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RETHINK POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL
CONTEXT. CYBERDEMOCRACY: DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY?

*Repensar la Comunicación Política en el contexto digital. Ciberdemocracia:
¿Democracia deliberativa?*

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes, from an extensive bibliographic review, to reflect on the concept of Political Communication and on the impact that the digital environment has had on the role of the three actors involved in it – politicians, the media, and citizenship –. Through a review of the evolution of the concept, we position political communication in a fourth phase characterized by detachment and discredit towards political and media bodies, demassification, media diversification, disintermediation, and the emancipation of digital citizenship. The phenomenon of political communication is addressed from its linkage to the classic concepts of Public Space and Public Opinion, which are extrapolated to the context of cyber democracy to question whether the interaction processes that develop in it, lead to a model of deliberative democracy. In response, this study shows the need for higher levels of exchange and consensus, especially between the political and citizen spheres, concerning the messages, symbols, and opinions that, through political communication, build digital public opinion. The possibility of deliberative democracy is a distant glimpse. The discursive confrontation typical of traditional political communication is transferred to the online

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environment, with the only caveat that, now and for now; it is more equated between the three elements involved there.

KEYWORDS

Political Communication – Digitization – Public Space – Public Opinion – Citizenship – Cyber democracy – Deliberative democracy.

RESUMEN

Este artículo propone, a partir de una amplia revisión bibliográfica, reflexionar sobre el concepto de Comunicación Política y sobre la incidencia que, en el rol de los tres actores que en ella intervienen – políticos, medios de comunicación y ciudadanía –, ha tenido el entorno digital. A través de un repaso por la evolución del concepto posicionamos la comunicación política en una cuarta fase caracterizada por el desapego y descrédito hacia las instancias políticas y mediáticas, la desmasificación, la diversificación mediática, la desintermediación y la emancipación de la ciudadanía digital. El fenómeno de la comunicación política se aborda desde su vinculación a los conceptos clásicos de Espacio Público y Opinión Pública que se extrapolan al contexto de la ciberdemocracia para cuestionar si los procesos de interacción que en ella se desarrollan conducen hacia un modelo de democracia deliberativa. En respuesta a ello, este estudio evidencia la necesidad de mayores niveles de intercambio y consenso, especialmente entre las esferas política y ciudadana, en relación a los mensajes, símbolos y opiniones que, a través de la comunicación política, construyen la Opinión Pública digital. La posibilidad de una democracia deliberativa se vislumbra lejana. La confrontación discursiva propia de la comunicación política tradicional se traslada al entorno *online*, con la única salvedad de que, ahora y de momento, está más equiparada entre los tres elementos que en ella intervienen.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Comunicación Política – Digitalización – Espacio Público – Opinión Pública – Ciudadanía – Ciberdemocracia – Democracia deliberativa.

REPENSAR A COMUNICAÇÃO POLÍTICA NO CONTEXTO DIGITAL. CIBERDEMOCRACIA, DEMOCRACIA DELIBERATIVA?

RESUMO

Este artigo propõe, a partir de uma ampla revisão bibliográfica, a reflexão sobre o conceito de comunicação política e sobre a incidência que, a função dos três atores que intervêm - políticos, meios de comunicação e cidadania - tem no entorno digital. Através de uma leitura da evolução do conceito posicionamos a comunicação política em uma quarta fase caracterizada pelo desapego e descrédito pelas instâncias políticas e midiáticas, a desmassificação, a diversificação mediática, a desintermediação, e a emancipação da cidadania digital. O fenômeno da comunicação política é abordado desde sua vinculação aos conceitos clássicos de espaço público e opinião pública que

se extrapolam ao contexto da ciberdemocracia para questionar se os processos de interação que se desenvolvem nela levam até um modelo de democracia deliberativa. Como resposta a isto, este estudo evidencia a necessidade de maiores níveis de troca e consenso, especialmente nas esferas política e cidadã, na relação as mensagens, símbolos e opiniões que, através da comunicação política, constroem a opinião pública digital. Possibilidade de uma democracia deliberativa se vislumbra ainda longe. O confronto discursivo próprio da comunicação política tradicional é transferido ao entorno online, com a única diferença de que, agora e neste momento, está mais equiparada entre os três elementos que intervêm na mesma.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: Comunicação Política - Digitalização - Espaço Público - Opinião Pública - Cidadania - Ciberdemocracia - Democracia deliberativa.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The field of Political Communication is a relatively recent field of study. However, the first contributions (Lazarsfeld, 1954; Wolton, 1989; Rospir, 2003; Canel, 2006; Dader, 2009) have not taken long to become obsolete in the face of new technologies. The impact of the digital revolution has disrupted the incipient bases on which this field of study began to be based, affecting the meaning of the first definitions of Political Communication; a binomial that, in the digital context, adopts new relational forms represented by nomenclatures such as cyber-politics (Cotarelo, 2013), cyber-democracy (Dader and Campos, 2006), e-democracy (Chadwick, 2008), or politics 2.0 (Tuñez and Sixto, 2011; Espino, 2014).

