

Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies

Volume 14 Number 2

© 2022 Intellect Ltd Editorial. English language. https://doi.org/10.1386/cjcs_00067_2

EDITORIAL

ADOLFO CARRATALÁ

Universitat de València

MARIA IRANZO-CABRERA

Universitat de València

GUILLERMO LÓPEZ-GARCÍA

Universitat de València

Communication and dissent: Competing voices in a post-truth world

There is a saying that the first victim of any war is the truth. Yet in a disinformation context like that we find nowadays, where there are apparently as many truths as reports defended in the public sphere, it seems hard to reach a consensus about which was the first to be defeated on the battle front. Although lies and fake news have been included in war coverage for some time, as evidenced by the way that William Randolph Hearst treated the Spanish–American war in 1898 with the *New York Herald*, today disinformation has flooded the yellow journalism field and affected the whole communication system; and now the mass media share it with many other key stakeholders. One clear example of this is the invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops that started in February this year. Along with missiles and tanks, lies have formed part of the offensive led by Vladimir Putin. His attempts to reinterpret

Delivered by Intellect to:

Intellect Ltd (id22687532)

IP: 92.232.118.72

On: Wed, 09 Nov 2022 11:53:41

www.intellectbooks.com 179

the attack on the children's hospital in Mariupol or him denying the massacre in Bucha demonstrate this. Albeit not a new phenomenon, disinformation has more chances today than ever to influence citizenship which, according to the 2022 Reuters Institute Digital News Report, is extremely concerned about this problem, and increasingly avoids the news given about certain themes, such as the war or the pandemic, which are perfect fields for fake news. Information is principally consumed through digital media and social networks, where news incidentally appear (Gil de Zúñiga and Diehl 2019), and where debate and remarks are enjoyed. And so it is in this scenario where the dissent that is inseparable from public debate often becomes noise and conspiracy-type narratives to which society is increasingly exposed, as pointed out by some recent studies of the Pew Research Center, among others.

BEYOND THE MEDIA: REALITY(IES) DISCUSSED

Journalism's mediator task, a determining factor that allows us to know the world whose dimensions exceed our empirical and essential experience and to share a representation of the reality surrounding us (Shehata and Strömbäck 2014), has been one of the reasons with which the mass media have traditionally sought to establish their claim to citizenship (Schudson 2008). In his works about information and democracy, Lippmann (1922) considered that the mass media's intervention was necessary to help society at the beginning of the twentieth century to understand an increasingly more complex and vast environment. However, he warned that the news and the truth were not the same, and the mass media tended to boil down reality to a set of stereotypes that are easily acceptable by an audience that was neither too eager to make the effort nor too involved (Zaller 1992). Certainly the creation of citizen consensus by mass media favours shaping up the key public opinion to build up majorities and to channel debate in democracies. Modelling the perception of the majority of citizens of what is happening around them also poses obvious propaganda and social manipulation risks (Herman and Chomsky 2021). In the face of this threat, alternative mass media, which are often driven by social movements, have defended readings that differ from the interpretation of power (Atkinson 2010).

This critical observation of the hegemonic media report does not, however, deny the necessary role they play as interpreters of social reality (Palau-Sampio and López-García 2022). Today this role is seen as being more committed than ever by the competence of voices that contend the representation of a world characterized by an unprecedented complexity and growing uncertainty (Davis 2019). The combination of a disconcerting reality and journalistic disintermediation (Deuze 2017) in today's hybrid communication system (Chadwick 2017) provides reports about our lives detached from factual truths (Bimber and Gil de Zúñiga 2020).

This present discredit-like context of what have been generators of public opinion to date, such as journalism and political institutions (Sánchez-Cuenca 2022), is penetrated by a post-truth concept (Harsin 2015). This term indicates emotion and personal beliefs as sources of the truth as opposed to facts and data. This fits the datified society that van Dijck defines (2014) and gives way to a capitalist regime, which apparently resembles freedom and unlimited transparency, but is actually a merciless domain of information completely hidden among our day-to-day practices, where social media occupy an increasingly important position (Han 2022).

