A contribution to the debate on the redefinition of the networked public sphere based on Portuguese public participation in cyberspace

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Abstract

This article locates Portugal in the discussion on the transition from a normative public sphere (Habermas, 1968/1989, 1998) to a new networked public sphere (Benkler, 2006), powered by the internet, global networked society and participative and interactive cultures. We use data from the public participation module of the 2018 *Digital news report* published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, which surveyed a representative sample of the Portuguese population. The results point to the existence and appropriation of many forms of public participation in cyberspace. Users share news, comment on news, take part in online votes, etc., on press websites and social media. Nonetheless, the collected data point to a type of online public participation that determines the slow constitution and consolidation of a new networked public sphere in Portugal.

Keywords

Seminal public sphere; redefinition of public sphere; networked
public sphere; online public participation; Portugal

Um contributo para o debate sobre a redefinição da esfera pública em rede a partir da participação pública dos portugueses no ciberespaço

Resumo

O presente artigo tenta enquadrar para Portugal a discussão sobre a transição de uma esfera pública normativa (Habermas, 1968/1989, 1998) para uma nova esfera pública em rede (Benkler, 2006), potenciada pelas características da internet, pela sociedade em rede global, e pelas culturas participativas e interativas. São utilizados dados do módulo participação pública do inquérito *Digital news report*, do Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, de 2018, aplicado a uma amostra representativa da população portuguesa. Os dados obtidos apontam para a existência e apropriação dos múltiplos formatos de participação pública no ciberespaço, através da partilha de notícias, comentários a notícias, participação em processos de votação online, etc., nos sites de títulos de imprensa ou nas redes sociais. Contudo, os dados coligidos apontam para a fundação de uma participação pública no ciberespaço que, pelas suas características, determina a constituição e consolidação lentas de uma nova esfera pública em rede para o contexto português.

Palavras-chave

Esfera pública seminal; redefinição de esfera pública; esfera pública
em rede; participação pública online; Portugal

Introduction

> The transformation of the mass media paradigm introduces clear changes
> in terms of media practices and in the role of citizens/consumers/produc-
> ers (Sousa, Pinto & Costa e Silva, 2013, p. 9).

With the advent of decentralised non-markets of horizontal production of inter-net contents (Benkler, 2006) and the redefinition of the boundaries between producers and consumers of information resulting from 1) the appearance of interactive, participative audiences and 2) networked journalisms (Beckett, 2008, 2010; Glasser, 1999, 2010; Noor, 2017; Rosen, 1999; Singer, 2012; Van der Haak et al., 2012), it now makes sense to reposition the debate on the public sphere in the context of networked public participation. This debate is both global, in the spectrum of the characteristics of networked society, and local within the specificities of each country.

Although difficult to define (Sousa et al., 2013, p. 9), Habermas's original idea of the public sphere (1968/1989), has led to "more contemporary settings that include a media ecology punctuated by the internet" (Sousa et al., 2013, p. 9) that "have been hailed as instrumental in supporting these new forms of engagement in public life" (Frenette & Vermette, 2013, p. 37). As Carvalho and Casanova (2010) mentioned, the internet and the different forms of information, interaction and discussion constitute an impetus that has been renewing the public sphere and the mediating instances of democratic order. This opinion is shared by Benkler (2006), Carlsson and Weibull (2018), who speak of a decentralised networked information environment operating outside the market sphere with an influence on the redefinition and democratisation of the public sphere.

Methodology

Our methodological strategy in this article focuses on a quantitative method using secondary data collated by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in its *Digital news report* 2018 (DNR) resulting from collaboration with the Communication Observatory in Lisbon, Portugal. Online questionnaires were sent to a proportional, stratified sample of the Portuguese population consisting of 2,008 respondents in mainland Portugal and the Azores and Madeira autonomous regions. This sample was representative of the Portuguese population in general rather than just internet users.

There are three reasons for using these secondary data: 1) since 2015 the *Digital news report* by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism has been the main tool for collecting data on internet users' relationships with the news in Portugal; 2) the "Sociedade em Rede em Portugal" survey, an important methodological exercise in gathering information on Portuguese people's online activities and experiences, was conducted for the last time in December 2013; 3) the author has a close relationship with the Lisbon Communication Observatory, a body that works with the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism on the planning, data management and dissemination of the report results in Portugal.

