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The aporia of ‘public communication’: an attempt at epistemological de-objectification and systemic modelling in Communication and Information Studies

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Abstract

The theoretical framework of Information and Communication Sciences (ICS) comes up against the porosity of its conceptual boundaries when the discipline incorporates terms that have been largely co-opted by managerial practice. This article examines the heuristic viability of the phrase ‘public communication’. Gradually stripped of its critical substance through instrumental use, this term now struggles to denote anything other than the engineering of institutional legitimation. Rather than dismissing it, we propose to ‘de-objectify’ it: an epistemological gesture, distinct from mere deconstruction, which combines the Bachelardian rupture with the reflexive objectification inherited from Bourdieu, in order to wrest the concept from the self-evident nature of its managerial use and re-situate it within a framework of complexity theory. On this basis, the institution is no longer viewed as a sovereign sender delivering an unambiguous message, but as an open system whose communication — intrinsically shaped by cultural foundations and informal logics — constitutes the regulatory mechanism through which the organisation absorbs the entropy of its social environment. We demonstrate that what managerial rationality regards as ‘noise’ is in fact a form of structural miscommunication, and that public communication functions less as a bridge to the citizen than as a membrane tasked with rendering the asymmetry between state norms and social practices tolerable,

and thus sustainable. This theoretical analysis draws illustratively on the case of the Moroccan administration and leads to a methodological shift: from the semantics of the message towards the pragmatics of the relationship and of evidence.

Keywords: Public communication; systemic approach; epistemological de-objectification; in communication; bureaucratic mediation; legal-rationality; reflexive modernity; Moroccan administration.

Introduction

The discursive inflation currently surrounding the analysis of state and territorial organisations has fostered a slow semantic sedimentation, as a result of which the conceptual apparatus of the social sciences tends to become alienated in favour of managerial logics. Few concepts illustrate this shift as clearly as that of ‘public communication’. Approached almost exclusively through the prism of institutional marketing, it has undergone an ontological shift that would be wrong to regard as insignificant: it no longer denotes a process of mediation, a forum for deliberation or a space for the resolution of conflict, but has been reduced to the status of a technical mechanism, designed to optimise the acceptability of a policy and the visibility of an administration. The word remains; what it once denoted has dissolved.

This observation is not a matter of terminological quibbling. It calls into question the very possibility of a critical understanding of public action. When a discipline carelessly borrows the vocabulary of the actors it claims to study, it runs the risk of merely echoing their perspective rather than constructing it as an object of study. Information and Communication Studies, because they deal with subjects whose very names are already laden with practical implications, are particularly vulnerable to this danger. ‘Public communication’ provides a textbook example of this: adopting the term as institutions use it amounts to surreptitiously adopting the fiction they perpetuate about themselves — that of a rational sender disseminating neutral information to a receptive audience.

This gives rise to the question that structures this article. Does the phrase ‘public communication’ retain heuristic value for the SICs, or has it become merely a managerial label that should be abandoned? And if it is to be retained, under what epistemological conditions? Our hypothesis is that the concept remains indispensable, not to denote a smooth and unambiguous function of the administration, but to precisely name the crux of tensions through which a power strives to manage the paradoxes of its own existence. Provided, however, that it is first subjected to what we shall call an operation of de-objectification.

This term requires immediate definition, as it underpins the entire approach and will be elaborated upon in a dedicated section. By ‘de-objectification’ we mean the epistemological act of undoing the seemingly self-evident ‘thing’ that the concept has become in its practical usage, in order to restore its genesis, presuppositions and social function. This approach is grounded in Bachelard’s call for a *break* — one must think against the evidence of first glance (Bachelard, 1938) — but it differs from pure literary deconstruction in that it extends, , Bourdieu’s reflexive objectification: to objectify the object, but also the practical and scholarly relationship we maintain with it (Bourdieu, 2012). To de-objectify public communication is therefore not to dissolve it; it is to cease treating it as a transparent given in order to reconstruct it as a problem.

