



## TECHNOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY, AND COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE From Classical Agenda Setting to Hybrid Media Systems

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| PALABRAS CLAVE                                                                                                                             | RESUMEN                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
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| <i>Agenda-setting 2.0</i><br><i>Citizen journalism</i><br><i>Mass media</i><br><i>Philosophy of communication</i><br><i>Public opinion</i> | <i>For much of the twentieth century, philosophy of communication broadly relied on the agenda setting theory developed by McCombs and Shaw, which emphasized the decisive role of mass media in organizing the public's perception of social reality. The rise of the internet and, above all, social media has substantially altered this model: traditional news organizations no longer operate only as institutions that determine which issues deserve attention, but increasingly respond to topics, controversies, and trends that emerge on digital platforms. Considering this transformation, this article argues for a philosophy of communication suited to a different technological and social framework, one capable of reconsidering the mechanisms through which the public agenda is now constructed. We refer to this reformulation of the process as agenda setting 2.0.</i> |

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## 1. Introduction

This paper takes McCombs and Shaw's (1972) *agenda setting* theory as its starting point to examine the extent to which the technological and social transformations associated with the transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century require us to reconsider how it operates. We will argue that the classical model, which we will call *agenda setting* 1.0, is insufficient to describe a communication ecosystem in which actors governed by different logics coexist and mutually condition one another. In contrast to a system dominated by centripetal forces linked to the major traditional media, the digital environment introduces centrifugal forces made up of users, communities, and networks capable of producing, selecting, and amplifying information. The aim is to explain how the interaction between these two types of forces now shapes the formation of the public agenda.

The argument will unfold in several stages. First, we will examine the role played by the mass media during the twentieth century, before the internet, paying particular attention to propaganda and the techniques of social engineering used to steer public opinion. We will then address the transition from a mass-consumption society to an information society characterized by increasingly personalized content. Next, we will study new forms of citizen participation in relation to traditional media, including citizen journalism and the *second-screen* phenomenon. We will also analyze the risks associated with a public sphere marked by information overload, disinformation, and *infoxication* (i.e., fake news). Finally, we will argue that digital users are no longer exclusively passive recipients and increasingly act as *prosumers*<sup>1</sup> who influence the news priorities of mainstream media. Put more strongly, a growing share of the agenda of leading news organizations depends on issues that have previously acquired visibility, circulation, or mobilizing capacity on digital platforms.

Moreover, the mass media also help shape public opinion, since they influence both the audience and the government by expressing the prevailing climate of opinion. They are also the ones that carry out the activity of setting the public agenda, a process known as *agenda setting*<sup>2</sup>, since they are "capable of transferring the salience of a news item on their agenda to that of society" (McCombs, 1996, p. 17). In this way, the media rank and prioritize the relevance of different pieces of information with the aim of reaching a larger audience and achieving greater impact, directing the attention of the masses and the government toward certain issues. This is also reflected in a negative context, since the media sometimes act as *gatekeepers*<sup>3</sup> who filter, censor, or prevent the public from accessing information on certain subjects.

In addition, we will analyze some of the methods that companies such as Google, Facebook, and other technology platforms use to extract information and learn about internet users' preferences and emotions: algorithms, metrics, emoticons, *big data*, etc. This collection of information is possible thanks to the opportunities the internet and social media provide individuals to socialize and share preferences on these platforms.

The capacity of platforms to turn everyday activity into data introduces an additional layer of mediation that was not present in classical mass communication. In the digital environment, every click, search, recommendation, reaction, or link can be transformed into a computable signal that subsequently plays a role in content selection. Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) describe this process through the notion of *datafication*<sup>4</sup> and emphasize that platforms are not simply neutral channels: their architectures organize interactions, rank content, and connect user activity with business models based on the extraction and exploitation of data. For this reason, the digital public agenda also depends on technical infrastructures whose selection logic is partly opaque to the participants themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Neologism coined by Alvin Toffler (1980) that merges or identifies producers and consumers.

<sup>2</sup> Term coined by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972).

<sup>3</sup> Concept defined by psychologist and sociologist Kurt Lewin (1943, 1947) and applied to communication by David M. White (1950).

<sup>4</sup> Term coined by Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier (2013).

This transformation does not necessarily imply a simple replacement of traditional media by digital media. Chadwick (2017) proposes understanding the contemporary environment as a hybrid media system in which the logics of older and newer media combine, compete, and adapt to one another. Added to this interdependence is the structural role of digital platforms, which do not function merely as neutral channels of communication but as infrastructures that organize, rank, and select interactions and content through data, algorithms, and business models (van Dijck et al., 2018). The current public agenda therefore depends on a dynamic relationship among media, platforms, and users.

## 2. Mass Psychology and Communicative Power

Sigmund Freud's theories lie at the origin of the propaganda and mass-manipulation methods that emerged in the United States during the second decade of the twentieth century. Freud, a central figure in psychoanalysis (Brown, 1961), conducted numerous studies in the fields of hypnotic suggestion, free association, and dream interpretation. In the course of his research, he concluded that human beings act in response to irrational stimuli and that primitive sexual and aggressive forces and impulses lie hidden deep within the human mind. According to Freud, these forces would foster individual and social chaos if they were not kept under control. Our dangerous primitive instincts therefore had to be controlled in order to ensure the maintenance of a stable society.

