



Partecipazione e Conflitto

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 13(2) 2020: 1152-1167

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v13i2p1153

Published in July 15, 2020

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Public Communication and the Barriers to Participation: The Case of Rome from and open Government Perspective

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ABSTRACT: The City of Rome inaugurated its open government programmes in 2016, but its heuristic relevance has been understudied. By analysing this peculiar case, this article proposes a reflection on the challenges of implementing open government in local settings, focusing on three barriers to civic participation: distrust towards public institutions, lack of digital skills and unawareness of participatory projects. Public policies and communication materials diffused by the administration of Rome are examined in order to highlight the tactics and tools used by the administration to overcome those barriers and promote participatory projects through on- and offline communication outlets. Particular reference is made to three case studies: the Forum of Innovation, participatory budgeting and the Punti Roma Facile (distributed internet points).

The results show that the City of Rome has implemented some promising participatory strategies, but still lacks a clear communication strategy. This article ends by elucidating some aspects of the participatory measures (institutionalisation of the process and impact on policy-making, salience of the specific policy in the broader strategic framework, and involvement of civil society coalitions), and how they are embedded in different perspectives on the role played by public communication in open government programmes.

KEYWORDS: Communication, participation, policy evaluation, open government, Rome

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1. Introduction

Open government programmes have been inaugurated with the aim of restoring public trust in institutions, in the context of the crisis of representative democracies and increasing disaffection between governments and citizens (De Blasio, 2018; Lathrop and Ruma, 2010). Both the OECD and the Open Government Partnership indicate that opening the decision-making process is pivotal for the survival of our democracies. At the same time, a certain measure of mistrust is believed to be intrinsic in democratic regimes and useful to induce governments to become more transparent and responsive (Norris, 2011; Rosanvallon, 2006). In this framework, opening decision-making to civic participation is a way to re-intermediate disaffected and mistrusting citizens, and public communication plays a key role in this process (Sorice, 2019).

By taking a broad public communication perspective on the relationship between public administrations and citizens (Bartoletti and Faccioli, 2016; Faccioli, 2008), this article aims to investigate the role of communication strategies and tools (including digital open government platforms) in the development of participatory governance at the urban level, and in overcoming barriers to full public participation. This study seeks to reflect not only on the role of communication in building spaces of participation within the decision-making process, but also on the factors of participatory strategies that determine different approaches to public communication.

To explain the relationship between communication, participation and trust, this re-search highlights the following: 1) the barriers to civic participation that public communication must overcome, including distrust towards public institutions, lack of digital skills and unawareness of participatory projects; and 2) the tactics and tools used by local institutions to promote participatory projects through on- and offline communication outlets (such as social media, press releases and BTL).

This reflection stems from a broader research project on open government in Europe (De Blasio, 2018). For the purposes of this particular issue, we wish to highlight the processes of public communication behind the implementation of open government in the municipality of Rome. This case has proven to be particularly relevant for our purposes because since the beginning of our research on this topic back in 2014, we have encountered numerous international case studies discussing other European capitals such as London, Paris, Berlin or Madrid; yet, the most renowned case studies in Italy thus far have concerned Milan or Bologna. The lack of coverage on the efforts made by the City of Rome towards the digitalisation of public services, improvement of transparency and engagement of a pluralist dialogue between civil society actors is due to several reasons (among which include the weakness of the political leadership, scandals of corruption, and governance problems). But concurrently, for the first time in its history, Rome has been experimenting with an open government reform programme aimed at improving its digital services — building an open data catalogue and engaging citizens, civil society associations, and municipal officers in deliberative assemblies (such as the Forum of Innovation) and participatory budgeting.

Our study relies on the analysis of three policies undertaken by the City of Rome in its agenda for open government: the Forum of Innovation, participatory budgeting and distributed network of internet points (Punti Roma Facile). Our aim is twofold. First, we provide an analytical framework to detect, foresee and remove potential obstacles to the fulfilment of open government goals, with specific reference to participatory processes. Then, we use our empirical findings to draw relationships between the three main factors of participatory strategies (institutionalisation, salience of the issue in the broader policy strategy, and involvement of existing civil society networks) and the roles assigned to public communication. Hence, this article focuses not on the diagnostic side (i.e. the motivations of non-participation) but on the prognostic side (i.e. what institutions can do to overcome potential barriers to civic participation, most of all in terms of public communication).