The first outcome of this operation is negative, yet decisive: it compels us to abandon once and for all the model of linear transmission inherited from Lasswell. By reducing the administrative structure to a rational sender and the social body to an atomised receiver, academic analysis effectively endorses a logic of hegemony in the sense of Gramsci (1975): the institution’s discourse thus serves less to nourish the public sphere — in the sense that Habermas (1978) assigns to this category — than to naturalise the established order. Under

the guise of a façade of administrative transparency, information is transformed into an injunction to conform, falling under that self-justifying technical imperative already denounced by Ellul (1962). Public communication thus quietly engineers a ‘manufacture of consent’ that smooths over the power asymmetries inherent in state action.

The second finding is positive. To break the deadlock, the adoption of a systemic model proves indispensable. Bureaucratic action is, in fact, embedded in a profoundly unstable macro-social environment, characterised by the ‘disembedding’ specific to reflexive modernity (Giddens, 1994): users find themselves distanced from the expert systems that govern their daily lives, which gives rise to a mistrust of official discourse that is no longer circumstantial but structural. Institutional rhetoric thus appears as a recurring — and largely doomed to failure — attempt to restore a fractured ontological security.

However, understanding the institution as an open system requires incorporating an analytical variable that is all too often marginalised by the North American tradition of organisational communication: the depth of cultural foundations. Weberian-style bureaucratic rationality, particularly when operating within societies characterised by strong traditional dynamics — as exemplified by the Moroccan organisational model we shall use to illustrate our point — never functions in a vacuum. It constantly comes up against anthropological underpinnings, logics of proximity and endogenous networks of sociability which, in their own right, redefine how public discourse is received. An organisation’s communication cannot therefore be assessed solely on the basis of its extrinsic performance; it constitutes the quintessential zone of friction — the organic and symbolic interface — where the system’s equilibrium is negotiated in the face of the dissonances of its environment.

Finally, a methodological clarification is required. This article is a theoretical and epistemological essay; it does not claim to provide empirical evidence, but rather to construct the conceptual framework that will make such evidence possible. The Moroccan examples it draws upon — the persistence of informal intercession, the ambivalence of administrative dematerialisation — are included for illustrative rather than demonstrative purposes; they refer to field studies we have conducted elsewhere, the results of which are published separately (Arbaoui, 2025a, 2025b, 2026). The present work constitutes the theoretical framework for these studies. On this basis, we shall proceed in four stages. First, we shall test public communication against the challenge of its own rationality, by showing how transmissive fiction leads to a crisis of mediation (*I*). We shall then explain the process of

de-objectification and, in doing so, dispel the functionalist bias that weighs upon any recourse to systems theory (II). We shall then propose a model of institutional action as regulation through in communication (III). Finally, we shall test this model against the backdrop of the digital public sphere, concluding with the need for a pragmatics of relations (IV).

I. Public communication put to the test of its own rationality: from transmissive fiction to the crisis of mediation

The historical equating of public communication with a mere sovereign function of the administration has permanently skewed its scientific understanding. By positing the existence of a neutral, overarching institutional discourse intended to enlighten a presumed receptive and homogeneous public, the technicist approach disregards the intrinsically conflictual nature of the relationship between the state apparatus and civil society. The institution, bolstered by its monopoly on legitimate symbolic violence, has long believed it could dictate the meaning of its actions, forgetting that the public sphere is not an empty vessel but a field of forces where long-standing memories and mistrusts clash. Before proposing an alternative interpretation, it is important to understand why this ‘transmissive fiction’ seemed so self-evident, and why it fails.

1.1. The illusion of instrumental neutrality and the depoliticisation of discourse

The roll-out of communication systems by public sector bodies was originally part of a broader narrative of modernisation: the transition – presented as beneficial – from a bureaucratic culture of secrecy to an approach characterised by openness, service and transparency. However, this transformation took place through the widespread adoption of the dogmas and techniques of private-sector management, driven by what the English-language literature has theorised as *New Public Management* (Hood, 1991). Yet this methodological transfer is anything but neutral; it is, both scientifically and politically. It shifts the very focus of public action: it replaces the figure of the ‘user-citizen’ — a subject of law participating in civic deliberation — with that of the ‘customer’, an atomised individual, made the target of a strategy of persuasion and immediate satisfaction.

