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CHAPTER · JANUARY 2012

DOI: 10.13140/2.1.4952.1925

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Online Journalism and Civic Life

João Carlos Correia

Introduction

Is online journalism a new communicative actor endowed with civic potentialities? How can new media, particularly in journalism, strengthen more dynamic forms of civic participation and promotion of deliberation? Has new technology contributed to revitalization of the public sphere or has it become a tool of commerce for an increasingly undemocratic news media, disengaged from public dialogue? (see Fenton, 2010: 4)

This chapter clarifies conceptually the necessary conditions within online journalism for the existence of a public sphere that satisfies the requirements of a strong democracy: public use of reason without coercion, and equality and reciprocity between the participants in the collective debate. It analyzes experiences within online journalism that seek to use ICT to further develop and mobilize deliberative skills and, consequently, citizenship. Also it further seeks to understand the role of new media in the representation of an increasingly complex society, confronted with the insecurity of its long-established structures and with the appearance of enclaves of meaning, related to the eruption of new expressions of citizenship. What will be the role of new media in the representation of new rights and new social movements? Is it possible that technological changes inside the media field will lead to the emergence of new public spheres carrying a democratic will?

Communication and Models of Democracy

Public discussion and subsequent formation of public opinion is frequently said to be one of the main functions of journalism in democratic societies. Recently, democratic theory scholars have been highlighting the increasingly important role of the media as an arena for public debate, in an age of mass communication and mass politics.

Behind different conceptions of democracy we may find different conceptions of the media's political role. One well-known and almost archetypal example of the intensive discussion on the relationships between journalism and the political system is the Dewey–Lippmann debate. Both Lippmann and Dewey shared a common belief in the essential role of the press in a democracy. Lippmann (1922) envisaged a role for the press as a bridge between the masses and powerful insiders who help to formulate the policies of elected decision-makers, while Dewey (1927) saw journalism's role to enable citizens to participate in the democratic discourse. They also differed on the role of the public in democratic societies. Dewey (1927) saw the public as capable of rational thought and decision-making, while Lippmann (1922) saw the citizens as unable to make good decisions and to participate in an enlightened and rational public deliberation. Familiar echoes of this debate still sound at present in theoretical discussions on the media's political role. There is an extensive literature analyzing the role of press in public life. The classics *Public Opinion* (Lippmann, 1922), *The Public and its Problems* (Dewey, 1927), *Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm, 1956), and *Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere* (Habermas, [1962] 1996) are important examples of different studies on the matter.

More recently, Hallin and Mancini (2004) developed a strong empirical analysis of relations between the media system and the political system, while Clifford G. Christians and colleagues, in *Normative Theories of the Media: Journalism in Democratic Societies* (2009), built a normative approach that connects different roles attributed to the news media (monitorial, facilitative, radical, and collaborative) with four different conceptions of democracy: pluralist liberalism, administrative liberalism, civic republicanism, and direct republicanism (Christians *et al.*, 2009: 97–98).

One of the theories concerned with public communication and the role performed by the media is the deliberative democracy model, which seeks to uncover the component of rational collective discussion among citizens within the political process. Deliberative democracy contrasts sharply with some of the prevailing elitist political theories, which emphasize the individual act of voting as the central institution of democracy.

The elitist theories argue that the choice of any social environment is always a mere conjunction of individual preferences (Arrow, 1963: 2, 6, 103). By perceiving democracy as a mechanism for choosing political leaders in the competition between parties through voting, an elitist model equates political dynamics with the market to some extent. In the elitist model, or at least in some of its formulations, citizens are “mere consumers of governance” (Erikson *et al.*, 2002: 16–17). This model reduces democracy to a mechanism for choosing political representatives who will set the direction of operations and public programs. By contrast, in the deliberative democracy model, the model of discourse that must prevail in the political debate should be one that fits with the political praxis inside the forum. While elitist theories only recognize private interests and try to legitimize the actions of experts and specialists through the aggregation of individual choice in elections, from the perspective of deliberative democracy, public problems require the creation of public forums in that private preferences can be modified in light of the discovery of general interests through argument and justification. Thus the discussion theory behind the deliberative model implies a network of communicative processes, inside and outside of the

parliamentary complex and its deliberative body, that sustains the existence of dialogic arenas where occur the formation of democratic opinion.

The Meanings of Public Sphere

Under the influence of authors such as Jürgen Habermas, Hanna Arendt, or Dewey, the deliberative model implies the existence of an informal public sphere where (i) all the citizens endowed with reason could participate, as long as motivated by the strength of better argument and (ii) all subjects could be topics of a public and reasonable argumentative discussion. The public sphere is viewed democratically as the creation of procedures whereby those affected by general social norms and collective political decisions can have a say in their formulation.

