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Communication, Public Opinion, and Democracy: New Challenges

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Abstract

This essay addresses the relationship between communication, public opinion, and democracy, which is evident in Athenian democracy. It briefly considers the complexity of the concept of public opinion, and how it was understood as a political phenomenon accepted in general thinking and political action, as a consequence of the democratic dynamism originated by the printing press. After briefly considering some of the most relevant ideas about this relationship throughout the 19th century, this essay discusses the main attitudes that emerged in the face of public opinion after the First World War, from which the most relevant theories about the effects of media on opinion, behaviours, and action begun to be developed. The study takes into account the development of an empirical science of public opinion, linked to scientific opinion surveys. It summarises how the investigation of the effects of the media goes through a stage in which they are considered irrelevant, until some studies – especially the theories of agenda setting and the spiral of silence – recovered the idea of the powerful effects of the media. Finally, the essay addresses the new challenges posed by the disenchantment with democracy, the loss of credibility of the media, and the way of understanding communication, at a time in which digital technology has facilitated the creation of social media, causing a situation described as the post-truth era, in which the global need for information becomes more evident. The new challenges affect the political science, research on public opinion, and the science of communication, which requires a foundation of greater consistency than the current one.

Keywords

Public opinion, democracy, post-truth, agenda setting, social media.

1. Introduction

The obvious and close relationship between communication, public opinion, and democracy has had diverse manifestations throughout history. Currently, it represents a complex scenery. Athenian democracy, a landmark when we talk about democracy, had a numerical limit imposed by the possibilities of communication. The important aspect, when the assembly of the citizens of Athens took place in the Pnyx Hill, was to be able to hear, speak, and be heard: the scope of the human voice defined the dimensions of the polis. That primitive democracy showed that “participation is,

clearly, the proper avenue of approach to the study of public opinion, for, in various senses, public opinion is participating opinion” (Wilson, 1962, p. 7). Price has underlined that, taking into account its links with the processes of discussion, debate, and collective decision-making, “public opinion remains fundamentally a communication concept,” although it is approached from a philosophical, political, and sociological or psychological perspective (1992, p. 91).

From a broad perspective, public opinion has an ancient existence (Holtendorff, 1879). However, the intellectual and academic awareness of this phenomenon with diffuse contours, which has aroused and continues to arouse enthusiasm and suspicion, was developed in the last centuries. Although the circumstances have changed, some theoretical problems are renewed, sometimes with few variations.

2. The concept and name of public opinion

Undoubtedly, the notion of public opinion has problematic aspects. Bryce, a great enthusiast of the American system, which he considered to be the genuine popular regime or a regime of public opinion, and to whom we owe an ‘orthodox democratic theory,’ understood it as a “vague, fluctuating, complex thing... omnipotent yet indeterminate, a sovereign to whose voice everyone listens, yet whose words, because he speaks with as many tongues as the waves of a boisterous sea, it is so hard to catch” (1995, II, p. 929). This author briefly defined it as “the aggregate of the views men hold regarding matters that affect or interest the community” only in his later work “Modern Democracies” (1923, vol. I, chap. XV, p. 153). At the beginning of the 20th century, Oncken defined it as “a Proteus, a being that appears simultaneously in a thousand guises, both visible and as a phantom, impotent and surprisingly efficacious” (1914, cited by Noelle-Neumann, 1983, p. 59). Public opinion, “one of the most interdisciplinary concepts in social science” (Donsbach & Traugott, 2008), continues to be “one of the most nebulous concepts in democratic theory” (Herbst, 2011, p. 302).

Although there are precedents of the expression ‘public opinion’ in Cicero’s writings, in the John de Salisbury’s ‘Policraticus’ (1159), or in the essays of Michel de Montaigne, it was not incorporated into the political, academic, and popular language until the end of the 18th century. In Great Britain, the expression ‘the opinion of the people’ was used to refer to the voice of the people relating to political affairs (Gunn, 1983, p. 261), whereas ‘public opinion’ was used to indicate how the opinion of others could condition personal behaviour, as proposed by Locke when dealing with the law of opinion or reputation (1690, p. 475): human beings, due to fear of isolation, are forced into conformity by fearing the court of opinion. Anyway, although the research places England as the cradle of the concept of public opinion (Gunn, 1983, 1995), the notion in continental Europe was consolidated in France, with Necker’s writings and politics, who was minister of Louis XVI (López-Escobar, 2008), although it had also been used by Rousseau in France, or Von Müller in Germany (Noelle-Neumann, 1984, p. 251).

