

## **The Role of Public Service Journalism and Television in Fostering Public Voice and the Capacity to Consent: an Analysis of Spanish Viewers' Discourses**

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This paper explores the relevance of voice, recognition and consent as central attributes of the subject of participatory journalism. On the understanding that in democracy the design of political and social organisation ought to favour a process that develops the public voice of citizens, it explores the role that journalism, above all the public service kind, plays in meeting this objective. From this perspective, an analysis is performed on the discourses of the viewers of the newscasts of the Spanish public TV channel TVE, with a view to determining to what extent public recognition is based on the following three elements: (1) the recognition of citizens as such, and (2) their capacity to give or

withhold their consent and (3) to develop a voice capable of vindicating participation. The discussion and results aim to contribute to the debate on the 'critical juncture' (McChesney, 2007) of media history, at which the information ecosystem is undergoing far-reaching changes.

**Keywords:** participatory journalism, media democratisation, audience studies, public service media, Televisión Española, voice, recognition consent, crisis of representation

### **1. The need for participation and voice in journalism today**

In the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of public journalism was developed by North American scholars and journalists (Glasser, 1999) who underscored some of its deficiencies when representing citizens and called for a more deliberative role. In the twenty-first century, the Internet offered the promise of a more fluent relationship between audiences and media producers. Rheingold (2008) and Lévy (1997) coined the concepts of 'intelligent multitudes' and 'collective intelligence', respectively. Both notions rest on the fact that technologically connected individuals can collaborate and the aggregation of micro-knowledge constitutes a supra-intelligence with the capacity to react rapidly and collectively to a given problem and to oppose the dominant authority.

To a certain extent, journalism seems to be in the process of incorporating these notions, despite the tension generated between the traditional values of journalism – above all journalistic autonomy – and the growing demand to incorporate other voices (de Haan, 2011: 206-207; Mäntymäki, 2009: 76-77). A participatory relationship with audiences has been encouraged not only out of altruism or for the sake of public service, but also for strategic reasons (Lowe, 2009: 20-21) in an adverse political and economic context marked by fragmentation and mobility (Hjarvard, 2017).

All this work seems to have had some effect. For instance, according to the Habermasian vision, Picard and Pickard (2017: 36) uphold participation as the cornerstone of journalism insofar as the democratic health of a country depends on it. The focus on participatory journalism seems to have peaked between 2007 and 2011 (Borger et al., 2012: 120). Afterwards – with the

implosion of the social and media influence of global corporations operating on the Internet, such as Google and Facebook – this mobile post-modern society has been identified as a network society (Castells, 2000), in which the influence of mediation processes intensifies and ‘paradoxically people are both more connected and unconnected at the same time’ (Van Den Bulk et al., 2017: 12), both in nation states and globally. Recently, after the Facebook–Cambridge Analytica data scandal, the term ‘information disorder’ is gaining ground.<sup>1</sup>

This new context calls for a reassessment of the public media mission, especially when we are, as McChesney claims, at a critical juncture, (2007: 9). Indeed, the protest movements emerging in different countries during the period 2011-2016 (‘Indignados’ in Spain, ‘Occupy’ in the USA and UK, and ‘Nuit Debout’ in France) underscored citizens’ disaffection with and detachment from representative democratic institutions such as parliaments and the media (Harsin 2018; Candón, 2014). In addition to demanding greater participation, the protesters experimented with elements of deliberative democracy in assemblies and by creating their own media. (Barranquero and Meda, 2015).

In this post-protest frame, our study explores citizens’ specific demands for representation, recognition and voice through focus groups with viewers of public service broadcasting news (TVE).

This paper is structured as follows: firstly, the theoretical background including a discussion on (1) the relevance of such a research proposal in the field and on the concepts of (2) voice, recognition and consent; secondly, a description of (3) the qualitative analysis methodology, followed by (4) the results and (5) conclusions.

## **2. The subject of voice and the field of participatory journalism**

According to Habermas (1987: 452-453) in democracy the public sphere influences state decision-making. And, as citizens, the people’s capacity for consent and expression depends on their ability to participate with others in a horizontal dialogue. This provides a lucid framework for understanding the key function of citizen participation, enabled mainly by journalism.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, see ‘Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking’, Council of Europe (2017).

