SOCIAL MEDIA AND HEALTH COMMUNICATION: THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC SERVICES

Elisabetta Gola[1], Fabrizio Meloni[2] and Riccardo Porcu[3]

[1]University of Cagliari
[2]Health University Institution
[3]Autonomous Region of Sardinia

Abstract: Social networks are really useful tools for public communication if we are able to manage them to improve the effectiveness of our messages in terms of engagement of citizens. Health is no exception. On the contrary, it is a fertile ground on which to innovate to make patients' lives easier, increasing online services and stimulating the interaction and communicating with patients. On this basis, we present a research about the social communication applied to public services. We analyze it, individuating crucial matters and innovative solutions. Social communication is transparency, involvement and information: three valid key points also for public communication in general, which can move towards new horizons and represents a great opportunity for the public governments. On the basis of statistical analysis and direct experience in Azienda Ospedaliero-universitaria of Cagliari (AOU-Cagliari), we conclude that introducing social media in public organizations, and in health organizations in particular, is not only useful, but it is a real public service. On the one hand, users want to interact and give a feedback; on the other hand, they increasingly require services that are delivered through mobile devices, which avoid waste of time. All these changes can greatly contribute to make the public health and the public administration more citizen-friendly.

Keywords: public communication, social media, e-health, participation

Introduction

Communication is "Social" by definition. So it is since the dawn of times. According to Robin Dunbar (1996) the birth itself of language is related mainly to the social need of identifying our own allies in the fight for survival and for the continuation of the species. Today, we find this same ancestral instinct poured into the communicative mechanisms of the digital nets. Understanding which cognitive and social processes are involved is therefore useful, if not essential, to provide and manage an effective communication. It is all the more so when the communication we are referring to is social in the most specific sense, that is to say a communication that benefits a social system. Public communication, which is aimed at citizens to inform them about actions regarding directly their rights and their lives, as belonging to a certain organisation (nation, region, municipalities) falls largely within the area of social communication. And certainly health communication falls as well within the area of social communication, since it aims at improving the citizens' well-being ((Gola, Meloni, Porcu (2018), Lovari (2017), Walter (2015a)).

In order to provide a solid foundation and to justify the new paradigm of communication proposed in this work, we shall present some of the most relevant cognitive and social processes regarding the effectiveness of actions of communication, particularly in relation to the new media environments. How relevant communication is in digital media and in social networks is instead going to emerge directly from the analysis of the quantitative data on the use of the media, on fruition of information and on contents management. Nevertheless often traditional communication strategies are not effective in changing behaviours in order to improve the quality of life of target audiences, as they are supposed to (Walter, 2015b; Volterrani, 2018;).

Corresponding Author E-mail: [1]egola@unica.it

The kinaesthetic approach: the UrP (public relations office) case

The institutional communication can contribute to enhance the image of the Public Administration, through an innovative path of progressive approach to the citizen's evolutionary needs.

The Central Office of the Presidency for the Relations with the Public in Sardinia region (Italy), coordinates the net of UrP offices, flexibly adapting to changes deriving from the digital transformation, introducing innovative practices of public management and implementing a model based on a matrix structure, articulated in projects and processes. We think that this model is really promising in terms of citizenship engagement (Volterrani, 2017, 2018), reputation, and transparency of information (Gola, Meloni, Porcu (2018). For this reason we want to share strategies and best practices that could be applied in principle to many public institutions.

Every operator should communicate with his interlocutor. It is therefore important that she/he is adequately trained in order to be able to empathise with the "other", it is necessary that she/he is willing to listen and prepared for an unconditional acceptance, but most of all, that she/he is aware of some notions and techniques of effective communication.

The kinaesthetic approach focuses on what happens between the operator and the customer, such as interpersonal relationships, without the deterministic features, which belong to the psychodynamic approach.

The primary objective of communication is to ensure a consistent and coherent disclosure of the company's image through the dissemination of its services, policies, rules, reference cultures, to strengthen the credibility of the company itself, which obtains always greater transparency, visibility and media exposure.

This type of background, renamed "kinaestheticUrP" as a tribute to the modern theories and techniques of Neuro-Linguistic Programming of institutional marketing, has been implemented on an experimental basis, for about three years, in the UrP of the Presidency of the Region.