3. Printing press and democracy

The interrelation that we are considering became relevant in a special way with the invention of the printing press. Gutenberg’s invention progressively changed the way in which Europeans shared information, ideas, and opinions. This fact allowed the creation of illustrated elites that shaped a ‘society of publics’ (Tarde, 1969). As Carlyle wrote, “printing, which comes necessarily out of Writing... is equivalent to Democracy: invent Writing, Democracy is inevitable” (1959, p. 21).

The influence and power of the press in general –and later newspapers– and its connection with public opinion, became commonplace, at least in the Western world, although that connection was seen with optimistic or cautious eyes. Bryce (1995) referred to “the journalists, whose business is to discover what people are thinking” (II, p. 910). On the

other hand, he also referred to “the man who tries to lead public opinion, be he statesman journalist or lecturer,” to conclude that “the largest part of the work of forming opinion is done by these men” (II, p. 914).

4. Public opinion and illustration

It has been pointed out that “both historians who have written about ‘the supremacy of public opinion,’ and those who have written about the *naissance d’un monstre* (Fay, 1965) have agreed that, at the end of the 18th century and in the early 19th century, there have been changes in Western Europe and other places that marked the arrival of public opinion as a significant force” (Gunn, 1983, p. 260). In the 1750s and 1760s, “politics broke out of the absolutist mold” (Baker, 1990, p. 24–25), and the opinion “villain of philosophy, became public opinion, hero of politics” (Peters 1995, p. 6).

The *Encyclopedie*, published in 1765, included the term ‘opinion’ –in the Logic section– but not the expression ‘public opinion’ (Kaufman, 2004, p. 91). This expression appeared in 1789 in the *Encyclopedie Methodique* (cited by Baker, 1990, p. 161), which disregarded the term ‘opinion’ in the philosophical sections, and introduced the term ‘*opinion publique*’ in the section dedicated to the topics of public administration. As Baker states, “within the space of a generation, the flickering lamp of ‘opinion’ has been transformed into the unremitting light of ‘public opinion,’ the light of the universal tribunal before which citizens and governments alike must now appear” (1990, p. 168). ‘Opinion’ became ‘public opinion’, “not a social function but a political category, the ‘*tribunal du public*,’ the court of final appeal for monarchical authority, as for its critics.” With the Revolution in France, “the sacred centre was symbolically refigured; the public person of the sovereign was displaced by the sovereign person of the public; *lèse-nation* was substituted for *lèse-majesté*” (Baker, 1990, p. 9).

The conception of public opinion as a court, superior to royalty, was a key idea for authors of the late 18th century and early 19th century. Necker, fascinated by ‘*l’empire de l’opinion publique*,’ underlined its power and reign ‘*sur tous les esprits*’ (1784, p. 49). This author considered it as “une puissance invisible, qui, sans trésors, sans garde et sans armée” (1784, p. 50), promulgating laws that were obeyed in the same royal palace; and also as “a tribunal où tous les hommes qui attirent sur eux des regards, son obligés de comparoître” (2003 [1820], p. 47–50; López-Escobar, 2008).

During the same period, Bentham –to whom according to Palmer we owe “the first detailed discussion of public opinion in English” (1953, p. 8)– referred to public opinion as a court that “unites all the wisdom and all justice of the nation”, even if it was not protected from corruption. Its ‘Constitutional Code; For the Use of All Nations and All Governments Professing Liberal Opinions’ converted it into a constitutional power; “he insisted upon the importance of public opinion as an instrument of social control; and in his more specifically political treatises, compiled after 1814, he regarded the free expression of public opinion as the chief safeguard against misrule and as the characteristic mark of a democratic state” (Palmer, 1953, p. 8). He also considered ‘the newspaper’ as the most important factor in the formation and expression of public opinion. The press was not only an “appropriate organ of the Public Opinion Tribunal, but the only constantly acting visible one” (Bentham, 1995, p. 579).

