

The Round Table Effect Communication and public policy

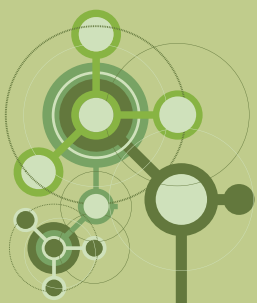
El efecto tabla redonda comunicación y política pública

O efeito da tábola redonda comunicação e política pública



Juan Camilo Jaramillo López

- Social communicator at Universidade Externado da Colômbia.
- Consultant, since 1990, on processes such as the reconstruction of the Coffee Axis (1999 earthquake), the Strategic Communication Plan of the Bolivian Parliament for the National Constituent Assembly or the Commission for the clarification of the Truth in his country. He implemented the Public Communication Model for State Entities (MCPOI) in Colombia and Paraguay.
- Email: juancaj1954@yahoo.com



ABSTRACT

The construction of public policy, in addition to political action, is communicative action. It is a mechanism that complies with and gives dynamism to the principle of publicity and is an exercise in public communication that admits agreements, consensuses, and commitments, it organizes and gives character to citizen participation. The “round table” effect uses metaphor to refer to the kind of broad, horizontal, and inclusive conversation that this democratic exercise requires, both in public deliberation and in direct spaces of participation.

KEYWORDS: PUBLIC POLICY • GOVERNMENT POLICY • COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE • CITIZEN PARTICIPATION • ROUND TABLE.

RESUMO

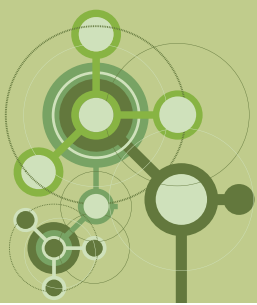
A criação de uma política pública não é apenas uma ação política, mas também uma ação comunicativa, como um mecanismo que atende e dinamiza o princípio da publicidade, e como um exercício de comunicação pública que admite acordos, consensos e compromissos, determina e dá caráter à participação cidadã. Utiliza-se como metáfora o efeito da “távola redonda” para se referir ao diálogo amplo, horizontal e inclusivo que esse exercício democrático demanda tanto na deliberação pública quanto nos espaços diretos de participação.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS • POLÍTICA GOVERNAMENTAL • GOVERNANÇA COLABORATIVA • PARTICIPAÇÃO CIDADÃ • TÁVOLA REDONDA.

RESUMEN

La construcción de política pública además de acción política es acción comunicativa, como mecanismo que da cumplimiento y le imprime dinámica al principio de publicidad, y como ejercicio de comunicación pública que admite acuerdos, consensos y compromisos, ordena y le imprime carácter a la participación ciudadana. El efecto “tabla redonda” recurre a la metáfora para referirse al tipo de conversación amplia, horizontal e incluyente que requiere este ejercicio democrático, tanto en la deliberación pública como en los espacios directos de participación.

PALABRAS CLAVE: POLÍTICA PÚBLICA • POLÍTICA DE GOBIERNO • GO-BERNANZA COLABORATIVA • PARTICIPACIÓN CIUDADANA • TABLA REDONDA.



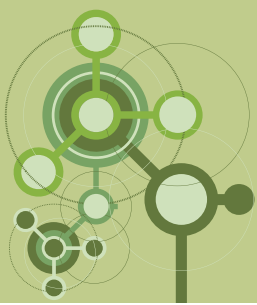
INTRODUCTION

It is intriguing, or at least noteworthy, that the political scientist who pioneered the discipline of public policy was also the sociologist and academic who proposed one of the first models for approaching mass communication. In 1948—shortly after World War II and in the same year as the publication of Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver's *Mathematical Theory of Communication*, a pioneering text in the field of information theory—American scholar Harold Dight Lasswell (1902–1987), in his essay *The Communication of Ideas*, introduced a statement now known as “Lasswell's model”: “Who says what, to whom, on what channel, and to what effect?” Three years later, in 1951, he published “*The Policy Orientation*,” a precursor text to what was then understood both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary as “*policy sciences*” (Canto Sáenz, 2000; Aguilar Villanueva, 2010).

