

# Public opinion, paywalls and “snacking news”

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The media’s role in shaping public opinion has been diluted in the digital environment. This is an environment that the media do not control and in which they act without knowing clearly what their role is. The media no longer have the hegemony of symbolic power (Thompson, 1985), which now also falls on millions of citizens who have become an active audience and who are connected and who keep themselves informed through social networks (Masip *et al.*, 2015). The news generated by the information media is epistemologically matched in the Internet browsers with the rest of the information generated by other sources and which is not necessarily created with informative intentionality. The difficulty involved in the media fitting into this metamorphosis of the public sphere is the first focus of this text. In addition, the media are also unclear on how to compete with the other actors who coexist in the digital locus and whether their erratic participation guarantees them economic survival. Therefore, the second objective is to analyse, in the context of this structural transformation, some decisions that the media have made, such as establishing paywalls, in an attempt to obtain the economic viability of journalistic companies. These decisions could undoubtedly generate an information gap between citizens, thus resulting in a reduction in pluralism and threatening democracy (Picckard & Williams, 2014), as the media, paradoxically, become “agents of exclusion” (Benson, 2019, p. 147).

## From illustrated salons to digital locus

The concept of “public opinion” has been marked since its birth, in the eighteenth century, by its communicative nature and its political connotations, as it emerged as an expression of an intellectual elite’s desire to participate in government decision-making (Habermas, 1989). Originally, public opinion was an emanation of enlightened ideals and the search for *correct solutions* obtained through reason and rational dialogue, what Habermas calls “communicative rationality” (Habermas, 1984). Conse-

quently, public opinion was perceived as a form of knowledge because it was linked to a notion of “truth” that was possible and achievable. With the advent of fully democratic systems in the twentieth century, the concept of “public opinion” remained and even deepened its communicative nature thanks to the emergence of the mass media. However, its political dimension significantly changed: if at first public opinion mainly referred to the opinion of the intellectual elites, it later began to designate, in a somewhat imprecise way, what the social majorities thought about the shared issues of social life, especially politics. With this change, it was no longer a question of finding the best solutions for collective problems through communicative rationality, but rather of guiding and directing the opinion of society as a whole so that individuals would choose one solution or another, one political option or another. However, the solution that wins is not the *best*, but rather the one chosen by the majority (Mañas, 2016).

Therefore, it is the context that marks the concept of “public opinion” in each historical period. Among the most important elements of this context are, dialectically linked, the political and social structures in which the context develops, and also the technological instruments with which public opinion has been formed and expressed at every moment. It is reasonable to think, therefore, that if socio-political structures and technological instruments change, the concept of “public opinion” will also necessarily change.

Social communication has been interested in public opinion, especially in the role played by the mass media in shaping it, in the context of liberal democracies and the mass media since the second half of the twentieth century. This interest has been reflected, above all, in research on agenda-setting and framing (McCombs *et al.*, 2014). This research, following a Habermas perspective, analyses the media’s capacity to provide the population with topics of public and private discussion, and also studies the terms in which these discussions are carried out (Dahlgren, 2005). From a sociological perspective, information transmitted by the media helps to *build* societies, and generates a sense of community belonging (Anderson, 1983). All this fuelled the idea of a public opinion, conveyed almost exclusively through the media, which was perceived as homogeneous, consensual and identified with an agora in which everyone could participate (as a spectator) and then (individually and privately) engage in conversations on a limited set of issues facilitated by the media themselves. Thus, the mass media were positioned as a kind of intermediary between reality and citizenship, in the sense that citizens could basically only access the social reality facilitated by the media. Given the centrality of the media and the journalistic profession’s standardized use of professional techniques, it is possible to think about the existence of shared debates within

each society. Moreover, despite the differences in media bias, the terms of the debate were transversal to the set of media.