The kinaestheticUrP, by working on the three dimensions of the service (relational, technical and technological, psycho-bio-physical), aims at developing a positive attitude which is based on the complete expression and implementation of the full potential of each person, in order to set an experiential communication which proves to be efficient, permanent and in accordance with intentions and objectives of who communicates playing the "situational" role, sometimes listening, informing, interacting, participating, co-planning, testing the quality (expected, planned, provided, perceived and compared).

This approach can be successfully applied also in digital environments (Laurita and Venturini, 2014).

The social communication and the digital environments

Social networks are tools for communication that canbe no longer ignored. The SNS (Social network sites) have become part of our lives. We are aware of it and – most of all – we see it: we can't almost do without, they enfold us, they reassure us, and they are our windows on the world, on our lives and on those of our friends. The social media are the beginning and the end of our days, of our adventures and of our stories: they are hobbies but also work, they are passion and love but also, too often, anger and hate. We are immersed in the social networks, so much that we no longer make a distinction between real and virtual life. Everything is real, including unreality, fakes and fake news. People who don't have a social media presence, who aren't active on SNS, are likely to disappear. They are unlikely to exist.

If this is true for persons –and we know from our own experience that's what it's like– it is questionable whether it is valid also for public administrations and for health institutions. From a strictly intuitive point of view this question can only be answered affirmatively. But it is interesting to understand if the empirical and experiential data support this theory. And, once this is made clear, to understand whether and how the social networking experience can be transferred into the so-called "traditional" communication, innovating it. First of all we need

to ask ourselves if the social media may be the right place where to offer better and faster health services and public services in general.

Health and public administration, in general, are certainly a breeding ground to introduce innovation and to facilitate users' lives, providing more and more online services, by promoting an ongoing dialogue with the patients, informing them, but most of all, communicating with them.

Actually, the current situation is not reassuring at all, at least in terms of technological infrastructures and coherent and organization strategies (Lovari, 2013). And we also have to take into account another aspect, very important as well: online interfaces offered by Public Administration are multi-sided and uneven, «favoured by the great penetration of the internet and of the web 2.0, increasingly seen as socio-communicative backgrounds where new forms of institutional visibility are developed» (Lovari andPiredda, 2017). But if, on the one hand, public administrations and health are present on the net on a mass scale, on the other hand the use of these backgrounds is mainly done in a manner, which is unprofessional and almost improvised.

The (New) digital media

The scenario we have in front of us has radically changed, compared to just 20 years ago. The mass media, which have been hegemonic in the policies for controlling information by the States (Castells, 1996), are still lasting, in spite of some forecasts, which had written them off:

> "Television won't be able to compete in the marketplace for more than six months. People will soon get tired of spending the evenings watching within a wooden box." (Darryl F. Zanuck, 1946)

> "Television won't last. It's just a little light in the eyes." (Mary Sommerville, 1948)

But the mainly unidirectional media (newspapers, TV, radio) are joined and hybridized by the digital media which represent a revolution that has given back to the recipient of communication his central role, that with the mass media had been weakened. From being passive listeners or spectators of messages decided and planned by the sender, the addressees of digital communication have become, by their nature, actors of the scene as senders, as addressees and even as messages (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Media users are indeed also authors of the contents (prosumers o consum-authors, borrowing Sobrero 's definition (Sobrero, 2016, 50) and often correspond with the content of the message itself. Just think, for instance, of the widespread phenomenon of the selfies or the stories.

The social networks in the world

The data of the agency We are social (www.wearesocial.com) which every year publishes a research on the digital distribution (Digital in 2017)[1], show that out of a world population of 7.4 billion people, the internet users (without distinction desktop-mobile) are 3.7 billion (table 2-5), with a penetration on the total of 50%. On a global level, besides, almost 2.8 billion people (they were 2.3 billion last year) use the social media (37% of penetration, against 31% of 2016) and there are more than 8 billion of signed mobile contracts. It is a situation of strong growth and it can be noticed in all the indicators.

Utilisers of the Internet have increased by 10% as well as the users of social media. Slighter is the growth of mobile, but we are talking, however, of tens of millions of new users. If in 2010 only 2.9% of consumers

---

[1]*We are social* is a multinational corporation which deals with communication, marketing e digital PR: every year it publishes a research ("Digital in") on the use of the internet all over the world: https://www.slideshare.net/wearesocialsg/2017-digital-yearbook

accessed the Internet through a mobile device, we have almost reached 40% users all over the world, with an undeniable increasing trend (figure 1).