Accordingly, formal requirements for the existence of this social instance have emerged from a wide range of theories: (i) Meetings should be public; (ii) citizens reflect and decide collectively rather than individually; (iii) all citizens have an equal opportunity to participate; (iv) decisions turn on arguments, not on coercive power; (v) citizens are fully informed; (vi) all alternatives are considered; (vii) deliberation is an ongoing process supported by institutions; and (viii) arguments are based on general principles and appeal to the common good, not exclusively to self-interest (Benhabib, 1992: 88).

Subsequently a functioning public sphere implies the existence of a constellation of communicative spaces that permit the circulation of information, ideas, debates, and also the formation of public opinion. Its structural dimension includes media organizations and their political, economic, and legal environment (Dahlgren, 2005: 148–149).

In his earlier conception of the public sphere, Habermas states that the bourgeois public sphere could not have existed without a regularly published and accessible press that has grown and developed thanks to the initial impetus provided by the demands of commercial and financial information.

In later works such as *Between Facts and Norms* (Habermas, 1996) the public sphere is seen as a sphere of identification and detection of problems, whose influence should continue to be reflected in the subsequent treatment of the issues that take place within the political system (Habermas, 1996: 359). Thus, deliberative democracy is nourished by an informal opinion that arises inside public spaces. On one hand we have informal and autonomous activity of formation of public opinion. This activity can be carried by citizens' movements, social movements, and so on. On the other hand, we have the institutional and legislative process that culminates in decisions that concern the development of concrete policies and legislative outputs. The public sphere appears to be a sensitive alarm system that increases the pressure exerted by the problems, not merely to identify them and thematize them, but also to problematize and dramatize them convincingly and effectively. In this sense, the public sphere has been analyzed using various metaphors:

- 1 One of the first metaphorical suggestions that we find considers that the public sphere can be envisaged as an extensive network of radars sensitive to social issues. These radars are located within society, sensitive to the point of reacting to pressure from social problems (Habermas, 1996; Gomes, 2008: 82–83).

- 2 The public sphere has also been compared to a resonance box that amplifies the pressure of problems by dramatizing them so they are taken into account and considered by the parliamentary institutions (cf. Habermas, 1996; Gomes, 2008: 82–83).
- 3 Another idea suggested the concept of public sphere as a network suitable to communicate issues and opinions.

Thus the identification of issues in the public sphere (civil rights, feminism) usually follows the same route: (i) certain issues are raised by intellectuals and social activists in the periphery of the political system; (ii) they are then picked up by journals, associations, clubs, forums for citizens, universities, professional organizations, and so on; (iii) the issues crystallize at the heart of social movements and subcultures, and are dramatized in ways that capture media attention; (iv) reaching a wide audience, they enter into the public agenda and ultimately influence policy-making and legislative institutions (Habermas, 1996: 341–342).

The demands of institutional architecture identified by theorists of deliberative democracy imply the existence of instruments and opportunities for the formation and intensification of discursive process. In fact there is no place of exhibition and visibility and at the same time, of discourse, discussion, and debate that can be compared, in terms of volume and importance, to the media system (Gomes, 2008: 118).

Of course, one could argue, as did Habermas (1996) and Dewey (1927), that the “public” should be conceptualized as something more than just a media audience, as a social reality existing as discursive interactional processes. However, in our complex and strongly mediated societies it is increasingly difficult to imagine the actual public sphere and its fundamental dimension of “interaction” without the citizens’ encounters with the media – where occur many of the communicative processes of making sense of and interpreting social and political reality. In the present day we have to accept as a fundamental element of the contemporary public sphere the circulation of media messages in many contexts, from the most structured and larger public forums to the broader micro-contexts of everyday life.

Online Journalism: A New Way to Increase Citizenship?

Despite the recognition of the important role of media in the democratic process, the sociology of communication has raised serious questions concerning the civic potential of media.

- 1 The traditional media were incubated in environments where the regulators for systemic media are predominantly power and money. The media industry by its nature is driven by economic rationality moving away from the civic requirements supported by advocates of deliberative democracy.
- 2 The task of setting the agenda is largely usurped by politicians and journalists from major media. Public opinion is formed largely within the confines of a prior selection of subjects of public attention.
- 3 There is still a strong dependence on primary definers and powerful sources that define ultimately the news agenda by controlling the access to the flow of important

information, building a hierarchy of credibility based on power, legitimacy, and authoritativeness (Phillips, 2010: 88).

