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Editorial

Social Cohesion in Times of Crisis: The Role of Communication for Democracies—Editors' Introduction

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1. Introduction

Global crises are becoming a feature of our society. The COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and several financial crises are a few problems that have massively affected our wellbeing. These phenomena require a common response, involving the whole of society. However, the social cohesion of democracies is in decline as several groups feel that they are not represented (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). This is linked to a geopolitical battle for global influence and to arise attention in a hyperconnected scenario.

In recent years, social media has emerged as the central infrastructure of public communication, triggering a transformation of the political system (Schroeder 2018). Despite the possibilities of better connecting with an audience, these digital media are also used to encourage polarization and disinformation (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018). Prior scholarship has described how polarization is fueled by digital platforms (Overgaard and Collier 2023), leading to the development of conditions of populism. There is concern regarding the capability of democracy to survive the Internet since trust in government or voter turnout are both diminishing (Powers and Kounalakis 2017).

Bearing these trends in mind, research is needed to further understand these structural challenges and decide how to tackle them to ensure the social cohesion of our societies. The objective of this Special Issue is to examine the main conflicts that put social cohesion and global geopolitics at risk. Furthermore, it aims to analyze the strategies of governments and public institutions in favor of social welfare and offer insightful findings on perceptions regarding the media and digital audiences. In this Special Issue, three themes are addressed: the role of communication by public institutions, the contribution of journalism in verifying what is false, and the responsibility of citizens in rebuilding social cohesion outside and within social networks.

2. Public Communication in the Era of Disinformation

News media, but also opinion leaders and citizens as digital prosumers (Casero-Ripollés 2021), build stories on digital platforms that can impact the unity of territories, consolidate extremist ideologies, or foster fragmentation between states. On this political backdrop, reports and opinion polls target audiences which are distant to politics, citizens' disaffection with the media, and an increasing loss of trust (Pérez-Curiel and Rivas-de-Roca 2022). Therefore, this negative rhetoric impacts both political and media systems.

A new public communication model has been consolidated in which most communication takes place in social networks, generating disrupted public spheres based on the lack of restrictions and eco-chambers (Larsson 2016). This overlaps with the platformization of politics, understood as the dominance of digital platforms in shaping public discourse (Smyrnaios and Baisnée 2023). As a consequence, using social media is essential for political actors to be known, with an emphasis on self-promoting leaders. Public spheres, including transnational ones such as the European Public Sphere, are now marked by

digital conversation (Rivas-de-Roca and García-Gordillo 2022), which is an opportunity but also a challenge for true communication between politicians and citizens.

On this matter, disinformation is a factor that explains weak social cohesion. Social media enables the wide spread of false information with the intention to deceive people (LETI). This phenomenon has become massive because social networks are used daily on smartphones, developing an information disorder that requires the collaboration of platforms (Facebook, Google, Twitter-X) in order to solve it (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017). International institutions such as the Council of Europe have adopted public initiatives to fight fake news (Keen and Georgescu 2020), especially considering its relationship to hate speech. The focus is on human rights education since the problem is not only technological. Regarding the working of disinformation, many people trust those who send them information through mobile instant messaging apps (Valera-Ordaz et al. 2022), which is a chance for the acceptance of false information.

One of the movements that has taken advantage of this disinformation scenario is populism. Given the great generalization of this term, populism is not an easy phenomenon to understand, but its growth is an additional risk to the development of a full democracy. Popular sovereignty is a key value of populism, in the sense of asking to regain control of the territory (Gerbaudo 2017). Those involved in this consider themselves as outsiders against a corrupt elite, seeking to return to a mythologized past.

Moreover, populism is not only an ideology but also a style of communication that draws on the tools of digital media systems to promote its specific type of communication (Engesser et al. 2017). Since conventional media sources are seen as enemies to them, these populist leaders apply their ideology to social networks in order to introduce their messages without filters. It should be noted that we could be living in a new populist wave, attracting greater public interest whilst also maintaining the characteristics of pop politics (Battista 2023). Hence, it is worth exploring to what extent public communication contributes to social cohesion in a context of populist politics and disinformed citizens.

