

The role of strategic communication in the appearance and growth of a new party in the Portuguese political spectrum

The defense of humanitarian, ecological, and animal causes led to the creation of the Portuguese political party People – Animals – Nature (PAN) that fits in line with the new political parties that are founded "bottom-up by activists in social opposition movements" (Lucardie, 2000 *apud* Silveira & Nina, 2019, p. 84). This party elected its first member of Parliament (MP) to the Portuguese Parliament in 2015. In 2019, PAN elected its first member to the European Parliament (MEP) and strengthened its national representation, electing four MPs to the Portuguese Parliament. However, this phenomenon has not yet been studied from the perspective of strategic communication. The aim of this article is thus to analyze how public relations intentional positioning is present on the rhetoric of the grassroots movement that led to the formation of PAN to obtain legitimacy in the public sphere. Grassroots movements generally involve volunteers rather than paid staff, they are smaller in terms of their bureaucracy and decision making and they involve people in their localities claiming for rights on their own behalf (Batliwala, 2002). It likewise investigates how the communication strategies carried out by the party may have impacted its electoral results and significant growth between 2015 and 2019.

Strategic communication is inevitably associated with the exercise of power in negotiations between different social actors, and the influence of this power in "contemporary society is an undeniable reality" (Kunsch, 2018, p.14).

As one of the areas covered by strategic communication approaches, traditional public relations research focuses on how to make organizations more effective. However, other traditions of thought have emerged in the field of public relations, namely, the sociological-interpretive perspectives (Ihlen, 2007; Ihlen, Van Ruler & Fredriksson, 2009), critical (L'Etang, 2008; Tyma, 2008; Alvesson & Spicer, 2016), postmodern (Holtzhausen, 2000; Smith, 2013) or rhetorical (Hartelius & Browning, 2008; Heath & Frandsen, 2008, Taylor, 2009). These approaches engage in the debate to challenge views focused only on efficiency, and to prove that the connection between strategy and success goes far beyond the purely functional control of management.

In this sense, public relations scholars have progressively claimed for the broader role of public relations and strategic communication in society and in fostering social capital, civic engagement, and democracy (Taylor, 2009; Taylor, 2010; Zhang & Abitbol, 2014).

The study is based on a qualitative methodology, anchored in the discursive analysis of public relations positioning elements in the original manifesto of the grassroots movement that originated PAN. A tag cloud-generating software (wordArt.com) was also used to analyze word frequency and identify the main themes of the document. In-depth interviews with PAN policymakers were carried out to analyze how the party communication strategies may have impacted its significant growth.

Findings indicate that a strategic approach to communication influenced the transition from a civic movement to a formal parliamentary party. PAN's manifesto was discursively constructed to position the movement as trustworthy with high ethical and moral standards. PAN used the possibilities of social media to build a collective identity from the grassroots-based on specific narratives.