

Reality and Limits of Empirical Research on Public Communication

Realidade e Limites da Pesquisa Empírica em Comunicação Pública

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the concept of public communication associated with the public sphere highlighting the importance of empirical research for this field as well as its methodological limits. Due to its normative nature, the concept of public communication allows us to assess the quality of democracy. But in seeking to respond to the factual dimension of communication, empirical research can create cognitive traps, triggering the dialectic between facticity and normativity, and between being and becoming. This thought highlights the need to recognize the complexity unleashed by objects involving communication conflicts in democracy. It also indicates methodological aspects that may be privileged when contrasting social, political, and communicative facts.

Keywords: Public communication, empirical research, methodology, facticity and normativity, democracy

RESUMO

Este artigo aborda o conceito de comunicação pública associado ao de esfera pública, ressaltando a importância da pesquisa empírica para o campo, bem como seus limites metodológicos. Por sua natureza normativa, o conceito comunicação pública permite aferir a qualidade da democracia. Mas, ao procurar responder à dimensão fática da comunicação, a pesquisa empírica pode criar armadilhas cognitivas, acionando a dialética entre facticidade e normatividade, entre ser e dever ser. A reflexão ressalta a necessidade de se reconhecer a complexidade desencadeada por objetos que envolvem conflitos comunicacionais na democracia e indica aspectos metodológicos que podem ser privilegiados ao se contrastar fatos sociais, políticos e comunicativos.

Palavras-chave: Comunicação pública, pesquisa empírica, metodologia, facticidade e normatividade, democracia

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identify actors, relationships, discourses, media, and communication products regarding their responsibility, based on legal and constitutional provisions and especially guided by the ethical-moral posture beyond their eminently factual and immediate function.

This article discusses theoretical and methodological procedures resulting from reflections and from several studies, theses, and dissertations within the research group Center for Public and Political Communication (NUCOP)¹. The problematization and considerations hereby presented are intended to add to new research approaches in the field of communication and to make its findings more robust. Thus, we approach the concept of public communication in aspects related to the communication dynamics, the factual-normative dialectics, and the theory of the public sphere so as to identify its potential and the critique on the methodology applied to the empirical analysis which is related to the public communication dynamics. Finally, the paper emphasizes the necessary complexity of methodology in research that studies communication conflicts in democratic scenarios. To this end, it points out the aspects that can be specifically privileged in studies about social, political, and communicative facts that define public communication.

¹ NUCOP is part of the CNPq directory of research groups and of the National Institute of Science and Technology in Digital Democracy (INCT-DD) and is linked to the Graduate Program in Communication at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul. It has, under its supervision, the Public Communication Observatory, since 2008 (<http://www.ufrgs.br/obcomp/>).

PUBLIC COMMUNICATION AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The normative concept 'public communication is constitutive of the communication and politics field as it is formed by different levels of communication from State, society, market, press, and digital media. Based on the public sphere paradigm, public communication refers to the processes that shape the public debate itself, according to Habermas (1997), and it is a necessary concept for the analysis of communication undertaken in democratic regimes linked to public interest (Arendt, 1999; Bobbio, 1986).

The conceptual interconnection between public and political communication attains relevance in democracies due to the normative character that must favor the public interest as the objective of the State's communication practices beyond political communication. For instance, the political-electoral speeches which will elect governors and political representatives also use the term public interest as a persuasive rhetoric or fallacious promises. Once elected, however, the candidates will have their speech and practices submitted to the public interest as a supporting concept for their practices and public policies addressed to social emancipation from the normative, as well as from the ethical and the constitutional points of view.



Nevertheless, to fulfill this article objective, we return to public communication as a guiding concept, identifying its normativity in different social systems that produce communication under the scope of public interest, specifically communication from the democratic state, the civil society, the market, the media, the press, and digital media. These systems trigger public debate by responding to the collective interest agenda, such as education, health, employment, violence, and corruption, among others. These are mobilizing issues for the powers of the republic, the civil society, the market, the press, and digital media, which, according to their own interests, participate and respond to the public debate, inhibiting or strengthening it with their symbolic productions.