Edward Bernays, Freud's nephew, recognized the potential of these ideas for application to advertising and propaganda (Curtis, 2002). Bernays showed a special interest in studies of mass psychology which, according to him, revealed that society as a whole "has mental characteristics distinct from those of the individual, and is motivated by impulses and emotions which cannot be explained on the basis of what we know of individual psychology" (Bernays, 1928, p. 61). Bernays then asked the following question: "is it possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing about it?" (Bernays, 1928, p. 61).

According to Bernays, mass society would be composed mostly of irrational individuals whose lives were governed solely by impulses and emotions. If, as Bernays (1928) believed, rationality is a limited capacity possessed by only a certain number of people, then those who possess it should govern the rest of the irrational population. This group of irrational individuals, which Walter Lippmann called "the bewildered herd" (Lippmann, 1922), had to be distracted to prevent it from creating problems and chaos in society. For both Bernays and Lippmann, it was therefore necessary to implement an engineering of consent (Lippmann, 1922), in which the mass media would play a key role as generators of public opinion. This would mark the beginning of "the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses" (Bernays, 1928, p. 15) by the major media throughout almost the entire twentieth century.

We must remember that, as a result of the great expansion of industry after the Second Industrial Revolution, the market became saturated; that is, so many things were produced so quickly that a point came when consumers no longer needed more products. Thus, stocks of goods (surplus production) began to accumulate in the early twentieth century, causing a notable decline in profits, which led large industrial corporations to consider how to remedy the situation. After the United States entered World War I, a change emerged in the way products and services were sold. A group of people who had worked together on the Committee on Public Information (also known as the Creel Committee), created by President Woodrow Wilson in 1917, realized that the propaganda methods used to persuade U.S. citizens to enter the European war could also be used in peacetime to sell products or services. Many people who worked or collaborated with this

committee, including Bernays and Lippmann, applied these wartime propaganda techniques to mass psychology in peacetime after World War I.

Radio, cinema, and, above all, television were decisive technologies in shaping public opinion (Lippmann) and public relations (Bernays) throughout the twentieth century. They were decisive weapons both in establishing a society based on compulsive consumption (thanks to mass advertising) and in creating a climate conducive to the development of capitalism and large multinational corporations (Klein, 2000; Smart, 2010).

This evolution reveals an important continuity between mass society and the connected society. Communication power does not disappear as the public's capacity to participate increases; rather, it changes form and location. Castells (2009) has emphasized that power in the network society depends to a large extent on the capacity to program networks and connect one network to another. From this perspective, traditional media retain highly significant institutional, professional, and symbolic resources, but they share the space in which visibility is produced with platforms, search engines, political actors, organizations, and users capable of driving their own information flows. The question is no longer simply who communicates, but who manages to connect, amplify, and stabilize particular messages within heterogeneous networks.

### **3. Digital Platforms, Personalization, and New Audiences**

The information society emerged as a result of the rise of capitalism and the development of digital technologies. Without a doubt, the invention of email was decisive in the worldwide expansion of private instant messaging between individuals (Leiner et al., 1997), especially within multinational companies, which quickly recognized its enormous potential for continuing the process of globalization. In addition, as McQuail (2010, p. 41) has noted, the advent of the internet enabled individuals to access public information not only as passive agents, but also as communicators and sources of information in their own right.

The shift from a predominantly one-way communication regime to one based on multiple connections also transforms the notion of the audience. Napoli (2011) notes that digital technologies multiply the ways in which audiences can be observed, quantified, and valued, while also making the relationship among exposure, attention, and participation more complex. In traditional television, it was enough to estimate how many people were in front of a screen; on the internet, by contrast, companies distinguish among impressions, clicks, time spent, comments, shares, conversions, and numerous additional metrics. This fragmentation of measurement enables a much more granular representation of audience behavior and strengthens the ability to tailor content to specific groups.

Today, large companies have learned to make the most of our relationships and sociability on social media as sources from which to obtain all kinds of information about us. User participation online is increasingly collaborative, leaving social and emotional traces as well as patterns for analysis by the gurus of Big Data (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013). Collaborative technologies are everywhere: from social media to video games, free software, and peer-production projects (for example, Wikipedia). As soon as we open any search engine on our smartphones and/or computers, we can find millions of answers to everyday problems, from how to solve a mathematical equation to making a restaurant reservation. Millions of people, often anonymously, answer questions posed by millions of others. A well-known example is Wikipedia, which defines itself as "a free, multilingual, collaboratively edited encyclopedia" (Wikipedia<sup>5</sup>). These kinds of platforms allow digital users to collaborate and share their knowledge of a particular topic so that other users can enjoy and benefit from that content.

Personalization, however, should not be interpreted as an autonomous technological force. The findings of Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic (2015), based on the behavior of more than ten

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<sup>5</sup> <https://es.wikipedia.org/>.

million Facebook users, showed that the structure of social networks, algorithmic selection, and individual choices all play a role in exposure to ideologically diverse content. In that study, users' own choices played an even greater role than the algorithm in limiting access to discordant information. This requires us to qualify any exclusively technological explanation: information bubbles result from the interaction among platform architecture, social homophily, personal preferences, and the media supply.

Other collaborative platforms such as blogs, forums, and sites such as TripAdvisor make it possible to share experiences and opinions about a particular topic, place, or service. And they do not only make it possible to share information and experiences; there are platforms that also allow people to share or trade physical resources peer to peer: BlaBlaCar, eBay, Airbnb, Uber, Wallapop, etc. These platforms base their business model on people who interact, address common interests, collaborate, and help one another. Aware of this, major technology platforms therefore provide an increasing number of collaborative applications and tools to facilitate these individual interactions.