In the digital political scene, traditional power relations, in which the hegemony in the construction of discourse was held by the political and media spheres, are modified. In the *online* context, civil society, previously a passive target of mediated political messages, acquires a status similar to that of political institutions or media companies by, the Internet and especially social platforms, enabling their direct and active participation in content that circulates on the web, their grouping, and their self-regulation outside the discursive elites. The 2.0 environment provides spaces for a public debate that is characterized by being more flexible, spontaneous, and autonomous (Chadwick, 2008). This fact affects the very notion of Political Communication and its link with the concepts of Public Space and Public Opinion.

The emancipation of the citizen-subject from political power and the audience-user from media power, and their comparison with both powers in terms of possibilities of intervention in the construction of Public Opinion, raise the possibility of thinking about cyber-democracy as a representative form of deliberative democracy, understood as:

[...] A form of government in which free and equal citizens (and their representatives) justify their decisions in a process in which each gives mutually acceptable and generally accessible reasons, to reach conclusions that are binding at present for all citizens, but open to changes in the future. (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004, p. 7)

Dader (2001, p. 214) spoke of “interpellating or replicating democracy” to refer to the greater weight that citizen demands and requirements acquire before the political-institutional elites through cybernetic channels.

However, the autonomy that digitization has granted to citizens does not seem to translate, at the moment, into a Public Opinion equally agreed and shared by the three actors that intervene in political communication processes. In this sense, Chadwick (2008) expresses himself, by questioning that the greatest options for citizen intervention in the production and discussion of political content online can be equated to formally deliberative exercises that result in real changes in political decisions. Greater levels of exchange, interaction, and feedback are still necessary to allow the embryonic phase in which digital political communication is to mature, to enable the establishment of deliberative, circular, and inclusive democratic models.

2. OBJECTIVES

This article proposes a review of the principles that govern traditional political communication and raises a reflection on its evolution in the digital context of cyberdemocracy from its link to the classic concepts of Public Space and Public Opinion from the Habermasian and Benhabibian perspectives. Likewise, the defining characteristics of digital political communication are exposed and developed and new terminology is postulated, "Hyperconnected Public Opinion", to represent the result of the deliberation that digital citizenship develops on matters of public interest in the online environment.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research proposes a bibliographic review that starts from the definitions of Political Communication that laid the foundations of the concept (Blake, Blondel, Canel, Denton, Fagen, Harondsen, Lazarsfeld, McNair, Rey, Wolton, Woodward, among others) to observe, later, how these initial postulates have evolved and question whether they are adapted to the current reality, characterized by the impact of the digital revolution. The different role played by each of the actors involved in the political communication processes – citizens, the media, and political institutions – is examined from its link to the formulations on the concepts of Public Space and Public Opinion developed by Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib. The study continues with an outline of what we call “the fourth phase of political communication”, based on the well-known classification of Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) and based on the research proposed in the last decade by authors of reference

in this field (Casero-Ripollés, Chadwick, Cotarelo, Dader, Dahlgren, Dahlberg, or Lévy, among others). Finally, the concept of Public Opinion is extrapolated to the context of cyber-democracy through the works of Sampredo (2000) and Resina de la Fuente (2010) whose object of study revolves specifically around the interrelationships that deliberative democracy entails and their digital impact. The study concludes with a reflection on whether the unprecedented participation of digital citizens in democratic deliberation leads *per se* towards a model of deliberative democracy.

The field of digital political communication and the implications that technology entails in democratic systems are issues currently under discussion and the leeway of which has yet to be defined. This research provides an updated overview of the similarities and differences observed between traditional and digital political communication, as well as the challenges that the latter implies; but the constant and vertiginous evolution of this field of study inevitably makes an incessant revision of the proposed postulates necessary.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Annotation of the binomial 'communication- politics' and link with the concepts of Public Space and Public Opinion

Political Communication has been defined as the interdisciplinary study that attends to the multiple interrelations that develop between the components of the triangulation that constitute politicians, media, and citizens (Lazarsfeld, 1954). Since the beginning of the delimitation of this field, the delimitation of these three defining elements and the relationships that are generated between them have been at the core of the discussion on the concept. The “infernal triangle” is called by Wolton (1997), understanding political communication in terms of discursive confrontations between information, politics, and public opinion. And it is that the matter revolves precisely around how some vertices exert influence on others.