Social media's responsibility in the production and peak of the post-truth (Hannan 2018) places the ambivalence of these technologies as tools at the

Delivered by Intellect to:

Intellect Ltd (id22687532)

IP: 92.232.118.72

On: Wed, 09 Nov 2022 11:53:41

heart of social and academic debate to reinforce democratic societies. On the one hand, these platforms have been revealed as resources that favour citizenship's empowerment (Leong et al. 2019). This is evidenced by cyberactivism experiences, which is proof of the opportunities that the so-called connective action offers (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), and also by the overseeing of power over the internet (Feenstra and Casero-Ripollés 2014). Hence they represent very important instruments to exercise critical dissent, and are, thus, useful, for generating messages that counterweight the manipulating temptation of the media discourses controlled by the political-economic structure. On the other hand however, social networks have also been decisive in the appearance and promotion of phenomena that weaken and threaten co-existence in the plurality of today's societies. The hate speech and populist rhetoric, which are basically stirred by the extreme-rightwing parties that have become increasingly important in recent years, have found a best possible diffusion support in the digital space (Ben-David and Fernández 2016; Gerbaudo 2018), and often via the pseudo-media that spread disinformation (Palau-Sampio and Carratalá 2022), but conventional media have also contributed to the success of these social polarization-based political strategies (Krzyżanowski and Ekström 2022). Likewise, instant messaging services (Schwaiger et al. 2022) and social networks (Kauk et al. 2021) are privileged channels for spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories, as COVID-19 pandemic experience shows (Johnson et al. 2022; Moreno-Castro et al. 2021).

Disinformation flows travel at breathtaking speed (Vosoughi et al. 2018). They also travel through the private spaces used for interpersonal communication, which makes their origin hard to find. In an attempt to stop, or at least to counteract, the negative effects of these post-truth reports, fact-checking initiatives have appeared worldwide. Their roots lie mostly in journalistic firms, and they also attempt to re-legitimize the profession. All in all, several studies have questioned their effectiveness, particularly when the result of checks does not coincide with the audience's previous views (Hameleers and van der Meer 2020).

OUTLINE OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

A three-day conference, organized by Mediaflows research group at the Universitat de València and the Universidad Internacional Menéndez Pelayo on 27 and 29 October 2021, is the origin of this Special Issue entitled 'Communication and Dissent: Competing Voices in a Post-truth World'. During this encounter, reflections were made about using communication as an instrument with which to build versions of reality which have little or nothing to do with factual truths, but end up on an endless list of fake news and conspiracy-like theories. Nonetheless, the role of communication as a tool with which to challenge official discourses and to monitor today's democratic systems was also explored. This relation between communication and dissent, between information and polarization, between alternative discourses and manipulated claims, is that which nineteen authors in this monograph deal with, and is made up of six scientific articles and two viewpoints.

The relevance of YouTube in the consumption of information has grown significantly as opposed to the established media. The possibilities provided by YouTube permit creators to attempt to normalize their ideas and carry out their cultural and discursive battle for hegemony by creating alternative media that allow them to bypass journalistic filters and broadcast their own framing.

In its contents, Jose Gamir-Ríos and Miguel Ibáñez-Cuquerella focus on the dissemination of right-wing activism messages in Spain. In the paper entitled “‘Fascist Heroes’ vs. progressive policies and political correctness: Agenda and framing of the Spanish Alt-lite microcelebrities on YouTube”, they analyse the content and discourse of 406 videos published by five Spanish right-wing YouTubers. Regarding the topics of their agendas, these activists consider both their identity and public freedom to be under attack from feminist, multi-culturalist and progressive positions. The general framing is based on lack of explicit supremacism, the use of cultural rather than racial arguments, the recourse to offensive humour and the absence of a propositional dimension. The scarce presence of issues, such as White identity, immigration, nationalism and globalism, usually polarizing for right-wing parties, evidences the discursively renewed character of this movement and its intention to move away from the appearance of traditional far-right populism.