Hence, it would be reasonable to continue conceiving the 'audience' in journalism studies and in journalism itself as citizens, members of the active public sphere. However, their role has been mainly and increasingly understood as that of consumers (Deuze, 2008; Jackson, 2008) or even spectators (Ferrés, 2000; Postman, 1985). Habermas relates it to the emergence of state capitalism (Fraser, 1989: 131), later aggravated by neoliberalism.

Despite this criticism, academia seems to have contributed to the fact that the right of viewers to be considered as citizens has been ignored: studies that focus on this issue are few and far between even in the field of participatory journalism, as shown by a systematic study by Borger et al. (2012: 130). This work described the academic area as comprising four normative dimensions: (1) enthusiasm about new democratic opportunities; (2) disappointment with the obduracy of professional journalism; (3) disappointment with the economic motives behind professional journalism's interest in facilitating participatory journalism; and finally (4) disappointment with the passivity of news viewers (ibid: 124). Moreover, as regards journalism, 'the journalistic model', with a strong focus on expertise, public orientation and independence (Singer, 2003), has been described as hegemonic (Holton et al., 2016: 857; Van der Wurff and Schoenbach, 2014: 134), even despite participatory demands.

This reminds us that hegemonic practices and discourses enable 'a limited set of possible utterances which set the limits of what we can say and therefore do (...) and exclude alternatives' (Schrøder and Phillips, 2007: 894).

Academic normative discourses and journalistic practices influence citizens' discourses on journalism too, as our previous findings illustrate as regards Spanish viewers' discourses (Lamuedra, Mateos and Broullón-Lozano 2018). As before, audience opinions not only have an impact on journalism in the shape of 'expected expectations' (Schmidt, 2008: 67). According to J. Hartley (2002, p. 11), 'the audience is a construction motivated by the paradigm in which it is imagined'. Interestingly enough, the notion of 'imagined audience' is being reframed and developed in the context of the emergence of social networks (Litt, 2012; Marwick and Boyd, 2010) to focus on its influence not only on what and how users communicate, but even on the way they build their identity:

Identity and the self are constituted through constant interactions with others – primary talk. In other words, self-presentation is collaborative. Individuals work together to uphold preferred self-images of themselves and their conversation partners (...) encouraging social norms, or negotiating power differentials and disagreements (Marwick and Boyd, 2010: 132).

This paper explores a significant lacuna in the processes in which citizens should be recognised as subjects capable of participating in the public sphere, which entails forming part of the audience of journalism, and developing a public voice that ultimately allows them to grant or withhold consent.

The object is to explore the perceptions that Spaniards have of citizens' voice, recognition and consent as regards journalism and democracy. These citizens are also viewers or audience members of the public television channel TVE and, at the same time, users of digital information and social networking sites. Consequently, they are all considered here as citizens, members of the public sphere or 'the public': 'where strangers meet to consider and to build a common life under rules by which they are treated as moral equals' (Schudson, 1999: 131). Using Sonia Livingstone's terminology, it can be held that in this study the term 'audience' collapses into that of the public (2005: 2).

### **3. Neoliberalism versus the voice, identity and consent of citizens**

In *Why Voice Matters*, Couldry (2010) explains that in democracy it so essential for society to have a voice that it should be designed to encourage and develop this aspect. This implies that subjects possess the necessary resources to become involved in self-reflection (for instance, access to the media, education and information or time...). However, Couldry argues that neoliberalism, after colonising the economic, political and social spheres of our systems, actively avoids the processes involved in developing this voice – for example, by promoting such a demanding work culture as to exhaust people.<sup>2</sup>

If identity is constructed in social interaction with others, people become subjects when they recognise others as such and vice versa (Fraser and

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<sup>2</sup> Han's work (2015) is also enlightening.

Honneth, 2006; Vázquez Medel, 2003). The concept of recognition in the field of journalism not only implies the representation of the identities of different groups and social sectors in the news diet, but goes beyond that. Such a representation should highlight the capacity of individuals and groups to contribute actively to society.

Rheingold (2008:101) confirmed this close relationship when studying youth participation on the Internet: young people complain that speaking their minds is no guarantee that they will be heard, understanding that this justifies the fact that they hardly feel any obligation to participate. Consequently, achieving 'voice', that part of the process in which their individuality comes into play, might help young people to associate self-expression with civic participation, something which the author believes is 'learnable'. Marwick and Boyd (2010) found that subjects with a more structured awareness of their imagined audience tended to be those more aware that theirs was a public voice, often with a purpose. Again there is a link between speech interaction within a community (albeit imagined), recognition and the fostering of a legitimate public voice.