The collaborative nature of these platforms does not eliminate asymmetries either. The visibility of contributions depends on reputation rules, recommendation systems, interface design, and moderation mechanisms that distribute attention unevenly. Gillespie (2018) has shown that platforms, by deciding which content they allow, prioritize, restrict, or remove, perform custodial functions over public conversation. Although these decisions are not exactly equivalent to the editorial gatekeeping of newspapers, they produce comparable selection effects. Digital collaboration must therefore be analyzed together with the rules that determine who can participate, which signals count as relevant, and which content ultimately reaches a significant audience.

At this point, we must point out and emphasize that this collaborative way of exchanging information is completely opposed to the mass communication discussed in the previous section. Radio, cinema, and television are not collaborative platforms *per se*, although they can occasionally be so<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, these channels are discovering ways to interact with the public, as we will see later when we discuss the *second-screen* phenomenon.

On the other hand, the rise of the *Long Tail* concept, popularized by Chris Anderson (2004; 2006), is related to the two types of markets discussed in this article. Put very briefly, the *long tail* is the opposite of *best sellers*. The early success of Netflix and Amazon lay precisely in exploiting the long tail of their respective markets: films in Netflix's case and books in Amazon's. Both realized that new business opportunities lay not only in selling what was most popular, but also in selling what was unpopular yet existed in large quantities, such as out-of-print books in the publishing industry. They understood that the internet was the perfect channel for bringing all that stored inventory to market very cheaply. And not only inventory, but secondhand goods as well. Secondhand goods are not especially glamorous, and they certainly are not advertised in the mass media during prime time, but they are clearly inexpensive and sell very well on collaborative platforms. The revenue generated by this long tail can reach levels close to those of best sellers.

The logic of the *long tail* is complemented by another feature of digital markets: the capacity of recommendation systems to make an almost unlimited catalog visible. Without classification, search, and recommendation mechanisms, abundance can turn into invisibility. In this context, algorithms do more than help consumers locate products; they participate in constructing their horizon of options. Personalizing that horizon has obvious commercial consequences, but also communicative ones, because the same classification principles are applied to news, videos, political messages, and cultural content. Intermediation does not disappear; it shifts in part from human editors to sociotechnical systems that combine automated calculations, business criteria, and the aggregated behavior of users.

The entire long-tail industry is strengthened by social media, where users share opinions about the products and services they want to consume. This is why collaborative platforms seek to personalize as much as possible the data and information users exchange in their online

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<sup>6</sup> For example, charity telethons to raise funds, whether for countries affected by natural disasters or to help sick children, etc.

conversations. The comments and links users share on social media provide valuable information to companies, advertising agencies, and media organizations alike, because what we read, save, download, or share says a great deal about each of us.

Following Anne Helmond (2015), Nieborg and Poell (2018) use the term *platformization* to describe the process through which the infrastructures, economic models, and governance mechanisms of major platforms progressively penetrate the production and circulation of cultural goods. Journalism is part of this transformation: news organizations adapt headlines, formats, publication rhythms, and distribution strategies to environments they do not fully control. This creates a structural dependence on intermediaries such as search engines and social media, whose technical changes can immediately alter the reach of content. From the perspective of agenda setting 2.0, this dependence is crucial because public relevance also becomes conditioned by platform distribution rules.

In the pre-internet era, it was very difficult to obtain this kind of personalized information about consumers' preferences and desires because interaction was limited. The flow of information was one-way because the consumer was a passive recipient of information. By contrast, today's digital era makes it possible to know each user in detail, allowing the services offered to that user to be personalized.

It is nevertheless important to qualify the idea that personalization automatically and uniformly leads to informational isolation. Flaxman, Goel, and Rao (2016) found that access to news through search engines and social media was associated with greater ideological segregation, but also with greater exposure to content from opposing positions, and that a substantial share of news consumption still went directly to traditional media. Moreover, the formation of echo chambers varies according to the architecture and dynamics of each platform: a comparative analysis of more than one hundred million pieces of content found important differences among Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and Gab (Cinelli et al., 2021). Personalization should therefore be understood as a relevant factor within a more complex ecosystem of technological, social, and voluntary selection.

The next section will analyze the strategies used by major technology companies to get to know their users better and thereby personalize their platforms to each individual's psyche. We will discuss screens, emotions, and users' reactions on the internet.

#### **4. The Metrics of Emotion on Social Media**

Information today is presented in such a way as to provoke emotions, because the objective is to generate visceral responses in the audience. Sounds and, above all, images are especially powerful in generating emotions and reactions. Laughter, hatred, envy, indignation, resentment, and other similar feelings are very common on social media. At times, these feelings arise spontaneously among the actors who populate digital platforms, but they are often the result of prior media actions encouraged by third parties.

Empirical research on digital diffusion confirms that emotions can alter the likelihood that messages will circulate. Brady et al. (2017) observed that moral-emotional language was associated with greater diffusion of political content on social media, especially within ideologically like-minded communities. This finding helps explain why indignation, anger, or moral identification are such visible resources in online conversations. It does not mean that all viral information must be emotional, but it does suggest that the competitive architecture of attention can favor messages capable of eliciting rapid and intense reactions. The agenda emerging from social media is thus partly linked to affective mechanisms of selection and amplification.

