Citizen participation in the digital sphere
Participación ciudadana en la esfera digital

Editors

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Approach

One of the main questions assumed about the impact of the Internet and social networks states the proliferation of (more or less visible) channels of citizen participation, through the so-called digital sphere. In this sense, literature offers a multiplicity of conflicting views on the nature, dynamics and profile of this new space. On the one hand, digital technologies have been identified as the pathway towards reversing distrust in political institutions and processes of modern democracies. Many scholars have emphasized how digital technologies have succeeded in the promotion and deepening of citizen commitment and participation through a wide catalogue of democratic innovation (both institutional and bottom-up). In this sense, social networks could have a direct impact on mobilization and empowerment, enabling citizens to interact with each other, or with public representatives, sometimes bypassing other more institutionalized communication channels, such as those capitalized by journalists in their gatekeeper role. At best, these processes could lead to a more inclusive and meaningful participation, and intensify public deliberation.

On the other hand, in opposition to these optimistic proposals we have observed critical approaches that emphasize the fragmentation, even atomization, of this potential digital sphere, and the creation of filter bubbles and echo chambers. These phenomena that we are only now beginning to understand, and which might be hidden behind increasing societal polarization. This perspective could include the hegemonic discourse of a few, as well as potential processes of intensive manipulation. Beyond this normative debate, we can find other open questions in regard to aspects such as the possibility of a transnational public sphere based
on online connectivity, the quality of deliberation or the new forms of audiences online. Research about the digital sphere has been forced to review many of the questions raised in its seminal version, given the serious transformations occurred recently with the application of technological developments not only to the field of communication, but also in education and political processes. This special issue welcomes theoretical works that contribute to the review of approaches proposed from the fields of communication, education or political science, as well as empirical articles, especially if they have a comparative perspective.

Topics

- Citizen participation in public issues of relevance and its increase with the emergence of digital media.
- Proliferation of digital platforms that boost the public sphere.
- Quantity and quality of citizen participation.
- Educational processes that increase participation in the digital sphere.
- Frames that involves communication based on emotions.
- Digital media and its performance in shaping the public sphere, but also its serious threats to privacy and transparency.
- Transformation of political systems, especially in the dimension of accountability and reciprocity.
- Information consumption patterns, sources, and their transformation with the new digital environments.
- Consolidation of spaces for participation and deliberation, and the fragmentation of the digital sphere.
- Political deliberation on social networks and the congregation of citizens with the same ideological predispositions.
- Reduction of borders and generation of transnational digital spheres.
- Digital world and new research techniques (algorithms, machine learning ...).

Questions

- Can we verify the increase of citizen participation through digital media? What are the findings regarding the quantity and quality of this participation?
- What experiences do we have from the point of view of education in order to contribute to citizen participation in new environments?
- What innovative forms of participation, interaction and communication are we addressing?
- What kinds of effects can be observed in the transformation of political and media systems, the provision of political news and its consumption?
- Can we confirm the spread of public sphere fragmentation in filter bubbles or eco chambers? What types of mechanisms have these bubbles and chambers developed?
- What is the role played by the public demand of higher levels of transparency in the transformation of the public sphere?
- Can we witness the growth of communication and participatory activities in the emergence of transnational audiences?
- What is the impact of surveillance in new digital spheres? Are there real security risks? Is manipulation a relevant element in these communication processes?
- Are the latest automatic analysis environments offering new useful methodologies for the understanding of these participatory and communicative processes?
- What are the implications of emotional frames in communication processes within social networks?
- What applications can machine learning have for data collection from these tools? Are they effective and adequate to advance the understanding of these complex processes of citizen participation and deliberation?
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