

Citizens and governance: media scrutiny in the digital era

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I. Introduction

Governance and “soft” regulation have been presented as concepts that embed a more broad consideration of the agents that regulate and frame media activity. This new paradigm considers several perspectives of analysis, from the state to organizations of civil society, in layers of jurisdiction that go from the global to the national or even local level. Governing mechanisms, in times of blurred boundaries between and within public and private spheres, do not only rest on recourse to the authority of the state, or of those by him mandated (Stoker, 1998). The regular functioning of institutions, media included, is now depending on several actors. In this new environment for regulation, the role of citizens must be considered in the discussion and setting of orientations and normative of functions for the media.

In the digital era, citizens may use a vast array of technological supports to participate and create conditions for collective action, thus allowing research to deepen new perspectives of analysis. They may assume responsibilities on the governing environment by using informal tools of control and by colonizing the digital public sphere, thus providing meaningful contributions to a network of actors that set out policies. Of course that power is not equally distributed among those actors and some sites of decision-making – as traditional regulators or other elements of the state’s sphere – are more important than others (Raboy, 2004). But citizens’ initiatives to participate and to take part of the process cannot be ignored as they represent new voices, beyond institutional processes and economic interests, that rise in public space and that challenge established powers. This is the framework to analyze the role that citizen, using new social media, can play in the enhancement of media scrutiny and accountability.

II. Media governance

Governance is concerned with the creation of conditions for ordered rule, following the settlement of normative objectives, but considers different ways to enforce the accomplishment of those aims. It goes beyond formal institutions of the state and considers other governing tools and mechanisms outside the government sphere. The concept has arisen in public managerial sciences and in economic studies in a neoliberal framework claiming for less government and for cuts public spending. Governance thus considers new set of managerial tools for more efficient public services (Stoker, 1998).

Governance has been adopted by several social areas to account for the changes in regulation and policy making, and media ecology was not an exception (Bardoel and d'Haenens, 2004). The concept also considers a more behavioral and dynamic perspective by embracing the interaction and interdependence of a multiplicity of actors and of policy venues (Raboy, 2004). The complexity emerges in all the definitions proposed and the unilateral governmental decision and policy making is no longer the single way to regulate the media sphere. Puppis (2010: 138) describes media governance as “the regulatory structure as a whole, i.e., the entirety of forms of rules that aim to organize media systems”, considering that a regulatory structure may meet the requirements of a democratic governance when, for instance, it is open to the participation of civil society.

Because the participation of citizens does not take place, most of time, in institutionally designed frameworks, it may be seen as irrelevant or without consequences. But citizens are claiming for the right to have a voice and to be part of the process. So the openness provided by governance concept should also consider formal and informal mechanisms of taking into consideration the contributions of civil society. These are meaningful participations that imply a certain degree of mutual recognition and acknowledgment – otherwise, this openness becomes empty and only contributes, in the long term, to citizens increasing disengagement (Carpentier, 2011; Dahlgren, 2005; Couldry et al., 2010) towards political affairs.

III. Informal media regulation and citizen participation

Commercial management of the media has been established in the last decades as a generalized practice, creating accountability mechanisms only market-oriented that have not accounted for the public nature of media and its role to democracy and healthy public sphere. This configuration resulted in the weakening of citizens position and, “therefore, it seems appropriate to bring back the citizen in the media and media policy debate” (Bardoel and d' Haenens, 2004: 166).

Different technological supports may give way to citizenry participation and the internet, namely social media, has been pointed out as major outburst in what concerns the display of new possibilities. Recent news on the Turkey protests showed citizens using Facebook to mobilize against government but also against mass media which were, according to them, taken by official positions. In previous protests in Egypt, Twitter was pointed out as an important element, this platform developing into a site for news storytelling, enabling collaborative story writing, but more typically, collaborative filtering and curating of news (Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013). Thus, collaboratively produced news feeds by citizens committing independent or coordinated acts of journalism presented an important alternative to the dominant news economy, being mostly important at times when access to mainstream media was somehow restricted or not trusted. Social media, in various protest around the world, promoted visibility to marginalized voices and enabled alternative narratives of dissention (Hamdy and Gomaa 2012; Lim 2012).

When analyzing the relationship between media regulation (broadly considered) and citizens, blogs have also been presented as a promising tool. In particular, media scrutiny has been performed by what is named media blogs, projects led by, most of the time, scholars who specifically reflect on media and journalism performance on a more academic and informed way. However, in what concerns media criticism, political blogs have become somehow more prominent and visible. Firstly, because of the ongoing and complex relationship between media and politics (Blumler and Coleman, 2010; McNair, 2011) and, secondly, because political blogs are considered to be highly influential due to the fact that they are part of journalists, politicians and other elites' reading habits (Tomaszewski et al., 2009).