- 4 In news discourse and practice, frames and typifications are basic cognitive structures that guide the perception and representation of reality (Gitlin, 1980; Tuchman, 1978). In the domain of journalism theory, the construction of “typifications” is, according to authors such as Tuchman who explicitly use the concept, a kind of crystallization of the experience that grants stability to the perception of social life. “News workers use typifications to transform the idiosyncratic occurrences of the everyday world into raw materials that can be subjected to the routine processing and dissemination of news” (Tuchman, 1978: 50). In the face of each new situation, the actor/journalist will look for similar past events, and so s/he will act in a similar way to before, following the principle that things will remain identical. The critical problem is that typifications are artificial constructs, which may lead reporters to apply stereotypes, easy simplifications, and incorrect labels.

Discussing “news frames,” Reese (2001: 9) suggests that media studies should accentuate ideology, considering the dimension of their relations with society. Thus, there would be a conceptual and evaluative framework that shapes the meaning of an event, making it understandable to the ideological system and setting it implicitly in a number of ways: as legitimate or illegitimate, as moral or immoral, as right or wrong, as patriotic or unpatriotic, as adjusted or not to the community interests, and so on. This does not mean absence of autonomy of news workers, as some theories, such as the propaganda model, suggest: the codes for the use of ideology are provided by the imperatives of professional journalism. However the ideological meaning is defined *a priori* and it can coexist with professional codes. This happened during the Gulf War, when the Bush Senior administration was able to restrict the political debate in the media to the discussion of the option to punish Iraq for its aggression against Kuwait.

Many of these criticisms are leveled at mass media, and the partisans of online journalism present it as an alternative to those undesirable features of mass media. Online journalism can enable a strong interactivity with publics and the generation of a new kind of public discussion. It could overcome the dependence of economic and political systems on mass media, opening the agenda for issues that would never be highlighted in traditional media, be more attentive to alternative sources and, subsequently, to new angles of approach, facilitate public dialogue among citizens, and, finally, avoid the excessive use of typifications and routines from traditional newsrooms.

Within this narrative, new media, particularly the Internet, have given rise to new hopes. Alongside online journalism appeared a set of proposals seeking to overcome some of the pathologies related to the daily practice of traditional journalism, trying to reconcile it with more inclusive social practices and democratic deliberation.

Despite the fragile frontiers between some practices carried out by models of online journalism, we decided to take the risk of attempting to classify particular movements and proposals. Thus, we will refer to (i) citizen journalism and (ii) participatory journalism.

The choice of these two particular movements is due to their strong influence in academic, professional, and industrial contexts. According to Schudson, public journalism (predecessor of citizen journalism) was the best-organized movement within the

history of the American press (Schudson, 1999: 118). Additionally, citizen journalism, which appeared with the second generation of web communities, has proposed dramatic changes in the usual way of dealing with publics. Many authors committed to public journalism (such as Jay Rosen) saw their hopes being fueled by the interactive potentialities of new technologies and have actively contributed to the appearance of citizen journalism as a current that helps online networks to increase and promote public dialogue. Dan Gillmor's *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People for the People* (2004) remains arguably the most influential work to celebrate citizen journalism and was met with extraordinary success among the public, the academy, and many professionals, becoming one of the most influential books on journalism in the first decade of the century. Finally, participatory journalism is reshaping our intellectual, political, and commercial landscape, and is at the core of all discussions on the future of the industry.

Many authors (Riggio, 2007; Lasica, 2003) work with those concepts as synonyms; however, we follow the suggestions that connect participatory journalism with the cooperation of non-professionals in the context of mainstream media and citizen journalism as being more committed to the tradition of civic engagement in the public sphere, following the intuitions of so-called "public journalism."

From public journalism to citizen journalism

The public journalism movement, generally seen as the antecessor of citizen journalism, emerged around 1990, in print and audiovisual media, from the critical consciousness of academics and journalists awakened by the lack of audience interest in journalistically mediated political information and also by low rates of citizen involvement in democratic processes, as evidenced by declining participation in elections. The conceptualization of "the public" in public journalism literature has not been consistent because public journalism has previously been mostly defined by its practice and not by theoretical formulations (e.g. Friedland, 2003). The movement's success was due, mostly, to the cooperation of organizations that sponsored civic experiences, establishing operating guidelines and preparing seminars, among many other activities that contributed to its consolidation (Haas, 2007: 68).

Public journalism seeks to encourage a more citizen-engaged press that increases the involvement of ordinary people with issues of public concern. Early proponents of public journalism, such as academic Jay Rosen and James Batten from the Knight Ridder Group, argued that newspapers should encourage greater audience involvement in news selection and promote dialogue on public issues.

Nip (2006: 6) states that the goals of public journalism in helping democracy are the following:

- 1 to connect to the community;
- 2 to engage individuals as citizens;
- 3 to help public deliberation in search for solutions.

