

The Impact Area of Political Communication: Citizenship Faced with Public Discourse¹

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Summary:

This article is a reflection on media changes and their repercussion in Politics and in Political Communication; it also hopes to be a historical-natural interpretation of the determinations of the communications media: human beings have always been subjected to dark forces of extraordinary collective influence, and have always come out ahead in their autonomy. In the end, it is this strength of opinion that paved the way for Democracy and that attempts to keep Democracy free amidst the most undesirable pressures. A more detailed analysis of what is called the impact area of Political Communication is also proposed for the purpose of improving our knowledge about individuals' relationships with public interests. This impact area is the theoretical place in which individuals integrate their personal interests (personal agenda) and their public interests (public agenda).

Contemporary Political Communication² in the Democratic Debate.

Things happen daily in the political sphere that bring up radically the matter of representative quality in contemporary democracies. In recent weeks, in the country where I am writing, Spain, millions of people have shown, by mass demonstrations in the streets or by opinion polls, their total rejection of the war in Iraq without the UN mandate, or even with it: no to the war, in almost any case. This surprising collective conscience was not lacking in criticism of the Public Communication of the president of the United States of America and of the men and women closest to him (Powell, Rumsfeld, Rice), and it was this public communication, which was considered to be unfounded and

¹ This article has been translated of Spanish by Nancy Konvalinka (nancykonvalinka@teleline.es).

² The terms "Political Communication" and "Political Marketing" have been used indistinctly. This is not totally correct: Political Communication was supposed to be a science of the effects of the communications media on Politics, and Political Marketing is a technique applied to Political-Electoral Communication, closely linked to the general field of Publicity. Political Communication, as a science, and even as a science applied to Political Marketing, has its principal points of reference in the scientific literature of the Social Sciences group, and its reflections and declarations follow the methodological tradition of Social Science.

even intentionally false, that contributed most in radicalizing the Public Opinion of all political flavors (in Spain, over 90% of the population over the age of 18 was against the war). These events showed that the Public Opinions in Spain and Europe in general enjoy a vitality that is very far from the idea that the communications media (in Spain, an important majority of the television channels, and even the printed Press and the Radio, are directly or indirectly linked to the present government and the social forces that uphold it) had managed to neutralize the population's autonomy of thought. This is very encouraging and opens media investigation up to a new and complex optimism that should ascertain the reasons why the Public Opinions conserve their autonomy in the midst of the intense din of media messages.

The entry of television to the public sphere³ as a source of political news⁴, and the political parties' need to adjust their messages to the needs of the TV format⁵, produce changes in political discourse⁶

³ And in recent times (according to some, since the events in Seattle, and more recently in the enormous demonstrations against the war in Iraq, demonstrations that we can already call globalized) television and Internet have shown their capacity to create a new world of global public communication previously unknown. With respect to Seattle, the following description is interesting: De Luca, K.M., Peeples, J. (2002) 'From Public Sphere to Public Screen: Democracy, Activism, and the "Violence" of Seattle', **Critical Studies in Media Communication**, Vol. 19-2; pp.125-151, p.125: "The WTO protests in Seattle witnessed the emergence of an international citizens' movement for democratic globalization. With the tactical exploitation of television, the internet, and other technologies, Seattle also witnessed the enactment of forms of activism adapted to a wired society. In the wake of Seattle, this essay introduces the "public screen" as a necessary supplement to the metaphor of the public sphere for understanding today's political scene. While a public sphere orientation inevitably finds contemporary discourse wanting, viewing such discourse through the prism of the public screen provokes a consideration of new forms of participatory democracy. In comparison to the public sphere's privileging of rationality, embodied conversations, consensus, and civility, the public screen highlights dissemination, images, hypermediacy, publicity, distraction, and dissent. Using the Seattle WTO protests as a case study and focusing on the dynamic of violence and the media, we argue that the public screen accounts for technological and cultural changes while enabling a charting of the new conditions for rhetoric, politics, and activism."

⁴ The classic work of Robinson, M. J. (1976) 'Public Affairs Television and the Growth of Political Malaise: The Case of TV Selling of the Pentagon', **American Political Science Review**, 70-2, pp. 409-432, following in the steps of an important current of scientific opinion, relaunched the matter of TV's influence on politics and voting in the 1970s, and added to an important bibliography on the effects of the media, that gave sufficient empirical basis to the idea that politics was changing and that the communications media had something to do with it. Perhaps the form that this change took is what it took longest to reveal, if it even has been revealed, which is still rather doubtful; the fact that new media changes (Internet, for example) always introduce new unknowns adds to this doubt.

⁵ Swanson, D. L. (1995) 'El campo de la Comunicación Política. La democracia centrada en los Medios', in Muñoz-Alonso, A., and Rospir, J.L. (eds), **Comunicación Política**, Madrid, Editorial Universitaria, pp. 3-24, p. 3: "For more than two millenia, thinkers have been interested in the role of communication in politics. Aristotle's Rhetoric and Politics, written in the Fourth Century B.C., provide a good many points of reference for locating

and in politics itself, the consequences of which do not seem to be merely formal: the appearance of a new political rhetoric has been observed and great, long-lasting alarm has been created among the most democratically sensitive scientists, politicians, and citizens⁷. This new way of narrating politics coincides historically with the definitive structural change in Europe in the advanced and semi-advanced countries towards a society of the middle classes, after World War II (Blumler attempts a classification by age of Political Communication since World War II⁸), with the multiplication of the communications media and with the appearance of a new type of political party, more related to management than to mobilization, more in agreement with this new Europe of strong middle classes and infinitely fragmented social strata. These changes were doubtless foreseen by some nineteenth-

the beginning of serious studies about politics and communication...At present, the most relevant changes that have created the relationship between communication and politics in the second half of the twentieth century seem normal and familiar to the citizens of the majority of the democratic states. One of the most important of these events is the appearance of the television as a mass communication media –perhaps the most genuinely ‘massive’ of all the media- and its conversion into the public’s principal source of news about politics and government."

