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*Political communication: transformations and challenges.  
Reflections on the case of a Belgian political party*

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*“Communication is one of the main concerns of the political system. On the contrary, the success and legitimacy of political action depend precisely on how well communication is managed.”*

Meyer 2002



## **Abstract**

Communication in the field of politics is constantly changing in Western democracies in relation to the steady transformation of society and technologies. This thesis emerged from a personal experience in a small Belgian political party called DéFI. During this experience I had the opportunity to work as DéFI's press officer during the 2019 electoral campaign.

The present work has the objective to contribute to a better understanding of the transformation and the challenges of contemporary political communication with a focus on small political parties. More specifically, this work seeks to understand the extent to which academic studies and theoretical arguments can respond to the reality on the ground.

Chapter 1 explains and clarifies the concept of political communication as well as introducing the media as an important actor in the field of political communication nowadays. Chapter 2 provides contemporary features of political communication and proposes a revised model of the current political communication system. Chapter 3 is devoted to the analysis of the contemporary communication of the DéFI party and gives a critical point of view about the reality on the ground from a personal experience. This analysis highlights the limits of academic studies and theoretical arguments and shows that political organizations do not all have the same opportunity to face current challenges and issues.



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## Introduction

In Western democracies, society and technologies are steadily transforming. As a consequence, communication in the field of politics is also constantly changing. This is a complex communication system composed of different actors: politics, media and citizens. These actors are connected with each other through different interactions that evolve continuously depending on their respective societal context. Nowadays, people gather information from the web and participate in demonstrations to make their voices heard about different political issues (e.g. climate change, gender and social inequality). In Western democracies, these issues are frequent and foster solidarity between people who feel concerned. These mass mobilizations of citizens have led political parties to hire professionals specialized in specific issues and with certain skills, thus leading to a dynamic of professionalization. Moreover, it is necessary for the parties to select the information that they want to communicate accordingly to the media request, thus leading to a dynamic of news management.

Besides, political organizations, in general, behave like organizations of the private sector. This is called consumerization of politics. This phenomenon is market oriented in order to meet the expectations of the citizen considered as a consumer particularly active in the field of politics. Nevertheless, contrary to sizable political parties, smaller political parties sometimes face challenges in adapting to these evolutions. Indeed, small political parties can for example be limited by their financial resources and so, cannot afford to hire professionals and cannot adequately use the latest technologies (e.g. digital media, social networks, election campaigns software) to adapt to the expectations of the citizens. Moreover, the lack of members and volunteers in small political parties limits their field of action and the impact of their activity contrary to sizable parties which are provided with more resources (e.g. association members, local committee members, large electoral base).

This thesis emerged from a personal experience in a small Belgian political party called DéFI. At the beginning of 2018, I was an intern for the 12 deputies of the political party in the Brussels Parliament for three months. At that time, there was nobody dedicated to this parliamentary group's communication. My main role was therefore to be in constant contact with the central party's communication unit. I was

expected to send them the information that I found useful to be highlighted in the external communication. Another task was to manage the parliamentary group's social networks. After this internship, I was hired by DéFI as a communications officer and then as a press officer for a year. During this period, I had the opportunity to follow and help the party to participate to the 2018 and 2019 electoral campaigns.

Throughout this professional experience, I developed a curiosity for the political field. Not having a background in politics, nor in political communication, made me wonder if hiring people specialized in fields other than politics was a common occurrence in political organizations like political parties. Moreover, I realized that many political messages didn't have a lot of impact on citizens. In fact, most of the time, DéFI's messages were not processed by the media, nor broadcast. The media made a selection of political information on the basis of several criteria such as relevance to current events. DéFI had difficulties to catch the attention of journalists and thus to have its messages received by the wider public. In that respect, DéFI's messages didn't travel beyond its own members. This allowed me to become more aware of the fact that political parties must forge a solid communications strategy in order to have their messages received by citizens on a large scale. However, in many cases they do not know how to approach this challenge.

With this context in mind, the present work has the objective to contribute to a better understanding of the transformation and the challenges of contemporary political communication with a focus on small political parties. More specifically, this work seeks to understand the extent to which academic studies and theoretical arguments can respond to the reality on the ground.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 helps to explore the founding principles of political communication through scholarly works. More precisely, this chapter offers definitions, a historical viewpoint and relates to different concepts and models that build a better understanding of the concept of political communication. In addition, Chapter 1 introduces the media as an important actor in the field of politics, particularly concerning the modern view of political communication that is constantly transforming.

Chapter 2 focuses on contemporary features of political communication. This chapter analyses mediatisation and decentralisation as current approaches. Then, the study analyses the important challenge of the professionalization of politics. The last paragraph proposes a model for a personalized approach to the current political communication system.

Chapter 3 deals with political communication as a practice by analysing the present communication of the Belgian political party DéFI. Developing on reflections from my personal experience, this chapter emphasizes the communications strategy of the party in a period of election campaigns. Secondly, it highlights the structure and tasks of the communications professionals of the party. Finally, the chapter concludes with a personal, critical point of view about the reality on the ground.

In the conclusion, I highlight the limits of academic studies and of theoretical arguments. In fact, political communications as a field of study doesn't respond to all challenges and issues faced by political parties on the ground. The analysis of the case of study of a small Belgian political party is a good example of how communication actually works in the political field. This shows that political organizations do not all have the same opportunity to face current challenges and issues. This thesis aims to contribute to grasp these questions by offering an up-to-date model of the political communication system based on scholarly works and on my working experience on the ground.





## Chapter 1: Understanding political communication

The general purpose of this first chapter is to clarify political communication as a field of study by analysing theoretical reflections and conceptualizations. Thus, this chapter gives a definition of political communication as a notion and as a system. Moreover, Chapter 1 shows how the notion of political communication has been relevant across historical phases and transformed over time. The last part focuses on the introduction of media as political actors. This leads to the notion of public sphere and its current dynamics with the media.

### 1. What is political communication?

The notion of political communication is complex because it represents a hybrid concept. In fact, this term encompasses the two concepts of communication and politics.

In order to better understand this hybrid notion, I decided to focus on some contributions and conceptualizations that are relevant to the conduct of this work. This first part focuses on early and recent scholarly inputs about political communication, which show its evolution over the past decades.

Some early definitions of the notion of political communication deal with exchanges between different subjects in the field of politics. In 1989, Dominique Wolton declares that *“political communication reflects the importance of communication in politics, not in the sense of a disappearance of the confrontation, but on the contrary in the sense that the confrontation that is the hallmark of politics is now taking place in democracies, in the communicative mode, that is, finally by recognizing “the other”*”<sup>1</sup>. In this statement, the author highlights the introduction of the principle of interaction in the political debate by means of political communication. This means that communication in the political debate enables a dialogue between two or more subjects. In this way, the interlocutor is taken into account in the context of political communication. Here, it can be understood that the concept of communication

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<sup>1</sup> Wolton, D. (1989), *Hermès*, La Revue. p.29.

prevails over the concept of politics in order to organize the whole conceptualization of political communication.

Furthermore, in 1990 Dominique Wolton writes that political communication *“essentially constitutes a locus for the exchange of conflicting discourses between three main actors, all endowed with legitimacy: political leaders; journalists; public opinion as expressed by polls.”*<sup>2</sup> Through this definition, political communication comes to be recognized as the core of debates between different actors identified as *“political leaders, journalists and public opinion as expressed by polls”*. Besides, in this definition, the author considers that the three actors mentioned before have a legitimate role to debate in and on politics.

More recent contributions deal with political communication as a process. In 2006, Darren Lilleker says that *“for much of human history political communication would have been a linear, top-down process from leaders to people”*<sup>3</sup>. The author introduces the notion of “top-down-process” which means, according to him, that the communication is going from “the leaders” (i.e. politics and media) to “the people” (i.e. the public).

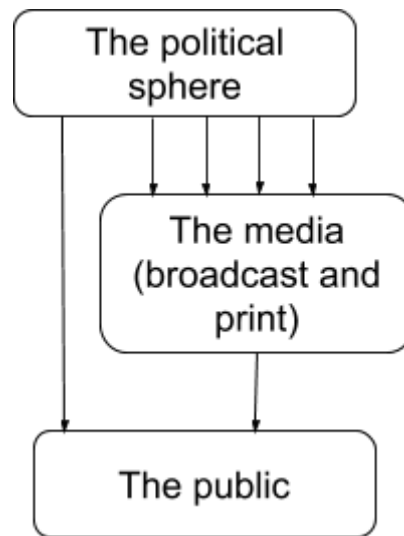
Different models have been elaborated to describe political communication as a process. I hereby refer to *Figure 1* formulated by Darren Lilleker. This figure shows the political sphere at the top of political communication process. The media (broadcast and print) are represented as an intermediary between the political sphere and the public. It can be noticed that the traditional view of political communication is based on a top-down process as stated previously. The messages sent by the political sphere are mainly used by the media but also directly conveyed to the public, without intermediary.

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<sup>2</sup> Wolton, D. (1990). Political Communication: The Construction of a Model. *European Journal of Communication*, 5(1), 9–28.

<sup>3</sup> Lilleker, D. G. (2006). *Key Concepts in Political Communication*. p.5.

**Figure 1 : A traditional view of political communication**



Source : G. Lilleker D. (2006). *Key Concepts in Political Communication*. p.5

Thereafter, Darren Lilleker focuses on a modern view of political communication and states that “*modern democracies need to be increasingly responsive to their publics, and at the heart of responsiveness is a dialogue*”<sup>4</sup>. Here, it can be noticed that the author talks about “modern democracies” not as a context but as the actors of a dialogue. This means that “modern democracies” form here the political regime presented previously by the same author. Darren Lilleker also identifies “the publics” as further actors of this dialogue. This means that the term “publics” can be understood as “the public” also previously presented in *Figure 1*. With this statement the author highlights the establishment of a dialogue between modern democratic states and their publics (i.e. the citizens) as an important State duty.

Subsequently, Darren Lilleker, goes further in his reflection about the modern view of political communication and says that “*political communication must (...) perform the role of an activator; it cannot simply be a series of edicts to society from the elite, ruling group but must allow feedback from society and encourage participation*”. According to the author, the role of political communication is to motivate the society (i.e. the citizens) to take interest and give its opinion about political issues. In this way, political communication is not depicted as a one-way process (i.e. top-down)

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<sup>4</sup> Lilleker, D. G. (2006). *Key Concepts in Political Communication*. Introduction.

anymore but as a two-way process. This means the elite (i.e. politics and media) interacts with society (i.e. citizens).

Furthermore, in 2008, Donatella Campus adds that :

*“Through the expansion in the net of modalities that presuppose the active intervention of the user, no longer confined to the sole role of receiver of the information, the net has gone more and more prefiguring itself as a space of participation. This happens in all areas of action, but it is particularly significant in the political sphere”<sup>5</sup>.*

Here the author goes further in the development of the modern view of political communication. Campus talks about the Internet as a native space of interaction and engagement from users. She emphasizes that the Internet enables these actions especially in the field of politics.

More recently, in 2015, Jay Blumler and Stephen Coleman say that *“what was once a pyramidal, top-down political communication system has become an up-and-down and reciprocally round the-houses one”<sup>6</sup>*. This input deals with a shift in the traditional view of political communication. The authors consider that political communication has evolved from a top-down to an up-and-down process. In other words, political communication is no longer considered as an informative process, but as an interactive one.

Finally, also in 2015, Eberwein, Porlezz and Splendore argue that *“recent debates about the relationship between media, democracy, and participation have emphasized the media's potential as an instrument for civil mobilization and empowerment”<sup>7</sup>*. Through this statement, the authors identify the media as a democratic tool which encourages citizens to go into action and make their voices heard.

To conclude, the contributions and conceptualizations that have been seen above enable to understand the large scale of existing understandings about the notion of political communication. In a traditional context, political communication is depicted as a top-down process. In other words, messages from the ‘top’ (i.e. politics and

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<sup>5</sup> Campus, D. (2008). *Comunicazione politica : Le nuove frontiere*. p.109.

<sup>6</sup> Blumler, J. G., Coleman, S. (2015). *Democracy and the Media—Revisited*. Javnost - The Public, 22:2, 111-128.

<sup>7</sup> Eberwein T., Porlezza C. and Splendore S. (2015). *Media as Political Actor*, In: G. Mazzoleni (ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication*, Palgrave.

media) are meant to inform the 'down' (i.e. the public) without allowing any dialogue. In this context, early definitions of political communication show the importance of the introduction of the principle of interaction in the political debate. Some highlight the presence of different legitimate actors (e.g. political leaders, journalists and public opinion) in the political debate. More recently, a different view of political communication has emerged. From a top-down process to an up-and-down one, the contemporary view of political communication focuses on the necessity of responsiveness and dialogue between the elite and the citizens. Some inputs emphasize that the Internet<sup>8</sup> and the media, by nature, are important places of citizen participation regarding politics.

## **2. Political communication from a historical viewpoint**

The history of the evolution of the concept of political communication has a long history. Some authors like Darren Lilleker believe that political communication has its origins in Antiquity.<sup>9</sup> In the same vein, Karen Sanders states that political communication was born in the ancient Greece<sup>10</sup>. In addition, Karen Sanders talks about the philosopher Aristotle as a pioneer in political communication studies.

Throughout the history of political communication, certain models have been put forward. In the following paragraphs, I present some of the models that have marked the history of the evolution of the concept of political communication in recent decades.

In speaking of models of political communication, it is important to recall the *hypodermic needle model*. This concept was first theorized in 1927 by Harold Lasswell in his work *Propaganda Technique in the World War*<sup>11</sup>. This theory is essentially based on the concept of conditioning<sup>12</sup> experimented by the Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov at the beginning of the 20th century.

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<sup>8</sup> The Internet can be considered as a mass media but it takes part of the category of digital media (i.e. in contradiction with traditional or mainstream media).

<sup>9</sup> Lilleker, D. G. (2006). *Key Concepts in Political Communication*. p.5.

<sup>10</sup> Sanders, K. (2008). *Communicating politics in the Twenty-first Century*. p.10.

<sup>11</sup> Lasswell, H. (1927). *Propaganda Technique in the World War*.

<sup>12</sup> What is called "Pavlovian conditioning" refers to the sending of a stimulus which launches an automatic answer in the receiver's brain. Pavlov discovered this concept by studying dogs' behaviour.

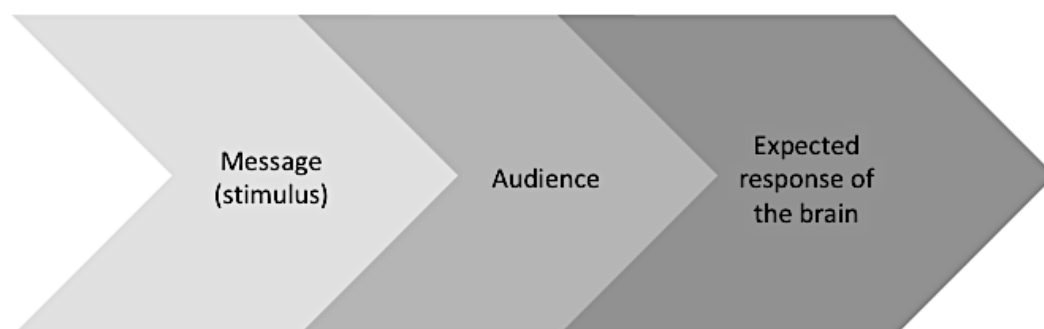
In *Propaganda Technique in the World War*, Harold Lasswell specifically discusses the massive propaganda campaigns developed by governments during World War I. According to the *hypodermic needle model*, the media kept hammering the same messages into the audience. The goal was to get the public to act in accordance with the propaganda message.

Harold Lasswell develops his model in a context of mass audience<sup>13</sup> where he considers that all individuals composing it are passive recipients. In other words, the author considers that the audience is satisfied with the information it receives. In this way, propaganda messages are more easily “injected” in the audience’s brains. Moreover, in this theory, each individuals making up the mass audience is impacted in the same way.

In *Figure 2*, which represents the *hypodermic needle model*, it can be noticed that the transmitted message is considered by the sender as a stimulus. In this concept, the stimulus is “injected” into the recipient’s brain (i.e. the audience) and then the brain is expecting to formulate an automatic response.

Therefore, according to Harold Lasswell, this model was used by leaders to manipulate audience behaviour. Actually, the message-stimulus was used through the media in order to better reach the mass audience. In the period of war, the media were almost the only news sources and so, reached a large part of the public. This is the reason why the media were chosen as communication channels by political leaders.

**Figure 2 : The concept of the “hypodermic needle”**



Source : Vincent Tiberj (2018), lecture on political communication theory.

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<sup>13</sup> Harold Lasswell is a pioneer in mass communication studies.

However, this model was disapproved in 1940 by Paul Lazarsfeld in his study *The People's Choice*<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, the sociologist closely studied Franklin D. Roosevelt's election campaign and concluded that only a few messages were assimilated by the audience in a uniform way. This finding thereby contradicts the theory of Harold Lasswell in which he says that all individuals making up the mass audience is impacted in the same way.

Through his researches, Paul Lazarsfeld discovered that interpersonal communication had a stronger impact than propaganda. This was the origin of a different model, named the *two-step flow of communication theory* that Lazarsfeld has elaborated upon in 1944.

Let us analyse *Figure 3* to understand the founding principles of this theory. Firstly, it can be noticed that this model only takes into account the mass media as message senders, and not the political leaders. Then, the model shows the presence of an intermediary (i.e. the opinion leader) between the sender (i.e. the mass media) and the receiver (i.e. the individuals). This intermediary called opinion leader is an individual who is aware of having influence over the other individuals. Most of the time, an individual becomes an opinion leader by means of his personal reputation, experience, social background, and the ability to share his thoughts clearly and effectively on various current political issues.

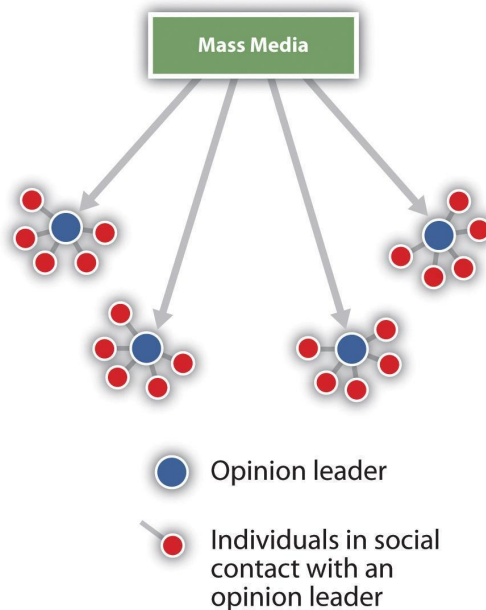
The goal of an opinion leader is to reach and convince as much individuals as possible through his position statements. The more individuals an opinion leader get, the more possibility he has to spread his point of view.

Moreover, this model shows that there are several individuals who are in social contact with the same opinion leader. This means that social groups form around opinion leaders.

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<sup>14</sup> Lazarsfeld, P. F., Berelson, B., Gaudet, H. (1940). *The People's Choice*, Columbia University Press.

**Figure 3 : Two-step flow of communication**



Source : Paletz, D., Owen, D., Cook, T. (1995). *21 century American Government and Politics*, Chapter 7. Adapted from Katz, E., Lazarsfeld, P. *Personal influence*. New York: The Free Press.

Subsequently, in 1989, Dominique Wolton focuses on the whole concept of political communication by saying that “*previously, many terms have been used to describe this dedicated activity to the exchange of political speeches but with most of the time a rather laudatory connotation, even critical especially since the 20th century when communism and Nazism identified political communication and propaganda*”<sup>15</sup>. In other words, the author insists on the fact that the concept of political communication has long existed, even before the appearance of the term ‘political communication’. Thus, Dominique Wolton gives the example of the ideologies of “communism and Nazism” which would have used propaganda as a concept of political communication. That is the reason why, according to Dominique Wolton, political communication has not always had good reputation.

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<sup>15</sup> Wolton, D. (1989). *La communication politique : construction d'un modele*. Hermès, La Revue, 4(1), 27-42. p.28



In 1999, Blumler and Kavanagh publish *The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features*<sup>16</sup> in which they identify three chronological phases from the second post-war period to the present day. The first age extends from the end of World War II to the end of the 1950s. The second age goes from the 1960s to the 1980s and the third one from the 1990s to the 1999s. The next paragraphs focus on the explication of these phases.

In the first phase, it was the political parties that dominated the political system. During this period, political communication was mainly based on controversies between the political parties. Indeed, the parties tried to distinguish themselves from each other by showing their added values. Communication between the parties was carried out publicly through the media and citizens. It is important to remember that at that time, the mass media (i.e. print media, tv and radio) were considered as very effective by the party leaders. In fact, as we said earlier, political leaders saw, through mass media, the way to reach a wide audience with their messages.

Moreover, the audience could be divided in two groups : the “sophisticated citizens” versus the “ordinary citizens”. The first group was composed of individuals from the bourgeoisie, who belong to the high society and who had a great interest in politics and on the issues of the political agenda. Most of the time, they were loyal to one or the other political party, depending on the ideologies they shared. Although they were a social minority, it was often people from the group of “sophisticated citizens” who had access to politics. On the other side, within the less privileged social classes, people had fewer opportunities to take part in political life. More often than not, they had access to the information through mass media like “sophisticated citizens” but couldn’t inform themselves otherwise. Thus, the large group of “ordinary citizens” was mostly composed of workers’ families who didn’t have the opportunity to inform themselves further about political issues.

Originally, the method of ideological confrontation used by political parties during this first phase aimed to set up a model for strengthening citizens' ideologies in political parties. A characteristic of this model was that citizens were undifferentiated amongst themselves.

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<sup>16</sup> Blumler, J. G., Kavanagh, D. (1999). *Political Communication*, Taylor&Francis, 16:209–230.

However, according to Blumler and Kavanagh, this method did encourage a large part of the population (i.e. ordinary citizens) to identify themselves, not in political parties directly, but in social and ideological groups led by opinion leaders (see the *Two-step flow of communication theory* pp 15-16). In this way, citizens of the same social and ideological groups tended to vote in agreement with each other.

Blumler and Kavanagh state that in the second phase, television, as a means of political communication, was at its peak. At the same time, citizens' loyalty to political parties was declining. According to the authors, political communication through television has made it possible to reduce political propaganda and open up the possibility of organizing debates on ideas, ideologies and processing information. Indeed, television was considered as non-partisan and therefore aimed to inform by offering everyone the opportunity to form his own opinion.

At the political level, citizens had access to a more global vision of local or national politics. The TV news were a particularly popular format because it gave an overview of daily news and allowed citizens to feel informed on different topics. Finally, political agenda was no longer managed exclusively by parties and politicians but also by journalists and by the way, the media.

The third and last phase deals with a context where the media had a strong presence. Blumler and Kavanagh identify television as one of the means of communication through which the offer were a more important. Indeed, over time, a considerable number of television mainstream channels have emerged, including the arrival of 24-hour news television channels. The authors identify here a more complex period than previous ones, in particular by the abundance of content and existing means of communication. In fact, at that time, mass media were composed by print media, tv and radio.

During this complex phase, the authors identify 5 different characteristic trends: the intensified professionalisation of politics, the increased competition, the popularisation of communication, the centrifugal diversification and the reception of political messages by the citizens. These 5 characteristics are briefly explained in the next few paragraphs ; they are then discussed in more depth in Chapter 2 dealing with political communication today.

Firstly, since decades, communicating in politics is an increasingly complicated task. Indeed, most of the time, political organisations are composed by people specialized in the field of politics but not in communication nor in other particular fields. However, mass communication related to the advent of the Internet and social media requires expertise and mastery to be successful. This is one of the reason why political organizations and specifically politicians are in constant demand for a professionalisation of their communication. This also means that political organisations and politicians rely on experts (e.g. in communication), who do not necessarily have a background in the field of politics.

Secondly, since 1990s, the media system have seen its competition steadily increase. Whether between different media or within the media themselves, competitiveness is more than ever at the heart of the media environment. Since the arrival of the Internet, there are countless digital media which, by definition, are all type of media which rely on computers (i.e. Internet, social media, emails, websites..). To exist, both traditional and digital media must try to stand out in order to attract audience. Moreover, within the media themselves, different types of journalism have emerged. Thus, political journalism is challenged by other types in the same media like entertainment, sports and business journalism. In their work, Blumler and Kavanagh find that political journalism is outmoded. Indeed, in competition with the other fields of journalism, political journalism is not attractive anymore for the audience. Political news have become market oriented and so, editors try to reduce the costs and adapt the news to advertisers in order to attract their investments. The diminution of financial means of publishing houses lead to a change in the work of political journalists. Thus, contents of political news have to follow the business rules of the private sector. Political journalists must produce exclusive and attractive news for both the public and the investors. In the same time, political organisations and politicians are also impacted by this shift. They straightly collaborate with political journalists when they have political information to spread. That is why the content of political information should be revised and adapted to the media demand which has changed. However, according to Blumler and Kavanagh, the media supply is increasing but the demand for political information is decreasing.

Thirdly, since 1990s, the popularity of political institutions and organizations as well as politicians have decreased. Citizens are less interested in politics (i.e. governance,

institutions, leaders) but more in political issues. In the words of the authors, the long period during which political communication was based on a top-down process is no longer relevant. In fact, citizens find this process no longer adequate to their proper view of political issues. As it has already been stated (see Blumler and Coleman p12), political communication has thereby been transformed in an up-and-down process. Thus, citizens give more easily their opinions about politics and political issues.

In this context, the Internet and social media give the opportunity to citizens who have access to it to express easily and massively their opinions, when they want. In addition, one of the the characteristic of the Internet is to put all users on the same level. This enable political parties to directly be in contact with other users of the same social network for instance. Users can also directly address themselves to other users as citizens or political institutions, political organisations or politicians who are present on the Internet.

According to Blumler and Kavanagh, *“since the early 1990s, however, strong currents of populism have been suffusing the worlds of both politics and the media”*<sup>17</sup>. Through this statement, the authors raise the issue of “populism”<sup>18</sup> within media and politics that has been strengthened in the beginning of 1990s. More specifically, *“politicians are impelled to speak in a more popular idiom and to court popular support more assiduously. Media organizations are driven to seek ways of making politics more palatable and acceptable to audience members.”*<sup>19</sup> Thus, both media and politics try to adapt their language to what the audience find interesting, relevant and easily accessible. They try to popularize themselves through their content and language to be attractive. They also try to involve more the audience in their proper actions.

Moreover, according to the authors, the public is increasingly confronted with opinion leaders. This means that public opinion is being brought to respond to political issues in an emotional and affective way. As a result, cognitive and rationalist responses are set aside and political and media agendas are guided by more public-

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<sup>17</sup> Blumler, J. G., Kavanagh, D. (1999). *Political Communication*, Taylor&Francis, 16:209–230. p.220.

<sup>18</sup> Definition found on Cambridge online dictionary : political ideas and activities that are intended to get the support of ordinary people by giving them what they want.

<sup>19</sup> Blumler, J. G., Kavanagh, D. (1999). *Political Communication*, Taylor&Francis, 16:209–230. p.220.

oriented questions. It is in this spirit that the trend towards popularisation in the field of political communication has taken place.

Fourthly, Blumler and Kavanagh focus on the “centrifugal diversification”. This concerns the conditions in which both the political and the media systems produce their messages addressed to the audience. In order to better understand this notion, it is important to also talk about its opposite “the centripetal communication”. This is characterized by the idea of pluralism, that is to say the recognition of the existence of different ways of thinking, ideologies and behaviours. Thus, for the politics and the media, the audience is composed of groups with different ways of thinking. Depending on their target, political systems and the media will choose the groups that would have an interest, according to them, in the unique message they want to broadcast. An example of centripetal communication would be the top-down communication. Through this type of political communication, the senders believe that the receivers are all affected in the same way by this single message.

Unlike centripetal communication, centrifugal diversification takes into account the diversity of the audience by dividing it into segments. In other words, it differentiates people by their geographical and socio-cultural origins, but also by their gender, age, etc. Since the advent of the Internet in the 1990s, the mass audience begins to be seen as a group with multiple thinking and divided into various segments. Thus, in contrast to centripetal communication, centrifugal diversification allows a central message to be disseminated in several others. These diversified messages are adapted to the selected segments and therefore to the appropriate communication channel related to these segments.

Fifthly, this paragraph deals with the manner in which citizens receive political messages. Indeed, in the current context of mass information, citizens have a lot of sources to deal with in order to stay informed. However, to form their own opinion citizens have to select only a few sources of information. Thus, Blumler and Kavanagh talk about the emergence of a “pick and choose” culture<sup>20</sup>. In other words, the authors see the emergence of consumer habits in the manner in which political and media information are processed. These practices tend to increasingly connect to those of the commercial sector.

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<sup>20</sup> Blumler, J. G., Kavanagh, D. (1999). *Political Communication*, Taylor&Francis, 16:209–230. p.223.

Recent contributions in political communication studies emphasize the disinterest in politics. In 2006, Darren Lilleker tells that "*in many democratic nations, it is argued that politics is in crisis. Apathy rules, the public do not want to listen; politics is viewed as detached from society and politicians often regarded as self-seeking and power hungry egotists*"<sup>21</sup>. In other words, the reputation of the political system is therefore in decline. This phenomenon enhances the emergence of more and more non-elective "political voices" (e.g. non-elective organizations like business sector, pressure groups, public organisations, celebrities...). According to the author, the last 60 years have shown television celebrities, actors and musicians increase their role in politics. Indeed, some celebrities promotes political causes and therefore exerts influence on their fans who consider them as opinion leaders.