Some of the first definitions put the focus of attention on the binomial that gives its name to this phenomenon, that is, in communication and politics, excluding from its explanation the third element: citizenship. Thus, Fagen (1996), Blake and Harondsen (1975), or Meadow (1980) emphasize the effects or consequences that communicative activity has or can have on the political system. Arora and Lasswell (1969) understand political communication as those political symbols that acquire greater relevance in the media elite. Chaffee (1975, p. 15) reduces the question to a minimum: “the role of communication in the political process”.

These contributions were considered simplistic, with multiple authors (Blondel, 1990; Canel, 2006; Denton and Woodward, 1998; McNair, 1995; Rey, 1995) who defended more complex approaches (interacting models versus unidirectional models) that did contemplate citizenry as another of the protagonists of the process

and they extended the restrictions of the previous proposals regarding the affectation of communication only towards the political sphere.

However, these attempts to overcome the limitation relative to the equalization of citizenship with the significance of the other two vertices (politics and media) that arose at the dawn or beginning of the 21st century, are demonstrated with the idealistic time. The reality is that, although citizens do participate in political communication and are affected by it insofar as it contributes to their perception of the political system, traditionally, their role has been restricted to the passive reception of the messages produced and disseminated from the other two instances (Gil-Ramírez, 2018, 2019a; Mazzoleni, 2010).

Like the Public Sphere or Space conceived by Habermas (1973) was “re-feudalized” (Habermas, 2000), taken over by interest groups that negotiate outside of public knowledge (Del Rosario, 2019), among which is the media; political communication, in its original conception, has also resulted in the colonization of factual media power.

The conception of Public Sphere (Benhabib, 1994; Habermas, 2009) that is implicit here is one in which the relationship between citizens (informal or civic public sphere) and politics (formal or institutional public sphere) is fundamentally carried out through the media.

"Media Politics" as a "way of doing politics in and through the media" (Castell, 2009, p. 261) has been the prevailing mode of political communication in the representative democracies in force in capitalist societies since the appearance of the *mass media*, and increasingly as these have become private for-profit companies, commercial institutions in search of consumers (Del Rosario, 2019).

The transformations of the media "are what have led us to qualify as 'media democracy', 'new public process', or 'media-centered democracy', the new situation in which the relationship between citizens, politicians, and the media is currently unfolding" (Rospir, 2003, p. 47).

Politics and the media have established an alliance that holds discursive hegemony based on performances that do not always respond to the public interest. The influence of political (and economic) interference in the media sphere, both in the processes of political communication and in the interactions that take place in the Public Sphere in general –and regardless of the role of the different national, regional, or local organizations that ensure "the protection of fundamental rights" of the citizen before the media (Gavara de Cara, 2015, p. 17) –, is verified if we attend authors such as Del Rosario (2019), who insists on the need of a normative theory of the media that regulates and guarantees its service to the general interest.

The flow of dominant political communication in Western societies has been predominantly unidirectional, downward, and managed by the “strong vertices” of

triangulation; In other words, the political sphere, through the media or in collusion with them, has directed its messages towards a citizenry constituted as a passive audience ("weak vertex"). The latter, despite configuring the representation of the popular will and the spokesperson of Public Opinion in the most idealized version of Habermasian democracy, has had little significance in the interaction beyond participation in electoral polls or at the time of depositing the vote in elections (Mazzoleni, 2010).

Authors such as Canel (2006) defend other forms of active participation of citizens in political communication processes, using "letters to the director" as an example. We could add some others: direct questions to candidates during a rally, participation by telephone (nowadays also through digital media and networks) in media programs of a political nature, or the presence of group voices (professional associations, NGOs, neighborhood groups...) in the media regarding any matter of public interest. However, they are nothing more than anecdotal modes of participation, given that citizens, turned into a mass audience by the media sphere, have not traditionally had the necessary instruments to act unanimously, to intervene in political communication as a citizen-subject who could be equated with the political-subject or the media-subject.

The weight (or domination) exercised by political and media agents in the production and dissemination of symbols and representations of what is considered to be of public interest exerts, on the one hand, an absolute influence on the perceptions that citizens build of them, and cancels, on the other hand, any possibility of social answer by not enabling true intervention mechanisms. Thompson (1998) speaks of "quasi media interaction" for the small margin of intervention that the "public" has over the media. The very inclusion of citizens as a component of political communication has been undermined by questioning whether their incorporation into this discipline is simply part of the set of the relationship model that develops between the media and politicians (Rospir, 2003).

