Political Communication Imaginary

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Journalistic forms construct "the public" and the environment for experiencing public affairs. Readers act within and construct a "newspaper environment" that is simultaneously an intimate world and a remote spectacle. The press offers from "microsystems" for immediate experience with others to "macrosystems," ranging from institutions to hegemonic ideology. Differing relationships between readers, content, politics, and news forms are connected to different idealized civic cultures. Four historical periods identified in the United States (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001) run as follows: the "printerly formation" (1780–1820), "partisan" (1820–1890), "Victorian" (1890–1920), and "Modern" (1920–1990).

The main split between the modern and the ancient democratic imaginary is well represented by the works of two leading German intellectuals. The political philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, is the main theorist and academic speaker in favor of the political imaginary of the Enlightment. During the 17th and 18th centuries western societies generated a "public sphere," a space metaphor for institutions and organizations where social debate should take place through rational deliberation of free individuals based only on empirical evidence and logical argumentation (Habermas, 1989). This type of "communicative action" would lead to a public-minded consensus thanks to the ethos of an "unfinished project" of social emancipation based on the same capacities of discourse for all the citizens and their equality of access to knowledge resources and participation venues.

Habermas vindicated the work of John Dewey: a major representative of the Progressive Movement who placed emphasis on two fundamental elements such as schools and an informed "civil society" (a concept also emphasized by Habermas to represent the critical collective actor for public spheres). Dewey claimed that experimental intelligence and social plurality were needed to ensure the benefits of universal voting rights: a fully formed public opinion could be accomplished by effective communication among well-informed citizens, knowledgeable experts, and accountable politicians. The notion of the "fully informed citizen" has been proved to be limited in its historical evidence and limiting because of imposing unreachable standards of political knowledge and competence.

The human capacity to deliberate and pursue rationally defined was challenged among others in media studies by German sociologist Noelle-Neuman (1984) who focused on an imaginary "spiral of silence," a form of social control that prioritizes core moral values and the rule of the social majorities. Mass media would have speeded up such spiral and expanded its extent by giving prominence and visibility to majoritarian "climates of opinion." This nonargued political imaginary show disadvantages for

instrumental, intentional, and rational communicative functions. But the functional dimension of moral cohesion, based on the irrational fear of minorities to excluding majorities, favors consensus through the silence of dissenters (Noelle-Neumann) or "public lies" attuned with the "majoritarian perceived public opinion" (Kuran, 1995).

A less demanding imaginary of the media depicts them as building a subsystem to reduce complexity and permitting minimal engagement of citizens in public life. Civic disengagement then is not only unproblematic but above all efficient in functional terms: paying attention to professionals and making choices from the options presented to the public should be enough to reach democratic and rational outcomes. The "monitoring citizen" inhabits this imaginary (Schudson, 1998). For the sake of democracy it would suffice if each of us could "monitor" or supervise our own vital contexts and issues of deep interest. If the media helped us to link our particular experiences to wide-reaching events, together we could "know" more than we ever can separately.

Modest but attainable ideals are projected on media systems in a changing and complex world. Following the "burglar alarm" metaphor (Zaller, 2003) the media just alert busy citizens to key events in their public lives. It is an informational imaginary opposite to the "full news standard" that offers detailed reports on matters of little consequence or interest. These two imaginaries complement for the functioning of democratic political representation and journalistic mediation. Expecting too much from citizens can be as risky as expecting too little. And the same can be said about journalists.

In high modern 20th century, the dominant notions of good democracy and good journalism include the imaginary of informed voters and full news that respectively know and cover in detail areas of no immediate threat or public attention (Bennett, 2003). Given the unequal distribution of resources there is also unequal distribution of political knowledge and media capability. Measured against high standards the magnitudes of "attentive publics" and "full news" journalism appear minimal. But it seems inappropriate to disregard their benefits for the political and communicative system as a whole. Actually they are necessary but not sufficient conditions for democracy.