In fact, new media like blogs changed the traditional forms of political communication, dominated by elites and media, leading to a less tight control on the political agenda by politicians, forcing a more defensive role in agenda-setting (Gurevitch et al. 2009). If, on one hand, governments and other political actors are forced by the proliferation of blogs and online networks (that monitor, scrutinize and criticize political messages) to deal with larger spaces mediation (Blumler and Coleman, 2010), also the media with its centralized organization, elite gatekeepers and established relationships with organizations of power lost the monopoly of public communication (Couldry et al., 2010: 37). Traditional mass media now coexist in a more dispersed, fragmented and interconnected ecology.

Most of links in political blogs directs readers to mainstream media sites, showing a high proximity between these two realities (Tremayne, 2007; Adamic and Glance, 2005; Reese et al., 2007). Nevertheless, this proximity, that some authors consider to represent an assumption by bloggers of the journalists' routines, facts and voices, does not mean a total identity between both of them. Blogs do seem to be a secondary market for professional news sites. However, there is a significant difference between them: while

blogs focus more on substantive issues, traditional media tends to prefer party politics (Koop e Jansen, 2009). In fact, bloggers claim the right to interpret and, most of the times, to reinterpret, facts in the light of their ideological frame. Thus, new potentialities of information, but mostly new readings are available to a more active and participative citizenry – and this reinterpretation challenges traditional framing of events by media, disclosing new approaches ignored by media, emphasizing aspects minimized by media or holding on issues let down by media.

In earlier considerations of political blogs, some research tended to analyze its journalistic potential (as bloggers being a new kind of information providers), but most studies have emphasized the fact the blogs did not fulfill the traditional news function but acted more as a watchdog for what media was doing. Bloggers could then be considered as “the watchdogs of watchdogs” (Hayes, et al., 2007) because they are outside the system and free of the organizational and economic constraints faced by traditional journalism. Affecting the journalistic sphere, citizen blogs “monitor the work of professional media online and offline to highlight under-covered stories, expose errors or bias in reporting, and to criticize poor arguments in editorials and columns” (Domingo and Heinonen, 2008: 7). Scott (2007), for instance, revealed that during the 2004 presidential elections in the US, blogs mostly provided a mediated report on news and facts – they assumed a surveillance function, linking stories to facts published in other sites, such as blogs, news sites, etc. Bivens (2008) suggests that bloggers could increase transparency for interested audiences, namely in what concerns newsworthiness. In a study that aimed at checking a normal routine in a blogger’s day, McKenna and Pole (2008: 106) asserted the high percentage of blogs’ links to mainstream media, but considered that “they also take their job as media fact checkers quite seriously as well”.

Mass media thus face some criticism that is expressed in blogs, assuming a role played in other instances by ombudsman or journalism reviews. Vos et al. (2011: 856) offered evidences that, in blogs, “most, but not all, of the discourse – whether brief or elaborate – resonates with traditional media criticism based on traditional assumptions about normative standards, roles, and practices” with bloggers “criticizing traditional news media for failing to be accurate, impartial, and independent”. Kaye (2007) found that users of blogs express some anti-traditional media feeling (which they consider to have a biased perspective) and consider the verification of the information allowed in blogs by hyperlinks a very positive feature.

Political bloggers are then a very sensitive group to issues of media accuracy and newsworthiness and, being their stands a matter of public interest, their sayings are worth analyzing. Following scientific literature that has considered traditional media to be challenged in its monopoly to interpret the public discourse, online initiatives of citizens (Couldry et al., 2010) are assuming an increasing important place in public sphere.

IV. Media scrutiny by Portuguese political blogs

The earliest considerations on the rising and growing of blogosphere reported the potential enrichment of public life in Portugal. First academic works on blogs focused on their contribution to a healthier public sphere namely by exercising the functions of scrutiny and control of the media. Although the emphasis was on the subjective nature of blogs' content, reflections also considered this space to be a site for review of current affairs, framed and disseminated by the media classics, blogs standing as a "remarkable amplification factor of social conversation, particularly around major events and large issues that mobilize the attention and concern of the people" (Pinto, 2004: 8).

An example of scrutiny performed by bloggers happened in the early times of Portuguese blogosphere, in 2005, and was targeted to the daily newspaper *Público*. The newspaper reported on the return of a convicted politician, Fátima Felgueiras, from Brazil (to where she had run away) and wrote about some alleged contacts that she would have kept with leaders of the Socialist Party. The blog *Bloguítica* raised the question on who were the "contacts" and that was echoed in more than 80 other blogs. The interrogation was eventually answered by the director of the newspaper on a television program. As stated by Pinto (2008), the blogosphere gradually constituted itself as a new instance of public scrutiny of the media, allowing a greater flow of information as well as a more regular and intense debate over the events published in the media sphere, particularly by giving greater visibility of media and journalism backstage. As in other geographic contexts, researchers appointed to mainstream media the dominant role of collecting, processing and disseminating information, while blogs play the role of interpret and critically evaluate such information.

