Media systems and the internet: structural transformations of the public sphere?

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Abstract

This paper endorses two arguments regarding the relationship between media systems and the public sphere taking into account the increasing role performed by political communication developed on and through the internet. The first argument provided is that political communication produced by the media systems maintains their decisive role in making the public agenda discernible. The second argument is that in the digital communication era two very decisive structures of the public sphere became more robust in many democratic countries. The structures regard the informative system, and the official transparency. By some uses of the internet, these structures are being strengthened and thus both the accessibility of public debates and the transparency of government actions are achieving an unprecedented level in many democratic countries.

Keywords: democracy, public debate, social systems theory, journalism, visibility, social networking sites (SNSs).

Introduction

CITIZENS communicate with each other and obtain information about public affairs using devices that are rather different from decades ago, especially before the widespread use of the internet and all of the devices related to it (smart phones, tablets, note/ultra/net/books etc). But does this scenario of new devices also lead to new structures and logics concerning the cycle of political communication? Is it possible to affirm that current news making and news reception are completely different from decades ago? Regarding

this question, this paper endorses two arguments, and for each one there is a correspondent section.

In the first section it is argued that the basic structure of media systems seems to have remained the same. In favour of this argument, theoretical and empirical sources are presented. They support the assertion that news makers still are specialized in the production of public attention (visibility), and that news factors still can explain how this public attention is shaped. Furthermore the section argues that much of what is regarded as 'new' and as 'drastic changes' is actually old wine in new bottles. In order to support this argument, this paper alludes to political studies which well before the invention of the internet had already indicated how audiences (opinion leaders in especial) are active and decisive in shaping the flow of political communication.

The second section emphasizes that, despite the same structure, some parts and related structures concerning the public sphere are being strengthened with some uses of the internet. Regarding these structures, this paper focuses on the changes in the informative system and in the official transparency. Taking into account that some uses of internet produced an impressive increase of the accessibility of the information delivered by these structures, the article supports the idea that the current level of transparency, and public debate does not have historical precedent in most democratic countries.

News as usual

> *We know, since Plato, that personal influence is persuasive. We also have learned that there is little use in asking which medium is more important because each may serve different functions – at different times – both in decision-making and in diffusion. (Katz, 2005: xxiv).*

This paper argues that, despite of some changes, the internet and its social networking sites (SNSs) did not change the way that the media system works. It means that the formulations about this system offered by Jeffrey Alexander (1990) and more recently by Rousiley Maia (2012), Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004, 2012) until now keep their validity.

According to Alexander, the media system "produces important resources (outputs) upon which others [subsystems] depend." (1990: 115). Clarifying

the main output produced by the media system, Maia (2006: 25) defines it as a complex of media outlets that "holds, through its own routines and operative rules, the instruments for the production of visibility." According to this definition, visibility refers not only to political matters, but to everything that is presented by the mass media, including entertainment, movies, talk shows etc (Gomes, 2008: 137). Actually this visibility performs an integrative function of the society to a greater extent than a deliberative one. This happens especially in the *expressive media* whose narratives stories and figurative resources "produces symbolic patterns that create the invisible tissues of society on the cultural level just as the legal system creates the community on a more concrete and ´real' one" (Alexander, 1990: 108).

This means that whereas the societal function of the visibility produced by media systems is usually constant across different countries, the deliberative attributes (i.e. the mediated deliberation) of these systems vary with many other factors. Amongst them one can stress the regulations enforced by the political system upon the media freedom and thus upon its autonomy in relationship to market and state forces. Thus the correlation between *media system and mediated deliberation* is similar to the correlation between *political system* and *democracy*. Whereas the former can be found in any modern society, the latter only can be reasonable identified in societies that fulfil the basic requirements of a modern democratic system (free elections, separation of powers, etc.). Therefore one can say media that systems across different countries produce visibility (public attention), but only some societies have a kind of media system that can boost out the publicity principle.

This implies that the *publicity principle* (see Parkinson, 2006: 99) to some extent depends on visibility since the political effects of this principle become unfeasible without mass public attention. For being responsible for producing this scope of audience, then media systems have great importance for the public sphere and consequently for the public deliberation. Hartmut Wessler (2008: 06) stress this importance pointing out that the large audience produced by mass media "exert an influence on the deliberation of decisions makers and prevent them from making decisions that are difficult to justify publicly and can be expected to find widespread disapproval in media discourse.". Concerning this influence, news media (especially the quality press) occupies the most important sector of the media system because it encompasses the cognitive dimension of media representations (Alexander, 1990: 109).