See also, among others:

Schulz, W (n.d.). Television and Declining Political Trust. How Germans React to Changes of the Media System". Institute for Social Science University of Erlangen-Nuernberg: www.wiso.uni-erlangen.de/WiSo/Sozw/kompol/; Blumler, J. and McQuail, D. (1968) **Televisión in Politics: Its Uses and Influences**, London, Faber and Faber; Mancini, P. and Swanson, D. (eds.), (1996) **Politics, Media and Modern Democracy**, London, Praeger; McCombs, Maxwell E. & Shaw, Donald L.(1977) **The Emergence of American Political Issues: The Agenda-Setting Function of the Press**, West Publishing Co; McCombs, M. Shaw, D. L. and Weaver, D (eds.). (1997) **Communication and Democracy**, London, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

⁶ An interesting reference about the evolution of presidential rhetoric in the USA is Jamieson, K. H. (1990) **Eloquence in an Electronic Age: The Transformation of Political Speechmaking** , Oxford University Press.

⁷ A classic text on the extended belief in *videomalaise* is that of Robinson, M.J. (1976.) ‘Public Affairs Television and the Growth of Political Malaise: The Case of ‘TV Selling of the Pentagon’, **American Political Science Review**, 70-2 pp. 409-432.

⁸ Blumler, J. (1999) ‘The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features’, **Political Communication**, 16, pp. 209-230, p. 209, “This article identifies key changes in society and the media that have shaped political communication in many democracies over the postwar period. Three distinct ages are described. In the first, much political communication was subordinate to relatively strong and stable political institutions and beliefs. In the second, faced with a more mobile electorate, the parties increasingly “professionalized” and adapted their communications to the news values and formats of limited-channel television. In the third (still emerging) age of media abundance, political communication may be reshaped by five trends: intensified professionalizing imperatives, increased competitive pressures, anti-elitist populism, a process of “centrifugal diversification,” and changes in how people receive politics. This system is full of tensions, sets new research priorities, and reopens long-standing issues of democratic theory.”

century theoreticians, such as Tönnies, whom we must quote once again⁹, because some of his texts are prophetic and accurate¹⁰.

The techniques of political marketing orchestrate these changes and simplify even more, if possible, the same political message and therefore the same way of doing politics. In fact, the old political rhetoric of slow tempos, long explanations, and heavy ideological content, is substituted by this new rhetoric which adjusts itself to the format of the media, and whose substance is the negativeness of the message, surprise, thematization (thematic adjustment to the media), and personalization¹¹. If we

⁹ Tönnies, F. (1979; ed.or:1887) **Comunidad y asociación**, Barcelona, Península, p.264: "The press is, thus, the real instrument (organ) of public opinion, weapon and tool in the hands of those who know how to use it and who have to use it; it possesses a universal force as a critic of events and changes of a social kind. It is comparable and in some cases superior to the material power that the states possess in virtue of their armies, their public treasuries, and their bureaucratic civil service. In contrast to these, the press is not confined within natural boundaries but, in its tendencies and faculties, is definitely international, comparable therefore with the power of a temporary or permanent alliance of the states. Consequently, its final object can be conceived of as the abolition of the plurality of the states and its substitution by a single world republic coextensive with the world market, which would be ruled by thinkers, scholars, and writers, and which would use no methods of coercion other than those of a psychological nature." (translation into English of the Spanish text)

¹⁰ Bouza, F. (2003) 'Tendencias a la desigualdad en Internet: la brecha digital (*digital divide*) en España', in **6º Foro sobre Tendencias Sociales**, Ed. Sistema, Madrid (at press): "Tönnies... is alluding to a process of universalization propelled by the press, a press that has a strong influence in shaping Public Opinion (that "strange force", as he says in this same paragraph) and that can be, if his words are interpreted in their most moral sense, an obscure threat for human autonomy and for democracy. This idea, which Mill and Tocquevill, among others, also express in some form, is present in all the theory and practice of the *Mass Communication Research*, the evolution of which has a great deal to do, at different moments in its history, with nineteenth-century catastrophism projected onto the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Even today, the fantastical idea that *Bugs Bunny* could have anything to do with the violence in United States adult society, because of his negative influence through television on children, a most colorful idea (and upheld by some influential experts on violence, using the wild admission of some methodologist who says that for the social world, a correlation of 0.5 can be considered equivalent to a correlation of 1), is the kind of idea that is born from an immense faith in the possibilities of the media and from a decisive distancing of sociology theses (or perhaps "socialist" theses) from the scholars of "old Europe" (Runsfeld), who insist on searching for structural imperfections in advanced democracies. But Tönnies knew how to see the substance of the problem or the problems that go along with universalization. Internet is a present-day addition to this threatening world of the most powerful communications media. Is this really how things are? The debate continues."

¹¹ Domsbach, 1995, citing Winfried Schulz (Schulz, W. 1976. **Die Konstruktion von Realität in den Nachrichtenmedien: Analyse der aktuellen Berichterstattung**, Freiburg, Alber.) and the *theory of news values*. Donsbach, W. (1995) 'Contenidos, utilización y efectos de la Comunicación política', in A. Muñoz-Alonso, A. and Rospir, J.L (eds). **Comunicación Política**. Madrid, Editorial Universitaria, p.45:

accept (beyond possible basic methodological criticisms of these supposedly empirical factors¹²) that these factors (among others) play an important role in media rhetoric, we can confirm, with no difficulty, that a good part of the political news is presented in this way. In one article¹³, I narrated the dramatization of the 1996 general elections in Spain, in which the *Partido Popular* did in fact use the news factors as the basis of its public communication in an extreme fashion, which was, however, also very clear and pedagogical with reference to the subject at hand¹⁴. But the war in Iraq surprises us once again in the use of the communications media in the USA, with a classic resource that seemed to be used infrequently, and even seemed to be unprofitable: simple censure or avoidance¹⁵. This is

