

Dialogues and Polarisation in the Mediated Public Sphere. Theory and practice of (Im)probable Communication

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been growing concern about the role of media in shaping public discourse and exacerbating polarization. Political, social, and cultural divides have been deepening, and the quality of public dialogue has been deteriorating, as people increasingly consume news and information from ideologically aligned sources and engage in filter bubbles and echo chambers. This phenomenon raises crucial questions about the nature

of communication in the mediated public sphere. How can we foster dialogue and exchange in an environment where opinions and perspectives are increasingly entrenched? What are the factors that contribute to or hinder effective communication across divides? How do media platforms and algorithms shape the way we perceive and engage with the world?

Keywords: polarization, dialogue, public media sphere

Diálogos e Polarização na Esfera Pública Mediada. Teoria e prática da Comunicação (Im)provável

Resumo

Nos últimos anos, tem havido uma crescente preocupação com o papel dos meios de comunicação na formação do discurso público e no agravamento da polarização. As divisões políticas, sociais e culturais têm-se aprofundado, e a qualidade do diálogo público tem vindo a deteriorar-se, à medida que as pessoas consomem cada vez mais notícias e informações de fontes ideologicamente alinhadas e se envolvem em bolhas de filtro e câmaras de eco. Este fenómeno levanta questões cru-

ciais sobre a natureza da comunicação na esfera pública mediada. Como podemos fomentar o diálogo e a troca de ideias num ambiente onde as opiniões e perspectivas estão cada vez mais entrincheiradas? Quais são os fatores que contribuem para ou, ao invés, dificultam a comunicação eficaz entre diferentes grupos? Como é que as plataformas e algoritmos dos media sociais moldam a forma como percebemos e interagimos com o mundo?

Palavras-chave: polarização, diálogo, esfera pública mediática

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In recent years, there has been growing concern about the role of media and technology in shaping public discourse and exacerbating polarisation. Political, social, economic, and cultural divides have been deepening, and the quality of public dialogue and debate has been deteriorating, as people increasingly consume news and information from ideologically aligned sources and engage in filter bubbles and echo chambers. Although the experiences of cyberactivism and, above all, technopolitical action over the past decades (WikiLeaks, Arab Spring, Occupy, YoSoy132, 15M, Geração à rasca) favoured an atmosphere of optimism, the recent proliferation of hate speech and fake news in a public sphere increasingly polarised under the logics of digital capitalism, places us on what seems like the other side of the coin.

In the same vein, the ‘manosphere’ warrants special attention, serving as a space that brings together various male subcultures promoting misogynistic and anti-feminist content (Ginj, 2019; Han & Yin, 2022). The technological appropriations stemming from feminism have been crucial for amplifying women’s voices in a traditionally restricted and exclusive public sphere (Fraser, 1990). The response to the rise of the feminist movement has been channelled through social media platforms with the dissemination of fake news, hate speech, and direct attacks on women. This strategy aims for social polarisation, discrediting the movement, and ultimately silencing women in the public sphere (Tornay-Márquez, Pedro-Carañana & Aladro-Vico, 2024).

Forces for the democratisation of the public sphere and society as a whole have levelled their critique against authoritarian tendencies and have envisioned alternative routes to foster participation, dialogue, peace, equality, diversity, and freedom in communication, culture, politics, and the economy. For example, peace journalism and communication have provided discourses which aim to unveil the underlying root causes of conflicts, denounce warmongering tendencies, and engage in practices for dialogue and conflict-resolution (Arévalo-Salinas et al., 2024; Pedro-Carañana & Carrasco-Campos, 2023). A recent example can be found in the *Manifesto for Peace Media in the 21st Century* launched by the Spain chapter of the Latin Union of Political Economy of Communication, Information, and Culture (ULEPICC-Spain) and the Research Network on Community, Alternative and Participatory Communication (RICCAP). This initiative denounces the role played by media systems and structures in hindering peace communication, but encourages professionals, social movements and political representatives to pursue information practices, communication structures and dialogue processes that allow mutual understanding and social justice.

