



Editorial

The Great Change: Impact of Social Media on the Relationship between Journalism and Politics—Introduction to the Special Issue

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1. Introduction

Digital media have become an indispensable element of a growing number of human practices that depend on these platforms to a great extent. In consequence, they have been configured as central infrastructures in our lives with the ability to shape society and politics (Couldry and Hepp 2017). These technologies have changed how contemporary politics are performed (Jungherr et al. 2020). Politics are now deeply shaped by the use of digital media. This fact, along with other phenomena of social change, such as the fragmentation of the public, the deterioration of political loyalties or the crisis of the legitimacy of democracy, and the increase in extremism, among others, are causing great transformations in politics (Schroeder 2018).

For this reason, research is needed to analyze this structural change, which is generating both new opportunities and new tensions as well as causing a multifaceted and ambivalent impact. The objective of this Special Issue is to examine the processes transforming the relationship between journalism and politics in this new digital media environment. Likewise, we are also interested in critically exploring the consequences and effects of these phenomena on political communication, democracy, and society.

2. Journalism and Politics in the Era of Social Media

The relationship between journalism and politics has always played a central role in democratic societies (Albæk et al. 2014). It is essential for setting the agenda, defining social frames of problems and issues related to the public interest, promoting public debates, as well as shaping public opinion (McCombs and Valenzuela 2020; Schudson 2020). The emergence of social media has led to many changes in the communication environment and relationship dynamics. Additionally, the power distribution between journalism and politics has changed. Furthermore, important changes have been detected in the demand–supply chain of political information (Jungherr et al. 2020).

This new environment has boosted the development of a new network logic and a hybrid system where old and new media constantly interrelate through platforms that play a central role in the current social dynamics (Chadwick 2017). The processes of production, distribution, and consumption of political information were transformed by the rise of digital media (Casero-Ripollés 2018). Several new phenomena changed the game rules between journalism and politics. These include the growing number of sources of information that increased the competition and decreased journalists' monopoly over the news. They also include the new forms of political news as well as the prevalence of fake news and sophisticated propaganda and disinformation strategies (Waisbord 2018). Moreover, there has also been a transformation in the distribution of power within the communicative system and the exercise of social influence by the media, journalists, and political actors (Casero-Ripollés 2021).



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Today, we are immersed in a time characterized by the emergence of disrupted public spheres in political communication (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018). This supposes the introduction of large-scale changes that alter what we have taken for granted. It is necessary to rethink the interactions between journalism and politics in a context where digital media generate new conditions and situations. We operate in a highly complex environment dominated by a more fluid and transitory hybrid system (Chadwick 2017). The old paradigms and conceptions, coming from the era of mass communication (Chaffee and Metzger 2001), must be reviewed in light of this changing and dynamic scenario. Researchers must face new challenges to make contributions that help us understand how the links between journalism, communication, and politics change. All this is necessary without forgetting their respective democratic consequences. Only in this way will we better understand the society where we live and will live in the future.

3. Special Issue Contributions

This Special Issue includes two reviews and ten research articles. In the first review, Baptista and Gradim (2020) address the topic of fake news consumption. Disinformation is one of the main problems journalism and politics are facing today. Social media have introduced radical changes in the way citizens access and consume news. In particular, young people are increasingly using digital platforms to obtain information. In this environment, the circulation of fake news proliferates. This can have important consequences for democratic health, such as political destabilization, the rise of populism and extremism, or the increase in hate speech, among others. Therefore, it is essential to understand why people consume, believe, and share fake news. Considering a sample of 52 articles published in the last 5 years, the researchers identify the main factors contributing to fake news' dissemination. To attract the readers' attention, fake news distributors use all possible resources, such as the format of headlines; the selection of certain images; and simple, emotional, and persuasive language. Furthermore, these researchers claim that right-wing people, the elderly, and less-educated people are more likely to believe and spread fake news. However, their analysis acknowledges that what motivates the consumption and sharing of fake news continues to merit further investigation.

Framing is one of the main theoretical approaches to explore the interrelation between journalism and politics. It affects the construction of the informational message and its impact on public debate. In the second review, López-Rabadán (2022) develops an analysis of the previous literature on this theory based on a sample of 78 articles published in the last decade in the most relevant journals of Web of Science and Scopus. Thus, he identifies its main points, strengths, and limitations. In this respect, he detects advances, such as, on the one hand, the construction of certain theoretical consensus and a better definition of primary concepts, and on the other, a diversification of the research agenda. In particular, he examines how social media generates a new reorientation of this perspective. The rise of digital media means that, as of 2015, a new stage opens in framing studies that reorient their research agenda towards the incorporation of digital platforms as an object of study, the commitment to the analysis of the effects, and the incorporation of new methodological approaches with a more comparative and international perspective. This supposes the growth of experimental studies and using large samples based on big data. Finally, this article raises the main challenges of framing for the immediate future established in the following points: opting for a comprehensive approach, articulating balanced methodological designs, incorporating visual aspects into the study, and considering the incidence of the current hybrid media system while analyzing not only the content of the messages but also their social consequences. Therefore, a complete diagnosis of a fundamental theory trend in the relationship between journalism and politics is presented, now adapted to the digital environment.