According to Lasswell, the new discipline sought to answer the question of “how to increase the function of intelligence to enhance political rationality” (Aguilar Villanueva, 2010, p. 20, free translation). Probably, (my hypothesis) this concern within the context of *mass media* was likely to determine the impact of operational sources on society as, since the mid-19th century, with the consolidation of the written press and the widespread adoption of radio and television in the post-war period of the 20th century, these media increasingly influenced matters of public interest, guiding, directing, and conditioning public dialogue, depending on the perspective analyzed. In addition to describing the flow of information (sender-message-channel-receiver, which was Shannon and Weaver's contribution), as a control mechanism for the communicative process, Lasswell's model sought to investigate the origin (who), content (what), the reception—audience—(to whom), and the impact of the process—consequences—(to what effect). In other words, it appears that both questions are based on the same concern of “increasing the intelligence factor” to achieve “greater rationality within the process.”

According to Mexican political scientist and philosopher Luis Fernando Aguilar Villanueva², who is recognized for introducing the topic of public policies in Latin America: “Government actions that aim to achieve objectives of public interest and do so effectively and efficiently are, in generic terms, labelled public policies” (Aguilar Villanueva, 2010, p. 17, free translation). For the author, the fundamental characteristics of public policies are their orientation towards objectives of public interest or benefit, as well as their capacity to achieve such objectives; citizen participation in defining objectives, goals, and political actions; political will and adherence to legality by the government; and implementation and evaluation in collaboration with or delegated to social actors (Aguilar Villanueva, 2010). From Aguilar's perspective, this characterization reveals at least three essential characteristics or conditions of public policies: They are 1) oriented towards objectives of public interest or benefit; 2) involve citizen participation in the definition of objectives, instruments, and political actions; and 3) include other social actors in their implementation and evaluation, whether through collaboration or delegation of powers, in addition to the public administration team. That is, this type of policy either results from or produces a form of dialogue between the government and citizenship that shapes common purposes, as it concerns public interest or benefit. Furthermore, in addition to broad debate and social deliberation organized prior to its creation, such policies allow for various forms of government interaction with other social actors during their implementation and evaluation. For these reasons, they require precise, efficient, and productive dialogue, which implies open, accessible, and transparent communication.

² Luis F. Aguilar Villanueva, a Doctor of Philosophy with a specialization in political philosophy, has served as a professor at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), El Colegio de México, and the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana – Xochimilco. He is a member of the National System of Researchers and serves on the International Committee of Experts in Public Administration of the United Nations (UN). He regularly teaches courses on government, management, and public policies in Latin American countries and Spain.



This intimate and organic relationship between the field of public policies and public communication has been evident since the field's inception. I define public communication as that which relates to participating in events in the public life of society, whether through communication actions impacting matters of collective interest to the government or other State entities, the involvement of civil society and the private sector in such matters, discussions in the media, or, in the digital environment, individuals participating in public dialogue. In other words, this refers to communication that takes place within the public sphere with the purpose of establishing dialogue between a particular sector or society as a whole to address issues of common interest.

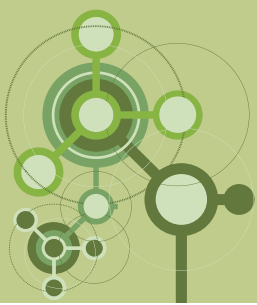
The connection between both conceptions—of this type of policy and the type of communication involved—seemingly stems from the adjective “public,” which qualifies both concepts. In the second case (communication), it is understood as previously mentioned, and in the first case (policy), following Aguilar Villanueva, it is perceived as a term describing a sort of public administration that is “increasingly public-private, public-social, and lacking the habits of past governments when dealing with any social or public issue.” This is associated by the author with a “*political pluralism [that] becomes a plurality of policies*” (emphasis added). This reflects the style of democracy, of open societies.” (Aguilar Villanueva, 1994, p. 33, free translation).