Public events (França & Oliveira, 2012; Quéré, 2011) also raise and maintain the public debate, such as the environmental tragedies of Mariana (2015) and Brumadinho (2019) both in the State of Minas Gerais, Brazil; terrorist acts that have ravaged the world; racial killings; health tragedies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic; the Kiss nightclub fire (in 2013 in Santa Maria-RS, Brazil); presidential elections, and impeachment; and wars and other events that erupt and unbalance political, social, and media routines. Participation in the public debate occurs discursively and symbolically with the use of strategies seeking to demonstrate the power of interlocution or as a way to assume responsibilities or evade them. This is the case of corporations harmful to the environment (a public interest issue), but which, at the same time, promote self-defense advertising campaigns with institutional and marketing objectives trying to spuriously qualify their public image.

Following this approach, it is possible to identify in market communication investments on issues of public interest that will simultaneously benefit the interests of society and specific audiences, but will mainly benefit their public image then associated with solidarity (vaccination campaigns) and preservation of life (campaigns against drugs or against cancer), for example.

On the other hand, democracies require governments and official institutions to publicize their actions and establish relationships through powerful systems of technology and professionals as required by the constitution and by public communication normativity. It means that all conveyed information, propaganda, political speeches, and communication products must comply with public interest. However, evidently, the State falls into symbolic and political disputes around its projects and reveals private interests due to the urgency of power, political projects, and the desire to conquer positive opinions and public image. Theoretical and legal principles (either from the 1988 Federal Constitution or ordinary legislation such as the Transparency and Access to Information Laws)

are not always respected by democratic governments and can be spotted in products and speeches disqualifying democracy. Studies on digital democracy, the reference to “hatred of democracy” (Ranciére, 2014) or the script of “how democracies die” (Levitsky & Ziblat, 2018) show the erratic path of contemporary democratic governments that do not follow the ethical-constitutional logic.

The use of processes and of public communication media by the state intends to expand the republican pact of social representation. Accomplishing this objective is related to public policies that foresee the valorization and participation of society. This welcome participation is proportional to the possibility of persuading for political projects not necessarily aligned with the public interest. Digital networks and platforms allow setting up stable relationships and continuous communication between state institutions and society. Democratic transparency and easy access to information and governance maps expand the public sphere and characterize it as digital. These changes have enabled the creation of a *digital democracy* concept which has been guiding research in the field of communication and politics (Gomes, 2018).

Civil society communication is obviously within the scope of public communication. Its organization around groups, associations, unions, identities, and networks seeks dialogue and to pressure the established powers for the recognition and enforcement of their rights in the pursuit of a better life. This process takes place within the public sphere and comprises it through a wide repertoire of direct actions such as street demonstrations, which are fundamentally grounded in communication seeking visibility and debate, and information production in digital networks or radical media (Parker, 2018). Another communication characteristic of civil society is *public communication networks* made up of groups based on common interest issues. The Kiss nightclub tragedy enabled the creation of a network of family and friends in search of justice for the 242 fatal victims and more than 600 injured, most of them young university students from the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM) (Kegler, 2016). This network has created strategies to avoid the tragedy being forgotten and developed demonstration practices aiming to draw the attention of justice and public authorities. As of 2021, they still had no answers, for the state can be impermeable to society.

Finally, mediatized communication encompasses a differentiated scope in technology and objectives. If the public interest is the ethos of the press and the journalism in which public communication is practiced, this interest has another configuration for the fascinating and contradictory world of the digital media, platforms, and corporate media conglomerates. The attractor



axis is the diversity and the combination of uninterrupted entertainment and information accessible by easily operated digital devices. Digital networks have created another kind of protocol between reality, information, traditional media, society, and individuals held together by the empowerment of being able to speak out (without ethical discretion or accountability) for the purpose of fostering a persona, a political idea or prejudice. These digital networks have altered the patterns of sociability and public communication, intensifying the democratic potential of the public sphere. However, they also host their reverse: the proliferation of misinformation and fake news has become a new virus; the enclosure of audiences in identity bubbles is a new form of apartheid.

