

Twitter and public opinion. A critical view for an educational outlook

Twitter y opinión pública. Una perspectiva crítica para un horizonte educativo

Vicent GOZÁLVEZ, PhD. Associate Professor. Universitat de València (Vicent.Gozalvez@uv.es).

Luis Miguel ROMERO-RODRÍGUEZ, PhD. Visiting Lecturer. Universidad Espíritu Santo, Ecuador (luis@romero-rodriguez.com).

Camilo LARREA-OÑA. Consultant. Instituto de Altos Estudios Nacionales, Ecuador (camilo.larrea@jaen.edu.ec).

Abstract:

In this article we reflect, from a theoretical and critical perspective, on how public opinion is currently shaped by social networks, focusing on the case of Twitter. Going beyond a purely sociological or factual concept of *public opinion*, we will offer arguments for expanding its meaning while proposing a model of deliberative democracy. In order to do so, we use some well-known constructs from the field of social communication, such as the *spiral of silence* or *digital niches*, which provide a referent for interpreting the phenomenon of social networks from a critical hermeneutics. The analysis of Twitter

as a platform for public opinion also aims to provide the keys to building an educational outlook, understanding that one of the purposes of this area in a democracy is to educate citizens about digitally formed currents of opinion, especially those supporting populist political movements and aggravated by the spread of fake news. After delving into the socio-political dimension of social networks such as Twitter, we conclude by proposing a normative concept of *interactive public opinion*, a proposal that will be specified in a set of educational competences at the epistemological and civic ethical level relating to the democratic use of social media.

Revision accepted: 2018-10-20.

This is the English version of an article originally printed in Spanish in issue 274 of the **revista española de pedagogía**. For this reason, the abbreviation EV has been added to the page numbers. Please, cite this article as follows: Gozálvéz, V., Romero-Rodríguez, L. M., & Larrea-Oña, C. (2019). Twitter y opinión pública. Una perspectiva crítica para un horizonte educativo | *Twitter and public opinion. A critical view for an educational outlook*. *Revista Española de Pedagogía*, 77 (274), 403-419. doi: <https://doi.org/10.22550/REP77-3-2019-04>

<https://revistadepedagogia.org/>

ISSN: 0034-9461 (Print), 2174-0909 (Online)

year 77, n. 274, September-December 2019, 403-419
revista española de pedagogía



Keywords: public opinion, social media, Twitter, democracy, interactivity, citizenship, educational competences.

Resumen:

En este artículo reflexionamos, desde una perspectiva teórica y crítica, sobre el modo en que la opinión pública es configurada actualmente por las redes sociales, centrándonos en el caso de Twitter. Más allá de un concepto puramente sociológico o fáctico de *opinión pública*, aportaremos argumentos para ampliar su significado en defensa de un modelo de democracia deliberativa. Para ello, nos servimos de algunos constructos reputados en el ámbito de la comunicación social, como el de la *espiral del silencio* o el de los *nichos digitales*, los cuales ayudan a interpretar el fenómeno de las redes sociales desde una hermenéutica crítica. El análisis de Twitter como plataforma

de opinión pública pretende ofrecer las claves para construir un horizonte educativo, entendiendo que uno de los fines de la educación en democracia es el de formar a la ciudadanía en relación con las corrientes de opinión digitalmente conformadas, especialmente las que sustentan movimientos políticos de corte populista y agravadas por la propagación de noticias falsas (*fake news*). Tras ahondar en la dimensión sociopolítica de redes sociales como Twitter, en el presente texto concluimos proponiendo un concepto normativo de *opinión pública interactiva*, propuesta que se concretará en un conjunto de competencias educativas a nivel epistemológico y ético-cívico en relación con el uso democrático de las redes sociales.

Descriptor: opinión pública, redes sociales, Twitter, democracia, interactividad, ciudadanía, competencias educativas.

1. Introduction. Social networks, public opinion and new populism

In our communicative environment, the impact of social media in creating currents of socio-political opinion or, to put it another way, on shaping a social state of opinion with strong repercussions in the field of institutional politics, is ever more apparent. Perhaps the first international confirmation of the importance of social media in democratic elections occurred in the campaign that first took Barack Obama to the White House. However, the

perceived role of social media in these political processes is changing as a result of Donald Trump becoming president of the USA, especially given his intensive use of Twitter (*@realDonaldTrump*) in the electoral campaign and in his presidential communiqués with a national and international reach (52.033.110 followers and 37.575 tweets as of May 2018).

The case of Trump is not an isolated phenomenon, as Europe has also undergone similar political trends with a digital impact on public opinion, from the rise

of xenophobic nationalism in France (@FN_officiel) to the campaign for and triumph of Brexit in the United Kingdom (@BrexitCentral), or the emergence of independence movements in Spain (@independencia; @DUI, etc.), with a populist style of political communication, that is to say, communication that exalts a homogeneous and closed “us”, moving towards a discourse based on hatred of what is different (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

Circumstances like these invite us to reconsider the meaning and scope of the expression *public opinion*, a revision that leads to an exploration of the different current models of democracy and representation (MacPherson, 2003; Camps, 2004; Greppi, 2012). In other words, what is the path of current democratic systems in which the acts of online public opinion are as intense as they are new in the political history of modern societies?

Talking about public opinion on social media is not limited to discussion of shifts in opinion on Twitter. However, as Anstead and O’Loughlin note (2015), Twitter is an especially interesting tool for measuring public opinion given that this platform’s microblogging format allows data of socio-political importance to be easily accessible on a massive scale and immediately.