And there is still the question of inequality as regards the extent to which the voice of groups is recognised as legitimate. Rancière claims that the categories that we employ in relation to professions, nationalities, posts and formal education determine, and even stipulate, who has the right to speak and who should be listened to (Rancière, 2009: 13). Therefore, whether or not someone is perceived as a subject worthy of participating in the public debate will depend on the shared social appreciation of this role in which voice recognition is distributed. In other words, some are perceived as political subjects with a voice and discourse, while others are seen as people who only make a noise (Rancière, 2009: 24).

And lastly, there is the relationship between voice, recognition and the capacity to consent, in which there is also inequality, as illustrated by Fraser's feminist insights into Habermas' work. As regards women's difficulties in participating in the public sphere in a horizontal dialogue, Fraser (1995:120-126) claims that this is due to several social factors – which other authors have also studied – such as (1) the traditional control that men exert in conversations

(see also Lakoff, 1975<sup>3</sup>) and (2) the lack of recognition of the legitimacy of women's voices, a collective whose voice has been habitually reinterpreted and distrusted<sup>4</sup>. These issues are, in turn, related to (3) their incapacity – or at best their lower capacity – to give or withhold their consent. The social perception of women's claims of sexual abuse stresses the extent to which their voices are not regarded as legitimate, by both their abusers and, as is often the case, judges (Ehrlich, 2015). Similarly, women have been subordinated by their husbands to such an extent that marital rape does not exist in some states, viz. women cannot withhold their consent from their husbands. Thus, it could be argued that in society women's voices are sometimes still considered as 'noise' and not deemed legitimate enough to be trusted, all of which denies them the capacity to consent.

Hence, a complex dialogic process takes place in the public sphere which requires, at the very least, (1) being heard/recognised as an interlocutor, (2) developing one's own identity and voice capable of connecting with the public sphere and (3) acquiring a 'citizen' status with the commitments that this entails and also (4) a certain capacity to grant or withhold consent.

So, the question here has to do with the consequences arising from whether our social structure – in a highly mediatised society – grants individuals and collectives the status of political subjects and, therefore, of citizens in a democracy. Fraser's observations also apply to other subordinated social positions (Haas and Steiner, 2001), a perspective that has had an impact on the field of journalism, mainly when exploring misrepresentation and 'othering practices' in news coverage of minorities (Eide, 2011; Prentoulis, 2012; Schneider, 2011).

For Bolstanski and Chiapello (2002: 13), the term 'consent' implies a general acceptance of a hegemonic worldview shared by both the strong and the weak to represent the way in which things work. Insofar as public voices are neither fostered nor recognised as such, the question explored here is whether

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<sup>3</sup> The main arguments of the second wave of studies in this field have been problematised by a third wave performed by authors such as Tannen (2008).

<sup>4</sup> Something that has latterly come to be known as 'mansplanning'.

<sup>5</sup> After the #metoo movement in which Hollywood stars denounced sexual abuse, in 2018 several high-profile rape cases in countries such as Ireland and Spain, with extensive press coverage and massive demonstrations, have underscored the tendency of the judiciary to distrust women's accounts of such events. No academic study of such recent events has been found.

these ‘othering practices’ are not exceptions, but aggravated episodes of a general tendency in Western representative democracies.

### **3. Methodological design**

The general aim of this work is to analyse the perception of the viewers of TVE’s news programmes as regards the aforementioned processes of recognition, voice and consent in the current news ecosystem. This makes it possible to explore the role of public television in recognising its imagined audience as citizens, hence as key participants in the public sphere, at a time when other possibilities of recognition via social networks sites are apparently available.

The analysis here focuses on Spain, where social unrest in 2011 coalesced around the well-known ‘Indignados’ or 15-M movement, critical with how decision-making had been monopolised by the elites, in which citizens’ voices tended not to matter (Couldry, 2010), whose demands included greater participation and recognition for ‘collective intelligence’. This movement and subsequent protests (very intense between 2012 and 2014) generated social dynamics in which more critical stances with the neoliberal order were developed and popularised, which also included more concrete demands as regards journalism and information. Thus, this study explores if citizens discourses just after that period revealed this greater demand for participation in the public sphere, as regards journalism, particularly that offered by public service television.