Regarding the problem of how this importance impacts on the public sphere, Maia argues that "approaching the media as a system implies recognizing that production and dissemination of news occur in connection with economic, political and cultural subsystems." (Maia, 2012: 85). In favor of this perspective, the work of Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004, 2012) offers a valuable contribution, especially for improving our awareness of the differences embedded in the relationship between state and civil society when one takes into account the different social political contexts. According to them, "any judgment we make about a media system has to be based on a clear understanding of its social context." (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 15). Thus, many of the traits that are ascribed to the media in different countries might be explained through the share of power that each sector of society (i.e. markets forces, the state, and civil society) holds in those countries.

That is why the models of media systems described by the authors correspond to different patterns that each aforementioned sector presents. In fact, in societies whose market forces are stronger, the media tend to be more commercialized, and societies whose state exercise greater power, tend to impose strict control or regulations on media system. In light of this influence that political systems have on media, Hallin and Mancini (2012: 293-294) acknowledge the critical assessment made by Afonso de Albuquerque (2012: 94), who points out that political parallelism "is more difficult to measure in countries with a presidential system than in those with a parliamentarian one, because political parties play a less active role in the government." It means that the way how the political system is shaped has an impact on the stratification structure of the public sphere that was described by Bernhard Peters (2008: 125).

It is valuable to note that the research of Ferree and colleagues (2002) had already presented concrete evidence of that, precisely because their comparison of abortion discourse in US and German quality dailies showed that the stronger the traditional political mediators (parties), the more intensely the media system tends to use them as the main sources. Thus in democratic presidential systems, the media seems to present a larger spectrum of political elites and opinion leaders beyond the borders of political parties, especially the media professionals themselves, and those coming from civil society organizations and social movements.

An assertion especially significant for this paper is that internet and its social networking sites (SNSs) do not seem to have changed this logic at the structural level. Precisely because of the fact that the public actively – and not only journalists – prefers to receive updates about what the political elites do and think, as opposed to non-elite political actors.

Regarding that, Ivan Dylko and colleagues presented a study stating that even "YouTube's most popular political news videos tend to feature elites (i.e. elite dominance of filter 1), be created by elites (i.e. elite dominance of filter 2), and generally consist of traditional media content." (Dylko et al, 2012: 843). The authors consider their findings as particularly 'striking' because "[...] they were obtained from YouTube – an egalitarian website visited by millions of users and where any user can post any content." (ibidem: 844).

This assessment reveals some problematic premises because it assumes that traditional media output is merely the result of what journalists and media professionals consider as relevant to become news, without taking into account the audiences' demands, and the news factors (Eilders, 2006). Then according to the gatekeeping perspective adopted by Dylko and colleagues, the news outputs could be predicted by identifying "the filters that news information must pass through from inception to distributions" (Dylko et al, 2012: 836). These filters in turn could be identified by analysing the news media organizations, institutions (e.g. the journalism industry), and the individuals (e.g. journalists).

Nevertheless even the gatekeeping studies themselves have already shown that "'news values' was a better predictor of how prominently the bills were covered than the characteristics of the people who wrote them." (Shoemaker et al, 2008: 83). Since these news values and the news factors related to them "do not only serve as exclusively journalistic criteria, but as general human selection criteria" (Eilders, 2006: 09), then it turns out that journalists tend to select the same kind of content that the recipients usually do and vice-versa (for further evidence in this regard see Neuman et al, 2014).

This alternative premise is able to explain the results of Dylko and colleagues (2012) research, which provides evidence that the audience select and prefer the same type of content as journalists. It happens because media professionals and the audience to some extent share the same understanding about what is relevant to be news. That is why news consumption on internet is confirming mass communication as usual, including those patterns of distribution

that Dylko and colleagues assume in their study as being part of the 'internet era'. According to them, there is also "evidence of the democratization of the gatekeeping process – specifically, for the third filter" (ibidem: 844). Whereas the first and second filters are respectively the news sourcing and the news production, the third filter regards to the news distribution. The evidences presented by Dylko and colleagues indicate that:

> [...] over one-third of the most popular videos in the sample relied on no traditional media content at all, which shows a small amount of democratization for the second filter of content creators. All of this suggests that citizens can now create their own political news content, independent of mainstream traditional media, and effectively distribute it to a massive audience. (ibidem: 844)

For the authors, it means "with this last filter, the gatekeeping concept appears to be drastically different from what it was during the pre-internet era." (ibidem: 846). Here the authors seem to accept another questionable premise, which assumes that during the 'pre-internet era' the audiences didn't use to play an important role in interpreting and disseminating their interpretation about elites' thoughts and threads.