At the epicenter of all these dynamics is the public interest, a core concept to human rights and democracies which justifies the modern option for democratic regimes. Yet, it also functions as a rhetorical weapon for the disputing groups, sometimes with diametrically opposed meanings. In politics, it tends to be used for electoral purposes and to legitimize government practices and their elected representatives. The press also uses the same concept to self-reference its practices, claiming for itself the speech of the presumed public opinion. Therefore, the simplistic association of the concept of public interest undermines the democratic state institutions and allows private, individual, family, and religious interests to override the public interest. Even authoritarian regimes may seek to justify censorship and restriction of freedom in the name of *public interest*. It is worth pointing out that totalitarian states do not practice public communication even when the term is used by them. The persuasive propaganda takes the place of information directed in favor of a political project, all participation will be controlled, and censorship will be imposed which prevents public debate from taking place.

Public communication is an achievement of democracies and their societies and currently, digital devices expand the communication possibilities for civil society, market organizations, state institutions, and the press. Visibility, participation, and public debate are increasingly viable, but they may also not happen or happen in a systematically distorted way.

Therefore, research around these issues need to stress the relations between democracy and public communication. The availability of new technical devices and the understanding about new communication practices allow interdisciplinary approaches and it is important to mention some of the authors that have outlined the field of studies in Brazil, such as Brandão et al. (2003), Duarte (2009), Matos (2016), and Zémor (2009). In their studies, they value

the idea of public communication carried out by the state and its responsibility, as well as its importance to qualify communication of other social actors.

RESEARCH, COMMUNICATION, AND LIFE IN MOTION

Our theoretical-methodological premise in this paper is to approach public communication as a social, dynamic, and essentially political phenomenon linked to the definition, construction, and defense of the public interest (Weber et al., 2017). Thus, studying issues that trigger this concept requires approaches combined with theoretical-methodological perspectives related to normative principles able to identify and analyze the scheme between public and private interests delimited by events, debates, relationships, speeches, and communicative products impacting controversial issues.

Currently, research subjects can be analyzed from the concept of public sphere active within the complexity of relationships, practices, and debates outlined by digital methodological engineering. Research in general gratefully submits itself to the facilitation of digital technologies that allows it to identify, measure, and link actors, relationships, information, and issues of public interest under debate. Theoretically, however, the public debate opened to high visibility participation, enabled by digital democracy, does not prevent the lack of communication. A paradox is imposed insofar as the public sphere facilitated by digital communication devices may not respond to communication and republican principles. For instance, the absolute freedom of speech and the occupation of digital spaces are not necessarily related to the responsibility and civility inherent to democracies, as stated by Maia et al. (2018) in the presentation of the book *Democracia em Ambientes Digitais: Eleições, Esfera pública e Ativismo* [Democracy in Digital Environments: Elections, Public Sphere, and Activism]:

One of the contemporary democracy dilemmas concerns the coexistence between the growing capacity of digital environments to promote political participation and at the same time the uncertainty about the purposes of such participation. Contemporary democracies have been confronted with several non-democratic attacks both in terms of practices and ideas. (p. 7)

In the recent Brazilian (2018) and US (2020) presidential elections, it was possible to identify the power of digital devices in which the voters were actively engaged: truth was downplayed (fake news) and human rights offenses and prejudices were authorized and used even by the candidates. The inevitable



polarization intensified the dispute, excluded or turned debates into simulacra, and marked a historic clash between political forces using democracy itself to weaken or strengthen it. These elections revealed that whoever masters the digital machines may win the ballot.

The delimitation of a research subject related to public communication will initially depend on its recognition in a specific historical context. Thereafter, a process of identifying the involved actors and institutions, as well as their respective interests, must take place. The identification of private/public contradictions is essential to the analysis of public communication undertaken by institutions in democratic regimes. Likewise, this opposition is important when analyzing existing debates on public interest issues with a potentiality to engage public institutions, private organizations, and civil society to pursue their respective interests and powers.