Therefore, during a first phase of our research work an intentional sample was gathered by selecting profiles in which it was likely to find this greater demand. Three groups were formed: (1) people linked to citizen movements and emerging and active political actors; (2) people linked to the executive apparatus of public service in the field of cultural reproduction – excluding public television (in the years prior to the crisis, there were plenty of media discourses against public institutions, for which reason it was hoped that a structured discursive position in this respect might have emerged); (3) a group of people who mainly resorted to digital news and participatory media sites.

When performing an initial analysis of these three groups, it soon became apparent that they shared a similar critical diagnosis about the culprits of the



crisis and the challenges ahead, and were demanding more participation both in politics and in the media than just before this period (Callejo, Lamuedra and G. Matilla 2010). This finding encouraged us to explore whether or not these – and other – similarities in citizens' discourses could be found in other social groups. Spain can be considered a pluralist polarised media and social ecosystem (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) in which most of the discourses tend to occupy opposing ideological poles. Accordingly, the critical repertoire of discourses deployed by the groups can be safely related to the frames employed by social identities to the left of the ideological spectrum. This may be explained by a certain discursive hegemony in the current political context (Conde, 2009: 139) and/or because the respondents were inadvertently mainly left-wing voters. In order to explore this issue and guarantee a certain pluralism in ideological positions (4) a group of conservative voters was created. Furthermore, since most of the subjects in these groups held an university degree, it was deemed necessary to explore the discourse in a group in which this variable was not present. Hence, the fifth group was formed (5) by people without higher education.

The respondents will be identified here by a pseudonym and the generic groups in which they participated: (1) Activists; (2) Public Employees; (3) Intensive Digital Users; (4) Conservatives; and (5) People without Higher Education.

An attempt was made to make the sample varied enough as regards age, gender and socio-economic status. As regards group size, the approach recommended by Javier Callejo-Gallego (2002: 418) was followed, to wit, from six to eight people.

The discussion groups – conducted with minimal intervention from the moderator – ensured that the following issues were addressed: (1) patterns in news consumption (2); journalistic standards and values and their role in democracy; (3) public service journalism specificity, i.e. how it differs from commercial media journalism; (4) observed trends in TVE news; and (5) connection with the audience and recognition, namely, the extent to which people feel that public service journalism reflects their work, problems or concerns, plus the extent to which they remember news stories and use them in making decisions.

The qualitative analysis performed here constitutes a third differential line (Alonso, Broullón-Lozano and Lamuedra, 2015; Lamuedra, Mateos and Broullón, 2018). The first insights had emerged after a close and exhaustive reading of the group sessions' transcripts in a previous study on the relationship between academic, normative and citizen discourses (Ibid). These insights were then developed into hypothesis in interaction with the theoretical framework (Conde, 2009: 39). These processes begged a number of research questions, used as analytical tools for a new intentional reading of the transcripts. The categories emerging from this analysis were the simplest and most plausible ways in which the respondents answered the research questions, attempting to condense both observable discourses and significant absent ones (Conde, 2009: 53). In fact, self-conscious discourses relating to all the processes between representation/voice/recognition and consent were scarce, there being a general feeling of frustration in this regard. However, trends, demands and discussion about a more participatory media ecosystem could also be observed. The research questions and categories are set in the following table:

Research questions	Categories
When citizens talk about journalism and news practices at TVE do they feel recognised as citizens?	Frustration with their limited recognition as citizens
Do their discourses assume that they are subjects who can give or withhold their consent?	(In)capacity to give or withhold consent.
In their discourses, as citizens, are there formulations or, at least, indications of some or other media design that may favour voice development processes?	Participatory trends and demands: content control, gate opening and citizens co-responsibly in news making  Ways to build a more participatory system: news management and routines, plus the design of the media structure.

There was also a fourth research question which explored if any socio-economic variables could be related to a greater demand of voice processes. Confirming Rheingold's (2008) findings, the clearest one was apparently having been involved in 'intense participatory media experiences'.