Notwithstanding the hypothesis of the 'two-step flow of communication' had already conceived, before the fifties, the idea of an active part of the audience (the opinion leaders) acting as disseminators and interpreters of elites' ideas. This idea came up with the study developed by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet about the media effects of the 1940 presidential campaign in United States, and "the findings of that study indicated that the effect of the mass media was small as compared to the role of personal influences." (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 2006: 03). Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld explain this limited effect giving further details of those findings:

> For the leaders reported much more than the non-opinion leaders that for them, the mass media were influential. Pieced together this way, a new idea emerged – the suggestion of a 'two-step flow of communication'. The suggestion basically was this: that ideas, often, seem to flow from radio and print to opinion leaders and *from* them to the less active sections of the population. (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 2006[1955]: 32).

But rather than 'radio' and 'print' it could be any other media outlet (medium) because what matters is the flow of communication in which different communication practices are performed in different situations, and in distinct social systems. During the forties, the lines between these different *communication practices* were indeed clear. Mass communication used to be produced in radio and print media, interpersonal communication in turn used to be produced in face-to-face situations, like in saloons, churches, at parties, between families, and so forth.

In the digital communication era, probably these places and situations maintain their importance, but now these social networks are increasingly developing online versions. In addition, the internet presents many sorts of situations where citizens keep in touch, and either often or eventually talk about politics. It could be said that, regarding these situations there are mass communication sources, opinion leaders, and opinion followers similar to the description by Lazarsfeld and colleagues. Evidences for that were provided by the study of Jaewon Yang and Jure Leskovec (2011), who during one year tracked two sets of quoted phrases. One was a set of 580 million Tweets, and the other one was comprised of 170 million blog posts and news. They found out that "the adoption of quoted phrases tends to be much quicker and driven by a small number of large influential sites" (Yang & Leskovec, 2011: 09). This massive data thus suggests that the basic structures of the political communication cycle remain very similar to the mass communication era.

One the other hand, a significant change promoted by the digital communication era is that the lines between mass communication and interpersonal communication have been blurred. This blurring can be regarded as something new because SNSs lead to a tricky situation in which different communication practices coexist on the same display. Thus if the current uses of the internet call attention to a worldwide role occupied by SNSs such as Facebook, Twitter and Youtube (Pew Research Center, 2012), it is also significant how the content shared and commented on by users of these social networks often comes from traditional media outlets, including those created by the both broadsheet and tabloid press. Moreover, as the study of Dylko and colleagues (2012) shows, often even content not created by this kind of media follows the mass communication pattern, especially regarding the most viewed, 'shared', 'liked' and 'top trend' pieces.

In sum, if the internet and SNSs on one hand is blurring a clear distinction between mass communication and interpersonal communication, the cycle of political communication and its different steps on the other hand seem to be the same.

Regarding this cycle and its different steps, the first one concerns the media system outputs. The second step occurs when most active sections of the public appropriate, interpret, and disseminate these outputs. This entire schema implies a difference in timing. The empirical support for this would consist of demonstrating that there is a 'first' step made by news makers and thereafter a 'second' one by active sectors of the audience.

Regarding this empirical challenge, the research conducted by Leskovec and colleagues (2009: 07) is impressive since it demonstrates that "thread volume in blogs reaches its peak typically 2.5 hours after the peak thread volume in the news sources." This finding seems perfectly suitable to describe the second step flow of communication since "research suggests that those going online for political information, often from political blogs, are more likely to be 'opinion leaders'" (Xenos & Kim, 2008, p.488). Taking into account that blogs and SNSs can be regarded as a typical environment of opinion leaders and consequently of the most active parts of the audience, the empirical evidence at stake supports the understanding that citizens are using new technologies in order to undertake old communication practices.