Furthermore, in the same vein, John Corner states in 2011 that political communication is changing and that one of these changes lies in "*an expansion of the terms of the "political" to cover a much wider range of social and cultural practices than was formerly the case*"<sup>22</sup>. In other words, the author depicts a growth in the use of political terms in popular and artistic environments. Thus, politics seems increasingly visible and adapted to other fields like television, cinema, association and so on. In addition, John Corner tells that this phenomenon is appreciated by those who consider it as a mandatory evolution or an improvement in the field. Others reject this phenomenon as demeaning towards politics.

In the previous paragraphs, we have seen that political communication has been marked by different phases throughout history. Models such as the *Hypodermic needle* and the *Two-step flow of communication* have contributed to a better understanding of the transformation of political communication. In particular, this part highlights the emergence of "new" challenges such as the intensification of professionalisation and competition of politics, the popularization of communication, centrifugal diversification and the reception of political messages by citizens between

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<sup>21</sup> Lilleker, D. (2006). *Key concepts in political communication*. p.15.

<sup>22</sup> Corner, J. in Brants, K., Voltmer, K. (2011). *Political Communication in Postmodern Democracy : Challenging the primacy of politics*, Palgrave Macmillan. p.266.

1990 and 1999. It is interesting to note that these challenges identified several decades ago are still relevant today. However, these challenges have evolved along with society and technology and need therefore to be revised and updated.

### **3. Defining political communication as a system**

In 2008 Donatella Campus states that “*political communication is the product of the interaction of these three actors (politicians, media and citizens) within the public sphere.*”<sup>23</sup> A couple of years before, in the words of Gianpietro Mazzoleni, the actors of political communication were the political system, the media system and the citizenship (see *Appendix 1*). Although writing in the same period, the two authors give two different perspectives. In fact, Campus talks about ‘politicians’ while Mazzoleni speaks of ‘political system’.

On the one hand, Campus refers only to “politicians”, that is to say people who are active in the political field (i.e. policy makers) and especially in political parties and governments. On the other hand, Mazzoleni talks about “political system”, that is to say all people who are working in political institutions like parliament, government, judiciary or head of state and in non-institutional organization like political parties, social movements or interest groups (see *Appendix 1*).

I find the approach proposed by Mazzoleni more relevant to the present work, because it is less restrictive than Campus' one. Thus, in the approach of Campus, “politicians” doesn't include political parties in their whole which represents a problem in this work which deals in particular with “political parties”. Hence, through the inputs of Mazzoleni, it will be seen how political communication can be defined as a system.

#### **3.1. The public-dialogical and the media models**

In 2004, Gianpietro Mazzoleni identified two principal political communication models: the *public-dialogical model* and the *media model*<sup>24</sup>. As it was already said, in both models the author took into account the following three political actors: the

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<sup>23</sup> Campus, D. (2008). *Comunicazione politica: Le nuove frontiere*. Roma-Bari, Laterza. p.IX

<sup>24</sup> Mazzoleni, G. (2004). *La comunicazione politica*, Bologna: Il Mulino.

political system, media system and citizenship (see *Appendix 1*). However, it is important to state that both models have been built on literature that was written before social media entered political system<sup>25</sup>.

*Figure 4* represents the *public-dialogical model* as it is characterised by the following interactions: between the political system and citizens (P/C), between the political system and the media (P/M) and between the media system and citizens (M/C). Mazzoleni clarified that the relationship between the media and the citizens is of an informative nature unlike the two others are on an interactive nature. However, this statement had a meaning in the context of mainstream media and the appearance of digital media, but the same relation is totally transformed in the contemporary context.

The three communication areas a,b,c represent political communication while the space d represents political communication through the media. Indeed, in this model, when the interaction takes place between the three actors at the same time in the political communication space, it is then mediatized.

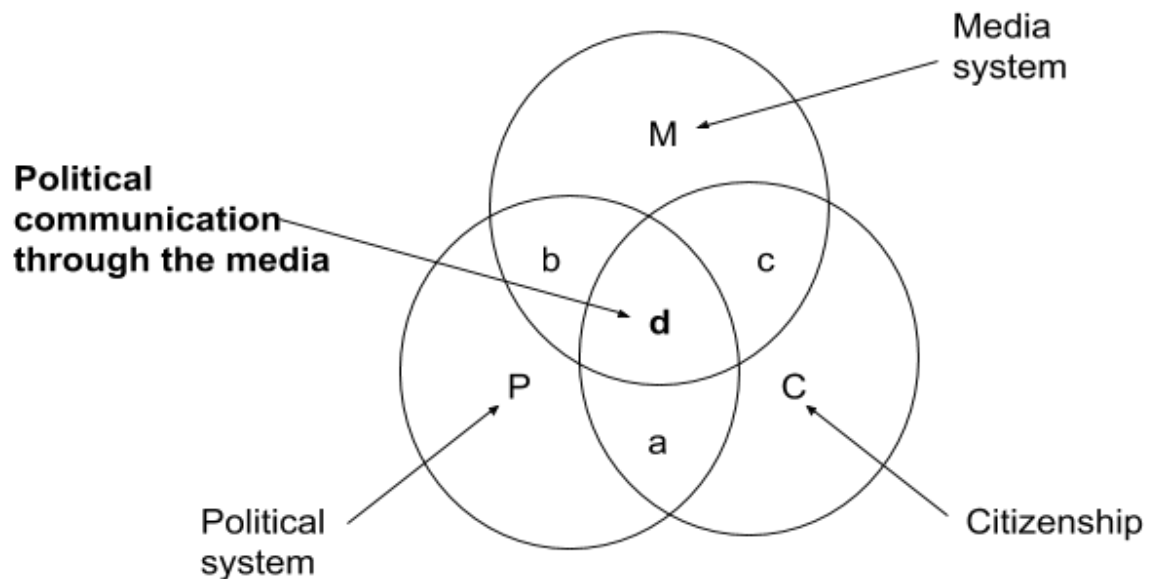
Through this model, Mazzoleni shows that the role of the media is secondary in political communication compared to the other two actors who seem to play a more important role.

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<sup>25</sup> It can be considered that social media entered political system in 2008 with Barack Obama who was considered as the first social media candidate in politics.



**Figure 4 : The public-dialogical model**



Source : Mazzoleni, G. (2004). *La comunicazione politica*, Bologna: Il Mulino. p.23.

In the second model (*Figure 5*), unlike *the public-dialogical model*, the media are represented as the core in which the interactions between the political system and citizens happen (mediatisation of politics). Mazzoleni called this representation 'media model' because of the interaction between political system and citizens in a media environment.

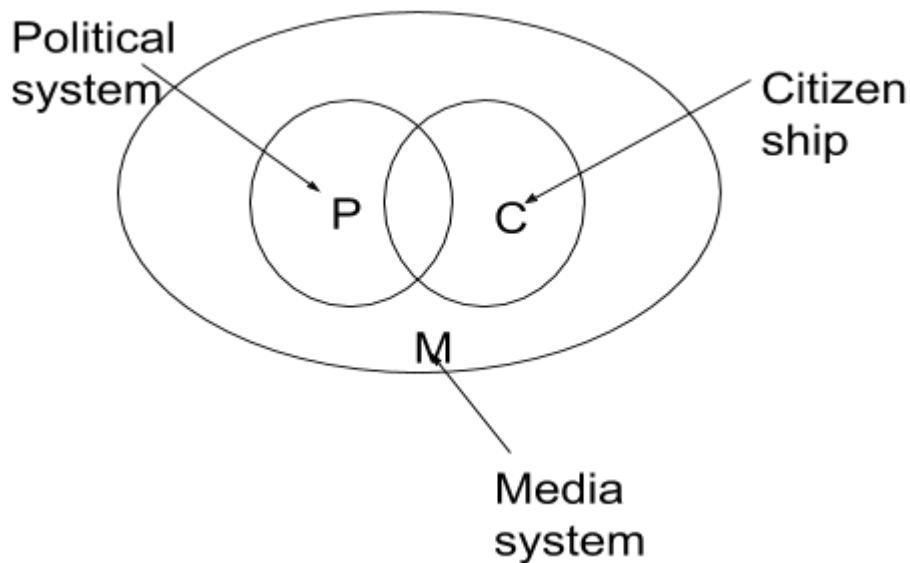
In this figure, the public sphere overlaps with the media space. Thus, the communication between the three political actors happen inside the mediatised public sphere.

According to Mazzoleni, this theory is relevant in a context of mediatisation of the politics<sup>26</sup>. This means that public political action takes place within the media space or, at the very least, depends on media action.

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<sup>26</sup> Mazzoleni, G., Schulz, W. (1999). "*Mediatization*" of politics : A challenge for democracy ?

**Figure 5 : The media model**



Source : Mazzoleni, G. (2004). *La comunicazione politica*, Bologna: Il Mulino. p.24.

To conclude, both models are interesting in order to better understand the changes that faced political communication studies over time. However, it can be stated that these models are partly relevant nowadays. In fact, the *media system* whose Mazzoleni talked about is quite different from today's political communication environment.

Thus, a revised model of the political communication would be needed to show the particular features of contemporary media system which are composed of traditional media and digital media. For the purpose of the development of an up-to-date model of political communication system, the next part focuses on the study of the nature of the relation between the different political actors.

### 3.2. The forms of political communication

This part is dedicated to the study of the relationships between the three actors of political communication as formulated by Mazzoleni: the political system, media system and citizenship (see *Appendix 1*). The following table (*Table 1*), has been elaborated on the basis of Mazzoleni's work.

**Table 1 : Relationships between actors of the political communication**

	Political system	Media system	Citizenship
Political system		Regulation, media and news management, politics as a source	Public communication, personal relationships, advertising propaganda
Media system	General information, watchdog journalism, partisan information, mediatization		General information, partisan information, political advertising
Citizenship	Voting, public debate, personal relationships	Participation in a TV show or news program, public opinion poll	

Source : Mazzoleni G., *La comunicazione politica*, Chapter 2 : Models and definitions, 2004

From the political system to the media system, the communication can be seen as a power relationship through which the political system wants to extend its influence and control. Mazzoleni highlights three forms of communication: regulation, media and news management and politics as a source.

Regulation deals with the public policies that govern media activity in the political system. For instance, the Gasparri law<sup>27</sup> in Italy identifies the general principles that guide the structure of public (i.e. RAI) and private audiovisual companies and adapts it to the advent of digital technology and mass communications (i.e. telecommunications, publishing, including electronic and Internet) in general. In concrete terms, the law provides for the protection of pluralism and competition in the broadcasting system. The law also provides for limits on network ownership and the collection of economic resources. This implies that no single network owner may broadcast more than 20% of radio broadcasts and that no single organisation may derive more than 20% of the total resources of the sector.

Similarly, in Belgium, the SMA Decree<sup>28</sup> provides that *“the exercise of a significant position in the audiovisual sector by a service publisher or distributor of services, or by several of them controlled directly or indirectly by a shareholder shall not affect the freedom of the public to access a pluralistic offer in audiovisual media services”* (Art. 7(1) of the SMA Decree).

These two examples of laws regulating the media system refer to the concept of media pluralism. This principle aims to guarantee the plurality of actors (structural pluralism) as well as the plurality of expressions of opinions and ideas (content pluralism). This principle is also enshrined in Article 11(2) of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights<sup>29</sup>.

Through media and news management, Mazzoleni talks about the actions taken to try to influence media activity. He takes as an example public relations actions or press conferences. Finally, some parts of the political system are able to create links of collaboration and exchange with the media.

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<sup>27</sup> Officially the *“LEGGE 3 maggio 2004, n.112 Norme di principio in materia di assetto del sistema radiotelevisivo e della RAI-Radiotelevisione italiana S.p.a., nonche' delega al Governo per l'emanazione del testo unico della radiotelevisione”*.

Full text of the law available at this link :

<http://www.rai.it/dl/docs/%5B1232099039939%5DLeggeGasparri.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> Full text of the law available at this link:

[https://www.francophonie.org/IMG/pdf/decret\\_sur\\_les\\_services\\_de\\_medias\\_audiovisuels.pdf](https://www.francophonie.org/IMG/pdf/decret_sur_les_services_de_medias_audiovisuels.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Article 11 - Freedom of expression and information : 1. Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. 2. The freedom and pluralism of the media shall be respected.

From the political system to the citizens, communication can take three different forms according to Mazzoleni: public communication, personal relationships and advertising propaganda.

Public communication is a concept that is often defined as having a general interest. It represents all communication actions undertaken by public institutions such as government agencies, public services or local authorities. This form of communication is often intended to promote public institutions, new legal mechanisms (i.e. social welfare) or causes of general interest (i.e. road safety, cancer prevention).

According to Mazzoleni, interpersonal relations in this case deal with moments when politicians interact directly with citizens. A concrete example of interpersonal relations between politics and the citizen would be the actions on the ground organized by politicians during election campaigns.

This brings to the last form highlighted by Mazzoleni which is the advertising propaganda. This last form of communication from the political system to the citizens takes place when parties or candidates turn to public opinion to persuade them of the validity of their proposals.

From the media system to the political system, the communication takes the following forms according to Mazzoleni : general information, watchdog journalism, partisan information and mediatization.

The broadcasting of information in its general sense is one of the primary roles of the media. Indeed, in order to be informed of daily news, the political system depends in part on the information published by the media.

So called watchdog journalism or watchdog press play a role in the media system, making the media the guarantors of the public interest. In this category, Mazzoleni describes the media as spokespersons and defenders of the citizen. In fact, the media help to control government abuses by forcing the government to be transparent and by trying to provide right information to citizens. In this case, watchdog journalists try to alert and investigate, sometimes over the long term, in order to try to find answers to missing information from the political system.

Moreover, according to Mazzoleni, partisan information represents, unlike watchdog journalism, the form of communication through which the media are spokespersons

of the political system and specific interests. Let's take the example of certain newspapers that tend to be closer to the voice of certain political parties in their information processing. For instance, Le Figaro in France used to be known as a right-wing newspaper and Libération rather a left-wing newspaper.

Finally, Mazzoleni deals with the concept of mediatisation. According to him, this phenomenon happens when the media impose their own languages and formats on the communication of political actors. The next chapter will focus on the direct consequences that result from this and that represent the emerging challenges in the world of political communication.

From the media system to the citizens, communication takes three forms: general information, partisan information and political advertising.

As mentioned above, the provision of general information is one of the fundamental roles of the media. Like the political system, the citizen depends on the information provided by the media. In this media/citizen relationship, a climate of trust generally prevails. Indeed, most of the time, the media are considered as reliable and neutral sources of information. There are of course exceptions, when a media is not considered impartial by the public there is an atmosphere of distrust.

The media system can sometimes take a stand for a particular party and convey messages that mainly serve the interests of one or more of these parts of the political system. This is what Mazzoleni calls partisan information and which has already been explained in the previous paragraph.

Finally, political advertising is the latest form of communication analyzed by Mazzoleni in the one-way relationship between media and citizens. It takes shape when the media use their proper channels to spread communications from the political system to the citizens. In this case, the media are an intermediary between the political system and the citizens. A concrete example is the broadcast of electoral tribunes during election campaigns. During the last Belgian parliamentary elections, each democratic political party was given the opportunity to produce a video and an audio as electoral tribunes for the television and radio of the public service broadcaster RTBF. In this case, the media only had a role in receiving, controlling and broadcasting the electoral tribunes. However, RTBF did not influence the content that was specific to each party.

From the citizens to the political system, the relationship develops on the citizen-elector's response to messages from the political system through three forms: voting, public debate and personal relationships.

Firstly, the vote is simply a democratic right of the citizen to express his political opinion. This action can sometimes be seen as a response to a message from the political system. For instance, when a citizen agrees with the proposals of a political figure, he or she tends to vote for that person and his or her political party. On the contrary, if the citizen is disappointed with a politician, a government or a party, he will try to respond to this perceived negative message by not voting for him.

Secondly, public debate is described by Mazzoleni as participation in the debate on issues and problems of general interest. Finally, the personal relationship between the citizen and the political party/political leader is the same interaction as already described in the political/citizen relationship. This form of communication takes place mainly during election campaigns when candidates meet directly citizens. A direct contact between the two actors is established in the form of interaction.

From the citizens to the media system, the communication takes the form of general feedback. According to Mazzoleni, the most common forms of interaction are: participation in a TV show or newspapers and public opinion poll.

In the first form, citizens, members of the public, can take part in political television programmes or write citizens' and open letters to newspapers, for example.

Finally, opinion polls conducted by or for newspapers are also a means of communication from the citizen to the media.

To conclude, as already said, political communication is constantly transforming. This is the reason why the previous paragraphs can be taken as a starting point and used for developing a model of political communication that better reflects contemporary dynamics.

## 4. Introducing media as political actors

### 4.1. The evolution of the concept of media as political actors

Media have previously been set by Mazzoleni in a central place within the political communication interactions. Even though the idea of media system of the author is not fairly recent to use it as it stands, the general idea of considering the media system as a political actor is a particularly interesting theory. This part focuses on some key moments of the evolution of this concept.

In 1972, the political scientist Oran Young expressed the idea that a political actor is *"any organized entity that is composed, at least indirectly, of human beings, is not wholly subordinate to any other actor in the world system in effective terms, and participate in power relationships with other actors."*<sup>30</sup> This definition implies that any partially independent organization from other authority, pressure groups or lobbies can be considered a political actor.

In a 1985 article titled *The Problem of Actor Designation in Political Analysis*<sup>31</sup>, Frederick W. Frey went further and explained that *"from a political-scientific perspective, one cannot accurately regard an actor in politics as a person in the sense of ordinary language"*. Indeed, according to the author *"the individual is regarded more as a persona"* which is defined by the dictionary as *"the personality that a person (such as an actor or politician) projects in public"*<sup>32</sup>. Here, the author therefore highlighted the personality shown publicly by an individual. He finally defined political actors as *"either individuals or collectivities that display behavioral cohesion to make it fruitful to regard them as unitary entities"*<sup>33</sup>. In this definition, he added the notions of 'cohesion' and 'unitary entities' as a condition for representing a political actor. A political actor can therefore be a group as long as it is driven by the concept of unity.

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<sup>30</sup> Young, O. (1972) *The Actors in World Politics*. The Analysis of International Politics. New York :Free Press : 125-144. p.140.

<sup>31</sup> Frey, F.W. (1985). *The Problem of Actor Designation in Political Analysis*, in Comparative Politics Vol. 17, No. 2. p.127.

<sup>32</sup>Definition found on Merriam-Webster on this link : <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/persona>

<sup>33</sup> Frey, F.W. (1985). *The Problem of Actor Designation in Political Analysis*, in Comparative Politics Vol. 17, No. 2. p.129.



Nevertheless, the notion of political actor is very often used in the field of political communication but very rarely defined. It is sometimes difficult to understand who are the actors targeted by this notion. In most cases, when not defined, the term "political actors" refers only to the world of politics (i.e. government, political institutions, political parties...).

In 1996, the concept of the media as a political actor appeared in the writings of the professor of decision making Benjamin I. Page. According to the author, "*the concept of 'political actor', applied to the media or anyone else, implies observable action that is purposive (...) and sufficiently unified so that it makes sense to speak of a single actor.*"<sup>34</sup>

Here, the author emphasized the same notion of cohesion as Frederick W. Frey by using the concept 'sufficiently unified'. Moreover, according to Benjamin I. Page, this concept is applicable to the media, or at least to some media of the time, that "*might seek to influence policy*". He explains that by the fact that "*the indirect approach of using their publications or broadcasts to try and change the beliefs and policy preferences of mass and/or elite audiences, which would presumably affect subsequent policy decisions*"<sup>35</sup>. However, the author identifies here media as political actors only on the basis of their motivation for actions, not on the basis of their 'nature'.

Somewhat similarly, Mazzoleni and Schulz introduced the concept of mediatisation of politics in 1999<sup>36</sup>. They stated that "*political institutions increasingly are dependent on and shaped by mass media but nevertheless remain in control of political processes and functions*"<sup>37</sup>. Since then, this theory has been in accordance with a wide range of works in the field of political communication. Indeed, a wide range of work treats the media as a political actor.

In 2001, P. Norris defined political communication as "*an interactive process concerning the transmission of information among politicians, the news media, and the public*"<sup>38</sup>.

In the same way, in 2008 Donatella Campus individuated politicians, media and citizens as the three most important actors of the political communication<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> Page, B.I. (1996). *The Mass Media as Political Actors*. In PS: Political Science and Politics Vol. 29, No. 1. p.20.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem, p.20.

<sup>36</sup> Mazzoleni, G., Schulz, W. (1999). "*Mediatization*" of politics : A challenge for democracy ?

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem

<sup>38</sup> Norris, P. (2001). *Political Communication*. In International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences. p. 11631

However, as it has already been exposed, it is the approach of Mazzoleni in 2004 that I consider more relevant. In his work, political actors are defined as political system, media system and citizenship. In any case, the three approaches show the emergence of the citizen as political actors.

Nevertheless, according to Eberwein, Porlezz and Splendore, political actors have long been characterized by political communication scholars as a group in its own right, distinct from citizens and the media<sup>40</sup>. This can be explained by the media model during the war, which was dominated by political propaganda as it has already been shown. Thus, the media and citizens were not seen as actors but as a means and a target respectively.

Besides, the 1990s saw the emergence of new technologies and particularly the digital media, and so the Internet, that quickly competed with traditional media (television, radio, print press). As it has been previously seen, the arrival of Internet has completely disrupted the media landscape. Indeed, the traditional media had to adapt to the new technologies. Thus, the mass media (i.e. mainstream media and digital media) have faced the choice of *“maximising audiences and providing citizens with the balanced information they need to fulfill their civic rights, empowering them to become participant actors themselves”*.<sup>41</sup>

In conclusion, this part shows that in the past decades the media have begun to be considered as actors of political communication, alongside the political system and citizens. In addition, the change brought about by the arrival of new technologies has created a transition in the media landscape and so, political communication. In this context, media as political actors face the issue of being responsive to the audience demand.

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<sup>39</sup> Campus, D. (2008). *Comunicazione politica: Le nuove frontiere*. Roma-Bari, Laterza.

<sup>40</sup> Eberwein, T., Porlezza, C., Splendore, S. (2015). *Media as Political Actor*. In: G. Mazzoleni (ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication*, Palgrave.

<sup>41</sup> Eberwein, T., Porlezza, C., Splendore, S. (2015). *Media as Political Actor*. In: G. Mazzoleni (ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication*, Palgrave.

## **4.2. How does public sphere and media as political actors interact and intersect ?**

Generally speaking, the result of the interaction between the media and the public is the “public sphere”. Indeed, the media broadcast information in this area in which public opinion forms itself. Thus, it can be stated that the roots of public opinion are built by the media. Public opinion can be seen as a combination of citizen and political dimensions. That is the reason why this part is dedicated to the definition of the concept of public sphere followed by the understanding of the dynamics between media and public sphere nowadays.

### **4.2.1. Defining public sphere**

In 2008, Donatella Campus stated that “*political communication is the product of the interaction of these three actors (politicians, media and citizens) within the public sphere.*”<sup>42</sup> However, in her statement, she added the notion of the ‘public sphere’ which is defined by Veronika Koller and Ruth Wodak as “*a concept (...) that contrasts with the private sphere, and is that part of life in which one interacts with others and with society at large.*”<sup>43</sup> The public sphere is therefore described here as the place where there is social interaction between individuals.

Habermas was the first to try to define the concept of the public sphere in 1964. He then explained that “*by ‘the public sphere’ we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body.*”<sup>44</sup> According to the author, the public sphere would be the place of social interactions where a part of the citizens, called here public body, would discuss about matters of general interest and tends to form public opinion.

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<sup>42</sup> Campus, D. (2008). *Comunicazione politica: Le nuove frontiere*. Roma-Bari, Laterza. p.IX.

<sup>43</sup> Koller V., Wodak R., (2008). *Handbook of Communication in the Public Sphere*, p. 1

<sup>44</sup> Habermas, J., Lennox, S., & Lennox, F. (1974), *The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article* (1964). *New German Critique*,(3), 49-55

Regarding politics, Habermas differentiated between the public sphere and the political public sphere. According to him, *"state authority is so to speak the executor of the political public sphere, it is not a part of it."*<sup>45</sup> In other words, the author described the political public sphere as a concept devoid of any political influence but composed of a public opinion guiding public authorities in their decisions.

To come back to the notion of public sphere, Habermas explained that in a context in which the public body is sizable, like in modern democracies, the communication of the information about matters of general interest must be accessible to each and every citizen. The plurality of information and opinions with which the citizen is confronted thus allows him to create his own opinion. In modern democracies, Habermas talked about what we call the traditional media (print press, radio and television) as a means of transmitting information.

Since then, Habermas' vision of the public sphere has been widely criticized, particularly because it took into account that of the bourgeoisie and not general public. According to Somers, *"the public sphere is a contested participatory site in which actors with overlapping identities as legal subjects, citizens, economic actors, and family and community members, form a public body and emerge in negotiations and contestations over political and social life."*<sup>46</sup> Here, the interaction between the individuals are not only "conversations" as Habermas said but rather "negotiations" and "contestations". In other words, the public body is formed by individuals who confront their opinions in order to form a public opinion.

More recently, Roberts and Crossley declared that *"the public sphere is a special space for the articulation of symbolic codes, values and representations that help to formulate individual and political orientations."*<sup>47</sup> The authors see the public sphere as a place in which it is easier to express one's own ideologies.

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<sup>45</sup> Habermas, J., Lennox, S., & Lennox, F. (1974), *The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article* (1964). *New German Critique*, (3), 49-55

<sup>46</sup> Somers, M. (1993). *Citizenship and the Place of the Public Sphere: Law, Community, and Political Culture in the Transition to Democracy*. *American Sociological Review*, 58(5), 587-620.

<sup>47</sup> Roberts, J. M. and Crossley, N. (2004), *Introduction*. *The Sociological Review*, 52: 1-27

#### **4.2.2. Media and the public sphere : the current dynamics**

The case of the media as political actors and particularly the digital media (Internet, social media, emails, websites) occupy a central place in the public sphere. Indeed, nowadays people are submerged all the time by information from traditional media but also and especially from digital media. That is why traditional media and digital media have to be distinguished in two entities. The sum of these two entities constitutes the media system.

A large part of the mass information that people receives come from social media, which are a subcategory of the digital media. Social media constitute online spaces in which users create and publish themselves the content information. In fact, since the advent of social media, people have become producers of media messages. Particularly regarding politics, social media allow everyone to publish and share their opinion through social networks as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube but also through blogs and micro-blogging or even discussion forums. This adds information content to the professional content already produced by journalists.

This contemporary issue of mass information, particularly present on the Internet, raises the question about the impact of it on the media/public sphere relation. In fact, on the Internet, the particularity of the public sphere is its very wide field of action. Thus, on the web, social media are acting in a private-public environment. For instance, when an Internet user publishes a post on Facebook, he or she is entering the public sphere of the Internet but at the same time sharing personal content, like an opinion, pictures or videos as he could do in a personal diary. Unlike a diary, Facebook is accessible by everyone in the world who has access to it and who signs up. That is the reason why it is complicated to distinguish the public sphere from the personal sphere on the Internet.

Moreover, as it was previously said, the information content produced on social media are of an amateur nature unlike the content produced by every other media which is, most of the time, of a professional nature (e.g. written by journalists). This led sometimes to the problem of fact-checking and fake news which are particularly present nowadays. In fact, when an information is published on the Internet, and especially on social media, the news can become viral right away. This could be a problem when the information are “fake news”, that is to say “*false stories that appear*

*to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke*"<sup>48</sup>. Indeed, in this case people who receive these information take into account false facts in their information processing. This also led to build a public opinion on false facts and affect the image of the targeted individual or organization.

Furthermore, by revising the model of Mazzoleni (see *Table 1*), we can revisit the dynamics between actors of the political communication by focusing on their relationship with traditional and digital media as entities. Thus, both entities interact most of the time independently with other political actors (political system and citizens). The relationships between the media system and the other political system and citizens, as highlighted by Mazzoleni, were in fact almost exclusively based on the traditional media. Thus, the relational dynamics developed between digital media as an entity and other political actors are analysed in the following paragraphs.

As we have already mentioned, the particularity of digital media is the freedom of expression and information that they give to citizens and that no other type of media gives. Whether it is through social networks, blogs and personal websites, forums or emails, digital media do not really have limits in terms of communication. Indeed, users can publish the information content they want, when they want and most of the time for free. In addition, they can also inform themselves about the topics they choose, when they want and often for free. This is why digital media are attracting more and more users. Thus, the growing popularity of digital media, and thus of the citizen/digital media relationship, does not leave other actors and political entities (political system and traditional media) indifferent. It is this dynamic launched by the arrival of digital media that brings about a change in the way the traditional media (print, television, radio) and the political system see their relationship with citizens.