One of the advantages of using the above-mentioned data from the DNR online participation module is precisely the scope achieved by the survey's representativity. After the discontinuation of the "A sociedade em rede" reports, it is a considerable asset in exploring new dynamics in online experiences in Portugal.

The main advantage of using a representative survey, as Bryman (2004, p. 11, 2012, p. 192) reminds us, is its ability to generate quantifiable data from a larger population and better mirror the characteristics of the population itself.

FRAMEWORK OF AND DEBATE ON NORMATIVE THEORY OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND THE NEW NETWORKED PUBLIC SPHERE

Habermas's (1968/1989, 1998) seminal definition of the public sphere describes a set of practices and institutions lying between the private interests of civil society's everyday life and the power of the state. Habermas (1998) speaks of a communication system between the state and civil society in a definition that is embraced by authors such as Gerhards and Neidhardt (1991), who refer to a communication system capable of mediating between citizens and government. According to the normative approach to the public sphere, a number of authors (Ahva, 2011, p. 1; Walter, 2015) see in this mediation process the decisive role of journalism and journalists, who define what is included in the news and who participates in media coverage.

The definition of the public sphere by the German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas (1968/1989) involves the normative idea that, without the stimulus of the flow of information based on experience and expertise capable of guaranteeing intensive research (which is not cheap), public communication loses its vitality and point of reference, thereby compromising the standards of journalism and the heart of the public sphere. Habermas's vision is therefore very close to the normative theory of gatekeeping (Lewis, 2012; Manning, 1950; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Singer, 2012). He more or less clearly states the journalist's position as gatekeeper of a unique public sphere.

Nonetheless, in their discussions of the role of informationalism and network society as catalysts of change fundamentally determined by technology, authors like Castells (2008) claim that globalisation has extended the debate from national to global and fostered the appearance of a transnational civil society and ad hoc forms of global governance. At the same time, the public sphere as a forum on public matters is also changing from a national to a transnational dimension built on worldwide communication networks.

Benkler (2006) upholds that the idea that citizens on the internet can now enjoy a new freedom to act and cooperate with each other will lead to a better democratic experience, justice and reflexivity, with obvious benefits to the community.

Benkler (2006) spoke of an age characterised by information overload and the dangers of an inability to take in the flow of information – *Nobody listens when everyone is talking!* Even so, he was not immediately able to foresee the effects of deregulation of this information hyper-flow and mainly took an optimistic, celebratory view of the formulation of a networked public sphere.

Benkler believes that the construction of a networked public sphere would, to an extent, minimise the limitations of the mass media, what Haas (2007) called the shortcomings in conventional journalism. This would increase the ways in which anyone could speak, question and investigate, thereby taking advantage of the internet's scope and characteristics. Benkler (2006) advocates the re-foundation of a networked public sphere based on decentralised approaches capable of acting as watchdogs by extending the debate to new actors in the different forms of horizontal production of information.

Hjarvard's (2018, p. 72) view is close to Benkler's (2006) celebratory considerations of this new public sphere, He believes that it constitutes a structural change in Habermas's public sphere, where the online media are responsible for the restructuring of private, personal relationships and public arenas, and new deliberative forms of communication.

On the other hand, Khan (2012) positions himself in the middle of this argument between Habermas's public sphere and the new networked public sphere. He argues that the framework for describing Habermas's public sphere still considers its founding principles and mechanisms to be relevant in the overall theory of the global public sphere (Giddens, 2000; Khan, 2012). He upholds that the characteristics of a new public sphere, with globalisation, social software, etc, not only do not oppose Habermas's view of the public sphere, but also support the principles and requirements of the idea of a global public sphere (Çela, 2015, also mentions the importance of social media). He believes that, at global level, this idea juxtaposes the usual and most contentious research on the matter.

Khan (2012) says that the structural conditions for Habermas's model of public sphere are firstly the fact that media institutions form its primary foundation, secondly the role of public opinion as a crucial player and main state watchdog tool and thirdly the imperative need for a vibrant civil society capable of leading the public debate. He therefore believes that the concept of a public sphere is more the result of a triad model that benefits from decentralised online participation. This is in an age of new freedoms to act and interact while the foundational role assigned to the media is disputed by the ever-increasing power of active, participative, networked citizens sustained by what Crack (2007) calls the decisively distinguishing role of the internet and new technologies in the reformulation of new model of the networked public sphere.