2. The barriers to civic participation: from mistrust to public communication

The decline of public trust in institutions has been observed in several surveys conducted in Western democracies (Dalton, 2004; Drakos et al., 2019; Morlino and Raniolo, 2018; Norris, 1999, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2017), and has accompanied the increasing popularity of locutions such as ‘good governance’ (OECD, 2017). In a managerial approach towards the relationship between citizens and public administrations, trust has been conceived as a proxy for citizens’ satisfaction with public services, and consequently for the quality of such services (van der Meer and Hakhverdian, 2017). This conception of public trust is completely depoliticised, adapted to a post-political order to ignore the social and political implications of separating citizens from their institutions (Crouch, 2010; Fawcett et al., 2017; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014). The emergence of the open government agenda has stimulated a reflection in slightly different terms: the principles of transparency, participation and collaboration have been coded specifically to overcome managerialism, although with contradictory results (De Blasio, 2018; De Blasio and Selva, 2016).

As an essential component of the open government agenda, civic participation must be nurtured by public institutions in order to restore public trust and legitimacy. This conviction derives from previous experiences of democratic innovations, which began long before the launch of the first open government project in 2009. Democratic innovations like participatory budgeting, public consultations, citizens’ assemblies and digital deliberative platforms ask citizens to take part in the decision-making process (De Blasio and Sorice, 2016; Elstub and Escobar, 2019; Smith, 2009). Proponents of such strategies for participatory democracy used to suggest that participation could ultimately enhance public trust. But the effects of such strategies on participants’ levels of trust have proven to be scarce and limited to peculiar settings. Research on this issue shows that trust is influenced by both mechanisms of path dependency and the particular characteristics of these strategies (Åström et al., 2017).

The study and evaluation of democratic innovation measures have analysed the best possible conditions under which public trust can be enhanced; under these conditions, a) a sufficient level of inclusion and representation of viewpoints is ensured (input dimension); b) deliberation is nurtured (process dimension); and c) citizens are really empowered, meaning they have a tangible impact on institutional decision-making (output dimension) (Geissel and Newton, 2012; Nabatchi et al., 2012). On the contrary, the path dependency of (mis)trust has not received adequate attention. Democratic innovations are conceived as invitational spaces of participation because institutions create the opportunities for citizens to participate, and set the terms of their involvement (Barber, 2009; Kersting, 2013). From this perspective, a common problem for democratic innovations is that citizens might not accept the invitation to participate; and yet, apart from some exceptions (Jacquet, 2017), the reasons for non-participation and the barriers to civic participation are a neglected field of research.

As a matter of fact, studies on democratic innovations are not the only ones to have ignored this gap in research on civic participation. Electoral studies, for instance, have offered limited explanations about reasons for low voter turnout, particularly for younger generations (LeDuc et al., 2010). Sociocultural analyses have offered some interesting insights on voter apathy (Dalton, 2017; Norris and Inglehart, 2019), but as far as other types of civic participation are concerned, many are relying on psychographic frameworks that emphasise factors such as perceptions of achieving an impact on policy-making and moral commitments (Aitamurto et al., 2017; Gustafson and Hertting, 2017). Finally, theories of social capital have focused their attention more

on the reasons why social networks develop in a given setting, or on the conditions under which these networks facilitate systemic trust (Field, 2017; Putnam, 2004).

From an open government perspective, understanding the barriers to civic participation means anticipating possible obstacles to the fulfilment of policy goals, and having the opportunity to address them efficiently. Against this theoretical background, four types of barriers to civic participation can be isolated:

- Psychological barriers – personality traits (such as shyness and lack of self-esteem) can represent an obstacle to civic participation at any stage (Recchi, 1998), and even more so in deliberative settings (Rosenberg, 2014). At the same time, this is the most difficult field of research because it relates to individual histories and requires a specific methodology (Jacquet, 2017). Since it is very unlikely that public institutions could address this type of barrier through an open government programme, psychological barriers are only mentioned, but not considered, in the rest of this article;

- Digital barriers – unequal access to digital infrastructure and lack of digital skills could hinder civic participation to open government strategies, even more so if these programmes are implemented through digital platforms. While digital technology can facilitate a number of participatory practices (Dahlgren, 2009), a vast amount of research on digital barriers has addressed how the latter intersect with issues of gender, age, race and disability (De Blasio, 2019). The debate around the various forms of digital divide, in particular, has stressed the potentially exclusionary nature of the digital world, insofar as we live in an era in which access (and speed of access) to information differentiates developed from underdeveloped countries and individuals (Ragnedda, 2018; van Dijk, 2020). That is why open government programmes used to include policies on infrastructure diffusion and enhancement of digital literacy to address digital barriers to participation;