Indeed, some research — including pieces by Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau (2015), Conover et al. (2011), Gruzd & Roy (2014), Hong & Kim (2016), and Lee, Shin, & Hong (2017) — concludes that social media, especially Twitter, are

consumed by audiences more than any other conventional type of media when obtaining political information.

Social media are a paradigmatic and highly-celebrated model of horizontal communication, and have been present in many social and political citizen movements in recent years (Ibarra, Martí, & Gomà, 2002; Dahlgren, 2005; Hindman, 2008; Castells, 2009; Basave, 2013; Baek, 2015). There is ample proof for their educational potential as a space for finding and sharing information, or for collaborating interactively in the construction of knowledge (Gozálvez, 2013; Tur, Marín, & Carpenter, 2017; Vázquez-Cano, López Meneses, & Sevillano García, 2017). Twitter is used as an interactive platform to channel and organise collective movements that undoubtedly help empower citizens (Saura, Muñoz-Moreno, Luengo-Navas, & Martos, 2017) and allow direct participation in public matters of national and international interest (Kahne, Lee, & Feezell, 2012; Castells, 2008).

But with the emergence of political leaders with a strong social media presence and clear ability to manipulate them in their favour, networks like Twitter can stop being technologies for parallel connectivity that help deepen democracy. Twitter can become a new medium for the segmentation of opinions with a strong emotional component (Cortina, 2016), making little contribution to the democratic regeneration of a society, especially if social media enters into the dynamic of the “spiral of silence”. But what is the scope and significance of this hypothesis?

In this article we will analyse this and other questions, using a critical hermeneutics methodology (Arteta, 2016; Habermas, 2010; Conill, 2008), based on the interpretation and rereading of texts in accordance with practical criteria (social, ethical, and political), and with a dual objective: (1) investigating the new relationship between social media (especially Twitter) and public opinion; (2) offering a valid theoretical framework for educational action relating to social media and networks such as Twitter, an action that is key for public deliberation in hyper-connected societies like contemporary ones.

2. Public opinion online: a new tyranny of the masses?

One of the main pitfalls in any research into *public opinion* is finding a widely-accepted definition for such a clearly controversial and polysemic concept (Price, 1994; Monzón, 2006). This can partly be explained by the complexity of the link between the realm of the *opinion* (individual, subjective, uncertain) and that of the *public* (which relates to the collective, universal, and rational). It is over half a century since a famous study by Childs (1965) found around fifty definitions of the expression *public opinion* in the history of Western thought, although all of them, as Noëlle-Neumann (1984) suggests, can be grouped into two main categories: rationalist approaches, rooted in the Enlightenment, and sociological or psychological ones. The first group tends to regard public opinion as a process of shaping the public sphere through debate or free deliberation, in order to be

informed, and in which citizens engage (participate) in dialogue concerning the questions that affect the community (Habermas, 1994; Dahlgreen, 2005). The second, as a social phenomenon that reacts to psychological dynamics such as fear of solitude or exclusion (Noëlle-Neumann, 1984), or instead responds to fluctuating interests only worth recording through polling techniques, such as the famous Gallup (1939) and Allport (1937). As well as this taxonomy of public opinion, there are other views worth considering, such as that of Luhmann (2000), for whom communicative structures and social interaction map out themes (the factual level) that serve as a framework for political discussion based on the establishment of matters of common interest (normative level), or that of Kuran (1995) with his model of the *prudential lie* according to which we either openly state our opinion or we lie prudently in a tension between dissidence and conformity, between open discussion and self-censorship, which explains the constant movement of reconfiguration of the thinking and feelings of society.

In recent years, such a concept has moved towards a more empirical or factual definition: *public opinion* is what surveys say about what society thinks in relation to a topic of social significance (Capellán, 2008), surveys which are often used to justify political power of a populist nature (Sampedro, 2000). However, we believe that narrowing the notion of public opinion in an empirical and instrumental way does not adequately solve the problem of its complex role in a democracy, where the public's deliberative processes are vital

and where, in the absence of such deliberation, the danger of a subtle tyrannical imposition of certain socially powerful opinions remains alive. When describing this sort of danger, in this section we will provide a deliberative and interactive vision of public opinion in the new setting of social media, with the ultimate aim of finding pathways to strengthen.

Indeed, one of the fundamental works in the history of public opinion is E. Nöelle-Neumann's well-known thesis on the *spiral of silence* (1984). What this basically states is that in any society, *public opinion* is the opinion with the greatest social presence, and can elevate or remove any leader. Social opinions circulate in a spiral pattern, creating an effective movement that concentrates the most widely-followed positions at its centre and expels or silences minority opinions. According to this theory, people speak more freely and defend their opinions more boldly when they perceive that these represent the majority perspective, the common view and what is socially accepted; in contrast, they tend to keep quiet when they see there is little support for their opinion and they sense it will lead to social rejection. It is not so much a question of what will or will not happen after they express these opinions, but rather their perception of the predictable social impact, the feeling of what might happen in the public sphere.

As a result of the spiral of silence, the opinions that circulate or spread without impediment or obstacles gradually become stronger and more intense, in other words, their perceived social legitimacy increases.

In contrast, opinions that have few supporters or are penalised lose support and intensity as they are seen to be unpopular. As a result of this mechanism, opinions undergo a process of social homogenisation.