A relevant aspect is to understand if there is political contention (and its magnitude) around the subject, who are the social actors involved, and the triggered repertoires which may or may not be exclusively those in the communication sphere (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007). It is important to identify whether the object is immersed in disputes of meaning or social conflicts – and it usually is. Therefore, it is important to perceive that, over the time a controversy lasts, the results of research on communication may be different if the time interval occurs in periods of *social normality* or *social conflict*. It is undeniable that issues and periods during the so-called *normality of life* can reveal a lot about the communication of individuals and organizations. However, experience shows us that, in periods of heated dispute, the peaks of controversy are theoretically and empirically more promising for unveiling the nature of each actor's communication (Locatelli, 2014, 2015). Open disputes around the appropriation of the *res-publica*, especially when time is finite and when there is a deadline for almost irreversible political decisions (such as constitutional changes, elections, or impeachment), make individuals, private organizations, and public institutions less covert. In these moments, their nature, strategies, and procedures to achieve goals are more perceptible and the links between their discourses and actions to achieve results are more evident. All actors' repertoires of political action and communication are triggered in these moments and, for the researcher, there is more room to perceive the limits on the purpose and responsiveness of each actor, the meaning of their speeches, the quality of their arguments, and their convictions and militancy.

Operationally, this non-static perspective of research in public communication requires objectivity when identifying and understanding public institutions

and political and social actors as well as their objectives, procedures, devices, and justifications for being involved in any dispute in relation to the object of research and in every moment of the dispute itself. The starting point for this power cartography mediated by communication may seem typical of the classical administration and of the organizational communication with a functionalist approach: in principle, all communication from a social actor – an organization or individual, whether from the market, the state or the civil society – is naturally strategic (in the sense of being consistent with the objective and the very existence of the actor). And, simultaneously, it contains some level of public interest since they are also a citizen, part of *civitas* as long as its demands minimally fit the principles and requirements of a liberal democracy (Locatelli & Weber, 2011).

In a normative context, the perspective of public communication supported here is clearly inserted in a strong register of democracy, specifically the participative-deliberative democracy, as communication is carried out with the strategic objective of disputing in the public sphere the meaning of problems that individuals and organizations believe to be legitimate, but, due to their own nature, they affect citizens in need for solutions beyond their reach. Therefore, they are problems that try to submit their supposed fairness and legitimacy to public scrutiny through different ways (more or less legitimate), and if they overcome other interests and arguments they may ascend to the longed-for condition of public problem in a specific moment in time; they may be welcomed by governmental decision as a public problem, typified as public interest, institutionalized and systematically contemplated by public policies until they stabilize as data within the scope of culture (Gomes & Maia, 2008; Habermas, 1997; Mansbridge et al., 2010).

In this approach, it becomes less relevant to label as a research objective whether or not the communication of each actor is public by comparing it with a predetermined concept in the literature, or to infer to what degree it would be by comparing it with other practices. What really matters is whether the communication becomes more or less public over the course of the dispute; how it behaves in the political game when faced with social facts and the arguments of other actors, media events, and the state. Ultimately, it means to identify whether the successive communication produced by the actors and released into the public space contributes to increase or limit transparency, accountability, participation, and the debate and deliberation themselves. The path of this contentious trajectory in the debate is what defines the intensity of the adjective 'public' that the word 'communication' deserves in such situations, so together they constitute a new substantive concept with two words and a single meaning: public communication.



THE FACTUAL-NORMATIVE DIALECTIC: TRAPS OF BEING AND BECOMING

As already mentioned initially, several factors have the potential to affect and disrupt the processes and the results of empirical research they certainly must be considered in rigorous modeling. We draw attention to one in particular: the permanent tension on the boundaries between the factual and the normative levels either in the actors' daily lives or in the production of communication about their lives, and in

their interpretation through research. If not placed under intense surveillance, especially in the absence of data and gaps in one or the other, being and becoming may be treated as if they were equivalent in order to fulfill the requirements of scientific narratives, weakening the research results.

In a simple way, being is understood here as something perceptible to the senses, the observable, the phenomenological to the being that manifests itself in a visible form of being in the present, as in Heidegger's terminology (2015). The normative is understood as the expression of the becoming, of the desirable; a possibility, a claim or imposition formalized by some previous collective consensus of how the being or beings should present themselves to the world. One cannot forget that the norm is the subject of permanent dispute by different groups and its strength varies according to the institutionality itself either in the field of culture or law, for instance. From this perspective, the normative and the factual are in permanent tension and feedback by groups in society disputing the gap between the permanence of *things as they are* until the radical change pointed out by the norm itself. Therefore, time plays a decisive role in this process. The present, the observable manifestation of the entity, carries within itself its historical, factual, and normative experiences, but, to some extent, anticipates the expectation of the future. It seems rational that the entity in a situation of hegemony clings to the present, to the being accepting some becoming as long as it occurs in a sense and at a speed that allows it to transmute itself into the new world without losing the status quo. On the other hand, for entities dissatisfied with the present and its continuity, change is urgent: clinging cognitively to becoming, to the norm, they seek to question the present anticipating the future at the highest possible speed. Here is the demanding political key that the normative exerts over behavior functioning as a trigger for conflicts.