The interrelation between the first ‘mass communication media’ –the periodical press– public opinion and democracy became evident throughout the 19th century. Mackinnon, who considered public opinion as a result of the accumulation of capital and the consolidation of the middle classes, and in his work highlighted “On the rise, progress, and present state of public opinion in Great Britain, and other parts of the world” (1828) stated: “It is evident that public opinion gains strength in proportion to the facility of communication”. Mackinnon refers to the means by which information is disseminated (1828, p. 10–21) and in particular to the ease with which “every sort of information is distributed in every direction, by means of the press”. This author states “To dwell on the powerful and irresistible way of conveying

information by means of the press, and of the immense influence it has in promotion of the formation of public opinion, would be useless; it must be evident to everyone that, by this means, the information and almost the civilisation of the community is established.”

Certainly, not all authors of the time understood public opinion as the spontaneous voice of the people. Comte tried to resolve the intellectual, moral, and political anarchy observed in France in the early 19th century using a ‘science of the social aggregate,’ whose essential elements would be the reorganisation of opinions and traditions (*opinions et moeurs*). As this author developed this germinal idea, his goal of achieving uniformity of opinions and traditions became more evident. In the set of his works, and especially in his *Discours sur l'ensemble du positivisme*, published after the 1848 revolution (1907), and in his *Système de politique positive, or Traité de sociologie, instituant la religion de l'humanité* (T. I., p. 821 [851-1854]), Comte places “l’opinion publique au centre de sa vaste theorie et de la politique qu’il en déduit”, assigning it a fundamental regulatory role in society (Reynié, 2007, p. 95), but in a contrary sense to that of many of his contemporaries (López-Escobar, 2014).

Throughout the 19th century, the study of public opinion was consolidated as a result of the organisation of masses of people that wished to express their political demands, “and mass opinion became recognised as a powerful force of government” (Wilson, 1962, p. 73). Those who wrote in newspapers, political leaders who wrote their speeches, and academics and intellectuals were contributing, perhaps unknowingly, to setting up a new discipline, in which public opinion was intertwined with the expansion of democracy and the action of the media, even though the judgments were discrepant.

De Tocqueville, for whom democracy was something providential, an indication of a progress wanted by the Creator (*De la démocratie en Amérique*), warned about the possibility of establishing a tyranny of public opinion and the risk that all newspapers informed in a redundant manner. Fifty years later, Bryce distinguished “three stages in the evolution of opinion from its unconscious and passive into its conscious and active condition.” This author imagined a fourth degree in which the opinion “would not only reign but govern” (1995 [1888], p. 919). He observed mechanical difficulties for its continuous action. However, in spite of it, he considered that the governors had a ‘reflexive’ behaviour of what they supposed to be public opinion; they behaved as if they knew it.

5. Consequences of the First World War

The enlightened ideal of rationality began to be broken with the ‘discovery’ and study of the Freudian ‘unconscious,’ and with the tragedy of the First World War. The notion of the unconscious was underlined by Le Bon in his *Psychologie des foules* (1895):

La raison est chose trop neuve dans l’humanité, et trop imparfaite encore pour pouvoir nous révéler les lois de l’inconscient et surtout le remplacer. Dans tous nos actes la part de l’inconscient est immense et celle de la raison très petite. L’inconscient agit comme une force encore inconnue.

Referring to the media, limited at that time to the press, Le Bon affirmed that opinions

que nous croyons si libres, nous sont données par le milieu, les livres, les journaux, et suivant nos sentiments héréditaires, nous les acceptons ou les rejetons en bloc, mai les plus souvent sans que la raison ait une part quelcoque dans cette acceptation, ou ce reject. (1898, p. 80).

He considered that, with an omnipotent press at its service, public opinion became dominant, and “dictated its judgments to judges, and wars and alliances to governments.” Reflecting later on the war, public opinion seemed to him a considerable but rarely spontaneous force, and for that reason the relationships between the powers included the alteration of the truth in order to act on it (1915, p. 23).