However, this concern with the “dominant majority” is nothing new. As long ago as the treatise *Democracy in America* (2018, originally published in 1835), Alexis de Tocqueville warned of a sort of *soft despotism* which develops from what he called the *tyranny of the majority*, referring to what for him was one of the greatest dangers of the USA's nascent democracy. He believed the exacerbation of popular opinion could lead to tyranny by imposing a single way of thinking as the very notion of the *majority* prevents any debate and, worse still, sends dissenting individuals or non-aligned minorities into social exile. In this regard, John Stuart Mill warned 25 years later (1859), in *On liberty*, that individual liberty cannot be alienated in favour of the social majority, and so the individual cannot become a *social prisoner* of dominant opinions (Mill, 1859).

A century later, the *two step theory* developed by Katz (1957) and Katz and Lazarsfeld (1966) established that flows of communication follow a logic of indirect replication starting from opinion passed through the media — in that era, only through the mass media — and necessarily passed through opinion leaders to create effective influence.

Nowadays, the blogosphere and the digital sphere of social media can consolidate this way of understanding public

opinion and the way in which it is shaped. According to Miyata, Yamamoto, and Ogawa (2015), Twitter offers an especially favourable setting for testing the spiral of silence model on the Internet. After the earthquake, tsunami and subsequent nuclear disaster on 11 March 2011 in Japan (Fukushima), these researchers observed a positive correlation between individuals' perception that their opinion represented the majority sentiment, and the number of times (tweets) they expressed themselves and spoke clearly online, something that contributed to the gradual homogenisation of opinions about nuclear power.

So, on the one hand, Twitter has become an open network since it has an enormous power to spread information widely and immediately, but, on the other hand, this has not necessarily led to real diversity owing to the clear risk of homogenisation: "Twitter accelerates the Spiral of Silence and strengthens convergence toward the opinion of the majority because it encourages selective exposure" (Miyata, Yamamoto, & Ogawa, 2015, p. 1138).

This finding is not an isolated phenomenon. Other authors have investigated the relationship between the perceived climate of opinion and expressing personal opinions on the Internet (Price, Nir, & Cappella, 2006; Woong Yun, & Park, 2011), finding that the climate of opinion stimulates a predisposition to speak out or remain quiet online, or to speak in one term or another, following the indications of the Nöelle-Neumann model (1984).

But shifts in opinion through social media it appears do not just match the spiral of silence model. Alternative voices, the infinity of online perspectives, can be segmented in accordance with another theoretical model, which is as interesting as it is worrying in terms of democratic participation: the *digital niches* or *echo chambers* model formulated by Sunstein (2009).

3. Strengthened digital niches and fake news: the limits of social media and a practical approach to *interactive public opinion*

At a socio-political level, social media can act as a spiral mechanism, but what happen in the new politics, the one based on using social media to shape opinions? In this sense, networks like Twitter still have to be observed insofar as they contribute to a new version of *manufacturing consent* (Lippmann, 2003; Camps, 2004).

Social networks like Twitter can be a stimulus for troubled political communication, especially when faced with evidence of microblogging practices based on fake news, shocking but unfounded rumours in unverified tweets, statements that are grandiose but doubtful if not clearly untrue, but which take shape as reality (as *truth*) as they appear and circulate widely online (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018; Lazer et al., 2018), above all because they say what many users want to hear.

The current communication ecosystem and the information consumption, production, and dissemination habits have increased the spectrum, occurrence, and

efficacy of this disinformation by mainstreaming lines of thinking that unfold in digital channels, easily becoming matrices for effective opinion (Tandoc, Wei Lim, & Ling, 2017).

The bandwagon effect adds to this complex scenario. In this effect, users, in an attempt to filter information emotionally and owing to the effect of the economy of connection time, often pay attention to, interact with, and share the information that is most popular, giving it more credibility without examining it fully (Sundar, 2008; Thorson, 2008; Bakir & McStay, 2017), thus feeding new spirals of silence. Furthermore, the algorithms of the most popular social media networks (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) give greater prominence to information that receives more frequent social interactions, something that *ipso facto* creates an automatic and algorithmic *bandwagon effect*, isolating dissenting voices.

On this point it is worth considering the approach of Kahneman (2015) concerning the ease with which a judgement is created regarding a given piece of “information”: context and truthfulness are of little or no importance so long as the information makes it possible to reach an immediate conclusion, without more in-depth analysis. This trend corresponds to the WYSIATI formula (What You See Is All There Is), a cognitive barrier that, in this case, smooths the path for the social media user to emit a personal opinion or to receive another from someone else with further reflection. The movement against reason and towards *digital niches* or *echo*

chambers where we only hear what we have selectively chosen in advance to hear does no more than reinforce a cognitive bias that is very much present in everyday reasoning: *myside-bias* (Baron, 1998).

The creation of public opinion through direct online communication, which is unfiltered, apparently truer, more intense, and more democratic, might in the end reinforce *digital niches* where millions of user-voters submerge themselves in a discourse they previously tuned into. One of the latest innovations on Twitter, in use since the summer of 2016, is the ability to filter the notifications you wish to read. All you have to do is turn on the “Only people you follow” filter. Is this an advance in better personalisation and control over content, or an intensification of currents of opinion in which users cocoon themselves?