## **5. Results: the recognition, consent and voice of citizens according to the viewers of TVE's news programmes**

### **5.1 Frustration with their limited recognition as citizens**

In all the groups analysed, it was recognised that the media represented the voice and interests of 'others'. What was involved was a sort of 'super-subject' with limitless political, economic and media power to whom the respondents often referred using the pronoun 'them' (Lamuedra, Mateos and Broullón 2018).<sup>6</sup> And this led to visible frustration. For example, the Public Employee Group spoke of the 'anger' that they felt towards the debates and news programmes 'in which everyone wants to get their oar in' and, as with the Conservative Group, believed that 'they want to win you over, rather than keep you informed' (Mónica). The respondents perceived a lack of recognition of their status as citizens and demanded 'neutral' information.

In general, the public media were regarded as a refuge in which to take shelter from the onslaught of third party interests in commercial television outlets. In four of the five focus groups the idea that RTVE had now become more dependent on the Government's agenda prevailed. Even so, all expected more from the public media than from their private counterparts and believed that, in the future, they should fulfil the mission with which they had been entrusted. Accordingly, in the Intensive Internet Users, Marcos explained how this lack of recognition was even more infuriating in the case of TVE, because it was meant to offer unpartisan and objective information.

If you switch on Antena3 or Telecinco, you perhaps know what you're in for, it has a specific viewpoint, but when you switch on TVE, I believe you're looking for direct and different content, no? (...) it's what it should

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<sup>6</sup> This issue is more comprehensively developed in the cited text.

be like, but then it isn't. And that's what, as a viewer, makes you feel a bit of an idiot (Marcos).

In other words, they demanded that RTVE recognise them as citizens and not as mere viewers, customers, voters in potential or simply 'others'.

## **5.2 (In)capacity to give or withhold consent**

All the groups taking part in the study shared the idea that the media functioned as a tool of a system that, as Couldry holds, overrode their capacity to give or withhold consent. In the Intensive Internet User Group, Victoriano argued that the system seemed to allow freedom of choice, which was far more limited than would be expected, and that the options that it offered were all similar.

Whatever you want, but the system's untouchable, (...) okay, you can comment on whatever you like, but you've got to comment on whatever I offer you (Victoriano).

The Activist Group developed a similar line of thought, reflected in the following ideas expressed by different members: (1) 'the institutional design in this civilisation uses us as puppets' (Federico); (2) 'that isn't aimed at fostering critical citizens or happy ones, but to get them to accept the conditions of the system' (all the participants). Here is an extract from the conversation:

Francisco: I'll always recall José Luis Sampedro who repeatedly said that... besides thinking about freedom of speech, what we also have to think about is freedom of thought (...) they're robbing us of that, that freedom to be able to think for ourselves because they set the agenda as to what we must think....

Carlota: Exactly....

Elvira: Come on, for the state the media are a tool, it's not interested in making citizens happy. They have other interests. It's clear they don't want to enlighten us, they don't want us to have a critical spirit, but only want us to consume (...).

Federico: to keep us in the dark, to make us accept the work conditions they impose on us and....

Elvira: It's obvious. Frightened. Crushed. We know what television gives us.

Francisco: Unsatisfied (...) in that way you consume more.

They also added that, associated with the lack of freedom of thought, scare tactics were resorted to, mentioning in this respect a media campaign against the party Podemos, created a few years after the advent of the 'Indignados' Movement.

The members of the rest of the groups expressed similar notions which were accepted by the other interlocutors. Here are two examples: (1) the idea that citizens needed to be enlightened and informed to be able to make decisions, a demand that was supposed to be met by RTVE (Conservative Group), as opposed as to commercial channels:

Perhaps before being informed I'd ask if we're being enlightened (...) if we're all paying for it, my first demand is that it adequately enlightens me at least as regards public matters (Guillermo).

And (2) the glut of negative news was seen as an attempt to undermine people's self-esteem and morale in order to subjugate them: 'so we cannot pick ourselves up' (Group without Higher Education).

### **5.3 Voice, identity and participation and intense media experiences**

Only two members of the different groups established a clear relationship between voice, participation and reinforcing public identity. Both of these lucid discourses were based on their lengthy media experience.

Firstly, Antonio (Activist Group) drew a parallel between participation and empowerment, namely, the existence of a process in which the recognition and representation of voice reinforced the identity of individuals and groups. This appraisal was based on the respondent's experience working for a town council. He went on to stress that whereas Spanish town councils had independently appointed financial controllers and lawyers whose role as civil servants

orientated their work towards the public good, the way of recruiting and considering journalists working for local media – often financially dependent on the same town councils – was not the same. In his view, journalists working for 'local television stations should motivate people in order that they may (...) develop what they need to participate' (Antonio).