The general interest that is presupposed in the processes of political communication, that is to contribute to the constitution of a formed and participated Public Opinion that emerges from a Public Space shared among all the actors that intervene in it, as proposed by the vision of Deliberative democracy of multiple authors (Benhabib, Habermas, or Fraser), in this context becomes a utopia.

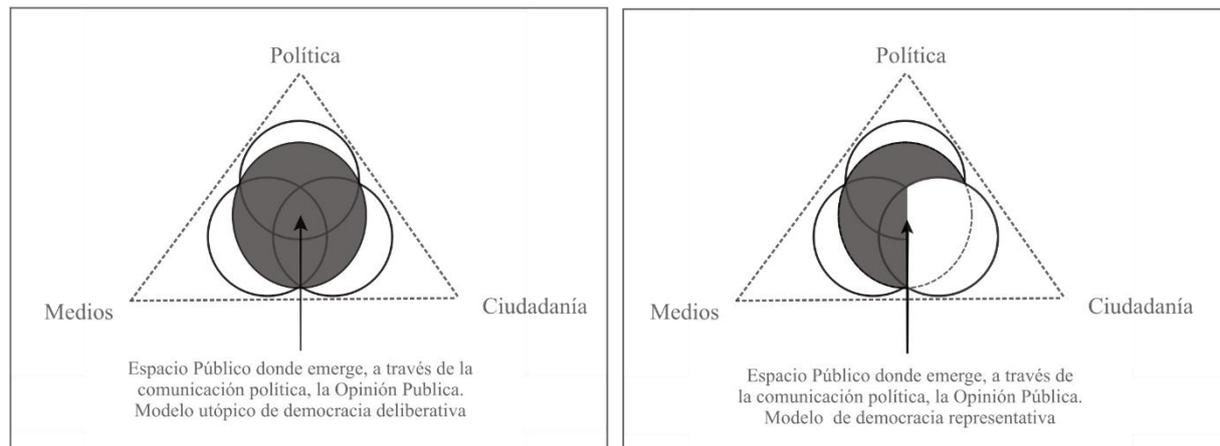


Figure 1. Representation of citizen participation in political communication processes depending on the models of democracy: deliberative versus representative.

Source: self-made.

Political communication understood from the perspective of Habermas's concept of Public Sphere (1973) could be defined as the process of symbolic interaction that takes place in the Public Space between political institutions, media companies, and citizens, and that results in a Consensual Public Opinion in favor of the general interest. This would be the ideal model, the utopia of a political communication aimed at decisively contributing to the establishment of a true deliberative democracy. However, the situation is different and seems to agree with Lasswell's inherited considerations that point to political communication as a strategic and planned action with persuasive purposes.

4.2. The fourth phase: digital political communication

Blumler and Kavanagh (1999), considered that the entrance of the 21st century brought with it what they called the third phase of Political Communication.

The first phase, which the authors call the "Golden Age of Parties" would be limited to the two decades that followed the First World War. At this stage, political communication would be characterized by broad consensus and public trust in institutions. Serious political messages had easy access to the media and elicited consistent attitudes from voters.

The second phase would have been marked by the appearance of television, decreasing the consumption of other media, and the influence of the parties. The audience becomes massive and the political language begins to undergo the process of mediatization. It could be considered a transition phase.

The third phase is determined by a series of defining factors of the political communication model:

1. Modernization: fragmentation of the social organization in interests and identities.
2. Proliferation of different lifestyles and moral approaches.
3. Individualization: consumption is more important than ideological-political convictions.
4. Secularization: a weakening of party activity.
5. Economization: increase of economic factors on the political agenda.
6. Aesthetization: association of politics with popular culture.
7. Rationalization: credibility is given to data-proven arguments.
8. Mediatization: the media at the center of the social process. The public sphere is only visible through it.

This third phase of political communication of which Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) speak, is still in force today. A communication in which "political" issues have succumbed to the spectacle format typical of the mass media, losing rigor and significance, in which media companies compete for audiences in favor of higher advertising revenues based on entertainment shows (even concerning political issues through the so-called "infotainment"), practically relegating its informative function to the newscasts, and in which the role of citizens is denatured, understood as a mass prey to the opiate effect of the Lasswellian "hypodermic needle.

Under this perception, it is questioned, therefore, whether the political communication model is, in the 21st century, evolved towards an inclusive circular model or, under different forms, is still anchored in the hierarchical and unidirectional communicational presuppositions of the preceding centuries.