Nevertheless, the extreme right-wing populist rhetoric remains in other digital channels, where it found a forum that favours promoting its dichotomy-type message between good and evil, or between ‘us’ and ‘them’. This last strategy, which is frequently applied to provide clearly anti-immigration discourse, is that studied by Antonia Olmos Alcaraz in her work ‘Populism and racism on social networks: An analysis of the Vox discourse on Twitter during the Ceuta “migrant crisis”’. In it she analyses the Vox extreme right-wing political party’s communication on social networks during the two weeks after thousands of people from Morocco entered Spain in May 2021. The tweets published by Vox at the time contributed to represent what happened with a threat, with the migrating people taken as a criminal enemy for the Spanish population, which would justify a repressive response. Therefore, that investigation work deals with this message as a responsible factor for an increase, radicalization and normalization of racism, which has also been noted in other European countries and in the United States in a context in which hate speech occupies an increasingly leading position in the public sphere. The ease with which this message is diffused over social networks, particularly by Twitter, is one of the central discussion points of that work. It represents a significant contribution to study how the normalization of racism emerges as one of the most worrying results of the far-rightwing’s strategic use of digital communication to build and spread its radical discourse.

Another of the populist discourse characteristics, namely political opponents’ offence, is at the forefront of the next work in the monograph. With a view to knowing the way in which the mass media have faced dealing with the healthcare crisis with its opinion discourse, the work ‘The pandemic as a political weapon: Analysis of Spanish press editorials during the COVID-19 health crisis’, signed by Anna Mateu, Lucía Sapiña and Martí Domínguez, analyses how the four main newspapers of Spain expressed themselves between January 2020 and August 2021 when faced with this challenge. Its results point out that the editorials privileged political comments when dealing with the healthcare situation. The fact that unscientific or denial considerations related to the origin of the virus, or to the efficacy of vaccines, were lacking would indicate a responsible use of the editorial article that is, however, compromised by the observed partisan use, especially among the conservatory press. That investigation shows that these newspapers used the article by means of which they channelled their institutional voice to attack the Government. The predominance of combative editorials also materializes in the frequent use of *ad hominem* attacks that particularly focused on the President of the Spanish

Government, Pedro Sánchez. The authors underline that this editorial strategy compromises a suitable journalistic analysis of such a complex matter like a pandemic, while also favouring social polarization by a similar discourse to that of extreme rightwing populism.

However in the digital environment, social networks also offer uses that favour citizenship's communicative and social well-being. Laura Alonso and Andreu Casero-Ripollés check it regarding WhatsApp users in their work entitled 'Does population size matter? Political participation of citizens through mobile instant messaging services depending on the place of residence'. This text analyses how citizens employ this communication service by means of WhatsApp in 200 towns in the Valencian Community (Spain). With an online survey conducted with 1202 citizens, the different ways that users employ this service – information, participation and engagement –, their level of satisfaction and its usefulness for them are observed. They observe that the Town Council's WhatsApp service has greater penetration in smaller municipalities. Regarding its use, it is stressed how residents in small towns use it more for informational purposes, while residents in medium and large ones participate more and employ it more frequently to register for the services offered by the Town Council, as well as to raise doubts about the management run by the municipal corporation. This may also be caused by the fact that politics in large- and medium-sized towns is considerably impersonal as opposed to small towns, where interactions between the local government and citizens are much more direct. In general, users are satisfied with this service, but they do not consider it a useful tool for accountability or for control of power.