- Socioeconomic barriers – social identity related to gender, education, origin, occupation, age and social capital might either facilitate or hinder civic participation. Democratic innovation studies used to refer to this trade-off as a matter of inclusion. If the prototype of the politically active citizen is a well-educated, urban, employed adult male, then women, the poorly-educated, rural residents, the unemployed and younger citizens must confront socio-economic barriers to their involvement in political activities (Geißel and Joas, 2013; Elstutub and Escobar, 2019). Questions of social identity transcend the individual because identities are influenced by actual living conditions, but also by self-perceptions and social representation of such conditions within society (Young, 2010). This circumstance paves the way for institutions and political leaders to play a critical role in creating a favourable environment for social groups most at risk of exclusion from civic participation. For instance, research on women and immigrants shows that the relationship between individuals and their broader environment is a determinant of civic participation in both political and community activism, cross-cutting social identity and cultural differences (Barrett and Zani, 2015). Social capital, in particular, has long been considered a precursor of civic participation: that is, the more an individual is involved in social networks and associations with others, the more likely s/he is to engage into political activities. At the same time, social capital is believed to have a direct relationship with systemic trust (Field, 2017). Increasingly, the relationship between social capital, civic participation and trust is perceived as context-dependent, insofar as those elements must be situated in specific settings (Diani, 2000). From this point of view, the link between social capital and trust is cemented. Social capital is proven to be effective in enhancing trust in institutions of the same cultural milieu as the networks themselves: for instance, citizens involved in Catholic associations tend to have more trust in the Church than citizens not involved in such associations, but this is not correlated to a parallel increase in trust in any other institution. An open government programme will only be effective if it is able to consider the demographics of the geography and its community — thus mobilising existing social networks across sociocultural subdivisions without forgetting to engage isolated individuals that tend not to participate; and

- Political barriers – such barriers include conditions of power asymmetries among citizens but also between citizens and the governing elites (institutions, interest groups and the private sector). Such asymmetries become political barriers insofar as citizens lack confidence in the impact of their participation in open government initiatives. This lack of confidence is the result of the interaction between the strategies of the participatory process and the actual possibilities of empowerment it forebodes (set by institutions and political leaders), and the trust bestowed to institutions and political leaders (by citizens themselves). The pre-existing degrees of trust and social cohesion determine the outcome of a participatory project. In this case, the lack of trust in politicians and institutions can constitute a political barrier. At the same time, a certain measure of mistrust is believed to be an engine of participation, where citizens can fully express their critical attitudes towards institutions (Norris, 2011), like in the case of the monitory democracy (Keane, 2013) and the counter-democracy (Rosanvallon, 2006). In the context of open government, for instance, mistrust is commonly addressed by reinforcing transparency and accountability. It has to be acknowledged, however, that more transparency can be counterproductive for civic participation in the sense that it produces much more information than can be conceivably digested, creating either unintelligible noise or a general climate of unreliability (De Blasio, 2018; 2019).

Public communication can play a strategic role in addressing the barriers to civic participation and restoring trust. Effective communication is not a matter of campaigns, although they are the most useful tool to ensure a widespread awareness of what the administration is doing and how it is allocating public resources; rather, strategic communication is a specific component of open government programmes aiming for a long-term vision on how citizens and institutions should interact with each other (De Blasio, 2018; Sorice, 2014). Against this theoretical background, this article now turns to the analysis of the open government policies undertaken by the City of Rome in the years 2016–2019, in order to identify a) the main challenges in terms of barriers, b) what has been done to address such barriers, and c) the best practices and ongoing problems of such a complex issue.

3. Assessing participatory democracy in Rome

When the mayor of Rome, Virginia Raggi, launched the city's open government programme right after the 2016 election, it was clear that digital platforms and infrastructure would play a major role. The erection of a specific department called Roma Semplice (Simple Rome) aiming to build the city's for innovation was just one of the main actions undertaken. The challenge was to modernise the city's bureaucracy and digital capacities to remediate the relationship between citizens and the administration. This modernisation strategy for the public administration was framed within a broader vision to reconfigure Rome's image as a completely wired, interconnected and data-driven 'smart' city (Angelidou, 2016; Caragliu et al., 2011; Picon, 2013).

Launching this new deal for Rome was the consultation for drafting the city's Digital Agenda 2017–2021; it involved about 300 contributors both online and offline, through deliberative roundtables and stakeholders' meetings. Following this consultation, in 2017 the new website was launched including an area for participatory processes. Between three and four thousand comments, feedback and proposals were sent through the website in order to collaboratively design an entirely new portal. Alongside these major projects, citizens were invited to send their ideas about how to foster the quality of municipal services and report malfunctioning. The implementation of the 5G Strategy was also conducted through a participatory approach, involving citizens and associations in multi-stakeholder fora, and providers such as Fastweb, Ericsson and ZTE in public-private

partnerships through open protocols. A specific focus was placed on the digital literacy of citizens: the installation of 26 internet points (Punti Roma Facile¹) in the local municipal offices aimed at providing citizens with internet connection hotspots, online resources, seminars and support to cultivate the potentials of e-government (Colasanti, 2019).