With respect to these practices, Katz (1957: 77) translated the hypothesis of the 'two-step-flow of communication' pointing out that "most spheres focus the group's attention on some related part of the world outside the group, and it is the opinion leader's function to bring the group into touch with this relevant part of its environment *through whatever media are appropriate*." (my emphasis). Once, churches, parties, families, universities and a myriad of socialization moments were responsible for fulfilling this communication practice. Now many use SNSs and blogs as appropriate ones. In short, old wine in new bottles. It is the same wine because the media system is yet responsible for making the public agenda discernible, for the production of visibility and therefore for arranging the cognitive and symbolic resources that promote the self-understanding of highly differentiated societies (Alexander, 1990).

This picture on the one hand frustrated enthusiastic expectations, such as those coming from the *cyberculture* paradigm, which claimed that the inter-

net was promoting the liberation of the communicative potential of audiences (Lemos, 2006). This approach seemed to support the idea that mass communication did not use to fulfil the communicative demands of audiences and that it used to exercise a monopoly of emission. Since the internet promised to be a technology that could break this monopoly, its dissemination would have the encapsulated power of increasing the visibility of ordinary citizens, of social movements, and of the counter-publics in a way that the mass communication supposedly used to hinder.

However the empirical research here presented gives solid evidence that the visibility of current societies is still focused on the political elites and that the configuration of these elites varies much more with socio-political structures than with the dissemination of the internet. Moreover, the current uses of this communication technology is giving further evidence that mass communication is not predominantly a product of technology, but of *a communicative practice* that is shaped actively by the audiences in a dynamic and *interactive process* with media professionals.

On the other hand, the current uses of the internet are also frustrating opposing perspectives, such as those concerned about the balkanization and fragmentation of the public sphere (Davis, 2005; Sunstein, 2001). Especially worried about this, Habermas (2006: 423) pointed out that the rise of millions of fragmented online forums across the world rather than strengthening the public sphere "lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics". Missing on this scenario is the fact that there is also a huge amount of SNS and blogs that share to a large extent the same agenda, and focus on the same topics that were made visible by the mass media (Cacciatore et al, 2012; Leskovec et al, 2009, Neuman et al, 2014; Yang & Leskovec, 2011; Xenos & Kim, 2008) .

The balkanization and ideological extremism might be a real threaten to the democratic life, but it was not created by the internet, and there is scarce empirical evidence supporting that it expands this political phenomenon more than the usual factors, such as economic and social crises.

Nevertheless it would be counter-intuitive saying that nothing more decisive changed with the digital communication era, especially when so many great efforts have been made in order to identify changes in the public sphere triggered by the internet variable. Indeed many changes are taking their course and it is not the intention of this paper to deny them. Actually the main pur-

pose so far was just to point out that most of what are being affirmed as 'new', 'drastic changes', or as 'post-mass media functions' followed by 'new technologies' were already identified by studies published well before these new technologies appeared.

But what could we regard as relevant changes within this digital era of communication? Concerning this question, some empirical evidence and grounds will be presented in order to indicate important transformations in some structures related to the public sphere. It is important to note that is not the intention of this paper to identify all the changes, but just to emphasize some aspects that seem relevant for an updated comprehension about how media systems are working currently and, what it means for the understanding of the contemporaneous public sphere.

Regarding this, one can observe predominantly news as usual, but there are some traditional communication practices that are strengthening pre-existing structures related to the public sphere and thus finding new levels of influence. It means old wine in new bottles, yet a wine becoming even better for democratic tastes. This article will now explore these structures and their expansion during the digital communication era in democratic countries.

Interpreting news with more sources and arguments than usual

Andrew Feenberg (2011: 03) reminds us that "technology is not an independent variable but is 'co-constructed' by the social forces it organizes and unleashes." Thus, in order to understand some important changes that the internet has been associated with, one need to take into account the social forces that organize its uses in the everyday life. In this regard, if internet is a worldwide technology, social forces and their structures are not. This means that the kinds of political systems, political cultures and civil society organization levels are crucial to understand some important processes that are expanding over the last decades. Considering this, we could conceive that, at least in democratic countries with a strong civic culture and a high level of political freedom, *some uses* of internet and SNSs are strengthening the second step flow of communication and probably the third step as well.

This third step occurs when audiences produce resources that affect news makers, eventually changing the patterns of news making, and indirectly the attitudes of political representatives as well. The inclusion of this third step in the political communication cycle is crucial since it depicts the multidirectional fluxes of influence that take place in the public sphere. This multidirectional approach overcomes the very linear scheme suggested by the original hypothesis of the two step flow of communication, which yet assume that there are effects coming from the media into the direction of the audiences. As we have seen above, these effects are 'limited' because between the audiences and the mass media there are the opinion leaders operating as one of the "intervening variables".