In a study I conducted on the Portuguese political blogosphere (Silva, 2013), the extent of direct and identified blogs' criticism of media activity was not very high. Hyperlinks of the 20 most read Portuguese political blogs were collected during four weeks in 2011 and studied to determine their destination and the action they performed. In that sample, that gathered almost 4000 units, links to the media that played a role of scrutiny and critical stance were very infrequent. Only 0.6% of the total accounted links in our period of analysis questioned some aspect of media coverage - even if scrutiny was also present only with more generic citations and references and not specific to an article to which the post would link.

In spite of not being a not very common one in political blogosphere, this activity may offer readers tools that increase media literacy. Even though not on a regular basis, blogs provide a not very common space in the public sphere where there is any monitoring and control of the activity of the media - hundreds of bloggers, every day, look at newspapers, watch televisions, listen to radio with a more critical perspective than the

ordinary citizen. By scrutinizing and deconstructing news coverage, by showing 'hidden' readings, bloggers teach their readers to read between the lines and to get some distance from the product offered, so that they can validate the information and the different perspectives of analysis offered.

Like noticed by several other studies, also in Portuguese political blogs, most of the links directed readers to mainstream media, showing a great proximity and incorporating most of the time media speech in its own. However, this does not mean that blogs present a linear discourse close to the media. Blogs speak mostly of the same issues as newspapers, but they do it differently. In that sense, blogs scrutinize newspapers by showing a different approach to events - thus contributing to the discussion in the public sphere with new angles of analysis and deepening of perspectives. Thus, blogs are, to some extent, counter-power vehicles and forms of resistance to the framework of the events provided by the media. As demonstrated in the study, blogs can even resist media agenda-setting by avoiding newspapers tendency to anticipate results on major political issue (criticizing them afterwards when anticipations did not match) and by not reporting on the backstage of politics.

On the other hand, the proximity between the two can be beneficial when used in favor of journalism qualification, particularly in a concentration of media ownership scenario. The exercise of media functions in democratic societies is provided by statutes and ethics (McQuail, 2003). Bloggers, who closely follow news production in Portugal and are particularly sensitive to evaluate issues of argumentation and validation of information, will be in prime condition to ensure the monitoring of compliance with these procedures and professional ethics. The scrutiny they exert over the media, although it has been the less frequent interaction with media via links, highlights the blogs as a possible instance of informal control which may, in particular, contrast corporate interests of big media groups and clarify factors that affect the independence of regulators and / or politicians over some news coverage.

Finally, the proximity of the blogs to the media, which can be interpreted as a dependence of the former compared to the latter, cannot be perceived as such by bloggers. In fact, this appropriation of media discourse may indicate that bloggers placed themselves alongside mainstream media, assuming the prerogative to interpret facts and events reported there. They are complementary to the media, peers of journalists, with different functions but acting on the same level of the public sphere

This ability to criticize and analyze presented by blogs, in what concerns speeches more or less consensual in the public sphere, is what contributes, with regard to interaction with citizens, to their enlightenment. Newspapers favor the factual, neutral and objective approach, informing the public about the government, political parties, institutions and other social structures. Blogs, assuming another role in the public sphere, promote a different kind of interaction with citizens, with their readers. First, by assuming the in-

terpretation of events and intentions of political actors, blogs reveal the ideological game - showing the different perspectives of analysis and argumentation. In this sense, they are the best representatives of the public media conceptualized by Bourdieu (2003) as a system of forces and tensions, conveying an idea of politics as the management of public affairs that calls for work, discussion and skills (Champagne, 2000). This contributes to the symbolic opening of the public, countering the effect of conformism and the adoption of a majority climate of public opinion (Nöelle-Neuman, 2002). This is even more important as the news coverage provided by the mainstream media tends to be less critical and pluralistic in the face of a broad consensus of politicians (Davis, 2009).

V. Concluding remarks

The conditions for a media scrutiny in the public sphere are set. Their impact depend on the assumption by bloggers of the role they can play in terms of media transparency and media literacy, but also, and perhaps, mainly, on the importance to them attributed by the media. So far, there is an acknowledgment of blogs' presence - some media provide tracking devices to their news, allowing posts to be networked with articles. But the degree of the action in result of blogs' criticism is yet to be studied. Do newsrooms respond to blogs' scrutiny by re-writing stories or by following new clues? Do journalists read and take into consideration blogs' criticism incorporating this new source of accountability in their daily routines? These are questions yet to be answered.

Blogs' effect on citizens literacy and ability to critically read the media is also an unexplored field, but blogs have a significant daily readership that is exposed to new stances of media ethics and routines scrutiny. Other citizens, aside the citizen bloggers, also can beneficiate of the bloggers' «watchdog» function by learning to read between the lines. This has to result in a more informed citizenry and a better prepared one to understand the challenges of media markets and that media regulation faces today.

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