On the one hand, traditional media are trying to digitise in order to be included in the phenomenon of digital popularity and to adapt to the transformations. For instance, paper-only newspapers create partially or fully paid online versions; television channels, aware that digital media users are less and less in front of their television screens, offer exclusively digital content such as video on demand platforms; radio stations, like television channels, offer exclusive digital content. However, these

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<sup>48</sup> Definition found on the online dictionary Cambridge : <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/fr/dictionnaire/anglais/fake-news>

examples do not take into account the "freedom of expression" factor which is a foundation of digital media. Thus, if a traditional media is digitised as in the previous examples but fails to provide space for users to express themselves, there is a good chance that it will not be a success for the media in question. In addition to the digital content offered by traditional media, communities can be created through websites, social networks or forums. The idea is to build user loyalty while at the same time including the user in the communication of the medium, for example by leaving space for comments underneath digital newspaper articles or by creating online opinion polls that can be reused in a TV show.

On the other hand, the political system also wants to follow the trend by digitizing itself, on the one hand to attract or not to lose the attention of citizens and on the other hand to follow the demand of the media which are themselves trying to adapt to the citizens' demand. Thus, it is not uncommon to see Facebook pages of political parties or Twitter and Instagram accounts of political figures. The idea is to show off and sometimes even show "the other side of the coin" that may appeal to citizens who no longer believe in the institutionalised politics.

To conclude, this chapter has allowed to clarify the general understanding of political communication. It has shown the complexity of this notion and the different manner to analyse it. As a notion, from a historical viewpoint or as a system, the concept of political communication has abundant resources. Thus, it has been seen that political communication has completely changed throughout its history. For instance, it shifted over the years from an unidirectional communication to a multidirectional one. From political propaganda to the *hypodermic needle* by going through the *two-step-flow of communication*, political communication studies have undergone a lot of updates.

Moreover, the current dynamics between the media as political actors and the public sphere have been highlighted. Thus, it has been seen that the media system is composed of traditional media and digital media entities which have impacted the traditional functioning of media and political system within the public sphere.





## **Chapter 2: Features of contemporary political communication**

The second chapter of this work aims to outline a contemporary perspective of political communication on the basis of scholarly works. Thus, the following paragraphs go through specific features of contemporary political communication.

Different features have been identified to describe political communication today. The first part of this chapter deals with the phenomenon of mediatisation which has long been shown as a major phenomenon of political communication transformation. The concept of mediatisation is not a new approach in political communication studies (see Chapter 1 p32). The first part focuses on the current interaction between media and political systems, also called 'horizontal process'.

The second part talks about the phenomenon of decentralisation which is characterised as a transformation of the public opinion over political and media systems but also as a vertical process of political communication. This part focuses on the relatively recent apparition of the notion of decentralisation in political communication studies. Decentralisation is identified as a 'vertical process' in which, on one side, political and media systems and on the other side, citizens, are organising their relationships.

The third part helps exploring the professionalisation of politics as an emerging challenge in the political communication process. In this paragraph, political marketing, news management and agenda-setting are introduced as current marks of the professionalisation of politics.

In the fourth and last part, an approach is modeled based on the previous paragraph and proposed as an analytical tool.

### **1. Mediatisation of politics**

#### **1.1. A four-dimensional process**

*"Mediatisation" of politics : A challenge for democracy ?* published by Mazzoleni and Schulz in 1999 constitutes a major input in the definition of mediatisation as a process. In this work, the authors distinguish 'mediatisation' from 'mediation' because both terms are often used conversely while there is a distinction to do.

According to Mazzoleni and Schulz, the term “mediation” *“refers in a neutral sense to any acts of intervening, conveying, or reconciling between different actors, collectives, or institutions”*. On the contrary, the notion of “mediatisation” *“denotes problematic concomitants or consequences of the development of modern mass media”*. Thus, mediatisation is a phenomenon which results from the emergence of mass information, particularly through the television as communication channel at that time.

In this way, Mazzoleni and Schulz explain that the mass media (i.e. media channels which spread mass information like television, radio, print media) can be characterised as “mediating agent” (also called “mass mediated communication”<sup>49</sup>). In view of the definition of mediation previously given, this means that mass media are an intermediary between different actors. More precisely, the authors describe mass media as actors which have substituted direct interpersonal communication between politics and citizens.

The contribution by Jasper Strömbäck entitled *Four phases of mediatisation: An analysis of mediatisation of politics* analyses the mediatisation of politics from a process-oriented perspective. In this work, the author highlights the multidimensional side of mediatisation by dividing it in four different phases.

Similarly to Mazzoleni and Schulz, Jasper Strömbäck distinguishes the phenomenon of mediation from the one of mediatisation of politics. Thus, the author states that *“the concept of mediated politics is basically a descriptive and rather static concept that refers to whether or not the media constitute the most important channels for information exchanges and communication between the people and political actors”*<sup>50</sup>. In other words, mediated politics is an unchanging phenomenon, contrary to the mediatised politics which is a “dynamic process” related to the evolution of the media. Jasper Strömbäck refers to the definition of mediatisation given by Mazzoleni and Schulz (see Chapter 1, p32).

Besides, in the context of mediatisation, the author declares that concepts of “media logic” and “political logic” are central. However, he states that both concepts are not

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<sup>49</sup> Mazzoleni, G., Schulz, W. (1999). *“Mediatization” of politics : A challenge for democracy ?*. p.250.

<sup>50</sup> Strömbäck, J. (2008). *Four phases of mediatization: An analysis of mediatization of politics*. Press/Politics. p.231.

developed on the same level: “media logic” is a dominant concept contrary to “political logic”. According to Jasper Strömbäck “*media logic can be taken to mean the dominance in societal processes of the news values and the storytelling techniques the media make use to take advantage of their own medium and its format, and to be competitive in the ongoing struggle to capture people’s attention*”<sup>51</sup>. Thus, media logic represents a form of communication which is particularly present in societies where media are relevant and independent from other organisations. This form of communication takes the shape of storytelling techniques (e.g. simplification, spectacularization, personalisation, stereotypization) which aim to enlarge the audience of the media themselves.

As previously said, the concept of “political logic” is less developed than the media logic. However, Jasper Strömbäck states that “*at the heart of any conceptualisation of political logic lies the fact that politics ultimately is about collective and authoritative decision making as well as the implementation of political decisions*”<sup>52</sup>. Through this statement the author highlights the policy dimension (“authoritative decision making”) and “the process of distributing political power” (“implementation of political decisions”). Thus, political logic represents the process in which political institutions (composed of political parties and politicians) focus and work principally on political and societal issues.

Subsequently, Strömbäck presents his four-dimensional perspective of the mediatization of politics. Thus, in *Figure 6*, the author formulates four aspects that, “*taken together, determine the degree to which politics is mediatized*”<sup>53</sup>.

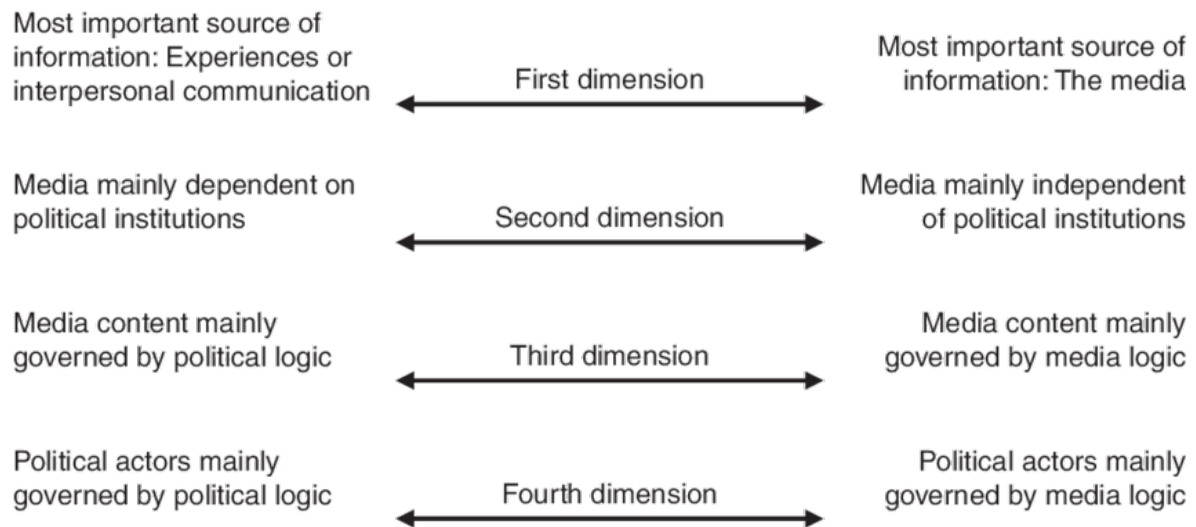
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<sup>51</sup> Strömbäck, J. (2008). *Four phases of mediatization: An analysis of mediatization of politics*. Press/Politics. p.233.

<sup>52</sup> Ibidem, p.233.

<sup>53</sup> Ibidem, p.234.

**Figure 6: A four-dimensional conceptualisation of the mediatisation of politics**



Source : J. Strömbäck, *Four phases of mediatization: An analysis of mediatization of politics*, Press/Politics, 2008, p235

The first dimension of the mediatisation of politics is the degree of media influence over the way the political field and citizens inform themselves. This means that this first phase allows to understand which are the most important sources of information for politics and society. Here, the author makes a distinction between experiences/interpersonal communication and the media as sources of information.

The second dimension focuses on the degree of independence of the media from political institutions. In other words, this step shows the way media are governed and if they are free to function how they want.

The third dimension deals with the degree to which political logic and media logic control media content. This means that this step enables to distinguish if media, as a source of information, follows the logic of politics or of the media as previously defined.

The fourth and last dimension of mediatisation of politics represents the degree to which political logic and media logic control “political actors”. Nevertheless, here the author declares that “political actors” are “*located within political institutions*”<sup>54</sup>. This means that Jasper Strömbäck doesn’t take into account political system, media system

<sup>54</sup> Strömbäck, J. (2008). *Four phases of mediatization: An analysis of mediatization of politics*. Press/Politics. p.234.

and citizenship as all political actors as it has been assumed earlier in this work (see *Chapter 1* p21). The distinction between the two different definitions has thereby to be done.

Furthermore, this conceptualisation of the mediatisation of politics shows that the mediation of politics takes place in the first phase which is the most important step according to the author.

Finally, one of the particularity of the mediatisation of politics is that it is a dynamic process. Thus *“it allows us to investigate and assess the degree of mediatisation across time, countries, or other units of analysis”*<sup>55</sup>. In addition, Jasper Strömbäck declares that this process is not linear nor unidirectional across the different steps. Thus, *“variances might occur across time and may also be dependent on the current political situation”*<sup>56</sup>.

Moreover, this analysis takes into account *“Western democracies in the period after World War II”*<sup>57</sup> and thereby focuses on mainstream media of the time (i.e. print media, television and radio) in specific societies. Also, the author doesn't talk about digital media, the Internet and social media. The *four-dimensional conceptualisation of the mediatisation of politics* is therefore only usable in a traditional media context.

In conclusion of his contribution, Jasper Strömbäck notices that *“the four phases of mediatisation identified here are somewhat idealised, and as in all processes, the distinctions between the phases are less clear in reality than in theory”*<sup>58</sup>. Thus, the next important step that the author emphasizes is to “operationalise” this conceptualisation in “the reality” to particular cases.

## **1.2. The horizontal dimension of mediatisation of politics**

More recently, different inputs also focus on the characterisation of mediatisation as an horizontal process. In 2011, in their work *Political Communication in Postmodern Democracy: Challenging the primacy of politics*, Kees Brants and Katrin Voltmer highlighted the horizontal dimension of mediatisation of politics.

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<sup>55</sup> Strömbäck, J. (2008). *Four phases of mediatization: An analysis of mediatization of politics*. Press/Politics. p.235.

<sup>56</sup> Ibidem, p.235.

<sup>57</sup> Ibidem, p.236.

<sup>58</sup> Ibidem, p.241.

According to the authors, mediatisation of politics is a process in which political institutions and media institutions<sup>59</sup> are confronting and collaborating with each other. The authors consider that the aim is to give a *“joint production of political messages”*<sup>60</sup> to the audience. Indeed, the authors state that there is a constant interaction between political and media institutions, and above all, an adaptation between each other. To be more explicit, according to the authors, political institutions follow the media logic and the media try to adapt to the political logic. In this process, both actors want to co-produce messages which will gain the consensus of the audience.

In the same way, media researcher John Corner characterises mediatisation as an approach which *“in many usages carries the sense of a changed condition within the institutions, structures and processes that have become subject to the activities of the media upon, within and around them”*<sup>61</sup>. In other words, the author declares that the media logic imposes its conditions over *“the institutions, structures and processes”*.

In addition, John Corner states that *“the consequences (...) include changed forms of relationship with people, perhaps in their identities as citizens, perhaps as consumers, as well as with media professionals”*<sup>62</sup>. In this sense, the author shows that the consequences of mediatisation are to be found in the shift of the relation between media and people. More precisely, Corner talks about a changing identity of the citizens to a citizen identified as a consumer. The author also talks about a transformation of the way media professionals (e.g. journalists, editors) work within the media.

In 2015 in their work *Media as Political Actor*, Eberwein, Porlezz and Splendore state that it is the media that have control over politics :

*“The media are first a political communication actor that plays a relevant role in the political arena, pursuing its own professional or commercial objectives. They constitute the site where politicians debate current affairs and where most parts of the electoral campaign take place; they are the arena in which democratic struggle unfolds. At the same time, they are*

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<sup>59</sup> Includes politicians and journalists.

<sup>60</sup> Jay G. Blumler in Brants, K., Voltmer, K. (2011). *Political Communication in Postmodern Democracy: Challenging the primacy of politics*. Palgrave Macmillan. p.X.

<sup>61</sup> John Corner in Brants, K., Voltmer, K. (2011). *Political Communication in Postmodern Democracy: Challenging the primacy of politics*. Palgrave Macmillan. p.270.

<sup>62</sup> Ibidem, p.270.

*increasingly imposing their conditions and rules on political actors who rely on the media to obtain electoral success”<sup>63</sup>.*

Firstly, the authors say that the media have “a relevant role in the political arena” and follow the business rules of the private sector. In fact, the media face the reality by choosing “*between maximising audiences and providing citizens with the balanced information they need to fulfill their civic rights, empowering them to become participant actors themselves*”<sup>64</sup>. Then, the authors characterise the media as the place where the political debate takes place and mostly where electoral campaigns take place. Here, the media are considered as a high place of democracy. Finally, Eberwein, Porlezza and Splendore affirm that the media, as political actors, exercise an influence over political institutions which consider the media logic as the most important mediator “to obtain electoral success”.

Furthermore, in 2016, in his work *Media Logic*, David L. Altheide articulates the concept. The author says that “*media logic is discussed as a general framework for understanding the nature, impact and relevance of media and information technologies for social life, as well as its use and appropriateness for investigating political communication. (...) Media logic refers to the assumptions and processes for constructing messages within a particular medium*”<sup>65</sup>. In other words, the author shows that media logic can be considered as a tool to understand the influence of the media and information technologies over societies and their relevance in political communication. In addition, the author considers that the media logic relates to the “construction” of messages depending on the channel through which they are spread. In other words, following the media logic means to produce messages adapted to the communication channels and so, to the audience of these media.

To conclude, the previous paragraphs on the definition of mediatisation of politics have introduced the concept of mediatisation as not new. The first contributions focus rather on the mediatisation of politics as a process and its distinction from the notion of mediation. In this context, the four-dimensional conceptualisation of mediatisation is a relevant tool to better analyse the degree of mediatisation of a

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<sup>63</sup> Eberwein, T., Porlezza, C., Splendore, S. (2015). *Media as Political Actor*. In: G. Mazzoleni (ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication*, Palgrave.

<sup>64</sup> Ibidem

<sup>65</sup> Altheide, D., Snow, R. (2016). *Media Logic*. Armand editore. p.1.

State. More recent contributions deal rather with the horizontal dimension of this process and thus with the interactions between media and politics. Thus, the phenomena of media logic and political logic are emerging. Following the media logic means that when politics is mediatised, the media are considered as the most important source of information by political institutions and also by citizens. However, sometimes political institutions do not want to follow the media requests. This is at this point that the political logic may come into play.

## **2. Decentralisation of politics**

Over last decades, political communication studies have provided several contributions about the recent phenomenon of “decentralisation”. In the next paragraphs, this phenomenon is thus characterised as a transformation of the public opinion over political and media systems but also as a vertical process of political communication.

### **2.1. Transformation of the public opinion over the political communication process**

Already in 1999, in their work *“Mediatization” of politics : A challenge for democracy ?*, Mazzoleni and Schulz distinguish political communication from “political substance”. In other words, the authors discern the “wrapping” of politics from the real “product”. In this sense, Mazzoleni and Schulz state that *“there is no doubt that much “politics of substance” is still practiced away from media spotlights, behind the scenes, in the discreet rooms of parliament and government”*<sup>66</sup>. Through this statement, Mazzoleni and Schulz show that what politics communicate to the public through the media is only a part of the political work. Thus, the authors highlight that political communication is not based on a principle of entire transparency.

The same year, Stephen Earl Bennett publishes a study called *“Video Malaise” Revisited: Public Trust in the Media and Government*, with the goal of showing the transformation of the public opinion over media and government. More precisely, this

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<sup>66</sup> Mazzoleni, G., Schulz, W. (1999). *“Mediatization” of politics : A challenge for democracy ?*. p.250.



publication analyses the thesis of “video-malaise” which “*asserts that a combination of negative political coverage by the press and exposure to the media lead to political cynicism at the grass roots*”<sup>67</sup>. In this way, the authors think that the media, when they give a bad press to political institutions and leaders tend to increase «political cynicism» from the public. Moreover, one of the statement formulated by the authors deals with “*the possibility that the public views both government and the media in the same vein*”<sup>68</sup>. Thus, through this study, Stephen Earl Bennett shows that if there is cynicism about governments, there is the same about the media. Indeed, the information spread by the media about governments leads to damage their image in the eyes of the public but this also leads to a phenomenon of distrust of the public towards both media.

More recently, in her work *Comunicazione politica : Le nuove frontiere*, Donatella Campus introduces the thesis of the “perfect society” in which she distinguishes the “ideal citizen” from the “new citizen”<sup>69</sup>.

In this perfect society, Donatella Campus describes the “ideal citizen” as a very well informed citizen in the political field. Thus, the political knowledges of this citizen are optimum and ideal. The ideal citizen is interested in searching for political information for instance reading political news. According to Donatella Campus, the ideal citizen also understands most of political terms.

In this context, the author refers to the thesis of the “vicious circle” which assumes that there are two parallel trends: on the one hand, more citizens are consuming political information from the media, more they will be interested and engaged in this domain; on the other hand, if citizens are already interested in politics, they will solicit the media of their own free will to have more information. Both trends prevail a high level of mediatisation of politics. This means that the media are considered as the most important source of information and that there is a high confidence in the media system.

Donatella Campus also refers to the thesis of video-malaise proposed by Stephen Earl Bennett in 1999, which represents the loss of confidence from the citizens towards

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<sup>67</sup> Bennett, S. E., et al. (1999). “*Video Malaise*” *Revisited: Public Trust in the Media and Government*. Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics. Volume: 4 issue: 4, page(s): 8-23.

<sup>68</sup> Ibidem

<sup>69</sup> Campus, D. (2008). *Comunicazione politica: Le nuove frontiere*. Roma-Bari, Laterza.

the media and politics. Thus, Donatella Campus remembers that “*viewership of televised public affairs programming results in an increased sense of malaise, or vague cynicism or detachment, regarding political institutions, processes, and actors*”. Contrary to Stephen Earl Bennett, Campus doesn’t only talk about governments but rather about “political institutions, processes, and actors”. At the same time, she says that the hypothesis of the video-malaise concerns mainly televisions programs about politics.

Furthermore, the perfect society of Donatella Campus provides for that the “new citizen” (also called “vigil citizen”) is a not deeply informed citizen in the field of politics, but aware of the main issues. The “new citizen” trusts thereby the media as a source of information and monitors political news rather than collects information. According to the author, the “new citizen” is only interested in knowing about current political issues on the surface without going into details. For instance, the headlines on the TV news or in the newspapers attract him but he doesn’t necessarily read the content or listen to the rest of the news. The “new citizen” is satisfied with few information content.

Later, in 2011 in their work *Political Communication in Postmodern Democracy: Challenging the primacy of politics*, Brants and Voltmer emphasise the disinterest and the disengagement of citizens towards political and traditional media institutions. According to the authors, citizens and especially the young generations « *are turning away from ‘high politics’ towards alternative or simply non-political spheres of communication* »<sup>70</sup>. This statement shows that the relationships between political system, media systems and citizens are evolving. Thus, Brants and Voltmer say that a part of the public is choosing “alternatives” and “non-political spheres of communication” to express their opinion about politics. The authors are the first to characterise this evolution as a decentralisation process.

## **2.2. A vertical process of political communication**

Different inputs focus on the characterisation of decentralisation as a vertical process in which, on one side, political and media systems and on the other side, citizens, are

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<sup>70</sup> Brants, K., Voltmer, K. (2011). *Political Communication in Postmodern Democracy: Challenging the primacy of politics*. Palgrave Macmillan. p.8.

organising their relationships. The process of decentralisation is in relation to the transformation of the public opinion over political and media systems.

In 2011, Brants and Voltmer consider « *the partial disappearance of the citizen* »<sup>71</sup> as a major phenomenon in the decentralisation process. According to the authors, “*participation in elections has declined dramatically, as has membership of and engagement in traditional political organisations, such as political parties and trade unions*”<sup>72</sup>. Nonetheless, Brants and Voltmer affirm that a majority of citizens, more specifically younger generations, choose to inform themselves through news and programs which deal with political information. Thus, the authors state that younger generations are no longer interested in political institutions but they engage with political issues.

Another phenomenon that Brants and Voltmer highlight in the context of decentralisation is the diffusion of the Internet and its consequences. According to the authors, “*the Internet has fundamentally changed the position of the public from simply being at the consuming end of political communication to active, creative and vocal citizenship*”<sup>73</sup>. In other words, the authors consider the Internet as a communication channel which allow its users to participate in politics. Thus, Internet users become active citizens regarding political and societal issues.

In addition, more recently, in 2014, Michele Sorice talks about the phenomenon of “ideological misalignment” in his work *I media e la democrazia*. The author characterises the “ideological misalignment” as a process in which “*voters abandon ideological-cultural loyalty to the party in favor of other choices: economic, personal, emotional*”<sup>74</sup>. In other words, electors don’t give their trust anymore to political parties which respond to the same ideology as theirs. Electors have changed the manner in which they choose for which party to vote. According to the author, citizens choose to vote for political parties or political leaders who respond to expectations related to the personal feelings and personal issues.

In *Figure 7*, Michele Sorice shows that generational turnover and social transformation are two factors that create ideological misalignment. This ideological

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<sup>71</sup> Brants, K., Voltmer, K. (2011). *Political Communication in Postmodern Democracy: Challenging the primacy of politics*. Palgrave Macmillan. p.8.

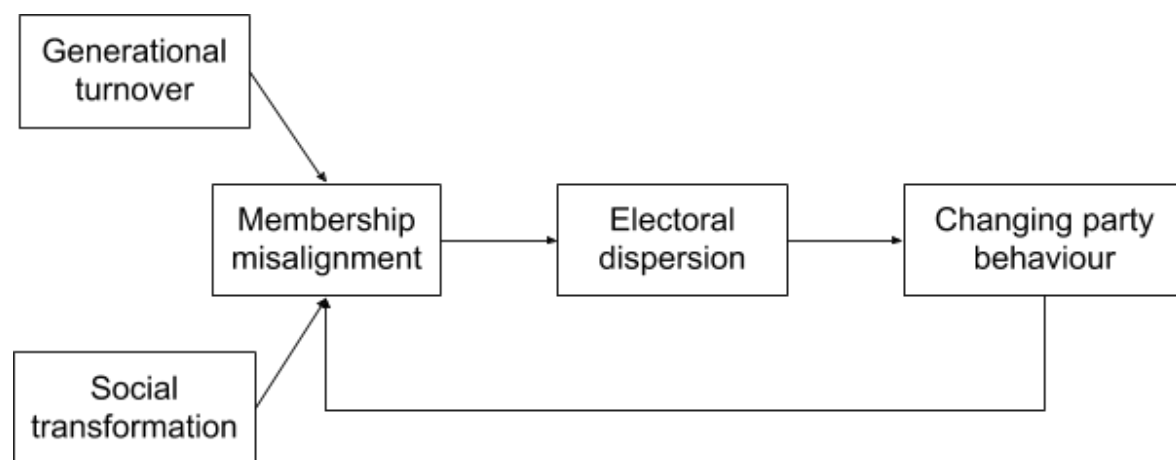
<sup>72</sup> Ibidem, p.8.

<sup>73</sup> Ibidem, p.9.

<sup>74</sup> Sorice, M. (2014). *I Media e la Democrazia*. Carocci editore. p.97.

misalignment leads to an electoral dispersion which then leads to a transformation of political parties behaviors. Thus, in order to recapture electors, political parties try to adapt their strategy which leads also media to rethink their strategy. According to Michele Sorice, the media are central in the context of ideological misalignment. Nevertheless, the author states that “*this process (...) joins the mediatisation of politics but (...) is not the cause of it*”<sup>75</sup>.

**Figure 7: Ideological misalignment**



Source : Sorice M., *I Media e la Democrazia*, Carocci editore, p98, 2014

To conclude, the phenomenon of decentralisation appeared relatively recently in political communication studies. The last paragraphs highlighted that decentralisation is characterised as the change of the public opinion to mistrust and cynicism over political and media systems. Phenomena like the video-malaise and the hypothesis of the new citizen show that this change in public opinion is in relation to technological and societal changes. Thus, the growing television offer of political programmes and the lower implication of citizens in understanding political information have played an important role in the degradation of political image.

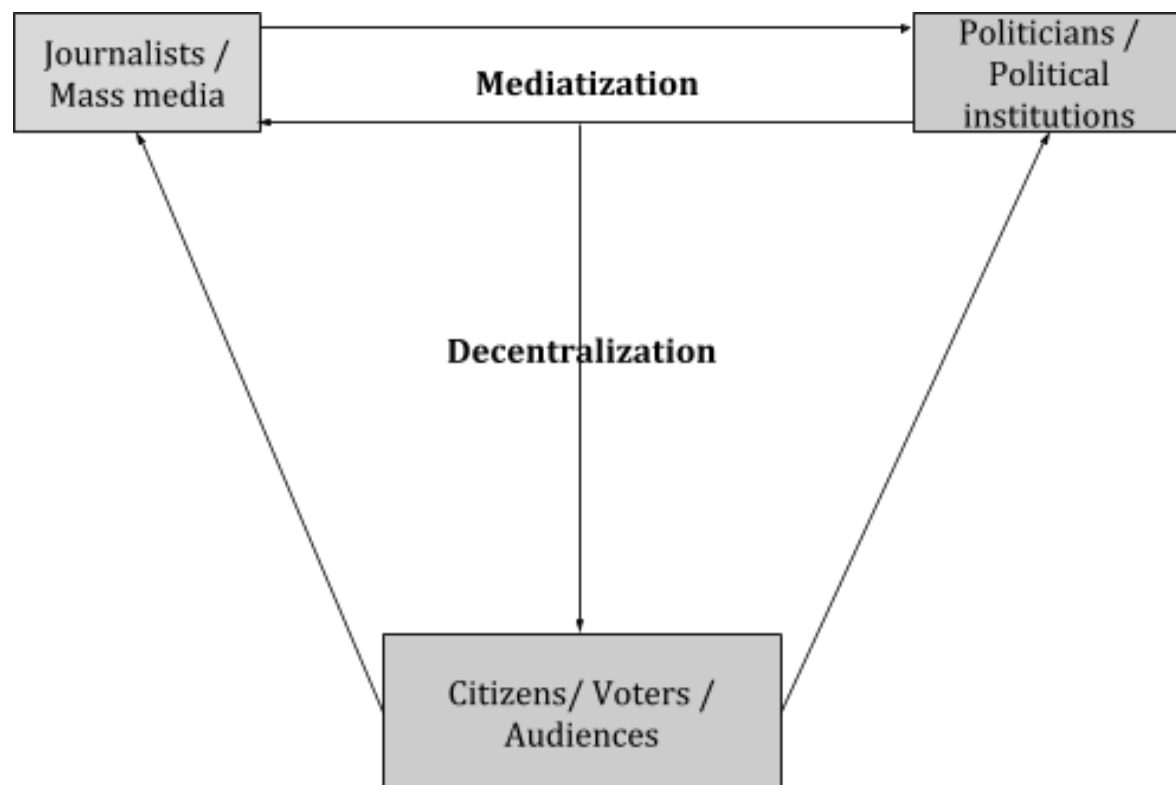
In relation to this transformation of public opinion, we have seen that decentralisation is also identified as a vertical process in which, on one side, political

<sup>75</sup> Sorice, M. (2014). *I Media e la Democrazia*. Carocci editore. p.97.

and media systems and on the other side, citizens, are organising their relationships. What make the singularity of the decentralisation process is that the shift of public opinion leads to a transformation of political and media behaviour through political communication. Thus, even if citizens change the way they vote by letting them guided by personal feelings and not only the ideology anymore, political parties change their behaviour to adapt to the expectations of the electors.

