

Introduction

The media sphere. Controversies in public life

La esfera mediática. Controversias en la vida pública

Guest-edited special issue:

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ased on the work of Habermas (1993) and Arendt (1981), the existence of a public sphere, in which all citizens can participate and make their voice heard, is considered an essential element in democratic life. From its inception, this public sphere has been characterised by the increasingly relevant presence of the media, which constitute a space of mediation between citizens and political authorities in the discussion of issues of general interest.

Today, this instance of mediation has been fully configured as a mediated sphere (Peñamarín, 2017), a space where media discourses are central in the production of a view of the common world, and where the logics of mediation ostensibly influence social interactions and practices (Hjarvard, 2016).

The public sphere described by German philosophers has changed radically with the arrival of the Internet and social networks which, among other things, has deteriorated the central role of the media as professionalised agoras where problems are discussed. Public problems no longer necessarily need the media to filter them, shape them, and make them visible. This new situation does not mean that journalism and other professionalised communication practices, such as advertising, no longer have an influence in the emergence, circulation and discussion of common issues. However, these mediation actors, practices and discursive experts must adapt to today's public sphere, which is more complex, fragmented and segmented according to people's preferred media and according to the different arguments put forward.

The challenges of the today's public sphere (or spheres and counter-spheres) are still similar, even though the conditions have changed: although it is presented as an open space to all citizens, the fact is that not all positions, groups or issues have equal access to the central place of the discussion which outlines the decisions that guide the direction of a society and the ways of imagining and configuring the common future, "the shape of things to come" (Latour, 2010: 486).

For this reason, this volume examines the pragmatic dimension of the public sphere and, specifically, the transformation of social problems into public issues, their representation and articulation in a controversy. In other words, the articles included in this issue reflect on how and why certain issues become relevant, while others remain on the periphery of the system and fall into oblivion, never becoming part of the public affairs. As Gusfield (1991) points out, a social problem becomes a public issue when, due to its modulation by the actors involved, it is presented as an issue that affects the general interest and, as a result, demands the intervention of some authority to channel it.

These public affairs can stir controversy: processes of dissent in which actors, with different perspectives, come into conflict in a context of shared uncertainty, within the framework of a common horizon driven by expectations upon the possibility of agreement (Venturini, 2010). In a mediated public sphere, the media (both traditional and

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digital) are precisely the best scenarios to observe the construction of social life, through the monitoring of these issues: the strategies of the social actors, the framing of issues, the modulation of controversies developed in media discourses, the practices through which the problem is elevated to the political organisations with decision-making power and to the perceptions that citizens form on the subject based on the interactions of all these dynamics (Cefaï, 1996).

It is clear that not all fields of activity nor all actors in a complex society can transfer their



issues of interest to the public sphere in the same way or with the same degree of success. The scientific field, for example, is a space marked by controversies, but they are largely located in a very restricted media environment: the opinions of experts. However, as Cassany, Cortiñas and Elduque rightly point out in the first article of this volume ("Communicating science: The profile of the science journalist in Spain"), science is an integral part of our lives and an indicator of social development: The circulation of information on scientific advancements and their potential impact on our natural and social environment is essential in democratic societies. The science journalist assumes the role of intermediary that facilitates the dissemination of expert knowledge, one of the essential elements in the construction of a public issue, among citizens. As these authors point out, this important task collides with the usual practices of the big media, which tend to marginalise this type of information. Another problem that has been identified is the ability of science journalists to cease to be mere transmitters of information and adopt a more critical and analytical role. In this line, the work of Cassany, Cortiñas and Elduque reviews the academic background of Spanish science journalists and its perception by professionals. In order to determine whether professional journalists have received the training necessary to mediate in the formation of a public issue with a relevant scientific dimension.

The presence of an issue in the media and the intervention of public authorities through the creation of laws and public policies do not guarantee its insertion in the public sphere free of limitations and contradictions. Souza-Leal, Carvalho and Antunes, in their article titled "Violence against Brazilian women in the public and media spheres", point out that in Brazil, one of the countries with the highest rates of violence against women, the media "are a few steps behind the actions and debates that take place in academic spaces, feminist movements and other

social actors”, are unable to collect the complexity of the issue, ignore the causes and effects of the events and link crimes to old interpretive frameworks that do not allow citizens to deal with the issue as a public problem that affects all.