¹² Evidently, the news factors are multiple and operate according to the context. But these four factors seem especially relevant. If I frequently cite the war in Iraq and the USA's role in this article, it is because of the relevance of this country as a generator of important news, that is, as a news factor. See, for example.: 'Country Characteristics as News Factors. The Effect of the Structure of International Relations on the News Value of Countries in the Foreign News Coverage of Newspapers and Television in 28 Countries', by Lutz M. Hagen, Reimar Zeh, Harald Berens & Daniela Leidner. (1999), communication at the 49th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, San Francisco, CA, May 27-31, (zusammen mit Lutz M. Hagen) Department for Communication and Political Science University of Erlangen-Nürnberg. Also: 'The 2000 U.S. Election in German Media', by Winfried Schulz: http://www.kwpw.wiso.uni-erlangen.de/pdf_dateien/ica_us2001.pdf. *Draft only*. Prepared for presentation at the 51st Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, Washington DC, USA, May 24-28, 2001. Or the classic work of Galtung and Galtung, J., & Ruge, M. H. (1965). 'The Structure of Foreign News. The Presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus Crises in Four Norwegian Newspapers'. **Journal of Peace Research**, 2, 65-91. In any case, it seems obvious that the relevance of news depends on so many factors of context (even quite local ones) that it does not seem possible to establish a complete or sufficient theory of *news values*, although an indicative one, according to time and place, could be established. See also: Staab, J. F. (1990) 'The Rôle of News Factors in News Selection: A Theoretical Reconsideration', **European Journal of Communication**, Vol. 5 : 423-443.

¹³ Bouza, F. (2000) 'Democracia y comunicación política: paradojas de la libertad', *Anales de la Cátedra Francisco Suárez*, Cátedra Francisco Suárez y Dpto. de F^a del Derecho de la U. De Granada, No. 34, pp. 9-27.

¹⁴ Bouza, F. op.cit, pp. 16-17: "Partisan stories or narrations (an *expressive tradition*) about the events of the exterior world (political communication) are explicit and/or implicit instructions about knowledge of this world, as well as instructions about political conduct (voting, particularly). In this sense, the function of partisan language (and the function of all language) is instructive, in the widest sense, but political communication must be even more intentional, clearer, and more didactic in transmitting an *analytic schema*, what we could call a set of concepts and instructions for their use, a narrative model and interpretations for it. All ideology transmits, with greater or lesser rigor and efficacy, such an analytic schema, but contemporary political discourse, somewhat lighter-weight, ideologically speaking, and more pragmatic, concentrates in this analytic schema more analytic instructions about the moment and about daily life rather than truly ideological instructions: what we have are very immediate analytic schema that are not very ideological at all."

¹⁵ ELPAIS.es, Internacional, 26-03-2003: "The webs of the big media in the US are ignorant of the bombing of the market in Baghdad: hours after two missiles killed 15 civilians in a commercial area of Baghdad, the main US communications media on Internet continue to ignore or minimize the news. The web page of the television

the least nice version of Public Communication in general and of Political Communication in particular. But the beginning of the systematic and modern use of Political Marketing is also situated in the USA, during the 1952 presidential elections (Eisenhower/Stevenson)¹⁶; in Europe, though, time would still go by¹⁷ before television had expanded significantly enough to be able to talk about modern and systematic political marketing. If we use World War II as the most distant reference point and the recent turn of the century as the most immediate one, we can say that political marketing does make up a substantial part of the new political-communicative order in Europe too, now. Some people would, however, require a closer definition of the affirmation, insofar as it states a substantial increase in certain forms of professionalization of political communication¹⁸, entering into debate with the point of view of Pippa Norris¹⁹, among others. The degree of professionalization in managing Political Communication is probably lower than we assume, and factors external to professional Political Communication still play an important role in many countries. My personal and professional

channel CNN has been continuously offering images of coalition soldiers dialoguing with Iraqi civilians while headlines talk about the advance of the allied troops.”

¹⁶ Maarek, P. J. (1997. Ed. or: 1995) **Marketing político y comunicación. Claves para una buena información política**, Barcelona, Paidós.

¹⁷ Maarek, P. J. op.cit. p. 27: “A third element that has favored the expansion of modern political marketing in the United States has been the rapid development of the mass communications media with respect to other democratic countries. In 1952, 40% of the homes in the United States already had a television. This figure rose to 60% in the northeastern United States. In France, for example, the figure of half a million televisions (approximately 4%!) was only reached in 1957.”

¹⁸ Lilleker, D and Negrine, R. (2002) ‘Quantifying Change in Media-Based Campaigning 1966-2001: The Rise of a Proactive Media Strategy’, (Paper: 52nd Annual Political Studies Association Conference 5-7 April 2002, University of Aberdeen: <http://www.psa.ac.uk/cps/2002/lilleker1.pdf>), forthcoming in **Journalism Studies**: “Literature on electioneering, political communication and political marketing all suggest that political campaigns are nationally orchestrated, centrally controlled and highly professional; all of which highlight a strong contrast with studies of similar areas thirty years ago. However evidence based on interviews with current and former MPs and candidates tells a very different story; instead there are strong continuities between the activities pursued during elections 1966-70 and 1997-2001. There is a greater level of technological support and changes in the way the media handle political stories, but the way candidates build a profile and gain media coverage are almost identical over this thirty-year period.”