Sunstein (2009), in *Republic.com 2.0*, provided an interesting reflection on the effects of the digital sphere in the political landscape. He warned of the dangers of the Internet which, rather than contributing to a broad and democratically-healthy public debate, could create niches of opinion in which the public forms into groups according to taste and previous perspectives, expressing views that people know will be well-received in the particular virtual community, or that generate in others what one hopes to hear in the online niche. Rather than deepening democracy, the Internet could impoverish it if the trend detected by Sunstein flourishes (*op. cit.*). The blogosphere and social networks could make a major contribution to the segmentation of society into echo chambers or

communication capsules (Barberá et al., 2015), in which each individual listens to herself through the reflection of those who think, feel, and opine in the same way or very similar ways online. This trend would eventually undermine one of the foundations of democracy, namely the possibility of hearing things one does not expect to hear in the framework of the diversity of views of public affairs: a space of politically enriching shared plurality as a condition for respectful but critical debate.

Some authors are currently questioning the political representativeness of what happens on social media (Mellon & Prosser, 2017; Whitman Cobb, 2015; Greppi, 2012). But going beyond representativeness, there is an underlying problem relating to how opinions are formed on social media, especially on Twitter. What first stands out is the brevity imposed by the network when expressing information and opinions. The famous initial 140 characters, now 280, require a very useful practise of summarising for interactions to be effective and dynamic. But this aspect does not undermine suspicions regarding the communicative quality of messages on Twitter from a political perspective. To put it another way, there are good reasons for asking ourselves whether the intense publication and exchange of tweets is a reaction to a debate or argument for quality public discussion, or if instead it feeds on superficial statements of a few characters containing simplistic opinions and feelings that are liable to circulate energetically online. In addition, Twitter's polarising effect on public debate should be mentioned (Lee, Shin, & Hong, 2017; Hong &

Kim, 2016). This leads to intensified suspicions of *homogenisation* polarised or segmented as a result of social media.

Admittedly, the positioning of certain topics on social media does not necessarily correspond with the interest of most of the public in a given moment, or the public importance of such questions. The primarily commercial (or, in general, proselytising) use of the hashtag, as well as the use of ploys such as bot programs dedicated to promoting topics, supporting publications, or disseminating topics, could increase the distance between the parallel worlds of social media and tangible reality. Nonetheless, their influence cannot be ignored.

Even in these early stages, the way we use social media is instilling suspicions disguised as absolute certainties, that could undoubtedly become uncontrollable floods. Nor can we ignore the stratagem of *framing*, which makes it possible to shape and design perceptions and opinions, positioning them in real public debate and opinion (Parenti, 2001).

The definition of the term “public opinion” is a matter we would like to examine again and it is present in the background of this whole discussion. From a more practical viewpoint (ethical, political, and educational), it is worth reformulating the definition of public opinion to pursue an authentic “interactive public opinion” in which the vector for *interaction* also includes normative elements. A strictly sociological approach to this concept is insufficient in the framework of an educational and civic epistemology, especially if

we still accept that one of the major aims of education in communicative and democratic settings is to encourage responsible autonomy and critical understanding in relation to the media (see Masterman, 1985; Gozávez & Aguaded, 2012; Buckingham, 2014), as well as active participation by the public in the interest of a deliberative and educated public opinion (Habermas, 1994; Gozávez & Contreras-Pulido, 2014). Knowing what is going on, being sensitive to what is happening online, observing trending topics on social media, is just a step or a phase. Education also means promoting transformational activity (interaction) based on an ethically valid normative outlook. It entails training in more civic and sensible communicative actions (from a position of critical respect, we repeat) when the public visit Twitter and “speak and listen” online.

It is vital that we do not lose sight of the fact that, while social networks enable immediate, almost urgent, exchange of opinions between users in a virtually horizontal way, this supposed equidistance disappears immediately when we turn our gaze towards the physical world, and so it is necessary to act on both sides of the mirror with the same coherency and conscience of mutual respect, of recognising the other as a valid interlocutor in the way upheld by discourse ethics (Habermas, 2002; Elster, 2001; MacPherson, 2003; Cortina, 1985) and more recently by the ethics of reciprocal otherness (Conill, 2006; 2010).

In this redefinition of public opinion, it is necessary to return to one of the great philosophers of education. Indeed,

John Dewey (2004, originally published in 1927), already advanced in age, answered Lippmann’s proposal (2003, originally published in 1922) in which five years earlier he had depicted the public as a *mass* in an elitist model of democracy. In Dewey’s view, however, we should speak of citizens who construct and test their opinions in a democracy through social action, debate, and collaboration within the community, the true heart of an active public life. If we accept Dewey’s proposal, one of the major educational challenges in our technological and liquid modernity (Bauman, 2006) is to educate a plural, socially responsible, and morally autonomous public opinion, that can, among other things, intervene critically when it encounters the spread of lies or false information that muddy the waters of rational deliberation in a democracy. Similarly, education in the new media must be established as an antidote to the *fragmented homogenisation* or *polarised uniformity* of public opinion as a result of spiral of silence processes in conjunction with the creation of online digital niches, processes that undermine a shared ethos from the plurality of life options.

4. Conclusion: competences for an interactive public opinion in democratic societies

After this analysis of social media and their incursion into processes of shaping public opinion, a radical question arises, which goes to the root of the issue: do social media really contribute to the creation of an “interactive public opinion” which is deliberative in nature and profoundly democratic?