What does seem true is that the 21st century has brought with it a substantial change at the communicational level: the irruption of mobile communication, digital platforms, so-called social media, social networks have transformed the traditional media system affecting the different fields with which it relates, including the political one. Some authors (García-Alonso, 2011) have even stated that thanks to the Internet, unidirectional communication processes have been canceled and overcome. Other less forceful approaches (Chadwick, 2013; López-Meri, Marcos-García, and Casero-Ripollés, 2017; Masip et al., 2020) point, however, towards a hybridization of analog and digital systems, towards the coexistence of two communication models: the one represented by the traditional media and the one generated on the Internet social networks (Gil-García, 2015).

In the field of political communication, the digital environment would be configuring a fourth phase that coexists with the third, but that presents its own peculiarities: detachment and discredit towards political and media instances, demassification, media diversification, disintermediation, the emancipation of the subject- citizen-audience-user. Let's look at each of them in more detail.

4.2.1. Detachment and discredit towards political and media instances

The asymmetric relationship between the "strong vertices" (politics and media) and the "weak vertex" (citizenship) could be linked or be the cause of the growing political disaffection of the citizens and the decreasing credibility of the audience towards the conventional media. Regarding the latter, "reality shows that in the second decade of the 21st century, the profession is clearly discredited" (Gómez and Patiño, 2018, p. 52). The infinity of sources of information that circulate on the Internet makes it possible for citizens to contrast and verify that the trend in the offline media system is to offer different versions of the same political message depending on the ideological line of the medium. Where is objectivity then?

Regarding political disaffection, this can be understood from two positions: that of the citizen fed up with manipulation, corruption, the *spectacularization* or theatricalization of political activity, the inability of political systems to meet the demands and needs of citizens, etc., who decides to withdraw from the effective exercise of democracy through abstention, what Megías (2020) calls "political disconnection"; or from that of the citizen disenchanted with the current modes of operation of political systems, who overlaps and decides to act accordingly, claiming their role as a component of the democratic system, which would point to an "institutional disaffection" (Megías, 2020), but not to the abandonment of attention for matters of public interest. On the Internet, cyber-activism could be considered a democratic response to the detachment from the ways of acting of the political class. From this second perspective, the increase in citizen involvement in matters of a political nature is not at odds with the increase in distancing from government institutions. Rather, it is a wake-up call, a social response to the deficiencies and problems that political entities accredit, the evidence of the "symptom of their illness" (Megías, 2020).

4.2.2. Demassification

The digital environment enables citizens to participate in a particular way in the construction of Public Opinion. The audience-mass built homogeneously by the media depersonalized the subject, constituted as a mere element of a uniform group that lacked the tools to act in a unitary way. In the fourth phase of political communication, that is, in digital political communication, the mass audience is fragmented into multiple "network me" (Papacharissi, 2010) that can intervene in matters of public interest in a personal or connected way through microspheres grouped around themes based on their own self-identification (Masip, Ruiz-Caballero, & Suau, 2019). In other words, it enables the action of private subjects and the articulation of group networks that strengthen participation in democratic deliberation. The so-called active audience (Masip, 2016; Masip et al., 2015; Masip and Suau, 2014), digital public sphere (Sampedro and Martínez-Avidad, 2018), or digital citizenship has found on the Internet a new habitus for political participation, a new platform for the civic agency (Dahlgren, 2013). The digital audience thus forms a group of empowered networks,

formed by active subjects who collaborate in the production and dissemination of information, supported by digital networks (Loosen and Schmidt, 2012).

The particular identity that the citizen acquires in digital political communication also affects the other two vertices. Both the political and media spheres can now decompose their messages, orient them towards more specific target profiles, and establish direct and interactive relationships. It is something that gradually seems to occur in the media that has adapted its routines to the digital context and has provided spaces for communication and socialization with audiences (Lara, 2008). In the digital media ecosystem, there is a tendency to consolidate models participated by the audience, understood as the backbone of the new relationship between the media and citizens (Masip et al., 2015; Masip and Suau, 2014). The same does not happen, however, on the part of the political sphere that, although with nuances depending on geographical parameters, in general terms does not end up shedding its old one-way communicative modes, wasting the potential of new digital channels to interact with the citizenship. In the specific case of Spain, countless works attest to this: Ballesteros; Diez, 2018; Berrocal; Martín; Gil-Torres, 2017; Gil-Ramírez, 2019a, 2019b; Gil-Ramírez and Gómez de Travesedo-Rojas, 2020; Marín; Simancas; Berzosa, 2019; Miquel; Alonso; Marcos, 2017; Muñiz et al., 2016; Suau-Gomila, 2020.