Some features of the Roman context were particularly evident, which could constitute either an opportunity or a barrier; Rome presents a peculiar combination of low trust in institutions, high social capital (with intense associational and political networks) and high digital skills (compared to other Italian cities), which compose a highly specific sociocultural environment. In the last report on Equitable and Sustainable Well-being (BES) for the city of Rome², residents rated their trust in the local government to be 3.9/10. For people between 18 and 35 years old, 70% had a low level of trust in local institutions. Regarding social capital, data focused on Rome are not available, but previous literature reports an environment that is both vibrant and flawed by many contradictory trends (D'Albergo and Moini, 2007; Coppola and Punziano, 2018). There are more updated data on the greater Lazio region, where Istat counted 31,274 non-profit organisations with a total of 105,798 employees³. Also in the Lazio region, 58.2% of people used a personal computer and 73.5% surfed the internet; the same data applied to the Rome metropolitan area⁴, indicating high levels of digital skills.

In this context, some hypotheses could be made regarding the challenges the city government would have to address to overcome barriers to civic participation:

- a) it should focus on restoring trust by improving accountability and by emphasising a greater physical proximity (or a simulacrum of such proximity) with citizens;
- b) it should focus on mobilising existing coalitions of civil society, networks of associations and active citizenship; and
- c) it should focus on addressing the residual, yet still present, digital divide by providing citizens with digital hardware and training.

With these hypotheses in mind, we turn to an analysis of the actions Rome has taken by analysing public communication and policy programmes during the period 2016–2019. We analysed three sets of data retrieved from official websites and press materials distributed by the municipality during this period, such as a) information and communication materials to promote participatory processes; b) public policies, with a focus on motivations to justify public action and the actors involved in policy design; and c) contributions of citizens, civil society associations and private businesses during the participatory process. The methodology follows an interpretive approach to public policies (Jones et al., 2014; Moini, 2013; van Hulst and Yanow, 2016), blended with the tradition of studies on public communication (Bartoletti and Faccioli, 2016; Ducci, 2017; Faccioli, 2008). The assessment of the open government policies of the municipality of Rome deals with two criteria in particular. The first is the coherence of the policy response to the specific challenges posed by the local context (i.e. mistrust, dispersed participation, and the digital divide), as highlighted in the hypotheses presented above; the second is the role of public communication in the overall participatory strategy.

The analysis focuses in particular on three case studies of policies and processes highlighting Rome's approach to open government and barriers to civic participation: the Forum of Innovation, participatory budgeting and use of the Punti Roma Facile for promoting digital inclusion. The case studies are analysed along four

¹ The webpage is available at: https://www.comune.roma.it/web/it/luoghi-di-partecipazione.page?tipo=punto_roma_facile. Last accessed on: 3/7/2020.

² The webpage is available at: https://www.comune.roma.it/web-resources/cms/documents/BES_2019_finale_ultimo.pdf (page 61). Last accessed on: 3/7/2020.

³ The webpage is available at: <https://www.istat.it/it/files//2018/10/non-profit.pdf>. Last accessed on 3/7/2020.

⁴ The data are available at: <http://dati.istat.it/>. Last accessed on: 3/7/2020.

dimensions: their adequacy in addressing the three challenges listed above; their permanence in the policy cycle, as a proxy for their institutionalisation; their hybrid articulation between the digital and a-nalogue dimensions; and their communication strategy and tools.

Table 1 – Analytical elements of participatory democracy in Rome

<i>Cases</i>	<i>Specific challenge</i>	<i>Duration</i>	<i>Hybridisation</i>	<i>Communication</i>
Forum of Innovation	Involving existing Networks	2017, 2018	Only in the field	Public tender and direct communication targeted for niche audiences
Participatory budgeting	Emphasising Proximity	2019	Both in the field and online	Official website, press releases and advertising
<i>Punti Roma Facile</i>	Addressing digital literacy and access	From 2017 onwards	Both in the field and online	Press releases, advertising and BTL

Source: authors' own elaboration.