However, a policy oriented towards objectives of public interest or benefit involves citizen participation in defining policy objectives, instruments, and actions. It also allows for the involvement of other social actors besides the public administration team in its implementation and evaluation. Additionally, it requires information, deliberation, agreement, co-responsibility, and, at certain stages, co-management in the process. Along with the regulatory obligation to adhere to the principle of publicity of public service³—which mandates that authorities make all acts, contracts, and resolutions visible “to the public and interested parties both systematically and permanently”—these elements create two essential conditions which, to ensure that such policies achieve the desired results in both their formulation and execution, require a type of communication expressed through tangible and concrete actions, not merely discourse. Thus, we are faced with that which German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, following British philosopher J.L. Austin, defines as communicative action⁴.

The creation of public policies, therefore, represents not only a political action but also a communicative one. Communicative action operates on two equally important and significant dimensions: i) as a mechanism that not only fulfills but also expands, energizes, and empowers the principle of publicity—which might otherwise be confined to a formal act of publication in an official medium. When this principle is achieved through information that is sufficient, accessible, accurate, transparent, inclusive, and timely, it enriches and documents a broad deliberative exercise. This exercise validates issues and creates space on the public agenda, thereby contributing to the visibility and examination of arguments, perspectives, and interpretations. In other words, it is an exchange that occurs within public dialogue, whether informative, consultative, or deliberative, whose natural settings are the legislative chamber and the participatory spaces provided by the Political Constitution, but also extends to specialized forums and settings, both in-person and virtual, promoted by civil society, as well as traditional and non-traditional media, including those that have emerged with the development and consolidation of information and communication technologies. This can be referred to as the broad social component of public policy construction as a communicative action; and ii) as a mechanism that is no longer limited to a consultative role but extends to the full exercise of communication, since, as a scenario of direct dialogue that allows for agreements, consensus, and binding commitments, it shapes and defines citizen participation, which, as a communicative action, is also characterized by being a type of dialogue among various actors with the explicit aim of achieving a specific outcome that wholly or partially benefits the objectives of the parties involved.

³ According to the principle of publicity, authorities are obliged to systematically and permanently provide information to the public and interested parties—without any request—regarding their acts, contracts, and resolutions. This is accomplished through communications, notifications, and publications as mandated by law, including the use of technologies that allow for the widespread dissemination of such information, in accordance with the provisions of this Code (Code of Administrative Procedure and Administrative Litigation, Article 3).

⁴ This type of interaction, where all participants harmonize their individual plans of action with each other and pursue their illocutionary goals [to achieve something by saying it] without reservation, is what the British philosopher J.L. Austin] refers to as communicative action (Habermas, 2003, p. 376).



Given the communicative nature of this reflection, rather than a political science perspective, the aim here is not to delve deeply into or propose hypotheses within the debate on public policy theory. Instead, the focus is on presenting ideas regarding the characterization and functioning of the public policy-making process as a communicative action. Therefore, I return to and emphasize three relationships—perhaps better described as tensions—that have been widely studied and discussed by various experts in the field. These relationships, which I find relevant, contribute to the ongoing discourse on the connection between communication and public policy: the shift from government politics to public policy, the link between public policies and governance, and the relationship between communication and participation.

The first of these relationships is the distinction—considered a tension in this context due to constraints and limitations of scope—between what is understood as public policy and what more accurately falls under the designation of government policy. In other words, whether every act in which the government makes decisions and sets guidelines on any matter, or which, as a governmental action, involves and affects the interests of specific sectors or society as a whole, constitutes or can be considered public policy. In this context, Rodolfo Canto Sáenz—Ph.D. in Political Science from the Autonomous University of Mexico and a graduate in Political Sciences and Public Administration from Universidad Iberoamericana—quotes Luis Fernando Aguilar Villanueva to argue that not all government policy qualifies as public policy:

Aguilar (1994) advocates for a government based on public policies: "Governing in accordance with public policy means incorporating the opinions, participation, co-responsibility, and financial contributions of citizens—that is, taxpayers and autonomous political actors who are neither passive nor unanimous. Public policy is not simply any government policy" (Canto Sáenz, 2010, p. 155, free translation).