¹⁹ Norris, P. (2000) **A Virtuous Circle: Political Communication in Post-Industrial Democracies**, New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 173-4: “British parties have also been transformed by the gradual evolution of the permanent campaign in which the techniques of spin-doctors, opinion polls, and professional media management are increasingly applied to routine everyday politics. Nevertheless, although the professionalization of British party communications has increased in recent years, as has the fragmentation of news media, neither process has yet reached the levels evident in the United States. In Britain, a few trusted experts in polling and political marketing are influential during the campaign in each party...”

experience in the field of applied Political Communication in Spain, in parties as well as in unions, makes me think that we are very far from a fully professionalized process, although the general style of campaigns makes us think the opposite²⁰. It is also possible that what we understand as Political Communication is, in many cases, only the routine presence of publicity techniques for preparing election campaigns (especially in the most material part of the campaign) and the activity of the demoscopes (sociologists and politologists, especially) who are close to each party, but it may be far from a professional and systematic job of applied Political Communication, and, of course, from any experimental-type academic methodology such as Iyengar proposes²¹. The majority (the absolute majority) of the parties' media messages (especially leaders' statements) are absolutely spontaneous and ingenuous, very distant from an ideal model of Political Communication, with its attention to the framing factors and to the Public Opinion data. A professional job of Political Communication implies the existence of a Communications Consultancy in the hands of specialists that designs ad hoc communications models for each moment of political life (not just during the election campaign); it also implies the execution of these designs, in full or in part, by the politicians that the consultancy is advising. A consultancy of this type goes beyond the simple circumstantial assistance of professional publicists (very far, in general, from what we understand as Political Communication) and enters fully

²⁰ José Luis Dader considers that, in Spain, there is an importante degree of "Americanization" that I do not really see clearly ("La retórica mediática frente a la cultura política autóctona: la encrucijada de la comunicación política electoral española entre la 'americanización' y el pluralismo democrático tradicional", in **CIC digital** No. 4: <http://www.ucm.es/info/per3/cic/Cic4.htm>): "From the beginning of our present democratic phase, in 1977, political life in Spain has in effect been suffering a process of "Americanization" or, what at times means the same thing, of adaptation to the autonomous logic and demands of the mass communications media. In consonance with this, the discursive rhetoric and strategies for persuading/capturing political adhesion that the directors of Spanish political action put into play have concentrated overwhelmingly on media platforms and have focused the majority of their efforts on these representational modes (statements to the media, the studied creation of newsworthy events, political publicity, and the construction of public image). Political communication has tended to compare itself with this media sphere of representations of political action, as if other communicative stages of, for, and about politics (parliamentary discussion, jurisprudence, administrative action, interpersonal political socialization...) were now only marginal channels, or only relevant in the momentary circumstances in which they arouse media coverage. Certain traditions of European political life, or the Spanish tradition itself, continue to be present in our political communication as forces that limit this trajectory. At any rate, the process of "Americanization" in the case of Spain is probably more intense than in other countries such as Italy, as a consequence of the weakness of Spanish 'civil society'."

²¹ Iyengar S. 'Experimental Designs for Political Communication Research: From Shopping Malls to the Internet', Stanford University Political Communication Lab, <http://pcl.stanford.edu>

into the design and debate of politics itself, insofar as politics itself can be a problem of communication. In this sense, we are very far from a Political Communication understood as a qualified, intense, professional activity, in the hands of very qualified people with one foot in science and the other in the daily practice of communication. The USA model of presidential adviser, Dick Morris style, with an important capacity to define communication policies, could be an already advanced and important model of Political Communication, if this is really the way Morris worked. Mere circumstantial assistance to a candidate, an active politician, or a party is not enough to speak of professional Political Communication. Following this reasoning, the British perspectives of Lilleker and Negrine in the work cited could be extended, with caution and lacking sufficient data, to the rest of the advanced and semi-advanced European countries.²²

In opposition to the perspective that is critical of the media and its (bad) influence on politics, Winfried Schulz affirms, based on a wide German sample, that the effect is more positive than negative²³. This is the same optimism as Pippa Norris'. In recent years, Pippa Norris (*A Virtuous Circle*) has taken up once more the reflection on "democracy focused on the media" in order to deny the supposedly negative effects of the new Political Communication. Pippa Norris' arguments²⁴ deny a very generalized belief about *videomalaise* (the Langs, Robinson, etc.) that led to the result that *by the 1990s a broad consensus had emerged that some, or all, practices in political communication have contributed towards public disenchantment with civic life*²⁵. From this generalized belief, Pippa Norris provides some significant, but not definitive, data to show her skepticism about *videomalaise*, along

²² For an in-depth debate on the subject of *Professionalization*, see: Negrine, R. and Lilleker, D. G. (2002) 'The Professionalization of Political Communication. Continuities and Change in Media Practices', **European Journal of Communication**, Vol. 17(3), pp. 305–323.

²³ 'Television and Declining Political Trust. How Germans React to Changes of the Media System': www.wiso.uni-erlangen.de/WiSo/Sozw/kompol/ : "Multivariate analyses show that high attention to information in all mass media strengthens or even improves German citizens' interest in politics and their feeling to be capable of understanding politics. Newspaper reading and radio listening are more beneficial in this respect than television viewing. At the same time, television viewing reinforces negative political stereotypes or even reduces political trust. This effect can be mainly attributed to the use of TV information programs, whereas attention to newspaper information is not associated with negative political effects."

²⁴ Op. cit.

²⁵ Op. cit., p. 310.

the lines of other investigators: this is political-communicational optimism, which has already formed a well-founded alternative belief to classic pessimism. In contrast with this optimism, however, the tendency of public television (and of a good many of the private channels also) in Spain is the complete disappearance of political debates and the strict control of information on the news programs. The CIS data series on interest in politics are shattering:

TABLE 1

*Are you interested in politics?*²⁶

	1980 (1)	1985	1989	1991	1992 (2)	1994	1996	1997	2000 (3)
yes (a lot/somewhat)	25.8	28.8	21.9	20.6	33.7	25.4	23,7	33,8	29,3
no (little/not at all)	68.4	72.2	77.7	79	64.7	73.1	75,6	65,4	70,4

²⁶ Data from the CIS (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas) prepared by <http://www.eleweb.net/> : (1) The categories in this study are not the same as in the following studies. "I am passionately interested in politics" and "I am interested in politics" count as "yes", and "I don't care about politics", "I don't trust politics", "Politics bores me", and "Politics makes me sick" count as "no". (2) Aggregate data from the 1992 macro-survey of all the autonomous communities. Studies 2025-2041. In this case, the percentages express an average of the interest in national, autonomic community, and local politics. (3) For the year 2000, the data reflect the percentage of interest in national politics. Source: data calculated omitting the lost cases (does not know/no answer). CIS studies: 1232 (1980), 1461 (1985), 1788 (1989), 1970 (1991), 2107 (1994), 2212 (1996), 2387 (2000).

