

Communication, citizen participation, democracy and misinformation in the architecture of the public space

Comunicación, participación ciudadana, democracia y desinformación en la construcción del espacio público

Ana Gabriela González Ayala
anagaby@gmail.com

Licenciatura en Comunicación Pública
Universidad de Guadalajara

RESUMEN

Este ensayo contrasta el ideal de una esfera pública democrática (conformada en parte por medios masivos imparciales y participación ciudadana) con las tácticas de desinformación que buscan legitimar, a través de participación ciudadana sesgada, la modificación de la arquitectura del espacio público. El ensayo explora la dicotomía entre lo público y lo privado y la manipulación de la información para legitimar procesos públicos con agendas ocultas.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Desinformación, esfera pública, participación ciudadana, arquitectura del espacio público, comunicación pública.

ABSTRACT

This paper contrasts the ideal democratic public sphere (partly made up by unbiased media and citizen participation) with misinformation tactics that wish to legitimize, through biased citizen participation, the modification of the architecture of the public space in terms of private interests. The essay explores the dichotomy between the public and the private and the manipulation of information in order to legitimize public processes with hidden agendas.

KEYWORDS

Misinformation, public sphere, citizen participation, architecture of the public space, public communication.

Elaborado: -
Recibido: abril de 2014
Aceptado: mayo de 2014



Democratic societies have different interaction processes between the diverse actors that constitute them. Governments seek the justification of their actions in terms of “what is best for their people”. Changes in the architecture of the public space should seek the greater good and should pose a positive outcome for the citizens or members of a community. But what if the greater good and private interests don’t follow the same paths? What if the greater good of a community interferes with the greater good of an individual?

In Mexico, society was reconfigured after the Mexican Independence Movement. The ideas derived by the French Revolution (*liberté, égalité, fraternité*) as we know from popular history, are one of the external causes of the independence movements in Latin America (González, 2007). This pursuit of “democracy” as a reaction to the oppression of colonialism set the tone for generations to come. Nowadays, we live in “democratic societies”. The French Revolution ideals paired up with Manifest Destiny and most of Latin America holds elections and representative processes.

Specifically in Mexico, democracy and sovereignty are the foundations of our society and State. There is a theoretical intrinsic relationship between our (society’s) sovereignty and liberty and the State. Society “willingly places” its sovereignty in the hands of the state through a democratic process. The people are then ruled representatively by a government that will care for their greater, collective well being (Arróniz Meza, 2005).

There is a constant pull between what should be ruled by the State and what an individual

should rule. This is where the dichotomy between the public and the private first comes to view. Where does the greater sense of being part of a society (society being the sum of views in a collective vision) stop being a matter of the government and where does it start being a matter of a single individual?

According to Nora Rabotnikof, all that is public fits in the *public space*. The public space is a space that is common to all peoples. It is open and visible, as opposed to what is kept in the dark. It is accessible to all. Public means that it will hold the greater common interests on top of the individual interests (2008).

In a more complex manner, Jürgen Habermas poses that the public sphere is a metaphorical space that is not necessarily tangible. It is “made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state” (Habermas, 1962, p. 176). In this scenario, democracy is a given because in the public sphere, there is a dialogue between government and society. There is a plurality of understandings and views that are exchanged. Except, when this public sphere takes place in mass media, there could be miscommunication.

One definition for *public communication* is: “All the phenomena of production, processing, dissemination and feedback that reflect create and direct the debates and public affairs. Public communication is not only the fact of the media, but also institutions, businesses, groups and movements involved in the public sphere” (Beuxchamp, 1991, pág. 21). In this broad definition of communication, we take into consideration all that is and should be accessible, open and decided between the different actors of the public sphere.



The media *mediates* the official statements, the public opinion, and the facts and elevates them to a seemingly unbiased perception of reality. Mass media plays a double role in terms of the public sphere (Rutherford, 2000). Mass media is the channel that is used to portray ideas in the public sphere. It is part of the scope of the public sphere because it contributes to the dialogue and to the construction of that imaginary space. Mass media is also an actor of the public sphere. It can represent private or state-related interests and have its own biased view.

Mass media may have private interests in mind: an official statement with an agenda of its own, omitted facts, corrupt leaders of opinion, etc. All of these possibilities bias the media and thus, the perception of what is said in the public sphere. This exposes the big conundrum of media and the public sphere: is the media as a source of information reliable if it is both channel and actor?

The public sphere is not as democratic as it should be:

private interests disguised as public interests can contaminate it. One way to ensure that what is public remains public is by legitimizing processes through citizen participation:

Citizen participation implies the involvement of citizens in a wide range of policymaking activities, including the determination of levels of service, budget priorities, and the acceptability of physical construction projects in order to orient government programs toward community needs,

build public support, and encourage a sense of cohesiveness within neighborhoods. There are many models of participation. At one end of the scale sits information provision – a one-way government-to-citizen provision in which a government simply tells its citizenry what it wants them to know through media or other means. At the other end is the active citizenship or empowerment model, in which citizen groups are involved in agenda-setting and decision-making and monitoring. Following the continuum model of participation, the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) conceptualizes participation in five categories of relationships: inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower (United Nations Public Administration Network, 2008).