Nonetheless, before Benkler's (2006) and Khan's (2012) more celebratory views on a reformulated normative theory of the public sphere, Boeder (2005) stated that the redefinition of the concept as an extension of the scope and impact of people's participation to a certain extent accompanied the abandonment of the strict distinction between post-modern fact and fiction. Contrary to Benkler's (2006) and Khan's (2012) later observations, Boeder's arguments (2005) underscored the central role of media institutions and professional credentials in determining a valid public sphere that was closer to Habermas's initial theory, as opposed to the strengthening of the role of civil society and public opinion in determining a new public sphere. Boeder's (2005) idea was reinforced years later by Ahva (2011), who stressed the central role of journalism as an institution

or agent in the construction of the public sphere, even though it was worth discussing the validity of a more maximalist debate focusing on multiple public spheres, unlike the single public sphere in Habermas's initial works.

Boeder (2005) also wonders about the possibility of the new media like the internet only constituting a superficial substitute for what he calls "authentic discourse". He speculates whether virtual communities can contribute to a new public debate or whether they are mere simulations of the cathartic distraction of an audience that feels more involved, even if this self-perceived involvement has no effect on an advance and consolidation of effective participation.

On the subject, Boeder highlights the need for a broad discussion of the redefinition of the public sphere (2005). He underlines the sparse debate on some limitations, such as a failure to discuss issues such as ownership and control of technology (central to the discussion of a new networked public sphere) and those that benefit from it. Boeder (2005) avails himself of the initial contributions of Fernback and Thomson (1995). In the late 1990s, when the internet was burgeoning, they upheld that online citizenship would have to prove 1) that it could be a panacea for the problems of democratic representation and 2) that sustained active participation in multiple electronic media publication and communication channels might not necessarily be synonymous with healthier societies thanks to the extension of the public debate.

In turn, Mahlouly (2013) introduces further debate on the construction of a digital public sphere model. She identifies the emergence of communities that are transnational and diffuse and bases her ideas on a certain technological determinism. She believes that online social interactions are conditioned and limited by the technological design of the new communication devices. Furthermore, she endeavours to demonstrate how the digital age affects the quality of public discourse by empowering amateur contributors and legitimising them in exactly the same way as specialised professionals. She distinguishes between the normative public sphere and the current participative culture that is central to the new public sphere model and rejects the idea that everyone is qualified to contribute to the public discourse in exactly the same way. Nonetheless, she also recognises the benefits of technology as a vehicle for expressing the many subjectivities, giving cyber-activism as an example. She underscores the idea that online social interactions make collaborative projects and political involvement more attractive as they offer users the chance to protect their personal identity and be part of broader social movements.

In short, Ahva (2011, p. 124) speaks of a categorical dichotomy of citizens' roles in the public sphere as active agents or representatives of citizenship. She is closer to Habermas's normative public sphere theory and upholds that although the ultimate authority in societies lies with their citizens it does not give them the central role in the functioning of the public sphere through their public activity.

On the other hand, the more disruptive agency framework associated with the new global networked public sphere suggests that citizens constitute the most important group of communicators in determining any public sphere. This model focuses on ongoing public participation and is based on the fact that all citizens are specialists in their own lives and interests (Walter, 2015).

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE REDEFINITION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE: THE PORTUGUESE PERSPECTIVE

The decentralisation of the news production process in the networked society (Castells, 2002) and in the age of the culture of connectivity (Van Dijck, 2013) redefines the symbolic power structures in the construction of news. Media organisations now have less control over content and its distribution. A major consequence of this is the strength of this role embraced by audiences that are simultaneously news consumers, producers, assessors and commentators. This strength now challenges the central role played by the media in general and journalism in particular as fundamental elements in a normative public sphere. It also features in a discussion that basically varies between the need to preserve the role of journalism and media organisations in the construction of a seminal public sphere, and the need to recreate the concept of a public sphere from the intricate system of global networked participation and interactions.

We will now take a close look at what is happening in Portugal based on the dynamics of public participation and the online public space, using the data from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism *Digital news report* (2018), which was produced in collaboration with the Lisbon Communication Observatory.