The emergence of digital media and, in the new millennium, of social networks has resulted in substantial changes in this paradigm, to the point that profound transformation of the concept of "public opinion" is beginning to be considered. This transformation pivots on two axes:

- a) The emergence of new actors who interfere in the classical mediation function of the mass media. Among these new actors are the same news protagonists (politicians, institutions, celebrities, athletes, etc., as well as social network influencers and new opinion leaders) who can now communicate directly with their audiences without any media intervention. Journalists have now internalized, as an added professional routine, using these interventions on social networks as a source, especially in the case of Twitter (Eldridge *et al.*, 2019). At the same time we also have active audiences who do not limit themselves to being mere spectators of the information provided by the media, but rather participate in the communication process by commenting, sharing and evaluating the news. These users give visibility to some news and condemn the irrelevance of other news (Bro & Wallberg, 2015) without following the classic criteria of *news values* that media have used in the past (García-Perdomo *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, audiences, that is, private individuals, acquire a status of "secondary gatekeeper" from the moment that the exposure to the news, through digital platforms, comes not only from the news disseminated directly by the media, but also from friends, family and social groups of all kinds, both public and private (Crawford *et al.*, 2015).
- b) The same social media platforms, using big data and developing algorithms and artificial intelligence, have applied their own forms of news selection that largely condition what information reaches people, based on opaque criteria and, ultimately, applying the commercial logic typical of these platforms (Lewis & Westlund, 2015).

This transformation has affected, first, the *locus* of public opinion, that is, the public sphere. In the eighteenth century public opinion was formed in the clubs, cafés, institutions and by a nascent press; in the twentieth century the *locus* par excellence was the mass media. However, now, with digital information, the public sphere has progressively moved to the Internet, where the information provided by digital versions of the media coexists on an equal footing with statements from institutions, associations and individuals (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018). The information from all of these sources is conveyed by the same digital platforms, and

therefore subject to the *technological affordances* of each platform and the uses that people give to the capacities made available to them.

This does not mean that the media have disappeared as news providers for fuelling social debates. For example, different studies in Spain have all found that television is still the main means used by people to keep themselves informed; however, audio-visual information is mainly being consumed outside the media, on YouTube, Facebook and even on private messaging networks (Newman *et al.*, 2021). Likewise, one of the main uses of social networks is to search for information, but only 25% of people search for news in the actual media that produce it. Rather, people search through social networks or Google, or they *find* the news in instant messaging services, in a phenomenon known as *News Finds Me* (Gil de Zúñiga & Zicheng, 2021).

New forms of information consumption have appeared in this new environment, and they are far from the news hierarchies and interpretations proposed by the media. On the contrary, people look for specific news items, adjusted to their interests, meet with others and pick up news here and there in a phenomenon that we could call “*snacking news*”, in many cases the result of chance (Van Damme *et al.*, 2019). The media’s role, therefore, has been diluted in the *locus* of the digital environment, which the media do not control. Moreover, the media no longer know exactly what their role is or how they can compete with the rest of the actors present in this environment. They are also not clear whether this participation in the digital *locus* guarantees them a seriously compromised economic survival.

The digital *locus*, moreover, has not been designed from the logic of communicative rationality, but rather it has been shaped by a commercial logic in which marketing is much more decisive than the defence of democratic values. This does not mean that the classic mass media did not also have a commercial logic, since they did aim to be economically profitable; however, in that logic there was room for a conception of public opinion in which a certain idea of general interest and a unified debate on issues relevant to society could still be proposed. In the digital *locus*, however, fragmentation is imposed (the “segmentation of markets” typical of marketing), both of specific audiences and the segmentation provided by the various platforms and the different uses that people give to these platforms. Moreover, this logic of the social networks has even been transferred to the information media themselves (Tandoc & Vos, 2016).

Therefore, communicative rationality, understood as a form of knowledge, is replaced by the use of information, or what people increasingly perceive as information, as another resource with which to reaffirm their own identity (Byung-Chul, 2021) and whose purpose is to generate con-

crete communities focused on specific purposes. The algorithms used by platforms to provide news exacerbate this reaffirmation of the self, reiterating preferences already expressed in advance (Pariser, 2012), and thanks to which digital platforms are able to develop consumption profiles with which to obtain an economic benefit.

If the original notion of public opinion was to go beyond individual opinions to communicationally reach a general opinion (Mañas, 2016), and in the golden age of the mass media public opinion became a fundamental justification of democratic systems, with social networks these previous conceptions have taken an 180° turn and the particular, the individual, rises to the category of the communicatively substantial and is placed as a central element. The digital *locus* is not that agora in which the citizenry could participate, even passively, in the general debates, but rather it constitutes a refuge of individuality in which the subject can actively build their own debate, or choose a specific debate in which to participate, using heterogeneous materials, among which are the news provided by the media. This news, however, is epistemologically equal to the rest of the materials made available through social networks, which are not generated by the media and which are not necessarily created with informative intentionality.

