Communication and crisis in the public space: Dissolution and uncertainty

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Abstract

The evolution from a public space such as the one defined throughout the twentieth century –characterised by unidirectionality and political and media intermediation– towards a digital scenario –with multiple actors and multi-directional messages– has not resolved the problems that existed beforehand, and has also generated others. This public space crisis has been aggravated by the fragmentation of audiences, often absorbed into their own echo chamber, and by the dispersion and jumble of voices that are an impediment to any possibility of unravelling the terms of public debate. Faced with enormous challenges such as disinformation, the conventional media, who have traditionally held the responsibility of providing quality information, address these issues from a position of extreme vulnerability, due to the disintegration of the former economic model and social credibility. In a context of uncertainty, crisis, and fragmented public spheres, and there being no alternatives that can guarantee distinct dialogue, the initiation of a social debate that prioritises quality of information is essential.

Keywords

Public space; Public sphere; Polarization; Crisis; Digital communication; Conventional media; Demediatization; Quality of the information; Disinformation; Sustainability; Profession; Professionals; Credibility.

1. Introduction

The title we have chosen for this single-issue edition of the journal *Profesional de la información*, "Communication and crisis in the public space", defines the complex situation faced by the communicative ecosystem, which has grown in intensity over the last decade. Indeed, using the term 'crisis' to define the functioning of the public space is no exaggeration, as it is now characterised by a multiplicity of sources, the speed of transmission of messages, difficulty in discerning their origin, fragmentation of the public and audiences and, finally, a loss of centrality of traditional intermediaries, that is, political parties and the media (**Sánchez-Cuenca**, 2022). It would, however, serve us well if we paused to analyse what kind of a crisis it is, and especially what type of a public space we refer to.

The public space is a place, as its name suggests, or rather an amalgamation of places, where public opinion is generated –actually or potentially. It is a space where public debate takes place, subjected to public scrutiny, in which the actors of public opinion progress. The public sphere emerges from the interaction of social actors in the public space. Both concepts, public space and public sphere, are defined by Jürgen Habermas in *The structural transformation of the public sphere* [1962] (**Habermas**, 1997), which contains a thorough analysis of the origins and evolution of public opinion that gave rise to bourgeois revolutions in the West. Habermas defines a public sphere with specific conditions and actors, who usually operate in small spaces, in person, and who have an active role in them. And that is the first thing we must consider when discussing 'crisis' in the public space: we must understand that 'crisis' necessarily incorporates the evolution of the actors operating within it.

The salons, cafés, and public assemblies eventually give way –after bourgeois revolutions– to the configuration of the public space that has organised our modern democracies, and which is essentially a public space organised by mass media, interpreters of social reality and generalised mediators. In Habermas' opinion, this situation partially distorts his critical public opinion model (**Habermas**, 1998), since the media often imposed a unidirectional form of communication, dictated by economic and social elites, where public participation was almost always marginal or even non-existent [1981] (**Habermas**, 1999a; 1999b). Indeed, the mediated public sphere, which tries to include public discussion in complex social systems, characterised by intermediation (political and media) –inevitable if we want to fit in groups of millions of people organised in nation states of hundreds of thousands or millions of square kilometres– has been and is heavily criticised by public opinion studies and, of course, specific media analysis studies.

2. The new communication and public space

Because of the above, the development of substantially new and innovative digital communication systems, which greatly facilitated one-to-one, many-to-many, and also –as had already occurred with the media– one-to-many (**Morris**; **Ogan**, 1996) communication, initially generated a wave of cyber-optimistic comments and analyses; these commentators saw the internet and the new digital communication as the answer to the insufficiencies and problems of mass society, whose public debate was in practice monopolised by intermediaries (**Rheingold**, 2002; **Jenkins**, 2008). Digital technologies weakened this intermediation by sharing it with other actors, and generated a new communicative and public scenario (**López-García**, 2006).