The last two parts of this work have shown that mediatisation and decentralisation are two central elements of current political communication. Thus, these two elements come together within the process of political communication. On the one hand, mediatisation is described as a horizontal process of interaction between politics and the media. On the other hand, decentralisation is characterised as a vertical process that encompasses the interactions between the three political actors, i.e. politics, media and citizens. *Figure 8* formulated by Brants and Voltmer, shows the scope of these two processes. We can see that mediatisation and decentralisation are related to each other since they act in the same process of political communication, however one is not a consequence of the other.

**Figure 8: Changes in political communication**



Source : Brants Kees, Voltmer Katrin, *Political Communication in Postmodern Democracy : Challenging the primacy of politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, Introduction, p4, 2011

### 3. Professionalisation : an emerging challenge of political communication

The phenomenon of “professionalisation” has emerged in the last decades in political communication studies. This phenomenon consists in the development of a more professional dimension of political communication professions to respond to the dynamics described above. Thus, recently, political communication is described as less amateurish than before. Indeed, in the field of communication, strategies are developed in order to adapt to emerging challenges through “*the rise of the professional politician, and importantly the professional political consultant*”<sup>76</sup>.

Besides, professionalisation concerns both political and media systems. In his work *Key Concepts in Political Communication*, Darren Lilleker formulates guidelines to better understand professionalisation as a process. Thus, *Figure 9* shows that social and political changes like misalignment and rise of political consumerism on one side and market orientation of the media like shift to infotainment and entertainment on the other side, are two causes of the emergence of the professionalisation of communication.

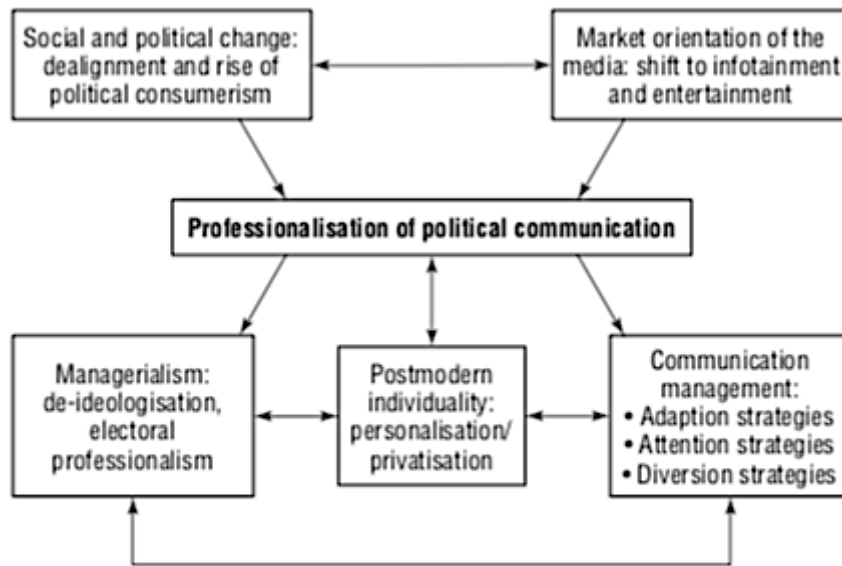
Then, *Figure 9* presents “managerialism” and “communication management” as two phenomena which are calling for competent people to perform. More precisely, “managerialism” represents the development of electoral strategies which aim to suit the public opinion in order to obtain electoral success; while “communication management” is defined as the different communication strategies adopted to formulate the whole electoral strategy. Political marketing and news management are two political communication strategies which emerged in the context of professionalisation of political communication. Thus, managerialism and communication management are related to each other.

Finally, *Figure 9* shows the emergence of the phenomenon of “personalisation” which refers to the “construction” of political figures. As we said earlier, the audience is very receptive to feelings and emotions. Thus, the phenomenon of personalisation has become common and replace in some ways political ideas and programs in which the public is less interested nowadays.

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<sup>76</sup> Lilleker, D. (2006). *Key concepts in political communication*. p.33.

**Figure 9 : The process of professionalisation**



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Source : Lilleker, D. (2006). *Key concepts in political communication*. p.32. Adapted from Holtz-Bacha, 2002

Next paragraphs focus on different communication strategies (i.e. political marketing, agenda-setting and news management) which are the result of the professionalisation of political communication.

### **3.1. Political marketing**

Political marketing has the principal role to “catch votes” but also relates to “an ideological function that aims to make citizens adhere to a certain political vision”<sup>77</sup>. Thus, marketing in the field of politics has firstly the role to “build” a positive political vision and secondly has the role of “selling” it to the public. Political marketing is composed of different elements, which are described in the following paragraphs.

#### **3.1.1 Aestheticization**

First of all, describing political marketing is not possible without the introduction of the phenomenon of “aestheticisation” which relates to the rising importance of the

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<sup>77</sup> Lilleker, D. (2006). *Key concepts in political communication*. p.23.



creation of a positive image of politicians or political candidates. Thus, *“the recent personalisation of politics, and the transformation of some politicians into celebrities with media interest focusing as much on their lifestyles as their policies, could be classified under aestheticisation”*<sup>78</sup>. In other words, in the context of aestheticisation, “style and presentation” are more pointed out than the “substance” of politics by politicians but also by the media.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of aestheticisation is a key element in electoral campaigns. People are less and less interested about institutionalised politics but rather in “interesting stories” and political transparency which includes storytelling of political figures personal and private life. Thus, the image of political candidates is fundamental to rise in popularity and have more chance to be elected by citizens. The reason why aestheticisation is a core element of political marketing is because of the appearance of the emotional sphere (emotionalisation) which means that the citizen-electors make decisions on emotional feelings. This manner to make decisions is the same as in the commercial sector where consumers choose a specific product not with rationality but with emotional feelings. Thus, in order to orient easily himself in politics, the citizen-elector demands less rationality from the political system and more emotions. In other words, in the case of political elections, the electoral success of political parties and candidates depends on their ability to raise a positive feeling<sup>79</sup>. In this way, political candidates have to “build” their own celebrity. Most of the time, building “political celebrity” is a task that the candidate cannot do alone because of his lack of professionalism in this domain. That is why, when it is possible, the political candidate surrounds himself with a staff of consultants and campaign managers.

According to Donatella Campus, the following guidelines have to be respected to build a political celebrity<sup>80</sup> in the context of political campaign. Firstly, there is the “targeting” which consists in doing deep researches to understand the sociodemographic characteristics of the electorate, through surveys, focus groups or interviews. This is called the pre-election campaign market research. By means of this first step, the candidate can decide if it is more appropriate to run a conquest or

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<sup>78</sup> Lilleker, D. (2006). *Key concepts in political communication*. p.25.

<sup>79</sup> Campus, D. (2008). *Comunicazione politica: Le nuove frontiere*. Roma-Bari, Laterza. p.25.

<sup>80</sup> Ibidem, p.26, adapted from Louw, 2005

maintenance campaigns. The conquest campaign is based on the winning of confidence of new electors while the maintenance campaign has the aim to preserve and strengthen the consensus of loyal electors.

Secondly, the candidate must elaborate a script in order to build an image which corresponds to the results of the previous targeting. According to Donatella Campus, *“the profile must include aspects related to the way of speaking, moving, dressing, appearing, but also more substantial elements: for example, which personal events to emphasise and which to minimise, which aspects of private life to make public and which instead try to keep hidden”*<sup>81</sup>. In other words, the script should outline the personality the candidate wants to show and the private life of the candidate without telling everything.

Thirdly, there is the organisation of media events specially thought to attract media and public attentions. To be successful, these events must lead to a relation of identification between the public and the candidate.

Fourthly, the candidate must communicate with the public through simplified messages and have leadership skills. Indeed, more than to be really precise and explicit about political issues, the candidate has to be reassuring and reliable to be appreciated and considered by the electorate. According to Donatella Campus, the use of slogans, strong sentences, reassuring body language, and demonstration of self-confidence are the keys for the candidate to be understood and to build step-by-step an image of leadership.

Fifthly, the candidate must embody a political myth. In other words, the candidate is viewed as a “hero” and represents an example and a source of motivation for the citizens. The myth of the “hero” is assigned to candidates who have lived or done exceptional experiences like for instance war.

Sixthly, the last step that the political candidate has to go through in order to build his proper “political celebrity” is the role of interpretation. In fact, the candidate has to put himself in the skin of his created character as often as he can. According to Donatella Campus, *“enjoying good press - newspapers, magazines, online editions - is useful and favorable to candidates, but there is an obvious and substantial difference between the potential impact of a live performance followed (such as a speech or*

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<sup>81</sup> Campus, D. (2008). *Comunicazione politica: Le nuove frontiere*. Roma-Bari, Laterza. p.27

*debate) and the narration of the same event reported by newspapers*"<sup>82</sup>. In other words, the candidate must multiply media appearances to interpret his proper role and so, have more chance to convince his target.

These guidelines have shown a manner in which a political candidate can build his celebrity and his positive political image. However, this contribution dated from 2008 maybe have to be updated in the present day due to the constant transformation of the political communication.

More recently, in 2011, John Corner highlights the "new" visibility of politics and the fact that "*citizens are getting to 'see' a lot more than they saw before of the political 'backstage'*"<sup>83</sup>. Indeed, "gossip" and scandals reveal the private and hidden of politics to the public at large, through the media. This represents a risk to damage the image of politicians involved in these concerns. According to John Corner, this risk requires the development of "new" strategies from politicians to manage what they want to show or not. This is called damage limitation.

### **3.1.2 Electorate segmentation**

The electorate segmentation is a tool used in political marketing in order to individuate the electorate in different groups. These different groups are characterised as "target segments" and individuated on the basis of sociodemographic characteristics of the electorate.

Most of the time, electorate segmentation is used in the context of political campaign. Political parties ask communication strategists to do this task. Moreover, the target segments individuated by the strategists have not all the same importance. Thus, the most important target segments are the one which will allow to gain more positive responses. In *Figure 10: The process and purpose of segmentation*, the most important target segment is represented by the primary target. In addition, *Figure 10* shows that the building of a long-term relationship with the primary target is the purpose of the strategists. Indeed, working on a long-term relationship with its target is essential in order to gain its loyalty and trust. A loyal target will thus no longer be a target to be conquered afterwards but rather a relationship to be maintained. In addition, a

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<sup>82</sup> Campus, D. (2008). *Comunicazione politica: Le nuove frontiere*. Roma-Bari, Laterza. p.29.

<sup>83</sup> Corner, J. in Brants, K., Voltmer, K. (2011). *Political Communication in Postmodern Democracy: Challenging the primacy of politics*, Palgrave Macmillan. p.269.

confident target will play the role of spokesperson and will allow to amplify the good image of the political party indirectly. Then, the diagram demonstrates that the secondary target is less important because it is not based on a long-term relationship between voters and political parties. Finally, in the “wasteland” are gathered voters which are not considered by the strategists as interesting target segments.

**Figure 10: The process and purpose of segmentation**



Source : Lilleker, D. (2006). *Key concepts in political communication*. P.186

Subsequently, Darren Lilleker states that “*parties have to identify key groups of voters, often those with no partisanship, the floating voters, and aim their key promises towards their wants and needs*”<sup>84</sup>. In other words, the author emphasises the fact that target segments are principally composed of “floating voters”, that is to say voters who don’t even know for which political party they will vote. This is mainly inside the floating voters group that strategists will try to distinguish the most important target segments.

Furthermore, Donatella Campus focuses on the fact that after being individuated, each segment is targeted through its privileged communication channels<sup>85</sup>. Thus, the electorate segmentation is based on the diversification of the messages spread to the audience.

<sup>84</sup> Lilleker, D. (2006). *Key concepts in political communication*. p185

<sup>85</sup> Campus, D. (2008). *Comunicazione politica: Le nuove frontiere*. Roma-Bari, Laterza. p.19.

### 3.1.3. Political marketing in the context of election campaigns

In the context of election campaigns, political marketing can be more specific. Donatella Campus individuates interesting guidelines relating to electoral marketing in her work *Comunicazione politica : Le nuove frontiere*. The author talks about different steps that political parties and candidates have to go through, with the help of communication specialists.

Firstly, Campus says that a main point is “*to identify the weak points of a candidate and prevent them from being exploited*”<sup>86</sup>. In this step, the author emphasises the prevention of scandals and critics and recommend to anticipate answers and also conduct an aggressive campaign. Nevertheless, communication strategists must know everything about the candidate in order to respond easily to possible accusations. When the weak points of a candidate are more personal, a strategy is to attract the attention towards more positive aspects of the candidate or turn the bad aspects in advantage for the candidate.

Secondly, Donatella Campus highlights the fact that candidates have to lead the election campaign. There are two main strategies to do so: to create information and events which will launch debates in the media and the public opinion, and to take advantage of political news in reacting quickly to it in order to gain more coverage by the media. Furthermore, Donatella Campus thinks that “*as there is an element of show-business in contemporary politics, the most interesting characters are perceived in the same way as film or television stars, stimulating manifestations of sympathy or dislike*”<sup>87</sup>. In other words, the author talks about the spectacularity of politics which catches particularly the attention of the public.

Thirdly, Donatella Campus tells that candidates should keep low expectations regarding surveys and other kinds of public opinion tools. In fact, if surveys are positive about a candidate, a strategy is to not take it into account in the communication and not appear like a *front-runner*.

To conclude, the last paragraphs have shown that political marketing brings together different techniques such as aestheticisation, electoral segmentation but also more

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<sup>86</sup> Campus, D. (2008). *Comunicazione politica: Le nuove frontiere*. Roma-Bari, Laterza. p.29.

<sup>87</sup> Ibidem, p.35.

specific techniques used in the context of election campaigns. Thus, political marketing techniques are rather used during election campaigns by political parties and candidates in order to build a positive image, this is the principle of aestheticisation, and then to convince voters by determining the right target, this is the principle of electoral segmentation. Other more specific techniques can be used by candidates with the help of communication specialists. Indeed, the logic of the media particularly guides electoral campaigns, especially through electoral mechanisms such as televised debates. This is why we have seen that candidates and their experts must succeed in putting themselves forward even in a context that is not led by them.

### **3.2. News management and agenda-setting**

#### **3.2.1. News management**

News management is, as political marketing, a strategy used by political organisations like political parties, in the current context of professionalisation of political communication. In this strategy, political parties construct their messages in accordance with the media logic. In other words, political parties try to make their communication more attractive to be covered by the media. Most of the time, political parties employ communication strategists or advisors like “spin-doctors”. The latter has the task to enhance the image of a political candidate for example, by the means of narration (i.e. storytelling) and marketing techniques.

More precisely, the main strategies which compose news management have been characterised by Donatella Campus by different steps<sup>88</sup>. However, the author focuses on the news management strategy of governments. This is the reason why political parties should take these guidelines with measure.

Firstly, governments must create a press and public relations office composed for instance by a press officer (also known as press secretary) and spin doctors. This is within the press office that all communication strategies are conceived.

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<sup>88</sup> Campus, D. (2008). *Comunicazione politica: Le nuove frontiere*. Roma-Bari, Laterza. p.41.

Secondly, the press office must work on the “construction” of a ready-to-use message for journalists. Thus, each day, the communication strategists have to analyse the news through a press review and try to understand which are the news topics. Then, they must try to create “the news of the day” and impose it. In this way, in order to be covered by the media, the message to communicate must have a relevant content but also an appropriate format. According to Donatella Campus, *“if, when launching a political initiative, daily sources and data are provided, but also official statements, interviews with politicians and photographic and audiovisual material, then the media are likely to give coverage to the topic”*<sup>89</sup>.

Thirdly, communication strategists have to transform political messages into simplified messages which could be easily understood by the public and so, covered by the media. Fourthly, the press office must organise media events like celebrations, traditional or occasional speeches which represent mandatory exercises of governments. According to Iyengar and McGrady, *“if in the 1970s and 1980s a speech by the president was perceived as a real event and all the major television networks were willing to host it giving it their full attention, today only speeches due to sudden disasters, national emergencies or on issues of great importance can hope to have the same audience as in the past”*<sup>90</sup>. In other words, the authors state that presidents have not automatically a huge coverage by the media as in the past. Thus, the content of political messages has become really important to interest the journalists. Besides, Donatella Campus highlights the importance of choosing the media channels according to the nature of the message to launch (see electorate segmentation pxx). TV or radio programs like talk-shows, interviews but also press conferences constitute different media channels where the audience is not the same and where political messages can be diversified.

Fifthly, the last step individuated by Donatella Campus is the government's defense by the press office. In other words, communication strategists must exercise a monitoring over the opposition in order to anticipate possible attacks. Governments should not be caught unprepared about opposition's attacks.

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<sup>89</sup> Campus, D. (2008). *Comunicazione politica: Le nuove frontiere*. Roma-Bari, Laterza. p.42.

<sup>90</sup> Iyengar, S., McGrady, J. (2007). Quoted in Campus D., *Comunicazione politica : Le nuove frontiere*. p.44.

As a conclusion of these guidelines of news management, Donatella Campus resumes the goal of the news management as *"to impose, without having the appearance of it, the themes of the day"*<sup>91</sup>.

### **3.2.1. Agenda-setting**

The concept of agenda-setting is related to the strategy of news management. Indeed, this concept is defined by the manner in which the news are organised by the media and their effect over the public opinion. Thus, contrary to news management which is led by political organisations, agenda-setting is led by the media.

In the context of news management, political parties, sometimes through spin-doctors, want to control the agenda-setting in order to have their messages covered by the media. In fact, Darren Lilleker states that *"organisations which aim to strategically set and control the news agenda will employ communication officers, the spin-doctors, who will attempt to control the information available to the media to ensure a negative line cannot be taken"*<sup>92</sup>. In this way, the agenda-setting is one of the subject that interests spin-doctors and on which they will try to work in order to impose their topics on the agenda.

Nevertheless, the agenda-setting is a concept which is difficult to identify because it appears between political organisations and the media. This is a phenomenon which appears in the context of mediatisation of politics, horizontal process which excludes the citizen as political actor. Thus, the agenda-setting is "hidden" from the public that is linked with the problem that the public becomes distrustful towards the news it receives.

To conclude, the last paragraphs have shown that news management and agenda-setting are an integral part of the broader concept of the professionalisation of politics. On the one hand, news management leads to a great demand for experts in this field on the part of the political parties. On the other hand, agenda-setting is the reason why political parties need to be more strategic and professional in their communication to the general public. Indeed, we have seen that the logic of the media

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<sup>91</sup> Campus, D. (2008). *Comunicazione politica: Le nuove frontiere*. Roma-Bari, Laterza. p.46.

<sup>92</sup> Lilleker, D. (2006). *Key concepts in political communication*. p.28.



dominates political communication during elections, which is why political parties want to adapt to it and need the help of strategists such as spin-doctors and communication experts.

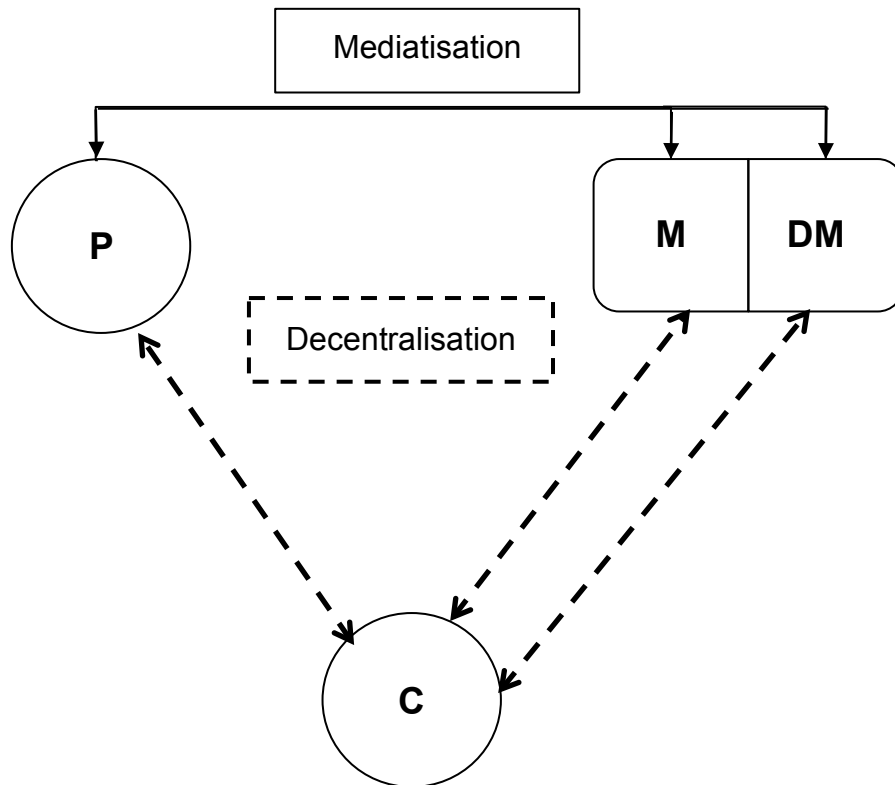
#### **4. Modeling a personalised approach of political communication today**

As already mentioned, political communication is a constantly changing system in Western democracies. In a general perspective, this work has already led to a better understanding of the principles and dynamics of political communication as well as its features in contemporary Western societies.

*Figure 11* represents a personal approach of the current political communication system. It is based on the academic studies analysed by this work in the previous paragraphs. Thus, this model is inspired in particular by Mazzoleni's *Public-dialogical model* (*Figure 4*) and *Media model* (*Figure 5*) but also by Brants and Voltmer's *Changes in political communication* (*Figure 8*). *Figure 11* provides a revised version of these contributions, which have already offered a better understanding of the dynamics of the political communication process over time.

Nevertheless, nowadays, the political communication system is complex because of the different actors that compose it. In particular, digital media occupy a large place within the media system, which is also composed of traditional media. Thus, contrary to the models discussed previously, this personal approach distinguishes between two entities composing the media system, namely, digital media and traditional media (see Chapter 1, 4.2.2.). *Figure 11* is composed of the political system (P), the citizenship (C) and the media system which is represented by traditional media (M) and digital media (DM) entities, which constitute it. Political system, citizenship and traditional media/digital media are considered as the three actors of the political communication systems. Thus, they are related with each others through interactions that are represented in the model by different arrows. Simple arrows represent interactions in a context of mediatisation (see Chapter 2, 1.2.) while dashed arrows illustrate interactions in conditions of decentralisation (see Chapter 2, 2.2.).

**Figure 11: Personal approach of political communications today**



**Legend**

P : Political system (political institutions, political parties, government)

M : Traditional media entity (print media, television, radio)

DM : Digital media entity (Internet, social media, emails, websites)

C : Citizenship (civil society, citizens as electors)

Source : Personal production

As already explained, the dynamics of political communication have been transformed, particularly by digital media as part of the media system. Firstly, *Figure 11* highlights the fact that political system interact with traditional media and digital media entities in different manners. The process of mediatization is the result of these interactions between the political system on one side and the traditional and digital media on the other side. Indeed, the political system tries on the one hand to regulate traditional media pluralism by establishing laws (see Chapter 1, 3.2) and on the other hand to influence the media agenda in favour of the spread of political information. Furthermore, the traditional media interact with the political system on news issues

in order to have an official opinion, but also impose a particular logic (media logic) on the political system, which is adapted to citizens' demands. Indeed, in order to interest the citizens, media information must be entertaining, sometimes spectacular, and tell a story (e.g. storytelling). However, it is difficult for the political system to regulate digital media. Laws can be introduced but they will always have limits since digital media are mainly available on the Internet, which is a communication channel used by the whole world. Furthermore, the political system can try to influence the agenda of digital media but not in the same way as with traditional media. Indeed, in order to try to influence the traditional media agenda, the political system has to interact with interlocutors (e.g. journalists) and try to convince them that the message to be conveyed is interesting to them. Whereas to influence the digital media agenda, the direct interlocutor is the citizen as a user. Thus, to influence the digital media agenda, the user is the first who must be interested by the message. To do this, political parties, for example, communicate with citizens through social networks, their websites or newsletters. The feedback and statistics received from these communication initiatives are then often analysed by the parties and used to improve future communication messages.

Second, *Figure 11* highlights the fact that citizens are actors in the interaction with the political system on one side and the traditional and digital media on the other side. Indeed, this model shows that communication is two-way between the political system and the citizens as well as between the media system (composed of both entities) and the citizens. On the one hand, the political system passes laws that regulate the life of citizens, communicates around these laws and around the priorities of its programme during electoral campaigns. On the other hand, citizens vote to elect their political representatives but also communicate with them directly, in particular through social media where political representatives and their parties are present, but also indirectly through demonstrations for example.



### Chapter 3: Contemporary communication of a Belgian political party

Chapter 3 is devoted to the special case of the small Belgian political party DéFI, for which I worked for a year and a half from 2018 to 2019. In the previous chapters, we were able to analyse the process of political communication through academic studies and theoretical arguments. Are the concepts and methods that were highlighted in the theoretical part confirmed in the concrete case that follows?

In the first part, Belgian media and political landscapes are depicted. The second part deals with the structure of the communication unit as well as the tasks that each staff member is responsible for. The third part is devoted to explain the main elements of the communication strategy put in place by DéFI during the last federal, regional and European elections of 2019 in Belgium. Finally, the fourth part aims to give a critical point of view on my experience with anecdotes and concrete examples. This part highlights the completions and limits encountered in terms of communication during the 2019 election campaign.

Before its name change on November 13th, 2015, the Belgian political party DéFI was called FDF (Fédéralistes Démocrates Francophones). The party was created in 1964 with the aim of defending the rights and freedoms of French-speaking citizens in Belgium. At that time, the leaders of the party considered that Belgium was dominated by Flanders<sup>93</sup>. From the beginning, the FDF advocates the idea of a federal state.

DéFI (Démocrate Fédéraliste Indépendant) is a Belgian political party, coloured amaranth, at the centre of the Belgian political spectrum.

On its website, DéFI defines itself as a party that "*aims to federate Belgian Francophones within the Wallonia-Brussels Federation<sup>94</sup> in order to guarantee their fundamental rights on the one hand, and on the other hand to enable Wallonia and Brussels to redeploy themselves economically while guaranteeing a social framework that respects everyone*"<sup>95</sup>.

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<sup>93</sup> Dutch-speaking region situated in the north of Belgium.

<sup>94</sup> The Wallonia and Brussels are two regions of Belgium in which the french language is mostly spoken. Thus, the Wallonia-Brussels Federation enable the two regions to implement the same rules in terms of education for instance.

<sup>95</sup> <https://defi.eu/a-propos-de-defi/>

In this sense, the main competitors of the DéFI party are the other French-speaking Belgian parties. The main French-speaking parties in Belgium are: the Centre démocrate humaniste (cdH), the Ecologists (Ecolo), the Mouvement Réformateur (MR), the Socialist Party (PS) and the Parti du Travail de Belgique (PTB).

One of the particularities of DéFI is that it is a party that kept the same president at its head from 1995 to 2019<sup>96</sup>, namely Olivier Maingain. The president of DéFI was also a federal deputy from 1991 to 2019 and has been mayor of the Brussels municipality of Woluwe-Saint-Lambert since 2006. Olivier Maingain is a Belgian politician who is highly appreciated by the French-speaking population. *Appendix 2* shows that a popularity poll carried out by the national newspaper *Le Soir* a few days before the May 2019 elections ranked him at the top of the list of the most appreciated political figures in Brussels and in the top 5 in Wallonia.

In addition, DéFI has other appreciated political figures such as the Brussels Minister of Economy and Employment, from 2014 to 2019, and Mayor of the Brussels municipality of Auderghem, Didier Gosuin, as well as the current Brussels Minister of Employment and Vocational Training and Mayor of the Brussels municipality of Schaerbeek, Bernard Clerfayt.

More recently, young figures have emerged within DéFI such as Sophie Rohonyi, former parliamentary attaché of Olivier Maingain, elected Member of Parliament in May 2019, and François De Smet, a well-known Belgian philosopher who was called by DéFI in February 2019 to run as a leader in the federal elections. Like his running mate Sophie Rohonyi, François De Smet was elected Member of Parliament in May 2019 and then new President of DéFI in November 2019. These two new figures come from "civil society", that is to say they represent unofficial institutions of society. Thus, neither of them had a background as politician. They entered politics out of conviction as active citizens.

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<sup>96</sup> In November 2019, Olivier Maingain has been followed by François De Smet.

## 1. Belgian media and political landscapes

In order to better understand the context in which this experience is reported, the following paragraphs give a description of the Belgian media landscape and political spectrum.

Belgium is made up of three regions: Flanders, Wallonia and the Brussels-Capital Region. The first two regions represent three language communities: Dutch, French and German-speaking. The Dutch-speaking community is mainly represented by the Flemish region in the north of the country; the French-speaking community by Wallonia in the south of the country; the German-speaking community by a small part of Wallonia in the south-east of the country. The third region, the Brussels-Capital Region, is located between Flanders and Wallonia. It has the characteristic of being the subject of controversy over its "community membership". Indeed, the Brussels Region is mixed because it is made up of all the Belgian language communities. However, some of these language communities, such as the Dutch and French-speaking ones, would like to appropriate it as part of their respective regions.

The Belgian media landscape reflects its complex community structure. Thus, each Belgian language community has its own media. Table 2 gives an overview of the Dutch, French and German-speaking Belgian media landscape. The table brings together the main Belgian media. For the print media, the main newspapers are classified by publishing companies and speaking communities. For television and radio, the main channels are classified by broadcasters and language communities. For digital media, the main newspapers and channels are classified by communication channel, which are print media, television and digital native media and language communities.