We can observe in the Spanish series (TABLE 1) that there are no significant changes between 1980 and 2000, twenty years during which the mass communications media have fully penetrated the general population as a central source of information. Maybe the media have not made the interest in politics decrease, but the media stimuli do not seem to impel the citizens towards a greater interest in politics, or at least achieve a more acceptable percentage of interest, either. In the absence of sufficient solid data, everything seems to indicate that, except for exceptional cases such as the war in Iraq, interest in politics is low. Blaming the media for this would be as absurd as blaming social violence on the Bugs Bunny cartoons that children see (as has been done in the USA). In reality, and in spite of the media not being very stimulating (at least in Spain), political indifference must be born in other locations in reality. However, we can hypothesize that the media could fulfill a very important specific function in this process of indifference: that of "formatting" political discourse according to their needs as media, reducing it, deforming it, and integrating it into a media rhetoric that increases the indifference to politics. In fact, what citizens state about the political parties²⁷ is not reassuring (particularly their acceptance of the statement *The interests that the parties pursue have little to do with society's interests*: **Tend to agree**: 47%, the most recent data from the 1996 Spanish series; there are no later data) and, actually, the conventional meanings of democracy and citizenship are being questioned and rethought²⁸, not only by investigators: but by citizens also²⁹ (*The parties criticize each other a lot but in reality they are all the same*: **Tend to agree**: 57%, the most recent data from the Spanish series that ends in 1996; there are no later data). The evaluation of institutions, with more recent data (see Note 26: the Cathoy-Isa survey) is also shattering for the political parties:

²⁷ See the CIS webpage (<http://www.cis.es/boletin/5/est5.html#30>) for the agreement on statements and the *Cataluña Hoy* webpage (<http://www.cathoy.com/>) for an evaluation of the institutions (Encuesta ISA 2001, directed by Joaquín Arango).

²⁸ The Third Age of Political Communication: 'Influences and Features' (1999) **Political Communication**, 16, pp. 209-230, p. 209: "Not only are the avenues of political communication multiplying in a process that is becoming more diverse, fragmented, and complex, but also, at a deeper level, power relations among key message providers and receivers are being rearranged; the culture of political journalism is being transformed; and conventional meanings of "democracy" and "citizenship" are being questioned and rethought (Brants, 1998; Buckingham, 1997)."

²⁹ See the CIS webpage: <http://www.cis.es/boletin/5/est5.html#30>

TABLE 2

Evaluation of the Institutions in Spain ISA-Cathoy Data (year 2001)

AVERAGE ON A SCALE OF 1 to 10

Small and middle-sized companies	7.3
Communications media	6.8
Security forces	6.8
Large companies	6.2
Parliament	5.8
Unions	5.2
Catholic Church	5.1
Political parties	4.1

People who are knowledgeable about the interaction mechanisms between the media, politicians, the economic powers, and citizens, such as Maxwell McCombs, among others, firmly believe in the possibility of activating new types of participation mechanisms³⁰, far beyond the vision of the passive, receptor citizen who is in the hands of political manipulation. In this respect, James Fishkin's³¹

³⁰ McCombs, M. and Reynolds, A (eds). (1999) 'Enhancing Grassroots Democracy', Chapter 11 in **The Poll with a Human Face: The National Issues Convention Experiment in Political Communication**, Mahwah, N.J, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp. 211-212: "In contrast to the spirited conversations of the 18th-century Parisian salons or to the enthusiastic torchlight parades and other public demonstrations of political opinion in 19th-century America discussed by Susan Herbst (chap. 10, this volume), contemporary political participation is usually described in passive terms. One particularly popular version is a consumer model of political communication in which politicians and the government joust vigorously with the news media, and both the news media and the political realm aim barrages of messages at a public that is expected to do little more than ratify the results at the polls on election day, if it even does that. But in the course of a single weekend, the National Issues Conventon (NIC) demonstrated the viability of a model for active public participation, the Deliberative Poll."

³¹ Fishkin, J. S. (1991) **Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform**. New York: Yale University Press, p. 1: "This book is about how to bring power to the people under conditions where the people can think about the power they exercise. It is, in short, about how to reconcile democracy and deliberation. /It is part of a 2,500-year quest to better adapt the democratic idea, originally suited to populations of several thousand in a Greek city-state, to populations of many millions in a modern megastate. It is about how we might bring some of the favorable characteristics of small-group, face-to-face democracy to the large-

Deliberative Poll technique is very interesting with reference to a new way of capturing and understanding Public Opinion. I will not enter into this procedure at this moment, as I only wish to note its existence as a sign of a democratic need linked to the problems of democratic quality that advanced contemporary democracies bring up. But this procedure also alludes to the deficiencies of the schematic methodology of the most commonly used techniques for investigating Public Opinion, which tend to decontextualize the cognitive processes and the rationality of the citizens, making the ultimate meaning of their acts very opaque.