This shift brings about a genuine depoliticisation of public discourse. By borrowing marketing’s metrics and vocabulary — satisfaction, image, reputation, user journey — the institution claims to purge its messages of any power asymmetry and disguises eminently political choices as mere managerial necessities. What is presented as rationalisation is

also, and perhaps first and foremost, a neutralisation: depoliticisation is not the absence of politics, but its concealment under the guise of technicality. The transparency on display here functions as a mechanism of opacity, since it shifts attention away from the substance of decisions towards the form of their presentation.

Dominique Wolton (1997, 2009) helpfully points out that reducing communication to mere information — the provision of data or procedural transparency — constitutes a major conceptual error. Information pertains to the message and, often, to the imperative; communication, however, falls within the far more demanding realm of relationship, which inevitably encompasses otherness, the risk of rejection and the possibility of misunderstanding. This is precisely what is encapsulated in his statement that ‘*to inform is not to communicate*’ (Wolton, 2009): the abundance of messages does not bridge the gap between interlocutors; indeed, it may even widen it. By saturating the social sphere with self-legitimising discourse, the public institution locks itself into a ritualistic logic and posits, illusorily, that it will control how its actions are received solely through the sophistication of its dissemination channels. The proliferation of media is conflated with the effectiveness of the relationship.

We must appreciate the significance of this assessment. If communication is not the same as information, then the bulk of what public authorities refer to as ‘communication’ is not, in fact, communication. Graphic guidelines, poster campaigns, talking points and annual reports all constitute a one-way transmission that takes for granted the very problem it purports to address: the existence of an audience willing to receive the message. It is this assumption that crumbles when confronted with actual social practices.

1.2. The clash of rationalities: anthropological underpinnings and the resurgence of the informal

The strictly transmissive stance indeed reveals its flaws as soon as it is put to the test of the material reality of practices. The institution produces a discourse structured by a formal, legal-rational, written and procedural rationality—in the sense in which Weber (1971) made it the principle of legitimacy of modern domination. But the social space that receives it is itself governed by profoundly heterogeneous interpretative frameworks. Between the norm and its recipient, there is no continuity of a single code, but rather an encounter between two orders of meaning.

This dissonance is exacerbated within public organisations operating in contexts with a rich historical and anthropological background. Where the Weberian model has, more often than

not, been superimposed upon older, traditional modes of organisation, the bond of trust is not established on the legal validity of an administrative act; it is rooted in endogenous logics: the importance of networks of mutual acquaintance, the prevalence of intercession, the primacy of orality, and the weight of relationships of precedence. The Moroccan case is, in this respect, exemplary: hierarchical distance there constitutes a foundational element of identity in the relationship with power, and trust circulates less through institutional channels than through interpersonal networks (Arbaoui, 2025b). Official statements are not accepted at face value, but are assessed in the light of what is known, from other sources, about those who utter them.

Stuart Hall's (1994) contribution remains central to understanding this discrepancy. The public message does not reach its recipient intact: it undergoes a process of decoding, which may be negotiated or outright oppositional. The recipient does not merely accept the norm; they sift through it, reinterpret it, circumvent it, or even discredit it, by drawing on their own frameworks and networks. Rumour, the unsaid, and ironic scepticism thus become mechanisms of self-defence against a discourse perceived as an instrument of domination. But Hall is not enough: he describes reception, not the organisational dynamics that give rise to it. This is where we must draw on Crozier and Friedberg's (1977) sociology of organised action. Far from being the disciplined cog in the machine posited by the organisational chart, the actor — whether an agent or a user — exploits the *zones of uncertainty* that the rule never manages to fill. Real power lies in these interstices: whoever controls the interpretation of a procedure, access to a service counter or the processing time holds a resource that no text has formally assigned to them. The informal sphere is therefore not the pathological flip-side of the formal; it is its necessary complement and the arena where effective regulation takes place.

This framework radically shifts the diagnosis of communicational failure. What managerial rationality attributes to 'noise', a 'lack of guidance' or an 'obstacle to change' is almost never a technical failure of the system. It is the expression of a structural breakdown in communication, that is to say, an irreducible gap between the order of the institutional message and the order of social practices. This failure cannot be remedied by simply increasing the volume of messaging: it is the ordinary mode of existence of the relationship between the state norm and its publics. This is precisely what the fiction of transmission is incapable of conceiving, and this is why we must de-objectify the concept before putting it back to work.