Today, citizen journalism emerges as the second phase of public journalism strongly related to the advances in online journalism. Significantly, the Civic Journalism Interest

Group of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication that began in 1994 during the formative years of public journalism, has turned to new ways of expressing civic engagement, especially through online journalism, leading to a corresponding change of the group's name to the Civic and Citizen Journalism Interest Group in 2005. So, with the appearance of the Internet most of the experiences of public journalism applied to online journalism. Citizen journalism, participated in by net-citizens and citizen reporters, appears as a second phase of public journalism, thanks to the potentialities allowed by the Internet. The Internet has provided ordinary people with free access to large amounts of information and with the means to share information and facilitate discussions on public interest issues.

According to the arguments of its proponents, citizen journalism has the following advantages:

- Allows access to the production public distribution of messages by many people, which is an obvious comparative advantage to citizen groups who want to organize as publics but suffer the disadvantages of a peripheral location.
- Allows the news coverage of issues that traditional media do not find profitable.
- Authorizes, thanks to its interactive features (including the ability to add comments to articles), a more substantial discussion of current events in a way that traditional media could never allow (Joyce, 2007: 3).

Participatory journalism

According to Nip (2006: 12) the term "participatory journalism" has some particularities that are distinct from citizen journalism. It was coined inside mainstream journalism, which now accepts the idea of giving news users the chance to express their views about public affairs. In participatory journalism, news users could participate in the newsmaking process in multiple ways, but user contribution is solicited within a frame designed by the professionals inside mainstream context. So participatory journalism generally falls into these broad categories: (i) audience participation at mainstream news media including staff weblogs, which incorporate reader comments, either through e-mails or direct postings; (ii) newsroom-sanctioned weblogs written by outsiders; (iii) discussion forums; (iv) articles written by readers; (v) photos, video, and reports sent in by readers; (vi) news and information web sites that accept works from independent writers and broadcasters, providing original interviews, research, and reporting previously checked and filtered by a professional staff. The famous OhmyNews, which recently closed, was an example of the last.

Some authors also believe in the specific nature of open source journalism. The general concept is that a cooperative of content producers and readers can be more effective in the correction of errors than a limited staff. The term generally means a collaboration between a professional journalist and his/her readers on a story, where readers who have some expertise on the topic are asked to contribute with suggestions, ask questions to provide guidance to the reporter, or even do actual reporting which will be included in the final journalistic product. However, even recognizing some

differences, its practices and methodologies aren't sufficiently codified to refer to a particular model of online journalism.

The differences between citizen and participatory journalism

Nip (2006: 14) reduces the difference between citizen and participatory journalism to the intervention or absence of professional journalists. So, photos taken of the tsunami in South Asia by tourists and the local people in December 2004 would be citizen journalism if they were published by the people themselves, but would be participatory journalism if the material was handed to a mainstream news organization for publication.

We consider that the significant commonalities and differences of online journalism must lie in their respective contribution to the public sphere and deliberative democracy, and subsequent dialogue among citizens.

Here arise two very different perspectives on what concerns public life: in participatory journalism, participation from audiences and the public are affirmed as a way to correct the limits of traditional professional journalism. In this sense, the underlying ideology supported by the advocates and practitioners of participatory journalism emphasizes the distinction between active and committed users and journalists cloistered in the "ivory tower" of their routine practices and professional standards.

In the case of citizen journalism we state that this is more committed to the detection and discussion of collective problems, developing debate among citizens. So, the distinction isn't only about the interactivity with newsrooms (certainly important but just a part of the problem) but also about the quality of the interaction among citizens. Citizen journalism is no longer just about overcoming the limits of journalistic professionalism but goes further and tries to overcome the limits imposed on citizenship by a certain kind of journalism conditioned by primary definers and powerful sources. Many of the sites that reclaim the label of citizen journalism focus explicitly on issues and angles that they feel the "mainstream" journalists have not yet covered sufficiently, and try to adhere to the principles of public journalism, paying continuing and systematic attention to how well and how credibly they communicate with the public (Lambeth *et al.*, 1998: 17).

Online Journalism and Deliberation: Limits and Possibilities

Inside online journalism there are different practices and proposals to establish its legitimacy, presenting themselves as attempts to overcome some of the above-mentioned pathologies of commercial mass media, increasing the participation of citizens in the process of agenda building, avoiding dependence on powerful sources and strengthening public dialogue. However, there are also serious criticisms directed at some of these proposals.