The recent mass mobilizations in Europe on the subject of the announced war with Iraq seem to announce a potent presence of Public Opinion in the governmental decision-making processes; in any case, they seem to announce, more abstractly, a summons by the citizens for their politicians to reduce the gap that democratic representation can create, in that it guarantees the autonomy of governments beyond what public opinions seem to desire. The old debates about delegation and representation, about democracy and Public Opinion, reappear today, as some governments seem to distance themselves from their publics' opinions (the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy) when making such transcendental decisions as in the case of a war with such singular characteristics as the war with Iraq. The idea of an "opinion regime" fades in situations in which governments opt for going against their own Public Opinions³², and the idea of electoral legitimacy between two elections prevails. This is, above all, a technical-political idea, as opposed to the idea of democracy as the free representation

scale nation-state. This quest will take us through a broad range of historical and theoretical topics, including the debates of the American Founders, the use of juries selected by lot in Athenian democracy, the transformations in the American system of presidential selection, the attempted transitions to democracy in Eastern Europe, and the rationale behind a new kind of democratic event that can be used to launch the next season of presidential selection."

³² A very interesting reflection upon the relationship between government and Public Opinion can be seen in González, J.J. (2001) 'Los sondeos de Clinton y las paradojas de la democracia', **Empiria**, No. 4, Revista de la UNED, Madrid, pp.43-57. González says (p.57): 'Democracy is riddled with paradoxes. If the leaders stray away from the people's wishes, they are accused of despotism; if, on the other hand, they bow to the people's will, they are accused of pandering. Analysts argue about the vote's role as an instrument of control while politicians strive to circumvent this control. Politicians use polls for this purpose, but little attention is paid to this aspect of polls. Clinton's first term in the White House (1992-1996) is a good illustration of this series of paradoxes. The pioneer experience of the third way allows not only to reflect upon these paradoxes but to explain possible scenarios. Faced with the ideological polarization that characterized American politics from the second half of the sixties to his first term, Clinton finally seemed to have found the path of pandering that got him reelected in 1996. Whether or not Clinton inaugurated a new era of democratic responsiveness is open to discussion, but there can be little doubt about its extraordinary influence on the use of polls.'

of citizens' opinions, which is a deep philosophical idea that is the foundation of the whole process that establishes liberty as the basic and central political norm.

And so proof piles up against a certain kind of Public Communications: established Political Communication is shown to be insufficient to improve citizens' relationship with their governments, and the need to modify this defensive, routine Political Communication begins to appear. At this point it is necessary to introduce some nuances in the very definition of Political Communication, accepting that one of its functions should be to democratically improve the capacity for interaction between governments and public opinions. It is not, therefore, a new name for marketing nor is it an analysis of the effects of the media on politics; it is, in addition, a therapeutic attempt to improve democracy. In this sense, Political Communication should aspire to be an encounter technique, not a vulgar generator of missed opportunities for the citizens and politics, or the citizens and government, to meet.

Internet seems to have awakened a great deal of hope in some students of Political Communication, such as Blumler and Gurevitch³³. I myself have studied the digital divide in Spain, searching for new pathways for public communication. Blumler and Gurevitch's thesis is, above all, normative: *we should aim to build a civic commons in cyberspace* (see Note 32).

Is this construction of a civic public area in cyberspace possible? Elsewhere³⁴, I have commented on the enormous difficulties for turning cyberspace into an open, egalitarian, and free space, an authentic *civic commons*, to use Blumler and Gurevitch's words. Internet's peculiarities as a new media for

³³ "Communications is now central to the politics of late modern societies but as presently organised is sucking the substance and spirit out of it. Fortunately, an opportunity and means to do something about this has emerged amidst the welter of technology-led change of media systems. The available chances are fragile, however, and must be grasped in a manner that is both visionary and practical. It would be utopian to rely on spontaneous activation of the better civic instincts of politicians, journalists or voters to harness computer-based communication to the needs of democracy. Only deliberate institution-building will suffice. As we argue in the conclusion, we should aim to build a civic commons in cyberspace.", in Blumler, J. G. and Gurevitch, M. (2001) 'The New Media and our Political Communication Discontents (1)', **Information, Communication & Society**, free On-line, Vol. 4-1, paragraph 1.

³⁴ Bouza, F. (2003) 'Tendencias a la desigualdad en Internet: la brecha digital (*digital divide*) en España', in **6° Foro sobre Tendencias Sociales**, Ed. Sistema, Madrid (in press).

expanding Political Communication are located, by Blumler and Gurevitch³⁵, in its capacity for direct communication between politicians and voters, skipping the conventional communications media which are wrapped in their own peculiar use of time and of people.

The man who was President Clinton's adviser, Dick Morris, began one of his texts with enthusiastic words on the new political world that Internet opens up³⁶, and voices the opinion of the most optimistic sector of analysts of the new public sphere that this Network of Networks forms. Nevertheless, we have to add nuances to this³⁷, because Internet itself reflects the same problems of the very society in which it is born: unequal access for citizens, and internal inequality for users, along the lines of the Knowledge Gap Hypothesis³⁸. In spite of this, it is true that Internet opens up a new area of worry for the professionals of social control; it is still an open space, although with limited access, but it is open enough to generate new communication conducts, and, of course, new Political Communications conducts, as Blumer and Gurevitch, and the enthusiastic Dick Morris, have emphasized. Using references to Habermas, Savigny wonders about Internet and the opportunity that it offers for

³⁵ In Blumler, J. G. and Gurevitch, M. op. cit., paragraph 30.: "In short, the Internet allows direct communication between citizens and politicians, enabling both to bypass the media. Here, then, may lie the Internet's greatest potential for change. It could introduce into the political communication environment a different set of qualities from those which predominate today, perhaps even constraining the mainstream media to take account of what people are receiving over the Net in their own coverage of politics. Politicians could be expected to offer more solid back-up to their policy ideas. And political journalists could be expected to concentrate less on process and more on substance. After widespread new media diffusion, the relations of politicians, audiences and the 'old media' may not be quite the same as before."