These kinds of emotional reactions are what companies such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and other collaborative platforms, as well as companies that produce goods and services, seek in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the psychology of their audience. As can be seen across social media, brands want their customers to have experiences: they are not satisfied merely with offering services; they also want customers to feel happy, satisfied, and proud to represent those brands and, by extension, to transmit that fascination to those around them. Brands are no longer

satisfied with having customers; they want fans: a customer makes demands of you (a rational response); a fan forgives you for everything (an irrational response).

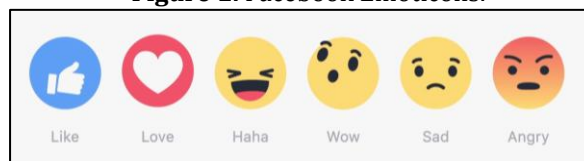
The ease with which many users decide to reveal their feelings to others, offering information about their moods (“I feel happy,” “this fascinates me,” “that outrages me,” “I’m angry today,” etc.) on websites such as Facebook, in fact allows these companies to get inside the minds of the most unsuspecting users. In physical stores, too, we can observe the constant intrusion of brands seeking to generate conditioned responses in a Pavlovian manner: wall colors, store fragrances, music, and lighting may appear dispensable, but they are fundamentally important for awakening our desires, emotions, and, consequently, our urge to consume. Or at least for unconsciously preserving a pleasant memory of that place, perhaps a store, a restaurant, or a soccer stadium.

The fact that platforms can record affective expressions on a large scale turns emotions into a source of information about audiences. This possibility has also generated methodological and ethical debates about the extent to which digital behavior can be used to infer psychological states. Reactions, comments, and interaction patterns provide incomplete and contextual signals, not a transparent reading of a user’s mind. Even so, their accumulation makes it possible to build probabilistic models that are valuable for advertising segmentation and content recommendation. It is therefore important to distinguish between the subjective expression of an emotion and the computational translation of that expression into a category or score used by a platform.

In addition, emotional responses serve as a barometer for companies and advertisers when measuring the interest (or rejection) generated by their products and campaigns. Neuromarketing experts claim that more than 90% of purchasing decisions are formed in the unconscious mind (Lindstrom, 2011; Ferrés i Prats, 2014). One recent method of measuring emotions consists of encouraging users to use emoticons in their conversations, as Facebook and WhatsApp do. The invention of emoticons dates back to 1982, when Scott Fahlman decided to implement the symbol ☺ in forums to avoid misunderstandings. Since then, the use of emoticons has grown exponentially.

A few years ago, Facebook introduced emoticons symbolizing the following feelings: “like,” “love,” “haha,” “wow,” “sad,” and “angry” (see Figure 1). These emotions are very common and can serve as a guide for politicians and companies seeking to launch, respectively, a new proposal in the *res publica* or a new product on the market. These new ways of measuring reactions with emoticons are the equivalent of the focus-group techniques used by Bernays and other advertising agencies throughout the twentieth century. The objective is the same: to obtain information from consumers about their opinions and motivations.

**Figure 1.** Facebook Emoticons.



Source: Facebook.

The introduction of reaction buttons also expands the repertoire of quantifiable signals. What would be an ambiguous and fleeting gesture in a face-to-face conversation becomes a discrete, storable, and comparable data point. This transformation is especially important for media organizations, political campaigns, and brands because it makes it possible to observe not only how many people have seen a piece of content but also what kind of response they express toward it. Metrics do not replace a qualitative interpretation of public opinion, but they facilitate continuous feedback that can influence editorial and strategic decisions. The digital sphere thus links expression, measurement, and content adjustment at a speed that would have been difficult to imagine in the twentieth-century media ecosystem.

Measuring audience stimuli and responses allows companies to learn about their customers’ preferences, needs, and demands, as well as what they should improve or correct in the products and/or services they offer.

On the one hand, companies can use user comments and responses to (re)orient their advertising strategies; on the other hand, individuals are free agents, and the sum of all these agents, whether stimulated by third parties or not, can establish the topics to be addressed on the public agenda, the products companies should offer, and even organize boycotts against certain brands for all kinds of reasons.

Today's social media have a strong capacity to connect with our emotional brain (LeDoux, 1999; Ferrés i Prats, 2014). Through the emoticons and graphic resources made available by sites such as Facebook, users are able to express their desires and concerns not only to a friend or family member, but to millions of unknown users connected to these platforms. If Facebook were a country, it would be the third most populous in the world (Lindstrom, 2011, p. 152), behind only China and India. But the number of users who click "like" every day is surely much greater than the number of couples who express that feeling to each other in person in China and India combined.

## 5. Influencers and Citizen Journalism

Many individuals who use social media and other collaborative platforms have become spokespeople for news and potential trendsetters online. There are increasing numbers of influencers who have mastered the art of online persuasion. And this is not something taught in journalism schools; rather, *influencers* (e.g., *youtubers*) learn by trial and error: if you gain followers or subscribers, you are doing it right; if you lose them, you are doing it wrong.

Microblogging contributed early on to blurring the boundary between professional producers and connected witnesses. Hermida (2010) proposed understanding Twitter as a system of ambient awareness in which small pieces of information from official and unofficial sources make it possible to maintain an ongoing awareness of developing events. This logic does not automatically turn every user into a journalist, but it does change the conditions under which journalists work: the first signals of an event can arise outside the newsroom, circulate publicly, and be observed at the same time by professionals and audiences. *Gatekeeping* then comes to include tasks of verification, contextualization, and selection within an already visible flow.