II. De-objectification as a method: rupture, reflexivity and the lifting of the functionalist burden

The preceding diagnosis only takes on its full significance if we make explicit the operation that renders it possible. Criticising public communication in the name of better use is not enough: we must transform the very relationship that the discipline maintains with this concept. This is the purpose of de-objectification. However, it must first be rigorously defined, and then safeguarded against a foreseeable objection — that of a surreptitious return to the functionalism it purports to dismiss.

2.1. What does it mean to de-objectify a concept?

To de-objectify is neither to deny the existence of the phenomenon nor to engage in sceptical wordplay. It is to undo the process of reification through which a historical and social construct comes to present itself as a natural 'thing', endowed with self-evidence that renders it unnecessary to question it. This act brings together two traditions that are all too often regarded as separate. From the first, the Bachelardian tradition, it draws the demand for a *break*: knowledge is constructed in opposition to opinion and to initial experience, at the cost of a detachment from the obvious (Bachelard, 1938). The concept of public communication, as it circulates in professional departments and textbooks, is precisely an 'epistemological obstacle' in this sense: its very familiarity obscures our understanding of it.

From the second, Bourdieusian, legacy, de-objectification draws on reflexivity. To objectify a social object is also to objectify the position of the person studying it and the practical relationship that binds them to their object (Bourdieu, 2012). The public communication researcher does not observe from a neutral vantage point: they often share the language, and sometimes the interests, of those who produce the mechanisms they analyse. De-objectification thus differs from *deconstruction* in the literary sense, which merely dissolves the oppositions within a text: it aims at a re-foundation, not a dissolution. It does not claim that public communication does not exist; it asserts that it is not what it purports to be, and proposes to reconstruct it as a scientific object by restoring its genesis, its presuppositions and its function. To de-objectify is therefore to restore the concept's depth as a problem after instrumental use has reduced it to mere obviousness.

We can then understand why de-objectification calls for a paradigm shift rather than a mere adjustment of definition. As long as we reason within the transmissive framework, any criticism remains internal: the sender will be criticised for

having targeted, formulated or disseminated the message poorly. To de-objectify is to step outside the framework itself, in order to reframe the question from the outside: what does public communication actually do, regardless of what it claims to do? Systems theory provides the most appropriate language for this question—provided it is stripped of its own baggage.

2.2. Overcoming the functionalist bias: from homeostasis to autopoiesis and complexity

Resorting to systems theory does indeed invite a serious objection, which it would be dishonest to sidestep. Systems theory, in its early cybernetic form, is closely linked to functionalism: to conceive of an organisation in terms of equilibrium, regulation and self-maintenance is to risk naturalising the very order one claimed to be questioning, and to let the harmonistic presupposition back in through the window that de-objectification had just thrown out through the door. The criticism once levelled at Parsons's structural-functionalism would therefore apply to us: by constantly explaining how the system sustains itself, we end up justifying its continued existence.

This objection must be taken seriously, but it applies only to a certain kind of systems theory. Three shifts can help to overcome it. The first consists in distinguishing homeostasis — a term borrowed from early cybernetics — from functionalist equilibrium. Homeostasis does not denote a harmonious state to be preserved, but a conflictual process of maintaining a system at the cost of constant and sometimes costly adjustments; far from presupposing harmony, it presupposes disruption. Retaining the term nevertheless requires subordinating it to a more demanding conception of organisation.

The second shift is decisive: it comes via Niklas Luhmann. In his theory of social systems, the system is not composed of individuals but of communications, and it is *autopoietic*: it reproduces itself through its own operations and maintains only a relationship of operational closure with its environment (Luhmann, 1995). This counter-intuitive thesis is of great critical significance here. It explains why institutions so often appear unresponsive: not because of any ill will on the part of their staff, but because a system processes only that part of its environment which it can convert into its own code. The administration perceives of the social sphere only that which is translatable into administrative terms — admissible, compliant, processable — and rejects the rest as 'noise'. Autopoiesis is therefore not an apology for closure: it is the tool that enables us to conceive of institutional deafness as a

structural property, rather than as a flaw that can be corrected through increased communication.