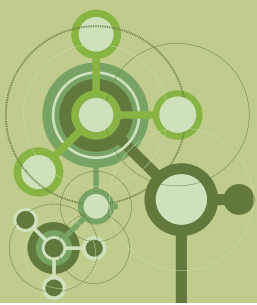
Aguilar Villanueva draws a clear distinction between the two concepts: "The governmental, he states, is public, but the public transcends the governmental" (1994, p. 33, free translation). Canto Sáenz, however, offers a broader perspective, directly addressing the participatory aspect that Aguilar Villanueva identifies as a defining characteristic of the type of policy proposed by the government. He argues that while all government policy can be considered public policy, there are government matters where citizen participation is inherently limited or are confined to elected representatives, such as in tax policy, foreign policy, monetary policy, or defense policy (Canto Sáenz, 2010). Thus, the differentiating factor in this relationship—one that easily leads to tension due to social pressures—is the extent of citizen participation in both the creation and implementation of the policy.

In the Colombian context, the Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies adopts a similar approach, citing the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to define government policy:

A government policy is a decision made by the government to (i) address socioeconomic challenges within a country (or, in the case of foreign policy, in the country's relations with other nations) and typically includes decisions on (ii) how these challenges will be addressed. Policies are the primary tools used by governments to direct action and are often outlined in laws, regulations, official statements, or policy and institutional guidelines. These policies then lead to specific programs and initiatives, funded, and/or led by government organizations, to tackle these challenges.⁵

And as an extension of this definition, it also includes the factor of government-society collaboration as a defining characteristic of public policies, adopting the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) definition:

⁵ Available from: <https://minciencias.gov.co/glosario/politica-publica-o-estado>. Access on: Mar. 18, 2024.



Public Policy is a product of government-society interaction, co-produced by the government and the citizen public. It entails a set of intentional and causal actions aimed at achieving an objective of public interest or benefit, whose guidelines for action, agents, instruments, procedures, and resources are consistently and coherently reproduced over time. Public Policy consists of intentional actions designed to achieve objectives regarded as valuable to society or solve issues deemed to be of public interest or benefit. Similarly, these actions are causal, as they are considered appropriate and effective for achieving the objective or solving the issue.⁶

Regardless of whether the policy is termed public or considered governmental, the key point is that it focuses on the type of policy that not only addresses matters of collective interest and benefit but also results from the interaction between government and society through citizen participation:

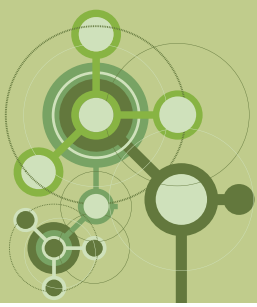
As a decision-making process, rather than merely an act of independent governmental decision-making, Public Policy is a product of government-society interaction shared between public authorities and the citizenry through various forms and degrees of dialogue and influence. It is public, not merely governmental (Aguilar Villanueva, 2010, p. 32, free translation).