3. Special Issue Contributions

This Special Issue includes eleven research articles, divided into three sections. They all have in common a concern about current democracies and mass media, dealing with narratives, phenomena, and perceptions of a series of existing global crises. The increase in antidemocracy and authoritarian policing shows the need for a deep academic reflection on the roots of the communication of these ideas.

3.1. The Role of Communication in Public Institutions

First, there is a group of articles in this Special Issue that examine the role of political and public communication, ranging from crisis management to elections. Tirado-García (2023) addressed criticisms made to the adversary by political parties on Telegram during a particular polarized electoral campaign (the Spanish region of Community in Madrid in 2021). A quantitative content analysis was applied to the messages posted on Telegram by the main political parties. Although mobile instant messaging apps have become an essential political tool to communicate with citizens, they are still little explored in the existing literature. The results of this study show that criticizing the adversary is an emerging communication strategy on Telegram, especially by the parties in government, which is quite different to findings on other social media. Thus, Telegram seems to work as a helpful network for ruling parties.

Other digital platforms have also been studied, focusing on political leaders. Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, Pérez-Curiel et al. (2023) analyzed action on Twitter by the four main political leaders in Spain. These actors played a role not only in the debate on vaccination, but also in the perception of the crisis. Using a content analysis, the conclusions point to rising polarization. The electoral use of the vaccine or measures such as social distance were much more important than fostering awareness about the virus. Political interest, and not social values, was at the cornerstone of the management of the crisis.

Together with digital platforms, political parties were also considered in terms of emotional narratives. Jaráiz Gulías et al. (2022) describes the relationship between far-right political party (VOX) voters in Spain and the levels of satisfaction with democracy. They contribute to a budding literature on the success of right-wing populism, arguing that emotion is a factor that is added to the traditional variables of far-right voters. Drawing upon a multivariate analysis, the results reveal there is hope in the VOX leader (Santiago Abascal) to solves the problems of Spain. This feeling is made up of cultural elements, which are linked to identity-driven politics.

3.2. The Contribution of Journalism in Verification and Wellbeing

Digital technologies have transformed the public sphere, but journalism is still a professional sector with influence on setting the agenda or defining frames for social problems. Within a framework of disinformation, the commitment of journalism to truth is even more relevant. The COVID-19 pandemic was a milestone in the dissemination of hoaxes. On this matter, Teneva (2023) furthers our understanding of the concept of digital pseudo-identification, which was present during the pandemic, by supporting journalists' opinion with non-factual arguments. Based on a computer-aided content analysis, as well as critical discourse analyses, articles related to four COVID-19 vaccines were analyzed in the mainstream media of the United Kingdom and the United States. The findings show that some quality press sources included the opinions of pseudo-authorities, which were accompanied by a positive approach to European vaccines compared to non-European ones. These results have a strong implication in terms of credibility in the media system concerning health crisis.

Another international problem is the war in Ukraine. Western mass media devoted great attention to the topic at the beginning of the conflict. This is the timeframe selected by Pallarés-Renau et al. (2023), who identified the characteristics of the news coverage of the Red Cross during the first 100 days of the war in Ukraine. Based on a literature review of the strategic relationship between press and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the authors carried out a content analysis of the headlines. Their findings show that the Red Cross is not a usual focus of media attention but rather a lure for political communication and publicity of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Hence, the press has not promoted comprehensive coverage to the mission of this historical institution throughout the whole duration of the war, which makes it difficult to see its impartial approach towards protecting human life.

Regarding existing global crises, climate change has also been tackled by this Special Issue. As there is an increasing debate on the connection between meat production and climate change, Palau-Sampio et al. (2022) examined how this relationship is addressed by three center-left media outlets from Germany, the United Kingdom, and Spain. Based on the assumption that news media shape public perceptions of nutrition, these authors developed an analysis that combines quantitative and qualitative methods. Even though a scant number of articles combining climate change and meat consumption was found, there were some differences between the countries, indicating a greater awareness in the British sample. Most of the news items were from an environmental perspective, but the lack of frequent media attention suggests that there is not a good understanding of the threats caused by the meat industry.