Along these lines, the work by researchers Onintza Odriozola Irizar, Iker Iraola Arretxe and Ane Larrinaga Renteria, entitled "What tools should we use?" Politicized youths' perspectives on digital activism in the Basque Country', explores the opportunities that the internet, especially social networks, offer for pro-independence nationalist youths' mobilizing and political practice in the open times after ETA ended. By means of in-depth semi-structured interviews held with 22 activists, these authors closely examine their perceptions and evaluations of the role that digital tools play in their political practice. Their research results point out that Basque youths take an ambivalent approach to digital technologies as tools for activism. On the one hand, they observe that the internet is seen as a space where the socialization of collective initiatives that address protest has many possibilities. On the other hand however, these political subjects acknowledge that cyberactivism does not completely dominate their protest/manifestation practices because they believe that physically occupying a space is still an extremely relevant strategy.

On the wide variety of discourses, especially regarding misinformation and disinformation practices, Dafne Calvo, Lidia Valera-Ordaz, Marina Requena i Mora and Germán Llorca-Abad wonder how society perceives today's fact-checking processes. In the work entitled 'Fact-checking in Spain: Perception and trust', the above-cited authors analyse the views of 42 Spaniards divided into seven discussion groups according to their age, political ideology, level of education, employment status and socio-economic status. The results evidence general lack of knowledge about the checking platforms that presently operate in the Spanish mass media context. Despite such lack of knowledge, the generalized perception is that they are polarized and used in the service of different ideological spheres. The interviewed citizens indicate very primitive checking practices, such as employing search engines, comparing the data offered by traditional mass media (especially newspapers)

and consulting family relations and friends, who they consider to be reliable sources of information. The participants believe that stopping this disinformation flow must lie in mass media education, but also in punishment and monitoring.

In this digital setting, where public opinion, the post-truth, populism, polarization and political communication (the '5 Ps') interact, Nicola Ferrigni, Matteo Pietropaoli and Marica Spalletta wonder if talking about 'what is public' makes sense. To answer this question, they perform a sociological literature review about the 5 Ps, five characteristics that define the social, political and communication relations of today's society. The researchers highlight that a public space as a common base for citizenship is lacking and we find ourselves in a context where self-advertising and arbitrary self-representation predominate. The new social individual does not want to be the 'masse', but a unique person who withdraws in the intimacy of his or her post-truth, and whose own opinion favours polarization and populism. Ultimately, the new version of 'what is public' is contributing to create a new model of democracy, which is not favoured by the over-abundance of information, misinformation and disinformation.

It is at this point when Andrei Richter wonders if the human right to (spread) lies exists and considers the possibility of developing an international right to know the truth. On the one hand, governments seek the ways and means with which to reduce the flow of false information and, by doing so, to diminish the social harm that it causes; on the other hand, suppressing alternative political voices from the pretext of forbidding disinformation in personal communications and in mass media might actually be possible. This has been the case in Russia after it started war against Ukraine. According to Richter, abusing the democratic right and politics in this sense leads to the creation of a 'governmental monopoly of information'.

Breaking away from routine, from what is known, what has recurrently hit the global society in recent years, opens up a space of uncertainty in which communication processes only seem to increase our confusion with journalism practice that is excelled by dissident discourses which promote disinformation. The works that this monograph contains attempt to shed some light on this uncertainty by means of the investigations and reflections that understand this phenomenon as a challenge for democratic societies.

FUNDING

The English translation of this article has been funded by the Conselleria d'Innovació, Universitat, Ciència i Societat Digital of the Generalitat Valenciana aimed at the celebration of the 'Dissent and communication: Voices and discourses in the era of alternative facts' conference (reference: AORG/2021/025). This work is part of the R&D 'Flujos de desinformación, polarización y crisis de la intermediación mediática (Disflows)' project, funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation and the State Research Agency (PID2020-113574RB-I00).