Also numbers at a global level, updated to 2016, on accesses to the internet from mobile, deserve to be mentioned (figure 2): according to We are social they amount to a total of 39%, with a 21% increase compared to 2015. The use of desktop platforms is decreasing (-9%) for surfing the web, as well as the utilisation of tablets (-21%). The latter is very interesting because it shows how the users' attitude is different from one country to another: in the western countries, where the use of the Internet from mobile is consolidated, there is a substantial increase in the utilisation of these devices.[2]

More than 2.8 billion people use social media channels at least once a month, and 91% of them does it through mobile devices: Facebook continues to grow, and it's a very interesting factor, since - for 10 years now- it is by far the most used platform (figure 2).

---

[2]Obviously, talking about global data, the variations year by year can even be very significant: developing countries, in particular, make a difference because they represent a very important share (in terms of absolute value) in the international market of devices.
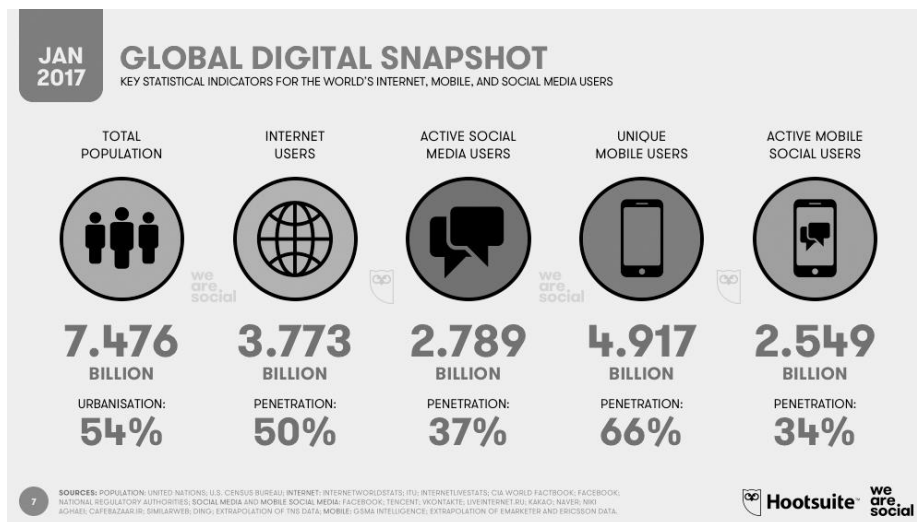
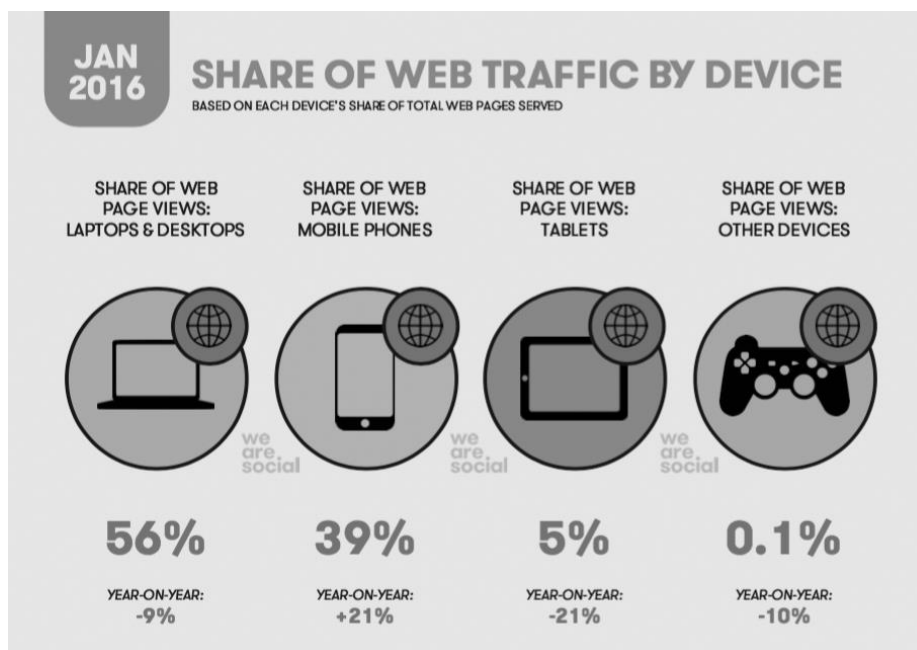*Figure 1 Utilization rates of the Internet and of the principal digital media. Source: https://wearesocial.com/it/*