The First World War modified, in facts and thoughts, the interrelation between democracy, communication, and public opinion. There were not only some fundamental principles of psychology changed, but, during the war, there was mass use of propaganda characterised by the participation of qualified journalists. The Soviet Union, established during the war, turned propaganda into a fundamental tool of its system; however, other countries, in particular the United States, also used it in a decisive manner.

At the end of the conflict, the theoretical consideration of the relationships between the political system, public opinion, and the mass media adopted different forms. Weber showed his rejection of the influences exerted on the government “by the so-called ‘public opinion’ – that is, concerted action born of irrational’ sentiments’ and usually staged or directed by party bosses or the press” (Weber, 1978, vol. II, p. 980). Lippmann (1922), based on his personal observations, highlighted the crisis of journalism as a consequence of the replacement of information by propaganda, and reflected on the needs that arose in a much more complex new society, a world to which citizens did not have direct access. He coined the notion of ‘stereotype,’ through which public opinion was constituted, and considered that the ideal of the omniscient citizen of the ‘orthodox theory’ of democracy was false and unattainable (1993 [1925], p. 39).

Contemporaneously, Tönnies wrote a dense reflection in which he appealed to the responsibility of the intellectuals to contribute to the formation of public opinion (1922). In contrast to Lippmann, Bernays decided to apply what he had learned in the war during the new peace period. In the first words of his book ‘Propaganda’ (1928), he expressed his conviction that:

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.

Bernays proposed that propagandists –who he considered experts in public relations (1923)– were not only able to create news, but could create ‘facts.’ It is not surprising that, forty years later, in his work ‘The image’ –a later edition was subtitled ‘Guide for pseudo-events in the United States’– Boorstin (1962) wrote about the tangle of unreality that had been forged in his country, and considered public opinion as a type of pseudo-event, provided that its measurement was made with the primary purpose of informing about it.

On a more strictly academic level, and largely as a result of Lasswell’s (1927) research on the propaganda technique during the First World War, the ‘magic bullet’ or ‘hypodermic needle’ model was established. The model affirmed that the media had very powerful and immediate effects on public opinion.

6. Empirical study of public opinion

During the fifty years prior to 1930, the most notable theorists were not only interested in the process of public opinion, but also in the ethics and significance of that process (Albig, 1957, p. 21). However, from then on, certain things happened that altered the trend. These facts included the consolidation of scientific surveys, and the launch of ‘Public Opinion Quarterly’ (1937), in whose first issue Allport proposed the creation of a new (empirical) science of public opinion.

Gallup, along with Roper and Crossley, was a pioneer in this field. He argued that the surveys were the answer to the political dream of the fourth phase of the popular government, or the public opinion imagined by Bryce. With the surveys, the study of public opinion started to be “a glorified kind of fortunetelling into a practical way of learning what the nation thinks” (Gallup & Rae, 1940, p. 5).

Taking into account that several academic fields had been interested in public opinion, and had contributed to its study (specifically psychology, history, statistics, social psychology, advertising, journalism, and politics), *Public Opinion Quarterly* emerged to coordinate and integrate that knowledge, and was conceived “to serve as a clearing house for contributions from different fields relating to various phases of the study of public opinion” (cf. Childs, 1957, p. 8), although, in fact, “the aspects of public opinion which soon came to receive major emphasis were opinion surveys and mass media” (Childs, 1957, p. 11).

These lines of studies were enhanced by the development of empirical research that, during the Second World War, the U.S. government entrusted to psychologists, political scientists, and sociologists interested in the processes of change of opinion –Hovland, Lazarsfeld and Lasswell among them. The concentration on empirical research explains why, ten years after the creation of *Public Opinion Quarterly*, and shortly after the creation of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR, 1947) and the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR), Blumer criticised what he considered a statistical drift and a conceptual narrowing of public opinion (1948).