The problem, as cyber-pessimists were quick to argue, is that such a scenario didn't work either. What's more: it generated more problems than those it 'resolved' (**Sunstein**, 2001; **Morozov**, 2011). The intermediation crisis has become a public space crisis that has led us to the paradoxical situation of yearning for the previous scenario, despite all its problems and insufficiencies, because media intermediation at least guaranteed a distinct dialogue that could establish a clearly delimited playing field (i.e. a public space) (**Bimber**; **Gil de Zúñiga**, 2020).

Schlesinger (2020) argues that the public sphere mediated by the mass media –particularly press and television– was characterised by a control of public discourse by the communicators who were located at the centre of this media system, who functioned as indispensable mediators. The inevitable evolution of this model was towards a dialogue and tension between media instances and new forms of digital communication (**Castells**, 2009), which **Chadwick** (2013) calls a "hybrid model of communication", characterised by the interaction, confluence and competition between the *old* and the *new* media. The loss of credibility of the traditional media, and the possibilities of creating and distributing messages in the public sphere through social networks, has allowed political and social actors who were previously excluded from it to participate in it; but it has also lowered the standards for the circulation of messages and facilitated the spreading of falsehoods or hate speech. Far from facilitating consensus and unity around democratic values, this context has contributed to polarisation and disengagement (**Sunstein**, 2019), as well as a greater presence and visibility of political positions that directly confront these principles.

The idea of an inclusive public sphere, fair debate and consensus (**Habermas**, 1997) is called into question mainly because of two factors (**Bennett**; **Pfetsch**, 2018): first, the multiplication of media and forms of digital communication have increased the dispersion and jumble of voices in the public debate; second, the fragmentation of public groups generates homogeneous public spheres that function as echo chambers in which alternative points of view are barely heard (**Dahlgren**, 2005). In addition, trust in institutions and traditional media is declining, as it seems is their influence. The public is separating into increasingly specific and singular realities, where they interpret things according to their con-

venience and biases (**Sunstein**, 2001), invalidating any notion of rational interaction between equals in search of a consensus, as proposed by **Habermas** (1998) when he outlined the space of deliberative democracy that should belong to the public sphere (**Sampedro**, 2000); Habermas's proposal for the functioning of public opinion was always much more prescriptive than descriptive (**López-García**, 2004).

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3. The dissolution of the public sphere

Certain analysis has led some researchers to argue that simply defining the notion of the public sphere is insufficient for this situation. **Dahlgren** (2005) suggests it be replaced by the concept of civic culture. **Bennett** and **Pfetsch** (2018) believe that its framework should be reformulated, so that it is no longer characterised by a coherent and self-sufficient public sphere and media system. **Bimber** and **Gil de Zúñiga** (2020) define a public

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sphere by the lack of attention and capacity of the public to unravel the terms of public debate around a varied series of issues, in terms that evoke the traditional criticism of public opinion of the mass media-controlled society carried out by **Lippmann** (1922), but now focused on the communication model advocated by the new media, and particularly social networks.

Given the degradation of the previous model and the problems derived from the incipient model currently being outlined, **Schlesinger** (2020) prefers to speak directly of a post-public sphere. This space generates doubts and uncertainty, since the media intermediation crisis is not replaced by a comparable intermediation model, nor can we consider the public debate that currently exists being characterised by the search for a Habermasian, rational consensus. Conversely, today's public sphere is intertwined by various phenomena that complement each other –all with negative implications, according to the once undisputed intermediaries (i.e., the media and intrinsic political parties)–, leading to this crisis and the questioning of democratic values (**Palau-Sampio**; **López-García**; **Ianelli**, 2022). Thus, we have spent years talking about *populism* (a concept that is still difficult to define, despite all the debate surrounding it; or perhaps because of that); political *polarisation*, understood as the undermining of consensus and centrality to the benefit of opposing extremisms; the *fragmentation* of audiences – public and electorate groups; and, of course, *disinformation*, understood as a complex process that is not limited to issuing false information (*fake news*) that can be verified (*fact checking*), but which has far-reaching structural consequences in terms of the public's perception of reality, the configuration of our democratic systems and, effectively, the configuration of the public sphere (**Bennett**; **Livingstone**, 2018; **López-García** *et al.*, 2021; **Valera** *et al.*, 2022).