The media, governed by the principle of transparency and publicising social and political actions, have been a vital element in modern states governed by the rule of law (Habermas, 1994; 2002). But the media have undergone a major process of change in the last decade, reinventing their methods and revolutionising their forms in favour of an intense horizontal and interactive communication, a hyper-fragmented and changeable *mass self-communication* (Castells, 2009), following the appearance of social media.

Nonetheless, this transformation is not free from socio-political risks that require educational attention. Recent research shows that, faced with a socially or politically important question appearing on Twitter, young people participate in the social media network, albeit in a more playful than ideological way, something that reinforces the need for civic media education to increase their capacities (Torrego-González & Gutiérrez-Martín, 2016). In effect, it is not enough to take note: as educators we must recognise reality to transform it from valid regulative benchmarks.

Social media networks have enormous potential for redefining the concept of public opinion, not in a sociological or factual way, but in a dynamic way, based on rational, prudent, critical, and considered online participation. Participation which, from an ethical-political perspective, builds bridges between what is given and what is deserved (the humanly dignified). In the new digital setting, the version of public opinion that should be

promoted by media education is not one that derives from opinion surveys and statistics monitoring what is imposed and produced on social media. Instead, there should be support for interactive and informed public opinion, a public opinion which is a fundamental social and political institution in a democracy and which requires participants who are educated and committed, participants who will not settle for simple vertiginous exchange of liquid opinions (Bauman, 2006) but instead aspire to public deliberation based on communicative reasoning, as currently promoted by institutions like the CDD (Centre for Deliberative Democracy) at the Department of Communication at Stanford University (<http://cdd.stanford.edu>), or the DDC (Deliberative Democracy Consortium), a platform from the USA of civic and academic organisations for public engagement, participation, and deliberation (<http://deliberative-democracy.net>).

This is one of the basic functions of education today: to teach people about the paths we have followed to get where we are and, from there, invite new generations to enjoy those radically democratic values that are perfectly desirable and applicable in the online or digital setting: freedoms based on civic responsibility, the equal dignity and consideration we deserve as interlocutors, the value of dialogue, active respect and supportive commitment to present and future generations (Gracia & Gozálvéz, 2016). Accordingly, it is vital to combat the notion of *technological determinism* and any tendency towards *cyber-utopia* (Morozov, 2011), recognising

and reclaiming the fundamental role the human being plays in building social relationships through the Internet. Like any other medium for social communication, the Internet and social media do not inherently have a positive or negative moral burden; it is their users and content creators that, depending on their intentions and values, shape the type of online participation.

The acceleration of communicative exchange, the explosion and trivialisation of messages, rampant consumerism, and the instrumentalization of relationships are undoubtedly risk factors that, in a digital setting, can make us insensitive to the problems of others, thus submerging us in a sort of technologically boosted moral blindness (Bauman & Donskis, 2015). These are obvious risks in our liquid modernity, in the face of which educational agents cannot remain impassive.

Pedagogically speaking, we cannot just be mouthpieces for trends that impose themselves by being loudest and retweeted the most; instead, we should critically re-examine what has the highest profile to avoid dangers such as the spiral of silence that tends towards homogenisation of political ideas in a society, with the risk of becoming a new form of domination (Pettit, 1999). Education, as a brake on such a trend, is especially interested in training in civic virtues for a democratic *ethos*, always starting from a diversity of options, especially those that are of interest to the public, are underpinned by solid arguments, and break through the bounda-

ries of digital niches, a proposal in line with the latest reports by UNESCO (2015), and it is interested in the international movement in favour of media and information literacy (or MIL) led by the United Nations (goo.gl/uEJ5tp).

Therefore, public opinion must not only be considered in its factual or sociological dimension, defined as the set of feelings, preferences, tastes, and opinions of the members of a society. In democracies, and through the Internet, interactive public opinion has to deploy its ethical and political dimension, which relates to the public use of deliberative reasoning in the pursuit of the common good from a multitude of shared referents. When more dialogic methods are used to detect public opinion, such as *deliberative polling*, it is noticeable that people state their opinions more openly and the volume of polarised or biased opinions expressed falls (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005), something that cannot be ignored from a practical and pedagogical viewpoint.

From these premises, it is possible to develop a proposal for educational competences that help strengthen deliberative and interactive public opinion in the digital context of social media. Starting from the idea of competences as structures and processes that people put into action to solve problems in everyday life to construct and transform reality (Jover, Fernández-Salineró, & Ruiz-Corbella, 2005), we offer this proposal to expand on the media competences formulated by Ferrés and Pisicelli (2012).

Firstly, it is important to educate in:

1. *Epistemological* competences (relating to knowledge of the Internet and networks), among which we particularly note:

- 1.1. The ability to distinguish between the popular and the public, between what circulates as a fashionable topic on-line (Luhmann's thematic structures, 2000) and what is public in a normative and ideal sense (Habermas, 2002), in other words, the intricate but necessary space of the common good and public and collective interests at a social and universal level.
- 1.2. The competence to analyse the interests underlying online messages, reframing the relationship between public and private interests, to understand the dialectic relationship between the personal and the social, between the particular interests of companies or political parties and the public interests to which these messages should supposedly and additionally point.
- 1.3. The capacity to be open to diversity, seeking and testing evidence when faced with the emergence of fake news and online news that exploits network users by detecting previous majority preferences and tastes (the popular).
- 1.4. The ability to break out of echo chambers and leave digital niches for open conversations rich in nuances, evidence, and reasoning, going beyond polarised visions and trends as simplistic as they are overwhelming online.