Today, there are *vloggers* on YouTube who have more followers and whose videos receive more views than prominent journalists have readers, or even larger audiences than television channels during prime time. Obviously, the vast majority of these influencers deal with trivial matters that have nothing to do with citizen journalism, but it is only a matter of time before young journalists or amateur communicators who are nevertheless highly capable begin to make a name for themselves. For many other young people who follow them, the opinions of these influencers are more relevant than the assertions of experts from major news organizations (Jarvis, 2014), whether in the press or on television news programs.

Naturally, the appealing idea of citizen journalism, in which information is democratized, is double-edged: on the one hand, there is the attractive proposal that we can all regard ourselves as citizen journalists, since we all have a smartphone with which to record or tell the world what is happening around us; on the other hand, it is not difficult to foresee that this proposal can lead, and very probably will lead, to chaos. To give a simple example, it would be utopian to think that the quality of traditional journalism could successfully be replaced by tools that do not allow more than 140 characters. A middle ground will probably be found over time.

Citizen participation must therefore be assessed not only in terms of the technical possibility of publishing, but also in terms of the quality of verification processes and the relationships between professionals and users. Singer et al. (2011) show that participatory journalism does not simply mean opening the editorial gates completely: news organizations continue to establish limits, rules, and procedures for integrating comments, photographs, testimony, and other user-generated material. The democratization of news production thus coexists with professional mechanisms of control. The tension between openness and verification is one of the central problems of the contemporary communication ecosystem.

The expression citizen journalism, coined by Jay Rosen (2006), has gained traction in the media because, as already noted, a large majority of the population has smartphones and access to mass-

distribution platforms (YouTube, Vimeo, Facebook, etc.). However, despite being presented as a form of journalism, the amateurs who practice it (and the content they produce) almost always lack the knowledge, quality, and credibility needed to produce high-impact content. Citizen journalism, also sometimes called *journalism 2.0* (Gillmor, 2004), is characterized as an alternative and activist form of news gathering that operates outside traditional media institutions. It arises in response to shortcomings in professional journalism, and although it uses similar journalistic practices, it is guided by different goals and ideals, often relying on alternative sources whose legitimacy is sometimes not accepted (for various reasons) by conventional professional journalists.

In reality, citizen journalism predates the advent of the internet because, as Preston (2016) states, this practice was common in the past, when local newspapers in towns published news written by nonprofessional journalists. In a sense, the citizen journalism mentioned by Preston is a *citizen journalism 1.0* that has evolved into today's *citizen journalism 2.0*, in which users have an immediacy of information and devices that previous generations lacked.

It is striking that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights itself already contemplated the possibility of citizens committed to producing news and opinions; that is, citizens as producers (and not merely consumers) of information and opinions. Specifically, it states that "everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (United Nations, 1948, Article 19).

Today, through Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, or Twitter, users can (and do) criticize political leaders, raise controversial issues such as climate change, or simply engage in the gossip press by recounting anecdotes about celebrities. It may be concerning that these kinds of initiatives are gaining such prominence relative to traditional journalism, investigative journalism, and high-quality sources.

These practices are also related to new forms of collective action. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) note that digital media facilitate a logic of connective action based on highly personalized participation frameworks that can spread without depending on strong hierarchical organizations. Hashtags, videos, images, and individual narratives allow citizens with different motivations to converge temporarily around a cause. The consequence for the public agenda is significant: certain issues can gain visibility through distributed participation networks before being fully institutionalized by political parties, associations, or the media. The capacity to turn dispersed attention into a recognizable public signal is part of the dynamic we call agenda setting 2.0 here.

Citizen journalism is democratic because anyone can practice it with the right tools. However, both information and disinformation are commonplace, circulating very rapidly on social media and frequently generating unfounded rumors. In addition, platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have provided tools such as live streaming, where audiences can comment and react live while the video is being broadcast, instantaneously. Of course, these practices are not regarded as citizen journalism, but they are examples of the prominence that such content and videos can achieve online, since they can influence thousands of people. We are therefore at a turning point where collaboration and democratization in providing and producing content are positive; nevertheless, the danger of fake news, unfounded online rumors, and subliminal defamation also remains present.

It is important to note that the academic literature on participatory journalism has shown that opening news production to citizens does not eliminate gatekeeping; rather, it redistributes its functions. Goode (2009) warns that social news and citizen-journalism networks contain new forms of agenda-setting and gatekeeping power, conditioned both by status differences among participants and by the code of the platforms themselves. Likewise, the comparative studies collected by Singer et al. (2011) show that newsrooms incorporate audience participation through comments, contributions, and other forms of collaboration while retaining professional procedures of selection, moderation, and editorial responsibility. The result, therefore, is a negotiation between participatory openness and journalistic control.

## 6. The Interactive Viewer

The *second-screen* phenomenon is based on the fact that many television viewers or radio listeners have a second electronic device, which they use in parallel with the first device. Thus, users interact and express their opinions about television debates and programs by using a second digital screen (smartphones or tablets) while watching television or listening to the radio.