REFERENCES

- Atkinson, J. D. (2010), *Alternative Media and Politics of Resistance: A Communication Perspective*, New York: Peter Lang.
- Ben-David, A. and Matamoros Fernández, A. (2016), 'Hate speech and covert discrimination on social media: Monitoring the Facebook pages

Delivered by Intellect to:

Intellect Ltd (id22687532)

IP: 92.232.118.72

On: Wed, 09 Nov 2022 11:53:41

- of extreme-right political parties in Spain', *International Journal of Communication*, 10, pp. 1167–193.
- Bennett, W. L. and Segerberg, A. (2012), 'The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics', *Information, Communication & Society*, 15:5, pp. 739–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661>. Accessed 22 June 2022.
- Bimber, B. and Gil de Zúñiga, H. (2020), 'The unedited public sphere', *New Media & Society*, 22:4, pp. 700–15, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819893980>. Accessed 22 June 2022.
- Chadwick, A. (2017), *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Davis, A. (2019), *Political Communication: A New Introduction for Crisis Times*, London: John Wiley & Sons.
- Deuze, M. (2017), 'Understanding journalism as newswork: How it changes, and how it remains the same', *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 5:2, pp. 4–24, <https://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.61>. Accessed 22 June 2022.
- Feenstra, R. A. and Casero-Ripollés, A. (2014), 'Democracy in the digital communication environment: A typology proposal of political monitoring processes', *International Journal of Communication*, 8, pp. 2448–68, <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/2815/1225>. Accessed 22 June 2022.
- Gerbaudo, P. (2018), 'Social media and populism: An elective affinity?', *Media, Culture & Society*, 40:5, pp. 745–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02F0163443718772192>. Accessed 22 June 2022.
- Gil de Zúñiga H. and Diehl T. (2019), 'News finds me perception and democracy: Effects on political knowledge, political interest, and voting', *New Media & Society*, 21:6, pp. 1253–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818817548>. Accessed 22 June 2022.
- Hameleers, M. and van der Meer, T. G. L. A. (2020), 'Misinformation and polarization in a high-choice media environment: How effective are political fact-checkers?', *Communication Research*, 47:2, pp. 227–50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650218819671>. Accessed 22 June 2022.
- Han, B.-C. (2022) *Infocracia*, Barcelona: Taurus.
- Hannan, J. (2018), 'Trolling ourselves to death? Social media and post-truth politics', *European Journal of Communication*, 33:2, pp. 214–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02F0267323118760323>. Accessed 22 June 2022.
- Harsin, J. (2015), 'Regimes of posttruth, postpolitics, and attention economies', *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 8:2, pp. 327–33, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ccr.12097>. Accessed 22 June 2022.
- Herman, E. S. and Chomsky, N. (2021), 'Manufacturing consent', in L. Chorbajian (ed.), *Power and Inequality*, New York: Routledge, pp. 198–206.
- Johnson, T. J., Wallace, R. and Lee, T. (2022), 'How social media serve as a super-spreader of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories regarding health crises', in J. H. Lipschultz, K. Freberg and R. Luttrell (eds.), *The Emerald Handbook of Computer-Mediated Communication and Social Media*, Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, pp. 67–84. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80071-597-420221005>. Accessed 30 June 2022.
- Kauk, J., Kreysa, H. and Schweinberger, S. R. (2021), 'Understanding and countering the spread of conspiracy theories in social networks: Evidence from epidemiological models of Twitter data', *Plos one*, 16:8, p. e0256179, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0256179>. Accessed 22 June 2022.
- Krzyżanowski, M. and Ekström, M. (2022), 'The normalization of far-right populism and nativist authoritarianism: Discursive practices in media,

