

Introduction

Citizen participation in the digital sphere

Guest-edited special issue:

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Social Science scholars and analysts in general agree that the speed of changes introduced in the realm of digital communication have transformed the public sphere to the extent that we can talk today about the crystallisation, and subsequent fragmentation, of a digital sphere. The development of this multifaceted and intricated communication phenomenon presents a frenzy profile; it represents a moving target due to the technical development such as the emergence of more and more complex algorithms, the imminent introduction of quantum computing, and the spread of 5G technology, but also due to changing stakeholder strategies and user patterns - whether on the supply or demand side. Research about the digital sphere has been forced to review many of the questions raised in its seminal version, given the serious transformations that occurred recently not only to the field of communication, but also in education and political processes (Luengo & Musial-Karg, 2021; Kneuer, 2020).

Just as it is true for research on digitality that a number of normative expectations have had to be measured against empirical reality, this can also be applied to the topic of the digital sphere. Thus, the last decade revealed more than anything else the ambivalence not only of the articulated expectations, but also of the 'real' development itself (DeBlasio et al. 2020). This refers to expectations of an emanating network society characterised by a de-hierarchised structure (Castells, 2011) and by a new autonomy towards the 'institutional' power (Castells, 2012). Others emphasise the prospect of more inclusion into the public debates, especially of those segments of the population that had been previously marginalised. The rather optimistic perspective (Papacharissi, 2002) that the Internet would expand the public sphere and allow more citizens to participate has been confronted with a variety of more critical assumptions on the fragmentation and even atomisation of the public sphere. It is in this perspective that one should place, for instance, the reflections on platform capitalism (Van-Dijck et al., 2018; Jin, 2020; Fuchs, 2021), the themes of filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011) and echo-chambers (and generally all the problems for democracy connected with the development of information disorder), as well as the return of critical attention of many researchers to the concept of manipulation (Morlino & Sorce, 2021).

Moreover, Hindman observes that the audience is shaped by two trends: the continued and accelerated concentration among the most popular outlets and the continued fragmentation among the rest; this is what he calls the 'missing middle' (Hindman, 2008: 133-5) raising the concern of an online social elite and an 'aristocracy' of deliberation (Hindman, 2008: 133, 139). The forms of concentration and inequalities of power constitute a de facto limitation of the public sphere. Both re-emerging authoritarian populism and neoliberalism tend on the one hand towards the unification (almost homogenisation) of the public sphere and on the other towards its fragmentation (Sorce, 2020). Likewise, another vision of a transformed digital public sphere as a globally networked sphere, reconfigured in its power distribution and deterritorialized is challenged by the reality of a disintegrated public sphere

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shaped by cyber ghettos (Dahlgren, 2005). The transformation of the public sphere induced by the digitalisation provides a new ecology of communication and interaction; this refers to all levels of society and state. The step from 1.0 to 2.0 has implied an effective opening of politicians, representatives, institutions, as well as the promotion of the interaction and the involvement of the political and administrative sphere in the discussion, dialogue and deliberation on public issues (Dahlgren, 2005, Túniz & Sixto, 2011; Luengo & Musial-Karg, 2021). Most importantly, citizens have acquired a new role as users and producers of communication, taking part in interactive many-to-many-interaction on the net. Moreover,



politicians are not only interested but also forced to address citizens more intensely and to involve them in a more meaningful way into political processes such as opinion building and decision-making (Mossberger et al., 2008). The Internet encourages a much more participatory society in the process of consolidation of citizens' empowerment. In addition, the implications of the definitive extension of social networks show a huge magnitude. The evolution and reinforcement of different and multimodal spaces reflect this course. First generation platforms like Facebook and Twitter are complemented by new and differently designed and oriented offers such as Instagram, Tik Tok, Telegram, YouTube or Clubhouse.

Social networks also have a direct impact on citizens' mobilisation, fostering horizontal interaction (between social actors) and vertical interlocution (between citizens and institutions), but also generating new public spaces. Reflection on the new public role of social media has been situated both within the framework of the transformations that have marked the emergence of a 'fourth phase' of political communication (Davis, 2019) and within the framework of research on digital communication and public deliberation. Without any doubt, the new technologies have created opportunities that are affecting political and social reality that had not previously existed. Online civic engagement is today on the increase and it affects political processes to a great extent (Luengo & Fernández-García, 2017; Coleman & Blumer, 2009; De-Blasio, 2019).

Digital communication ecosystems have often been identified –not without naivety– as tools and spaces for reversing distrust in the institutions and political processes of modern democracies. Literature shows a varied catalogue of opposing views on the essence, dynamics and shapes of this new forum. As we already advanced, many scholars have emphasised how digital realities have reached the promotion and reinforcement of citizen commitment and participation through a wide repertoire of democratic innovations (both top-down and bottom-up, i.e. capable of involving social movements, voluntary and active citizenship groups, etc.). In this sense, social networks could have a direct impact on mobilisation and empowerment, enabling citizens to interact with each other, or with public representatives, sometimes bypassing other more institutionalised communication channels, such as those capitalised by journalists in their gatekeeper role.