Community, independent, alternative, and cooperative media and platforms have strived to produce and share communication products to show that another world is indeed possible and foster the commons, including the digital commons (Fuchs, 2021). However, they face important challenges related to sustainability, dependence, and power dynamics (Krüger, 2022). The balance continues to tip in favour of dominant powers that favour inequality and polarisation as capitalism and authoritarianism continue to colonise and commodify the (digital) commons and the (digital) public sphere (Fuchs, 2021). This unequal relation between dialogic and polarising communication requires rethinking scholarship on the public sphere. A holistic view should be fostered, going beyond technological determinism by taking into account the evolution of technologies under digital capitalism, the recent social and cultural transformations, and the need to put politics in the core of the debate of the mediated public sphere (Candón-Mena, Carrasco-Campos & Barrio, 2023).

The ideal Habermasian public sphere based on free and rational discussion, deliberation, and consensus leading to the implementation of public policies (Habermas, 1989), can only be (partially) defended as such, as a normative ideal to be pursued, but not as a descriptive representation of an existing public sphere. A public sphere of these characteristics not only does not empirically exist today, but neither did it in the mythical past imagined by Habermas, as the late 18th Century bourgeois public sphere was strongly marked by exclusions and inequalities. The main theoretical limitation of the Habermasian approach to the public sphere is that it does not pay attention to asymmetries in power relations in so-

ciety, economy, and culture, including those related to class, race, gender, nation-State, etc., which do not allow a real, pluriversal intercultural dialogue (Dussel, 2012; Pedro-Carañana et al., 2023). Even more so, the liberal approach views the public sphere and society as pacified spaces, forgetting about the multiple forms of violence that cross them, including direct violence against journalists and communicators (Herrera-Huérffano & Miller, 2023; Miller, 2020). Thus, it comes as no surprise that Habermasian scholars have forwarded a techno-optimistic view of the internet as a deliberative, rational, and critical space, in spite of the lack of empirical evidence (Iosifidis, 2011).

Indeed, empirical studies have shown quite the opposite. For example, Aladro Vico & Requeijo Rey (2018) have shown that political communication in the public sphere is characterised by the elusion of rational discussion on fundamental topics for citizens and democracy. Moreover far-right parties instrumentalise social networks through a strategy of political polarisation and identity narratives based on nativism, cult to the norm and the leader, and simplification of language, which foster a closed group mentality and allow to present themselves as a movement of civil resistance adapted to the code of the youth (Aladro Vico & Requeijo Rey, 2020).

As Fenton (2016, p. 56-57) has argued, Habermasian scholarship on the internet holds the problematic stance that more quantity of information and participants leads to pluralism, which, in turn, leads to enhanced deliberation and, subsequently, to better democracy. This magical thinking approach “too often fails to take account of the many factors that still and increasingly delimit, constrain and undermine public spheres in an online age”, such as “surveillance and malware”, “censorship and blocking”, “corporate exploitation and dominance”, and “deep political histories and socio-economic contexts”, leading to “technocratic dead-ends as solutions to all social and political ills”.

Such a perspective on the public sphere also forgets, as developed by Freedman (2018, p. 604), that public policy frameworks “have facilitated the circulation of clickbait and misinformation, together with the incessant coverage” of far right leaders and movements, who have exploited such frameworks to secure “high levels of visibility thanks to often compliant media outlets and unregulated digital platforms”.

Since the Habermasian approach eludes the analysis of power structures it is also incapable of properly understanding the possibilities for participation and democratisation. The political economy structures of the mediated public sphere are a result of a long-standing process of concentration of ownership, marketisation, and political bias, which have been favoured by deregulation by States and have led to the disempowerment of citizens, journalists, and other professionals of media and communication (Gans, 2003; McChesney, 2008). Such processes in the communication ecosystems have not developed in a vacuum but have run together with the deterioration of democracy and the acceleration of civilisational crisis in Western countries.