³⁶ Morris, Dick. 1999. *Vote.com*, Los Angeles.: Renaissance Books, p. XVII: "There has been a quiet but radical revolution shaking the very foundation of our politics. While the television blares in the living rooms of America and the magazines and newspapers pile up beside the couch, Americans are quietly tapping away on their home computers—tuning in to the Internet. Bank.com, Travel.com, Shopping.com, RealEstate.com, and a hundred other businesses on tens of thousands of new Web sites are changing every aspect of American life. As tens of millions of people tune out the nightly network television news and stop dirtying their fingers with newsprint, they are using the Internet as their prime source of news and information about the outside world. News.com is increasingly opening the eyes of America to pluralistic input, different opinions, new information, and a wealth of news that even the most prolific of newspapers cannot match."

³⁷ I deal with this subject in Bouza, F. (2003) 'Tendencias a la desigualdad en Internet: la brecha digital (*digital divide*) en España', in **6º Foro sobre Tendencias Sociales**, Ed. Sistema, Madrid (in press).

³⁸See: Bonfadelli, Heinz. (2002) "The Internet and Knowledge Gaps. A Theoretical and Empirical Investigation". *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 17(1).; Bouza, F. op.cit. *supra*; Savigny, Heather. 2002. "Public Opinion, Political Communication and the Internet ". *Politics*: Vol. 22 (1), 1-8.

democracy³⁹. Savigny also is optimistic and positive, while at the same time he warns about the illusion of an apparent public sphere in Internet, while the traditional media, controlled by the élite boundary-keepers, continues to create public opinion.

The normative Habermasian perspective of a public sphere with ideal characteristics does not seem to me to be the best sociological reference for speaking about the real world. Public Opinion probably is and will be marked, essentially, by the imperfection of the sociopolitical, technical framework, and the public sphere will always be an irregular sphere whose specific characteristics at each moment and in each place will be the object of sociological criticism. But real Public Opinion exists outside of this normative framework: there is no celestial model of Public Opinion, nor is it good to think about social life in ideal terms, except as a methodological option in the style of Max Weber's ideal types; but we must never forget that it is only that, a methodological or instrumental procedure.

The Impact Area and the Implication of Individuals in the Public Agenda.

The personal implication of individuals in the Public Agenda that they themselves, as a collectivity, define, is important but not absolute. If we take the data from recent months in Spain, we can observe the following correlations:

³⁹ Savigny, H. (2002) 'Public Opinion, Political Communication and the Internet', **Politics**, Vol. 22 (1), pp.1-8, pp.1-2: 'The internet is an instrument, as yet, largely outside of traditional élite control. This medium offers greater opportunities for individuals to participate and embodies a challenge to the existing forums of debate. This article, through a Habermasian framework, raises normative theoretical questions in respect of the role of the internet in political communication and the construction, reconstruction and expression of public opinion. Does the internet represent an opportunity for democracy to be reinvigorated and for participation to become more meaningful?'

TABLE 3

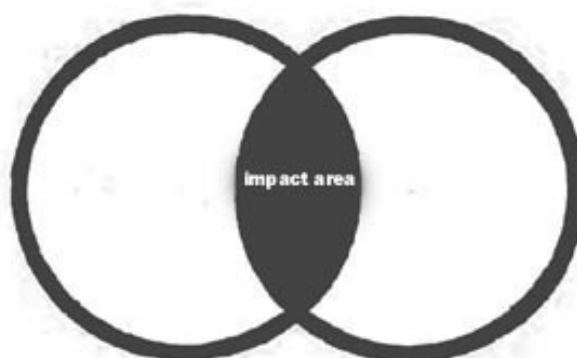
SPEARMAN'S RHO CORRELATION BETWEEN RATINGS OF PUBLIC AGENDA AND PERSONAL PUBLIC AGENDA in the CIS barometers for November 2002 and January 2003

(Source: CIS data from the November 2002 and January 2003 barometers, prepared by author)

SPEARMAN'S RHO CORRELATION BETWEEN RATINGS OF PUBLIC AGENDA AND PERSONAL PUBLIC AGENDA	Personal Agenda November 2002 <i>(Which three problems personally affect you most?)</i>	Personal Agenda January 2003
Public Agenda November 2002 <i>(Which are the three main problems that exist at present in Spain, according to your judgment?)</i>	+0,650 (sig. bilateral 0,042)	
Public Agenda January 2003		+0,590 (sig. bilateral 0,073)

And this means that individuals maintain an important area of personal interests that is separated, to a certain degree, from what that individual considers to be public interests or everyone's interests (a separation expressed in terms of a greater or lesser correlation between the first ten subjects on the public agenda and the ranking that these first ten subjects have in the personal agenda), represented verbally as "Spain's main problems". This clear distinction between an area of personal interests and another area of public interests makes the existence of an area that I will define as the impact area of Political Communications possible. This area is the joint intersection of the Public Agenda and the Personal Agenda, as shown:

FIGURE 1



The impact area would be that subject area that is most sensitive to public communication in general and to political communication in particular, because it is the area in which the individual feels a clear coincidence between the country and himself: a mixed agenda that has the strength of what is general and what is specific. Because of this, this seems to be the agenda that the individual feels most inclined to exercise pressure to achieve, while at the same time the individual is most receptive to any communication made about this block of mixed subjects. We can define the impact area operatively as the greater or lesser coincidence in the three most often mentioned subjects on both agendas, starting with the public agenda as the initial reference. I will use the example of the Public and Personal Agendas from January 2003 (CIS):

TABLE 4

IMPACT AREA in JANUARY 2003 (DATA FROM THE CIS)

(The figures in parenthesis are rankings: the first is the ranking of the agenda of each column, the second the ranking of the other agenda in the other column. The subjects of the impact area are in boldface: Unemployment and Crime Rate, in this case.)