Critical visions denounce the mainstream political imaginary as "colonized" (Habermas) by public relations and state propaganda. Corporate and state messages overflow the media camouflaged as news defending the audience or the public interest. But this "media regime" seems to have undergone. New forms of political engagement and the proliferation of politically relevant media and new forms of political communication bring the opportunity to examine imaginaries without contrasting them against the dichotomy of either rational or irrational standards.

The new digital public sphere has unsettled the political imaginary with new narratives and the ideal roles to display. Political engagement always required cognitive attention but also affective involvement, being both dimensions present at the discussion. Digital optimists forecast a networked "collective intelligence" that will counter the exclusions of representative democracies with institutional transparency and citizens' participation. Meanwhile pessimists announce dystopian regimes such

as the irrational, antagonistic and segmented public sphere exemplified by the Babel Tower metaphor. The dispute continues given the contradictory data of research conducted in different media contexts and the novelty of expanding digital devices and their uses.

Setting apart untestable macro-level conclusions the type of engagement of the citizens in the digital media ecology gains relevance. Political communication allows now for bottom-up politics based on noncorporate generation and diffusion of messages, as well as on contestation of meanings thanks to the collaborative efforts that people establish speaking to many others through the so called "social media." In changing media environments straight rational and cognitive reasoning seems almost untenable or at least not the pattern of news processing that the citizens display. New research focuses "on what science has previously ignored: passion, faith, comedy, and hope — states that have produced great works of journalism and politics as well as literature and art. From the new science could also emerge a philosophy of political communication that attends to the representation of citizenship, youth, and changing social geographies" (Barnhurst, 2012, p. 586).

A recent research agenda gives up to normative laden notions seeking to disentangle the new ways to imagine politics, the relation between citizens and politicians, and the activities that publics consider as political communication linked to its use for daily living. Emotion, affective, and (inter)personal ties have become of most importance for a political life that relies now more on images and narratives. In this vein expressive and communitarian interactions are not opposites or degraded foundations for political communication but its main fabric.

Popular culture was "the true origin of modern journalism," and it is relevant to understanding "user-led innovation, consumer-generated content, self-made media, DIY culture, citizen-journalism, the blogosphere and peer-to-peer social networks" (Hartley, 2009, p. 310). A digital political imaginary is still in the process of being built in parallel to a emerging networked public sphere where some findings of late 20th century media become relevant. The Internet did not turn all media logics upside down but also emphasized traits already present in the analogical period.

Citizens were identified as retrieving significant cognitive resources from tabloid media and infotainment. News engagement always demanded a process where understanding (conforming a meaning) becomes more relevant than the acquisition of knowledge. No surprise then that "fandom" becomes a key term when understanding the "convergence" of producers and consumers in digital cultures (Jenkins, 2006). Again providing or contesting the political spectacle becomes the main activity of politics in modern societies (Debord, 1994).

As already said news forms encouraged readers to adopt different patterns of inter-action with micro- and macrosystems throughout history. Political communication always resembled a "play" with a meaning that was constrained but remained open and offered narratives charged with enough expressive power to promote active audience engagement. Democracies should explore ways of becoming "conversational" or "deliberative" regimes where citizens expect not a utopian direct digital plebiscite but to be heard and engaged in conversation and decision-making as (at least potentially) equals.

An urgent task would be to rethink how to guarantee the features that are essential to democratic representatives: receptive to the demands of the citizens, responsive to electorates of their acts and removable. To do so digital politicians and officials must redefine their roles to ensure: (a) closeness, (b) mutuality, (c) coherence, and (d) empathy. The transitions to be made to reach each one of them are (a) from distance to copresence, (b) from place to networks, (c) from transmission to dialogue, and (d) from spectacle to play (Coleman, 2005). These features of political representation all together constitute a new imaginary of the public virtues to be displayed by democracies in a networked public sphere.

SEE ALSO: Democracy; Online News; Opinion Leadership; Public/Private Distinction; Public Sphere; Social Movements; Spiral of Silence

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