Finally, the third shift relates to the philosophy of complexity as formulated by Edgar Morin (1990) and Jean-Louis Le Moigne (1990). Systemic modelling is not, in this context, a mechanism of equilibrium, but a *dialogic* process: it holds together order and disorder, regulation and crisis, without reconciling them. The system is never purely stable; it thrives on its own tensions and transforms itself at their expense. Reconceived in this way, systemic theory ceases to be conservative: it does not assert that the system must maintain itself, but describes how it goes about doing so, and at the cost of what forms of violence. This is precisely the critical stance that de-objectification demanded. Far from being at odds, critical theory and complex systems theory converge here: describing the mechanics of reproduction is not to absolve it, but to make it visible — and thus open to challenge.

Once this obstacle has been removed, the way is clear for a form of modelling that is neither a eulogy to the established order nor a mere descriptive tool, but rather an analysis of an ongoing and never-ending endeavour: that through which the public organisation attempts to absorb, without resolving it, the lack of communication that constitutes it.

III. The systemic modelling of institutional action: from transmission to regulation through in communication

Armed with this clarification, we can replace the analysis of message flows with another interpretation: that of the processes through which the institution survives within its own environment. It is no longer a question of measuring what the administration puts out, but of understanding what its communication does — including, and perhaps above all, when it fails to convey its message.

3.1. Moving beyond the linear model: the organisation as an open system

A state, local or quasi-public institution cannot be conceived as a self-sufficient monad producing decontextualised discourse. Following in the footsteps of the Palo Alto School (Watzlawick, Helmick, Beavin & Jackson, 1972) and complexity modelling (Le Moigne, 1990; Morin, 1990), it must be understood as an open system, immersed in an intrinsically entropic social environment — characterised by uncertainty, the fragmentation of audiences and the proliferation of group-specific demands. Maffesoli (1988) had foreseen this fragmentation when he described the decline of the grand unifying narrative in favour of a mosaic of tribes and

shifting affiliations: it is to this fragmented and defiant social reality that the institution now addresses its message.

In this context, the concept of public communication sheds its promotional attributes to take on a structural function: regulation. The administration is constantly beset by paradoxical demands. It is torn between the rigidity of its normative framework — strict adherence to procedures, vertical hierarchy, lengthy processing times — and the demands for fluidity and responsiveness imposed by reflexive modernity. The communication system is therefore no longer an optional tool, grafted onto the decision *after the fact*; it acts as an organic agent of translation, tasked with making bureaucratic dryness intelligible whilst absorbing the feedback loops — that rise from the civil sphere. It is no longer the formal clarity or aesthetic quality of the message that determines its value, but the system's capacity to maintain its dynamic equilibrium in the face of external turbulence.

We can already see an unexpected consequence emerging. If the function of communication is to regulate, then its success is not measured by the amount of meaning conveyed, but by the stability maintained. An administration may well 'communicate poorly' in the transmissive sense — causing numerous misunderstandings, maintaining ambiguity, delaying its responses — and yet 'regulate well' in the systemic sense, if this ambiguity and these delays help to cushion the pressure and restore internal order. It is this dissociation between apparent communicative effectiveness and actual regulatory effectiveness that lies at the heart of our model.

3.2. Homeostasis through a lack of communication: the management of symbolic boundaries

This regulatory process never takes place within the idyllic transparency of a pacified public sphere. It is precisely at this intersection that the variable of cultural foundations comes into its own. The interaction between the administrative apparatus and the social fabric generates constant friction, which reveals the structural lack of communication mentioned above. Far from being an anomaly that a better campaign or an optimised digital portal could correct, this lack of communication is the ordinary mode of existence of the asymmetrical relationship between the state norm and social practices.

A systemic analysis demonstrates that public communication operates precisely along these fault lines. It functions as a porous membrane, a boundary whose role is to cushion the symbolic violence inherent in any legal-rational imposition. In a context deeply steeped in tradition, the institution deploys discursive strategies that borrow — often mimically — from the

registers of endogenous forms of social interaction: the use of a vocabulary of closeness, the staging of institutional empathy, and the recourse to mediating figures. It learns the language of those it governs, not to listen to them, but to gain their acceptance.