Missing in this scheme is the influence of audiences and opinion leaders affecting not just their followers, but the media system as well. Therefore a third step is necessary for transforming the hypothesis of the two step flow of communication from a linear scheme into a political communication cycle more alike with the two track model of political power conceived by Habermas (1996). Actually this more encompassing and cyclic approach was made clear by Katz (2005) in his recent introduction of his classical work *Personal Influence*, co-authored with Paul Lazarsfeld. In this introduction, Katz mentions the work of Gabriel Tarde and of Jürgen Habermas in order to present a political communication scheme where the influence is performed also by the audiences, producing effects both in the media, and in the political system:

> Both Tarde (1898) and Habermas (1989) may be said to have theorized a public sphere based on the sequence media-conversation-action. In Tarde´s scheme, the media deliver a menu of these political issues to the cafes and coffee shops and salons. Discussion of these issues percolate more 'considered opinions.´. These opinions circulate from café to café until they crystallize into Public Opinion, which feeds back to government, the media, and individual decisions. As already noted, it is obvious that the ´two-step flow´ media to conversation to opinion – has a major presence in these theories. (Katz, 2005: xxxiii).

This feedback coming from the audiences is a key feature of Habermas' conceptualization (2006) of the media system's role in political communication. But more than being an important normative feature of the media sys-

tem, it is impressive how this feedback (conceived here as the third step flow of communication [1]) has been implicitly indicated since the 19th century.

The good news about the internet is that this same flow is currently much more trackable than before. Evidence of that was also given by the study of Leskovec and colleagues (2009: 08) when they were able to observe that "there are also phrases that propagate in the opposite way, percolating in the blogosphere until they are picked up the news media.". More recently Neuman and colleagues (2014), through big data demonstrated the prominence of the "reverse pattern" in which bloggers and tweeters also set the public agenda. Such kind of empirical evidence gives support for

a) the hypothesis that "if a critical number of elite blogs and web sites focus their attention on a particular story, it can attract the interest of mainstream media outlets" (Correia, 2011: 45)

b) the assumption that the personal interactions and political mobilization throughout social networks "can help ideas that originate on the periphery of the political system to 'leak' into mainstream media and become publicly available on a large scale" (Maia, 2012: 94).

It is also important to emphasize that this 'reverse pattern' and this 'leaking' were not invented by bloggers or by the internet and thus should not be regarded as a 'drastic' change of communication practices. An example of this same process during the 'pre-internet era' was given by Daniel Hallin, who identified a change in the amount of the American coverage given to political issues. This amount decreased during the seventies, but it increased again due to criticism made by journalists and by the audiences:

> Just as early in the 1970s journalists were often criticized and criticized themselves for failing to focus on the candidates' image-making strategies, later they were taken to task for failing to deal with issues. And this criticism too seems to have produced significant change, with the percent of issue coverage turning back up. (HALLIN, 1992: 18).

This kind of change in coverage patterns supports the idea that in democratic societies there is a permanent interaction between media professionals

1. For a conceptualization of the third step flow of communication at stake as subsystem of the media system, i.e. the *critical-interpretative media subsystem*, see Braga (2006).

and their audiences, which through the interpretation of media content and the subsequent circulation of such interpretation can produce the third step flow of communication. In empirical terms, it means that the timing of news makers is different from the timing of audiences.

Incidentally this difference was also measured by Leskovec and colleagues (2009: 07), who observed that the "thread volume in news sources increases slowly but decrease quickly, while in blogs the increase is rapid and decrease much slower." A similar result was found by Xenos & Kim (2008: 496) regarding the time duration with which the blogosphere kept the Alito nomination under debate longer than the New York Times did.

One might assess such findings by a systemic perspective, which assumes that different social systems and its correspondent different communication practices perform specific roles in relation to public deliberation. Whereas the media system makes the public agenda discernible for the society as whole, offering a menu of the current topics and frames of the public discourse, the audiences appropriate, and eventually transform these discourses with its own pace, and within its own discursive arenas.