The second relationship, which I highlight as a consequence of the first, can become a tension when one of the parties—whether the participants or the governing body—fails to clearly understand its scope, or dialogue fails to establish the essential link between citizen participation and governance. When democratic and collaborative, this link is also a form of communicative action that gives voice to social organizations and independent citizens in the exercise of government through a complex model of collective dialogue, calling for creative and effective methodologies to guarantee results. Aguilar Villanueva argues that the decrease in governing capacity within the context of global democracy and economic liberalization has increased the political independence of society. This, coupled with the growing desire of citizens to participate in and influence the definition and management of public affairs, has enabled what the author defines as “a powerful expansion of the public sphere that the government no longer limits or controls” (2010, p. 58, free translation), thereby giving substance and support to the concept of governance:

“New governance” is described as a shift from the hierarchical form of governing through command and control to a more decentralized, horizontal, interdependent, relational, interactive, participatory, networked form in which public and private, governmental and social actors engage in dialogue and negotiation to align their interests, reconcile their differences, and reach agreements on the objectives and future of society, which will serve as a reference for the development of policies, provision of public services of social benefit, and decisions on investment projects crucial for society's viability and prosperity” (Aguilar Villanueva, 2010, p. 58, free translation).

Olga Beatriz Gutiérrez, Colombian professor and researcher at the Minuto de Dios University Corporation (Uniminuto), deepens the meaning of the term “new governance” used by Aguilar Villanueva when referring to the communication component in the collaboration between government and society: “The function of communication in the construction of public policies,” she states, “is to contribute to enabling collaborative governance,” as “government cannot be exercised outside of a collaborative setup. Complex, multi-cause problems demand the participation of various actors” (Olga Beatriz Gutiérrez, informal conversation, March 14, 2024). The deliberative dimension of this understanding of governance is further supported by Xabier Barandiaran Irastorza, who graduated in Sociology and Political Science, in an article published in 2022 by the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* of the Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey, within the framework of the *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* (Building the Future) program, which promotes collaborative governance in the Basque Country. The author refers to this type of governance as “the process of deliberation and shared action linking public institutions, organized society,

⁶ Available from: <https://minciencias.gov.co/glosario/politica-publica-o-estado>. Access on: Mar. 18, 2024.



and civil society with the aim of strengthening the public policy ecosystem," which "builds a shared public space by generating social capital and a new political culture" (Barandiaran Irastorza, 2022, free translation).

Dr. María Teresa Villarreal Martínez, a public policy researcher at Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, also in Monterrey, emphasizes that the differentiating factor in this field is citizen participation, "because it constitutes a fundamental element and condition of possibility for democratic governance, and can become a mechanism of social empowerment" (Villarreal Martínez, 2009, p. 31, free translation). Lastly, in this brief, subjective, and incomplete summary of experts' approaches to the topic, Dr. María Victoria Whittingham Munévar, a Colombian public policy researcher, proposes a broad definition of the notion of governance, rich with nuances and possibilities, which also reflects Aguilar Villanueva's approach to governance through public policies in both form and content:

Governance is the realization of political relations among various actors involved in the decision-making process, implementation, and evaluation of decisions on matters of public interest. This process can be characterized as a power dynamic, where competition and cooperation coexist as possible rules, encompassing both formal and informal institutions. The form and interaction between different actors reflect the quality of the system and involve each of its components, as well as the system (Whittingham Munévar, 2010, free translation).

The conclusion drawn from the analysis of these first two relationships, as a perceptive detective might say, is that the core of the matter lies in the concept of participation, suggesting that, to address the third relationship—communication-participation—a quick review of what is meant by citizen participation, as well as participation in general as a broad category, is necessary.

María Teresa Villarreal Martínez references the Chilean researcher and international expert on issues of citizen participation, social and non-state public control, Nuria Cunill Grau, who differentiates between four forms of participation in public space: social participation, community participation, political participation, and citizen participation. According to Cunill, social participation refers to an individual's involvement in social organizations, emphasizing that in this context, the dialogue does not involve the State, but other social actors. Community participation, on the other hand, involves individuals in collective actions aimed at community development; in this case, the interlocutor is not necessarily the State, although support from it is anticipated. Political participation, in turn, is mediated by mechanisms of political representation. Cunill defines citizen participation as:

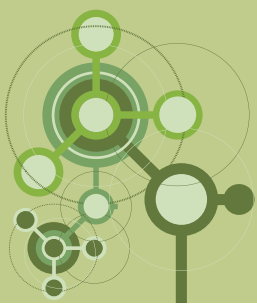
one in which citizens are directly involved in public actions, with a broad conception of politics and a vision of public space as a space for citizens. This participation unites citizens and the State in defining collective objectives and methods to achieve them (Villarreal Martínez, 2009, p. 32, free translation).