This is therefore not a genuine dialogue, but — and the word deserves careful consideration — a ruse. It is, however, necessary to specify to whom, or to what, this ruse is to be attributed, lest we fall back into a conspiracy theory that would ascribe to the institution a unified intentionality that it does not possess. The strength of the link between Crozier and Luhmann lies here in holding both ends of the argument. At the level of the actors, the stratagem is indeed strategic: agents and decision-makers exploit areas of uncertainty, ration information, and maintain the appearance of listening in order to preserve their room for manoeuvre (Crozier & Friedberg, 1977). At the system level, however, cunning is an *emergent* property: no individual intended it as such, but it results from — the way in which the system processes its environment according to its own code (Luhmann, 1995). 'Systemic cunning' is therefore not the calculation of a hidden strategist; it is the unintended overall effect of thousands of intentional micro-strategies. This dual attribution resolves the ambiguity that threatened the concept and lends it its rigour.

Public communication thus emerges as the homeostatic mechanism par excellence: it enables the institution to feign cultural adaptation and receptiveness in order to better preserve the rigidity of its decision-making core. By absorbing the public's dissenting voice through token consultation mechanisms or soothing rhetoric, the system manages its own entropy. The purpose of communication is therefore not to bridge the gap between the state and the citizen, but to make it socially tolerable, in order to ultimately guarantee the sustainability and reproduction of the organisation itself. The gap is not a problem to be solved; it is the very space in which the institution breathes. Public communication, in other words, does not cure the disease: it makes the symptoms bearable, and it is on this condition that it renders itself indispensable.

IV. The digitised public sphere: the collapse of the monopoly on discourse and the urgent need for a pragmatics of relationship

Whilst the systemic approach allows us to view public organisation as a space perpetually seeking equilibrium, this model is now confronted with a drastic transformation of its environment. The emergence and widespread adoption of socio-digital arenas do not merely entail a change of scale or tools; they bring about a fundamental shift in the very

structure of the public sphere. This reconfiguration calls into question the bureaucratic apparatus's ability to fulfil its function of symbolic regulation solely through institutional discourse. The system, the dynamics of which we have just described, is seeing the external conditions of its equilibrium change — and must, in order to survive, relearn how to regulate itself.

4.1. Disintermediation and the crisis of institutional temporalities

Historically, the effectiveness of public communication relied on a structural privilege that was rarely made explicit: control over temporality and a monopoly on legitimate discourse. The administration dictated the pace of official discourse and imposed its agenda on the media landscape. The digitisation of spaces for deliberation has brought about a radical disintermediation, which strips the institution of its position of authority as a source of discourse. The State and its various branches are now forced to enter an arena where their words no longer enjoy any a priori presumption of truth, and where they stand side by side, on an equal footing, with those of the anonymous citizen, the impromptu witness or the organised opponent.

This loss of centrality gives rise to an acute crisis of temporalities. The long-term timeframe, inherent to bureaucratic rationality — the time required for investigation, hierarchical validation and regulatory inquiry — collides head-on with the tyranny of immediacy demanded by the connected social body. In environments where institutional trust is already undermined by historical baggage, this desynchronisation is not seen as prudence, but as opacity, or even contempt. Administrative silence, which could once cloak itself in the dignity of the long term, is now interpreted as an admission of guilt.

The user, endowed with remarkable self-organisational capabilities, sets themselves up as an instant counter-power. They document the failings of public action, capture the event — an infrastructure failure, a hospital malfunction — and produce their own systems of visibility, bypassing official channels of legitimisation. Attempting to resolve this crisis through an increase in managerial communication — frantic e-reputation management, crisis storytelling, a cosmetic presence on social media — amounts to conceptual blindness. In doing so, the institution exhausts itself by mimicking a conversational horizontality that directly contradicts its asymmetrical and vertical nature. It speaks the language of the network without being able to adopt its logic, and this very mismatch comes across as a sham.

4.2. From rhetoric to action: the front-of-house experience as the epicentre of communication

Faced with this dual recognition of failure — the futility of the transmissive model and the obsolescence of institutional persuasion in the face of counter-publics — research in Communication Studies must undertake a final analytical shift: to mark the transition from a semantics of the message to a pragmatics of evidence. In a climate of deep mistrust, the official narrative no longer carries authority; only the material reality of action produces social meaning.