Berelson analysed the changes that occurred in the study of public opinion, comparing a selection of texts, some representatives of the classical tradition, and others published from 1939 to 1953. This comparison led him to underline the revolutionary change in the study on public opinion, which had become more technical and quantitative, making the above considerations practically archaic. Whereas prior to the consolidation of scientific surveys historians, theorists, and philosophers had paid scholarly attention to the phenomenon of public opinion, it had then moved to a new way of working, in which “teams of technicians do research projects on specific subjects and report findings. Twenty years ago the study of public opinion was art of scholarship; today it is part of science” (Berelson, 1956, p. 304–305). It was enough to analyse the content of *Public Opinion Quarterly* during those decades to see how the theory had been “outstripped by description,” and how the “interest in manipulation seems to have crowded out attention to the values fundamental to our democracy” (Albig, 1957, p. 14).

7. From minimal to powerful effects

The changes in the way of studying public opinion led to a revision of the theory of the powerful effects of the media, based on the well-known investigations promoted by the Austrian researcher Lazarsfeld, especially on the occasion of the presidential elections of 1940 (Erie county) and 1948 (Elmira county). Such studies suggested that, in the political sphere, opinions were basically stable and that the mass media did not exert a decisive influence on them. On the other hand, when the detailed observations of study of Elmira (Berelson, Lazarsfeld & McPhee, 1954) were published, the authors added a chapter to explain that democracy did not work according to the assumptions of ‘orthodox theory’. In the academic field, such results oriented attention towards opinion leadership and personal influence (Katz, 1966), promoting the two-step flow theory. At the political level, these studies influenced the planning and development of electoral campaigns, a decisive moment in any democratic system.

These investigations and others that were conducted in different moments, spaces, and contexts seemed to contradict the popular and academic expectations that arose during the First World War, given that there was little evidence of the effects of mass communication on behaviours and opinions. Twenty years after the research in Erie County, Klapper –who in 1949 had already prepared a report for the Bureau of Applied Social Research– based on the analysis of the available literature, proposed a new approach to the effects of mass communication: the theory of minimal or limited effects, basically reinforcing the opinions (1960).

Such an approach took root in the thinking of researchers and professionals until the theories of cultivation (Gerbner), the ‘agenda setting’ function of the media (McCombs & Shaw), and the ‘spiral of silence’ (Noelle-Neumann) forced scholars to reconsider the influence exerted by the media on citizens’ opinions and behaviours. Gerbner and his colleagues investigated the effects in the medium and long term by studying entertainment programs, and preferentially focusing on violence. The other lines of research worked with news.

7.1. *The agenda setting function of mass media*

The central tenet of the agenda setting theory is the transfer of salience from one agenda to another. It has been inspired by Lippmann’s ‘Public Opinion.’ Lippmann emphasised the importance of the press in shaping public opinion, particularly in his notion of ‘pseudo-environment,’ which states that human beings are not reactive to the real world but to the world presented to them by the news media. “The world we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind” (1922, p. 29). The title of the first chapter of *Public Opinion* is “The world outside and the pictures in our heads”, and the media are the bridge. This theory has decisively contributed to leave up the minimal media effects approach. The agenda setting role of the media links journalism and its tradition of storytelling to the arena of public opinion, a relationship with considerable consequences for society.

McCombs and Shaw conducted their first study, now known as the origin of the agenda setting theory, in Chapel Hill during the 1968 U.S. presidential election. They focused on undecided voters on the assumption that, being interested in the election, but undecided about their vote, would be the most open to media influence. To confirm the findings of the Chapel Hill study, they conducted a second research with a representative sample of all voters and content analysis of their news media during the summer and autumn of 1972 (McCombs, 2014).

Since then, the agenda setting theory has evolved, widening its scope, improving its methodology, and being considered a very effective theoretical framework to analyse the influence of media content on the public. There was an article in the inaugural issue of *The Agenda Setting Journal* that assessed the trends in agenda setting research from 1972 to 2015. The authors found 451 articles published in English and, certainly, a great number published in Spanish, German, Chinese, and other languages (Kim, Kim & Zhou, 2017). Agenda setting has become one of the best theories of communication research. It is approaching 50 years, and has generated a significant amount of empirical studies. The theory can be applied in about any country that has a reasonably open political system (if elections matter in those countries), and where the press –or at least part of it– is an open system, i.e., it is not under the thumbnail of the government or a dominant political party. The vitality of the agenda setting theory is also evident in the progress of various methodologies that, obviously, were not used in the original study.