4. Quality of information and democracy

The multiple challenges posed by disinformation have especially highlighted the inevitable link between quality journalism and democracy (**Casero-Ripollés**, 2016) and its status as a cornerstone in democratic states (**Allan**, 2009; **Schudson**, 2008). To a large extent, this relationship has been forged by the capacity of journalism to offer truthful information, based on public interest, respect towards the ethical principles of the profession, and its contribution to public debate (**Schudson**, 2015). Disinformation, in its desire to manipulate the facts in a biased manner and 'create' alternative realities (**Lewandowski** *et al.*, 2017), not only violates the principle of truthful information, but also perverts its very nature and possibilities, adulterating and falsifying images, data, photographs or historical events in the so-called post-truth era.

Although disinformation has existed throughout the entire history of humanity, its intensity, immediacy and ubiquity in recent years have made it a major concern. Following the first warnings of its dangers, subsequent to the 2016 Brexit referendum (**Cervi**; **Carrillo-Andrade**, 2019) and the 2016 US presidential campaign (**Bovet**; **Makse**, 2019), this issue became a priority on the public agenda (*European Commission*, 2018), increasing in concern after Covid-19 and the ensuing *infodemic* (**Bechman**, 2020; **Zarocostas**, 2020).

5. Disinformation and disruption in the information industry

After decades of hegemony in mediation, practised by some internationally prestigious newspapers with obvious leadership (**Merrill**, 1968), the conventional media must now address the rise of disinformation at a time when they are clearly vulnerable, in a context of the greatest disruption ever experienced by the information industry since the beginning of the commercial press (**Lacy**; **Rosenstiel**, 2015). They do so mired in two serious crises, a financial one (**Curran**, 2010; **Picard**, 2014) and a social trust crisis. In recent decades, commitment to a commercial focus and growing politicisation have resulted in a diminishing confidence in the conventional media. This has resulted in minimum levels of credibility (**Lee**, 2018; *Edelman Trust Barometer*, 2021), and a frequent criticism of superficiality and loss of contact with reality.

However, at a time of profound and vertiginous changes, in the technological, economic and sociopolitical spheres, quality of information continues to be one of the essential pillars of democracy, as well as the main vaccine against disinformation and polarisation, in a hybrid context of communication (**Chadwick**, 2013), under a new paradigm of information consumption through social networks (**Casero-Ripollés**, 2018; **Mitchell** *et al.*, 2020). Despite this, when these issues are debated, the conditions that make access to truthful, contrasted and responsible information possible are often overlooked.

> *Disinformation is a complex process that is not limited to issuing false information (fake news) that can be verified (fact checking), but has far-reaching structural consequences in terms of the public's perception of reality, and the configuration of our democratic systems*

Journalistic quality is a complex and widely discussed topic, particularly in recent decades, where the emphasis has been on lamenting its decline (**Meier**, 2019). Three factors contribute to the difficulties in its definition. First, it has an intrinsically multi-faceted character, which requires a holistic treatment that must consider the conditions of production and its reception (**Gutiérrez-Coba**, 2006; **Pujadas**, 2011; **Gómez-Mompart**; **Palau-Sampio**, 2013). Second, different approaches have been taken to define it since its incorporation into the field of the media in the 1960s, not only from traditions that have emphasised one aspect or another –from results to social responsibility or technical conditions– but also from sector approaches by journalists, editors, audiences, politicians or judges, who apply different criteria or give them a different value (**Meier**, 2019). And third, the difficulties in delimiting the blurred limits of journalistic activity in the digital environment (**Malik**; **Shapiro**, 2017).