The questions in the Reuters survey module on public participation in the internet first show that approximately half of the respondents tended to share news, mainly by email or on social media. Around seven out of 10 said that they participated in online information content in a sample that said it was very or extremely interested in the news.

On the other hand, commenting on the news showed a different trend in this sample, as they tended to share news much more than they commented on it. This evidence could be interpreted to mean that "people do not create new information by themselves: basically, they echo what comes to them" (Luque, Martínez & Sánchez, 2013, p.79).

Additionally, "deliberative theory has several conditions that citizen conversations need to satisfy in order to be considered democratic conversations" (Barber, Dahlberg & Stromer-Galley, quoted in Strandberg & Berg, 2013, pp. 132-133). Where comments on online news headline websites are concerned, the authors believe that, based on data from an analysis of comments on an online Finnish newspaper, public participation outputs often lack quality (Strandberg & Berg, 2013, p. 111).

This means that, although online comments enable people to discuss issues in context (Strandberg & Berg, 2013, p. 134), they often do not offer the right conditions for reformulation of the public sphere based on the quality of public participation in digital formats. They may represent a set of demagogical, belligerent, exhibitionistic, subjective, irrational, uncivilised considerations and incidental conversations that do not meet the normative requirements for deliberation or the public sphere (Dahlberg, 2004).

When all is said and done, as Torres da Silva (2013, p. 83) points out, "although several studies have underlined the internet democratization features, doubts remain as to the quality of the debates that it hosts".

Share news	48,8%
Share news by email or social media	44,5%
Comment on news reports	29,9%
Participate in online informative contents	69,5%

Table 1: "In a normal week, in your online activity, you usually…"
Source: RDNR, 2018

When asked about ways of sharing and participating in news contents, the forms that respondents mentioned most, in decreasing order of importance, were online interaction with friends and co-workers; sharing news on social media such as Facebook and Twitter, a category that shows the weight of social media today in determining the life cycle of news; and comments on the news in the social media. On the subject of the power of the social media, Luque, Martínez and Sánchez (2013, pp. 57-59) remind us that these networks offer real opportunities for personal and mass protests carried mainly by user-generated contents, as they have become the main civic organisation platforms for communication among millions of people.

It is worth saying that comments on the news on press group websites are valued by only around 9% of the respondents, while about 18% graded, flagged or 'liked' news.

I share news on social media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn)	35,7%
I share news by email	17,8%
I grade, like or flag news	17,6%
I comment on news on social media (Facebook, Twitter)	26,2%
I comment on news on press group websites	8,7%
I blog about political or news issues	14,4%
I send or share news videos and photos on social media websites	8,6%
I send or share news videos and photos on press group or media organisation websites	5,4%
I take part in online votes on news or social media websites	11,6%
I participate in news-based groups or campaigns	3,4%
I interact with friends and co-workers on the internet about news (email, social media, messaging apps)	42,3%
I share news on messaging platforms (WhatsApp, Facebook, Messenger, etc)	18,5%
None of the above	20,3%

Table 2: "In a normal week, how do you share or participate in news contents?"
Source: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2018

The dimensions of interaction and sharing of news are therefore two important aspects of the respondents' relationship with the news, even though comments on news are highlighted by only 25% of the sample.

While the vast majority of the respondents mentioned at least one form of participation in or sharing of online news, only 20,3% said that they did not share or participate in online news contents in any way.

Table 3, on the other hand, confirms the growing weight of social media in what Castells (2007) called the online news environment. Authors such as Bergström and Belfrage, 2018; Carlson, 2017; Mourao and colleagues, 2015; Sampedro and Avidad, 2018; Usha and Niemann, 2017, refer to it as one of the main means of changing the news ecosystem.

Indeed, 75% of the respondents used Facebook. Of these, 52,5% usually read, viewed, shared or discussed news contents. Even though Facebook's hegemony in the social media in Portugal is clear and it is the social medium used most to interact with news contents, many respondents use other social platforms.