At the beginning, in its first level, the agenda setting theory addressed how the salience of objects transfers from the media agenda to the public agenda. Subsequently, it extended its analysis to the attributes, taking into account that any object had attributes, characteristics. That meant the incorporation of a second level, although the analysis procedures were identical for both levels. More recently, it has been widened to include a third level known as the ‘network agenda setting’ (Guo & McCombs, 2016).

The network analysis perspective shows how issues or other objects and their attributes are talked about in relation with others. Asserts that these issues or other objects and their attributes can be either implicitly or explicitly linked in news coverage or the public’s mind. Third level agenda setting is more like a ‘gestalt’ focused on how the elements in messages are connected to each other. In terms of how Lippmann explains the pictures in our heads, the first level asks what are the pictures about, the second level asks what are the dominant

characteristics in these pictures and the third level is getting closer to the idea of what the picture is.

The theory has evolved with a coherent vocabulary, which gives unity to all the studies in the field, and notions such as the need for orientation (Weaver, 1977), the intermediate agenda (which takes for granted journalists tend to look around to see what other journalists are reporting about), or the agenda melding (Shaw *et al.*, 1999). The last one illustrates how audiences pick and choose among different media agendas in an active way. The core hypothesis of agenda melding is that distinctly identifiable audiences value issues and attributes in different manners. Obviously, each of these audiences melds agendas from various media into a comfortable, but different, mix of issues and attributes (Vargo *et al.*, 2014).

As it is well known, the notion of framing, very close to the second level of agenda setting analysis have lost visibility, because the notion has become blurred (Cacciatore, Scheufele & Iyengar, 2016), in spite of its utility in underlining that, in any case, facts and their details are selected with a different level of consciousness with possible purposes and consequences.

The agenda setting theory, which along with the spiral of silence theory served to demonstrate the real media effects after a period of stagnant acceptance of the minimal media effects, not only served to this last approach, but has opened a wide path to analyse and understand the influence of any medium, including the social media. As a matter of fact, some studies have been conducted regarding this new field (Vargo *et al.*, 2014).

The notion of ‘need for information’, particularly relevant in the new panorama of communication technology, sheds light to investigate whether the loss of confidence in the media is related to citizens’ personal experiences (obtrusiveness), searching other sources, with the consequence of a lower level of agenda setting effects. In any political system, but basically in a democracy, citizens are not a whiteboard passively waiting for the action of the media upon them; they use the media when they need information about something that is of interest for them and cannot be known by personal experience.

7.2. The theory of the spiral of silence

When Bryce published his reflections on public opinion, he pointed out that popular governments or governments of public opinion were exposed to two dangers: the first “is the difficulty in ascertaining the will of the majority” (1995 [1888], p. 920); and the second “is that minorities may not sufficiently assert themselves.” Consequently, the power of the majorities grows as the minority retreats and renounces the struggle; the minority “loses faith in its cause and in itself, and allows its voice to be silenced by the triumphant cries of its opponents” (1995 [1888], p. 921).

The theory of the spiral of silence proposed by Noelle-Neumann in the early 1970s of the last century, after detecting a band-wagon effect in the German elections of 1972, confirmed Bryce’s warning. Noelle-Neumann described the process in which a more voiced opinion seemed to be stronger than it really was as a spiral of silence, in such a way that it ended up dominating the public scene, whereas the opinion that appeared as a minority was publicly extinguished. This theory assumes that individuals adjust their behaviours and opinions to what they consider to be the majority due to fear of isolation. Mass communication intervenes in this process by influencing the perceptions that the public have about the dominant idea, in such a way that citizens’ perception may not correspond with reality. Those who compose the minority tend to silence their opinions in public, and the minority group will seem increasingly weak because of the fear of expressing themselves in public. As a consequence, the opinion that seems to belong to the majority would become predominant and even a social norm.