The ten remaining research articles can be grouped into three large blocks: the core values of political journalism in the digital age, the new communication formats and

technological platforms for political actors, and the impact of the far-right in communication and journalism.

The first block analyses the problems related to the core values of journalism, such as transparency, verification, and credibility. The latter is a pivotal value for journalism and democracy. Its importance increases given the current scenario characterized by the dissemination of fake news and the loss of centrality of traditional media outlets. [Besalú and Pont-Sorribes \(2021\)](#) dedicate their article to analyzing the levels of credibility that Spanish citizens assign to political journalism in the online environment. To achieve this goal, they used a survey ($n = 1669$). Their findings demonstrate that news items shown in a traditional media format, especially digital television, were given more credibility than news presented in a social media format. In addition, they reveal that citizens showed a more cautious attitude towards social media as a source of news. However, the results indicate that the credibility levels of the news on digital platforms are moderately high. These data help to understand the progress of disinformation in the digital environment. In addition, they offer relevant evidence to learn the public's attitudes towards political journalism since perceptions about credibility predict exposure to news and citizen engagement with journalism.

Transparency is one of the core values to strengthen the public service dimension of journalism and its social contribution. Furthermore, it is a way to recover its legitimacy before the citizenry. [Rivera Otero et al. \(2021\)](#) address this relevant topic to analyze the transparency policies developed by the main European public broadcasters from nine countries. In this sense, they study the values traditionally associated with transparency, its transformation in the digital environment, and its presence on the websites of these television channels. Through a group of experts, they identify 12 new indicators on transparency and accountability in the public service media in the digital context. Their findings show an uneven commitment to transparency with a reduced presence of these new indicators in the media examined. In addition, they demonstrate the low institutionalization of transparency policies in the analyzed websites. Finally, they found that the level of transparency is determined by the relationship model between the political system and the media system. Thus, this research diagnoses the achievements and pending challenges concerning this crucial value for journalism in the digital context.

Another of the core values of journalism is the verification of information. This issue is currently subject to great tension due to the increase in information disorders in the digital environment. For this reason, [Llorca-Asensi et al. \(2021\)](#) investigate how disinformation is produced and articulated concerning the Catalan independence process. Combining social science methods with artificial intelligence and text mining found a widespread presence of disinformation on Twitter around this important political topic. In addition, their findings reveal a high presence of negative emotions, such as contempt, hatred, anger, fear, and extensive use of irony. This fosters social polarization and the creation of two antagonistic factions based on the distinction between them and us. Thus, the "right of self-determination" is used as a source of disinformation to enhance political conflict. Therefore, the researchers demonstrate that disinformation creates confusion in public debate, generalizing "information pollution".

The second block focuses on the new communication formats and the technological platforms for political actors. One of them is the use of negativity. Attacks on political rivals during electoral campaigns have been a traditional element of political communication. However, we still know little about how this phenomenon works in social media. [Marcos-García et al. \(2021\)](#) focus their research on learning the use of criticism on Facebook by political actors and citizens' reactions. They developed a content analysis of 6 variables and 20 categories about 600 Facebook posts from the main parties during the 2016 Spanish elections, finding that 23% of these posts have negative content. This demonstrates an emerging use of criticism in the digital communication strategy of political actors. The opposition parties and their candidates usually employ this formula to attack the party and the leader of the government. Concerning the typology of criticism, parties tend to

prioritize attacks on the professional role of their rivals, while candidates focus on the values and ideology of their opponents. On the other hand, citizens react with negativity in three ways. First, those messages with specific types of criticism obtain the highest number of comments and shares. Second, those posts without criticism reach a higher average of positive or neutral reactions. Finally, the messages containing criticism receive the most negative reactions on average.

Another important format in the relationship between politics and communication in the digital environment is online advertising. In recent years, Facebook-sponsored content has become an indispensable tool for implementing political campaign strategies. The possibility of reaching target audiences chosen based on profiles and interests, as well as the fact of precisely calculating the cost of ads, makes this advertising model extremely appealing for political actors. [Calvo et al. \(2021\)](#) perform an analysis of the strategies implemented by six national parties during the campaigns running up to the two general elections held in Spain in 2019, on a corpus of 14,684 ads downloaded directly from the Facebook Ad Library. Their findings reveal an unequal use of this resource from the view of the economic investment made by the parties. In addition, they discover that the communicative effort consolidates on the last days of the campaign, publishing most of the ads then. In the first campaign, party promotion predominates, while in the second, it focuses on economic and social issues, especially employment. These data provide relevant information to learn the new advertising strategies of political actors in the social media environment.