The true communication of the public organisation no longer lies in manifestos, poster campaigns or talking points polished by consultancy firms. It lies in the user-friendliness of its processes, the clarity of its interfaces and the tangible experience of the citizen during what Vincent Dubois (1999) termed 'the counter experience', whether physical or digital. This perspective aligns with the founding axiom of the Palo Alto School: *one cannot not communicate* (Watzlawick, Helmick, Beavin & Jackson, 1972). The architecture of a service, the arbitrary nature of a queue, the labyrinthine complexity of a form or, conversely, the fluidity of an e-government platform constitute communicative acts of formidable power: they implicitly inform the citizen of the degree of regard in which they are held by the state apparatus. The service counter does not speak; it conveys a message. And what it conveys carries infinitely more weight than any speech.

In the context of Moroccan organisations, which are undergoing a vast digital transition, this paradigm is particularly striking. The digitisation of procedures, on its own, in no way guarantees better communication if it merely digitises the bureaucratic opacity that existed previously. If the cultural underpinnings of '*piston*' — informal intercession — or the logic of precedence survive behind the screen interface, the discourse on modernisation loses all credibility, and even the most sophisticated platform becomes the scene of redoubled disappointment. This means that digitisation is an act of communication before it is a technical act: it promises equal access, which the very architecture of the system will either uphold or betray. Our research into the digital dynamics of Moroccan public communication confirms this point: institutional visibility cannot be decreed; it is demonstrated through the concrete experience of interaction (Arbaoui, 2026). The administrative act, in its apparent coldness, is scrutinised by the public as the ultimate marker of the relationship.

Public communication must therefore be rethought not as a rhetorical practice of justification, but as the very engineering

of the point of contact between the user and the norm. This shift does not constitute a renunciation of discourse analysis; rather, it is its fulfilment, for it broadens the concept of discourse to include the mechanisms, thresholds and gestures through which the institution, whether it intends to or not, constantly speaks of itself.

Conclusion

The epistemological trajectory outlined in this article has sought to demonstrate that the heuristic impoverishment of the concept of ‘public communication’ is by no means a disciplinary inevitability. It is a symptom of intellectual capitulation to the pull of the lexicons of private-sector management and political consultation. By accepting to reduce this analytical category to a mere technical apparatus designed to promote state action, the Information and Communication Sciences ran the risk of transforming themselves into the sciences of legitimation — of studying institutional communication through the very eyes of the institutions themselves.

The process of de-objectification that we have undertaken—and which we have taken care to distinguish both from mere deconstruction and from a systemic eulogy of the established order—reveals that it is not only possible but necessary to retain this term. Not to denote a smooth and unambiguous function of the administration, but to name the nexus of tensions through which a power strives to manage the paradoxes of its own existence. Viewed through the prism of complexity, and freed from the burden of functionalism thanks to the combined contributions of Luhmann and Morin, public communication reveals its true identity: not a bridge, but a membrane; not a remedy for the divide between the state and the citizen, but the mechanism that makes it tolerable and, in so doing, perpetuates it.

It is therefore clear that the aporia referred to in our title was not a fruitless impasse, but a productive tension. The aporia stems from the fact that the concept can neither be retained as it stands nor abandoned without causing harm; it is resolved when we cease to expect public communication to reconcile precisely what it is designed to keep separate. The contradiction that transmissive thinking experienced as a failure is recognised by systemic thinking as a mode of operation. Such is the benefit of de-objectification: transforming an insoluble difficulty into an intelligible object.

Researchers must now resist the temptation to analyse solely the stated intentions of institutional communicators. Thinking about public communication in the age of organic mistrust and digital disintermediation requires turning one’s gaze to where

the relationship is forged and fractured: probing the silences within the organisation, exposing the gaps in the informal sphere, analysing the brutal materiality of bureaucratic mediations. It is only on the condition of this reversal — abandoning the complacent semiology of official discourse to embrace the rough pragmatics of institutional frictions — that the concept will regain its full critical acuity and justify its continued place at the heart of the SIC’s scientific project. Finally, this theoretical framework calls for its own testing: it opens up an empirical programme, already underway in Morocco (Arbaoui, 2025a, 2026), where *the digital service desk* provides a prime vantage point for measuring, as closely as possible to the actual act, the gap between what institutions claim to communicate and what, through their very mechanisms, they actually communicate.

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