4.2.3. Media diversification

"The scarce resource is now not information, but the public" (García-Alonso, 2011, p. 1395). Digitization has brought with it the emergence of countless new information channels. The Internet has fostered a more plural and diversified media landscape (Chadwick, 2008).

Lozano (2010, p. 13) manages to capture the reality of the current media saturation through an accurate metaphor:

[...] We have entered the 21st century carried away by the torrent of information.
[...] The flood overwhelms us because we were countrymen accustomed to contemplating the peaceful bed of the informative river as something external, always in its place and at its time. [...] That flood in which we are immersed is the internet.

The internet is an inexhaustible container of information. Traditional media have adapted by incorporating their online versions, but now the competition is immense. New digital media, blogs, social networks, innovative and better-adapted-to-the-virtual-environment web platforms (Wayner, 2001) saturate the supply. The possible sources of information are multiplying, which destabilizes the central role that the media occupied in the third phase of political communication. "It goes from a model based exclusively on supply to a model that focuses on demand" (Masip et al., 2015, p. 241).

4.2.4. Disintermediation

The media influence is diluted when the citizen has the necessary tools to go directly to the sources of information and self-manage them (Benkler, 2006). The citizen acquires control to establish their own consumption patterns (Brundidge, 2010) breaking the chain of political-media authority. The weight of the media in the construction of the public agenda (agenda-setting theory) decreases in favor of citizen interests that shape the reversed agenda (Sung-Tae and Young-Hwan, 2007). The digital audience can select, interpret information, and share it on networks, capacities previously reserved for communication professionals (Masip et al., 2019). Communication between subjects, in the online environment, is no longer mediated to occur from person to person, directly (Espino, 2014), closing the cycle of horizontal communication (Panke and Esquivel, 2013). "The 'mass media' of companies no longer lead, but the 'social media' of the audiences" (García-Alonso, 2011 p. 1395).

4.2.5. Emancipation of the subject-citizen-audience-user

The digitization of the media, added to the emergence of new communication channels and platforms supported by the Internet, has provided citizens with channels of response and intervention that give them a certain independence from the political-media powers. The characteristics of multifunction mobile devices (laptops, tablets, smartphones, etc.), such as multimedia, hypertext, interactivity (Canavilhas, 2013), ubiquity, or instantaneity (González-Molina, 2013), contribute tools to the user that give them a new role in the entire digital media ecosystem. The audience, which passively received political communication, now decisively intervenes in the configuration, production, and distribution of messages. The political economy of ideological content creation has significantly changed (Chadwick, 2008).

This new role of the audience has been designated in a majority way through the term "prosumer" (Toffler, 1980), an expression that represents the evolution of the classic audience of offline media towards a "demanding, critical, active, productive, collaborative, involved, commentator, and disseminator with his own digital environment" subject (García-Alonso, 2011, p. 1395). It is, perhaps, the most significant change that the impact operated by ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) has had regarding the role of citizens in political communication processes: productive and relational capacity. Thus, the figure of the prosumer would be determined by a purely technological component (ICT), but also by the emancipatory nature of said technology (EPT – Empowerment and Participation Technologies –) compared to the previous system (Acuña, Céspedes, Castiblanco, and Said, 2016). The prosumer is understood not only in his particularity as producer-consumer, but also in his role in the creative, disseminating community (Polo and Cárdenas, 2014) as an articulating element (Islas, 2008) capable of interpreting information and generating a dialogue (Gómez -Castellanos, Ortiz, and Concepción, 2011), also acting as a speaker for the conversation that takes place on the internet (Berrocal, Campos, and Redondo, 2014) and influencing other users. In this sense,

Rodríguez-Fidalgo, Ruiz, Paíno, and Jiménez-Iglesias (2017) rescue the idea raised previously by various authors (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Ritzer, Dean, and Jurgenson, 2012; Cheong and Lundry, 2012) of the Web 2.0 as the new social factory.

This magnitude that the audience acquires positions the citizen as a key figure in the modes of digital political communication. The prosumer as a member of a social group of intelligent individuals who find on the internet a way to detach themselves from the traditional media agenda based on political interests, to build new alternative protest channels within the framework of the contemporary Public Sphere (Dahlgren, 2013). The digital space is a new channel for activism and citizen deliberation (Resina de la Fuente, 2010; Sampedro and Martínez-Avidad, 2018) favoring the connection between previously isolated subjects, generating new ways of channeling social demands, and enabling a more decentralized mobilization at the ideological level. A mobilization that in the online context can also acquire a transnational character (Cammaerts and Van-Audenhove, 2005; Della-Porta, 2011). The forms of digital counter-power dismantle the pre-existing balances in the previous model of political communication. Citizens find online an instrument with which to monitor the action of the political power (Casero-Ripollés, 2008; Feenstra and Casero-Ripollés, 2014). In this context, media elites and political actors find it difficult to escape the vigilant gaze of the "little brother" (citizenship) (Chadwick, 2008, p. 21).