At the same time, however, more critical views have also emerged, highlighting the persistence of social inequalities and the irreducible contrast between communication companies (which live in a market and follow its

logic) and their claim to flank and even replace public spaces for debate. These approaches point to the risk of atomisation within the digital sphere, and the formation of filter bubbles and echo chambers. These phenomena that we are only now beginning to understand, and which might be hidden behind increasing societal fragmentation. This point of view also alerts about the possibility of severe episodes of deep manipulation, and the persistent overweight speech of a few. It is precisely within this rapid and disruptive transformation that studies linking political polarisation and the fragmentation of the public sphere are to be found. Hence, a number of questions remain open: Under which conditions can the digital public sphere actually enhance citizens participation? What forms of participation can be observed? And what effect do these new forms of citizens' engagement have on the digital sphere? This special issue addresses these questions providing new perspectives.

This special issue was designed and developed under the very particular conditions determined by the Covid-19 pandemic. A crisis involves threats and opportunities. The Covid-19 pandemic became an incentive to boost the process of searching for alternative solutions and thus to introduce ICT to the participation processes. Since the earliest attempts to promote e-participation has aimed at overcoming political distance, the pandemic has provided a new function of e-participation tools - as a measure to ensure social distancing and the health of participants of involvement processes. Thus, this topic is visible in the contributions of the authors to the volume. Hence, this proposal brings together papers that contribute to a review of approaches to these issues, both in the light of the pandemic crisis and within scenarios that are already trying to project themselves towards a new (and different) normality, and contributes to the debate about the mentioned trends with five pieces of work.

Oscar Luengo, Javier G. Marín and Emiliana de-Blasio present an interesting and updated analysis of the deliberation observed in YouTube about the Covid-19 crisis in the cases of Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom. They count with a data set of more than 100.000 posts and developed an innovative methodology based on algorithms in order to verify the degree of polarisation registered in those online discussions. Coherent with previous studies, the Italian and Spanish cases involved more levels of polarisation than the British one.

Rafael Carrasco-Polaino, Miguel-Ángel Martín-Cárdaba and Ernesto Villar-Cirujano, contribute to the volume with a remarkable study of citizens participation in the social media, this time in Twitter, about the anti-vaccines controversies, again in the context of the present pandemic. Employing social network analysis and language processing tools, those authors examine the degree to which users' interactions observed on the mentioned social media are favorable or unfavorable towards the main Covid-19 vaccines. They conclude that the most accepted vaccines are those of Oxford-AstraZeneca, Pfizer, Moderna, and Sputnik V, and that the presence of bots is practically non-existent.

An article about children's participation, local policy and the digital environment is proposed by Ana-María Novella-Cámara, Clara Romero-Pérez, Héctor Melero and Elena Noguera-Pigem. This work focuses on the local political sphere as a space for the promotion of child participation and citizenship through digital mediation. The authors confirmed the importance of the digital environment as an interactive space for informational purposes. It concludes on the need to rethink the digital environment as a participatory area and increasing the use of technology in support of children's citizenship.

Ana-Laura Maltos-Tamez, Francisco-Javier Martínez-Garza and Oscar-Mario Miranda-Villanueva provide a piece of work on the Mexican university political practices in relation to public spheres and the consolidation of participatory democracy. Using a survey conducted to more than 400 undergraduate students, they conclude the significance of the active role of young people in their political socialisation, as social interaction and content creation is more closely correlated with political participation than news consumption is, which was more beneficial to participation when articulated through political talk.

Finally, Paula Renés-Arellano, María-José Hernández-Serrano, Mari-Carmen Caldeiro-Pedreira, Cleofé-Genoveva Alvites-Huamaní, presents a study on the role of counter-values in the digital ethosphere during the process of users construction of their personal and cultural identity. Based on a survey analysis, this contribution deduces that the majority of students identify the presence of counter-values when using the Internet (and social networks), highlighting manipulation and violence, lack of respect, inequality, and dishonesty. The conclusions provide evidence on the need to include values education in critical media education, reinforcing the preparation of future teachers who can teach how to deconstruct and eradicate counter-values in the digital sphere.

This special issue of *Comunicar* does not represent a point of arrival but, if anything, a point of departure. The articles presented, in fact, give us the awareness of the need to increase studies (also in a comparative and international key) on some specific strands. In particular, a hypothetical (and only initial) work agenda should include:

- The study of digital communication ecosystems within social relations, the development of digital capitalism and the possibilities (and risks) associated with the emergence of artificial intelligence.
- The analysis of the dynamics of participation (especially those 'facilitated' by the adoption of digital technologies) within the development of the platform society.
- Research into the educational effects of the relationship between participation and the digital sphere.
- The role of citizen participation in the digital sphere, both as a response to instances of depoliticisation and as a potential risk of standardisation of experiences of 'creative participation'.

This is an arduous and complex task, to which this special issue of 'Comunicar' nevertheless seeks to provide some answers. In this case, as in many others, the stakes are not only academic but also concern the way in which scientific research can contribute to an understanding of social reality and, at the same time, the identification of tools for increasing the quality of democracy.

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