What is truly significant is the leading role assumed by the user, in contrast to the passive position historically imposed by the mass media. Indeed, we see that on more than one program the host invites the audience to vote for a favorite contestant, comment on Twitter using the program's hashtag, or even use mobile applications to connect while the content is being broadcast. The second screen turns media consumption into a practice that is simultaneously receptive and expressive. Gil de Zúñiga, García-Perdomo, and McGregor (2015) found that seeking additional information and engaging in conversation are central motivations for this combined use of television and connected devices. The theoretical importance of the phenomenon lies in the fact that it breaks the classical transmission-reception-response sequence: the response can occur while the content is still being broadcast and can be visible to other viewers, journalists, and producers. In this way, audiences leave traces of their interpretation in real time and participate in constructing a social context parallel to the original program.

The second-screen phenomenon offers another major advantage to advertisers and brands. Through interaction, comments, and visits to a program's website, brands can determine how many people are using their smartphones and social media at each moment of a television broadcast. They can therefore place advertisements and offers at the most appropriate moments during prime time, as well as in programs whose audiences contain consumers with the greatest affinity for each brand. The economic dimension of this simultaneity thus reinforces the convergence between content and metrics. When an audience comments on a program while consuming it, producers can observe which moments generate attention, controversy, or disengagement. This information supports commercial decisions, but it can also influence the future production of the content itself. The audience does not merely receive a finished product: its aggregated responses are incorporated into processes of evaluation and design. Interaction therefore turns audiences into a permanent source of data on communication performance, extending the role of the prosumer beyond the explicit creation of content.

Aware of the benefits of having an audience that interacts with, participates in, and comments on a program through the internet and social media, many companies have created mobile applications dedicated to the second-screen phenomenon. One such application was Shootr, which collaborated directly with some Spanish television networks. Shootr was a system with "channels, or chat groups, dedicated to each series or program (TV or radio), in which the user registers to talk through them or simply read what others are saying" (Abajo, 2017).

There are real examples of the second-screen phenomenon. For instance, companies such as Coca-Cola have recognized the advertising opportunities of the second screen (Hatalaska, 2012). Some years ago, Coca-Cola broadcast a television advertisement in Hong Kong with the aim of having all teenagers and young people watch and comment on it. To do so, the company invented the word "Chok" to symbolize a quick movement with a smartphone. If teenagers downloaded the corresponding app and vigorously shook their smartphones each time the advertisement aired on television, they would have a chance to win prizes and discounts. Through this simple and entertaining proposal, the company managed to involve the entire young audience with the brand. The response was so massive that Coca-Cola's app became the most downloaded application in Hong Kong in just one day, in addition to becoming the city's most successful advertising campaign of the previous thirty-five years.

Media organizations and companies are aware of the importance of having an active audience that participates and comments, since this is a way to publicize a program and increase its visibility. Digital users today have all the necessary tools (smartphones, tablets, computers, and social media) to decide what content they want to consume and what content they want to share. But second-screen use has not only commercial consequences, but political ones as well. Its use was associated with greater online political participation, functioning as a link between television

news consumption and digital forms of political engagement. In this way, the second screen transforms a traditionally one-way experience into a hybrid process of reception, search, commentary, and redistribution of information.

## 7. Counterknowledge and *Post-Truth*

Information overload on social media means that, despite having millions of different sources and search results, we are in fact misinformed. Too much unclassified and unordered information is equivalent to having no information. The rise of misinformation has given rise to expressions such as *counterknowledge* and *post-truth*. Thompson (2009, pp. 9–10) defined counterknowledge as “misinformation, packaged to look like fact; presented so effectively that the twenty-first century faces a pandemic of credulity. Ideas that in their original, crude form flourished only on the fringes of society are now taken seriously even by educated people in the Western world.” Carlos Elías (2008; 2013) has expressed similar ideas.

Information abundance also poses a cognitive problem: having more messages does not imply having better conditions for evaluating them. Lewandowsky et al. (2012) have shown that misinformation can continue to have effects even after it has been corrected, because a false explanation may remain integrated into the mental models people use to interpret an event. Effective correction therefore requires more than simply denying a claim; it must offer alternative information that is understandable and credible. This persistence helps explain why the speed at which rumors circulate is an especially serious problem in networks where a claim can reach large audiences before verification processes appear.

Thompson’s view reflects the reality of today’s information world, which is contaminated to a large extent by online rumors and fake news circulating on social media. Education naturally helps people sift through information and determine whether it is plausible or suspicious. Nevertheless, creators of misleading advertising and false information are experts in the art of informational camouflage; they disguise fake news<sup>7</sup> so effectively that they can make it pass as real even among well-educated people. So far, Google and other search engines have not been able to detect such fake news effectively.

For the ordinary user, this counterknowledge creates a world full of doubts or questions with millions of different answers. The most prominent examples circulating online may be related to conspiracy theories, such as the death of Marilyn Monroe or the attack on the World Trade Center towers in New York; by contrast, there are widely divergent theories about scientific issues that affect the entire world population, such as climate change, nuclear weapons, secret NASA discoveries, medical advances, epidemics, and so on. For the ordinary user, the internet thus becomes a chaos of contradictory news.