3.1 Case study #1: Forum of Innovation

The official website of the municipality of Rome describes the Forum of Innovation as a 'permanent opportunity to meet and participate' in the applications of technology for simplification, transparency, quality of public services, and civic involvement in decision-making⁵. The Forum was established in 2017 and further subdivided in four thematic laboratories: open government, digital skills, smart city, and digital agenda. The Forum has a variable composition — a result of a public tender held once per year. Citizens, associations and other non-profit entities can apply to interact with municipal representatives. The aim of the Forum was to engage and mobilise the existing social and creative capital of the city in the form of networked associations, think tanks, social movements and collectives of internet activists. It is a peculiar example of how a public administration can foster the processes of social innovation, bringing together dispersed initiatives, ideas and experiences. The intuition was to transpose this potential for social innovation to an institutionalised process of collaborative policy-making, in line with 'governance-beyond-the-state' governmentality (Swyngedouw, 2009). As is typical of this form of governmentality, involving 'civil society' as a partner of policy-making can effectively depoliticise the policies and role of institutions. Subsequently, the challenge of this kind of experiment lies in listening to and valuing the contributions coming from civil society, while simultaneously avoiding the replication of power asymmetries and overrepresentation of the 'usual suspects' at the expense of a generalised public.

The laboratories were inaugurated in November 2017 and met once or twice a year until July 2019. Although the laboratory on digital agenda never officially began its work as stated above, a broad consultation was put in place for drafting the city's Digital Agenda 2017–2021. Unlike the open government laboratory,

⁵ The webpage is available at: <https://www.comune.roma.it/web/it/forum-inn.page>. Last accessed on 2/13/2020.

which only met once in two years, the digital skills and smart city laboratories met regularly for two years, producing different outputs. The meetings' minutes⁶ identify goals, terms and tools to carry out each task.

The Forum met during plenary assemblies. Although the laboratories were designed as deliberative mini-publics as citizens were invited to participate, they were mainly composed of experts and policymakers for a total of about 10–12 participants per meeting. A representative of the Department for Innovation and Administrative Simplification (Assessorato Roma Semplice), flanked by a coordinator chosen by the participants, was appointed to supervise each of the four laboratories' tables. For these reasons, the actual composition of the laboratories' meetings mostly resembled a multi-stakeholder model of governance rather than a deliberative democratic setting. The results of the public tenders and the composition of the Forum are described in the table below.

Table 2 – Participants of the Forum of Innovation from 2017–2018.

	2017	2018
Open government laboratory	72	94
Digital skills laboratory	71	90
Digital agenda laboratory	75	92
Smart city laboratory	89	115
Total number of individuals	101	129
Total number of associations and other entities	16	20

Source: Comune di Roma.⁷

Despite increased participation in the Forum during its second year, in 2019 the process slowed due to some transfers of responsibility within the government. Notwithstanding, it should be acknowledged that the Forum of Innovation has been launched together with the Forum on Environment, led by the homonymous department, which has similar aims and involves about 50 associations; this Forum on Environment has met only once in 2017. In this regard, the municipality of Rome's goal to institute permanent fora for deliberation and participation appears far from fulfilled. The programme's initial pursuit of innovation led way to a typical discontinuity that has impeded the city's full development, compared to its homologues in the international context.

⁶ The webpages are available at: https://www.comune.roma.it/web-resources/cms/documents/Verbale_Competenze_Digitali_17_11.pdf, https://www.comune.roma.it/web-resources/cms/documents/Verbale_Smart_City_17_11.pdf, https://www.comune.roma.it/web-resources/cms/documents/Verbale_Open_Government_17_11.pdf, https://www.comune.roma.it/web-resources/cms/documents/Verbale_Laboratorio_Smart_City_11.7.18_LA_CC_CT.pdf, https://www.comune.roma.it/web-resources/cms/documents/Verbale_Competenze_Digitali_11.07sito2.pdf, https://www.comune.roma.it/web-resources/cms/documents/Verbale_Competenze_Digitali_17_10.pdf, https://www.comune.roma.it/web-resources/cms/documents/forum_17_ottobre.pdf, https://www.comune.roma.it/web-resources/cms/documents/Verbale_Smart_City_24.07.19.pdf. Last accessed on: 3/7/2020.

⁷ Available at this link: https://www.comune.roma.it/web-resources/cms/documents/Elenco_ammessi_2017.pdf, https://www.comune.roma.it/web-resources/cms/documents/Elenco_ammessi_giugno_2018_per_publicazione.pdf. Last accessed on: 2/27/2020.

In addition to the choice of areas for testing the 5G network, the most important achievements of the Forum of Innovation were the first draft of guidelines for developing the smart city strategy, now officially implemented through a political act⁸, and the proposal to institute a diffused school for digital skills⁹.