For Esteves (2011), public communication encompasses normative and factual dimensions that affect the forms of sociability and the public debate. The author understands that the factual or empirical expression "of the ethical-moral dimension is very uncertain and sporadic," subject to questioning, and "reveals another form of affirmation of what is denied by empirical reality:

the critical exercise of public space and public opinion” (p. 185). To study public communication is to mobilize the analysis principles of the “public sphere” paradigm (Habermas, 1997) to analyze the functioning of this public sphere from the publicity criteria, critique and debate that are strengthened by the principles offered by Esteves (2011, p. 211): publicity, accessibility, ability to discuss, and rationality. So, there seems to be no point in talking about public communication (even in its most liberal sense) when it involves anti-democratic actors or those who put democracy at risk, even if they occur in environments qualified as democratic.

The factual-normative tension potentially affects research in three moments: during the conception, structuring, and operationalization of a project, understood not as sequential, but simultaneous moments, although clearly one of them stands out in each moment. Its conception does not strictly refer to ideas and insights leading to a project, but rather to the permanent process of creation and re-creation that refers to how researchers structures their way of perceiving, thinking, and understanding life as well as perceiving, thinking, and understanding what emerges from it and affects the studied subject. The research structuring dimension is similar to that of its conception as it frames the researcher’s understanding and knowledge. The difference is that in this phase questions are already formulated in the form of concepts and the challenge lies in the choice of the theoretical principles recognizing that they lead and induce the work and affect the research results. In the case of research on public communication in situations of social or political conflict, the theoretical choices that most affect and direct the work are those that define the concepts of democracy, public interest, and public communication. The operationalization stage is about how to approach life in motion in the safest and most coherent way considering its complexity, dynamics, and erratic character. The difficulty is to perceive what is generally called reality (with the complications the term entails), understood here as the relation of infinite beings manifesting themselves phenomenologically as entities subjected to the factual and normative tradeoffs of other entities performed in the field of cultures. Furthermore, reality is there despite researchers and sophisticated digital devices for its measurement: observing, narrating, and interpreting are in themselves constitutive of a new reality.

In summary, when empirically researching public communication, it is crucial to perceive its own conclusions of the desirable normative, the perceived factual, and to understand that the factual-normative stages are also triggered by the actors involved in the processes and reveal their strategies in the political game.



Perhaps, one of the researchers' greatest risks – that may lead to error on how they look at and perceive their research subject – is the seduction by naturalization or idealization of life, naivety, and militant engagement which may induce, anticipate or pursue outcomes with the consequent prior arbitrary acquittal or condemnation of the other's behavior in relation to specific normative choices. Another important risk lies in the impossibility of obtaining data and the extent to which it distorts or prevents the understanding of the factual. The offer of mechanisms for capturing, storing, and classifying data no longer justifies the partial and minimal use of information. It is also worth mentioning the analytical problems caused by narratives in which the gaps of being are covered by the becoming available in the literature, databases, repositories, and in scientific production access, generating evidently fragile and preconceived results. If not perceived and adequately addressed, these aspects tend to result into fragmented works and ultimately unnecessary for knowledge accumulation as they reflect more the researcher's aspirations than its scientific view on the studied subject dynamics.