In this world of confusion, in which what is viral is sometimes valued more than what is real, the term *post-truth* (Keyes, 2004) emerges. The Oxford Dictionary named it Word of the Year in 2016: the term *post-truth* denotes the phenomenon that occurs when “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Coughlan, 2017). The post-truth phenomenon has evolved largely thanks to social media, where users contribute a somewhat narcissistic view of the world, where everyone can express an opinion and opinions can come to be valued more highly than empirically verified data. This way of becoming visible and putting oneself on display, thereby becoming an influencer, gives individuals notoriety and a sense of fame and celebrity that satisfies vain spirits. The term post-truth gained particular resonance because of Trump’s victory and perhaps also the success of Brexit. We are living in an

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to clarify the concept of fake news. Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018), after reviewing the definitions used in the academic literature, identified different categories—including satire, parody, fabrication, manipulation, advertising, and propaganda—that vary according to the degree of factuality and the intention to deceive. This distinction is important because not all false information responds to the same mechanism or requires the same response. Combining error, deliberate manipulation, humor, and propaganda under a single label makes it more difficult to analyze their causes and effects. To study misinformation within agenda setting 2.0, it would be useful to distinguish among falsehood, intention, format, and mode of circulation.

era of informational post-truth in general, but more specifically in political debate in the public sphere.

The different ways in which true and false information spread add another dimension to the problem. Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018), analyzing approximately 126,000 stories disseminated on Twitter, found that false information spread farther, faster, and more deeply than true information, especially in the political sphere. The authors also observed that novelty and certain emotional responses helped explain this pattern. These findings show that competition for attention is not neutral with respect to the epistemic quality of content: the properties that favor circulation may not coincide with those that favor truth or verification. Lazer et al. (2018), for their part, emphasize that the problem of fake news cannot be reduced to a single technological or psychological cause, but requires the joint study of individuals, platforms, institutions, and actors interested in producing or amplifying misinformation.

## 8. *Transmedia Narratives and Agenda Setting 2.0*

Agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Shaw, 1979) was developed after its authors conducted an exhaustive analysis of televised presidential campaigns in 1968, 1972, and 1976. In their study, they found that the concerns shared by members of different communities corresponded to the messages broadcast by candidates during the campaign. From this analysis, the two authors concluded that the mass media significantly influenced the concerns of citizens and audiences. The *echo chamber* (Sunstein, 2001) consists of reading, listening to, and accepting only what fits our prior beliefs.

However, when McCombs and Shaw developed the idea of agenda setting (Wolf, 1987), social media and smartphones did not exist. The absence of these tools made it easier to create the public opinion most convenient for the various spheres of power (political, religious, economic, etc.). The advent of these digital devices, together with growing globalization—not only economic but also cultural—has become a factor that disrupts the normal operation of the old agenda setting promoted and financed by traditional powers.

Agenda-setting theory itself has evolved to incorporate a more complex scenario than the one described by its initial formulation. McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver (2014) highlight, among its contemporary developments, *network agenda setting* and *agenda melding*. The former, originally proposed by Guo (2012) and developed in Guo and McCombs (2015), holds that the media not only tell us what to think about (first level) or how to think about it (second level), but also have the power to structure the connections among issues in our minds as a network (third level). The latter, originally formulated by Shaw, Hamm, and Terry (2006), is an evolution of classical agenda setting that focuses on how individuals combine agendas from different sources to construct their own orientations; it was specifically designed to explain how people shape their own reality and identity in the digital age of the internet and social media. These extensions are especially relevant in an environment in which users simultaneously receive information from traditional media, personal contacts, opinion leaders, and digital platforms.

The arrival of social media does not eliminate the effect of conventional media either. Feezell (2018) showed experimentally that incidental exposure to political information through Facebook could increase the importance attributed to certain issues, even when that content came from the broader media environment. This suggests that platforms often function as layers for redistributing and filtering material produced by traditional actors. Agenda setting 2.0 should therefore not be understood as a mechanical reversal in which users replace the media, but as a circulation of influence among journalistic institutions, platforms, and publics.

Here we defend the thesis that it is no longer traditional media (television, radio, and the press) that set the agenda, but increasingly social media and online debates that establish it. The mass media are increasingly dependent on and attentive to these new media. Digital platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook are scanned daily by media organizations to detect—by measuring likes, emoticons, shares, and so on—what Germans refer to as the *zeitgeist*, the spirit of our time.

Vargo et al. (2014) provide evidence of this interdependence by analyzing issue agendas on Twitter during the 2012 U.S. presidential election. Their work shows that different groups combined agendas from vertical and horizontal media in different ways, and that relationships among issues could be studied through the network agenda setting model. The importance of these findings for the thesis defended here is that the public agenda ceases to be the product of a single center of transmission. Different communities integrate signals from multiple sources and, in doing so, can feed new configurations of salience back into the media system.

There are currently tools that allow media organizations and journalists to analyze Tweets and Instagram posts as they are being published online, while also making it possible to search by customized hashtags on a particular topic. The results are provided in real time and can be ordered by publication time, the most popular tweets, those with the greatest impact, and so on. In this way, when writing about a particular topic, tools such as these provide information about what users think, which trends or controversies are circulating on social media, and, if they become trending topics, they may even become part of the public agenda of leading media outlets and journalists.

Nevertheless, trend measurement also introduces a risk of circularity. Media organizations observe which issues generate interaction on social media and produce content about them; that content, because it comes from outlets with large audiences, can further increase digital conversation and reinforce the metrics that initially justified its coverage. Feedback loops thus arise in which social attention, editorial decisions, and algorithmic recommendation mutually reinforce one another. A trending topic is therefore not a pure, external indicator of public opinion, but the provisional result of multiple selection processes that include citizen activity, professional strategies, and platform rules.