Conversely, it may be the case that the institutional actors, through awareness campaigns, control the modulation of the debate to some extent, generating “action from above”. This is one of the conclusions reached by Saiz-Echezarreta, Alvarado and Gómez-Lorenzini in their article “Political advocacy of anti-trafficking campaigns: a controversial narrative”. Their analysis of campaigns against trafficking in women and girls for the purpose of sexual exploitation identifies a process of simplification powered by an abolitionist stance that is never made explicit by the actors that promote them. In this way, public bodies participate indirectly in the framing and orientation of the most general controversy about prostitution, and do so by ignoring the controversial nature of the issue, opting for narratives that are based on clichés and common places and hampering the connection of these consensual discourses against trafficking with other alternative perspectives to the abolitionist policies.

On some issues, citizens are able to navigate the limitations imposed by the media and hegemonic institutions when presenting a problem as a public issue, by resorting to the use of social networks. This is the case of the visit of the President of the United States to Mexico in August 2016, whose coverage on Twitter has been analysed by Meneses, Martín-del-Campo and Rueda Zárate in their article “#TrumpinMexico. Transnational connective action on Twitter and the dispute over the border wall”. Based on the premise that social networks allow networked connective actions that facilitate participation in political life, they offer a comparative analysis of the impact of that controversial visit depending on the language chosen on Twitter. Their analysis of the most influential actors in the discussion about the visit indicates that many of them are journalists and media outlets (along with some users who use controversy, with strategic opportunism, to make themselves known). Controversy is mediated by “politicised publics that react to political events, creating a news stream”, which leads the authors to reach the conclusion that the orientation of the opinions shared on Twitter is not necessarily representative of the public opinion.

The complexity of the contemporary public sphere has disrupted the system of positions in the political game, reordering the role of the media and social actors, as we have seen. It would seem that political institutions have experienced this disorder with less intensity. However, the institutional role neither ensures a privileged access to the public sphere, as shown in the last work in this volume, in which Clúa, Ferran-Ferrer and Terren analyse the impact of the disappearance of one many public agencies in Spain as a consequence of the crisis («Impact of young people in the public sphere: The dissolution of the Youth Council of Spain in the press and on Twitter”). Despite the Youth Council of Spain was a public institution composed of a large number of associations that represent most of the young people associated in Spain, its disappearance was hardly mentioned in the media and social networks. It did not become a public issue: the media put the spotlight on the government’s action and ignored the consequences of that action. On the other hand, “offline” institutionality acts as an impediment for the circulation of messages across the network: much of the messages protesting the dissolution of the Youth Council were produced by institutions affiliated to the Council, restricting the circulation of the protest to an institutional sphere of limited scope. Young Spaniards did not learn that a body representing them was being eliminated and, consequently, there was no social problem that would generate common action.

These research works provide an idea of the immense complexity of the contemporary public sphere: new digital communication practices promise greater democratic dynamism in the processes of opinion and decision making that would favour the articulation of more participatory, inclusive and reflective mediation spaces. However, the hegemonic dynamics of the central media and institutional system against peripheral actors hinder the development of the potentialities enabled by technological mediation. The historical burdens, the economic constraints, the regulatory subjugation and the limiting action of the socio-cultural imaginaries held as common places in shared encyclopedias all operate in the same way. All of these aspects can limit the emergence of actors and publics engaged with common issues based on alternative or divergent perspectives as well as the development of the democratic discussion of the controversies around the idea of a productive dissent, which by accepting conflict is capable of configuring the future.

The perspective proposed for this volume is the result of the work carried out by the “Semiotics, Communication and Culture” Research Group of the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM). Over the past years, this research group has studied the media coverage of public issues, first through the analysis of the relationship between story-issues and controversies: “The construction of public issues in the mediated public sphere”

(CSO2013-45726-R). Currently, the research group delves into the development of controversies and forms of social participation and creativity: "Public issues and controversies: diversity and participation in the media sphere" (CSO2017-82109-R).

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