One major criticism of participatory journalism is that its supporters rely on a kind of dichotomy between journalists and the public, and consequently fail to take into account other mechanisms of power involved in the newsmaking process. Embedded in the mainstream context, the participation of audiences doesn't mean (at least necessarily) there has been any attempt to increase the quality of citizenship. This movement

appears to neglect the social and political components of power over the media system. Supporters of participatory journalism act as if journalists are the only ones responsible for gatekeeping and agenda setting, and their partial replacement by people without specific training would be a step forward in the democratization process. A substantial part of the ideology formulated around the promotion of this kind of journalism shows a confrontation between “us” (citizens aware of the free and unrestricted communication) and “them” (journalists as obstacles to that freedom, confined to rigid procedures and jealously guarding their position of “privilege” as keepers of information). However, the societal, economical, and political constraints that are involved in the newsmaking process remain hidden. Consequently, many argue that their supporters neither demand nor inspire fundamental changes to the commercial logic of news organizations.

Another major criticism particularly directed to participatory journalism is concerned with the immediacy and speed fetishism boosted by new technologies and the risks that it entails in terms of accuracy. The phrase “publish then filter” is the clearest expression of a series of projects depending on the production and dissemination of information from the voluntary collaboration of ordinary citizens. So, the immediacy of the Internet becomes the cause of major errors when a logic is imposed that speed is more important than the quality of information (Moretzsohn, 2007). News organizations are encouraged by immediacy to release and update stories before the checks demanded by journalistic integrity. Ultimately, these forms of expression may be a step toward the dismissal of specialized procedures and a complete submission to immediacy that turns a blind eye to the procedures of verification, confirmation, and credibility.

Generally, in spite the hopes brought about by the general discourse of online participatory journalism, many authors from the sociology of news production find that it hasn't significantly changed the hegemony of the mass media paradigm, in terms of routines and news values. Content analysis and ethnographic research within online newsrooms have found that many online projects use the same news stories, the same news judgment, operating in similar financial, organizational, and professional constraints (Fenton, 2010: 9). Jane Singer (1997) conducted one of the first observations of the routines in the production of online news, focusing mainly on the attitude of journalists in relation to new media. The journalists surveyed believed that their ethical and professional values were perennial in the new context and were a crucial factor in establishing differences in the proposals marked by a lack of professionalism.

Similar studies carried out in Spain by Masip (2005, quoted in Díaz Noci and Palácios, 2007: 92) and Soriano (2004) on the Internet's impact on traditional media, demonstrated that, although it is present in newsmaking, it has not completely changed the traditional routines. For its part, the research conducted in Brazil by Thais de Mendonça Jorge (2007, quoted in Díaz Noci and Palácios, 2007: 95) shows that online search, verification, and selection of sources is now a standard part of the everyday production routine, but has not changed traditional practices and news values. In Portugal, Zenith (2010: 33–34) compared Portuguese online journals (news/journalistic web sites), creating and applying a table of measurement of the levels of the potentialities offered by online journalism, in particular those considered most important and widely referenced by the extended literature on the matter: hypertextuality, interactivity, and multimediality (see Deuze, 2005; Palácios, 2003: 39–53; Canavilhas, 2008: 53).

The results obtained by Zenith (2010: 46–47) verified that immediacy is the only potential benefit with a significant presence in the table created by the author. Zenith found there to be a very low level of hypertextuality – even considered to be disastrously low, indicating a very embryonic stage of development of specific languages and techniques. Interactivity and personalization indices were also revealed to be low, which confirms the great distance that news web sites still keep between themselves and their visitors and users.

Even in online journalism with civic orientation, that pursues the improvement of public dialogue, searching for alternative ways of dealing with citizens and the political system, one also finds problems that are not yet solved or goals that are not yet achieved.

This was revealed in the significant work undertaken in Spain by David Domingo (2006: 24). The author analyzes the model of online journalism developed in different contexts: the web site of a print medium from a large group (elPeriodico.cat), a public television portal owned by the Generalitat (Government) of Catalonia – CCRTV (3cat24.cat), the web site of a local daily news company (DiarideTarragona.com), and a digital news portal (aMalla.net). The analysis was based on ethnographic observation of online newsrooms and in-depth interviews with reporters and editors.

The research discusses the formation of a critical discourse on traditional journalism, which laments the mix of information and entertainment and the self-referential nature of news production, increasingly distant from the problems of the public (Domingo, 2006, p. 56). It shows how the Internet and its non-hierarchical network were seen (in the context of this critical discourse) as an opportunity for a fundamental transformation of journalism in the sense of a return to rationality-oriented public service.

The study concluded that although interactivity was a keyword in the interviews with online journalists, journalists continued to be seen as producers and users as passive consumers (Domingo, 2006: 506–507). In online newsrooms linked to traditional media, the most oft-quoted news value was immediacy and the main goal was still the publication of stories as soon as possible. However, even more significantly, the analyzed routines in online newsrooms, even in the portal originally and specifically designed for the web, still favor traditional professional criteria as the main reference to produce an assessment of newsworthiness, rather than the preferences of users.