This respondent then recalled an experience that he had had in local media, identifying them as those most suited to generating such processes:

Some time ago, some friends and I were trying to start up a movement, to create a sort of news programme on the Internet and such, and everyone felt really empowered because it's an element... a... how can I describe it?... a great totem of our society. A newscast is a newscast, right? And public [television] helps people to acquire the resources and skills to speak.... It's one of the primary functions of public television... or at the same time as offering information... it's participation (...) I believe it's not so much seeing oneself on TV as being... being capable of doing so. Granting that importance and that capacity (...) in local (public service) radio or television stations (...) there should be a participation technician (...), okay? Those local resources which belong to everyone can be used in that way (Antonio).

And a different scenario was apparently the experience of another respondent (Laia) in free software and interacting within the logic of sharing on the Internet. She spoke about how her online participation allowed her to express and gain recognition for her knowledge by sharing it, before linking this to her freedom of expression and capacity to speak out:

At home, I work with free software (...) I share my knowledge with anyone who wants to share with me and they share with me (...) so, I now possess that freedom, which before I couldn't have even dreamt about or achieved (...) training and education should be shared (...). It's the only way we human beings can evolve and advance more quickly (...) shared intelligence and all that is the path to shared power (...). In comparison with my own mother, nowadays I feel completely free to express my

opinions, with all due respect I'm referring to taking action and such, she didn't have the same opportunities as I do (Laia).

At this juncture, there was an important thematic shift in the focus group's discussion from the media to mediations. In other words, the debate at this point focused on the type of relationship dynamics established by the media with their viewers, and not so much about media influence on public opinion.

#### **5.4 Participatory trends and demands**

All the groups called for a more diverse kind of journalism, which was linked to a greater recognition of their status as citizens, and a more equitable representation of several sectors of society, such as the young (Lamuedra, Mateos and Broullón 2018). But besides this, three of the five groups held that news making had to take into account the voices of citizens in several ways: (1) a certain degree of control over content allowed for several forms of feedback in the digital ecosystem; (2) some participation in agenda setting through their capability to exchange information and news; and finally, (3) the possibility of citizens' co-responsibility in the news making process.

##### **A) Content control**

The Intensive Digital User, Public Employee and Activist Groups shared the idea that citizens could and should be recognised as actors who can exert some, albeit reactive, control over the media. For instance, as regards RTVE, some respondents referred to the huge number of complaints lodged about some specific programmes or issues, which had indeed led to a number of changes.

Moreover, content control through feedback appeared as an already existing trend that ought to be enhanced:

The comments posted on websites which perhaps highlighted the fact that a specific media outlet was concealing information (...) it was working really well (...) it was implying a pure de facto citizen control... it's being built. So... to enhance that in some way, forcing them (...) to be open to comment (Antonio).

In point of fact, two people in the Public Employee Group practised this 'content control' by writing letters to the editor to point out errors in the news. For instance, Maribel did so because she believed that she knew more about areas in which she was an expert than the media did when covering them. This implies exercising the right to voice which presupposes the duty of the media to recognise it.

Besides, there was even a certain demand to know more about news making precisely in order to be able to exercise a better control over it.

Basically we need to be shown the inner workings... inside, what has been discarded and what hasn't (...), to reveal sources. And showing you where you can check if there're two different versions is much neglected (...) but I don't know what shape such a mechanism would take (Antonio, Activists).

That happens above all because the sources cannot really be checked, right? You can't access all that information appearing on the news as easily (...) in all likelihood part of the information is selected and the other part concealed, right? (Elba, Public Employees).

It's not only the raw data (...) it's an interpretation of that information and that's a conceptual matter and it should probably be treatable or verifiable, assessable (Elisa, Public Employees).

In these appraisals, it is possible to observe a demand that surpassed the function of control to explore a more proactive dimension. However, all in all the groups agreed that an increase in options and possibilities to participate was a quantitative step forward which was contributing to make citizens more critical.

## **B) Participation in social networks as 'gate opening' vs 'talking rot'**

In the Public Employee Group, there was an interesting discussion as regards whether or not social networks had a 'gate opening function', in the sense that, through their capacity of sharing, news site users now had some responsibility in the traditional agenda setting role of journalism. On the one



hand, Gael emphasised the role of his contacts as ‘gate openers’ of his information diet:

You let your social network contacts advise you to some extent, who also offer you different points of view as regards the news. I believe, well, it’s in fact happened to me, such as discovering things from people who send you a link to a media outlet such as *El País* or one in Great Britain, France or wherever (Gael).