The most important print media in Dutch-speaking community is *Het Laatste Nieuws* followed by *Het Nieuwsblad* and *De Standaard*<sup>97</sup>. The most popular radio station is VRT's *Radio 2* and the most watched TV channel is VRT's *Één*. Thus, the VRT public service broadcaster is the one with the largest market share in Flanders. Digital media are quite developed in Dutch-speaking community. First of all there are the print media such as *De Standaard*, *De Morgen* or *De Tijd* that offer an online version. The newspaper *De Standaard* has the largest digital sales. Then, there are the

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<sup>97</sup> <https://medialandscapes.org/country/belgium/media/print>

television channels that create their own video-on-demand platforms such as *Stievie* from the commercial broadcaster Medialaan and *VRT nu* from the public service broadcaster VRT. Finally, there are native digital media such as *Apache*, *MO\** or *Newsmonkey* which were created exclusively to be accessible in digital format.

The most important print media in French-speaking community is *Sudpresse* followed by *Le Soir*, *La Dernière Heure* and *La Libre Belgique*<sup>98</sup>. The most popular radio station is *Radio Contact* followed by *Bel-RTL* and *Vivacité*. The most watched TV channel is the commercial channel *RTL-TVI* followed by the french channel *TF1* and the public service channels *RTBF's La Une* and *La Deux*. Thus, the *Groupe RTL* commercial broadcaster is the one with the largest market share in French-speaking community. As well as in the Dutch-speaking community, digital media are also developed in the French-speaking one. First of all there are the print media such as *Le Soir*, *Sudpresse* or *L'Echo* which offer a digital version of their newspapers. The daily *Le Soir* has the largest share of digital sales. Then there are the television channels that are creating their own video-on-demand platforms such as *Auvio* from RTBF public service broadcaster and *RTL Play* from the *Groupe RTL* commercial broadcaster. Finally, there are native digital media such as *LN24* which were created exclusively to be accessible in digital format. In fact, *LN24* is a news channel only accessible online.

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<sup>98</sup> <https://medialandscapes.org/country/belgium/media/print>



**Table 2: Dutch, French and German-speaking Belgian media landscape**

	<b>Dutch-speaking community</b>	<b>French-speaking community</b>	<b>German-speaking community</b>
<b>Print media</b>	<p>Daily newspapers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>De Standaard, Het Nieuwsblad, Het Belang van Limburg, Gazet van Antwerpen, Metro</i> (as free)</li> </ul> <p>→ From <i>Mediahuis</i> publishing company</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Het Laatste Nieuws, De Morgen</i></li> </ul> <p>→ From <i>De Persgroep</i> publishing company</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>De Tijd</i></li> </ul> <p>→ From <i>Roularta</i> publishing company</p> <p>Free weekly magazine</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Bruzz</i></li> </ul> <p>→ Local magazine for Brussels area</p>	<p>Daily newspapers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Le Soir, Sudpresse, L'Echo, Metro</i> (as free)</li> </ul> <p>→ From <i>Groupe Rossel</i> publishing company</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>La Libre Belgique, La Dernière Heure</i></li> </ul> <p>→ From <i>IPM</i> publishing company</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>L'Avenir</i></li> </ul> <p>→ From <i>Publifin</i> publishing company</p>	<p>Daily newspapers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Grenz-Echo</i></li> </ul> <p>→ From <i>Groupe Rossel</i> publishing company</p>
<b>Television</b>	<p>Public service channels</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Één</i></li> </ul> <p>→ From <i>VRT</i> public service broadcaster</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Bruzz</i></li> </ul> <p>→ Local channel for Brussels area</p> <p>Commercial channels</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>VTM</i></li> </ul> <p>→ From <i>Medialaan</i> commercial broadcaster</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>VIER, Vijf</i></li> </ul> <p>→ From <i>De Vijver</i> commercial broadcaster</p>	<p>Public service channels</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>La Une, La Deux, La Trois</i></li> </ul> <p>→ From <i>RTBF</i> public service broadcaster</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>BX1...</i></li> </ul> <p>→ Local channel for Brussels area</p> <p>Commercial channels</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>RTL-TVI</i></li> </ul> <p>→ From <i>Groupe RTL</i> commercial broadcaster</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>TF1, France 2, France 3</i></li> </ul> <p>→ French channels</p>	<p>Public service channel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>BRF TV</i></li> </ul> <p>→ From <i>BRF</i> public service broadcaster</p>
<b>Radio</b>	<p>Public service stations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Radio 2, Studio Brussel, MNM...</i></li> </ul> <p>→ From <i>VRT</i> public service broadcaster</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Bruzz</i></li> </ul> <p>→ Local channel for Brussels area</p> <p>Commercial stations</p>	<p>Public service stations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Vivacité, Classic 21...</i></li> </ul> <p>→ From <i>RTBF</i> public service broadcaster</p> <p>Commercial radio stations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Bel-RTL, Radio Contact</i></li> </ul> <p>→ From <i>Groupe RTL</i> commercial broadcaster</p>	<p>Public service stations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>BRF 1, BRF 2</i></li> </ul> <p>→ From <i>BRF</i> public service broadcaster</p>

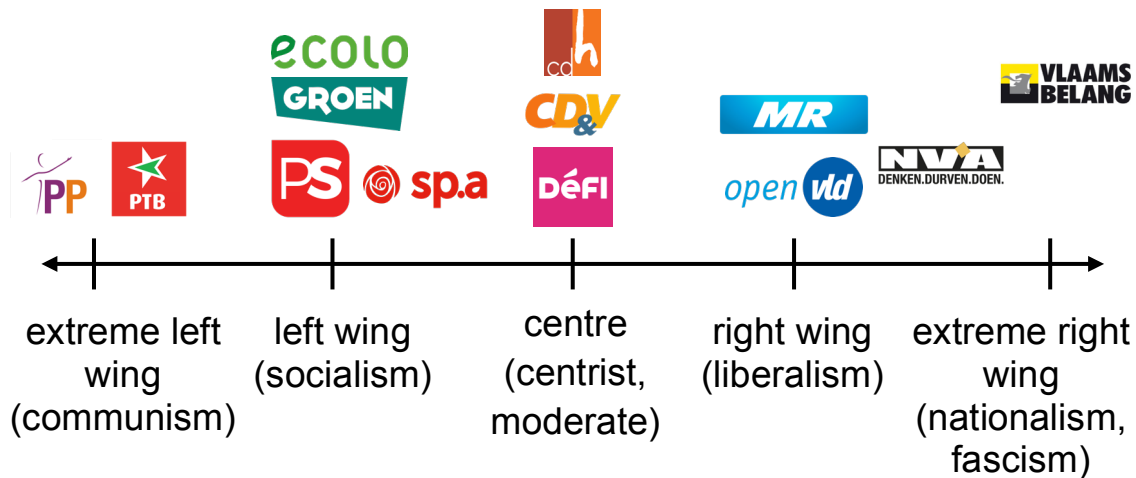
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Q music, JOE fm, Nostalgie</i> → From <i>Medialaan</i> commercial broadcaster</li> </ul>		
<b>Digital media</b>	<p>Print</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>De Standaard, De Morgen, De Tijd...</i></li> </ul> <p>Television</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Stievie (Medialaan), VRT nu (VRT)...</i></li> </ul> <p>Digital native media</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Apache, MO*, Newsmonkey...</i> → From <i>Media21</i> association</li> </ul>	<p>Print</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Le Soir, Sudpresse, L'Echo...</i></li> </ul> <p>Television</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Auvio (RTBF), RTL-play (RTL)...</i></li> </ul> <p>Digital native media</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>LN24...</i></li> </ul>	

Source : Own production adapted from <https://medialandscapes.org/country/belgium>

Furthermore, it is important to remember that Belgium is a constitutional monarchy where the King is the head of state. However, King's powers are limited by the Belgian constitution and he is independent of any political party. Executive power is thus in the hands of the Prime Minister.

In Belgium there are 13 main political parties: the Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA), Vlaams Belang (VB), Christen-Democratisch & Vlaams (CD&V), Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (Open VLD), Socialistische Partij. Anders (SP.A), De Vlaamse Groenen (GROEN) for the Flemish community; the Socialist Party (PS), Mouvement Réformateur (MR), Ecolo (ECOLO), Centre Démocrate Humaniste (CDH), Démocrate Fédéraliste Indépendant (DéFI), Parti Populaire (PP), Parti du Travail de Belgique (PTB/PvdA) for the French-speaking community. *Figure 12* illustrates where are located each main Belgian political parties on the Belgian political spectrum.

**Figure 12: Belgian political spectrum**



Source : Personal production

## 2. Structure and main tasks of the Communication Unit

The Communication Unit is the place where all of the party's communication materials are created, from content to visuals. As the DéFI party is a small political party, its communication unit is also small. However, the tasks related to the party's communication remain the same as in all parties, regardless of their size. Indeed, every political party must manage media relations, develop a communication strategy to differentiate itself from its competitors or create events and communication supports such as leaflets, magazines and programs. The following paragraphs describe how DéFI's communication unit is structured and the main missions assigned to it.

Before explaining the structure of the DéFI communication unit, it is important to note that its composition has changed since the start of the 2019 election campaign<sup>99</sup>. Prior to this election campaign, the communication unit was composed of a communications director, a press officer and a graphic designer. In view of the 2019

<sup>99</sup> The 2019 election campaign began in February 2019 and elections were held on 26 May 2019.

election campaign, the communication unit has been strengthened with two new profiles: a social media manager and a communication officer.

*Figure 13* shows the organizational chart of the communications unit as it has stood since the beginning of the 2019 electoral campaign in Belgium. *Figure 13* also gives an overview of the communication unit's relations with other party units such as the presidency and the party's study centre.

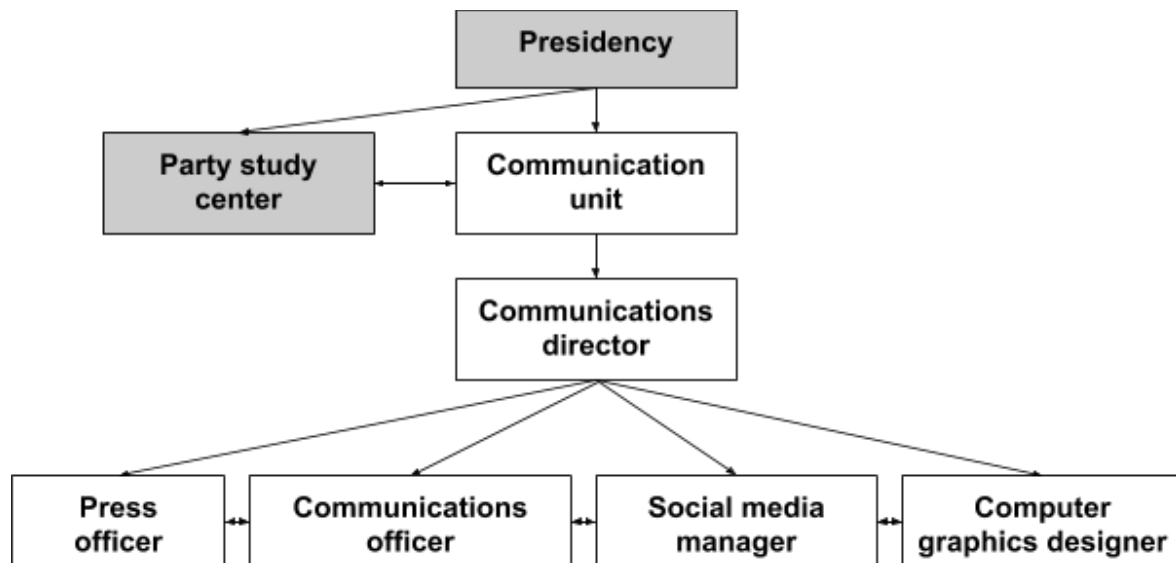
The President of DéFI is the highest authority in the party and therefore makes all official decisions. The main decisions are made on Monday morning at the internal party meeting with all staff members. At this meeting, the staff of the communication unit and the party's study centre are present and discuss with the presidency the tasks and topics of the week. Usually, at the end of the meeting, the presidency gives directives to the communication unit which then has to carry out its missions following the direction given by the presidency. For instance, there have been occasions when a news topic has surfaced on the Saturday before the internal meeting and the presidency has asked the communication unit to create communication materials highlighting the party's views on the issue as a matter of priority. In this case, after the meeting, the communication unit works with the party's study centre to agree on the material to be used. The content is then adapted to the medium chosen by the communication unit, such as a video, an article on the website, a publication on social networks or a press release. Thus, at DéFI, the work of the communication unit depends directly on the decisions of the presidency, just like the party's study centre.

Furthermore, the communication unit may collaborate with the party's study centre from time to time for any information concerning the Charter of Ideals and Commitments<sup>100</sup> or the official electoral programs.

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<sup>100</sup> The Charter of Ideals and Commitments of DéFI is the party's programme during the term of mandate. <https://defi.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Charte-DeFI-ideaux-engagements-fondamentaux-2018.pdf>

**Figure 13: Organization chart of the Communication Unit**



Source : Personal production adapted from [www.defi.eu](http://www.defi.eu)

As anticipated, the Communication Unit is composed of the director of communication and 4 other persons<sup>101</sup>: the press officer, the communication officer, the social media manager and the graphic designer. The members of the communication unit collaborate with each other in their different assignments.

At DÉFI, the director of communication is Carine Kolchory since 25 years. Previously, Carine was journalist and so she is an expert in terms of writing. Her role is to manage the various people who make up the Communication Unit. She must also validate and have validated by the party's presidency the productions made by the communication team.

The role of press officer was held by myself since 2018. As already explained in the introduction of this work, I did previously an internship for the DÉFI parliamentary deputies in the Brussels parliament in the field of communication. Then, I have been hired to work as a communication officer at the party headquarters. A few months later, the position of party press officer became available and was offered to me. I therefore took on the role of press officer for the DÉFI party without any prior

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<sup>101</sup> This is the composition of the communication unit since the start of the 2019 election campaign.

significant professional experience. During my assignment, I was responsible for managing the party's relations with the media and the party's image in the media. I must draft and send out the official press releases of the party. I also organized press conferences, which involves finding the location, writing the press kit, sending out invitations to journalists, ensuring that the press conference runs properly by dealing with last-minute unforeseen events and following up by sending a press release to all journalists who were not present. I must also be able to respond to journalists' requests 24 hours a day. At events organised by the party (e.g. the party 2019 election campaign launch), I should manage the journalists. Another of my task was to respond to media invitations addressed to party representatives, making sure that everyone is available and that the terms of the invitation are clear. As DéFI press officer I also had to carry out the daily press review of the party and send it to all party members.

In terms of collaboration, I worked regularly with my colleagues the communication officer and the social network manager to agree on the content and language to be used as well as with the party's study centre for substantive content.

Before the arrival of the social media manager, the social networks of the DéFI party were managed by the press officer<sup>102</sup>. The party was already present on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Youtube<sup>103</sup>. The party pages were more or less updated according to the priorities that the press officer had to manage. DéFI had several Facebook pages related to certain local party sections. These pages were not managed by the party but by the local DéFI members or sometimes a candidate who decided to create and animate these pages.

In preparation for the 2019 elections, DéFI realized that to achieve its communication objectives, it needed to be more present on social networks and digital media in general. That is why the party hired a social media manager. Thus, Marie Vandenberg was hired. She is not specialized in politics and had never worked in this field. However, she is an expert in digital media, which drew the party's attention to her candidacy.

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<sup>102</sup> As I arrived in the party before the social media manager, I managed the social media of DéFI for a while.

<sup>103</sup> @DemocrateFederalisteIndependant (Facebook), @defi\_eu (Twitter), @defi.eu (Instagram), @DéFI TV (Youtube)

Since her arrival, Marie has been in charge of the entire digital part (digital media, social networks, website). More specifically, she has taken charge of managing all the party's social networks in collaboration with a communication agency, the website design in collaboration with a web design agency, as well as the video editing. At her initiative, the social media manager took on the mission of professionalizing the party's digital presence by establishing an editorial calendar reserved for social networks. The editorial calendar enables to plan publications over several weeks or even several months on the different social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube). In addition, at the end of each month, Marie produced a report showing the strengths and weaknesses of DéFI on social networks over the past month.

*Appendix 3* presents the example of the first report produced by Marie in February 2019. The report is a powerpoint divided into several parts: Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The Facebook part shows the statistics of "Like" from February 2018 to February 2019 (1). This part also highlights that there is a significant increase in "Like" mentions when using "boosted" publications, which are publications that have been paid to be visible by more persons. In February 2019, Marie's first month of work, DéFI's Facebook page won 52 "Like". Marie boosted 3 publications over the month for a total of 150€. Marie's goal was to surpass the page of the political party cdH which had 6,180 "Like" on its Facebook page at that time. Then, Marie highlighted the 3 best boosted publications of the last 180 days and then the best organic publications, which means publications that have not been boosted (2). In addition, the best boosted publication of February 2019 were highlighted as well as the 3 best organic publications. Finally, Marie shows the Facebook statistics regarding the percentage of men and women who like the DéFI page and their country, city and language (again according to Facebook data) (3). Thus, in February 2019, 62% of the subscribers to the DéFI page were men and 38% were women coming for the most part from Belgium, more particularly from the Brussels Region and speaking mostly French. Marie also provided the percentage of engagement of men and women on the DéFI page. Thus, 56% of the people engaged, that is to say active on the DéFI page (Like, comments) are men and 43% are women. They still come for the most part from Belgium, more particularly from the Brussels Region and speak mostly French. The section of the report dedicated to Twitter first shows a summary of the actions of the DéFI profile for the month of February 2019. Thus, there were 38 tweets, 47.1k

views of tweets, 2,502 visits to the Twitter profile, 415 "I like" and 61 new subscribers. The report also shows the 3 best tweets of the month as well as the audience reached, namely 58% women and 42% men.

The part of the report dedicated to Instagram also highlights the audience reached by the DéFI page, i.e. 63% men and 37% women coming mainly from the Brussels Region and mostly between 25 and 44 years old.

To the question, "How do you use social networks?" Marie Vandenberg, social media manager for the DéFI party answers: *"Even if DéFI has been present on social networks for a few years, our party is still only a novice in its relation to a real digital strategy. We are therefore in a period of reflection and strategic development regarding our communication on the web and social networks. Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are used both by the party and by proxies, election candidates, elected officials... As our audience is more present on Facebook, it is this social network that we are developing as a priority, as well as Twitter, which is heavily used by the media and politicians in Belgium".*

Moreover, Marie adds that *"it is essential to be present on the web and on social networks. A political party could no longer communicate effectively today without a website and, at least, a social network. However, a political party would also not have effective communication by limiting itself to "technology". Communication must be thought in 360°, i.e. press, digital, relational, print..."*

Today, the DéFI party has 7,658 subscribers on Facebook, 4,751 subscribers on Twitter, 576 subscribers on Instagram and 283 subscribers on Youtube.

In addition, DéFI has decided to also hire a communication officer to strengthen the team. Indeed, before the arrival of the communication officer, it was the director of communication who managed all the communication material. However, an election campaign means a lot of organization, work and manpower for a political party. In this context, the communication unit is very much in demand for communication materials as leaflets, business cards, video scripts, communication coaching and so on. During the previous local elections of 2018, DéFI didn't strengthen its communication unit which was a real obstacle in the communication production of the party. The profile of the communications officer was chosen on the basis of his professional experience, which was a plus for the party. Indeed, the selected person, Jean-François Lauwens, had already worked for 20 years in the political arena as a



journalist for *Le Soir*, one of the most important Belgian French-speaking newspapers. This new profile was therefore chosen for his expertise in Belgian politics but also for his good editorial qualities.

Since joining the party's communication team, the communication officer has to write communication content such as texts for leaflets, articles for the party's website, scripts for videos produced by the party but also communication coaching for party representatives who need it before a debate for example.

The graphic designer's mission is to create all the digital visuals and leaflets of the party, except during the election period when independent graphic designers come in support for the creation of the posters through the communication agency. He collaborates mainly with the communication director for the paper supports and the social networks manager for the digital visuals.

### **3. Communication strategy in a period of election campaigns**

This part outlines the communication strategy adopted by the DéFI party during the last federal, regional and European election campaigns of 2019 in Belgium. The strategy adopted by the party began by commissioning a survey from a Belgian market research and opinion poll institute called DEDICATED in order to better understand how to approach the election campaign in terms of communication. Following the results of this survey and its analysis, described below, the party decided to collaborate with consultants external to the party for its website as well as for its overall communication. Finally, the party's communication unit had to adapt to the specific demands of the presidency as well as civil society and the media during the 2019 election campaign.

#### **3.1. Study on successful campaign themes for DéFI**

The first strategic action carried out by the DéFI party with a view to the elections was to commission a survey on the campaign themes to be highlighted in its communication. The survey has been done by the Belgian market research and opinion poll institute DEDICATED.

First of all, through this survey, the party was able to better understand what were its voters' priorities. Then, the survey made it possible to identify which themes of DéFI's programme should be given more prominence than others. This enable to consolidate the voters already in favour of the party and also maybe to reach a new target.

This survey was carried out about 4 months before the elections and delivered to the party 3 months later.

The next paragraphs deal more specifically with the results of this survey in two parts: qualitative and quantitative. The first part, the qualitative phase, has an exploratory and guiding purpose and was carried out on a small sample of French-speaking Belgian people. The second part of this survey, the quantitative phase, was carried out on a much larger sample of French-speaking Belgian people and is therefore more precise. The quantitative phase aims to provide a reliable statistical basis.

### **3.1.1. Two phases: Qualitative exploration and quantitative validation**

The first qualitative phase focuses on a very limited samples of people. Thus, 15 Brussels and 14 Walloons from 3 priority areas (Namur, Liège and Charleroi) have been interrogated by the market research and opinion poll institute. These people have been chosen on the basis of an in-depth interview whose questions were prepared in collaboration with DéFI party's study centre<sup>104</sup>. All the selected people should have an openness and sympathy for DéFI, without however being necessarily DéFI voters. The aim of the qualitative phase was to orient the party's discussions on the priority themes on which it must position itself.

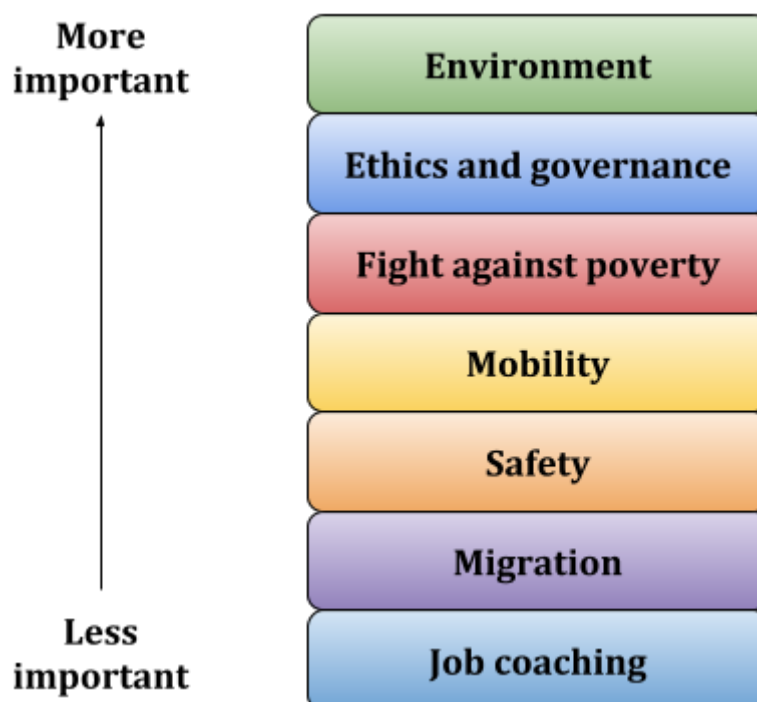
Firstly, the qualitative phase enables to identify in order of importance the priorities of the citizens interviewed. *Figure 14* shows that 7 themes have been highlighted by the respondents: environment, ethics and governance, fight against poverty, mobility, safety, migration and job coaching.

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<sup>104</sup> DéFI has a proper study centre called Centre d'études Jacques Georgin.  
Website: <https://www.cejg.be/>

The most important theme, that is to say the one cited by the most respondents, is the environment. Then there are ethics and governance, which are two themes that the party has already been promoting for several years. In third position is the fight against poverty followed by mobility, mainly in Brussels. Indeed, the theme of mobility is not considered as important in Wallonia as it is in Brussels because Brussels has many more traffic problems. In fifth place is the issue of safety and, above all, incivility and impunity for petty crimes. Next and last come the issue of migration and the job coaching which are considered as the less important issues from citizens' point of view.

**Figure 14: Citizens' priorities**



Source : personal production adapted from the qualitative phase of the survey carried out by the Belgian market research and opinion poll institute DEDICATED, at DéFI's request in February 2019.

Secondly, the qualitative phase provides information on citizens' perceptions of the DéFI party. The majority of respondents answered that DéFI is the most credible Belgian party in terms of ethics in politics and the defense of Francophones.

However, this study also highlights the fact that the party's image is not strong enough and that it is little known. Thus, many know the party's famous president

Olivier Maingain but sometimes not the party itself. Moreover, in the eyes of the citizens surveyed, it appears that the party seems too weak to really be able to influence Belgian politics. These results did not come as a great surprise to the party, which was already aware of the general image that citizens have of itself. This information was gathered in particular during communication actions on the ground where party members meet and talk with citizens. Thus, the results of the survey are rather a confirmation for the party and the starting point for a new strategy.

In the second phase of the study, the quantitative stage, 807 French-speaking Belgians between 18 and 75 years old, who do not reject the DÉFI party, were interviewed through a questionnaire to be filled in on the Internet. The sample is larger than in the qualitative phase, which allowed the polling institute to provide more accurate results.

In this phase, the most important campaign themes and the degree of satisfaction of citizens about DÉFI are highlighted. Besides, the quantitative phase gives an idea of the voting intentions of the citizens for the elections of May 26th, 2019. This phase offers also a comparison between the votes obtained in the previous federal and regional elections of 2014 and the results of the elections of May 26th, 2019. The results obtained are divided: on one side there are the voting intentions of Wallonia and on the other side of Brussels.

*Figure 15* shows some campaign themes and their importance in the same time than the degree of satisfaction of citizens about DÉFI's management of this themes. The figure is divided in four parts in which the most important campaign themes are scattered. The first part represents the less important but satisfactory themes like for instance the self-employment. Thus, this means that the themes of self-employment is not so much important for citizens but they feel quite satisfied about DÉFI's management of it.

The second part highlights the most important and satisfactory campaign themes according to the citizens. Thus, the governance and political transparency are both considered as really important but also well-managed by the DÉFI party. Moreover, examples like mobility, elderly people and job coaching are considered as quite important by citizens but they remain on average for the satisfaction.

In the third part of *Figure 15* are shown campaign themes considered as important for citizens but not satisfactory in terms of management by DéFI. The environment is one of these themes and a good example of an important theme which is under average in terms of satisfaction.

The fourth and last part represents campaign themes that are less important for citizens and that are also not satisfactory in terms of management by DéFI.

**Figure 15: Most important campaign themes vs satisfaction of citizens about DéFI (in %)**



Source : personal production adapted from the quantitative phase of the survey carried out by the Belgian market research and opinion poll institute DEDICATED, at DéFI's request in February 2019.

Furthermore, the quantitative part of the survey gives two tables which show the voting intentions of the respondents according to the region where they live (Brussels or Wallonia).

In this sense, *Figure 3* is divided in two parts (Brussels and Wallonia) and highlights the voting intentions for the DÉFI party for the federal, regional and European election of 2019. Both tables gives also the voting intentions of the other main French-speaking parties. In a sense of comparison, each table shows the results of the last election of 2014.

Focusing on DÉFI's voting intentions, *Table 3* shows that the party is likely to see its consensus increase from 10.8% of the vote in 2014 to 13.3% of voting intentions in 2019 for the federal elections, from 13.1% to 15.7% for the regional elections and 7.1% to 15% for the European elections in Brussels. In Wallonia, the party would increase from 2.4% of the votes in 2014 to 5.6% of voting intentions in 2019 for the federal elections, from 2.5% to 5.6% for the regional elections and from 2.3% to 3.5% for the European elections. These two tables show that, according to the survey, DÉFI would have an increase in votes in its favour in the May 2019 elections.

Compared to the other French-speaking parties present in the two tables, DÉFI is one of the only parties to see its voting intentions increase with Ecolo and the PTB in both Brussels and Wallonia. However, DÉFI remains the last party in Wallonia and the third in Brussels. This gap between the voting intentions of these two regions can be explained by the fact that the party is originally from Brussels and that it has difficulty in establishing itself in Wallonia.