Subsequent studies highlighted the fact that there were two sources to obtain information about the distribution of opinions, namely: direct observation of reality; and the observation of its representation through coverage of news media. Regarding the questions

that remain outside the immediate personal sphere, citizens are almost totally dependent on the mass media, both in terms of the facts and the perception of the climate of opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, p. 51).

The theory of the spiral of silence highlighted the existence of a dual climate of opinion when analysing the change of opinion that occurred in the German elections of 1976, in which there was a conscious struggle against the spiral of silence. The research, which confirmed the influence of the media, showed that the change of opinion had been perceived by those who observed the environment through television, whereas those who observed it directly had not perceived any change (Noelle-Neumann, 1993, p. 161). The spiral of silence against the real distribution of opinion could occur because the coverage of the issues contested by news media tends to be consonant and cumulative (Noelle-Neumann, 1973).

8. New challenges

At the end of the 20th century, the disenchantment with the concrete way in which democracy functioned, and the loss of credibility of the mass media became evident: both The American Society of Newspapers Editors and The Associated Press Managers and Editors Association promoted studies in 1985 to face the credibility gap and regain the trust of the readers. As a result of the trends that showed a new complexity in the relationship between communication, public opinion, and democracy, initiatives such as civic journalism, surveys with prior deliberation, and experiences of deliberative democracy emerged.

Civic, public, or community journalism, promoted by information professionals, journalism teachers, and some foundations, began in 1989 (Rosen, 1999, p. 262-263). It was determined what should be done to make democracy work and what the media could do to achieve it. The suggestion was to look for a genuine ‘public agenda,’ considering it as something beyond “a market for information, an audience for spectacle, or a pollster’s random sample” (1999, p. 75). The media, particularly journalists, should not be limited to offer the frames of the contestants, but the framing (or frames) of the citizens. Rosen stated that journalism should not be considered as a business, and that “is best understood as one of the arts of democracy” (1999, p. 295).

The deliberative polling initiative proposed to perform surveys that ceased to be a numerical count of immediate answers to common simple questions given by isolated individuals. The surveys would differ from the usual ones, because while they said what the public thinks –even if the public was not thinking too much, or barely paying attention– a survey with prior deliberation would show what they would think if they had a better opportunity to consider the matters. The original idea (Fishkin, 1995) proposed the use of television and the investigation of public opinion in a different way, supposedly in a more constructive manner. The aim at the end of the 20th century was to recover deliberative democracy. For Fishkin, the type of democracy achieved with technology at the end of the century, by operating in a social context that did not allow “a real collective deliberation on complex issues” was more reminiscent of the Spartan model than the Athenian ideal (1995, p. 24). For that reason, this author proposed a different form of democracy, in which dialogue would have been recovered and could give life to the synthesis of communication and democracy. That was an approach that faced undoubted technical and economic difficulties, but that had allowed the accumulation of some experiences (Fishkin, 2009, p. 96-97).

A further step in the process of recovering communication in democracy, i.e., citizens’ participation and dialogue, was the initiative of deliberative democracy (empowered deliberative democracy) focused on concrete problems with the intervention of ordinary citizens, who contribute with their talent, common sense, and experiences to the debate in order to find solutions. Fung and Wright (1999) suggested that deliberative democracy offered more advantages for decision-making than the procedures proposed in the programs of political parties, or that were the consequence of pressure exerted by interest groups on the

members of the legislative bodies, or that were influenced by the action of social movements that intended to create a set of concrete interests in the collective consciousness, or were the result of a negotiations, which ended up averaging the differences between the positions that intervened in those negotiations.

Careful surveys performed in diverse environments (Eurobarometer, Latinobarometer, World Values Survey, etc.) showed the disenchantment with democracy and the loss of credibility of the mass media in the transition to the 21st century. However, the surveys, closely linked to democracies, because what counted was the voice of the people (Carballo & Hjelmar, 2008), also lost credit on the occasion of the British referendum on Brexit and the U.S. presidential elections of 2016.