According to the Political Constitution of Colombia, this interaction takes place within a participatory and pluralistic democracy through productive dialogue between citizens and the government, with clearly established rules of engagement:

The mechanisms for public participation in the exercise of sovereignty include: voting, plebiscites, referendums, popular consultations, open assemblies, legislative initiatives, and recall of mandates. The law must regulate them (Colombia, 2015, art. 103, free translation).

However, citizen participation, although seemingly contradictory as is political participation, is inevitably mediated by representation. It is a communicative action in which, using J.L. Austin's ⁷ terminology as employed by Habermas,

⁷ According to J.L. Austin, *utterance* corresponds to that which was spoken and the meaning intended, *illocution* refers to that which was done, and *perlocution* is that which took place as a result.



the *locutionary* (speech), *illocutionary* (argumentation, debate), as well as *perlocutionary* (negotiation, agreement) acts all play a role in a dialogue among multiple actors, each with the same right to have their arguments heard and considered. At the same time, this is a process where the personal and direct participation of each citizen, with their own voice and name, is truly possible only within smaller territorial and population units. Even in such cases, the very concept of participation (from the Latin *participare*, meaning “to take part in something”) tends to be more theoretical than real, as not everyone has the same willingness or capacity to intervene personally. It is inevitable that credible voices will emerge, gain legitimacy, and support, and speak on behalf of the collective and those who do not feel they have the discursive and argumentative ability to debate in public. Instead, they express their ideas, viewpoints, and interests in private to someone they trust, with the expectation that this person will know how to present and defend them. This dynamic, at least within the structure of this conversation as a communicative action, gives shape to the concept of a spokesperson or representative. The same Political Constitution establishes and determines the democratic mechanism of representation for citizen participation:

The State will contribute to the organization, promotion, and training of professional, civic, union, community, youth, charitable, or non-governmental associations for common use, without prejudice to their autonomy, in order to establish democratic mechanisms of representation in various instances of participation, agreement, control, and supervision of public management that may be established (Colombia, 2015, art. 103, free translation).

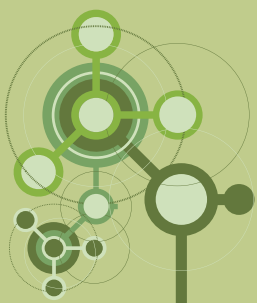
The literature on citizen participation is as extensive, if not more so, than that on public policies and governance, presenting a challenging path of exploration with various emphases, differences, characteristics, contextual conditions, and approaches. These factors impose, once again, limitations and reduce the scope of this reflection, which aims to focus concretely and specifically on the relationship between communication and public policy. However, to highlight one key aspect—which is the transversality of citizen participation in public management, a fundamental issue if we refer to the communicative dimension of a governance style that seeks to establish a permanent, formally established dialogue with consequences, aimed at agreements, co-responsibility, and, in specific cases, the co-management of certain public matters of collective interest—it is relevant to mention the definition adopted by the Ibero-American Charter of Citizen Participation in Public Management, as approved at the XI Ibero-American Conference of Ministers of Public Administration and State Reform, held in Lisbon, Portugal, in June 2009, and later adopted by the XIX Ibero-American Summit of Heads of State and Government, held in Estoril, Portugal, in November of that year:

Citizen participation in public management must be a transversal and continuous element in the actions of public authorities, ensuring its implementation throughout the process of forming public policies, social programs, and public services (Centro Latinoamericano de Administración para el Desarrollo, 2009, free translation).