Growing user participation in media content has given rise to *transmedia* experiences and narratives. Harry Jenkins (2006) notes that users are no longer satisfied with being passive consumers of content; they want to become part of the storylines. Jenkins highlights the case of Marvel: in addition to comics, they created films, video games, and all kinds of merchandising related to the franchise in order to attract users across different media. Increasingly, companies create mobile applications, blogs, and contests around a particular program so that audiences can enjoy the experience; consider the previously mentioned example of Coca-Cola and its initiative involving shaking mobile phones in Hong Kong. The idea of convergence helps place *transmedia narratives* within a broader process. Jenkins describes a convergence culture in which content circulates across media and consumers actively participate in searching for, combining, and reinterpreting it. This participation does not necessarily imply equality of power between companies and users, but it does require cultural industries to take into account practices that occur outside the original product. In the news domain, a story can continue through comments, videos, memes, threads, and responses that alter its interpretation and reach. Agenda setting thus also becomes a struggle to sustain attention to a story across multiple connected spaces.

In short, today it is not only brands and major news outlets that decide what people talk about; users can also use social media to establish which issues should be addressed and which news items are or are not relevant to agenda setting. Chadwick's (2017) concept of a hybrid media system offers a formulation that is particularly compatible with this conclusion. Instead of opposing old and new media, he proposes analyzing how actors, technologies, and logics from different eras combine, compete, and adapt. Newsrooms use social media to identify topics and distribute news; users rely on professional media to document their conversations; platforms depend on journalistic content, and media organizations depend on platform distribution. The public agenda emerges from these reciprocal relationships. Speaking of agenda setting 2.0 therefore means studying a system of dependencies and feedback loops rather than attributing stable control to a single actor.

## 9. Final Considerations

Throughout the twentieth century, the mass media were the major protagonists. They clearly set the pace of public opinion. Through strategies based on psychoanalysis (see Edward Bernays),

they took control of audiences' minds. Television viewers were passive and uncritical consumers of content and, therefore, easy prey for politicians and advertising agencies.

However, the internet and smartphones have created a new, more connected, collaborative, and emotional environment that turns users into a type of prosumer who may even come to determine the public agenda of the once-untouchable mass media. This is what we have called agenda setting 2.0, an idea already present in Johnson (2014).

Digital-native users have gone from being passive consumers of information to prosumers who participate and create content. The use of social media and other electronic devices shapes the public agenda of major media organizations. These media will not address in depth those issues that fail to arouse audience interest and, therefore, an increasing amount of effort and news space is devoted to satisfying audience demands rather than determining the content that listeners and viewers should consume (as occurred before the advent of the internet).

However, this change in the user's position should be interpreted with caution. The capacity to produce and disseminate information is distributed far more widely than in the mass-media model, but attention remains a scarce and highly concentrated resource. Not all users have the same network of contacts, reputation, technical competence, or capacity to activate amplification mechanisms. The condition of prosumer describes a relevant structural possibility, not an effective equality of influence. Precisely for this reason, an updated theory of agenda setting must examine which users, communities, and intermediaries manage to transform participation into public visibility.

Social media provide companies and media organizations with highly valuable information. Consumers' emotions and feelings toward a news item or a brand can be empirically translated into likes, comments, and shared posts. These platforms constitute a model of collaborative technology in which individuals freely interact with and judge (sometimes with exaggerated vehemence) all kinds of content, from political proposals to new advertising campaigns, even going so far as to promote boycotts of brands.

Dependence on metrics such as likes, comments, and shares also changes the criteria by which the success of a piece of content is evaluated. In classical editorial logic, public relevance could be justified through professional standards even if a topic did not generate an immediate audience response. On platforms, by contrast, interaction is visible and comparable almost in real time. When these metrics are incorporated into journalistic decisions, there is a risk of equating relevance with engagement<sup>8</sup>. A sufficiently complete agenda setting 2.0 must distinguish between these two dimensions: what attracts measurable attention and what, for social, political, or epistemic reasons, deserves attention even if it does not initially receive it.

Thanks to the immediacy of social media, young freelance journalists who specialize in particular subjects can find an ideal market niche in which to develop their work. These young people, experts in the use of current hardware and software, can influence thousands of other young people and become opinion leaders. We may ask whether these young cyberjournalists will be a key factor in agenda setting 2.0 in the coming years.

The opportunity for new communicators coexists with a transformation of informational authority. Credibility no longer depends exclusively on belonging to a journalistic institution, but neither should it be reduced to the number of followers. In the digital space, professional authority, network reputation, subject-matter expertise, and algorithmic visibility can reinforce or contradict one another. The challenge for digital media and independent journalists is to build recognizable mechanisms of verification and accountability that make it possible to distinguish influence from reliability. Agenda setting 2.0 will be as much a theory about the circulation of attention as about the conditions under which that attention becomes public authority.

In this sense, agenda setting 2.0 can be understood as the provisional outcome of a hybrid media system in which no actor completely controls the flow of information. Traditional media retain professional resources and production capacity; platforms intervene in the visibility and circulation of content; and users select, comment on, recombine, and amplify that content. Public

<sup>8</sup> For a deeper discussion of the concept of *engagement* in communication and social media, see Solis (2010) and Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie (2014).

relevance emerges from the interaction among these levels and from the feedback loops generated between them (Chadwick, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018).

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