Together with these formats, the digital environment offers new tools for the communicative activity of politicians. One of the most important is mobile devices. These offer new forms of relationship with citizens that can generate new forms of political participation. [Quevedo-Redondo et al. \(2021\)](#) explore the characteristics of the mobile device app use in political discourse and the utility of these tools to enhance civic engagement. From a theoretical approach based on politainment, pop politics, and ludification, they apply a content analysis, including user comments, of 233 apps of 45 politicians from 37 countries. The results suggest that mobile devices, through apps, contribute to playful forms of politics linked to gamification and spectacularization. In addition, the study of user comments shows the advance of polarization in this new communicative space.

Another element growing its importance in the digital scene is political bots. This technology, linked to astroturf, has a great ability to create artificial public opinion and turn non-existent or minority opinions into majority or dominant ones. Therefore, it can have detrimental effects on democracy. [García-Orosa et al. \(2021\)](#) analyzed the use of bots in the 2019 Spanish electoral campaign to design strategies for their identification, improving their automatic detection. Using a methodology based on hybrid intelligence and framing theory, they developed the first bot classifier in Spanish. In addition, they discovered that the bots used in Spain's election campaign seemed more geared towards the repetitive dissemination of specific messages than generating interactions or conversations. Thus, they are configured as a highly useful and appropriate tool for disseminating strategically designed frames. In this sense, the results indicate that the bots focused on problems in the game frames that distract users from the core message. Finally, the ability of the bots to draw people's attention to certain issues and create artificial opinions is confirmed.

The third block is devoted to studying the relationship between far-right politics and journalism and communication in the digital environment. In this context, freedom of expression and the fact that any user can place opinions into circulation have caused hate speech to spread faster and more widely on social media. This can not only deteriorate democratic coexistence but also lead to crimes. One of the social issues most affected by this phenomenon is immigration, which, without a doubt, is configured as one of the central themes of the public debate that takes place between journalists, political actors, and citizens. Particularly active in this dynamic are the far-right parties. [Arcila Calderón et al. \(2020\)](#) analyze this issue by using computational methods on Twitter. Specifically, they study the hate speech against immigrants linked to the Spanish far-right party Vox. Findings

show that the traits of this discourse were foul language, false or doubtful information, irony, distasteful expressions, humiliation or contempt, physical or psychological threats, and incitement of violence. In addition, they reveal that the four underlying topics of hate speech (control of illegal immigration, economic assistance for immigrants, consequences of illegal immigration, and Spain as an arrival point for African immigrants and Islamist terrorism) were similar to those in the discourse of Vox.

On the other hand, Pérez-Curiel et al. (2021) focus their attention on the worldwide influence of the rhetoric and speech of one of those significant political leaders promoting populism and extremism, the former president of the U.S., Donald Trump. To demonstrate his ability to influence other political leaders, they use a content analysis comparing tweets of various international political actors linked to the far-right, such as Mateo Salvini, Jair Bolsonaro, Santiago Abascal, and Marine Le Pen, and the front page of various newspapers, such as *The New York Times*, *O Globo*, *Le Monde*, *La Repubblica*, and *El País*. Their findings show that the discourse of fraud and conspiracy, characteristic of Trump, extends to the rest of the populist leaders studied. In addition, other significant elements are identified, such as the predominance of the appeal to emotions, misinformation, and confusion between opinion and information. This reveals the widespread use of propaganda mechanisms by far-right politicians on Twitter.

The last article in this block analyzes the impact of populist discourse on constructing reality during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through an analysis of the Twitter accounts of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro for three months, Cervi et al. (2021) identify the central elements of their discursive strategies. Their conclusions indicate the predominance of the affective dimension of a conspiracy narrative and the protagonism of one of the main elements of the populist style of political communication: the distinction between the people, associated with positive and blessed values, and the elites, linked to negative and horrific matters. Despite the similarities, the two leaders discursively confronted the pandemic differently. While Trump conceived it as an enemy to be defeated, using warlike rhetoric, Bolsonaro presented it as a circumstance to overcome by downplaying it. This research offers elements to understand how far-right politicians launched populist narratives to confront COVID-19.

This set of twelve investigations offers an exciting vision of the changes that social media are introducing in journalism and politics. Many of these investigations formulate findings that indicate that the consequences of this process affect many more social spheres, causing substantial effects on citizenship and democracy. Thus, they portray a field of research of great centrality and strategic value to understand the transformations shaping the society in which we live.

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