Finally, studies carried out inspired by the media effects theory have not clearly confirmed an increase in pluralism and political participation inside online journalism. The liberal and individualistic approach of uses and gratifications theory seemed well suited to the characteristics of the new environment. Consequently, this earlier theoretical framework was the first to be used when the new medium was introduced into our society (Rafaeli, 1986; Morris and Ogan, 1996). Conversely, it was thought that the agenda-setting hypothesis would be one of the theories that would suffer the hardest blow from the appearance of online journalism. However, it was found that the agenda-setting process was far from becoming irrelevant. In fact, the research carried out by scholars on the agenda-setting hypothesis showed that when people go to the Internet they often look for web pages from traditional media.

For instance, a study by Messner and Distaso (2008) reaffirmed the importance of traditional media in the blogosphere, but also the opposite, namely the growing influence of blogs and news web sites on traditional journalistic accounts. Blogs depend heavily on

traditional media for collecting information. The research verified that of 120 observed bloggers, 73% of them use other mainstream media as sources. In turn, the authors also note a significant increase in the number of times that the *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* have used blogs as news sources, indicating that they are an increasingly influential and credible source. This study also showed that the traditional hypothesis of agenda setting could be more complex, demanding more analysis of the relationships between different media, the audience, and sources.

Surprisingly, the hypothesis of the spiral of silence seems to have had some impact on literature concerned with online journalism. Noelle-Neumann's (1977) theory defines the "spiral of silence" as the process an individual experiences when "he may find that the views he holds are losing ground; the more this appears to be so, the more uncertain he will become of himself, and the less he will be inclined to express his opinion" (44). If individuals perceive that their opinions are in the majority or on the rise, they might be willing to speak out. However, if they judge that their opinions are on the minority side, they become silent and refrain from voicing those opinions out of fear of social isolation (Liu and Fahmy, 2011: 46). The literature indicates that experiencing fear of isolation and perceptions of the opinion climate are two key variables related to this theory. So it is worth testing these variables on online journalism, in digital forums. Basically, the supporters of online journalism believe that online forums limit the fear of social isolation that supports the hypothesis of the spiral of silence. The absence of social cues and the anonymity that one may have in online chatrooms, forums, and commentary boxes attached to web sites and blogs should moderate the effect of the fear of isolation inherent to the effect of the spiral of silence. However, this is not so clear an effect as the more optimistic thought it would be.

On the contrary, some authors found a tendency toward conformity in the fact that people prefer to form groups with those with whom they agree, a phenomenon called homophily in primary groups (Wilhelm, 1999: 161). Cass Sunstein, in Republic.com (2001), expresses his concern about the polarizing effects of the Internet. The Internet, as with other new technologies, dramatically increases the possibilities for people to hear their own voices and to wall themselves off from others (2001: 49). Sunstein argues that people must be exposed to expressions, opinions, and perspectives they would not have chosen. He states that groups of like-minded people are inclined to end up with a more extreme version of their original view after discussing it among themselves.

Dahlberg (2001) attributes the practice of flaming to the disinhibiting effect of digital communication, which motivates individuals to feel free to really express themselves because of the absence of socially identifying references. In flaming cases, anonymity increases the opposite of a pluralist participation: a disinhibition formed by manifestations of verbal abuse that intimidate and discourage the participation of others and, indeed, work as a form of social constraint.

Such discussions can easily be extended to two other types of theories related to media effects: thematization (Luhmann, 2009) and a vast range of theories strongly inspired by Habermasian insights that are grouped according to the concept of deliberation, supporting online journalism as a kind of universal expression of citizenship. The hypothesis of thematization – the idea that the media favor the formation of issues on which to focus attention – is the opposite of the idea of universal participation in the public sphere.

Luhmann, a remarkable author of systems theory, theorizes journalism as a subsystem of the media system (along with the subsystems of entertainment and advertising). Luhmann finds that the most important selection criteria of the media are surprising news, topicality, conflicts, quantitative data, local relevance, scandals, and norm violations.

From a systemic point of view each new event increases entropy and contingency. That is to say, each new piece of information contradicts prior understanding or changes a previous state of affairs. The subsystem of news media incorporates surprising news into the status quo and it reaffirms the norm after its violation. It does so defining the common themes on which to focus attention, assuring the system's stability. So the theory of thematization is consistent with studies that draw attention to the possibilities of online journalism to aggregate and specialize topics, readers, and thus induce the formatting of specific but fragmented forums used by participants and commentators. In this case, it raises the idea of a market dominated by countless versions of the "Daily Me." Such a fragmented news environment with interfaces situated in social networking sites is suspected of having a negative impact on the rational and democratic process (Fenton, 2010: 8–9) The opposite hypothesis is nurtured by those who see in the Internet and online journalism the possibility of forming a more inclusive public sphere, where everything can be discussed and to which all have access.