3.2 Case study #2: Participatory budgeting

From June to September 2018, the first participatory budgeting¹⁰ experiment was launched: 17 million euros were allocated to public works in a district of Rome for projects concerning the environment, landscape and public greenery, sustainable mobility and accessibility, urban redevelopment, and infrastructure. To collect a variety of ideas and proposals, both online channels and focus groups were put in place. Specifically, resident citizens and city users of this municipality were able to nominate themselves to participate in a focus group with up to 60 members as established by regulation¹¹. If more than 60 people applied for the focus group, the participants were selected through a randomised lottery.

The vote for the best ideas took place online, and required registration on the Roma Capitale portal. The Puntini Roma Facile (Easy Rome Points), discussed in the next case study, played a key role in helping people obtain their personal digital credentials to vote.

After a screening phase carried out by the administration, 80 projects were selected: 37 projects came from citizens' proposals and 43 from the administration. The number of votes totalled 2,256.

Following the results of the pilot vote described above, in 2019 the city finally initiated a consultation to decide how to allocate 20 million euros for the urban renewal of the entire city's territory, 'to value the identity, beauty and usability of urban spaces, most of all in the parts deputed to collective use [...] aiming both at the restoration and maintenance of existing spaces, and at the addition of functions and innovative elements to facilitate liveability and sociability' (Deliberation n. 103/2019)¹².

The process was held mainly online, although municipalities could organise public assemblies and multi-stakeholder focus groups to further promote civic participation in the field. The process was articulated into a plan with five phases, in line with the most recent trends in participatory budgeting in metropolitan areas (Doustaly, 2019):

- 1) From June 3, 2019: information, which included advertisements on public transport and social media, press releases, and the launch of the dedicated platform on the official website of the municipality;
- 2) June 10–July 15: presentation of proposals on the platform, with a maximum of five proposals for each proponent, and June 10–July 21: online voting on proposals;

⁸ Memoria di Giunta Capitolina n.4 Programma dei lavori 'Piano Roma Smart City' (Protocollo N. 36496 del 04/12/2019).

⁹ Deliberazioni della Giunta Capitolina n. 116 Modifiche ed integrazioni alla deliberazione della Giunta Capitolina n. 7 del 3 agosto 2016 avente ad oggetto – 'Istituzione dei punti di accesso assistiti per i servizi digitali, denominati 'Roma Facile' sul territorio della Città di Roma' Istituzione della Scuola Diffusa per la Partecipazione e la Cittadinanza Digitale, sul territorio della Città di Roma (Protocollo N. 17661 del 07/06/2019) and n. 143 Approvazione del Regolamento per l'organizzazione e il funzionamento dei Puntini Roma Facile e della Scuola Diffusa per la Partecipazione e la Cittadinanza Digitale (Protocollo N. 20628 del 04/07/2019).

¹⁰ More information available at this link: <https://www.comune.roma.it/web/it/processo-partecipativo.page?contentId=PRP156137>. Last accessed on: 3/7/2020.

¹¹ Available at this link: https://www.comune.roma.it/web-resources/cms/documents/Disegno_estrazione_focus_group_60_unita.pdf. Last accessed on: 3/7/2020.

¹² Available at this link: https://www.comune.roma.it/web-resources/cms/documents/Deliberazione_della_Giunta_Capitolina_n.103_del_31_maggio_2019.pdf. Last accessed on: 2/17/2020.

- 3) June 10–September 13: presentation of proposals by the municipalities, collaboratively drafted in public assemblies and focus groups with stakeholders;
- 4) August 7–October 4: screening of proposals according to technical, administrative and financial criteria;
- 5) October 12–21: final consultation.

The communication campaign demonstrated a major effort to maximise participation. The information phase began on June 3rd and was implemented through both online and offline tools: posters, fliers, radio commercials and videos on the under-ground’s CCTV network. The process was hosted on a specific segment called *Partecipa* (You Participate) of the official website of the City of Rome, and all the disseminated materials linked to it. The city’s official accounts on Facebook and Twitter were also involved in the online communication campaigns. Additionally, a direct mailing campaign was sent to 500,000 registered users to invite them to take part in the participatory budgeting, with text formulated with the help of behavioural science tools. The official hashtag ‘#RomaDecide’ was taken from the previous (smaller-scale) experience of participatory budgeting from the VII municipality and has been reaffirmed through-out the process. The claim was ‘Diamo valore alle tue idee: decidiamo insieme come investire 20 milioni di euro per il decoro urbano’ (‘We value your ideas: we decide together with you how to invest 20 million euros for urban renewal’).

Despite the limited scope of the experiment, the numbers of participation in the participatory budgeting experiment in Rome were encouraging (Table 3).

Table 3 – Participants in the participatory budgeting experiment, 2019.