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Despite the ethereal nature of the concept of journalistic quality, **Meier** (2019) underlines the need to evaluate it according to the role of journalism in society, the values on which it is based (truth/factuality, relevance/context and independence). To this end, he establishes quality criteria that the journalistic product must meet: impartiality, diversity, transparency, interactivity, clarity, attractiveness, usefulness and prospective capacity (**Meier**, 2019, p. 4). **Spurk** sets out ten conditions, which include: variety of sources, identification of issues beyond the official agenda, inquisitive questions, clarity of approach, good formal structure, contextualisation of data, diversity of approaches, furthering the root causes of the issues and historical background, variety of viewpoints and, if relevant, the response from the parties involved (**Spurk**, 2019, pp. 28-29).

6. Precariousness and professional 'decapitalisation'

Journalistic quality requirements are largely inspired by a regulatory approach to professional practice (**Kovac**; **Rosenstiel**, 2007) and intrinsically appeal to specific production conditions to manifest. In this sense, an evaluation of the quality of journalistic content cannot be separated from the economic and business model crisis that media companies have had to navigate for almost 15 years, in a sector undergoing an ill-fated radical transformation, presided over by uncertainty (**Currah**, 2009; **Franklin**, 2014; **Pavlik**, 2013), productive disruption (**Anderson**; **Bell**; **Shirky**, 2014; **Ryfe**, 2019) and the search for formulas that facilitate sustainability.

The crisis has resulted, on one hand, in a drastic decline in advertising revenues –a decrease of 64% since 2007– to 2.47 billion euros in 2020 (*Infoadex*, 2020); and on the other, as a consequence of the above, in a significant destruction of employment, fuelled by the closure of media outlets and the dismissal of journalists. Media jobs between 2008 and 2013 fell by 23%, and recovered only slightly by 3% until 2017. The relative improvement was cut short, however, by Covid-19 (*MPA*, 2020) and there was an announcement of new cuts to survive the post-pandemic era, a circumstance that some define as journalism being in a state of emergency (**García**; **Matos**; **Alcântara-da-Silva**, 2021).

The challenge of disinformation also decapitalises and threatens the role of watchdog journalism as a guardian to prevent abuse of power. The relative recovery of employment has not contributed to a reinforcement of human resources assigned to this role, and this impacts the growing responsibility placed on communication offices. It results in a reverse effect of greater influence of public relations on the editorial content of the media: increasingly rickety newsrooms with a similar volume of work are fertile ground for press releases, as different studies have highlighted (**Macnamara**, 2016; **Sallot**; **Johnson**, 2006). Faced with such a scenario, investigative journalism (**Waisboard**, 2001) has become a utopia.

The precariousness and 'de-professionalisation' experienced by journalism globally (**Witschge**; **Nygren**, 2009; **De-Peuter**, 2011) not only has an impact on professional careers (**Deuze**; **Witschge**, 2018; **Örnebring**; **Moller**, 2018), but also on professional values, regulating them to second place after commercial (**Goyanes**; **Rodríguez-Castro**, 2019) and financial priorities, while blurring the essence of journalistic work (**Witschge**; **Nygren**, 2009; **Evett**, 2003), with a growing weight of professional hybridisation. The rise of branded content, embraced as a journalistic lifeline by the media (**Ferrer-Conill**, 2016), supposes a perversion of professional values –both because of it mimicry of content and exercise of ventriloquism (**Hardy**, 2017)– by handing the choice in style of delivery and editorial power of the content it includes over to brands (**Palau-Sampio**, 2021).

The magnitude of the above shows the extreme fragility of the media sector and the disastrous consequences (**Casero-Ripollés**, 2014) that this entails. Some 78% of Spanish journalists claim to have suffered pressure while exercising their profession (*APM*, 2020, p. 39). Self-censorship is a recurring mechanism for almost six out of ten journalists. In fact, eight out of ten people surveyed have opted for favourable news coverage in exchange for advertising, either sporadically (49%) or frequently

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(31%) (*APM*, 2020, p. 39). These figures are reflected in journalists' perception when they define their professional problems, with two main points reiterating the fragility of the sector. First, poor pay, unemployment, precariousness, and intrusiveness (42%); and second, threats to quality: lack of rigour and neutrality, and political or economic independence, increased workload and excessive working hours (53%) (*APM*, 2020, p. 35).

