarly, politicians use political storytelling to present themselves as empathetic and authentic figures, taking advantage of all the positive features of stories in terms of message memorization as well.

4. *Voter experience optimization*

The customer journey is the study and subsequent improvement of the customer buying experience by optimizing each touch-point. In *citizen-centric* politics, it will seek to make every interaction between voter and candidate more engaging and memorable. If we think about events such as Atreju or the Leopolda (in Italy) and their evolution precisely in terms of experiential marketing, we can get an idea of the future development of these opportunities for politics to meet the community.

As is well known, this centrality of the citizen-voter carries with it certain risks, both individual and systemic. On the individual side, these include first and foremost privacy issues. Big data analysis often involves the collection and use of personal information raising important ethical issues (on this front the school case is clearly the *Cambridge Analytica* scandal). Beyond privacy there is obviously an issue of emotional manipulation that also involves a reduction in public debate. Hyper-personalization and so-called nano-targeting entails an incentive to create *ad personam* truths and the

creation of bubbles, thus reducing the possibility of general discussion on issues of common interests and fueling polarization from a systemic perspective. Again, from a systemic perspective, this *market-oriented* and “poll-cratic” attitude, in which the citizen shows the way, here and now, results in a transformation of leadership into followship of public opinion. The latter, moreover, in a configuration tending toward a kind of “public emotion”<sup>7</sup>, typical of the era of dopamine and immediate gratification in which we are immersed.

### **The dilemma of political neuromarketing and *citizen-centricity*: opportunity or danger?**

*Citizen-centricity* constitutes a transformative approach that, on the one hand, can make politics closer to the real needs of citizens, but on the other hand, exposes it to the risks mentioned above, from privacy to emotional manipulation to followship replacing leadership and presentism as the *leitmotif* of political class behavior, which is increasingly crushed on tactics and less and less on strategy.

These dangers call into question what is the classic dilemma of political marketing: there are those who accuse it of being one of the reasons why citizens turn away from politics and political participation, and there are those who argue the opposite, namely that it is only through marketing techniques and tools that politics is able to capture the attention of an electorate otherwise light years removed from political issues and themes. The first thesis adopts the wrong assumption, namely, that doing marketing is tantamount to manipulating public opinion. In fact, as precisely a marketing guru, Simon Sinek, argues, there are two ways to influence the behavior of the masses: manipulate and inspire. Marketing should serve the second purpose, otherwise the emotional bond and connection with the public remains ephemeral and superficial. The second thesis, on the other hand, assumes that nation-states and governments have now lost the ability to truly affect our lives. And this is a further propellant toward narcissism, individualism, presentism and that “flight from politics” that Christopher Lasch identified and predicted as early as 1979 in *The Culture of Narcissism* itself.

The same dilemma, even in a heightened form, arises for the eventual (and likely) dissemination of political neuromarketing techniques. Is understanding how our unconscious mind reacts to political stimuli a way to manipulate us or is it a way to better reach us? Is identifying the issues, topics, and images that mobilize our emotions the most a tactical shortcut to influence our behavior or is it the only way to get us interested in politics and institutions? To answer these questions, we need to go

---

<sup>7</sup> L. Di Gregorio, *Demopatia. Sintomi, diagnosi e terapie del malessere democratico*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2019.

back to the initial concepts of this contribution: technologies are not neutral, they change us profoundly, but they are always *dual* use, that is, some will use them well, others badly. It is inevitable, I would say an iron law of humanity.

In this sense, the expansion of artificial intelligence broadens the scope of these issues, since it will be a *General Purpose Technology* capable of affecting virtually every sphere of our lives and therefore extremely powerful and fraught with *dual-use* dangers. The possibilities of using it in manipulative, destabilizing, even terrorist terms are just around the corner. Not to mention--leaving the strictly communicative sphere--the dangers related to the resilience of democracies and the infinite possibilities of hybrid warfare when the cost of arming swarms of small drones will be laughable, or when quantum computers will be able to hack the servers of any institution in minutes, or even when a group of malicious people will be able to create a virus or poison in the laboratory with relative ease.