- journalism and the wider public sphere/s', *Discourse & Society*, 3 June, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F09579265221095406>. Accessed 15 June 2022.
- Leong, C., Pan, S. L., Bahri, S. and Fauzi, A. (2019), 'Social media empowerment in social movements: Power activation and power accrual in digital activism', *European Journal of Information Systems*, 28:2, pp. 173–204, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0960085X.2018.1512944>. Accessed 22 June 2022.
- Lippmann, W. (1922), *Public Opinion*, New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Moreno-Castro, C., Vengut-Climent, E., Cano-Orón, L. and Mendoza-Poudereux, Isabel (2021), 'Estudio exploratorio de los bulos difundidos por WhatsApp en España para prevenir o curar la COVID-19', *Gaceta Sanitaria*, 35:6, pp. 534–40, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gaceta.2020.07.008>. Accessed 22 June 2022.
- Osah, J. and Pade-Khene, C. (2020), 'E-government strategy formulation in resource-constrained local government in South Africa', *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 17:4, pp. 426–51, <http://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2020.1715907>. Accessed 22 June 2022.
- Palau-Sampio, D. and Carratalá, A. (2022), 'Injecting disinformation into public space: Pseudo-media and reality-altering narratives', *Profesional de la información*, 31:3, <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2022.may.12>. Accessed 23 June 2022.
- Palau-Sampio, D. and López-García, G. (2022), 'Communication and crisis in the public space: Dissolution and uncertainty', *Profesional de la información*, 31:3, <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2022.may.16>. Accessed 14 June 2022.
- Sánchez-Cuenca, I. (2022), *El desorden político: Democracias sin intermediación*, Madrid: Libros de La Catarata.
- Schudson, M. (2008), *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Schwaiger, L., Schneider, J., Rauchfleisch, A. and Eisenegger, M. (2022), 'Mindsets of conspiracy: A typology of affinities towards conspiracy myths in digital environments', *Convergence*, 10 June, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F13548565221106427>. Accessed 14 June 2022.
- Shehata, A. and Strömbäck, J. (2014), 'Mediation of political realities: Media as crucial sources of information', in J. Strömbäck and F. Esser (eds), *Mediatization of Politics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 93–113.
- van Dijck, J. (2014), 'Datafication, dataism and dataveillance: Big data between scientific paradigm and ideology', *Surveillance and Society*, 12:2, pp. 197–208, <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v12i2.4776>. Accessed 22 June 2022.
- Vosoughi, S., Roy, D. and Aral, S. (2018), 'The spread of true and false news online', *Science*, 359:6380, pp. 1146–51.
- Zaller, J. (1992), *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Adolfo Carratalá is associate professor of journalism at the University of Valencia and member of Mediaflows Research Group. His primary research interests are communication and conflicts, media and social movements, framing and LGBTQI+ Media Studies.

Contact: Departament de Teoria dels Llenguatges i Ciències de la Comunicació, Facultat de Filologia, Traducció i Comunicació, Av. Blasco Ibáñez 32, València 46010, Spain.

E-mail: adolfo.carratala@uv.es

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9865-9246>

Delivered by Intellect to:

Intellect Ltd (id22687532)

IP: 92.232.118.72

On: Wed, 09 Nov 2022 11:53:41

Maria Iranzo-Cabrera is lecturer in journalism at the University of Valencia and member of Mediaflows Research Group. Her research focuses on self-regulation in journalism, especially with regard to compliance with a gender perspective. She also studies how new digital platforms could favour the spread of feminist cyberactivism.

Contact: Departament de Teoria dels Llenguatges i Ciències de la Comunicació, Facultat de Filologia, Traducció i Comunicació, Av. Blasco Ibáñez 32, València 46010, Spain.

E-mail: maria.iranzo-cabrera@uv.es

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6237-6041>

Guillermo López-García is professor of journalism at the University of Valencia. Most of his research focuses on political and online communication. He coordinates the Mediaflows Research Group.

Contact: Departament de Teoria dels Llenguatges i Ciències de la Comunicació, Facultat de Filologia, Traducció i Comunicació, Av. Blasco Ibáñez 32, València 46010, Spain.

E-mail: guillermo.lopez@uv.es

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5701-2024>

Adolfo Carratalá, Maria Iranzo-Cabrera and Guillermo López-García have asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the authors of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.