At the same time, the plurality and the different languages developed in these arenas offer the risk of making the public communication between the different social systems largely implausible. In order to overcome this problem, the key idea that makes the public sphere discernible in the context of pluralistic and highly differentiated societies is the *interlocking* of these arenas (Mendonça & Maia, 2012). Such interlocking has been translated during the last two decades by several scholars through the concept of deliberative system (Habermas, 2005; Maia, 2012; Mansbridge, 1999; Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012).

When one takes into account the political communication cycle described above, one realises that there are solid evidences that to some extent an intertwining of the three steps is taking place on and through the internet. Thus this communication technology is part of the deliberative system and not something apart as the widespread differentiation "offline x online" deliberation suggests. Actually the internet can be regarded as a communicative environment where all those steps have been developing.

Regarding specifically the second and third steps of the political communication cycle, from now on I would like to point out some important structu-

res related to the public sphere, that are being strengthened with some uses of the internet.

The informative system

The first structure is the informative system, which is more encompassing than the media system. Whereas the latter specializes in the production of visibility (public attention), the former concerns "the range of information that is *available* to citizens rather than the balance or otherwise of particular media outlets taken in isolation." (Page apud Parkinson, 2006: 106). The informative system intersects the media system and the educational system, working as an information repository with multiple layers and issues. When one finds some news that seems interesting, one can use these multiple layers and outlets in order to get more information, or to get involved with the subject matter (NGOs websites for example). The informative system is therefore especially important because "in their attempts to make sense of the world of public affairs, ordinary people are only partially dependent on media discourse." (Ferree et al, 2002: 16). Maia further explains this process:

> The mass media operate as a repertoire of perspectives, opinions, and discourses that accumulate through time. Citizens can critically examine this stock of information in their own time and in their own way to form their opinion and to engage in any debate that takes place in different social settings. (Maia, 2012: 119).

Some uses of the internet are strengthening the informative system, since the accessibility of its deepest layers has increased enormously. With the hypertext structure of the internet, it is easier to find out the meaning of words and concepts that would otherwise be taken for granted. In addition, the boosting of institutional communication on the internet has made it easier to access, for example, the opinion of a trade union about a strike announced in the media, or the Greenpeace's reasons that justify its disruptive actions. This is an improvement of the public debate structure since some of these reasons and justifications cannot be found in news media at all (see Lycarião, 2011).

Cleary such process is only possible if governmental agencies not constantly block the political content published online. Thus, in countries that assure reasonable levels of political liberties both online and offline, it is pos-

sible to notice a growing accessibility to opinions and perspectives of those who are usually mere subjects of news bulletins. When one takes into account that social movements, NGOs and political observatories are using the internet and SNSs in order to promote their own perspectives about public affairs, one realises that opinion leaders and news readers are able to interpret and make sense of the world of public affairs using more sources and arguments than usual.

Official transparency

Regarding the interdependence between the different steps that comprise the fluxes of political communication in the public sphere, there is another substructure extremely important for deliberative practices and which is being strengthened as well. It concerns *the official transparency*, which encompasses all media outlets and forms of communication provided by the State and by the political institutions in order to fulfil the publicity principle. For example the official gazettes, the broadcasting of public hearings and of parliamentary debates etc.

The importance of the official transparency lays on the limits of mass communication in providing a complete and exhaustive report on representatives actions, statements and so forth. These limits are inherent to the mediated communication of journalism since their focus lies on political elites, especially on those who have greater power within the political system. This focus is valuable for promoting “pressure on representatives and policymaking branches, which are asked to innovate.” (Maia, 2012: 162). In fact journalism often promotes accountability not only due to its focus on representatives and on political elites, but also due its criticism via various types of critical statements about those in power (Benson, 2010).

However, like any subsystem of the deliberative system, the media has also its shortcomings and limits. One of these is "that the public never has a chance to hear a candidate - or anyone else - speak for more than about 20 seconds.” (Hallin, 1992: 19). And if it is true for the representatives with greater power, the extension of information concerning those holding minor power within the political system turns out to be extremely concise in news media. Therefore a robust official transparency becomes extremely important in or-

der to deliver the more encompassing kind of information that is necessary for holding representatives, and the administrative power in general accountable.

Since the accessibility and extension of this kind of information increased enormously with the initiatives of digital democracy, so it is possible to infer that the level of official transparency was intensified as well. In Brazil, this kind of transparency was recently improved with the implementation of the E-Sic (Electronic System of the Information Office to Citizens), which is intended to be a low cost and inclusive tool of transparency (see Angélico & Teixeira, 2012). In addition, one can find on the official websites of the low and upper national chambers extensive and detailed accounts of representatives' statements, draft bills etc.