Therefore, it is evident that a government conception of this nature, which formally incorporates citizen participation and collaboration, is a hallmark of democratic models founded on harmonious collaboration between the State and citizens, as stated by María Teresa Villarreal:

Developing public policies aimed at participation or proposing citizen participation as a transversal axis throughout the entire government exercise is not only a matter of technical and administrative efficiency, but above all, an issue tied to a political project and a view of society (Villarreal Martínez, 2009, p. 38, free translation).

These three relationships—government policy/public policy, public policy/collaborative governance, and communication/citizen participation—converge as *sine qua non* conditions in the link between public communication and public policy. This is based on the understanding that the public—as Argentine philosopher and sociologist Nora Rabotnikof describes it—is “of common interest or utility to all, that which concerns the collective, the community” (2008, p. 38, free translation). This convergence, ultimately, forms



the context that generates communicative action inherent to the construction of public policies within a collaborative governance framework, with citizen participation as a transversal axis. As a comprehensive exercise of communication—its other functions being information management and facilitating public debate to uphold the principle of transparency—this communicative action aims to establish a dialogue platform that fosters agreements, consensus, and commitments, and encourages diverse and pluralistic dialogue among different actors, with the explicit goal of achieving an outcome in which all participants can see themselves represented. This requires communicative strategies for debate and negotiation that facilitate and ensure dialogue with sufficient quality information, space for consultation, inclusive deliberation, consultation mechanisms, and even, in the execution phase, forums for dialogue to coordinate shared commitments and possible co-management mechanisms. In other words, constructing public policy necessitates communicative action characterized by genuine horizontality in direct dialogue, effective processes and outcomes, inclusiveness, and unrestricted openness to public debate, with broad citizen participation across various contexts, such as media, social networks, and academic, specialized, sectoral, or political forums.

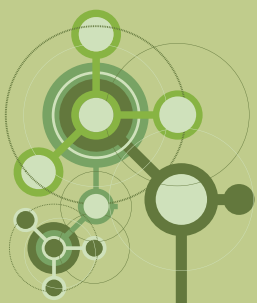
Thus, the first condition for meaningful participation, with respect to the essential characteristic of horizontality inherent in communicative action, is that those who sit at the table to participate—whether with their own voice or as representatives of others who have entrusted them with the responsibility of being spokespersons for their arguments and interests—must do so on equal terms. They must have the same access to the floor and the same opportunity to influence decisions. This dynamic is reminiscent of what, according to Arthurian legend, the mythical King Arthur sought when he invited his knights to speak on equal terms. By doing so, he proposed a gesture of recognition by authority, allowing any participant to intervene on equal footing, thus transforming the vertical power relationship between the throne and court into one of listening, empowerment, and respect for each other's opinions. This was symbolized and enacted by the round table, which perhaps evokes any possible ideas of ancient images of councils of elders deliberating in a circle around the fire to collectively discern and make important decisions for the community—albeit with respect and obedience to the figure of authority. The symbolism is powerful, as the position of the person who presides, coordinates, and, when necessary, must take responsibility for the decision is evident at one point of the table. However, when the prior agreement is to reach a consensus decision, the gesture transcends mere symbolism, promoting a productive conversation with consultative or binding implications. This is what I call the “round table effect.”

Lost in the mist of legend is the protocol governing Arthur's dialogue with his knights. There is speculation about the number of seats at the round table, and it is said that it could be expanded to accommodate more participants if necessary. What is interesting in our times is that this expansion is not limited by physical co-presence, adhering to the principle of horizontality. Instead, it may be indefinitely extended in public deliberation through media, which continue to appeal to a certain level of representativeness based on function, specialization, academic authority, or the status of editorialists and columnists. This principle is also projected onto social networks, where anyone can intervene and make their voice heard or, at least, be included in trends of collective expression, except for the pertinent concern with gray areas and issues related to this supposed democratization of public opinion. In my view, this serves as the best metaphor to illustrate the dimension and scope that public communication can and should contribute to the construction of public policies: creating favorable conditions through communication so that intervention, argumentation, and influence are possible for each and every participant around the table.

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