Figure 2 Utilization rates of the Internet and of the principal digital media in January 2016. Source: https://wearesocial.com/it/

The strongest growth comes from the apps of instant messaging. Let's take the case of Whatsapp: in 2015 it registered 600 million users, who increased to 900 million in 2016 and then reached one billion in 2017. One billion as well is the number of Facebook Messenger utilisers. In just 24 months it has doubled the number of users: in 2015 they were 500 million. Data which lead to a reflection: if we consider the entire apparatus of Facebook - which includes Instagram, WhatsApp and Messenger – the audience consists of 4.37 billion people.

Penetration rates are interesting as well (fig. 4): we find the highest rates in North America, Europe, South America and Eastern Asia.
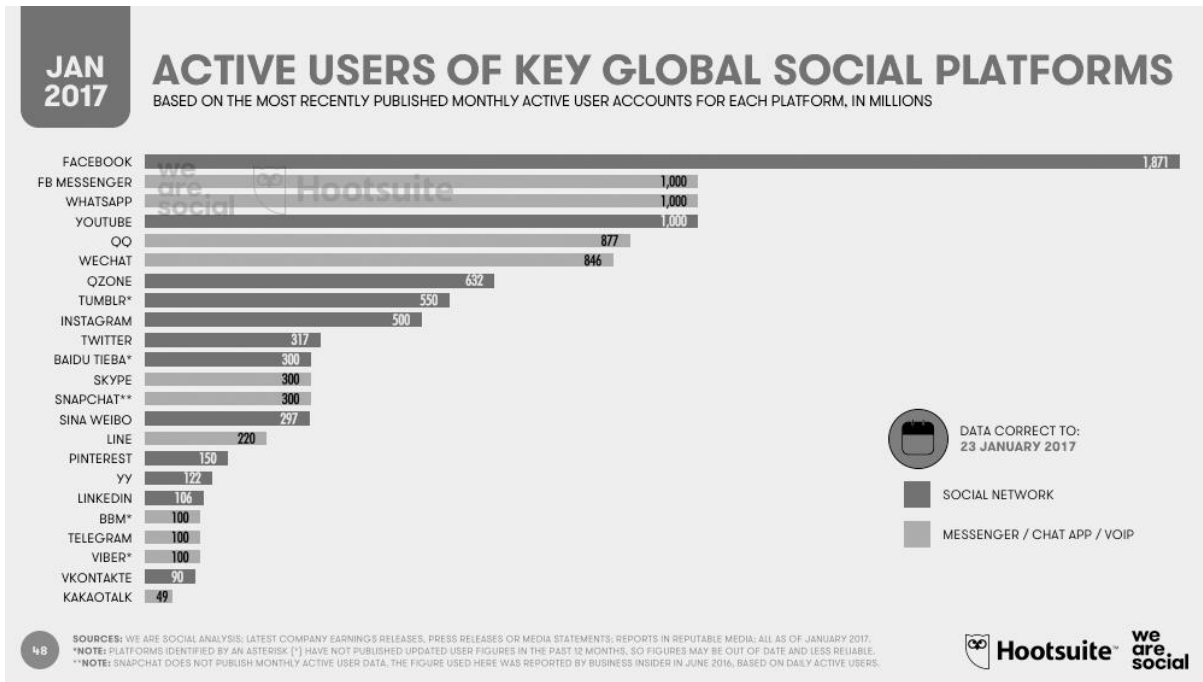
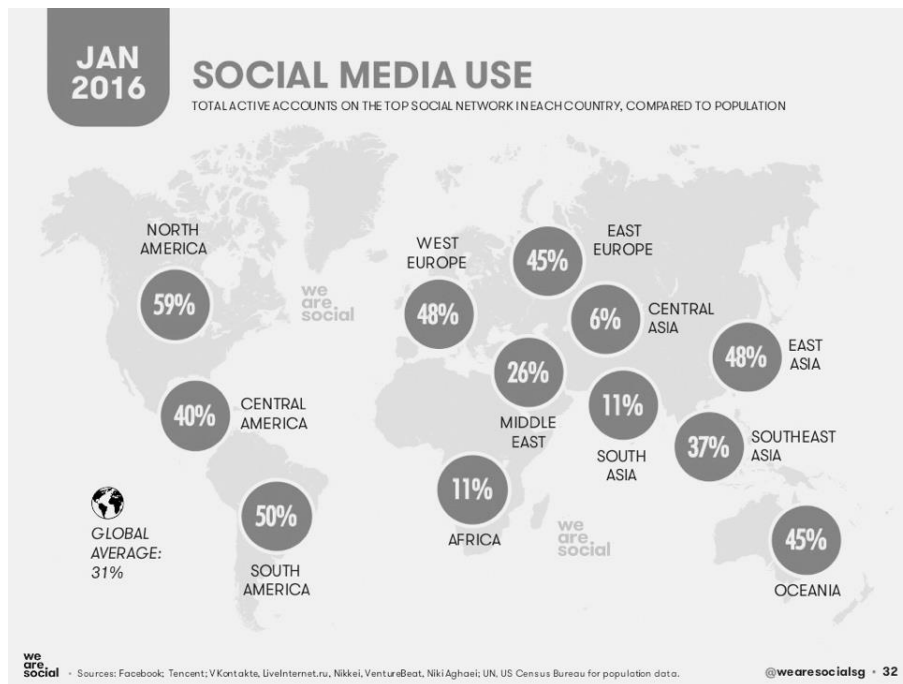*Figure 3 Users of social media platforms. Source: https://wearesocial.com/it*