	GENERAL USE	READING, VIEWING, SHARING OR DISCUSSING NEWS ITEMS
Facebook	74,8%	52,5%
YouTube	68,7%	22,2%
Facebook Messenger	62,5%	19,4%
WhatsApp	39,9%	11,2%
Instagram	33,9%	6,4%
LinkedIn	24,7%	6,7%
Pinterest	21,4%	3,3%
Twitter	13,1%	5,3%
Google+	9,6%	3,6%
Snapchat	5,7%	0,8%
Tumblr	3,2%	0,6%
Viber	2,7%	0,4%
Telegram	1,7%	0,5%
Flickr	1,2%	0,1%
Slack	1,2%	0,4%
Periscope	0,7%	0,1%
Line	0,6%	0,2%
WeChat	0,6%	0,0%
Kik	0,3%	0,1%
Other	1,0%	0,7%

Table 3: General use of social media and reading, viewing, sharing or discussing news items

Source: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2018

I posted news	16,9%
I shared or liked a news item	57,1%

Table 4: "What did you do when using Facebook the week before the survey?"
Source: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2018 (n=1055)

More than half of the 1.055 respondents who said that they had used Facebook in the week before the survey said that they had shared or liked news, while 16,9% had published news on their Facebook pages. Once again, there were more respondents who had shared something already published or circulating online than those who had published on their own initiative.

Agree	31,4%
Neither agree nor disagree	33,6%
Disagree	34,9%

Table 5: "When I am looking up news on social media, I pay attention to the number of likes and shares, because they are what tell me the news is worth my while"
Source: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2018 (n=1937)

The attention economy (Davenport & Beck, 2012) is built and defined in metrics based on views, likes and shares in the online experiences of some internet users. Regarding the importance of likes and shares in determining users' news diets, although 31.4% of the respondents considered the number of likes important when choosing news, 33.6% neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement and around 35% did not regard the number of likes or shares of news as defining their interest in news.

Agree	36,0%
Neither agree nor disagree	34,4%
Disagree	29,6%

Table 6: "I tend to think carefully when I express my political views on the Internet, because it may cause me problems with the authorities"
Source: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2018 (n2018=2008)

Some of the reasons why the respondents shared news more often than commenting on it are set out in table seven. Indeed, 36% of them (more than a third of the sample) still tended to think carefully about their online political comments and views. It is not clear in this analysis whether this reflection prevents greater online participation in the form of comments or whether it is determined by the idea that, by not creating

new information, people basically tend to reproduce what they view (Luque, Martínez & Sánchez, 2013).

	Gender		Age					Academic qualifications			
	Male	Female	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+	Less than 12th grade	12th grade	Vocational training	Higher education
I shared news on social media	33,5%	37,6%	22,8%	27,2%	32,1%	37,3%	43,1%	36,7%	37,1%	32,1%	35,8%
I commented on a news post on social media	26,7%	25,7%	17,3%	19,9%	27,5%	26,5%	30,1%	15,9%	28,5%	23,9%	26,4%
I commented on a news post on a news website	11,1%	6,5%	4,6%	8,6%	8,1%	10,5%	9,1%	6,1%	8,2%	11,3%	8,8%
I took part in online votes on news websites or social media	14,2%	9,2%	8,1%	10,0%	10,3%	14,2%	12,7%	11,0%	9,7%	12,6%	13,1%
I interact about news with friends and co-workers online (email, social media)	25,2%	26,4%	28,9%	23,9%	23,5%	22,5%	28,5%	22,0%	22,4%	20,1%	28,8%
I think carefully before expressing my political views online because it may cause me problems with the authorities	36,6%	35,4%	37,1%	38,2%	38,3%	34,2%	34,7%	31,7%	36,4%	36,5%	35,8%

Table 7: Some sociodemographic analyses of ways of interacting and sharing online

Source: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2018 (n2018=2008)

Based on a cross-tabulation of some sociodemographic variables (gender, age and academic qualifications) with the issues set out in the previous tables, we found that there were no significant differences in terms of association between the variables.