Oligopoly corporations have increased their control of both the media sector and the broader economic and social systems. Companies such as Google, Apple, Meta, Amazon, and Microsoft now manage and control most of the online communication flows in the West, as well as in most parts of the world (Taplin, 2017). Moreover, these companies collaborate closely with other corporations, States, authoritarian-populist forces, the military, and the surveillance industry (Zuboff, 2019), providing advanced technology that plays a strategic role in the advancement of vested interests. For example, Google provides Artificial Intelligence and other services to the Israeli military. The traditional mass media sector has also continued with its process of commodification and concentration of ownership (Birkinbine et al., 2016; Noam, 2018).

These processes have facilitated the production of high profits and capital accumulation by media and technology corporations, which use their economic power to influence culture and public discourse (Pedro-Carañana et al., 2024). Thus, economic, cultural, and political power go hand in hand as a strategic vector of the industrial-military complex (Elveren, 2024). Economic power favours the mo-

nopolisation of communicative production and distribution, which is instrumentalised to legitimise and foster further economic inequality, authoritarian political objectives, war, and the exploitation of natural resources.

It is in this context that participation in online and offline communication ought to be framed (Grenfell, 2020; Tapias, 2024). By doing so, it becomes possible to think of alternatives for the democratisation of the public sphere. Such alternatives involve engaging in transformative communication practices facilitating critical-liberatory narratives, democratic organisation and horizontal relations, and the creation of new communities (Kidd, 2020), as well as advancing in the structural reform of the mediated public sphere as to develop the conditions that effectively allow the participation of all on equal grounds and the significant reduction of manipulations by State and corporate actors (Al-Najjar Trujillo, 2024).

The ongoing deterioration of the public sphere, characterised by asymmetry in power relations, raises crucial questions about the nature of communication in the mediated public sphere. How can we foster dialogue and exchange in an environment where opinions and perspectives are increasingly entrenched? What are the factors that contribute to or hinder effective communication across divides? How do media platforms and algorithms shape the way we perceive and engage with the world? What is the role of mass media in shaping public discourse, conflict and polarisation? What is the impact of social media on political communication and civic engagement? What are the potential and limitations of dialogue across ideological and cultural divides? What is the role of communication and media in class struggle? What are the effects of filter bubbles, echo chambers, and algorithmic bias on public opinion and behaviour? What is the role of emotions, affect, and identity in shaping communication and polarisation? What is the potential of deliberative, participatory, community and counterhegemonic media practices to foster dialogue, mutual understanding and conflict-resolution? What are the challenges and opportunities of cross-cultural and interfaith dialogue in the mediatized public sphere? What are the implications of media polarisation for democracy, social cohesion, and human rights?

These are key questions that should be placed in the forefront of public sphere theory and practice. This special issue on *Dialogues and Polarisation: (Im)probable Communication in the Mediated Public Sphere* faces the challenge of responding to the need to rethink media and communication theory and practice in the context of important transformations undergone in the public sphere, communication ecosystems, and participation. We understand that there is no valid depoliticised epistemology; the proper way of thinking about knowledge is by considering if it looks at the roots of conflicts, criticises dominant structures, institutions, and actions, and is capable of envisioning viable alternatives based on ethics (Mosco, 1996). This perspective informs this special issue, which aims to respond to the most pressing challenges faced by the public sphere based on interdisciplinary approaches.

The special issue is organised around three blocks. Firstly, theoretical approaches on the public sphere are discussed. Secondly, case studies on disinformation and polarisation are presented. Thirdly, alternatives for democratisation and counteracting these negative dynamics in the public sphere are considered.

The first block includes two theoretical papers on the public sphere. By putting into dialogue classic and contemporary authors and theories of communication and public opinion, these papers develop an interdisciplinary perspective across media studies, sociology and philosophy of communication to discuss the limitations and possibilities of the mediated public sphere.