<i>Items</i>	<i>Data</i>
Proposal phase	
Proposals by citizens	1,481
Proposals by municipalities	40
Proponents	1,076
Votes	158,937
Total people involved	29,211
Final consultation	
Proposals approved	65
Total people involved	16,993

Source: Comune di Roma.

Comparative research of the different strategies of participatory budgeting employed worldwide tends to highlight several of their benefits; for instance, enhancement of the relationship between civil society and politics, decrease of corruption in managing public resources, and a more just allocation of finances across territories (Traub-Merz et al., 2013). At the same time, the global expansion of participatory budgeting has focused mainly on its communicative dimension rather than its emancipatory character. In other words, participatory budgeting is most often deployed by urban administrations as a tool of public communication for obtaining a fast consensus, but rarely has the disruptive effect it originally had in Porto Alegre in terms of social justice and empowerment of traditionally excluded strata of population (Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2014). Undoubtedly, this is also the case for Rome, where participatory budgeting only addressed a small piece of policy-making regarding urban renewal. The limited scope of the process suggests that these initial participatory budgeting measures in Rome should be considered as an experiment, rather than a fully institutionalised

practice of open government, notwithstanding the efforts made by the administration to promote civic participation and the actual response of citizens in terms of engagement.

3.3 Case study #3: Inclusion through distributed internet points

With the aim of managing the digital divide phenomenon and leaving nobody behind, the network of 26 internet access hotspots called Punt Roma Facile (Easy Rome Points) was inaugurated in November 2016. Municipal offices and libraries previously removed from the metropolitan public attention became hubs to help citizens access online services. ‘Digital facilitators’ were trained to assist people in using digital tools within and beyond the framework of public services supplied by the City of Rome, like obtaining a national digital identity card (SPID) and navigating public administrations’ portals. The points also scheduled periodical seminars and training sessions to improve citizens’ digital literacy, which formed part of the overall communication strategy together with advertising on public transport, social media and in public offices.

The Punt Roma Facile was the first and probably the most renowned project launched by the Department of Simplification of the Raggi administration. Data on the traffic at the hotspots confirmed that they attract a heterogeneous audience (Table 4).

Table 4 – Users of the *Punt Roma Facile* (data up to 2019).

	<i>Data</i>
Women	69%
Men	31%
Italian	78%
European (not Italian)	4%
Extra-EU	18%
Over 65 years old	38%

Source: Colasanti (2019).

It is important to underline the twofold function of the Punt Roma Facile both as a direct way to improve citizens’ digital skills, and an indirect way to provide access to online voting through personal digital credentials.

4. The role of public communication in participatory strategies

The literature on democratic innovations suggests that four main barriers can discourage citizens from taking part in participatory processes designed by public institutions: psychological, digital, socioeconomic and political barriers. Leaving aside psychological factors, this article has analysed if and how the municipality of Rome has addressed digital, socioeconomic and political barriers (in particular the mistrust of citizens towards institutions) through open government programmes that blend participatory innovations and public communication. Returning to the hypotheses presented earlier, assessment of the case studies highlights three main points.

First, the City of Rome focused on restoring trust by emphasising physical proximity (or a simulacrum of such proximity) with citizens, as the work on municipalities during the participatory budgeting proves. The decision to use public offices as points of reference for providing access to online resources and programmes of digital literacy (Punti Roma Facile) accompanied efforts to engage with citizens in the field. Participatory budgeting, in particular, has seen municipalities play a leading role in promoting offline participation and involving stakeholders in the neighbourhood. The strategies for the participation, in this case, were twofold: first, the digital platform was used as a privileged channel of interaction between citizens and the City of Rome; second, offline focus groups and assemblies were promoted to ensure a decentralised dialogue between citizens and municipalities. The choice to supplement the digital participatory process with on-site assemblies and focus groups appears particularly inspired. However, the experiment did not fully succeed in transforming municipalities into participatory hubs and the participatory budgeting experience has not had a follow-up.

Second, the municipality mobilised existing networks of associations and active citizenship through the Forum of Innovation. Unlike with participatory budgeting, this initiative was not accompanied by an adequate communication campaign to inform citizens about the development of the Forum and its initiatives. As the main channels of communication regarding the Forum were official acts (i.e. deliberations), the information that was disseminated merely addressed niche publics already informed about the ‘stakes’ or well-equipped in terms of expertise and technical knowledge. In this way, the Forum was weakened by its apparent inaccessibility and opacity about its role, function, legitimacy and outputs.