Association metrics	Gender (dichotomic)	Age (Ordinal)	Qualifications (Ordinal)
I shared news on social media (dichotomic)	Vcramer=0,043	Vcramer=0,153	Vcramer=0,063
I commented on a news post on social media (dichotomic)	Vcramer=0,009	Vcramer=0,102	Vcramer=0,069
I commented on a news post on a news website (dichotomic)	Vcramer=0,086	Vcramer=0,058	Vcramer=0,036
I took part in online votes on news website or social media (dichotomic)	Vcramer=0,076	Vcramer=0,062	Vcramer=0,070
I interact about news with friends and co-workers on the internet (email, social media)	Vcramer=0,014	Vcramer=0,059	Vcramer=0,080
I think carefully before expressing my political views online because it may cause me problems with the authorities (dichotomic)	Vcramer=0,050	Vcramer=0,054	Vcramer=0,043

Table 8: Crosstabulation between sociodemographic variables and module questions "News and public participation"

Source: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2018 (n2018=2008)

We can, however, recognise some differences in the percentages obtained: 1) the male respondents tended to comment more on news posts on chat sites and to participate more in online votes on websites or social media; 2) the female respondents and those in the older age groups tended to share more news on social media; 3) older respondents tended to comment more on news posts on social media, while the respondents who had not completed the twelfth grade tended to do so the least; 4) the respondents with degrees tended to interact more about news issues with friends and co-workers online; 5) older respondents and those who had not completed the twelfth grade tended to be more convinced that expressing their political views online might cause them problems with the authorities.

These results can be explained by the fact that:

> the age factor is of relevant weight as an influence on sharing and comments on news (…). Older people share and comment more on news on online platforms. Knowing that younger people are avid users of online social media, this analysis shows that, where news is concerned, they are not the ones who have the most influence on the flow of online shares and comments. Older people are in fact the ones who share the news most on social media (Cardoso et al., 2017, pp 56-57).

The fact that older people are the ones who share and interact most with the news on online platforms goes against the idea that, as young people have the universal skills, as a number of authors seem to suggest (Frenette & Vermette, 2013), they communicate more online than the other age groups, "expressing their own identities, experiences and interests online" (Frenette & Vermette, 2013, p. 48).

Conclusions

The main characteristics of the internet have boosted the redefinition of boundaries between producers and consumers of contents. Consumers are increasingly becoming active, participative players in the production and dissemination of information and in the solidification of new forms of public participation online.

As mentioned by Dahlberg (2007), Mason (2012) and Palczewiski (2001), digital devices have generated new forms of social mobilisation that go beyond screens. They have enabled citizens to exert a growing influence on decision making and the democratic process, leading authors like Sampedro and Avidad (2018) to talk of the construction of a digital public sphere as an alternative, counter-hegemonic space for public participation.

In this article we have discussed some of the defining characteristics of the dynamics of public participation in Portugal based on their relationship with digital news contents, in which they share, publish, comment on and vote on news, etc.

We began with a theoretic review of the concept of the public sphere and the transition to a new networked public sphere. We reflected on the theoretic dichotomies of 1) a current that upholds the normative concept of Habermas's public sphere and the

hegemonic position of professions experience and expertise and 2) a more celebratory current of a new networked public sphere based on greater online participation and interaction between participative cultures (Jenkins, 2006; Lewis, 2012; Singer, 2012) capable of maximising internet features, such as speed and global scope, so that they can become effective members of a more decentralised, horizontal, differentiated global public debate.

> The Internet has an impact on how power relationships play out in society because, among other factors, it enlarges the possibility of participation by allowing forms of expressions that are less demanding, socially and culturally speaking, as well as being very appealing. For instance, the interactive features allowing us to receive personalized feedback and the capacity to interact instantaneously with other parties, are characteristics of ICTs that facilitate participation. Moreover, ICTs allow engagement in the public sphere (...) these characteristics of ICTs that enable new forms of engagement in the digital sphere (...) meaning that you can participate in the public sphere, at any time and from anywhere. (Frenette & Vermette, 2013, p.37-38)

The data from the 2018 *Digital news report* resulting in Portugal from a collaboration between the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and OberCom demonstrated how people in Portugal conduct their public participation in cyberspace based on their online experience and relationship with news. Ranging from sharing news and interacting with it by submitting comments on social media and chat websites to online votes, there are many ways in which a substantial percentage of internet users in Portugal become part of a system that was previously characterised by a unidirectional relationship between news producers and passive consumers. As Frenette and Vermette point out (2013, p. 38),

> indeed, media have always served as an important relay of information between those holding power and the general population, but for a long time, the communication was mainly unidirectional. Their recent transformations (i.e., immediate access to information, variety of sources from all over the world, possibility for the public to intervene, and so forth) inevitably have consequences for how power relations play out, both within and between the public spheres. (Frenette and Vermette, 2013, p. 38)

Nonetheless, although these many forms of participation in and relationship with news are part of Portuguese users' online experience today and even if the hegemonic dimension of sharing may in itself be considered an extension or legitimisation of a point of view, the Reuters' survey results for a sample of 2.008 respondents show that the news-sharing dimension is far greater than comments and opinions on news issues. This may be based on the idea that people tend to reproduce what comes to them rather than creating their own information (Luque et al., 2013, p. 67). A considerable percentage of the respondents admitted to a certain reluctance to express their points of view, because of consequences from the authorities.