Secondly:

2. *Ethical-civic and political* competences (referring to moral values and democratic participation):

- 2.1. The competence to evaluate social problems from the axiological foundations of democracies. The capacity for critical autonomy that can handle and distinguish good arguments, but also empathise with the other, recognising its dignity beyond its particular circumstances.
- 2.2. The capacity to produce messages and interact with a sense of responsibility, gauging the consequences for oneself and for others of what is published on social media.
- 2.3. The competence to overcome social labels when taking a stance on a controversial issue, to overcome conventional views or seek simple group approval or recognition, to detect and question clichés spread online. Using the Internet to propel oneself towards the *generalized other* (Mead, 2009) regarding community and *postconventional* responsibility (Kohlberg, Power, & Higgins, 2009) and a broad moral sensibility, akin to civil rights or human rights, but also regarding care based on individual situations in their real existence and difficulty (Levinas, 2014; Noddings, 2002).
- 2.4. Online intercultural competence: using social media as a new public space to enable intercultural dialogue (Pérez-Tornero & Varis,

2012; Innerarity, 2006), which, without denying the value of collective culture and group identity, seeks agreements or common ground with people from other cultural or social backgrounds or with different worldviews, with the aim of promoting human development (Nussbaum, 2012) which is socially sustainable (UNESCO, 2015).

In the new digital setting it is not just important to educate for fragmented masses, but also for a public body trained in seeking and producing good interpretations of social and political phenomena. In other words, proven, prudent, and well-considered interpretations, that accept alternative nuances and perspectives. Deliberative and interactive public opinion starts from the principle of publicness in its dual meaning (Habermas, 1994): participation by the public and transparency of these governing, power groups, and opinion leaders. Hence the importance of comparing online opinion and participation trends with the voices of opinion leaders from other media, with reputed specialists in different subjects, and above all to compare through dialogue or face-to-face encounters, in groups of friends, family events, civic associations, or neighbourhood groups.

As Sampedro warned (2000), “without encouraging online community relationships, discussion forums, and collective real (not virtual) actions, we will fragment civic participation even further. Individualised in front of screens, the public will lack a meeting place” (p. 188). Social

media can provide a forum for debate and exchange of ideas, or, in contrast, they can be an ideal place for spreading untruths, rumours, and opinions extracted from systems for detecting what it is socially profitable to say. Faced with this, the worsening of people’s “suspicions and cynicism, as revealed by the unfounded rumours that circulate online” (Ibid.) is to be expected.

Knowledge does not derive from the accumulation of information (information overload), but from how it is selected and interpreted, in accordance with thoughtful and valid criteria. Hence the need for a humanistic education which, along with scientific and technological culture, is vital for training in these criteria, from a broad view of social and historical reality. Participation (online) in the absence of quality information or good interpretative frameworks, is sterile or hollow, democratically speaking.

References

- Allport, F. (1937). Toward a science of public opinion. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1 (1), 7-23.
- Anstead, N., & O’Loughlin, B. (2015). Social media analysis and Public Opinion: The 2010 UK General Election. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 20, 204-220.
- Arteta, M. (2016). La hermenéutica crítica de Habermas: Una profundización de la hermenéutica gadameriana. *Contrastes. Revista Internacional de Filosofía*, 21 (2), 27-39.
- Baek, Y. M. (2015). Political Mobilization through Social Networks Sites: The Mobilizing Power of Political Messages Received from SNS friends. *Computer in Human Behavior*, 44, 12-15.
- Bakir, V., & McStay, A. (2017). Fake News and the Economy of Emotions. *Digital Journalism*, 6 (2), 154-175.