This emancipation of citizens from political and media interference presupposes, a priori, progressive democratization of political communication processes, but it is necessary to take this conjecture with caution.

On the one hand, it is necessary to address the limitations implied by the unequal opportunities for participation in the democratic debate that the still existing digital gap entails; a challenge, nowadays and taking into account the enormous expansion of infrastructures for Internet access in the last decade, based more on the degree of electronic openness by the different States towards e-participation processes, than on educational, training, or income reasons (Nielsen et al., 2020), issues that would still persist but to a lesser degree than in past decades.

On the other hand, it must be taken into account that aspects such as disintermediation not only empower citizens but at the same time increase the risk of manipulation of Public Opinion due to the circulation of fake news or little-contrasted information.

Likewise, the genuine character of citizen *prosumption* is endangered by the false appearance of public service offered by some of the new digital media, in general, and by social networks in particular, an appearance behind which the business of large transnational media corporations (Reig, 2011) and instruments of social control (Almansa-Martínez and Castillo-Esparcia, 2014; Gutiérrez-Rubí, 2011) would hide. From this perspective, as was already the case with traditional political

communication, in the digital one the “*prosumption*” space would be being colonized by new-breed companies (De-Aguilera, 2018), by:

[...] Groups that monopolize the exploitation of resources, centralize the flows of the new digital communication, select and condition the forms of innovation and creation, and, finally, imprison the development options in the exclusive direction of obtaining the benefit for the digital companies at the top of the economic pyramid, which evade tax obligations, trade with their users' data, and restrict access to knowledge by imposing draconian conditions for its exploitation. (Caldevilla, Barrientos, and Parra, 2020, p. 270)

And it is that technologies have never been decisive by themselves, but by the use made of them. The Internet contains from its inception various usability options. In the case of political communication, these possibilities seem dichotomous: “towards creation and growth, or towards commercial exploitation and immediate profit” (Caldevilla et al., 2020, p. 270).

4.3. Hyperconnected Public Opinion. Deliberative cyber-democracy?

The active role that citizens acquire in the processes of democratic deliberation in the fourth phase of political communication, the digital one, is reflected in the concept of cyber-democracy: a more participatory form of digital democracy that enables, in deterritorialized virtual communities, renewed deliberation practices between all those interested political actors, under the conditions of transparency, cyber-polarity, and universal civic inclusiveness (Dader, 2009; Lévy, 2004). Cyber-politics (Cotarelo, 2013) have equated the weight of the three vertices of traditional political communication, putting “the power of the powerless” on the game board (Gutiérrez-Rubí, 2011).

Dahlberg (2011), postulates four types of cyber-democracy depending on the levels of grouping, self-management, and activism of the subject-citizen on the internet: *liberal-individualist democracy, deliberative digital democracy, counter-publics digital democracy, or autonomist Marxist digital democracy*. In the first, digital media, considered independent of centralized controls, would function as providers of information and containers for the opinion of citizens. The subject's rational and individual character stands out. Individual, rather than collective, interests are pursued. In the second, digital media would promote the democratic deliberation of subjects who question the action of political power and are configured around a collective consensus that pursues the common good. In the third, it would go a step further by allowing, in the online environment, mobilization and activism. The subject is formed as a counter-public based on his belonging to the group and the level of commitment to it. Digital media would act here as catalysts for protest. With the fourth option, the deliberative democracy ideal would be achieved. Digital channels would enable collective self-organization outside the political and economic powers. The subject, from a Marxist position, is constituted based on a decentralized, open, and autonomous common entity.

These changes lead to rethinking the role of digital citizenship in the construction of Public Opinion, understood as the manifestation of the consensus reached in the field of Public Space by the actors involved through the political communication processes.

Two decades ago, starting the 21st century, Sampedro (2000) proposed to differentiate between a “Central/majority Public Opinion” and a “Peripheral/minority Public Opinion”. The first is defined by its predisposition to consensus and consent to established power. It is made up of political, informational, and demographic institutions. The second is made up of civil society in its form of manifestation and tries to encourage the participation of minorities. In this way, the degree of openness of the Central Public Opinion towards the Peripheral Public Opinion conditions the democratic level of the system.