Figure 4 Penetration rates of social media in the world. Source: https://wearesocial.com/it/

Social media marketing and Public Administration

First of all it's crucial to understand that in these new environments the "person" is necessarily "at the centre": at the centre as fruition and production of contents (prosumer), but also as message: «Facebook is a huge market of biographies, where every user gets involved as creator and utilizer, but also as content itself» (Laurita and Venturini, 2016, 322). The scenario produced by the advent of digital and social media in the last ten years requires the adoption of communicative practices which are able to strike the right balance between the necessity of visibility and engagement on the one hand and of privacy and netiquette on the other hand. The

51

filter and the mediation of technology can indeed give the illusion of a distance and protection to those who engage in a process of communication, which, on the contrary, proves to be an overexposure. If in the promotion and selling of products this may totally turn into an advantage, in the case of public communication, and health communication in particular, it is necessary to design an editorial plan[3], which takes into account the net interactions in a manner similar to the models proposed in the first chapter and exemplified in the services of the kinaestheticUrP. Even in the messages written and published on the internet it is possible, in fact, to adopt an attitude more or less hostile, it is possible to aim or not at an active participation of the citizens, or to be more or less willing to listen. What we can no longer afford, not even as public administration, is to think of the digital media as a panacea, at no cost, which solves all the problems and can replace the communication plan. Or yet as if it were the only channel to reach people on whom to transfer, improvising, contents and methods derived from other Internet channels. Nor can we stay on the net with a neutral attitude and just be there: institutional pages and profiles must communicate the nature of the authority they represent in a consistent manner in order to be effective.

There are in our opinion some indications, borrowed and adapted from digital marketing, that can be used as a system of orientation to guide our choices when we are preparing an editorial plan. We may summarise them in 10 points:

1. Considering the today Internet not as a media, but as a place where to live: there isn't a sender who addresses unidirectionally to his recipients, but there are users who join in communities to discuss on matters of interest.
2. Being innovators in a brave way: the net requires, for instance, transparency. Publishing contents that before remained confidential within an office or a department demands conscious and often strong choices.
3. Adequate investments are necessary to build a team, train it, manage the spaces, and to follow the life of the flows of messages that are proposed.
4. It is necessary to listen to the net measuring, through appropriate tools, both the reputation of the institution and the perception the users have of it. This can be done both through quantitative (likes and shares) and qualitative metrics (analysing the words utilised within the interactions).
5. Reserving sufficient time to work with great care and see the results, which arenot immediate. Building relationships even in the net is a long process, which requires the consolidation of relations of trust, as it is in physical environments.
6. Being willing to relate to each other with common sense, honesty and with the speed required by the net.
7. Searching, always, quality of contents, by elaborating original contents, legitimised by authoritative sources (including the represented institution's offices and/or departments themselves), being honest and remembering that even though who writes is always an individual, in public communication each one represents the institution and identifies himself with it.
8. Adopting a strategic approach, defining our own identity, both through key words to describe it, and through activities and values to be conveyed to users.
9. Defining how to measure the return on investment (ROI) with respect to the resources deployed and to the objectives pursued to be attained.
10. Adopting a circular model of communication, monitoring the interactions and not interrupting the feedback, not even in situations of crisis.