Democracy, the most successful political idea in the 20th century and “one of the most potent political symbols in the world today” (Fung & Wright, 1999) loses appeal precisely in the historical moment in which there is a general trend to its establishment or restoration. Few individuals argue that democracy is not the best form of government; however, the way it works satisfies less and less (Minogue, 2010), and public confidence in democratic institutions, particularly parliament and political parties, continues to weaken (Carballo, 2017).

In the same way that the technology of printing gradually transformed political systems towards democracy, the new digital technology is changing the way in which citizens disseminate and share their ideas, public opinion is formed, and democracy manifests itself. In recent decades, the development of new technology has erased the boundaries between the media (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001). Both mass media –now called legacy media– and social media, although indispensable in current democratic societies, are implicated in the weakening of that trust due to various reasons. The legacy media were already facing a financial, professional, and identity crisis caused by the new technology of digital communication before the emergence of the most relevant social media: for example, Facebook in 2004, YouTube in 2005, and Twitter in 2006.

The results of the British referendum on Brexit and the U.S. elections of 2016 caused great perplexity, and continue to provoke a heated debate about the origin and truthfulness of messages in the democracy of our time. The Oxford Dictionaries announced that the word of the year 2016 was post-truth, a word “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (d’Ancona, 2017). Shortly after, the discussion about ‘fake news’ and ‘fake news media’ encouraged the Collins Dictionary to declare the expression fake news as a word of the year 2017, defining it as “false and sometimes sensationalist information presented as fact and published and spread on the Internet.” The issue had an international scope as evidenced by the approval of the “Joint declaration on freedom of expression and fake news, disinformation and propaganda” (Vienna, March 2017) by people representing the United Nations, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Organisation of American States (OAS), and the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR) (2017). In addition, in January 2018, the European Union constituted a “High level experts group on fake news and online disinformation,” which last May presented the report “A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation” (2018). However, it is still a problematic issue, given that its regulation makes one fear that there will be an Orwellian style ‘Ministry of Truth’. In turn, the complex debate about facts and fact checking raises new problems of transparency and reliability.

At the beginning of the 21st century, it was proposed that we were facing a neo-democracy (Dean, 2002, p. 170) or a post-democracy (Stalder, 2018). Currently, several countries of mature democracies are discussing whether democracy has died (Buffin de Chosal, 2014), or what type of crisis is happening, and whether there are remedies for it (Runciman, 2018; Mounk, 2018). In the diagnosis of the crisis, Piketty (2014) associates it with the inequality

created at the international level by a capitalist globalisation; however, there are still no answers on how to overcome it. It would be pretentious to affirm that we have solutions for a problem as intricate as the present one, which cannot only be explained by economic reasons, but which requires taking into account the evolution of cultural factors (Carballo, 2017).

Almost ninety years ago, Lippmann (1931, p. 161) wrote something that seemed to prophesy the situation currently faced by information professionals:

The working journalist today is confronted, it seems to me, with a double and cumulative complexity. On the one hand, the facts themselves have multiplied enormously. On the other hand the accepted standards of judgment have dissolved, so that he finds himself on an ocean of fact 'plunged in a thick fog of details' and 'with few of the charts and lights' for which he longs.

It is undoubtedly difficult to achieve, at the present moment, "a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning," as proposed by the Commission on Freedom of the Press chaired by Hutchins (1969, p. 21). A current problem for the media is to correspond to those issues that are relevant to citizens, to truly satisfy the need for information they feel. There is an obvious need for an orientation to restore confidence in a global universe, in which differences have been sharpened and in which, as a consequence, disenchantment spreads, which represents a fertile ground for nationalism and populisms of different origins.

The new challenge also extends to the academic sphere, and in particular to those who deal with communication. It seems as if in this time of post-truth and fake news everything was oriented to produce an effect or to establish an agenda, as if communication consisted in imposing its own agenda. More than sixty years ago, Gerbner warned that the communication theory could "find a scientific orientation based on values or continue to be the elaboration of manipulation techniques" (1956). Many centuries before, Aristotle wrote that all communication was political communication (López-Escobar & Martín Algarra, 2013), because he understood that the polis was built through genuine communication. Calling the issuance of messages to manipulate citizens 'political communication' seems to be a euphemism.

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