PUBLIC SPHERE, THE ANALYTICAL BASIS

Esteves (2011) proposes that the understanding of contemporary public space requires special attention to its two complex structures: the factual and the normative dimensions of communication. The first, with objective structures (especially the media and its contents) and the second in its ethical-moral sense. He states:

These are complementary dimensions, but tensionally linked to each other in the sense that none of them entirely covers the current reality of public space and at the same time there is a sort of competition for supremacy between them (p. 294)

This finding, associated with previous assumptions involving the socio-historical scenario in which public communication actually takes place leads to a decisive question to be answered by the researcher: which theoretical-methodological model would be able to support so many variables without major contradictions? In our view, a choice of great potential is research on the public sphere theories of a recent Habermasian tradition, such as those of Habermas (1997), Esteves (2003, 2005, 2011), Gomes and Maia (2008), Maia (2012), and Mendonça (2016a, 2016b). In its broad sense, it is a social theory in which communication is central to the understanding and explanation of social and political lives rather than an exogenous, sporadic,

and functional phenomenon for institutions and political and social actors. It is also a theory that offers reflective paths, porosity, and safe connections for interdisciplinary exchange on issues that are generally of interest to research in public communication, such as democracy and public interest, power, citizenship, social movements and civil society, identities, representations, and struggles for recognition. This theoretical perspective also offers interesting links with issues from the journalistic field (social function, agenda, events, etc.) as well as from the field of organizational communication and advertising (audiences, public opinion, public image, etc.). In addition, theoretically it contemplates all forms of communication from interpersonal conversation to social networks, and surely the so-called traditional mass media in relation to digital media.

In practical terms, based on this social systemic reference centered on communication, in each studied situation it is necessary to assemble the socio-historical scenario, map actors and their interests, align and confront related social facts. These facts are associated with objective disputes on the political, cultural, social and institutional levels, and they contemplate communicative facts on each episode which is part of the dispute in the course of time. Therefore, it is necessary to identify how communication acts in the construction and solution – or not – of the conflict. The research complexity resides in this amplitude of relations, facts, and conflicts that mobilize publics, society, political institutions, the media, and the digital media.

Thus, in understanding the intersection of social and political facts x communicative facts we understand that some issues and variables should necessarily be identified and analyzed, at the risk of affecting the modeling and results of a research, especially the following:

- Public communication policies;
- Communication systems and structures in public institutions;
- Public communication broadcast systems;
- Digital platforms, websites, and digital media;
- State agencies communication products;
- Public interest campaigns by public and private organizations;
- Public events (political, social, environmental etc.);
- Public debates on issues that affect the whole society (health, elections, education, abortion etc.);
- Public communication networks (organization of society on vital issues);
- Public opinion and audiences' opinion;
- Reputation and public image;
- Press and public interest;



- Government advertising and propaganda;
- Public events and acts;
- Speeches of actors and political leaders,
- Communication of executive, legislative, and judiciary powers.

The choice and delimitation of these research objects depend on the problematization of the linked social and political issues and facts, and within them, the following aspects are privileged:

The conflict delimitation to be studied in terms of its scope on social, political, cultural, and communication consequences;

The identification of the actors involved directly or indirectly considering their nature, interests, and power of intervention in the political, economic, social, and communication spheres;

The period in which the conflict occurs (political regime, sociability, cultural differences etc.);

The state of mind of the public and social groups involved in (demanding, participatory, submissive, active, etc.);

The power of the issue itself in terms of its capacity to trigger sensibilities, religious practices, moral and political controversies, among others;

The potential for consensus and conflict the issue carries in the light of history, politics, and culture regarding the actors' interest in joining the public debate;

The time, the expected time length for a specific round of decision-making on a public issue (interests and actors and institutions' agendas);

The actor's actions - from lobbying to violence, the strategies of communication, and occupation of spaces of visibility;

The reconstruction of the conflict trajectory and its identification with the most relevant social facts during the analyzed period;

The actors' behavior during the conflict development and the decisions consequences and their possible reversibility.

From another perspective, the identification and problematization of social and political facts are constitutive instances of a research subject as the communicative facts delimit the working hypotheses and the methodology that lie especially in the relevance of the following aspects:

- Mapping all forms of communication related to the research subject: from graffiti to Twitter; from speeches to space occupation in the press;
- Analysis of the most used communication forms by the main actors, i.e., those with the greatest potential to affect the public sphere;
- Comparison of the communicative trajectory of each actor with the social facts in which they are involved to understand the correlation

between communication gaps, silences, systematic distortions, position changes, and their meaning;

- Identification of the actors and institutions' communication capacity to interfere in the social processes; comparison between empirical data and the chosen deliberative normative model to reveal the existence of communicative pathologies such as persuasion, systematic distortion, manipulation, and omission.