---

[3]The editorial plan is a kind of table where the guidelines are set out for writing messages and posts and for the timetabling of their publishing.

These indications are derived and summarised from strategies typical of the social media marketing, specially adapted for public communication, under the perspective expressed in the first chapter of this text.

The social health, models and good practices

As we have seen communication can't ignore the internet and the social media. Let's think of our everyday life: most of us, probably, first thing in the morning take our smartphone, look for the Facebook app and click on it. And if before having breakfast we scroll up and down the timeline, after coffee we can't do without satisfying our desire of being constantly connected: we watch the news on online sites, we check Twitter or the "stories" on Instagram. And while we are gettinginthe car (or catching the bus or taking the subway) to go to work or to study, we start replying to the lots of messages we received on whatsapp, sent by friends to us or to groups we are registered in. We just do anything with the smartphone: we plan our day, we decide where to go shopping or for a weekend trip, we buy the tickets for the bus which will take us to the cinema to watch the film we have chosen on the dedicated app. And if we don't know how to reach our destination, there is an app for that, too.

So, if everybody's life is tuned to the rhythm of apps, of chats and of social media, how can the Public Administration not consider all of this? Simply, it's not possible. Particularly if the main task of Public Administration is offering services and communicating them promptly. And there is no more effective way that doing it through a simple click.

Citizens require answers from Public Administration but also ask for a dialogue, a continuous exchange. No more a top-down communication, not a broadcast style approach "one to many", but a kind of horizontal communication, through which the user feels an integral part of the system and is able to express his opinion (almost) without filters on the social pages of the public administration.

The key word in this case is "participation" ((Volterrani, 2017, 2018; Gola, Meloni, Porcu (2018)). Because by participating, by socialising, by feeling free to express our thought and our opinion, we all also feel part of the common governance of public affairs, active players and not passive entities. This goal is achievable just thanks to the social networks, with a "social" approach to the Public Administration, which a band of innovators and visionary thinkers is starting to implement.

Obviously the social media are continuously evolving. It's a very fast progress. In figure 5, for instance, we can see what happened on the net, in a minute, in 2015.
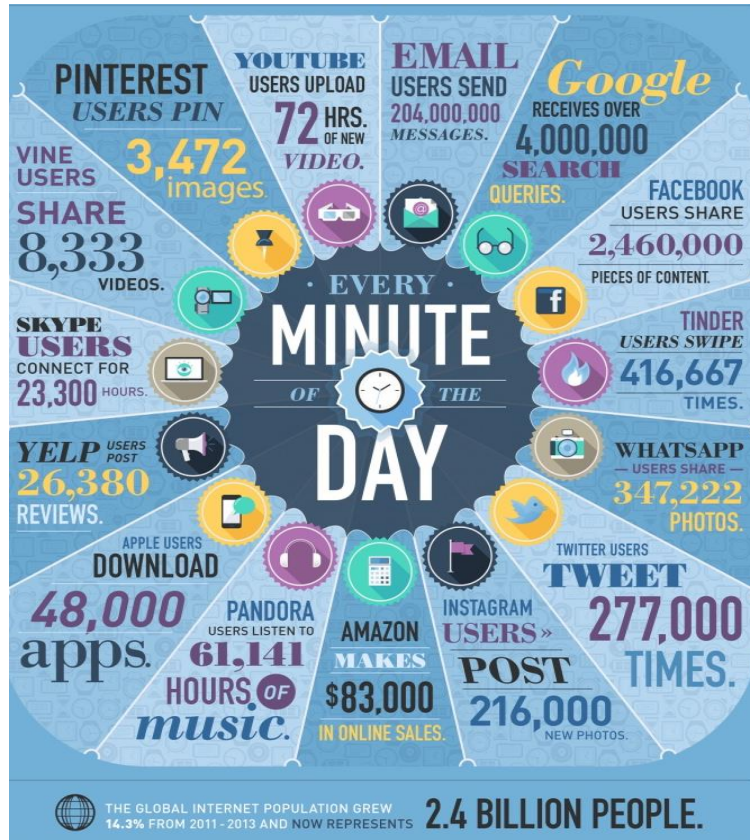
Figure. 5   What happened on the net in a minute in 2015. Source: Domo