On the contrary, Maribel held that ‘people’ on social networks spoke about ‘trivial matters’, apparently refusing to recognise their voices. Javier mediated at this point arguing that it depended on knowing how to choose, noting that it was possible to follow ‘journalists and writers who kept up to date with current affairs’, although he conceded that ‘most talk rot’. This recalls Rancière’s ideas insofar as the group members’ discourses revealed a hierarchy of social positions and topics; some at the bottom were nothing short of background noise.

The members of the Intensive Digital User Group also discussed this issue, which could lead to another more participatory state. This discourse was linked to the (unaccomplished) ideals of the Internet as a ‘peer-to-peer’ communication network and therefore problematised.

It’s assumed the distributed network, with a peer-to-peer system like that, would indeed interact with people on an equal footing, without passing through hierarchical filtering nodes which already manipulate and control the system like, for example, Twitter and Facebook (...) okay, you can comment on whatever you like, but you’ve got to comment on whatever I offer you (Victoriano).

### **C) Citizens co-responsibility in the construction of news**

All of the groups held that the voice of the media was that of ‘others’ (the opposing camp), while that of public media belonged to the parties winning the elections. As to solutions, the Activists held that everyone should help to construct a system that represented citizens and in which their voice was

recognised. This possibility led to several lively debates, to a lesser degree also among Intensive Digital Users and Public Employees, in which the difficulties in designing spaces for mediation in an ecosystem with multiple voices were raised. These will now be discussed below.

### **5.5 Towards a more participatory system: Internet opportunities, news management & routines and a new media ecosystem**

A good part of these conversations discussed the participatory potential offered by the Internet. Antonio expressed a number of ideas relating to the discourse on the potential of 'connected multitudes' or 'collective intelligence' which led him to reflect on journalism:

In what can be a debate anywhere, there'll always be people who're more involved in your topic and others who're more involved in another; people who in a specific topic have (...) a more basic level of reflection and others who've made a great effort (...) Who goes the furthest? Who supplies more information? Who... sets the news agenda more? (Antonio).

In the case of the Intensive Digital Users, there was a discussion on whether, besides political or social organizations, a multiplicity of individual voices on the Internet could be a way of opposing and effectively improving the system:

Joaquín: I think thousands of individual opinions will get you nowhere, but what really get things moving is a well organised community.

Carlos: But how do you go about organising that community?

Marcos: If thousands of opinions point in the same direction (...)

Joaquín: As I see it, I sense it isn't as efficient, when thousands of opinions, although pointing in the same direction, if they're biased, if they all come from an association (...) I don't believe such a community on its own free will (...)

Carlos: I don't think social networks should be underrated because they're a powerful tool, many people are constantly expressing their opinions. They're important at a media level, corporate level, advertising level.

Furthermore, the Intensive Digital Users held that the Internet generated a virtual reality of individualistic people, where civil rights such as freedom could be commodified. In the conversation, the storyline of the film *Total Recall* (Verhoeven, 1990) was given as an example. Victor noted how the film's main character visits Memory Recall, a virtual entertainment company that implants artificial memories. He feared that the experience of freedom could become something that could only be accessed online and as a commodity.

A complementary approach emerged in the Activist Group resulting from a discussion on pluralism, which then steered the conversation towards the Internet. They talked about the possibility of the Web hosting that much sought-after collective space, far-removed from commercial and partisan rationales, before coming to the conclusion that this would be improbable. They also held that the multiplicity of voices ended up promoting exposure to that which 'only acts as self-confirmation' (Francisco). To wit, they were worried about an accumulation of isolated voices that were of no import or in which there was not any interlocution, pluralistic debate or a public opinion formation process.

After problematising the digital environment's potential, some of the members of the Intensive Digital User, Activist and Public Employee Groups put forward suggestions on how to organise the media system to ensure that the voices of citizens were recognised and channelled in a common space.