**Table 3: Voting intentions in Brussels and in Wallonia**  
**in February 2019 (in %)**

**A. Brussels**

	Federal		Regional		European	
	<i><b>Elec 2014</b></i>	<i><b>Survey 2019</b></i>	<i><b>Elec 2014</b></i>	<i><b>Survey 2019</b></i>	<i><b>Elec 2014</b></i>	<i><b>Survey 2019</b></i>
<b>PS</b>	25.6%	18.3%	23.5%	21.1%	24.2%	20.4%
<b>MR</b>	21.9%	16.3%	20.4%	16.9%	21.1%	17.4%
<b>DéFI</b>	10.8%	13.3%	13.1%	15.7%	7.1%	15.0%
<b>Ecolo</b>	10.5%	17.5%	8.9%	16.3%	13.2%	16.8%
<b>cdH</b>	9.4%	8.3%	10.4%	4.8%	8.6%	4.8%
<b>PTB</b>	4.0%	7.9%	3.4%	7.2%	4.0%	5.4%

**B. Wallonia**

	Federal		Regional		European	
	<i><b>Elec 2014</b></i>	<i><b>Survey 2019</b></i>	<i><b>Elec 2014</b></i>	<i><b>Survey 2019</b></i>	<i><b>Elec 2014</b></i>	<i><b>Survey 2019</b></i>
<b>PS</b>	32.0%	25.0%	30.9%	27.1%	29.7%	25.3%
<b>MR</b>	25.8%	22.8%	26.7%	19.6%	27.4%	22.1%
<b>cdH</b>	14.0%	9.9%	15.2%	10.3%	11.7%	9.9%
<b>Ecolo</b>	8.2%	14.6%	8.6%	17.1%	10.9%	15.4%
<b>PTB</b>	5.5%	11.8%	5.8%	12.5%	5.7%	12.5%
<b>DéFI</b>	2.4%	5.6%	2.5%	5.6%	2.3%	3.5%

Source : Revised publication from the quantitative phase of the survey carried out by the Belgian market research and opinion poll institute DEDICATED, at DéFI's request in February 2019.

### **3.1.2. Deducing points to be improved in terms of communication**

The results of this survey has led DÉFI to question itself about the communication strategy to adopt for the May 2019 election campaign. Thus, the presidency, experts from the study centre as well as ministers, some deputies and the communication unit of the party have organised an internal meeting to raise the new communication strategy of the party. During this meeting, they have reflected on the campaign methodology to improve the party's chances of reaching new electors and convincing them.

Firstly, it was decided that the party should focus on its image as a challenging party and not only on its president. Indeed, DÉFI president Olivier Maingain is a public figure who is very well known and appreciated by Belgian Francophones but his party much less. That is why the importance of bringing out new figures like the young generation of DÉFI members has been highlighted.

Secondly, DÉFI is a party that has difficulty emphasizing a particular theme. Before the name change, the party was clearly known for its defence of Francophones in the Brussels periphery. However, since the name change, the party wanted to break away from this image, which is too extreme. Thus, since 2015, DÉFI focuses on more societal themes such as ethics in politics or employment and education. Nevertheless, societal themes are often identified to other parties. Indeed, some of the issues and proposals that DÉFI wanted to put forward in the election campaign are, for instance, the environment (assigned to ECOLO), social security (PS), lower taxation on labour income (MR), education (cdH). This is the reason why DÉFI has decided to adopt priorities from its 2019 programme and emphasize them in its communication during the electoral campaign. With this methodology, the party wants to bring out not one particular theme but several campaign themes.

In addition, DÉFI has decided to better highlight the work done by its elected representatives, notably its Brussels Minister of Employment and Training Didier Gosuin, who had very good results during his political mandate.

Thirdly, the members of the internal meeting decided to make more accessible the chosen proposals through their communication. Indeed, DÉFI programme contains proposals that may be seen as complex by the voter because they are too specific. For



instance, one of the party's proposals is to introduce a "smart toll", which may seem complex without explanations and also repressive out of context. Thus, the explanation of this proposal adopted by the members of the internal meeting was changed to "more budgets for the RER and public transit, financed by a congestion tax".

Fourth, in order to reassure the electorate, DÉFI has decided to emphasize that it is a "pivotal party", that is to say, a reliable and federative party that seeks consensus with other parties whenever possible. Indeed, the first qualitative phase showed that the party is not yet well known by the electorate and that the image of the party is based mainly on its president Olivier Maingain. Moreover, the DÉFI party was considered as a "weak" party that does not have enough weight to influence Belgian politics. By putting forward its federative side, DÉFI wants to show its strength to the electorate.

Fifthly and finally, the members of the internal meeting decided to accentuate DÉFI's identity to the citizens by creating a slogan regrouping the following three concepts: citizenship, responsibility and solidarity. It was agreed that the slogan would be discussed with the communications agency that collaborated with the party during the election campaign, which will be dealt with in the rest of this work.

### **3.2. Collaboration with external consultants**

Following the results of the survey commissioned by DÉFI and the decisions taken at the internal meeting, the DÉFI presidency decided to call on external consultants. Thus, the party hired a web design agency to redesign its website and a communications agency to have a more effective communication during the election campaign. The following paragraphs give an overview of the different projects developed with these two external consultants.

#### **3.2.1. Website redesign by a web design agency**

As part of improving its communication and image, DÉFI has decided to modernize its website following the example of competing parties, which have cutting-edge websites. This is why the party called upon a web design agency. The party has

approached several web design agencies and freelancers. Indeed, the party didn't know if it was going to use a single freelance expert or rather an agency. After several interviews, one agency was chosen by the party, notably for its expertise and its clients such as the Belgian French-speaking daily newspaper *Le Soir*.

First of all, the question that arose was whether to create a brand new site or whether to redesign the old one. After a first analysis by the web agency, the first solution was the least adapted because the current website contained too many archives. Transferring these archives from the old website to the new one was therefore too "dangerous" according to the agency. Indeed, some archives could have been lost during the transfer. It was therefore decided to keep the database of the old website and to modernize it.

*Image 1* shows the layout of the homepage of the site as it was before its redesign with the web design agency. When an Internet user visited the site, he or she would come across a large banner with scrolling images. When the user scrolled, he saw directly the news of the party, that is to say the latest published articles. *Image 2* shows that the current layout of the homepage has indeed changed. For example, the scrolling banner has been replaced by a static banner with the party logo and slogan. During a meeting, the web design agency advised against the use of a scrolling banner at the top of the homepage because this is no longer used on modern websites.

**Image 1 : Old scrolling banner of DéFI's website**



**Image 2 : New static banner of DéFI's website**

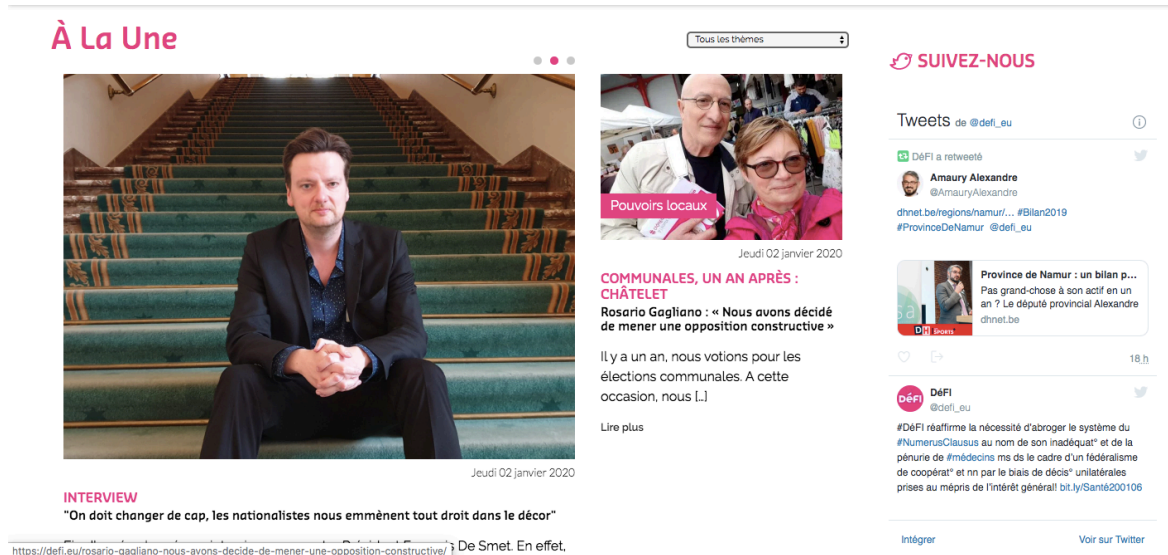



Moreover, *Image 3* shows the rest of the homepage of DéFI's website as it was before its redesign. *Image 4* shows that below the new static banner there are not only the news of the party in the form of articles, but also several "front page" articles that scroll and attract the attention of the Internet user. To the right of the news is the party's Twitter feed and the upcoming events on the agenda.

**Image 3 : Old homepage of DéFI's website**



**Image 4 : New homepage of DéFI's website**






**Pouvoirs locaux**

Jeudi 02 janvier 2020

**COMMUNALES, UN AN APRÈS : COLFONTAINE**  
Didier Golinveau : "J'obtiens de très bons retours de la part des citoyens"

Il y a un an, nous votions pour les élections communales. A cette occasion, nous [...]


[Lire plus](#)



**GRAND ENTRETIEN**  
"Nous cochons toutes les cases : libéralisme social, laïcité et défense des francophones sublimée dans le fédéralisme"

Ce samedi 21 décembre, dans une grande interview La Libre, François De Smet explique pourquoi [...]

[Lire plus](#)



**Bien-être animal**

Vendredi 20 décembre 2019

**LIBRAMONT-CHEVIGNY**  
Utiliser des feux d'artifice à bruit contenu pour réduire le stress des animaux de compagnie

A l'approche des fêtes de fin d'année, Jonathan Martin, échevin en charge du bien-être animal à Libramont-Chevigny, sensibilise les habitants de sa commune aux risques des feux d'artifice pour nos animaux de compagnie. Les risques [...]

[Lire plus](#)

**AGENDA**

**10 janvier 2020, 19h00**  
Réception de Nouvel an de la Liste du bourgmestre - Woluwe-Saint-Lambert

**11 janvier 2020, 20h00**  
Repas « fromages et bières de nos contrées wallonnes » - DéFI Ardennes &

**14 janvier 2020, 20h00**  
Présentation des programmes pour le secrétariat général & la présidence de la

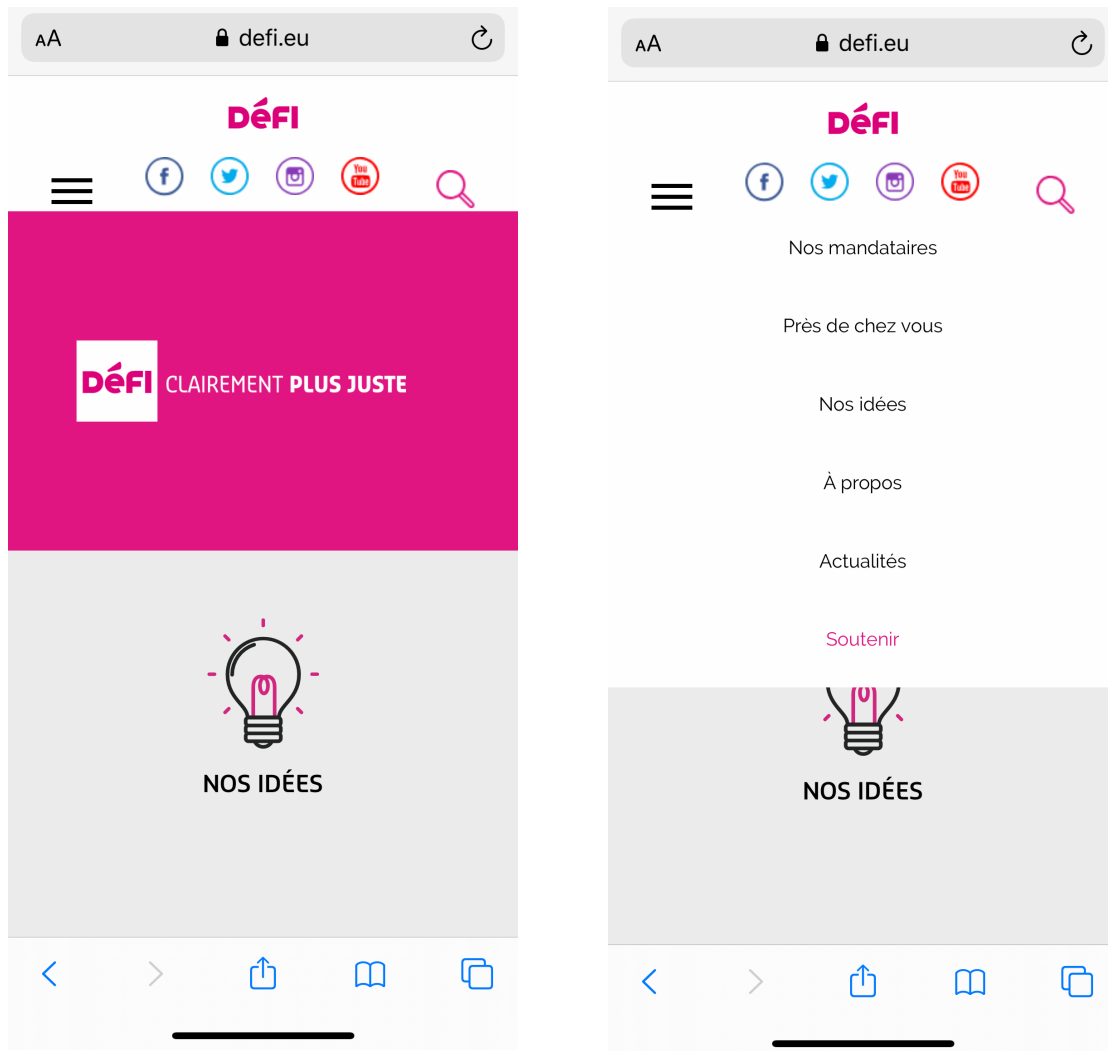
[Toutes les actualités >](#)

[Tout l'agenda >](#)

The redesign of both the graphics and the content of the homepage has been conceived with the aim of providing users with the latest party news as soon as they arrive on the website, which was not the case before. As the party called upon the web design agency in March 2019, 3 months before the elections, it was not possible to redesign the entire site before the elections. Thus, for the elections the agency focused on the homepage and the interface "elections 2019" on which it was possible to see the electoral program of the party and its candidates.

Moreover, one of the objectives of the redesign of the DéFI party site was to make it a "mobile first" site, i.e. a site that is adapted to display on smartphones. Indeed, the party realized that a majority of people were visiting the DéFI website with their smartphones, and the old site was not at all adapted to this. *Image 5* shows the current layout of DéFI's mobile website which has been adapted to a mobile display.

**Image 5 : Current layout of DéFI's mobile website**



The entire redesign of DéFI's website was conceived during working meetings between the social media manager and the web design agency. During the election campaign, these meetings were quite frequent, about once a week, because there were a lot of changes to make in a short period of time. Apart from the meetings, the web design agency worked on a platform annexed to the website, called "staging". This internet platform allows the developer to make changes on a copy of the site without them being visible on the original site. Thus, step by step, the web design agency sent an email to the social network manager with the link of the updated staging so that the social media manager could make her improvement remarks. After several exchanges and when the social network manager validated the modifications, the web design agency proceeded to put the staging on the original site. This

methodology was used throughout the election campaign for the different modifications made to the site such as the modernization of the homepage, the list of candidates for the elections, the posting of the electoral program, etc.

The collaboration with the web design agency was designed for the long term and continued after the 2019 elections to finish the redesign of the website. Moreover, the collaboration with the web design agency foresees that in case of problems with the site, consultants will always be available to support the site in order to solve the problems. This follow-up was very much appreciated by the DÉFI party, which does not have the appropriate staff to deal with this type of situation.

### **3.2.2. Communication strategy by an external communication agency**

At the same time, DÉFI called upon a communication agency to improve its communication and more particularly the points previously mentioned such as the image of the party, the clarification of its preferred themes, the simplification of its communication and the creation of a slogan. Some of these points are highlighted in the following paragraphs.

Meetings with the consultants of the communication agency were held every Monday before the internal meetings of the party. At the meeting with the communication agency, only the presidency and the Communication Unit of DÉFI were invited.

During the first meeting with the communication agency, one observation was made: the voter is lost and afraid, he no longer has confidence in politics. Then, a reflection on the position that DÉFI should take was launched. After a brainstorming, a baseline emerged: DÉFI, clearly on your side. The consultants of the communication agency also advised to create a slogan specific to the election campaign that would be used on the communication supports of the party. Thus, the campaign slogan adopted was: "Listening to what is right for you".

During this meeting the organisation of campaign events, i.e. media events, was also discussed. A first idea of the communication agency was to set up a video photo booth that would be moved during the whole month of April in Wallonia and the Brussels Region, in the big cities. The images from this video photo booth would then be

recovered, processed and a video montage would be published by the party in early May, 3 weeks before the electoral poll.

In addition, the communication agency had the idea of publishing a "White Paper", i.e. the publication in the French-speaking daily press of a letter, signed by DÉFI president Olivier Maingain, inviting the presidents of the other French-speaking parties to come and take note of the citizens' requests.

Next, the communication consultants proposed a particular visual to be used for the election campaign and possibly to be kept afterwards. The idea of using a bubble speech on the visuals was therefore adopted. Indeed, the bubble speech has a communicative connotation, of listening and speaking that the party wants to convey to citizens through its visual and textual communication.

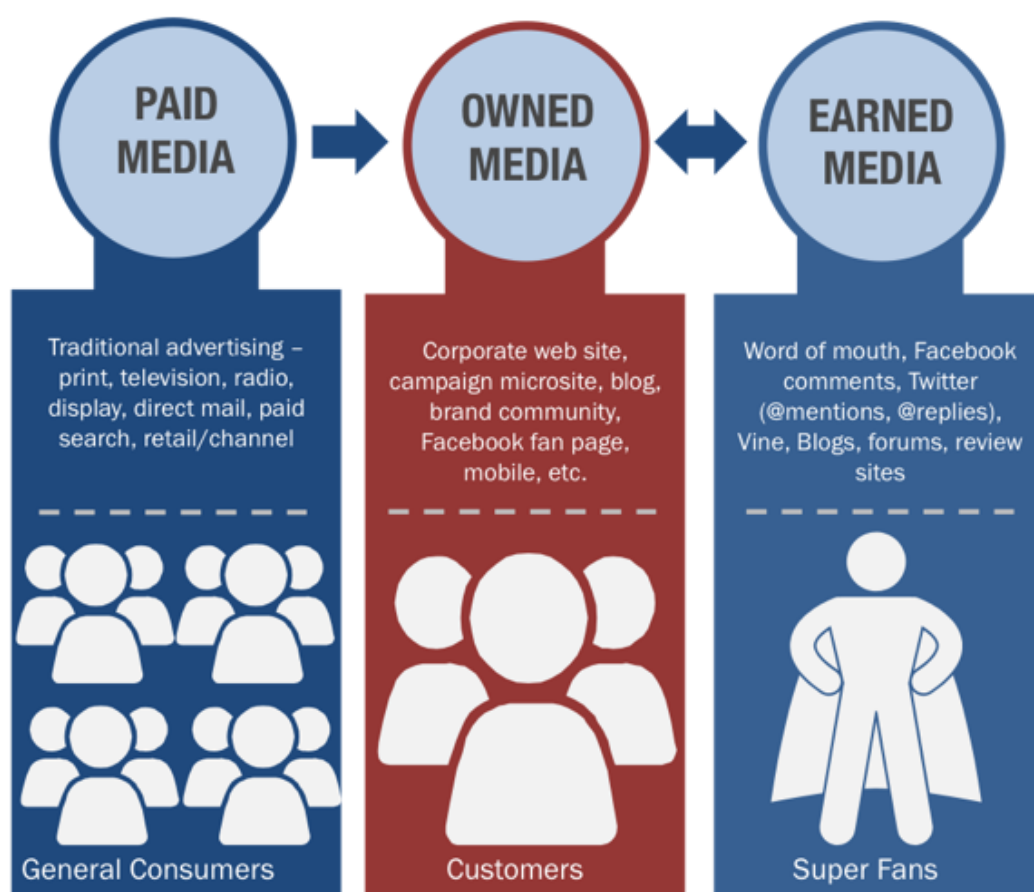
Finally, the communications agency has drawn up a communication plan that is confidential and that I cannot divulge in this work. However, it is interesting to know that this communication campaign was structured around the concepts of paid, owned and earned media.

To better understand these 3 concepts, *Figure 16* gives examples of them while showing their relationships. Paid media is similar to traditional advertising since it generally consists in paying for visibility. For example, DÉFI's sponsored publications or Facebook ads are paid media just like newspaper inserts. Communication through paid media is considered ephemeral. Unlike paid media, owned media has a long-term goal. In fact, owned media consists of creating quality content, specific to its organisation, in order to improve the image of the organisation and to strengthen the relationship with the target group. Thus, the website, blog, social networks, etc, are channels that allow the implementation of owned media. Another particularity of owned media is its 365° strategy, which allows the organisation to reach its target audience through different channels. In the case of DÉFI, an owned media is the insertion of the campaign slogan "What is right (for you)" in all the party's communication media such as social networks, election posters, videos or speeches. Earned media is independent of any control by the organization. Indeed, this concept is characterized by word-of-mouth and can therefore depend very strongly on owned media because if a solid long-term relationship is established between the organization and the target, word-of-mouth will be positive and can bring positive and unexpected results. In the case of DÉFI, voters won over the party through word-



of-mouth. Conversely, disgruntled voters have also been able to give the party bad publicity and cause it to lose voters.

**Figure 16: Defining Paid, Owned and Earned Media**



Source : Brito M., *Your Content Strategy: Defining Paid, Owned and Earned Media*, on [www.business2community.com](http://www.business2community.com), 2013

### **3.3. Handling of campaign-specific communication requests**

#### **3.3.1. Coaching election candidates**

At the specific request of the President of DéFI, one of the most important missions of the communication unit during the 2019 election campaign was to support and coach the candidates running on the DéFI lists in terms of communication. Indeed, several candidates who were running were from civil society and therefore new to politics.

The party's mission was to support them by training them on an important subject such as their communication in substance and in form. The objective was in line with one of the improvements formulated following the analysis of the survey results, namely to create a good image around each candidate, since he or she will be directly assimilated into the DéFI party.

DéFI have presented lists for the 3 elections of May 2019, namely federal, regional and European. This represented about 250 candidates in Wallonia and Brussels.

Coaching of DéFI candidates for the 2019 elections began with the organization of two campaign meetings. One with the candidates of the Brussels Region and the other with the candidates of Wallonia. The main purpose of these two meetings was to federate the candidates among themselves and with the party staff and to bring them together. During these two meetings, the president of DéFI announced to the candidates the electoral events that will be organized by the party during the campaign and that require the participation of all candidates. In addition, the communication agency was present at each of these meetings to present the communication strategy put in place with the party. Thus, the communication agency presented the visuals of the communication supports that all candidates had to use in order to have a uniform visual communication. In addition, the agency presented the campaign slogan "Clearly Fairer" and the hashtag "#It's Fair for All" which should be massively used by the candidates in all their communications. The communication agency also announced to the candidates that they would be entitled to a photo shoot in order to have quality photos for their communication materials. During these meetings, the heads of the lists were also put forward as they are the spokespersons for each of the federal, regional and European lists of DéFI. This is why the communication agency explained to the heads of list that they will be asked to produce video clips on themes from the party's electoral program that will be broadcast on the party's website and social networks during the campaign. Finally, these meetings also allowed the communication team to motivate the candidates to be as active as possible in the field, to create group actions by going to meet citizens, to distribute leaflets and to talk about DéFI as much as possible around them.

In addition to the information meetings with the candidates held in Wallonia and Brussels, the party has published thematic fact sheets on its intranet, to which all candidates have access. As the intranet already existed, this method of in-depth coaching saved the party time and money. More specifically, the fact sheets were written by the parliamentary attachés of the party's deputies in collaboration with the DÉFI study centre. The purpose of these sheets was to give the party's proposals and positions on specific themes. Each fact sheet had to be concise so that a candidate could quickly find out about a party position in order to argue a debate, for example. *Image 6* is an example of an environmental theme sheet that follows the following structure: background, challenge's environmental objectives, the party's main proposals, and a comparison of the challenge program with those of other parties. Thus, with this type of fact sheet, candidates could be autonomous in their substantive preparation.

## **Image 6 : Environmental fact sheet frontpage**

### **FICHE THÉMATIQUE ENVIRONNEMENT**

RZ + AG

DéFi veut protéger l'environnement, tant pour assurer la santé et la qualité de vie locale des citoyens que pour répondre aux défis mondiaux comme le changement climatique ou l'épuisement des ressources. A cet égard, nous estimons que la transition écologique doit être un régulateur puissant d'une économie de marché sociale et durable.

Lors de la COP21 qui s'est déroulée à Paris en décembre 2015, les Etats se sont engagés à maintenir l'augmentation de la température mondiale moyenne en-dessous de 2 degrés par rapport au niveau préindustriel de 1990 et à tout mettre en œuvre pour limiter cette hausse à 1,5 degrés. Pour un pays industrialisé comme la Belgique cela signifie une diminution des émissions de gaz à effet de serre (GES) de 95% d'ici 2050. Une transition vers une société bas-carbone implique donc de s'engager dans une évolution profonde de notre société, tant en investissant dans les bonnes technologies qu'en adaptant nos comportements. Pour DéFI, transition vers une société bas carbone et une croissance économique sont conciliables.

Transition écologique et justice sociale doivent impérativement aller de pair. Alors que deux tiers de nos émissions de CO2 sont produites par le chauffage et la consommation de carburant, nous voulons sortir de la dépendance aux énergies fossiles qui nous rend vulnérable tant sur le plan de la santé que de l'environnement. A cet égard, DéFi veut mettre en place une fiscalité environnementale pour orienter le choix des consommateurs et des entreprises vers des achats économes en énergie et peu émetteurs de GES.

Les 5 objectifs de DéFI :

1. développer une fiscalité au service de l'environnement et défendre un modèle environnemental régulateur dans une économie de marché durable ;
2. améliorer la qualité de l'air des citoyens ;
3. assurer une transition énergétique de la Région bruxelloise ambitieuse en vue de sortir de la dépendance aux énergies fossiles ;
4. réduire les déchets et lutter contre toute forme de pollution (produits toxiques, plastiques, sonore, électromagnétique, etc.) ;
5. préserver la biodiversité et améliorer le bien-être des animaux.

#### **Nos principales propositions :**

Une fiscalité verte au service de l'environnement et des citoyens qui repose sur deux mesures phares :

- La mise en place d'un bonus-malus du précompte-immobilier pour encourager les propriétaires à rénover et améliorer la performance énergétique de leurs biens
- La mise en place d'une tarification carbone pour intégrer les impacts climatiques de la consommation de carburants fossiles et encourager les consommateurs à réduire leurs émissions tout en générant des recettes destinées à stimuler la transition énergétique et l'emploi.

In addition, DÉFI organized two coaching sessions, one in Brussels and the other in Wallonia, with professionals from outside the party, for the frontrunners. Indeed, the party did not have the means to train all the candidates and had to choose to train only the frontrunners since they are the ones who are the most publicly solicited during the election campaign. Each coaching session lasted a whole day, focused on coaching in form and not in substance like the thematic sheets, and took place in two parts: the theoretical part in the morning and the practical part in the afternoon. The trainers were a former journalist and her partner. During the theoretical part, the coach gave tips to the frontrunners to make them comfortable during TV interviews, public speaking and debates for instance. Indeed, in Wallonia, most of the frontrunners were novices in politics and therefore needed training. During filmed interviews, one of the tips given by the coach was to make sure that the camera was at the height of the frontrunners. Indeed, if the interviewee is small and the cameraman is tall, then the rendering of the image may not put the candidate to his or her advantage at all. Thus, the coach advised the small frontrunners to ask for a small stage so that they could be at camera height during the interview. During televised debates, the coach advised the top candidates not to wear flash colours or patterned clothing such as stripes, for example, as this is visually unattractive. In addition, the coach reminded the frontrunners that when they enter a television set, they must be very careful what they say, as a microphone may record comments that are not intended for public broadcast. Thus, even off the air, candidates must be beyond reproach.

During the practical part, each candidate participated individually in a mock television interview in which the coach played the role of a journalist and her cameraman partner. Thus, the coach asked a question about the DÉFI program and the frontrunner had to answer it as in a real filmed interview. During this part, the coach helped the candidates put forward their ability to explain the party's positions in a simple and effective way. Afterwards, everyone visualized the filmed interview and commented on the strong and weak points of the interview. In this way, each frontrunner could see him or herself on-screen and try to improve his way of answering the interviews.

Finally, at the request of the President of DéFI, the communication unit remained in support of the candidates throughout the election campaign. In other words, if a candidate had any questions about the way he or she communicated, the staff of the communication unit helped him or her by advising him or her punctually by phone or email.

### 3.3.2. Civil society demands

During the election campaign, civil society approached the DéFI party in various ways. DéFI received many memoranda<sup>105</sup> from organisations and associations. This is a customary practice in Belgium. In addition, the 2019 election campaign saw arrive a large choice of citizen initiatives such as applications and websites promoting transparency by elected officials and parties about their political intentions. The following paragraphs deal specifically with these topics by highlighting concrete examples.

One of the most important kind of civil society demand received by DéFI was the many memoranda from all sorts of organizations like the alliance of news media “LaPresse.be” or the general nurses' union of Belgium. All the memoranda received by DéFI were managed and read by the party's study centre.