In **“Changes in political discourse. The emergence of post-truth and the challenges in the quest for understanding in light of the theory of communicative action”**, Bruno Rafael Gueiros Barbosa, Pedro Spíndola and Karl Heinz Efken carry out a discussion of the phenomenon of post-truth, the spread of misinformation and the consequences in the public sphere, taking Habermas’ theory of communicative action as theoretical basis. By discussing this cornerstone concept for philosophy and sociology of communication, the manuscript vindicates rationality and communicative deliberation to provide understanding in times of post-truth.

The theoretical debate on the mediated public sphere continues with **“Polarization, radicalisation and confirmatory bias on the network: A reading from media effects theories and deliberative democracy”**, by Víctor Hernandez-Santaolalla and José Candón-Mena. The authors discuss the possible consequences of contemporary media effects, such as echo chambers and filter bubbles, including in the debate theories of media communication, social action and deliberative democracy. Although the analysis focuses on the threats and limitations of polarisation and mediatisation, the authors avoid a technological determinist discourse. By adopting the media ecology perspective, their analysis points to some possibilities for social emancipation, as the mediatisation of the public sphere could be an opportunity to re-politicise journalism, media systems and democratic institutions.

In the next block, five papers develop a critique of disinformation and polarisation in specific contexts. These contributions can be framed within the development of what Sampedro Blanco (2023) calls pseudocracy, i.e., the rule of falsehood: there are specific power-actors who control and manage information channels and flows, favouring a type of citizen participation that is not geared towards generating knowledge or dialogue, but to the creation and amplification of misinformation and conflict. The conditions of socioeconomic inequality and injustice provide the breeding ground on which hate, hostility, and lies can flourish effectively to polarise society around fixed beliefs and identities that work to hide and rationalise privilege and unfair power relations. In this view, the digital world blurs -but does not eliminate- the boundaries between senders and receivers. While a deliberative public sphere would give space for civil society to act as a counterpower, the current communication ecosystem grants more power to elites so that they can instrumentalise public opinion, hindering rationality, empathy, and dialogue in favour of vested interests.

In the first paper of this block, titled **“Polarization in public opinion and politics: an analysis of the spanish animal welfare law in the context of X”**, Rafael Carrasco Polaino, Patricia Lafuente Pérez, and Jaime Benguria address polarisation in the political sphere and public opinion in the social network X around the topic of the recent Animal Welfare Law passed in Spain. Authors employ Social Network Analysis and inferential statistics to study the creation of communities of support and opposition to the law through retweets. Findings reveal that these communities are centred more on individuals than on organisations, and that user polarisation takes place equally between the different communities, as well as within them.

Next, Thiago Cury Luiz presents a paper entitled **“Electoral disinformation in the middle of the campaign: nuances of post-truth and populism at the heart of Brazilian democracy”**, investigating how disinformation, populism and post-truth work in the context of the electoral process in Brazil. The analysis is based on a content analysis that shows the wide use of and political adherence to false information and fallacious narratives favourable to candidate Jair Bolsonaro. The appeal to conspiracy theories against specific institutions and political figures, parties and ideology -mainly represented by candidate Lula da Silva- have cast doubt on the fairness of the electoral process and democracy itself.

In third place, in **“Misinformation and villainization: fake news targeting religious audiences in the brazilian elections of 2022”**, Marco Túlio de Sousa, Reinaldo Maximiano Pereira, Jênifer Rosa de Oliveira, Leticia Costa Paolinelli Barro and Brígida Gonçalves Magalhães Silva discuss fake news in Brazil specifically tailored for religious audiences in the context of the Brazilian presidential elections of 2022. The authors analyse materials identified as false by the Bereia Collective and Agência Lupa during the electoral period, focusing on topics sensitive to religious audiences. The results indicate a prevalence of content harmful to left-wing sectors, consequently favouring former President Jair Bolsonaro.