As Pickard (2020) points out, when analysing the press crisis in a society of disinformation, the journalism crisis is a threat to democracy. The transformation of the public sphere described here has also meant the structural collapse of commercial journalism, which is exploring new models so as not to sink completely. It is difficult to think of a democracy without newspapers, as Jefferson has already pointed out. However, this search for a profitable model cannot mean that the commercial logic of the press acts by turning its back on its democratic commitments.

### The “original sin” of free of charge

Alan Mutter, journalist and CEO of three different Silicon Valley companies, considered that the “original sin” of traditional media was giving away online news content for free (Mutter, 2009). As Pickard & Williams (2014) pointed out, a few years later, an increasing number of journalistic companies tried to redeem this sin by charging for their online content. The paper press has historically always charged for its content; however, this new characteristic emerged with its digital transformation and the uncertain search for a business model that fostered the culture of free. As explained by Goyanes *et al.* (2022), the Internet is generally considered to be a medium that propagates a democratic ideal and, therefore, the consumption of news in this medium is related to its corresponding

*ethos* (democracy), which can lead to a different culture, that is, to a culture of the free. This *ethos* was already present in the beginnings of the Internet, for example, in the Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace by John Perry Barlow, when he describes a world in which “all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth”, and where “your legal concepts of property, expression, identity, movement, and context” cannot be applied (Barlow, 1996). It is the context in which the “free” mentality takes root (Dou, 2004). In fact, various studies have found that one of the reasons that citizens choose not to pay for information is that there is a free information content alternative on the web (American Press Institute, 2017; Newman *et al.*, 2021; Groot, 2022).

There are two worrying data items involved in the relationship between citizenship, information and democracy, according to the Digital News Report Spain 2022. First, the percentage of people who do not trust the news in general (39%) exceeds those who usually do (32%). Second, one-third of respondents (35%) often or sometimes avoid staying informed about the news. To which we must add another fact: the majority of the respondents (67%) say they do not pay anything for obtaining information, either in printed or digital format. The number of people who do pay for digital news, remained stable at around 12% in recent years, 11.7% in 2021 (Vara-Miguel *et al.*, 2022). Some studies indicate that, in a context of disinformation, during the pandemic, subscriptions to digital newspapers increased in the search for trustworthy and quality information (Masip *et al.*, 2020).

During 2020, the year of the pandemic, the main Spanish media began to charge for their digital news, thus accentuating a process that had been started the previous year by other newspapers (Vara-Miguel, 2021). According to the Digital News Report Spain 2022, El País online (with paywall) retains its leadership as an information medium with a large weekly online audience, although it loses three percentage points compared to the previous year. In second place is the right-wing newspaper Okdiario.com (13%), which also leads the digital native media. The third place is occupied by a generalist television channel, Antena3 online (13%). It has displaced another digital native, Eldiario.es (12%), which now occupies the sixth position followed by Elconfidencial.com (12%), another digital native. These audience figures show that the digital native media has established themselves among the media with the highest audience and, in fact, the percentage of online readers of the main national newspapers already exceeds the percentage of offline readers (Kaufmann-Argueta, 2022). Digital media in Spain had 750,000 digital subscriptions in 2021, 90% more than in 2020, according to sector data. However, we must bear in mind, as stated by the Madrid Press Association (2020), that “there is

little verified information on the number of readers who formalize digital subscriptions”. In general, it is difficult to obtain data on digital subscription numbers or revenue (Myllylahti, 2013). However, beyond the important economic considerations involved in establishing paywalls, the concern is whether this decision, as we have pointed out, affects citizens and to what extent.

In this sense, the Digital News Report Spain 2020 uses the concept of *media poverty* to define the situation of people with lower incomes who would not have access to quality information when payment systems are established. One third of Spanish Internet users (33%) believe that paying for news would prevent others or themselves from accessing the news (35%). As the report states, this concern is especially felt by people who have a more diverse and intense media consumption, are concerned about the independence of journalism in democracy and are willing to pay for access to information. From an ideological point of view, netizens closest to leftist positions are more concerned (38%) than those on the right (30%) (Negredo *et al.*, 2020).