How is a memorandum presented? Let's try to understand it better by taking for example the memorandum of the alliance of news media “LaPresse.be”<sup>106</sup>.

First of all, in this case, the organization asked to meet each party president individually to present them the memorandum. However, this is not always the case and most of the time the memoranda are sent by email. Thus, the president of “LaPresse.be” met the president of DéFI as well as a DéFI member of parliament specialised in media issues and the party's press officer, in order to present them the memorandum in view of the May 2019 elections.

“LaPresse.be” memorandum is divided into several parts. First there is an introduction with facts about the daily press such as: *"The fight against disinformation*

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<sup>105</sup> A memorandum is a document from an organisation, composed of requests and recommendations addressed to political parties and leaders to inform them about the "reality on the ground." Most of the time, the memoranda call for concrete actions from the political world.

<sup>106</sup> “LaPresse.be” is the representative of the editors of the French and German speaking daily press in Belgium.

*is at the heart of current societal and democratic questioning. Our societies have indeed taken the measure, often in an acute way, of the damage caused by fake news which, little by little, gangrene certain categories of opinion and modify the way we live together"* and *"the daily press uses professional means of selection, analysis and explanation to offer citizens (this) verified and credible information"*<sup>107</sup>. The introduction also highlights the crucial problems faced by daily press publishers, such as the fall in advertising revenue and print sales. "LaPresse.be" which is *"leading media sites in terms of unique visitors"* wants to succeed in converting all these readers into paying subscribers in order to compensate for the loss of advertising and print media revenues. In order to maintain itself economically, "LaPresse.be" believes that the next government will have to help publishers with legislation, for example with *"the implementation of a level playing field between media players"*. More specifically, "LaPresse.be" is calling for *"the regulation of RTBF<sup>108</sup>'s access to the advertising market"* and *"the development of sustainable strategies for collaboration with RTBF"*<sup>109</sup> in order to maintain Belgian media pluralism. Indeed, as a public service channel, RTBF has advantages such as written content published free of charge whereas publishers have to pay to be able to publish it.

Second, there are several chapters such as the one dealing with *"the press as a tool of democracy"*. In this chapter, "LaPresse.be" explains in more depth the role and importance of daily press publishers in the proper functioning of democracy. On the one hand, *"for more than four years now, "LaPresse.be" has been highlighting the need and urgency to extend media education to the daily press as it exists today and as most young people conceive it, i.e. on digital media"*<sup>110</sup>. A project was presented to the previous government without obtaining concrete support. Within the framework of this project, the publishers who are members of "LaPresse.be" offer teachers and youth organisations access to an online platform *"with daily PDFs of the various titles and various tools for research, archives, etc"*<sup>111</sup>. In concrete terms, "LaPresse.be" asks that such an investment by publishers of daily newspapers should not go unheeded and should obtain concrete support from the public authorities.

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<sup>107</sup> "LaPresse.be" memorandum 2019 p.1

<sup>108</sup> RTBF is a French-speaking public service channel

<sup>109</sup> "LaPresse.be" memorandum 2019 p.6

<sup>110</sup> Ibidem, p.12

<sup>111</sup> Ibidem, p.12

On the other hand, "LaPresse.be" recalls that *"good communication between the authorities and the citizen is one of the foundations of democracy"* and that *"the written press is in a position to make an essential contribution to improving the quality of communication in the public interest"*<sup>112</sup>. Moreover, *"institutional communication is (...) a win-win approach to supporting the sector"*<sup>113</sup>. However, publishers of daily newspapers state that they have seen public authorities' investment in communication via the daily press decrease by 15 to 12% between 2014 and 2017. Through this memorandum, "LaPresse.be" therefore asks that *"a real public communication policy be put in place"*<sup>114</sup>.

After the presentation of this memorandum by the President of "LaPresse.be", the President of DéFI indicated that he was not aware of all the facts mentioned in this memorandum and that he was a fervent defender of the daily press. For these reasons, he asked that the memorandum be studied carefully by the study centre and that the new DéFI deputies, after the elections, work on these specific requests from the publishers of the daily press.

Another important type of demand from civil society in the 2019 campaign has been the establishment of various websites and applications promoting transparency in politics. The CIVIX application is an example of a citizens' initiative created by young citizens to inform other young people about the programmes of Belgian political parties. Behind origin CIVIX is an association which counts nearly 30 student volunteers from different Belgian faculties and universities. The three main objectives of CIVIX are pedagogy to help young people better understand how the Belgian political system works; awareness-raising in order to stimulate young people's interest in politics and make them aware of the stakes involved in elections; and the development of tools to enable young people to take concrete action in the politics of their countries.

The slogan of the CIVIX application is "Give meaning to your voice". The application is accessible via smartphone and is free of charge. It allows citizens to obtain substantial

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<sup>112</sup> "LaPresse.be" memorandum 2019 p.13

<sup>113</sup> Ibidem, p.14

<sup>114</sup> Ibidem, p.14



information on the programmes of the various parties and to vote in full knowledge of the facts during elections.

The application is divided into several sections: the thematic section (*Appendix 4*), which compares the different political programmes classified by theme and allows political parties to ask and answer questions on a specific theme; the education section, consisting of fact sheets, instructional videos and questionnaires to better understand the Belgian political system but also the stakes of the elections; the last section presents the political parties and their candidates as well as the key measures taken by the latter. In order to enter the CIVIX application, the user must enter his postal code, which allows the application to show him only the candidates for whom he will be able to vote in his geographical area.

In addition, before the CIVIX application was launched, the political parties were contacted by the creators of CIVIX to provide the content of the previously submitted headings. Indeed, apart from the "education" section, the CIVIX team did not create the content of the sections but asked for the participation of the political parties. Thus, the DéFI communications unit collaborated with the CIVIX team to provide the programme in a simplified thematic version as well as providing a presentation of the party, the good quality logo and the list of all DéFI candidates. After the launch of the CIVIX application, DéFI continued to collaborate with the CIVIX team, particularly in responding to questions posed by users via the application. This citizen's initiative was an opportunity for DéFI to be visible to a younger target group and to be able to interact with them through question and answer sessions.

### **2.3.3. Adaptation to the “extraordinary” media organization**

During election campaigns, the Belgian media must set up electoral measures. Indeed, in the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (FWB), the Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel (CSA) is the independent administrative authority responsible for audiovisual regulation and control<sup>115</sup>. Each media is free to set up electoral measures during an election campaign as long as these measures are approved by the CSA.

Thus, the usual functioning of the media is modified for stricter rules and a clearer agenda. At DéFI, it was the press attaché who was in charge of bringing together all

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<sup>115</sup> <http://www.csa.be/pages/show/1>

the electoral systems of all the television channels, national and local, and the written press. The press attaché also had to present the specific requests of each media during internal meetings on Monday morning and ensure that DéFI responded to all these requests. But what exactly are these electoral measures?

During the 2019 election campaign, it was mainly the television and radio channels that developed specific electoral measures. First of all, the election campaign is divided into three parts: the cautionary period, the election period and election day. During the cautionary period<sup>116</sup>, apart from television news and spoken news, there must be no interviews or sound bites of candidates, proxies or well-known political party activists. On the contrary, television news programmes and newspapers may interview candidates, proxies or well-known activists, provided that this is done with due respect for pluralism. The election period is different for each channel. The television channel BX1 provides for the "fair balance" of the parties' television appearances to be respected, based on a count of interviews established by the editorial staff. A maximum margin of 10% is tolerated. Only French-speaking political parties with outgoing elected representatives may be represented. On the contrary, the public service channel RTBF does not balance the parties' television appearances. Indeed, RTBF has decided that parties that were already represented simultaneously in federal, regional and European assemblies should be more visible because they represent more citizens. Secondly, the parties that are represented in at least one of the three assemblies must be as visible but less than the first ones. Thus, the former have been divided into percentages of appearance like this: PS 30% - MR 26% - cdH 13% - ECOLO 10%. The second group like this: DéFI minimum 5% - PTB minimum 5%. As a result, the DéFI party could not be as present as the other Francophone parties on the RTBF set.

On election day it is forbidden for all media to broadcast images or interviews advocating a particular candidate or party until the closing of the polling stations. Thus, the images broadcast by the television channels on election day were mainly of party chairmen voting in their respective polling stations but also the setting up of each party's headquarters for election night.

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<sup>116</sup> The cautionary period may be different for each media outlet but generally runs from January to February 2019.

In addition to the electoral measures taken by the media, there is also the establishment of an editorial line specific to elections with electoral debates, interviews, media reports... The most important part to manage for the press officer was the election debates. Indeed, each media outlet sent its programme with several debates for each, which required significant logistics. Thus, the press officer created a specific calendar for the electoral debates where she noted the date, the appointment time, the "channel" (i.e. the broadcasting channel), the name of the programme, the name of the speaker but also of the other guests, as well as the subject of the debate. In addition, this calendar was a file shared with the social network manager, who could use it as a schedule for announcing and monitoring the debates on social networks and the party's website. When inviting to the debates, the media gave the party a free choice to send the candidate of its choice, except in the case of a debate with leaders only. Thus, the party has a great deal of work to do in deciding which candidates to send to the debates. The goal is not to always put forward the same or the best-known candidates. However, with the euphoria of the election campaign, it was sometimes very difficult to match the candidates' agendas with the debates proposed by the media and also to convince some candidates who were less comfortable to debate with others.

Moreover, it was impossible for DéFI to leave the chair empty during a debate, especially since the party was not as well represented as the others because of the electoral rules of some media outlets. It was therefore by making many changes in the choice of candidates to be sent to debates that the press attaché collaborated with the party's presidency to have each participation validated before proposing the candidate to the media in question. When the debate was organized, there was the candidate preparation stage. In general, the candidate prepared himself, but the press officer always sent a summary of the debate by e-mail to the candidate a few days beforehand. The press officer tried to gather as much information as possible on the modalities and themes of the debate by calling the journalist directly in order to brief the candidate as much as possible.

On the day of the debate, the press officer always tried to watch or listen to the program so that she would be aware of what the candidate said on behalf of the party and be able to react if necessary. After the debate, the press officer always sends a short message or calls the candidate to give him/her feedback on the debate and also

to get his/her impressions. Electoral debates are generally debates between the candidates and frontrunners of the different parties throughout the election campaign.

However, towards the end of the campaign, the last month before the elections, the debates started to focus on the party presidents. During the debates between the party presidents, the press officer always travelled to accompany Olivier Maingain. This made it possible to take backstage photos and send them to the social networks manager to feed the social networks but also to be there to maintain the link with the journalists and not miss anything that is said on the set but also off-set and that could be useful in his work.

The media channels provided for election debates but also for less formal programmes and media still linked to the elections. For instance, the public service television and radio channel RTBF deployed a whole system for the 2019 election campaign. The channel divided its system into three periods: issues, programmes and debates and candidates. The issues period took place in March 2019 and included programmes helping citizens to answer the following questions: Why do I vote? What motivates my vote? The main election themes were highlighted in different formats. The program period took place in April 2019 and aimed to answer the following questions: What are the political responses to citizens' issues? What are the choices? The programmes were explained to citizens by politicians through different formats. Finally, the debates and candidates period took place in May 2019 and aimed to answer the following questions: How do the candidates differentiate themselves? Who will carry my voice? During this last period before the elections, RTBF's objective was to allow citizens to finalize their choice of vote. The following table shows the different formats used by RTBF to respond to its special election editorial line.

**Table 4: Various RTBF media programmes for the 2019 electoral campaign  
in Belgium**

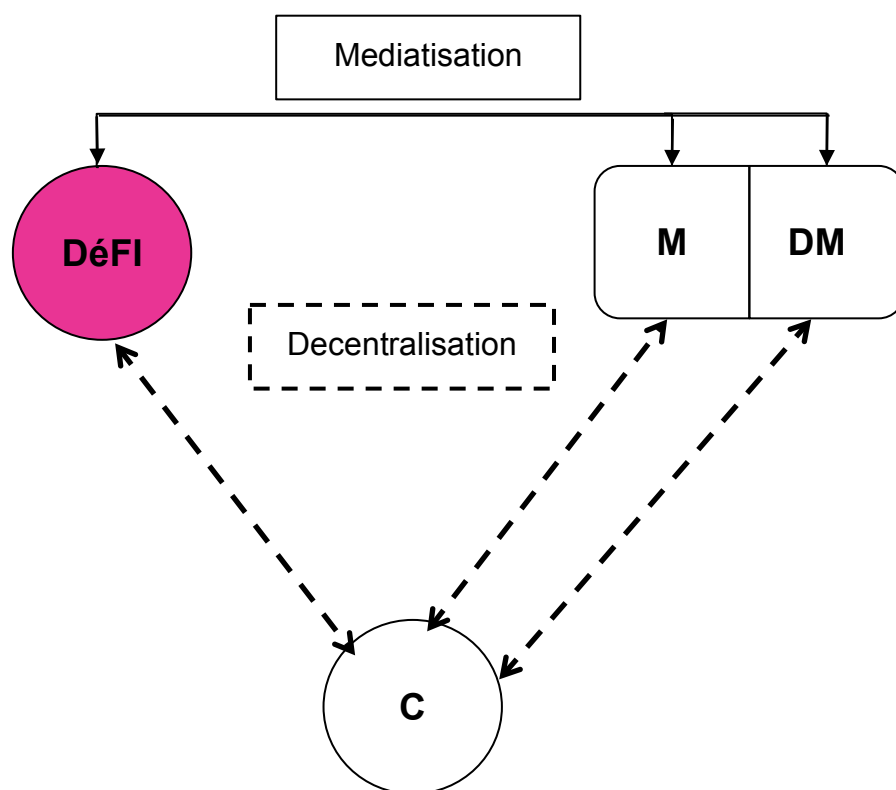
<b>Issues (march 2019)</b>	<b>Programmes (april 2019)</b>	<b>Debates and candidates (may 2019)</b>
Launch of the CIVIX application sponsored by RTBF	Video broadcast for the RTBF social networks "Photomaton": a candidate enters a photo booth. He is asked a series of questions. He is exposed to photos and videos. A counter then gives him the time he has to answer. The light goes out once the time has elapsed.	"Citizen's train" TV show: the president of a party takes the train with the journalist and goes to meet citizens
Radio programme "facing the Belgians": a candidate faces Belgians from civil society and their questions, then answers the journalist's interview.	TV talk show "In your opinion": the candidates of several political parties meet on a set with the journalist and an audience. The show has a special theme and there is interaction with the audience.	The radio programme "Les petits papiers": a party president confronts two journalists. He randomly picks out words that evoke social issues and reacts to them live.
	The "Electoral Test" on the RTBF website and social networks: questionnaire developed by academics in collaboration with the daily press and RTBF on the political parties' programmes. Citizens answer the questionnaire and see which party they are closest to based on their answers.	The radio programme "Debates première": a debate on campaign issues with civil society representatives and candidates.

Source : [https://www.rtbfbel.be/info/belgique/detail\\_dispositif-electoral-de-la-rtbf-en-vue-des-elections-federales-regionales-et-europeennes-2019?id=10128491](https://www.rtbfbel.be/info/belgique/detail_dispositif-electoral-de-la-rtbf-en-vue-des-elections-federales-regionales-et-europeennes-2019?id=10128491)

This table shows that RTBF tried to adapt its electoral measures to different formats such as radio, TV, debates but also videos for social networks. When choosing the candidates to send to the programs, the DÉFI press attaché had to find candidates adapted to the target of the program in question. For example, for the "photo booth", the party sent a young candidate since the video had an entertainment format and targeted a young generation via social networks.

To summarize how the interactions between political system, media system and citizens have worked for DÉFI, let's use the personal approach of political communication today theorized earlier in this work (see Chapter 2, 4). Thus, *Figure 17* is an application of my personal model to the case of DÉFI that have been analysed in the previous paragraphs.

**Figure 17: Personal approach of political communications today applied to the case of DÉFI**



**Legend**

DÉFI : Political party

M : Traditional media entity (print media, television, radio)

DM : Digital media entity (Internet, social media, emails, websites)

C : Citizenship (civil society, citizens as electors)

Source : Personal production

*Figure 17* is composed of the political party DéFI (DéFI), the citizens (C) and the media system which is represented by traditional media (M) and digital media (DM) entities, which constitute it. DéFI political party, citizens and traditional media/digital media are considered as the three actors of the political communication systems. Thus, they are related with each others through interactions that are represented in the model by different arrows. Simple arrows represent interactions in a context of mediatisation (see Chapter 2, 1.2.) while dashed arrows illustrate interactions in conditions of decentralisation (see Chapter 2, 2.2.).

As already explained previously, the dynamics of political communication have been transformed, particularly by digital media as part of the media system. Previously, *Figure 11* highlighted the fact that political system interacts with traditional media and digital media entities in different manners (mediatisation). It also emphasized the fact that citizens are actors in the interaction with the political system on the one hand and the traditional and digital media on the other (decentralisation). Thus, *Figure 17* aims to apply this theoretical approach to a practical case, namely the case of the Belgian political party DéFI analysed above.

On the one hand, the regulation of traditional media pluralism is applied by DéFI which has deputies specialized in the field of culture and media. In particular, the previous analysis showed that the party committed itself to work on the specific requests from the publishers of the daily press (see Chapter 3, 2.3.2) that it met during the election campaign for the presentation of their memorandum. Moreover, the influence of the media agenda in favour of the spread of certain political information is also applied by DéFI. Indeed, the party was not so much solicited by the media during the electoral campaign, that is why the party tried to attract the attention of the media on certain message through, for example, media events like press conferences or congress's.

On the other hand, it is true that the traditional media have mainly solicited the DéFI party on news issues. It is also true that most of the information that made the buzz was new or spectacular information, such as the time when a newspaper unveiled the name of the frontrunner that was going to be announced to the press at the DéFI press conference the day before the conference (see Chapter 3, 3). This type of exclusivity was what interested the media most during the election campaign. The more basic information, such as the content of the electoral programs, which were

privileged by DéFI because they were background information, were of much less interest to the media.

Furthermore, as it is difficult for the political system to regulate digital media DéFI worked on media education in French-speaking Belgium to help students develop a critical sense and teach them how to receive and process information. The party made this one of its programmatic priorities during the 2019 election campaign. In addition, in a context of digital media in which the direct interlocutor is the citizen as user and is the first who must be interested by the message, DéFI tried to adapt its communication to some digital media. Indeed, the party has hired a social media manager to professionalize its digital communication through its social networks, its website and its newsletter. The feedback and statistics received from these communication initiatives are then analysed by the social media manager (see Chapter 3, 1), share with the communication unit and the presidency of the party and then used to improve future communication messages.

Besides, *Figure 17* shows that communication is two-way between DéFI and the citizens as well as between the media system (composed of both traditional and digital media entities) and the citizens. On the one hand, there is DéFI's communication towards citizens, especially communication on the ground during door-to-door or events such as speed-datings (see Chapter 3, 3) organised during the election campaign.

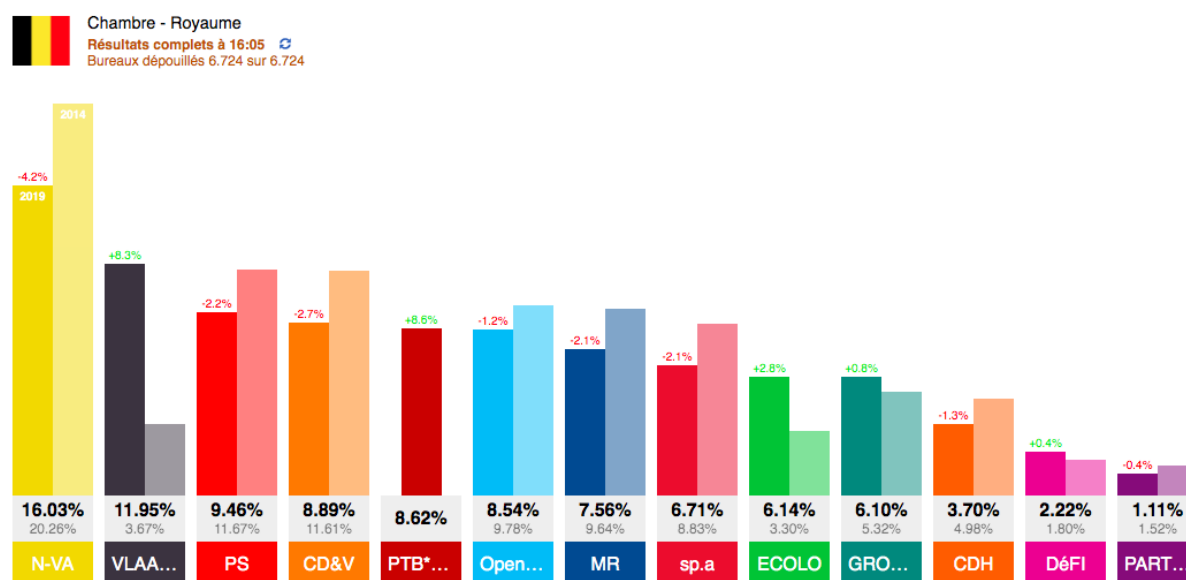
On the other hand, there is the citizens who vote to elect DéFI's political representatives but also the communication from citizens to the party, in particular through DéFI social media, where DéFI political representatives and the party are present. The interaction of citizens and DéFI can also be understood as indirect through demonstrations for example with Climate march which took place in Brussels during the 2019 election campaign and which indirectly called on political parties to take action on climate change (see Chapter 3, 3).



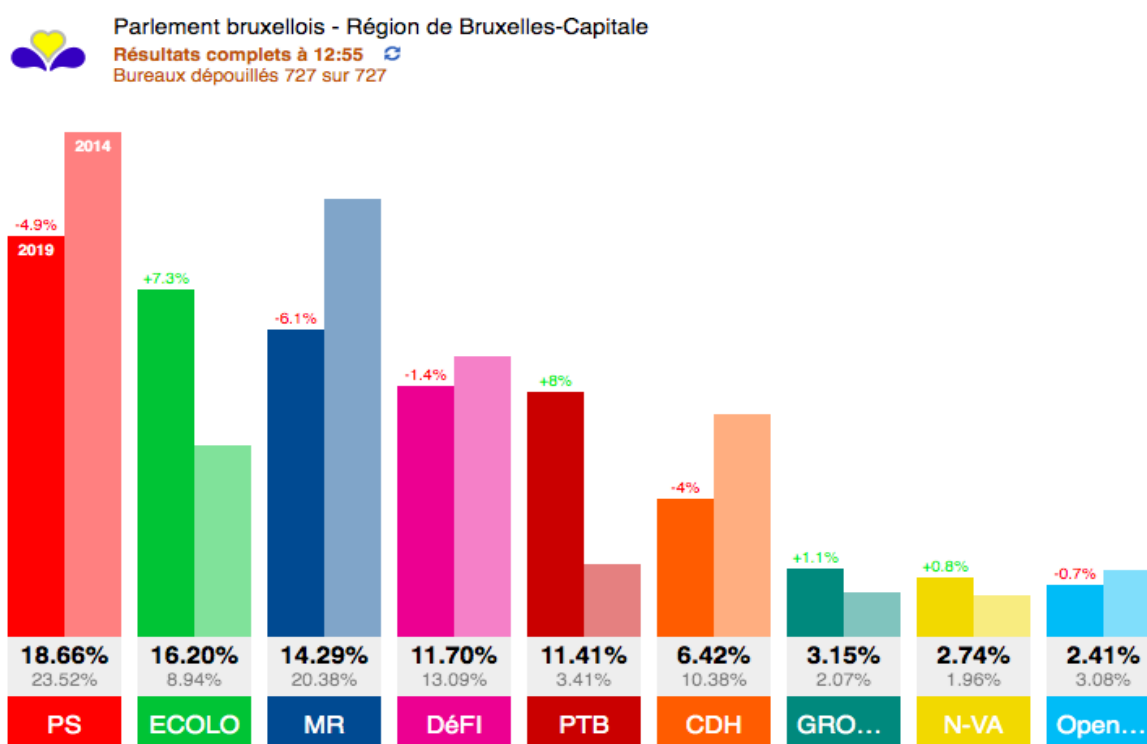
In addition, the following *Figure 18* show the results of the May 2019 federal, regional and European elections.

**Figure 18: May 2019 Belgian federal, regional and European election results**

### A. Federal results



### B. Regional results - Brussels

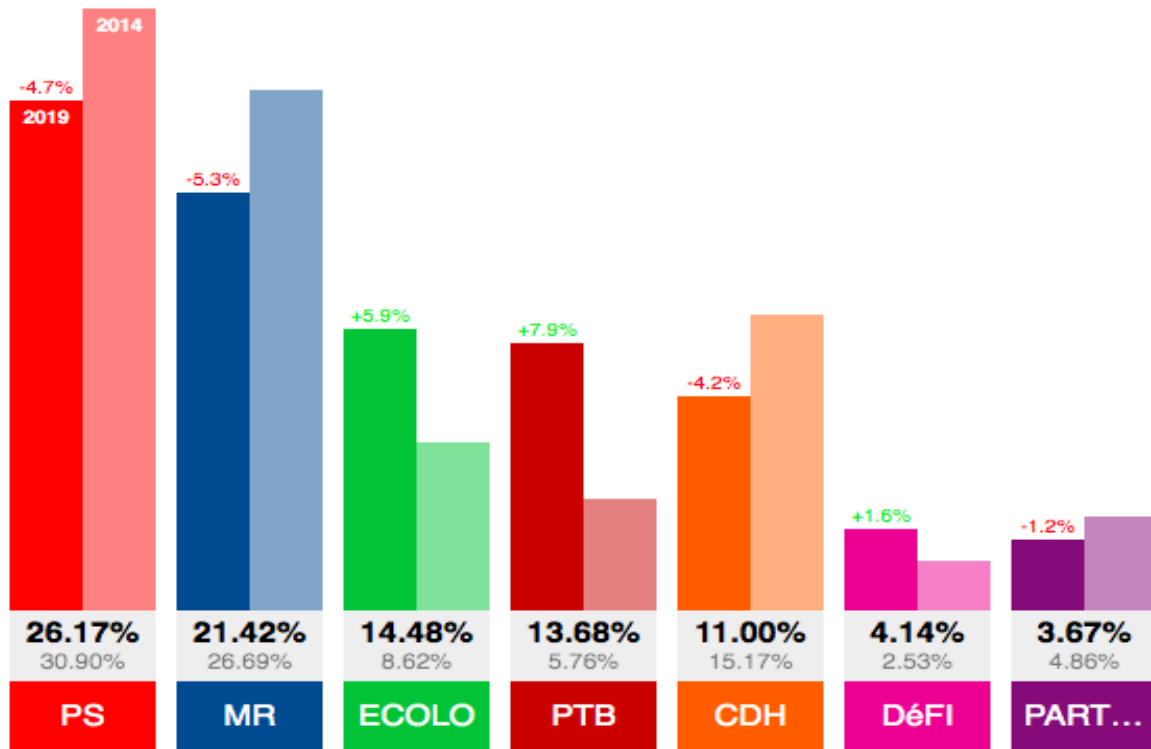


### C. Regional results - Wallonia



Parlement wallon

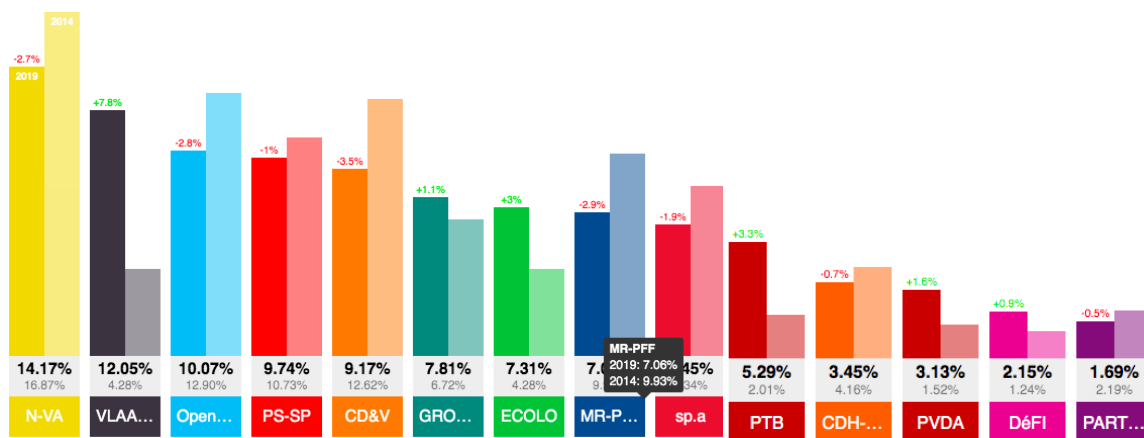
Résultats complets à 03:30  
Bureaux dépouillés 1.360 sur 1.360



### D. European results



Parlement européen - Royaume  
Résultats complets à 16:05  
Bureaux dépouillés 7.324 sur 7.324



Source: [https://www.rtf.be/info/election/circonscription/detail\\_les-resultats-des-elections-europeennes-2019-en-belgique?id=10216049](https://www.rtf.be/info/election/circonscription/detail_les-resultats-des-elections-europeennes-2019-en-belgique?id=10216049)

Through an article<sup>117</sup> on its website, DéFI has publicly described its results in the following way:

## **Brussels**

### **Federal**

DéFI retains its 2 deputies. DéFI progresses overall in the Chamber in terms of votes (150,394 votes, + 4.42%) and is stable in the Brussels constituency (51,544 votes, 10.28%).