Although the statistics did not show great differences in participation profiles, the male respondents tended to comment and share slightly more than the female respondents on media group websites. The female respondents tended to share and participate more in social media than the men. The older respondents were the ones who commented most on news posts in the social media, while those with the lowest academic qualifications commented the least.

To a certain extent, the results of the survey of Portuguese internet users show very similar behaviour to those in Boeder's (2005) findings. Boeder (2005) was critical of the assessment of consolidation of effective participation in new public spheres. Referring to the new formats of internet participation, he speaks of an ecosystem that, in spite of its varied forms of participation, is not reflected in the stabilisation of participation capable of building a new public sphere based on greater citizen participation. Boeder's (2005) thinking, set out in this survey's results, suggests holding back on the idea that the "digital public sphere is immersed in the present conjuncture of accelerated transformation and probable rupture, which certainly will affect the way we exercise our citizenship in contemporary times" (Andrade, 2013, p. 202).

On the subject, Luque, Martínez and Sánchez (2013, p. 67) refer to public participation as a distant dream, a networked public sphere that is not fully inclusive in a context where ICTs do nothing more than produce a placebo effect in terms of public participation in the public sphere. The authors believe that the reason for this distant dream is the certainty that citizens' use of technology for public participation does not occur automatically and proportionally. In other words, it is not enough to have the equipment in order to access it.

Frenette and Vermette (2013) went further in a study on young adults' involvement in the digital sphere, which helps us to position the results used in this article. They refer to the intricate system of reconfiguration of the digital public sphere and the impossibility of embracing the normative, celebratory guaranteeism of the new public spheres, where each one is an integral part of this reconfiguration. They uphold that, although the internet boosts freedom of expression, its ability to encourage citizens' empowerment is by no means certain (Frenette & Vermette, 2013, p. 29). This can be explained by six points: 1) although the internet has allowed more people to take part in current public discourses, its users do not have the same technical or social skills to make the most of these opportunities; 2) in spite of the obvious advantages of the internet in terms of involvement in the public sphere, not everyone uses or wishes to use these opportunities permanently; 3) on the other hand, socialisation practices subtly guide men and women to different concepts of their role in the construction of the public sphere; 4) the predominance of personal self-interest in life outlooks and each person's role in society favours a mixture of personal interests and matters that have to do with society as a whole; 5) beyond the democratic horizon of "all-participative", there is unequal distribution of socio-cultural capital; 6) there are different degrees of public involvement, from permanent activism to a vaguer interest (Frenette & Vermette, 2013, pp. 50-55).

In conclusion, even if the material configuration of the new communication technologies supported by the internet includes huge potential for participation, interaction

and collaborative production, the real effects of these changes have yet to be verified (Murru, 2013, pp. 171-172).

Suggestions for future research

One way of complementing the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism report might be to form focus groups and conduct interviews with internet users. This would help ascertain in more detail the reasons and dynamics behind public participation in cyberspace and achieve self-perception of the impact and influence of their online participation on decision making. This would minimise the risks of one-dimensional interpretations resulting from the quantitative method that, according to Bryman (2004, p. 35), runs the risk of generalisation beyond the boundaries of research. Following the ideas on the qualitative methods of Flick, Kardorff and Steinke (2004, p. 9), a more intensive approach to forms of networked public participation would complement the so-called "hard data". It would introduce differentiation and intensification and offer a new reference in the interpretation of statistical relationships from the quantitative research in the *Digital news report*.

On the other hand, it would be equally interesting to confront professional journalists, the central figure of the seminal idea of the public sphere, with the results of future studies seeking to reflect on citizens' self-perceptions regarding their participation in the construction of a new public sphere, in a discussion that merges with the wider debate of gatekeeping and the theory of ambivalence in the journalist's profession. ✎

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