Paywalls limit pluralism by further restricting voices and views in the press (Pickard & Williams, 2014). In its report “Information as a Public Good”, UNESCO (2021) warned that, as the media are oriented towards serving their own paid subscribers, they may risk becoming more partisan “and serving an audience only what it wants to hear”. In a survey of 246 media leaders in 52 countries in December 2021 by the Reuters Institute, nearly half of the respondents (47%) were concerned that subscription models could be “super-serving richer and more educated audiences and leaving others behind” (Newman, 2022). Therefore, some media are experimenting with more inclusive models. This is the case of The Daily Maverick in South Africa, which offers a “pay what you can pay” model, or eldiario.es in Spain, which allows people who can’t pay anything access to information (Newman, 2022). As Benson (2019) states, as the press was in such a hurry to resolve the financial crisis, they forgot the civic challenge of educating and involving all citizens.

Myllylahti (2013) considers that charging for news content generates a new digital divide, and also raises the issue of what happens when the newspaper that erects the wall is financed with public funds. This issue points to a democratic contradiction: public financing, private access. By way of example, public sponsorship is the second source of funding in 193 cybermedia in Catalonia and 55 cybermedia in the Basque Country (Salaverria *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, leading media that have paywalls are among these cybermedia subsidized to promote the Catalan and Basque languages.

It is also necessary to determine empirically whether, as the literature states, there is a relationship between paywalls and quality information.

O'Brien *et al.* (2020) reviewed the literature on the factors that contribute to the audience's willingness to pay for information. They found that, as awareness of quality increases, the willingness to pay also increases. However, they are critical because many studies do not provide a clear definition of "quality". Chen & Thorson (2021) also analyse studies that relate the perception of quality information and the willingness to pay for that information. Being well informed about public affairs and politics is crucial in a democracy. If this depends on an economic capacity, the *watch-dog* function of digital journalism is put in question, since it is not aimed at the entire population, but only at a part of the (well-informed) audience (Tóth *et al.*, 2022). According to the Digital News Report 2021 (Newman *et al.*, 2021), the vast majority of the population is still not prepared to pay for online news, and warns that "with more high-quality content disappearing behind paywalls there are pressing concerns about what happens to those who have limited interest or who can't afford it."

Benson (2019) warns that even if subscriptions contribute to higher quality news, if that news does not reach a wide audience, it will not solve the problem of an uninformed and distrustful citizenry. In addition, paywalls fragment the audience size based on the number of subscribers. As Tóth *et al.* (2022) states, the paywall strategies limit democracy because low-income citizens do not have the same opportunity to educate themselves and stay informed as high-income citizens. In addition, among other issues, it could mean leaving a large part of society in the hands of a journalism that seeks to obtain audiences at any price.

## Final considerations

The theoretical approach to the transformations of the concept of "public opinion" cannot only take into account the technological dimension, represented by the communication infrastructure provided by social networks. It must also incorporate, from a holistic viewpoint, the changes in the political, social, economic and cultural spheres that have been operating in recent decades, and that different authors, such as Beck, detected long ago, "The basic figure of fully developed modernity is the single person....The form of existence of the single person is not a deviant case along the path of modernity. It is the archetype of the fully developed labour market society. The negation of social ties that takes effect in the logic of the market begins in its most advanced stage to dissolve the prerequisites for lasting companionship" (Beck, 1992, pp. 122-123). Integrating the different elements that converge in the concept of "public opinion" is the only way to allow the development of a new conceptualization of public opinion or its definitive disappearance as an operational

concept. However, the disappearance of the concept would imply a democracy without information, without journalism, as we have understood it until now; that is, it would not be a democracy. The concept of public opinion, with or without Habermas, implies that in democracy the citizen needs information to make political decisions. The citizen requires a minimum epistemological dimension (Masip *et al.*, 2019), and it is necessary to establish or at least approach, in further research, what this minimum is. The economic viability of digital media is very complex in a high-choice environment, but formulas must be sought that do not involve informational discrimination against citizens based on their economic capacity. Paywalls further fragment the audience, and distance the press from what normative theories establish and what is considered one of its fundamental roles: fostering a citizenship informed with the same set of facts (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Because, as Byung-Chul (2022) points out, we are running the risk of losing the common world.

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