We are facing a technological transition characterized by unprecedented potential (positive and negative). If world leaders approach it from a tactical perspective, it is likely that negative uses will be widespread, with the risk of planetary-scale destabilization. If, on the other hand, a strategic rationale prevails, it will be possible to contain negative externalities and exploit the immense potential of artificial intelligence also to defend the precarious scaffolding of our democracies. The important thing, however, is to gain awareness not only of how they work – *media literacy*, technological literacy, etc. – but especially about how we react to these changes and how our “emotional mind” works.

## References

Bhaskar M. e Suleyman M., *The Coming Wave: AI, Power and Our future*, Crown, N.Y. 2023; tr. it. *L'onda che verrà. Intelligenza artificiale e potere nel XXI secolo*, Milano, Garzanti, 2024, edizione Kindle.

Bennett W. L. e Livingston S., *The Disinformation Age: Politics, Technology, and Rationality in Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2020.

Bradshaw S. e Howard P. N., *The Global Disinformation Order: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation*, Oxford Internet Institute, Oxford 2019.

Damasio A., *Descart's Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*, Putnam Pub Group, N.Y. 1994; tr. it. *L'errore di Cartesio. Emozione, ragione e cervello umano*, Adelphi, Milano 1995.

Di Gregorio L., *Demopatia. Sintomi, diagnosi e terapie del malessere democratico*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2019.

Di Gregorio L., *Demopathy and the Democratic Malaise: Symptoms, Diagnosis and Therapy*. Edward Elgar Publishing, Chaltenham 2021.

Di Gregorio L., *War room. Attori, strutture e processi della politica in campagna permanente*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2024.

Haidt J., *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, N.Y. 2012; tr. it. *Menti tribali. Perché le brave persone si dividono su politica e religione*, Codice Edizioni, Torino 2013.

Haidt J., *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, Penguin, N.Y. 2024; tr. it. *La generazione ansiosa*, Rizzoli, Milano 2024.

Howard P. N. e Woolley S. C., *Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media*, Oxford Internet Institute, Oxford 2016.

Kahneman D., *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Penguin, N.Y. 2011; tr. it. *Pensieri lenti e veloci*, Arnoldo Mondadori editore, Milano, edizione Kindle, 2012.

Lakoff G., *The Political Mind: Why You Can't Understand 21st-Century American Politics with an 18th-Century Brain*, Penguin, N.Y. 2008; tr. it. *Pensiero politico e scienza della mente*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2009.

Lasch C., *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, Norton, N.Y. 1979; tr. it. *La cultura del narcisismo*, Bompiani, Milano 1979.

McLuhan M., *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, MIT Press, Boston 1964; tr. it. *Gli strumenti del comunicare*, il Saggiatore, Milano 2015.

Ogilvy D., *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, *Confessioni di un pubblicitario*, Southbank Publishing, London 1983; tr. it. *Confessioni di un pubblicitario*, Fausto Lupetti Editore, Milano 2022.

Persily N. e Tucker J. A. (eds), *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2020.

Sinek S., *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire to Take Action*, Portfolio, N.Y. 2011; tr. it. *Partire dal perché. Come tutti i grandi leader sanno ispirare collaboratori e clienti*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2014.

Spitzer M., *Digitale Demenz: Wie wir uns und unsere Kinder um den Verstand bringen*, Droemer TB, München 2012; tr. it. *Demenza digitale: come la nuova tecnologia ci rende stupidi*, Garzanti, Milano 2013.

Spitzer M., *Cyberkrank! Wie das digitalisierte Leben unsere Gesundheit ruiniert*, Droemer Verlag, München, 2015; tr. it. *Solitudine digitale*, Corbaccio, Milano 2016.



Sesto San Giovanni (MI)  
via Monfalcone, 17/19



& AlboVersorio Edizioni  
di Ass. NonsoloSophia  
[nonsolosophia@gmail.com](mailto:nonsolosophia@gmail.com)

© Metabasis.it, rivista semestrale di filosofia e comunicazione.  
Autorizzazione del Tribunale di Varese n. 893 del 23/02/2006.  
ISSN 1828-1567



Quest'opera è stata rilasciata sotto la licenza Creative Commons Attribuzione-NonCommerciale-NoOpereDerivate 2.5 Italy. Per leggere una copia della licenza visita il sito web <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/it/> o spedisci una lettera a Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.