Public Agenda	Personal Agenda	Impact (0 to 3)
Unemployment (1)	Unemployment (1)	1
Terrorism, ETA (2,4)	Crime Rate (2)	
Crime Rate (3)	Economic Problems (3,6)	0,75
		1,75

The impact area is formed here by a coincidence in subject and ranking (Unemployment) and a subject coincidence, without a ranking coincidence (Crime Rate). If we give a value of 1 to the full coincidence and a value of 0.75 to the subject coincidence with only one level of difference (level 3, level 2, in this case, for Crime Rate), we have a 1.75 impact area, with the maximum being 3 (and the maximum is when both agendas coincide fully, even in their order, on the three main subjects: when the individual integrates his needs totally in the public agenda). The Public/Political Communication that will receive greatest attention in this example case will be (hypothesis) the communication about unemployment, with the crime rate following right behind. These must be the two star subjects of any party communication because they are the ones that occupy the public-personal sphere most intensely, with this public-personal sphere understood to be that part of the public sphere that is most perceived from the personal sphere, the place of public communication in which the individual situates herself the most, in the most individual way. We have to assume that the subjects or topics of the public agenda integrate themselves into the apparently altruistic arguments on public subjects, too, similar to what the Anglo-Saxons call *public issue arguments*⁴⁰, and which define individuals' public rhetoric, while the personal agenda includes the topics that make up the arguments on private or personal subjects, the *personal issue arguments*. Where both meet, we find the mixed topics and the mixed arguments of individuals that act from this theoretical place that I call the impact area and that, hypothetically, define the highest degree of receptivity in Political Communications. The relationships between the perceived public agenda (or what the individual takes the public agenda to be at each moment) and the personal agenda should be similar to the relationships between personal opinion and perceived public opinion⁴¹, complex relationships which it is not my task to evaluate at this moment.

At any rate, whatever the relationships between personal opinion and public opinion, it is possible to find out what the consequences of these relationships are in the impact area, in order to determine, at

⁴⁰ See, for example: Johnson, A.J. (2002.) 'Beliefs about Arguing: A Comparison of Public Issue and Personal Issue Arguments', **Communication Reports**, pp. 99-111.

⁴¹ See: Joslyn, M.R. (1999) 'Perceiving Public Opinion of Political Figures: Examining the Link between Individual and Collective Opinion', **International Journal of Public Opinion Research**, Fall 1999, pp. 213-232.

a specific moment, their state in relation to the agenda. In this sense, the impact area can show (for all of a survey sample, but also, and above all, for specific collectivities according to class, culture, habitat, etc.) a collectivity's implication in the public agenda at a given moment. In an interesting paper⁴², McCombs analyzes what he calls *personal involvement with issues on the public agenda*, taking the Public Agenda to be a projection of various types of personal interests, including altruistic or recreational interests, as well as others⁴³. There is no doubt that this is how it is: there is always a reason for doing something, but for analytic purposes, it may also be convenient to compare the Public Agenda with the Personal Agenda, because in the first the question itself requires a special effort to altruistically objectify the interests (*Civic duty*) and in the second there is an intentionally selfish perspective in the question itself. This is another way of analyzing the Public Agenda, and I propose this as a complementary way. The motives are less important than the result of this complex mixture of things that make the Public and Personal Agendas differ at times.

A Kind of Conclusion: The Naturalness of Determination, a New Way of Facing the Scientific Myths on the Effects of the Media.

Elsewhere I have tried to explain my viewpoint on the political influence of the media, and I have tried to use a naturalist interpretation to approach this influence⁴⁴. By a naturalist interpretation, I mean

⁴² McCombs, M. (1999) 'Personal Involvement with Issues on the Public Agenda', **International Journal of Public Opinion Research**, pp.152-168.

⁴³ McCombs, op.cit, p. 155 and ff.

⁴⁴ Bouza, F. (1998) 'La influencia política de los medios de comunicación: mitos y certezas del nuevo mundo'. Published in *El debate de la Comunicación*, edition prepared by Juan Benavides Delgado, Fundación General de la Universidad Complutense de Madrid/Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 1998. pp. 237-252, pp.239-240: "As a preamble to the contemporary situation, I would like to recall here some moments in which the debate on liberty and determination (and this is the basic debate on the matter of effects) was strong enough to penetrate social life and popular spheres. The three moments I choose are: the Greek debate on destiny and the gods' will (or, also, the atomic determination of man from the atomist model), the medieval debate on divine prescience or foreknowledge of man's destiny, and the nineteenth-century political debate on liberty as economic equality as opposed to liberty as a free market. At these moments, the idea that human liberty was being kidnapped (*luckily*, in many cases, according to the valuation or cultural framework of liberty) by some historically significant circumstance (the gods or the atom, God, man's exploitation by man) was the historical way in which the conflict between freedom and all the determinations that were considered central in a certain epoch was set forth. Or, in terms that are significant with respect to my analytic criticism: the naturalness of an event (the tension liberty/determination, in this case) implies strategies for analyzing and interpreting a phenomenon that are not the same if this event is considered to be ahistorical, unknown, or unapproachable. Threats to human autonomy have always been part of collective social life and it is in this sense, and only in this

framing media influence in the history of human determination by agents with special repercussions at a given moment: a historical recurrence of liberty as a political subject as opposed to the determinations of the moment. In this sense, the mass communications media would be the heirs of the various historical motifs (see Note 43) and they would be generating new ways of reacting for Public Opinion, which at times seems to surrender completely to the media, while at others distancing itself surprisingly from them. When this last occurs, we feel a special relief, even though, in itself, the fact that Public Opinion distances itself from the media is no guarantee of greater autonomy. But it could be, at times.

sense, that I consider them to be **natural**. If the communications media are a threat of this class, but no longer a physical-religious (Greece), theological (Middle Ages), or political-economic (Modernity) threat, what we probably have is a recurrence of the subject of liberty in a form that seems to us today more disturbing: the multiplication of technology, the internationalization of finances, and the increase and universalization of the communications media. It is the contemporary projection of a historical debate.”