The methodological design and the instruments chosen for the selection, capture, classification, and combination of data linked to the research subject may favor the content and discourse analysis, discursive frameworks, interviews, case studies, etc. It is possible, however, to point out significant risks in three very common field procedures in research, specifically: (1) the application of content and discourse analysis methodologies when public communication is approached as an isolated fact and reduced to communication products; (2) the use of interview techniques as the single approach to understanding interests and the strategic perspective of organizations; and (3) the generalization of results obtained through case studies on the supposed communication effects, with a tendency to overestimate and distort the very concept of public communication which necessarily encompasses communication among many audiences, actors, and facts.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article addressed theoretical-methodological issues relevant to research that has in, public communication, public interest, and in democracy, its normative theoretical axis whose results seek to infer on the nature of public communication and democracy when subjected to exercises of power. The specificity attributed to public communication made it possible to highlight the complexity of the concept and its interfaces with political communication and governmental communication.

Research in this study field has been mainly empirical and responds to the factual dimension of public communication insofar as it discusses events, speeches, and communication products based on reality and life. However, it usually does so according to a normative dimension of these same phenomena. From this perspective, empirical subjects are defined by public events (political, social, environmental, electoral, governmental); public debates on issues of vital interest to social and political life; by relations between the state, the press, the media (mass and digital), and the society; by communication strategies and products developed by public and private institutions that seek to influence the definition public interest.



Accordingly, the article points out some aspects that should be taken into account when planning and developing empirical research in this domain. As an underlying issue throughout the entire process there is the fact that subjects and researcher find themselves in a dialectical process between facticity and normativity that can create traps between the perspectives of *being* and *becoming* due to the complexity raise by communicational conflicts – public and private – that happen and alter democratic environments. This tension affects all research stages – conception, structuring process, and operationalization – and requires permanent reflection by the researchers on how they think the subject and cognitively perceives life, whether they prioritize factual or normative forms, or do not even notice their differences, mixing them in the convenience of the process and academic narratives.

A second issue concerns the prior recognition that the way researchers theoretically perceive the society in which their subject is immersed

affects and even induces specific outcomes. We consider as more promising the theoretical-methodological perspectives that allow the insertion of the dynamic effects of political and communicational interactions between the different actors involved in public controversies. In other words, the choice of models that only allow static communication portraits and its effects in specific moments of disputes over time may be insufficient to understand complex social processes. Thus, we realize that theoretical-methodological models inspired by the public sphere theory of the recent Habermasian tradition have shown great promise mainly because it is a social theory that places communication as a central element, and not a stochastic phenomenon in the interrelations between institutions and political and social actors; for having a good dialogue with the politics and the ability to sustain so many variables without major contradictions.

Third, the cartography of actors disputing the public sphere around the issues under study – and their powers over society – is a necessary step to understand the nature of the communication produced by each one and their interactions in the public sphere. The identification of the social and political events that trigger, feed, and delimit disputes, especially in the intervals between times of normality and conflict, their comparison with communicative events and the chosen normative model can generate robust indicators to measure the quality of public communication and the studied democracy. In addition, they may point out pathologies such as persuasion, systematic distortions, manipulation, and omission in relation to the public interest.

In other words, the potential of this research methodology lies in its non-reductionist and dynamic character of relations and social facts by analytically considering not only isolated facts and actors, but successive interactions produced

through communication in a dispute over the public interest. Its applicability considers the context, the disputed subject, the interest and power of the social, political, and the media actors, the communication and the available time until the decision-making on issues of public interest. The analysis of the intrinsic processes of the public debate demands perception of each actor's communication and the possibilities of relating it to the expansion of transparency, accountability, participation, and public debate, identifying whether the strategy of each one of them leads to consensus solutions of any nature or, instead, closes itself off to support particular positions.

Finally, the main criticism of this kind of normative model always falls on a supposed idealization of society, especially in the altruism expected from actors in search of the common good. However, it is worth noting that every model – be it normative or not – is simultaneously a reduction and a simplification of reality. When addressing communication, research depends fundamentally on how these dimensions are activated by the researcher and by social actors during the research, observing the aspects related to public communication theory and its links with democracy. Hence, there are permanent challenges presented to the researcher during the initial perception of the problem in its conceptual definition and during the work itself. ■

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