Regarding these initiatives of digital democracy, it should be acknowledged that the digital divide and faulty implementation of their normative goals are problems that need to be tackled (see Marques, 2008). Despite these problems, it is plausible to affirm that regarding representatives' statements and actions the current level of their accessibility does not have historical precedent in many democratic countries.

However, one could argue that this accessibility may not have important political effects since most ordinary citizens lack the necessary time and cognitive skills to decode all of this information which usually is made available through a rather bureaucratic language, or displayed on websites that are not user friendly at all. Indeed it is important to acknowledge that making information available is not enough if the information provided is incapable of obtaining resonance in the public sphere.

Taking this consideration into account, the role performed by organized civil society turns out to be rather relevant, especially concerning those organizations engaged in the examination and use of official transparency. This kind of organization makes official transparency politically meaningful as soon as the examination of public documents is able to unveil corruption and misuse of public resources by representatives. With this kind of information in hand, the capacity of grasping public attention increases significantly. For example, the NGO *Transparência Brasil* since 2000 has been conducting this kind of work and thus became an important source for quality dailies in Brazil, including both online and offline newspapers (see Lycarião & Sampaio, 2010). Therefore, it is possible to observe that information initially available only on the internet, often triggers a chain reaction and reaches the public sphere.

At the same time even in authoritarian countries the power of the microchip so far was followed by a major difficulty of dictatorial regimes in controlling information. On the other hand this should not be immediately regarded as an 'internet effect' since independently of the internet, radical media and grassroots communication tend to perform a stronger role in political communication in authoritarian countries, especially in periods of social-political crisis (see Downing, 2001). Furthermore, Kalathil and Boas (2001) present arguments and evidences that shed light on the capacity of authoritarian regimes to improve their surveillance skills in the long term through the use of new technologies, including the internet as the main tool for this purpose.

Even more worrying is the fact that such surveillance is most effective and pervasive not by the hands of authoritarian countries, but by a democratic one, i.e. via the tentacles of the National Security Agency (the NSA).

Therefore, it is pertinent to note that improving accessibility to new forms of communication and information is not enough for strengthening communicative power. For this, one need additional requirements that the technology by itself is not able to fulfil, such as a strong legal framework that assures individual rights, a widespread political trust on democracy and a civil society organized towards democratic goals.

Conclusion

This article has sought to endorse two arguments regarding the relationship between media systems and the public sphere taking into account the increasing role performed by political communication developed on and through the internet. For this purpose, it presented theoretical and empirical sources for each argument.

Regarding the first one, it supported the assertion that the media professionals still are specialized in the production of the public attention (visibility), and that news factors still can explain how this public attention is shaped. Nevertheless it is not so important for this argument who produces the mass communication (news makers content x user-generated online content), but the kind of relationship that this communication establishes between citizens and the political actors and that can be explained recurring to news factors. In light of that, it was possible to point out that the public attention remains

focused on the political elites, and that the institutional structures of the political system is a variable much more important to explain the variances of who comprise these elites than the technology that is used for promoting political communication in large scale.

The second argument was that in the digital communication era two very important structures of the public sphere became more robust in many democratic countries. The structures at stake regard the informative system, and the official transparency. With some uses of the internet, these structures expanded their effectiveness and thus both the accessibility of public debates and the transparency of government actions improved to an unprecedented level for many democratic countries.

Nevertheless, this does not necessarily means that these same democratic societies have been standing progressively closer to the normative conception of public sphere. It is worth to recollect that the public sphere is normatively conceived as a sort of power that should constrain the political system in order to keep this system accountable to the public debate and in order to guarantee the democratic legitimacy of political decisions (Habermas, 1996). Notwithstanding Habermas himself has been arguing in his most recent works (2012; 2014) that the internationalisation and the enlargement of the financial markets vis-à-vis the limited and weakened power of the national state depicts a picture where – rather than by the public sphere – the political system has been seized by market forces.

In order to break this trend, much more than new technologies, a higher level of deliberative democracy requires new political instruments and a new dominant cultural framework that might be able to extend the political power to the level that democracy needs for advancing its unfinished project, i.e. the international level. Otherwise the communicative power forged on and through the internet will not be able to be translated in administrative power.

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