And in figure 6, instead, we see what happened in a minute only one year later, in 2016.
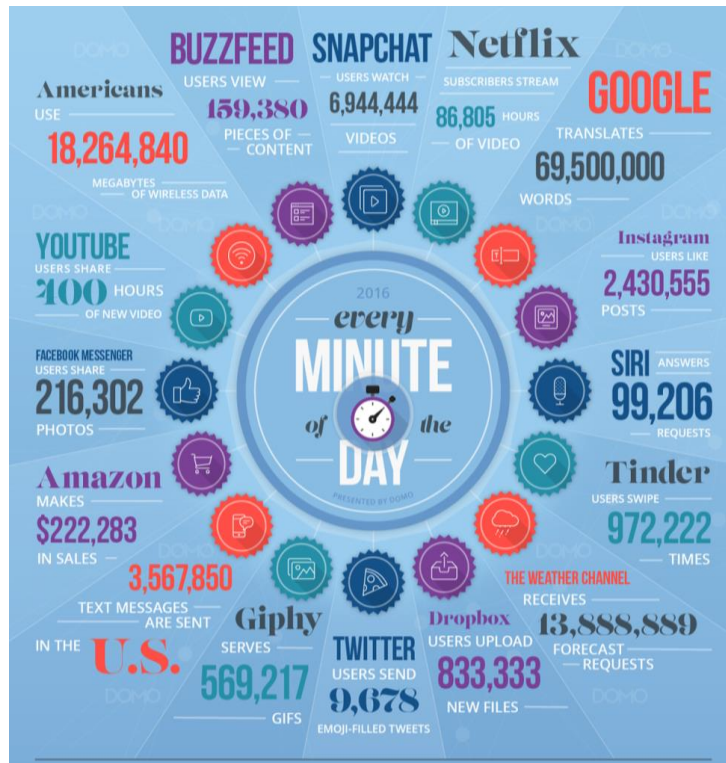
Figure. 6   What happened on the net in a minute in 2016. Source: Domo

By comparing the two figures we can immediately notice some things. The first one is that the presence of the social media, in just one year, has increased exponentially: in 2016 Snapchat appears, which in 2015 didn't practically exist, the clicks on Youtube videos grow, there is a considerable increase in Amazon transactions, all the somewhat "social" offers, that is to say those which involve interaction and not simply a communication "one to many", raise their attractiveness.

Obviously people are not all the same. In figure 3.3, for instance, we see which social media, between 2012 and 2014, were the most popular among adults: the most followed was Facebook, second Linkedin and third Pinterest.
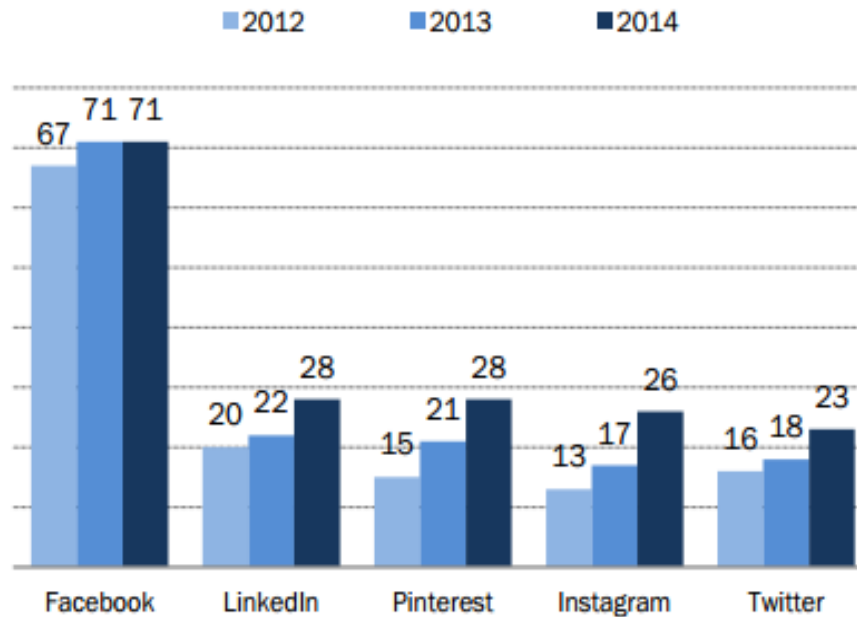
Figure 7 The most used social media in 2012 and in 2013. Source: Pew Research Center