So, What's Civic in Online Journalism?

There are several reasons to devise alternative ways of communication that emphasize a dynamic relationship with publics and social movements, a relationship that maintains itself open to critical attitude and to interchange of knowledge, opinions, feelings, and arguments by opposition to the hegemonic paradigm of mass communication.

Citizen and participatory journalism have some characteristics that may sustain the exchange of opinion and criticism, the openness to some aesthetic dimensions of newsmaking often dismissed as infotainment, and the use of new opportunities for contextualization created by multimediality (the simultaneous use of written, audio, and iconic signs by different media at once), hypermediality (the potentiality of remission between different layers), and interactivity (the chance for audience members to participate in the process of newsgathering and newsmaking).

The technological nature of online journalism (in all its multifarious forms) allows the cultivation of experimentalism and innovation in discourse, including hypertextual and multimedia techniques that may constitute the distinguishing feature of alternative forms of culture and representation of political identities.

The nonlinear and associative hypertext format exceeds the limits of the black and white, static, and uni-sensory world, leading to multisensory modes of representation. With hypertext there is an implicit invitation to surf among links, which may be simple references but also other forms of information opening up a whole universe of possibilities. Similarly, online journalism is a combination of multimedia elements and participation of readers in real time, in which notions of relevance and contextualization regarded as relatively rigid may be reconsidered. The multiplication of these possibilities can result in the acceptance of the agonistic dimension of communication as a field of

conflicting claims, with multiple versions, angles, and frameworks of the same events being confronted instantaneously.

Simultaneously it should be understood that audiences can appropriate various media materials in an argumentative and dialogical way (see Gomes, 2008: 152). Sonia Livingstone (1998) identified six routes toward reception studies that focus the role of active reception: cultural studies and Hall's theorization on oppositional decoding; the uses and gratifications model, which emphasized the idea of active audience; critical mass communication research with the concept of a resistant audience; the move to post-structuralism with Umberto Eco underlying the role of the reader; the feminist critique with the emphasis on the marginalized audience; and the ethnographic turn showing the importance of everyday life contexts in the reception of media messages. More recently the role of the audience took a new turn, becoming producer of and also public commentator on the traditional news flux. Alex Bruns (2011) identifies a form of reporting and commenting on the news that acts to filter the news flow and to highlight and debate salient topics of importance to the community. The community of bloggers, citizen journalists, and commentators offer alternative interpretations of the day's events, and critically watch industrial news and other sources providing further related (and often contradictory) information enabling readers to better assess the accuracy of mainstream news stories.

It is not by chance that media criticism and media watching are becoming increasingly strong movements worldwide. Blogs and other forms of intervention linked to citizen journalism often question the mainstream media, asking them about their representations of issues of collective interest. In this sense, online journalism may stand as a way of introducing elements of reflexivity to the industry. Deuze (2002: np) has already called attention to many sites worldwide that practice media criticism directed toward traditional journalism; quoting examples such as *Mediekritik.nu* in Sweden, *Extra!* in the Netherlands, and *onlinejournalismus.de* in Germany, which are still working with the same original goals, that is, discussing content found elsewhere either on the Internet or in traditional media.. This "journalism about journalism" acts to reinvigorate the function of journalism in perpetuating and amplifying public conversation on the criteria and practices of the media system.

Accordingly, there are multiple blogs and web sites that make media coverage a central issue. Media power has become one of the issues that invites attention, interest, and controversy in the public sphere. Not surprisingly, the agenda, the frames, and the editorial guidelines of the mass media are being increasingly criticized, discussed, and challenged in online discussions, on Facebook pages, social media, and blogs, and also by collaborative news media. Cultural studies have found that there is a legitimacy deficit that seems to punctuate examples related to oppositional decoding by audiences, in the sense referred to by Stuart Hall in 1973. In this kind of situation traditional media face a growing distrust from audiences, who begin to read between the lines promoting distinct versions of events, ending in the rejection of the official and hegemonic version, achieving the phenomenon Hall (1973, quoted in Hall, 2002) called oppositional decoding.

This has happened in both Tunisia and Egypt, for example. Obviously, social networks (especially Twitter) were used to call for demonstrations and not to discuss issues.

However, behind social networks, some blogs and web sites criticized the official coverage from governmental media, spreading news that reflected the point of view of revolutionaries. This was the case with the Nawaat web site (largely in French; www.nawaat.org), which covered the news and uploaded pictures from all over Tunisian cities. As Timothy Garton Ash states in the guardian.co.uk on January 19, 2011: “Professional satellite TV fed off online citizen journalism.” Al-Jazeera heavily relied on blogs, referencing Facebook pages and YouTube in reporting the events, and half the Tunisian television audience watches satellite TV.