Years later, Resina de la Fuente (2010) reformulates the types proposed by Sampedro (2000) and distinguishes between “Aggregate Public Opinion” and “Discursive Public Opinion”. The Aggregate one comprises the set of individual judgments that, assimilating the term public to the majority, tends to be artificially constructed and controlled by the political-institutional elites and is specified in the expressions of the media, polls, or the results of the urns. In the Discursive one, the public is understood as the collection of individual wills that deliberate and condition each other, the result of an expanding group conversation and whose manifestation comes from civil society.

From the proposals of both authors, a Public Opinion made/imposed by the media under the directives of the political power emerges, and another Public Opinion constructed/emerged from civil society in the sense of community.

Before technological advances, the Central/Aggregate Public Opinion has occupied a position of supremacy over the Peripheral/Discursive one. In the digital context, what we propose to define as the Hyperconnected Public Opinion (which refers to the second of the proposals by both authors and, therefore, to the citizenship’s collective expression, in this case, through the internet) gains strength, independence, and protagonism regarding the political-media powers.

However, the appearance of this new form of Hyperconnected Public Opinion does not, *per se*, imply that we can liken cyber-democracy to the deliberative democracy model. Although it is true that in this context, social participation in deliberation is much greater through decentralized, self-organized, and autonomous-from-political-and-media-powers citizenship; said deliberation, if we pay attention to the lack of interaction between politics and citizenship mentioned above, seems to be taking place only between equals. Considering the fourth model of cyber democracy proposed by Dahlberg (2011) – *autonomist Marxist digital democracy* – with the constitution of the Hyperconnected Public Opinion, the ideal of deliberative democracy would have been

achieved. But, is it enough that digital citizenship has reached the status of the other two vertices - political and media spheres - to speak of a deliberation that results in a participated and consensual Public Opinion?

The political-media elites continue to form a Central Public Opinion lacking a retroactive and dialoguing character, which hardly leaves any loopholes for interaction with the Hyperconnected Public Opinion. Without such interaction, without feedback, the necessary consensus in any deliberation is impossible. Moreover, if the online debate that takes place among the members of the digital citizenship does not lead to an active governmental response, that is, if there is no structural connection between the virtual spaces for reflection of civil society and the offline processes of decision-making in the political sphere, digital deliberation could turn into chaotic populism (Dahlgren, 2005). For now, the interaction that occurs on the internet has not replaced the dependence of individuals with the real processes of government action outside the digital space (Masip et al., 2019).

On the other hand, it could be questioned, as Chadwick (2008) does, to what extent does the dialogical exchange that takes place on the internet, mainly through the comments made in forums and spaces enabled in this regard, or the forms of interaction based on clicks of support or rejection of the opinions expressed in such spaces, imply a sufficient level of reflection to be considered as forms of democratic deliberation? The author (Chadwick, 2008), without detracting from the potential of e-democracy, nevertheless points to an early phase in online deliberation where modes of participation with a low deliberative threshold prevail with greater quantitative than qualitative expression.

5. CONCLUSION

We are currently witnessing the constitution of digital political communication, still in an embryonic phase and in coexistence with the traditional political communication that continues to rule for the most part.

Certainly, digitization has opened the door to the democratization of citizen deliberation processes, completely transforming the role that, until its implementation, civil society played in the interactions typical of political communication (Acuña et al., 2016; Berrocal et al., 2014; García-Alonso, 2011; Gómez-Castellanos et al., 2011; Islas, 2008; Polo and Cárdenas, 2014).

The passive and massive “weak vertex” is activated and establishes group networks (Masip et al., 2019; Papacharissi, 2010) that allow it to equate its significance with that of the “strong vertices”. In the digital context, the three spheres – political, media, and citizen – have the same possibilities to intervene in political communication (Gil-Ramírez, 2019a) and, with this, to participate in the construction of Public Opinion.

However, on the one hand, the reflection and debate proper to deliberation do not seem to be yet consolidated in the online context (Chadwick, 2008) and, on the other, the necessary consensus that would lead to truly deliberative democracy is not viable if the messages, symbols, and opinions of the three participants in digital political communication are not exchanged and agreed in a balanced way in favor of the common interest; a horizon that looks blurry if we pay attention to the progressive colonization of digital space by ideological and commercial interests (Almansa-Martínez and Castillo-Esparcia, 2014; Caldevilla et al., 2020; De-Aguilera, 2018; Gutiérrez-Rubí, 2011; Reig, 2011).

Far from envisioning the possibility of deliberative democracy, in the digital context there continues to be a discursive confrontation around political communication, with the only exception that, now and for the moment, the confrontation is more equated between the three elements that intervene in it.

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