### **Brussels Region**

DéFI attracted 53,638 votes in the Brussels Region, which represents 13.8% and a very slight drop of 0.99%. DéFI sent 10 deputies to the Brussels Parliament.

## **Wallonia**

### **Federal**

DéFI is progressing in terms of number of votes (sometimes doubling them as in Hainaut) and as a percentage in all Walloon provinces, achieving its best score in Walloon Brabant (6.11%, +1.44%). Progress also in Liège (3.60%, + 1.38%), Hainaut (3.76%, + 1.81%), Luxembourg (2.98%, + 1.32%) and Namur (4.85%, + 2.06%).

### **Walloon Region**

DéFI obtains 4.14% in the Walloon Parliament, which is a net progression compared to 2014 (2.53%, +1.61%), but it is not enough to obtain a deputy. DéFI achieves its best scores in Walloon Brabant (6.33%, + 1.67%) and in the province of Namur (4.72%, + 2.24%) while also progressing in the other provinces, in Hainaut (3.73%, + 1.43%), in Luxembourg (2.90%, + 0.92%) and in Liège (3.81%, + 1.6%).

### **Europe**

DéFI achieved a very good score (5.92%, up 2.54%), 144,555 votes in Brussels and Wallonia (+62,000 votes) including 22,804 votes for the head of the list Benoît Cassart, but this is not enough to win a seat in the European Parliament.

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<sup>117</sup> <https://defi.eu/suivez-les-resultats-en-wallonie-bruxelles-et-dans-sa-peripherie/>

Furthermore, here is DéFI's statement<sup>118</sup> following the results of the May 2019 elections. According to the party there are two major findings:

*"Both because of the digital evolution (social networks are the only source of "information" for many people who are very far from politics but who have the right to vote since voting is compulsory) and because of the crises and mistrust towards politicians, many citizens no longer hesitate to vote without worrying about the consequences for parties that challenge the system such as Vlaams Belang or the PTB, but which do not provide any credible or fundable solution, any solution that is not acceptable to Europe to which we must be accountable. These parties give simplistic and sometimes frankly dangerous answers such as the racism of Belang. The important vote in favour of Ecolo is obviously not an extremist vote, but it responds to the same concerns about the way in which traditional parties seem to provide an insufficient response to specific concerns of the citizen.*

*Furthermore, there is a deepening divorce between two different public opinions (Flanders, Wallonia) and even 3 or 4 (with Brussels and the German-speaking Community) who all vote very differently. Flanders votes very massively for the conservative right or even the racist extreme right while Wallonia votes very massively for the classic left or even the extreme left which does not deny communism. This adds to the complexity by calling into question the very basis of Belgian federalism, namely cooperation and the search for consensus and in any case a federal majority, mishandled by the exclusives launched by the two largest parties, the N-VA in Flanders and the PS in Wallonia."*

In addition, DéFI speaks of an evolution in the way of doing politics and analyses:

*"There is no doubt that the way of doing politics is changing. At least that is what citizens are asking for many reasons: the development of social networks has increased the manifestation of citizens' opinions and the idea of a more participatory democracy; the multiplication of scandals linked to traditional political parties has increased distrust of the political world ; the increasingly limited room for manoeuvre of national policies in relation to large companies, major players in world trade and the European institutions gives the public the impression of being even more remote from politics and an increasingly harsh perception of political decisions; finally, the current climate*

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<sup>118</sup> This official statement was drawn up by the party's Communication Unit following the May 2019 elections.

*(political and economic crises, climate crisis, migration crisis, ...) increases this negative perception of politics, which is perceived as doing nothing or serving no purpose. So, yes, contrary to a recent past, politics, even at the local level, is more and more, live and especially on social networks, confronted to the citizen's questioning. And when we say that the way of doing politics has to evolve, it is because we have to admit that many politicians and parties do not seem to understand this or at least do not seem to show it. The main challenge is to reconnect the citizen to the political world for the reasons mentioned above and in a context where it is difficult to achieve this: public authorities have fewer and fewer financial resources to meet citizens' demands and political decisions are increasingly influenced or even imposed by external actors who basically mean that all governments are conducting more or less the same policy. Citizens are obviously right to be concerned, but the danger threatening a democracy like ours is that some of them opt for parties that are dangerous for democracy and our values (Vlaams Belang, PTB) or even for the future of the country (N-VA)."*

#### **4. Critical point of view from a personal experience**

Although its results are almost all increasing in the May 2019 elections, they were not considered satisfactory for the DéFI party. Indeed, DéFI's ambition was to win a third Member of Parliament, but this was not the case. In addition, the party lost two Brussels regional deputies and had no elected representatives in Wallonia despite the means deployed in previous elections. Moreover, the voting intention results of the survey conducted by the polling institute DEDICATED were not achieved. Thus, the communication strategy adopted by the party was not enough to win over the voters. One of the first questions the party asked itself after the 2019 elections was the following: Why did we not win much voters? Although it is difficult to give a concrete answer to this question, my experience as press officer of the party helped me to develop the following reflections.

First of all, DéFI was severely limited financially compared to other major parties that have much greater financial resources and therefore more developed means of communication. DéFI could spend a maximum of €3.2 million on the election

campaign but spent only €914,706<sup>119</sup>. Approximately €100,000 were dedicated to DéFI's communication strategy, including €38,247 on social networks<sup>120</sup>. Thus, even though a large part of DéFI's budget was dedicated to the party's election communications, this was not enough according to me. The party could maybe expand its communication budget. In that case, DéFI would have had to seek more funding through private donations for instance.

Other strategic choices reserved for the party's communication could be improved in my opinion. For instance, during the campaign, the party decided, in collaboration with the external communication agency, to organize meetings between certain DéFI candidates and citizens in public places. These events were organized as a test for both the communication agency and the party. The goal was twofold: to meet the citizens and explain to them how the party approaches the priorities that interest them but also to make it a media event by attracting the attention of journalists around these specific events organized in the form of "speed datings". These events were organised in Wallonia and in Brussels. There were DéFI candidates who were all sitting on the same side of a large table and proposed to the citizens to come and talk about a specific theme during 2 minutes. These events were not a great success in terms of communication because on one side only one journalist came to the speed dating in Wallonia and on the other side the weather and the location did not attract many citizens. However, a communication about the location of the speed datings was made the day before each speed dating in the local newspapers. In addition, the local and national journalists were notified through an official invitation from the party. However, these events were not a success and still cost the party money in terms of event communication. I think this experience had to be tried because it is not possible to know exactly if communication strategies will work before to test it. However, this experience should not be repeated, or at least not under the same conditions.

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<sup>119</sup> There is a maximum amount of spending allowed by law for each party and its candidates. It is a maximum of 1 million euros for each party plus an individual amount for each candidate, which depends on several criteria such as his or her place on the list, where he or she is running and the results of previous elections.

<sup>120</sup> DéFI's public data.

Secondly, the DéFI party was represented by a president who is very much appreciated by the French-speaking Belgian community. In Wallonia and Brussels Olivier Maingain has been a political celebrity for several years. However, I realized that this celebrity did not have much influence on the image of the party itself. Indeed, as a candidate, Olivier Maingain has done incredible scores, however, in the 2019 elections DéFI president did not stand for re-election. Thus, many people didn't know the name of the party that changed in 2015, but talked about "Olivier Maingain's party". In terms of communication, this phenomenon wasn't a good news because it meant that the image of the party was not present enough. This is the reason why, during the 2019 election campaign, Olivier Maingain tried to use his notoriety by introducing new candidates to the party supporting candidates publicly by participating in local initiatives or by mentioning their names in interviews. However, the fact that the celebrity of Olivier Maingain has been built during several years on his personal image (personalisation) is one of the reason why his actions didn't worked so much. I think his strong personality and the manner he the way he expresses himself are really appreciated. That is why, even with his support, other younger candidates in politics will not enjoy the same notoriety right away.

In addition, Olivier Maingain was a president appreciated by the internal teams and members. However, the hierarchical aspect were very present at DéFI when it comes to official decision-making. Indeed, no information or decision could be taken without the agreement of the presidency. This control on the part of the party president were sometimes difficult to manage during the election campaign. For instance, a quick and simple question from a journalist could take hours to be validated by the president. However, during the election campaign, journalists often called the same morning to get an answer by noon at the latest. This is the reason why meeting the response deadline was very difficult given the president's busy schedule and the response time that went with it.

Furthermore, factors external to the party may have been detrimental to the success of DéFI's communications strategy. One of these factors is the fact that there are fewer political journalists in the newsrooms (see Chapter 2). This fact, which is specific to the current situation of the traditional media in Belgium, leads to a lower availability of journalists to attend all the press conferences and events organized by the political parties during the election campaign. According to me, DéFI's strategy

was not adapted to this context. Indeed, for instance, at the request of the presidency, the party organized press conferences for the presentation of each list of its candidates. The president's strategy was to put forward DéFI candidates and more particularly the frontrunners. For each list, whether federal, regional or European, a press conference was organised by me to present the frontrunner, his or her candidates and the priorities. Let us take the example of the presentation of the Brussels federal list and the european list.

The Brussels federal list was announced twice. Indeed, on February 6, 2019, DéFI announced the name of the frontrunner François De Smet and his running mate Sophie Rohonyi at a press conference, without revealing the rest of the list. DéFI wanted to generate interest around this announcement, which was eagerly awaited by political journalists. Indeed, the arrival of François De Smet, philosopher and director of the Federal Migration Centre (Myria), as the head of DéFI's list was difficult to predict and therefore created a general surprise, which was an interesting subject for journalists. In addition, the fact that DéFI bet on "political renewal" by deciding to put forward candidates from civil society was an interesting media topic.

On the eve of the press conference planned by the party, the national newspaper *La Libre Belgique* announced exclusively that François De Smet was the frontrunner of DéFI's Brussels federal list. This event represented a setback for the party, which was to announce the news the following day. In this case, my role was not to confirm this information and to leave doubt to the journalists who asked me if the information was official. The press conference took place on February 6, 2019 in the presence of DéFI president Olivier Maingain, François De Smet and Sophie Rohonyi, as well as a number of journalists from the print, audio and television media (traditional media). During the conference, both running mates introduced themselves and listed their political priorities. Then, DéFI president explained why the party chose these persons as candidates and highlighted the fact that they were from the civil society. Afterwards, there was a question-and-answer session with the journalists and then individual interviews. Some journalists left the press conference with their notes and the press kit presenting the candidates and their priorities, while *Le Soir*, one of the largest French-speaking Belgian press newspapers, asked François De Smet and Olivier Maingain to conduct an exclusive cross interview with the two of them. Following the press conference, several headlines were immediatly published on



Belgian news websites and published on the media social networks. The following day, articles were also published in the written press. To my mind, the presence of several journalists at the press conference was fortunate, since the information had already been disclosed by a newspaper the day before.

In addition, on 21 March, 2019, the DéFI European electoral list was also presented through a press conference. The announcement of the DéFI frontrunner of the European list was, like the Brussels federal frontrunner, eagerly awaited. Indeed, *La Libre Belgique*, the same newspaper that published the information of the Brussels federal frontunner the day before the press conference, also tried to get the information first so that it could be published exclusively. This time, the name of the frontrunner was not revealed before the press conference, and some journalists were present as well as DéFI president, the DéFI European frontrunner Benoît Cassart and some candidates of the list. It should be known that Benoît Cassart also comes from civil society as he is a farmer a farmer with a passion for European politics but without political background. The press conference consisted of a speech by the frontrunner, the presentation of his list and his political priorities. Journalists were given a press kit and group pictures which has been taken by me the same day so that they could be sent to journalists who were still very much in favour of being provided with official photos (see *Appendix 5*). Nevertheless, very few journalists attended this press conference and there were very few articles about it published in the media the next day. This event is a good example of the fact that Belgian political journalists no longer go to all political events. Despite several reminders from me, journalists told me they were overwhelmed with work and did not have time to come to all the press conferences. I think that this could be avoided later on by DéFI by simply taking into account the change in the way journalists work. The party should organise very rarely media events and under the following conditions: exclusive, unpublished and adapted to the demand of the media.

Another factor external to the party that has surely played negatively on the image of the party is the fact that the party was not entitled to the same media representation as other bigger parties (see Chapter 3, 2.3.3.). This is of course part of the media rules to be respected, but I think the party could have tried to compensate for this lack of presence in the media by other means, such as a stronger presence on the ground and in associations.

Moreover, the societal context in which Belgium found itself during the 2019 elections led political parties and the media to adapt their strategies to the strong citizen demand and mobilisation. That is what we have characterised as "decentralisation" in Chapter 2. Indeed, the modern society see a large part of its population, especially young people, involved in citizen movements to fight specific issues such as the fight against global warming with the aim of raising awareness among other citizens to start acting locally on this aspect. Let us take the example of the young activist Greta Thunberg. She started her militant fight against global warming by going on strike (i.e. she was a schoolgirl) alone in November 2018 in front of the Swedish Parliament and by publicizing her action. In December 2018, she gave a speech at COP24 in Katowice that attracted worldwide attention and was widely reported in the media and on the Internet. This is the beginning of the "Greta Thunberg effect" and the "Fridays for Future" in all major cities around the world, including major Belgian cities such as Brussels, Antwerp, Liège... Particularly, « Fridays for Future » are massive strikes organised by young students from all over the world, mainly to ask political institutions to take drastic measures in favour of the environment. These citizens' marches took place in Brussels every Thursday during the 2019 election campaign. Their impact on politics was notable as some political parties such as DéFI asked to meet with the organizers of these marches in order to discuss their demands. It is important to know that these marches were highly mediatized and that not only do young people feel concerned about this issue but also their parents and grandparents who walked with them to support them. These marches are an example of the decentralisation of politics where citizens are at the origin of the subjects that make the news and therefore they are the ones who influence the media agenda.

Finally, as a final reflection, I would like to talk about the fact that DéFI focused too late on its communication strategy for the election campaign. Indeed, the party did call upon the communication agency and the web design agency at the beginning of 2019, too little time before the May 2019 elections. In Chapter 2, we saw that the development of long-term political marketing methods is a technique that should be adopted by parties in order to build voter loyalty. However, this was not the case at DéFI. I think that the party has nevertheless tried to adapt to changes in political

communication by using external consultants and by implementing certain modern measures such as commissioning pre-election campaign market research (see Chapter 2, 3.1.1.) for example. Within this framework, the party developed its communication strategy for the elections, which I think was too vague. Indeed, in Chapter 2 we saw that a pre-election campaign market research can lead either to a conquests or a maintenance campaign. In the case of DÉFI, both were chosen, which did not allow the party to adequately target its voters. In my opinion, if the party had launched these initiatives just after the previous 2014 elections and had developed its strategy during the 5 years prior to the 2019 elections, the results might have been different and perhaps more favorable.

In conclusion, the preceding paragraphs have allowed us to develop a critical analysis of the communication strategy adopted by DÉFI during the 2019 elections. These personal reflections highlight the limits of this communication strategy and the improvements that could be made.



## Conclusion

This work aimed to understand the extent to which academic studies and theoretical arguments about political communication can respond to the reality in the field. In the first part, the discussion mainly showed that political system, media system and citizens are three political actors that compose political communication. Second part focused on the contemporary features of mediatisation, decentralisation and professionalisation of politics. Finally, third part highlighted the specific case of the Belgian political party DéFI and the establishment of its communication strategy during the last election of 2019. In this part, I demonstrated the limits of the party strategy and gave a critical point of view from my personal working experience.

Specifically, this work emphasized the current vision of the political system through the elaboration of a theoretical model (*Figure 11*) which provides a current overview of the system of political communication in Western democracies. This personal approach highlighted the fact that the media system is composed of two different entities (i.e. traditional and digital media) which transformed the dynamics of the interactions between the different political actors. It also enabled to explain the interactions between the different political actors abovementioned. Thus, political system interacts with traditional and digital media in a context of mediatisation where the logic of the media prevails. In a context of decentralisation of politics, citizens interact with political system and traditional and digital media but participate mainly in politics by using digital media and mobilization in the field. However, both traditional media and political system are trying to adapt to these transformations which are guided by the digitisation of the Western society. Furthermore, this work has shown the application of this model to the practical case of the Belgian political party DéFI during the 2019 electoral campaign. The results of this case study show that digital media such as social networks or information sites are taking a large place in the current political communication landscape. Moreover, it confirms the growing place of the citizen in politics and the changing dynamics of political communication in the face of these transformations. Thus, the applied model confirms the validity of the developed theoretical model.

Through the analysis of theoretical arguments on the one hand and a practical case on the other, it can be concluded that academic studies and theoretical arguments present some limits in their application in the field. Indeed, the results of this analysis show that small political parties do not all have the same opportunity to face current challenges and issues due to various factors such as financial resources, lack of professionalism or the rules established during election campaigns, for instance.

Finally, as we said in the introduction of this work, political communication is constantly changing in Western democracies in relation to the steady transformation of society and technologies. Thus, this work has built an « up-to-date » vision of what political communication is today, but will necessarily need to be updated in the coming years in order to be able to closely follow the societal and technological transformations. In this context, it would be interesting to see the changes in the dynamics of political communication in response to techniques based on artificial intelligence, such as the use of "deepfakes" to divert political messages. « Deepfake » is a hyper-engineering technique that constructs content (mainly videos) in order to communicate false information to a wide audience. This technique can be used, for instance, to put the face of one person on top of another in a video and thus make it seem as if the person you see is the one speaking. This has already been used as a simulation<sup>121</sup> to raise warnings about the amplification of this phenomenon which could manipulate the general public. Indeed, political communication could be more and more affected by scandals linked to deepfakes in the years to come, such as the hijacking of a speech by a president or an opinion leader.

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<sup>121</sup> "Jordan Peele's simulated Obama PSA is a double-edged warning against fake news" (video):  
<https://www.vox.com/2018/4/18/17252410/jordan-peepe-obama-deepfake-buzzfeed>

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## Appendix 1

In the following table are detailed the actors of political communication according to Mazzoleni's theory.

**Actors of the political communication**

<b>Political system</b>	<b>Media system</b>	<b>Citizenship</b>
Institutional actors : parliament, government, judiciary, head of state.	New media, TV, radio, press, books, cinema.	Single people, public opinion, electorate.
Non-institutional actors : political parties, social movements, interest groups.		

Source : Mazzoleni G., *La comunicazione politica*, Chapter 2 : Models and definitions

## Appendix 2

### Le score potentiel des personnalités politiques à Bruxelles

Ces personnalités politiques ne se présentent pas forcément dans la région, il s'agit d'un sondage de popularité.

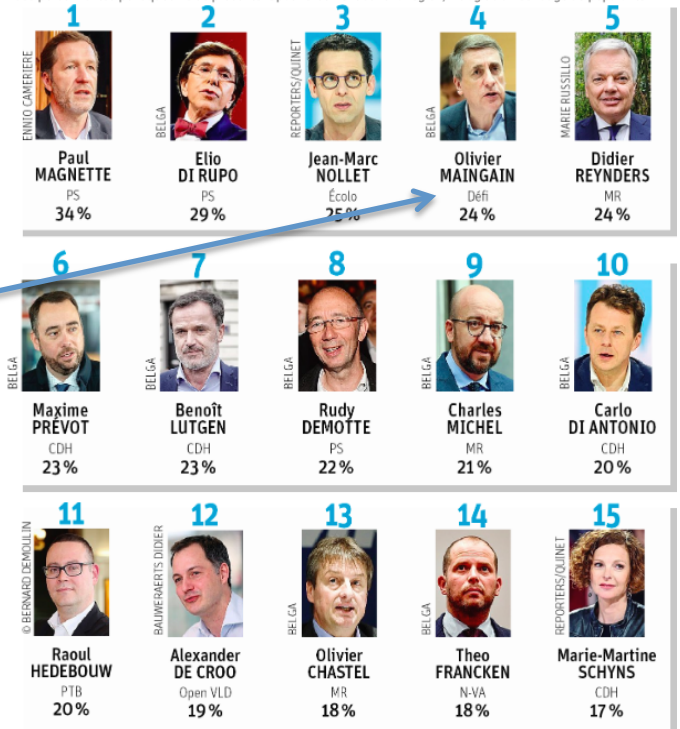


Popularity survey of political figures in Brussels. Focus on Olivier Maingain, DéFI president.

Source : [www.lesoir.be](http://www.lesoir.be)

### Le score potentiel des personnalités politiques en Wallonie

Ces personnalités politiques ne se présentent pas forcément dans la région, il s'agit d'un sondage de popularité.

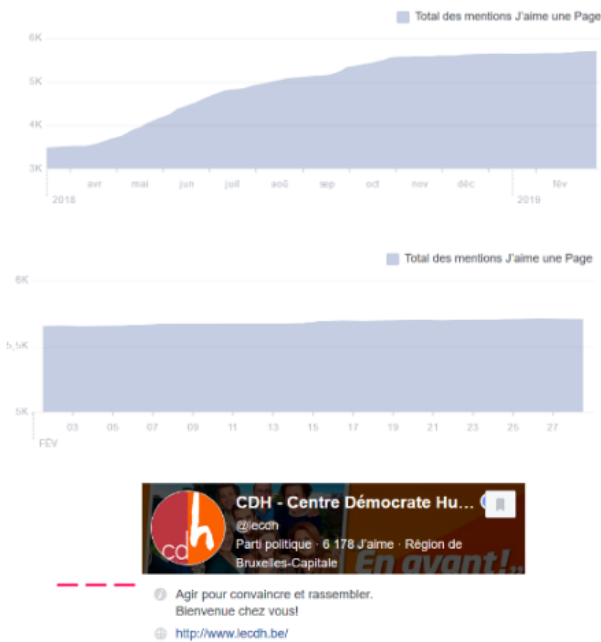


Popularity survey of political figures in Wallonia. Focus on Olivier Maingain, DéFI president.

Source : [www.lesoir.be](http://www.lesoir.be)

## Appendix 3

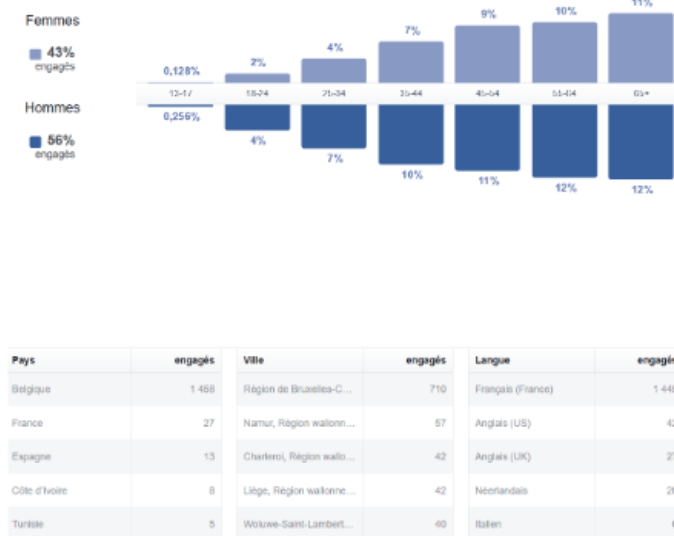
### Social media report (February 2019) Facebook part



1

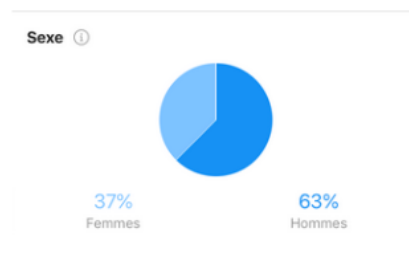
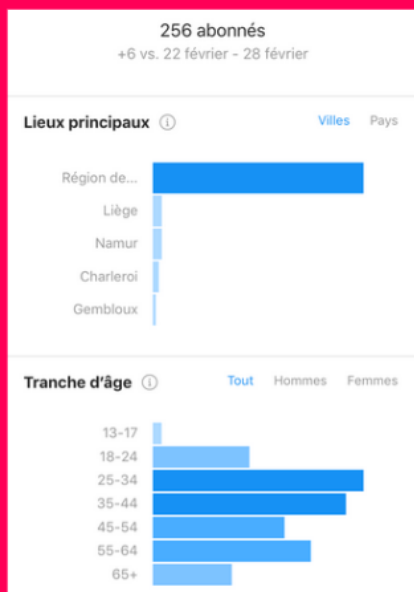


2



3

## Social media report (February 2019) Instagram part



## Social media report (February 2019) Twitter part

### RÉSUMÉ POUR FEB 2019

Tweets <b>38</b>	Impressions du Tweet <b>47,1 k</b>
Visites du profil <b>2 502</b>	Mentions <b>415</b>
Nouveaux abonnés <b>61</b>	

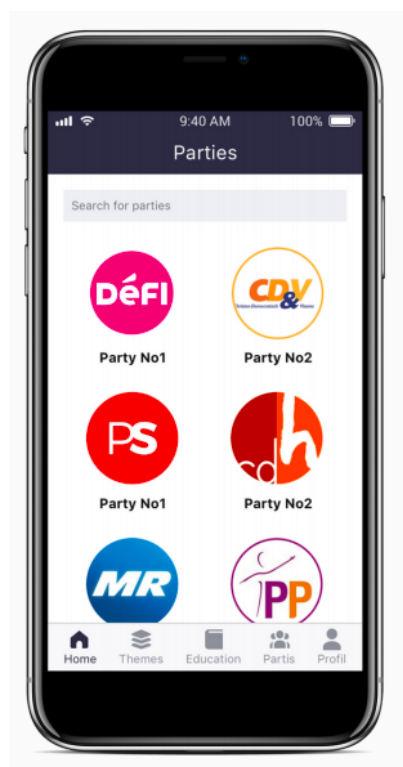
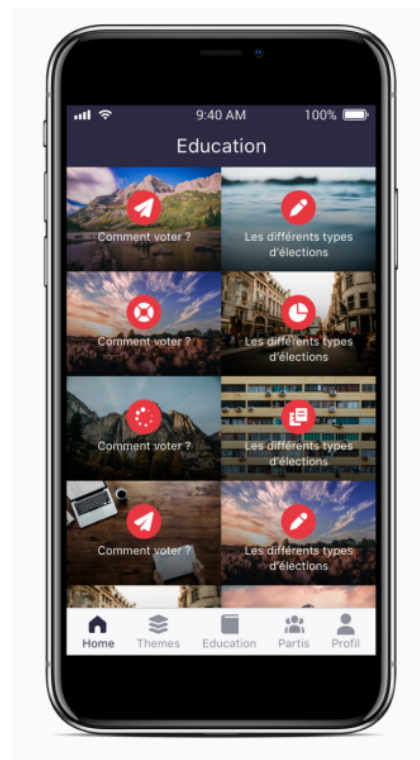
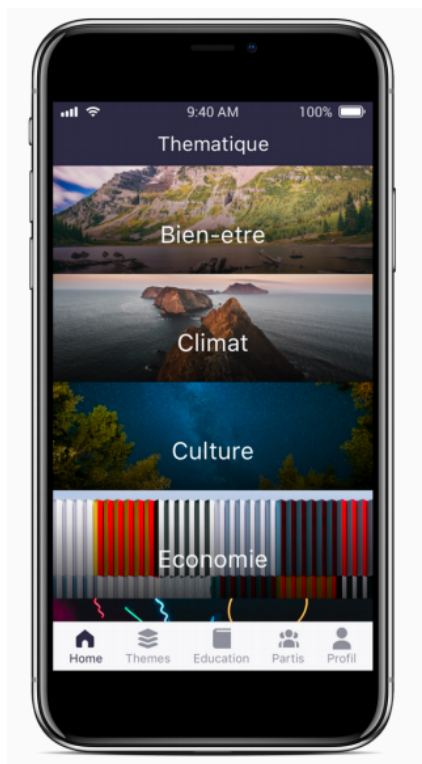
Audience touchée sut Twitter >>>

### Meilleurs Tweets du mois de Février 2019

<b>Défi</b>	<b>Défi</b> @delfi.eu · 12 fév. #TaxeKilowatt #Défi demande une coordination forte de la Belgique avec les États membres de l'UE pour une fiscalité plus cohérente au service des citoyens et de l'environnement. En savoir + <a href="#">🔗</a> <a href="#">delfi.eu/taxation-serie...</a>	2 633	26	1,0 %	<a href="#">Sponsoriser</a>
<b>Défi</b>	<b>Défi</b> @delfi.eu · 19 fév. #DcRi a déposé une proposition de loi à la Chambre visant à abaisser l'âge de l'obligation scolaire de 6 à 3 ans. Plus d'informations ici <a href="#">🔗</a> <a href="#">delfi.eu/enseignement-d...</a>	2 519	30	1,2 %	<a href="#">Sponsoriser</a>
<b>Défi</b>	<b>Défi</b> @delfi.eu · 3 fév. #StopPlastique 70% des déchets marins sont des plastiques à usages unique (cotons-tiges, pailles...). A l'occasion de la #JournéeInternationaleSansPaille, rappelons notre soutien à l'Europe qui prévoit de les interdire dès 2021! Des alternatives existent: <a href="#">bit.ly/2MK3Mh</a>	2 461	31	1,3 %	<a href="#">Sponsoriser</a>



## Appendix 4





## Appendix 5