The above examples lead us to the theoretical approach of Brian McNair (2008), who talks about the transition from a paradigm of control to a paradigm of chaos. The first paradigm includes a whole range of critical approaches to media culture as a monstrous apparatus that exerts a strong manipulation, while the second one is marked by fragmentation of audiences and channels and by segmentation of messages and platforms. The paradigm of control emphasizes the importance of structure and hierarchy in maintaining an unjust social order. It is based on the idea of economic determinism, where the ruling elites extend their control to the cultural apparatus of media. So it believes strongly in a unilateral formation of a dominant ideology. By contrast, the paradigm of chaos recognizes the desire to control by elites but suggests that the exercise of control is often interrupted by unpredictable eruptions and bifurcations emerging from the impact of political, cultural, economic, and technological developments in the communication process. Accordingly, the new public sphere faces new phenomena such as the increasing volatility of the news agenda, the emergence of frequent critical messages even in the mainstream media system, the multiplication of validity claims arising from conflicting minorities and social movements, the emergence of media with different and contradictory viewpoints, the expansion of alternative forms of expression, the effect of competition within the media, the increased scrutiny of the media itself, and the diversification and decentralization of media production (see McNair, 2008: vi, xiv, 4, 37, 124).

Obviously, one must ask if this paradigm fits in with the classic portrait of a deliberative public sphere, with its trust in communicative rationality and in the strength of better argument, but this is not the place to discuss the strong philosophical debate that emerged around the concepts supported by Jürgen Habermas. At least, one question remains open: Are the concepts of argumentative discussion and rational consensus still appropriate to analyze the public debate, bearing in mind the current conditions of increasing media pluralism and social complexity? Many authors suggest that online journalism is compatible with a plurality of public spheres, crossed by a plurality of rationalities, strategies, and interests.

Conclusion

This increasing fragmentation of cultures and messages in late capitalist societies creates the opportunity to perceive the plurality of rationalities that intersect each other within the media industry. There are the techno-optimists who see online journalism as reinvigorating democracy, with their utopian vision of a brave new world with everyone connecting to everyone else, and there are the neo-Luddites (techno-pessimists), who

believe that online journalism will downgrade the news to a level of generalized commoditization. Both miss the point. The first approach emphasizes only normative voluntarism, forgetting that online journalism can be used by Nazi and pedophile groups or just by lobbyists and spin doctors who disguise themselves as independent journalists. The second one assumes a kind of economic reductionism that forgets the emergence of phenomena that can hardly be seen as just marketing to attract audiences.

We support an approach that looks to the new communicative environment as a chance to take into account several critical instances of legitimizing the actions and utterances produced by the various powers in the course of an increasingly diverse intervention by social movements within societies characterized by diverse values and visions of life. Thus, cultural pluralism induced, in a contradictory and ambiguous way, by conflicting social actors goes well with the fragmented and pluralist media environment catalyzed by new media and online journalism. These media environments can be an opportunity to support a more direct relationship with everyday life (defense of local identities, promotion of deliberative processes, focus on concrete issues and policies) and can be translated into a more inclusive citizenship.

However, these increasing opportunities aren't a necessary and inevitable outcome resulting from the use of new technologies. The product of online journalism continues to be an ambiguous and contingent result of the convergence of technological factors, organizational and economic constraints, political decisions regarding regulation, and civic commitment by publishers and journalists.

In this sense, old questions will return, as old fashioned as they might appear: What is the mission of journalism? What kind of training do professional journalists need to have in order to simultaneously work with new technologies and new participatory guidelines? How do we design and implement strategies that enrich and diversify the journalistic practices and discourses in order to envision new agendas and new frameworks? Media are confronted with contradictory interests, being themselves compelled to reconcile economic, cultural, professional, ethical, and deontological points of view. The answers to these questions will be the outcome of decisions that are not strictly technological choices. Without an ethical and political discussion, technological euphoria will miss the point. Without taking into consideration the nature and impact of technological changes, ethical and political discourse will be helpless.

Coming from spontaneous counterpublics, we find, in specific circumstances, ways of informal, spontaneous communication that work as a kind of natural element of criticism, but that stay confined to restricted circles without achieving visibility in the media. However, in democracy, the frontiers between those kinds of communication and the public sphere are not so strictly rigid: the pressure from excluded groups may often become politically relevant. Within this complex environment inspired by the opportunities of participation arising from some movements inside online journalism, the chances for excluded agents and new social movements to bring new issues to visibility and collective discussion in order to obtain public recognition are not completely or explicitly denied. In spite of their internal contradictions, new media and online journalism perhaps appear as interstices where counterpublics representing the memories, purposes, and claims from several excluded social agents still continue an ongoing activity in order to obtain some gains inside the hegemonic consensus.

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