- Baron, J. (1998). *Thinking and Deciding*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Barberá, P., Jost, J. T., Nagler, J., Tucker, J. A., & Bonneau, R. (2015). Tweeting from left to right: Is online political communication more than an echo chamber? *Psychological Science*, 26 (10), 1531-1542.
- Basave, A. (2013). Del 11-MM al #YoSoy132: crónica de un movimiento denunciado. In J. Buj (Ed.), *Universidad desbordada: jóvenes, educación superior y política*. México D.F.: Universidad Iberoamericana.
- Bauman, Z. (2006). *Vida líquida*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Bauman, Z., & Donskis, L. (2015). *Ceguera moral: la pérdida de sensibilidad en la modernidad líquida*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Buckingham, D. (2014). *Media education. Literacy, learning and contemporary culture*. Polity press: Cambridge.
- Camps, V. (2004). Opinión pública, libertad de expresión y derecho a la información. In J. Conill & V. Gozálvez (Eds.), *Ética de los medios. Una apuesta por la ciudadanía audiovisual* (pp. 33-50). Barcelona: Gedisa.
- Capellán, G. (2008). *Opinión pública: Historia y presente*. Madrid: Trotta.
- Castells, M. (2003). *La galaxia Internet*. Barcelona: Debolsillo.
- Castells, M. (2008). The New Public Sphere: Global Civil Society, Communication Networks, and Global Governance. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616 (1), 78-93.
- Castells, M. (2009). *Comunicación y poder*. Madrid: Alianza.
- Childs, H. L. (1965). *Public Opinion. Nature, Formation and Role*. Princeton: Van Nostrand.
- Conill, J. (2006). *Ética hermenéutica. Crítica desde la facticidad*. Madrid: Tecnos.
- Conill, J. (2008). Hermenéutica crítica desde la facticidad de la experiencia. *Convivium*, 21, 31-40.
- Conill, J. (2010). La alteridad recíproca y la experiencia del reconocimiento. *Investigaciones fenomenológicas*, 2, 61-76.
- Conover, M., Ratkiewicz, J., Francisco, M. R., Gonçalves, B., Menczer, F., & Flammini, A. (2011). Political polarization on twitter. *ICWSM*, 133, 89-96.
- Cortina, A. (1985). La ética discursiva. In V. Camps (Ed.), *Historia de la Ética* (pp. 532-576). Barcelona: Critica.
- Cortina, A. (2008). *Ética aplicada y democracia radical*. Madrid: Tecnos.
- Cortina, A. (2016). *El triunfo de populistas como Trump se debe al auge de emociones*. Retrieve from https://www.eldiario.es/cultura/populistas-Trump-emociones-Adela-Cortina_0_579892342.html (Consulted on 2016-11-13).
- Dahlgreen, P. (2005). The Internet, public spheres and political communication. Dispersion and Deliberation. *Political Communication*, 22 (2), 147-162.
- Dewey, J. (1927/2004). *La opinión pública y sus problemas*. Madrid: Morata.
- Elster, J. (Ed.) (2001). *La democracia deliberativa*. Barcelona: Gedisa.
- Ferrés, J., & Piscitelli, A. (2012). La competencia mediática: propuesta articulada de dimensiones e indicadores. *Comunicar*, 19, 75-82.
- Fishkin, J. S., & Luskin, R. C. (2005). Experimenting with a democratic ideal: deliberative polling and public opinion. *Acta Politica*, 40 (3), 284-298.
- Gallup, G. H. (1939). *Public opinion in a democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gozálvez, V., & Aguaded, I. (2012). Educación para la autonomía en sociedades mediáticas. *Anàlisi*, 45, 1-14.
- Gozálvez, V. (2013). *Ciudadanía mediática. Una mirada educativa*. Madrid: Dykinson.
- Gozálvez, V., & Contreras-Pulido, P. (2014). Empoderar a la ciudadanía mediática desde la educación. *Comunicar*, 42, 129-136.
- Gracia, J., & Gozálvez, V. (2016). Justificación filosófica de la educación en valores éticos y cívicos en la educación formal. Análisis crítico de la LOMCE. *Teoría de la Educación*, 28 (1), 83-103.
- Greppi, A. (2012). *La democracia y su contrario. Representación, separación de poderes y opinión pública*. Madrid: Trotta.
- Grudz, A., & Roy, J. (2014). Investigating political polarization on Twitter: A Canadian perspective. *Policy & Internet*, 6 (1), 28-45.
- Habermas, J. (1994). *Historia y crítica de la opinión pública. La transformación estructural de la vida pública*. Barcelona: Gustavo Gili.

- Habermas, J. (2002). *Conciencia moral y acción comunicativa*. Barcelona: Península.
- Habermas, J. (2010). *Teoría de la acción comunicativa*. Madrid: Trotta.
- Hindman, M. (2008). *The Myth of Digital Democracy*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Hong, S., & Kim, S. H. (2016). Political polarization on Twitter: Implications for the use of social media in digital governments. *Government Information Quarterly*, 33 (4), 777-782.
- Ibarra, P., Martí, S., & Gomà, R. (Eds.) (2002). *Creadores de democracia radical. Movimientos sociales y redes de políticas públicas*. Barcelona: Icaria.
- Innerarity, D. (2006). *El nuevo espacio público*. Madrid: Espasa.
- Jagers, J., & Walgrave, S. (2007). Populism as politics communication style. *European Journal of Political Research*, 46 (3), 319-345.
- Jover, G., Fernández-Salineró, C., & Ruiz-Corbella, M. (2005). El diseño de titulaciones y programas ante la convergencia europea. In V. Esteban Chapapriá (Ed.), *El espacio europeo de educación superior* (pp. 27-93). Valencia: Editorial de la Universidad Politécnica de Valencia.
- Kahne, J., Lee, N. J., & Feezell, J. T. (2012). Digital Media Literacy Education and Online Civic and Political Participation. *International Journal of Communication*, 6, 1-24.
- Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Katz, E. (1957). The Two-Step Flow of Communication: An Up-To-Date Report on an Hypothesis. *Political Opinion Quarterly*, 21 (1), 61-78.
- Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1966). *Personal Influence, the Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications*. London: Transaction Publishers.
- Kohlberg, L., Power, F. C., & Higgins, A. (2009). *La educación moral según L. Kohlberg*. Barcelona: Gedisa.
- Lazer, D. M. J., Baum, M. A., Benkler, Y., Berinsky, A. J., Greenhill, K. M., Menczer, F., ... Zittrain, J. L. (2018). The science of fake news. *Science*, 359 (6380), 1094-1096.
- Lee, C., Shin, J., & Hong, A. (2017). Does Social Media Use Really Make People Politically Polarized? Direct and Indirect Effects of Social Media Use on Political Polarization in South Korea. *Telematics and Informatics*, 35 (1), 245-254.
- Levinas, E. (2014). *Alteridad y trascendencia*. Madrid: Arena Libros.
- Lippmann, W. (2003). *La opinión pública*. Madrid: Cuadernos de Langre.
- Luhmann, N. (2000). *La realidad de los medios de masas*. Barcelona: Anthropos.
- MacPherson, C. B. (2003). *La democracia liberal y su época*. Madrid: Alianza.
- Masterman, L. (1985). *Teaching the Media*. London: Comedia Publishing.
- Mead, G. H. (2009). *Escritos políticos y filosóficos*. Buenos Aires: FCE.
- Mellon, J., & Prosser, C. (2017). Twitter and Facebook are not representative of the general population: Political attitudes and demographics of British social media users. *Research & Politics*, 4 (3), 1-9.
- Mill, J. S. (1859). *On liberty*. London: John W. Parker & Son.
- Miyata, K., Yamamoto, H., & Ogawa, Y. (2015). What affects the spiral of silence and de hard core on Twitter? An analysis of the nuclear power issue in Japan. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 59 (9), 1129-1141.
- Monzón, C. (2006). *Opinión pública, comunicación y política*. Madrid: Tecnos.
- Morozov, E. (2011). *The net delusion: The dark side of Internet freedom*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Noddings, N. (2002). *Educating Moral People*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Noelle-Neumann, E. (1984): *La espiral del silencio. Opinión pública: nuestra piel social*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Nussbaum, M. (2012). *Crear capacidades. Propuesta para el desarrollo humano*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Parenti, M. (2001). *Monopoly Media Manipulation*. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2x9fusy> (Consulted on 2018-02-12).