Next, Paula Requeijo, Jonathan Rodríguez, Eglée Ortega and Graciela Padilla present **“The crisis of representation and mediation in the context prior to 23J: citizenship, political issues interest and information consumption”**. This paper analyses the manifestations of political disaffection in Spain, by considering specific problems of the mediated public sphere such as the loss of credibility of

institutions, political representations, journalistic mediation and the media. The study focuses on the Spanish general elections on July 23, 2023 and analyses the results of a survey aimed to observe citizen interest in political affairs and consumption of information. As results point to a general disinterest on political issues, the authors discuss some strategic actions to develop a critical citizenship through the promotion of media literacy, encouraging more democratic and participatory institutions, and incorporating media ethics and political transparency in institutional governance.

The last paper on this block reflects on how media portrayal and interpretation of sexual violence can lead to a positive or negative response. Priscila Chalá-Mejía and Wilson Moreno-Ortiz analyse audience attitudes towards sexual violence in the paper titled **“Sexual violence as spectacle: Framing, revictimization, anger and empathy”**. The authors analyse comments made about the so-called ‘Martha Case’ on the fan pages of three Ecuadorian newspapers with either a generalist or a sensationalist focus. Through sentiment analysis, the research demonstrates how the differences between mainstream and sensationalist press blur when both provide a superficial and morbid treatment of information. The results allow for the recognition of differentiated feelings according to the gender of the people who make comments, which, in turn, enables the observation of the media’s role in eliciting emotional reactions.

In the last block, three papers delve into the possibilities for improving the functioning of the mediated public sphere. The first two discuss the possibilities of civic and democratic participation through the use of digital tools and social networks. In the paper titled **“Citizen Participation and Digital Technologies: Between the Cracks in the State and the Transformation of Politics”**, Gabriel Kaplún and Martín Martínez Puga present the results of an action-research project on citizen participation in public policies and digital tools conducted in Uruguay between 2020 and 2022. The research, carried out by a multidisciplinary team, analyses the potential and limitations of using digital tools in contexts and processes convened by the State. The findings allow for the determination of factors that favour or hinder participation, as well as the tensions that underlie them, leading the authors to conclude with reflections on democracy, participation, and technologies, from a political perspective.

In **“Between Echo Chambers, Political Polarization and Intolerance. The Damaging Reverse of Consumption and Political Mobilization of Young People on Social Media”**, Catarina Feio and Lídia Oliveira draw a state of the art of the recent research on social uses of social networks by young people, providing a critical discussion and a proposal for future research on this issue. The article summarises the findings of previous research, pointing to some critical aspects such as the contradiction between the social and political possibilities of social media in political mobilisation, participation and empowerment of the youth, and the threat of negative effects of media misinformation such as polarisation and intolerance. The authors point to the need to promote safe, aware and competent uses of media technologies by developing public policies in media literacy, and encourage scholars to take into account the specific political context (specially in Portugal) for future research on these topics.

The last paper of the issue addresses the importance of collaborative fact-checking in a context prone to misinformation, such as electoral processes and polarisation in a wartime context. In **“Disinformation and fact-checking in France’s 2022 elections. Ukraine War and polarisation”**, Lucía Ballesteros Aguayo, Raúl Magallón-Rosa and María Lamuedra-Galván focus their study on the data verification work carried out by the collaborative project Objectif Désinfox during the 2022 French presidential election. The authors set three objectives: to uncover the main narratives verified during the analysis period, to gather insights of professionals on these projects, and to propose a decalogue of suggestions for collaborative fact-checking initiatives. The results identify prominent narratives on topics such as the Great Replacement theory, the war in Ukraine, campaign hoaxes about candidates and parties, and elections. The conclusions highlight the importance of collaborative projects as a tool against misinformation and the significance of standardising verification methodologies.

As editors, we hope this special issue makes a significant contribution to the theoretical and empirical analysis of the public sphere while also helping to envision practical paths for its democratisation. At a time of increasing structural inequalities, expanding disinformation, and manufactured polarisation of citizens, critical reflection which can be connected to social and communicative practices, the implementation of public policies, and profound systemic intervention seems to us a much needed theoretical-practical endeavour to foster the common good.

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