There are different levels of citizen participation that ensure democracy in the public sphere. According to Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, there are three main levels: non-participation, tokenism and citizen power. In the non-participation level, there are manipulation and

therapy, which are one-sided communicative processes. In tokenism there is a certain level of citizen participation, but it isn't enough to empower the citizen. Citizens do have a voice in this level and practice informing, consultation and placation. This is the stage where polls, pamphlets and some advising take place. The decision is still the power holder's in this level. In the last level there is citizen power. This includes partnerships, delegated power and citizen control (1969).

THE MEDIA MEDIATES THE OFFICIAL STATEMENTS, THE PUBLIC OPINION, AND THE FACTS AND ELEVATES THEM TO A SEEMINGLY UNBIASED PERCEPTION OF REALITY



Citizen power is the level of citizen participation that every democracy should aspire to reach, provided that it bears the common, greater good of its society in mind. Citizen participation could legitimize the use of state funds for intervention projects. If there is citizen participation, then, whatever the government wants to build, it would be built sharing the power with the citizens and thus, having society's best interests at heart.

Despite having mechanisms to ensure citizen participation of the citizen power level, some governments attempt to legitimize their projects with non-participation and tokenism. Biased citizen participation is procured through misinformation tactics to legitimize the architecture of the public space in terms of private interests. Partial exposure to the truth could result in opinions that support certain projects that, if the subjects had been exposed to all the information available, they would not have supported the project. The results of polls, consultations and some advising can be manipulated to only shed light onto certain agendas.

In "The human condition", Hannah Arendt writes:

Since our feeling for reality depends utterly upon appearance and therefore upon the existence of a public realm into which things can appear out of the darkness of sheltered existence, even the twilight which illuminates our private and intimate lives is

ultimately derived from the much harsher light of the public realm. Yet there are a great many things which cannot withstand the implacable, bright light of the constant presence of others on the public scene; there, only what is considered to be relevant, worthy of being seen or heard, can be tolerated, so that the irrelevant becomes automatically a private matter (1958, p. 51).

This means that not every decision has to be made under public because it is not relevant to the cause. Some decisions must be made in private and then have some light shed upon them when they, once again, become relevant to the public sphere. This also means that some decisions that should be public can remain in the dark. It is a two-way street.

BIASED CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IS PROCURED THROUGH MISINFORMATION TACTICS TO LEGITIMIZE THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE PUBLIC SPACE IN TERMS OF PRIVATE INTERESTS

The public sphere is a contest. It is a fight for visibility. Only what is visible is truly public and the many actors in the public sphere can affect this visibility in terms of their own interests:

The [public] sphere remains a site for the production of public opinion that is given concrete form by surveys and polls which, to a degree, actually fashion the opinion through the process of asking certain questions (and not asking others). Because of an excess of goods and risks competing for attention, the sphere continues to be a contested arena; however, much of the excess is manufactured by people and institutions with money, moral clout, or other forms of power. The mass media play out a double roll here, both as the vehicle for competitive spectacles and as the source of news, a different kind



of discourse, though again a monologue and now contaminated by the ubiquity of publicity (Rutherford, 2000, p. 274).

With the disguise of citizen participation, governments can manipulate the public sphere to justify their actions. The search for true democracy, a public sphere that is accessible to all and executed in the light of day, can only be successful if citizen participation and the check and balances mechanisms are held to the highest standards. Tokenism and non-participation can only function as vehicles to legitimize corruption.

In terms of the architecting of the public space: the genesis (or modification) of new public spaces (public buildings, squares and all infrastructure that is public) should be a matter of democratic citizen participation. It should be the product of discussion between the government and the citizens and should have weighed the pros and cons of the project. However, the construction of public infrastructure often represents the interests of the collective private interests of certain groups. As previously stated, what is public should hold the collective greater good higher than the collective individual good. When the public space is modified to please the interests of the private realm on top of the public realm, the public space loses its meaning: it is neither democratic nor inclusive.

It would be relevant to pose the following questions: Who should ensure that citizen participation is held to its highest level: the citizens of the government? What can citizens do to ensure their participation does not simply legitimize the modification of the architecture of the public space but ensure that these modifications tend to their needs? In the Mexican context, is it really possible to have citizen participation of the highest level?



Works cited

Arendt, H. (1958). *The human condition*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press.

Arnstein, S. (1969). *A Ladder of Citizen Participation*. *JAIP* , 35 (4), pp. 216-224.

Arróniz Meza, H. (2005). *La defensa constitucional de la soberanía en materia energética*. Puebla: Universidad de las Américas Puebla.

Beuxchamp, M. (1991). *Communication publique et société. Repères pour la réflexion et l'action*. Montreal, Quebec, Canada: gaetan morin.

González, L. (2007). El liberalismo triunfante. En E. C. México, *Historia General de México* (Vol. Versión 2000). México: Centro de Estudios Históricos.

Habermas, J. (1962). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Burgeois Society*. (T. Burger, Trad.) Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA: The MIT Press.

Rutherford, P. (2000). *Endless Propaganda: The Advertising of Public Goods*. Toronto. Ontario, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Rabotnikof, N. (2008). Lo público hoy: lugares, lógicas y expectativas. *Íconos. Revista de Ciencias Sociales* , 32, 37-48.