- Pérez-Tornero, J. M., & Varis, T. (2012). *Alfabetización mediática y nuevo humanismo*. Barcelona: UOC-UNESCO.
- Pettit, Ph. (1999). *Republicanismo. Una teoría sobre la libertad y el gobierno*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Price, V. (1994). *La opinión pública. Esfera pública y comunicación*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Price, V, Nir, L., & Capella, J. N. (2006). Normative and informational influences in online political discussions. *Communication Theory*, 16 (1), 47-74.
- Sampedro, V. (2000). *Opinión pública y democracia deliberativa*. Madrid: Istmo.
- Santos, E. (2016). *Las cifras de Twitter en su décimo aniversario*. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.es/2016/03/21/cifras-twitter_n_9496074.html (Consulted on 2018-02-24).
- Saura, G., Muñoz-Moreno, J. L., Luengo-Navas, J., & Martos, J. M. (2017). Protestando en Twitter: ciudadanía y empoderamiento desde la educación pública. *Comunicar*, 25 (53), 39-48.
- Sundar, S. S. (2008). The MAIN Model: A Heuristic Approach to Understanding Technology Effects on Credibility. In M. J. Metzger & A. J. Flanagan (Eds.), *Digital Media, Youth, and Credibility*, 73-100. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Sunstein, C. R. (2009). *Republic.com 2.0. Revenge of the Blogs*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Tandoc, E. C., Wey Lim, Z., & Ling, R. (2017). Defining "Fake News". *Digital Journalism*, 6 (2), 137-153.
- Thorson, E. (2008). Changing Patterns of News Consumption and Participation. *Information, Communication and Society*, 11 (4), 473-489.
- Tocqueville (de), A. (2018). *La democracia en América*. Madrid: Trotta.
- Torrego-González, A., & Gutiérrez-Martín, A. (2016). Ver y tuitear: Reacciones de los jóvenes ante la representación mediática de la resistencia. *Comunicar*, 24 (47), 9-17.
- Tur, G., Marín, V. I., & Carpenter, J. (2017). Uso de Twitter en Educación Superior en España y Estados Unidos. *Comunicar*, 25 (51), 19-28.
- UNESCO (2015). *Rethinking education. Towards a global common good?* Retrieve from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000232555> (Consulted on 2018-05-20).
- Vázquez-Cano, E., López Meneses, E., & Sevillano García, M. L. (2017). La repercusión del movimiento MOOC en las redes sociales. Un estudio computacional y estadístico en Twitter | *The impact of the MOOC movement on social networks. A computational and statistical study on Twitter*. **revista española de pedagogía**, 75 (266), 47-64. doi: <https://doi.org/10.22550/REP75-1-2017-03>
- Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, 359 (6380), 1446-1151.
- Whitman Cobb, W. N. (2015). Trending now. Using big data to examine public opinion of space policy. *Space Policy*, 32, 11-16.
- Woong Yun, G., & Park, S. (2011). Selective posting: Willingness to post a message online. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 16, 201-227.

Authors' biographies

Vicent Gozálv has a PhD in Philosophy and Educational Science and a Master's in Psycho-Ethics for Civic-Moral Education from the Universidad de Valencia. He is Associate Professor in the Department of Theory of Education at the Universidad de Valencia and Editor in Chief of the journal *SOPHIA. Colección de Filosofía de la Educación*.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7952-8347>

Luis M. Romero-Rodríguez holds a Doctorate in Communication with an international doctorate award and a special doctorate prize from the Universidad de Huelva. He has a Master's in Social Communication from the Universidad de Almería. He is Associate Editor of *Revista Comunicar* and editor in chief of the journal *Retos*. He is visiting Professor at the ESAI Business School, Universidad Espíritu Santo (Ecuador) and postdoctoral

fellow at the Tecnológico de Monterrey (Mexico).

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3924-1517>

Camilo Larrea-Oña holds a Masters in Ethics and Democracy from the Universidad de Valencia. He is a lawyer and has a degree in Legal Sciences (Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador). He is

a Senior Specialist in Constitutional Law (Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar). He is a member of the International Board of Reviewers for the journal *SOPHIA. Colección de Filosofía de la Educación* and an advisor to the Instituto de Altos Estudios Nacionales (Ecuador).

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4490-3178>