Beyond specific crises covered by journalism in the digital age, media outlets are suffering from their own platformization. In their work, Morais and Jerónimo (2023) offer insightful findings on the perceptions on how platforms change newsroom routines and news distribution. It is noteworthy to examine to what extent digital platforms have altered news consumption and the structural conditions of the craft of journalism, but there is little evidence on how this phenomenon is linked to challenges such as disinformation or news authorship. Drawing upon an in-depth study of local media in the central region of Portugal and three focus groups with editors, journalists, and local media consumers, they reveal a concern about the inability of audiences to distinguish the content created by local

media from others that circulate online. This demands new actions and strategies in terms of media literacy. Nevertheless, local media professionals are still considered essential for digital news distribution infrastructures. The strong mission of local journalism, consisting of representing its area and building community ties, explains why its future could impact on social cohesion.

3.3. The Responsibility of Citizens in Rebuilding Social Cohesion

The massive use of digital technologies had led to initial optimism about the possibilities of interaction and conversation on the Internet. Despite the fact that this kind of dialogue has not been confirmed yet by the literature, the proliferation of disinformation puts the focus on citizens once again. A lot of fake news is directed towards vulnerable groups such as the LGBTQI+ community, as stated by Carratalá (2023), who performed an analysis of the social audience's reaction to four messages of pseudo-information against LGBTQI+ people posted on Twitter. Based on user comments to news items assessed as "fake" by well-known fact-checkers and in-depth interviews with representatives of Spanish LGBTQI+ organizations, the management of disinformation was explored. It is outstanding how many responses consider disinformation against this social group to be true, but there were also comments that reject these messages. For its part, the interviewee activists believe pseudo-media and social networks are mostly responsible for this kind of disinformation, although collaboration with other groups, including citizens, was evaluated as key to fight fake news.

Another highly vulnerable group are women. Beltrán et al. (2023) investigated violence on social networks towards female politicians in Chile. Specifically, the analysis pays attention to the Chilean constitutional process (2021–2022). The authors used a tracking database, "Women and Politics", composed of Twitter posts mentioning women candidates. The hashtags were examined, showing that there were a lot of messages containing hate speech, which can be better understood under the concept of incivilities. These contents were present not only in the presidential election, but also in the constitutional plebiscite. Within the discussion, the article suggests that social networks have increased the violence suffered by women in politics, which is employed in a strategic way by their opponents.

There is a relationship between the use of social media and the mistrust of mass media, being a consolidated line of research that is here expanded on by de la Garza Montemayor and Rasgado (2023). These authors focus on another social group (youths) by using a mixed methodology. As trust could affect consumption, they carried out a survey of young Mexican university students in order to find out which media sources are most trusted and used. On the other hand, a set of interviews was conducted with university professors. The purpose of this study was to collect their observations of the media behavior of students. The results highlight that trust is not a key variable for youths as its level does not impact the consultation of a specific media outlet. Likewise, media sources which are mistrusted have a high rate of usage. This finding is concerning since it fuels the scope of disinformation.

The last article in this section (Khaile et al. 2022) explores the perceptions of trust in terms of social cohesion. This paper is one that more largely deals with the notion of social cohesion, seen through the lens of social cooperation. In countries such as South Africa, this concept is more an ideal than a reality. This is the reason why two rural communities of South Africa were selected to assess the knowledge gaps and level of trust. A qualitative methodology was conducted through semi-structured interviews, showing limited trust. Participants who know each other are more likely to trust and develop social cohesion, which overlaps to the two-step flow communication theory (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1970).

4. Conclusions—Reconfiguring the Crisis of Democracy

The eleven contributions to this Special Issue offer an exciting and renewed vision of the challenges of social cohesion in a digital and polarized scenario. These investigations use different contexts, media outlets, and networks to show how public communication is

managing ongoing problems, with a special focus on global crises such as climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, or the rise of populism. The survival of democracies based on trust and high-quality information is a challenge, in a context where digital technologies have become relevant infrastructures for the public sphere.

This set of articles portrays a changing field of research that aims to understand the transformations affecting current democracies. The central question is still how to ensure social cohesion and integrity through communication, especially regarding vulnerable groups. Taking these contributions together, we argue that ameliorating media literacy would enhance the use of news media and social media. Future research may consider focusing on theoretical insights that reinforce this background, generating an understanding of the structural conditions that support the flow of disinformation.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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