Third, the city addressed the residual, and still present, digital divide by providing citizens with digital hardware and training through the Punti Roma Facile in the municipal offices. This seems to be the most effective policy undertaken by the City of Rome to address barriers to political participation. Given the unique nature of this initiative, the public communication campaign has endured through both its online and offline channels.

The analysis shows that the city administration’s most coherent steps have addressed political and digital barriers, such as distrust and lack of digital access and skills. At the same time, it is still missing a clear communication perspective, resulting in a persistent public unawareness of what the municipality is doing to open its democratic procedures. Examining the communication tactics of participatory budgeting and the Punti Roma Facile offer some steps going forward, but a deeper reflection on the role of communication is needed, in order to ignite a real modernisation process.

Following an inductive methodology, the three cases enable generalisations of some traits of the relationship between participation and public communication. In particular, the following table sketches how the modalities of the three factors of the participatory measures align with different perspectives and roles attributed to public communication (Table 5).

Rather than hypothesising a causal process, the case study analysis suggests that the peculiar traits of participatory strategies are correlated (logically and empirically) with different perspectives on the role played by public communication in democratic processes at large. When the process is highly institutionalised — meaning that it is designed to have an impact on policy-making, such as the Forum of Innovation and participatory budgeting — public communication is understood as an asset to enhance public participation and awareness about what the administration is doing. Communication is a tool and mainly plays an informative role. On the contrary, where the process is less institutionalised, as with the Punti Roma Facile, public communication is a goal in itself, aimed at building a relationship between citizens and civil servants.

Table 5 – Factors of the participatory processes and the role of public communication.

<i>Factors of participatory processes</i>	<i>Modalities</i>	<i>Role of communication</i>	<i>Cases</i>
Institutionalisation of the process (impact on policy-making)	High	Communication as asset for enhancing participation	Participatory budgeting
	Low	Communication as relation building	<i>Punti Roma Facile</i>
Salience of the specific policy in the broader strategic framework	High	Communication as part of the public action	<i>Punti Roma Facile</i>
	Low	Communication as transitory and episodic	Forum of Innovation Participatory budgeting
Involvement of civil society Coalitions	High	Communication through official acts — niche publics	Forum of Innovation
	Low	Communication through multiple channels — general public	Participatory budgeting <i>Punti Roma Facile</i>

Source: authors' own elaboration.

At the same time, the salience of the policy issue in the administration's broader strategy can change the role of public communication. If an issue is believed to be particularly relevant for attaining the general objectives of the government, public communication is intended as a specific part of the policy. The transformation of Rome into a smart city is one of the main political goals for the next few years. That is why reducing the digital divide and equipping the city with next-generation access networks constitute the most salient policy issues. The case of the *Punti Roma Facile* is again illuminating: the installation of the *Punti* has both a substantial (reducing the digital divide) and communicative goal (establishing contact with dispersed citizens), and thus supplying municipal offices with hardware is just half of the public action. That is why public communication regarding the presence and functioning of the *Punti Roma Facile* will likely never cease and will probably remain the same even after a political turnover. The same can be said about the Forum of Innovation, since the policy issues it addressed are very strategic (open government, digital skills, smart city, and digital agenda); notwithstanding, public communication is somewhat silenced, impeding potential future deployments. On the other hand, the limited scope of participatory budgeting (urban renewal) is less salient with respect with the broader political strategy. Hence public communication is transitory and e-episodic, formalised in a specific campaign (which typically has a defined duration and can be ignored in the case of future events).

Finally, the involvement of civil society coalitions contributes to defining the role of public communication. By observing the case of Rome, we can realise a clear difference in the ways in which public communication is organised and spread: the communication of the Forum of Innovation, as already noted, is restricted to official acts written in a bureaucratic style and available on the portal of *Roma Capitale*. On the contrary, the communication of the participatory budgeting measures and of the *Punti Roma Facile* is oriented to reach a broader public through multiple channels (both online and offline).

As shown in these pages, adopting an open government strategy raises a set of questions regarding the goals, methods to achieve them, the portions of the public to address, and ultimately the role of public communication. The research on open government has benchmarked existing procedures and set common refe-

rences of best practices; but this outlook has neglected a more contextual approach to open government that is able to highlight specific cultural challenges. This article experiments with a novel methodology to study why institutions propose participatory processes, as well as how they confront the demands and weaknesses of citizens and the burden of their historical leanings, most of all in terms of mistrust and depoliticisation. The choice of Rome as a subject of study is not incidental, as the city is experiencing an intense period of reflection and transformation. As citizens and researchers, we are persuaded that a greater sensitivity towards public communication is propagating within the city administration. The next years will be crucial for establishing a broader culture of open government and removing barriers for full public participation; it will depend on the role assigned to communication.

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