Considering this theoretic reflections and the new media scenario, since 2014 the public health service AziendaOspedaliero-universitaria of Cagliari (AOU-Cagliari) started to design and adopt a social web communication strategy coherent both internally among the different instruments and with the indications we discussed above. As the first step, the AOU-Cagliari decided to design its current logo involving its customers, who chose it among differentones proposed in a contest through social media . Many services started to be offered online (such asdownloading medical reports or scheduling medical appointments). The social network profiles have been activated between 2014 and 2017: : FB in 2014, Twitter in 2015, Instagram in 2017. A social media team has ben created in cooperation with the course of Communication science of the University of Cagliari and under the supervision of the responsible of the communication, Fabrizio Meloni, who also proposed the project. After four years the reputation of the institution changed considerably. In 2018 complaints and negative evaluations of health services decreased by 40 percent. A virtual community of patients, caregivers, and more generally users, grew more and more showing a high engagement level (for example answering to complaints and giving information .(Gola, Meloni, Porcu, 2018).

Conclusions

We have seen that communication is still too tied to old patterns. The question is not whether it is recommended to open Facebook o Twitter pages linked to this or that hospital, to this or that health institution, to this or that department. What is important is that social media need to be used in a proper way, in order to foster the active engagement of citizens, with an ongoing dialogue.

Today, a modern Public Administration and a modern Health Institution cannot be but "social". Where with social we mean not only the communication carried out through Social Networks but also the one performed by utilizing methods and practices of the Social Networks. Communication is social when it isn't unidirectional, when there is interaction, when there is a dialogue. Communication is social if the media aren't used as self-contained compartments, but are blended together to create a new environment.

Online communication can indeed be that added value which enables Public Administration, and obviously Public Health, to better and better serve the citizens. A real Social Public Administration, a real Social Health.

Acknowledgements

References

Castells, M., (1996).*The Rise of the Network Society, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Vol. I. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Dunbar, R.,(1996).*Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language*, Harvard (MA): Harvard University Press.

Gola, E., Meloni, F. and Porcu, R. (2018), *Comunicare la salute. Metodi e buone pratiche per le amministrazioni pubbliche*, Rome: Carocci.

Laurita, G. and Venturini, R. (2014).Strategia Digitale. Comunicare in modo efficace su Internet e I social media, Milan: Hoepli.

Lovari, A. (2013), Networkedcitizens. Comunicazione pubblica e amministrazioni digitali, Milan: FrancoAngeli.

Lovari, A. (2017), Social media e comunicazione della salute. Profili istituzionali e digitali, Milan: Guerini scientifica.

Lovari, A. and Piredda, A. (2017), Comunicazione pubblica digitale. In Marketing e comunicazione. Strategie, strumenti casi pratici,edited by M. Masini, J. Pasquini, and G. Segreto (2017), pp. 369-91.

McCombs, M., and Shaw, D., (1972).The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media. The Public Opinion Quarterly, 36(2), 176-187.

Sobrero, R., (2016).Comunicare con passione. In *I linguaggi della comunicazione sociale*, edited by R. Sobrero, *Pubblicità Progresso*, 2016.

Volterrani, A. (2017), From Perception to Change: A Model for Prevention Communication, in Conference Proceedings of the 3rd World Conference on Media and Mass Communication, vol. 2, Tiikm Publishing, Pitakotte (Sri Lanka), pp. 82-90.

Volterrani, A. (2018), Prefazione. Verso una sanità partecipata. Chimera o realtà? In Gola, Porcu, Meloni (2018), pp. 7-16.

Walter, W. (2015), Formulating Effective Social Marketing and Public Health Communication Strategies in W. Walter (ed.), Innovations in Social Marketing and Public Health Communication, (2015), pp. 3-31.

Walter, W. (ed.), (2015) Innovations in Social Marketing and Public Health Communication, Switzerland AG: Springer.