For the Activists, a media system in which it were indeed possible to give and withhold consent would be one in which the voices of citizens were taken into consideration (1) to establish management structures and (2) broadcast programming and (3) to allow them access to a greater number of sources than those appearing on the news. Similarly, they believed that it was essential to ensure that news making was transparent (4) to control journalistic practices and provide feedback (and to be taken into account) and that (5) local public broadcasters should encourage participation in the creation of newscasts, programmes, etc. Overall, this would require a more participatory political system, rather than one merely based on representation. Francisco defended a complex system, i.e. the existence of more democratic state and community media that did not receive subsidies from the public administrations.

Besides, it was possible to glimpse other shared references – although not particularly structured – to two elements: (1) a virtual ecosystem that did indeed recognise a range of individual voices and encouraged their organisation, an idea particularly strong among the Intensive Digital Users, (2) co-existing with a media structure in which the public should occupy a significant space. This aspect was also very present in the Public Employees Group which, in turn, defended, together with the Conservative Group, the idea that public media constituted a meeting place for people with different identities which was supposed to serve as a benchmark in a media system open to individual and group participation.

## **6. Conclusions**

Firstly, all the focus groups complained about the lack of recognition of their status as citizens. This was an issue that angered them, suggesting an affective dimension in that unrecognised identity, especially as regards public service television. They seemed to be frustrated with feeling a ‘malaise’ difficult to describe,<sup>7</sup> maybe because the hegemonic normative discourses on journalism do not address them.

In addition, there was a transversal feeling shared by all the groups that the system, that powerful ‘super-subject’ which they identified as ‘them’, manipulated their consent or diminished their capacity to withhold it and that the media were ‘their’ accomplices. Even if citizens tend to naturalise this ‘reality’ as the way ‘things are’, it should be stressed that these results point to the general belief that representative democracies such as Spain are not working and journalism is felt to be part of the problem.

Secondly, a biased development was reported as regards the voices and demands for recognition on the part of different social groups. In this regard, the initial hypothesis has been confirmed: the demands of the Activist, Intensive Digital User and Public Employee Groups were fairly well structured with respect to the roles that journalism should give the voices of citizens, which can be defined as control, participation in assessing the relevance of issues

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<sup>7</sup> This term is used here to refer to a slight similarity to the feeling that Betty Friedan described among American housewives (1963).

comprising the journalistic agenda or gate opening, and even the creation of spaces in which voice development processes prosper.

Thirdly, references to the theories of collective intelligence and connected multitudes emerged in the Intensive Digital Users' discourses, but only as an unfulfilled promise. The Activists, whose statements also showed some influence of these trends, placed greater emphasis on how to benefit from available knowledge to devise a more participatory system less dependent on political representation. It was, in fact, the group with the most elaborated discourse in this connection. The members of Public Employee Group expressed similar concerns.

These three groups stood out for the high level of education of their members, an aspect that they shared with the Conservative Group, whose members did not however voice these demands. Nor were they expressed in the Group without Higher Education, whose ideological orientation was more diverse. This indicates that there are two variables that can in themselves limit or discourage the demand for recognition and voice: a conservative ideology and the lack of higher education.<sup>8</sup> For their part, intense participatory media experiences helped to shape highly structured discourses interweaving the notions of representation, voice and its recognition and power to consent.

And, finally, public service television was seen as an institution responsible for recognising viewers as citizens. In the Public Employee and Activist Groups, it was also perceived as a relevant space in the alternative design of a media ecosystem that fostered the recognition of citizens and reinforced their capacity to give or withhold their consent.

For citizens to be able to construct their identity (also a process) as active subjects with a public voice and the capacity to give (or withhold) their consent, beyond casting their ballot every four years, it is essential that news making be a participatory process in which the 'imagined audience' is tantamount to the 'imagined public'. And it is not only a question of 'voice', but of voices. That is, a polyphony that breaks the power of the sole one-way voice between the assumed 'super-subject' and 'them'. The challenge is to devise a system that promotes the emergence and development of the voices of citizens, which

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<sup>8</sup> This variable was also considered to be strategic by Schröder and Philips (2007: 895-912) in the design of their study.

implies sustaining an iterative debate between them that shapes a majority public opinion capable of giving or withholding political consent. And this does not involve moving away from Habermas' public sphere ideal.

In view of the foregoing, it is possible to observe that despite academic concern over how the role of the consumer has influenced that of the citizen, insufficient attention has been paid to the implications that being constructed as 'others' may have for citizens (who are also viewers) in allegedly representative processes that strip them of their status as citizens, deprive them of an authoritative voice and do not allow them to withhold their consent in a technologically mediated lifeworld.

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