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7. Distancing and lack of credibility

Several international studies have revealed the chain of factors that connects the precariousness of working conditions and a reduction of journalistic standards, in a downward spiral that also feeds the detachment of the audience from the media (**Lacy**; **Rosenstiel**, 2015; **Costera-Meijer**; **Bijleveld**, 2016; **Newman**; **Fletcher**, 2017). The work context described shows how difficult it is to produce an in-depth development of any issue, to which the necessary time cannot be dedicated. This, together with excess overtime, manifests in factual errors and mistakes caused by the immediacy, improvisation and, often, lack of contrasting information. This has repercussions on the credibility of the media, afflicted by insufficient transparency in the use of information sources, which often remain unclear when their origin and verification are not reported (**Lacy**; **Rosenstiel**, 2015; **Newman**; **Fletcher**, 2017).

The scant representativeness of the content published by the media and the difficulty in reflecting increasingly multicultural societies are two more reasons for such a detachment. The media are seen as part of the elite, associated with partisanship, a group that furthers campaigns and hidden agendas representing only biased political or commercial interests (**Newman**; **Fletcher**, 2017). Added to this is the commitment to capture digital audiences through *clickbait* (**Palau-Sampio**, 2016), a formula to counteract the financial weakening experienced by media companies (**Freelon**; **Wells**, 2020), which contravenes professional principles and results in a trivialisation of information and a distortion of the work of these media companies in a democratic society (**Tandoc**; **Thomas**, 2015; **Welbers** *et al*., 2016).

Recent studies have highlighted the need to continue delving into the role of the media against disinformation (**Blanco-Herrero**; **Arcila-Calderón**, 2019). This implies going further than relying on verification platforms and *fact-checkers*, as the responsibility of that mission falls to the media, which they have resigned for the sake of a journalism based on statements (**Escolar**, 2015) that often serves as a loudspeaker for disinformation and contributes to the increase of noise. Faced with such stridency and dangers of information manipulation, journalism now faces the challenge of becoming valuable to society again (**Costera-Meijer**, 2021; **Bimber**; **Gil de Zúñiga**, 2020), and this involves (r)establishing a new relationship (**Costera-Meijer**; **Bijleveld**, 2016) based on valuing the content it offers and restoring lost credibility.

8. In conclusion

The current communicative crisis is far from being a model for a democratic co-existence. And although communication is simply one ingredient in a complex and multi-factorial issue, the repercussions of its misuse are widely felt when dealing with a growing and destabilising political and social phenomena, such as polarisation, disinformation or populism.

The difficulty of the traditional media to resolve the problems of unidirectional mediation and to offer a journalism that has social value has aggravated the public's detachment towards them, which has in turn resulted in a notable loss of credibility. This constitutes an intangible value on which, to a large extent, the link between journalism and democracy has been built, based on the public's trust in the capacity of the media to offer truthful, contrasted information of public interest –or, in other words– trust in journalists and the media's ability to provide quality content that allows them to make informed decisions. The limitations to this work have not, however, been compensated in the new scenario due to digitisation and the multiplication of public spaces; in fact, evidence points to the opposite, that there is now a greater difficulty in accessing issues of social relevance, to be found among a magma of content of questionable veracity.

Faced with this crisis in the communication system, in which conventional media have not always lived up to the social responsibility expected of them, and where new options have not managed to establish a reliable alternative either, we must urgently open a social debate on the need for quality information to guarantee democracy. Until now, frag-

mentary frames –limited to technological, political, economic, labour issues or fighting so-called fake news out of context– have blurred our approach to this key issue, which requires a broad social commitment on the basis of three axes: responsibility, demand and sustainability, to guarantee truthful, contrasted and responsible information. Without a consensus for such an essential service, the *disinformation society* shows signs of becoming the definitive paradigm.

> Several international studies have revealed the chain of factors that connects the precariousness of working conditions and a reduction of journalistic standards, in a downward spiral that also feeds the detachment of the audience from the media

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