

## News Media and the Emotional Public Sphere

### *Introduction*

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This introduction provides the conceptual and theoretical context that informs a multidisciplinary approach to the relationships between news media and emotions and their influence on the dynamics of the public sphere. It also highlights the importance of the emotional dimension of the public sphere to understand why rationalistic perspectives on both the media and the public sphere do not suffice to capture the complexities of social and political life in contemporary democracies. This Special Section of the *International Journal of Communication* presents theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and empirical research that contribute to our understanding of the relationships and mutual implications of news media, emotions, and the public sphere.

*Keywords: news media, emotions, emotional public sphere, journalism*

In recent years, we have witnessed several events in European and international contexts that have triggered strong emotional reactions from national governments, political parties, nongovernmental organizations, and large sectors of the civil society across the globe. Huge anti-austerity demonstrations in different countries, terrorist attacks in major cities, the massive flow of immigrants and refugees from Middle Eastern and African countries across Europe, the rise of both right-wing and left-wing populisms in different parts of the world, Brexit, and the worrying intensification of echo chambers, filter bubbles, post-

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Date submitted: 2018-04-02

<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank all the participants in the International Workshop on News Media and the Emotional Public Sphere, organized in 2015 as part of a postdoctoral research project (Rosas) at the Institute for Culture and Society at the University of Navarra, Spain. Many thanks to authors who joined this publication project following the workshop and contributed to its scholarly quality. Special thanks also to our anonymous reviewers, whose pertinent comments and feedback shaped in important ways the content of this Special Section. Finally, our heartfelt thanks to Arlene Luck, managing editor of the *International Journal of Communication*, for guiding and overseeing the Special Section to publication.

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truth, and fake news, to name a few, have highlighted both the mobilizing power of emotions and the crucial role of the media in shaping the dynamics of social and political life in contemporary societies. In addition, these events have raised questions about the power of the media to affect public opinion and how we should understand the space of public information, discussion, and citizen participation in contemporary societies.

Although the Western idea of citizens participating actively in public life through public discussion dates back to ancient Greece and Rome (Weintraub & Kumar, 1997), the theoretical underpinnings of the modern notion of citizens participating in their governance can be located in the Enlightenment period, an example of which is Kant's view that for people and nations to be enlightened, "nothing is required but *freedom*, and indeed the least harmful of anything that could even be called freedom: namely, freedom to make *public use* of one's reason in all matters" (Kant, 1999, p. 18, emphasis in original). This modern and enlightened ideal of the public use of reason lies at the heart of both the theoretical foundations of the Habermasian view of the public sphere and the development of journalism as a professional practice in Western societies.

Habermas's (1989) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is one of the major attempts both to provide a synthesis of the sociohistorical rise and decline of the bourgeois public sphere in Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries and to draw its implications for a normative model of public communication and participation in modern democracies. According to the Habermasian conception, the public sphere designates the arena of rational discussion and deliberation about social, political, economic, and cultural issues within a state. It is, therefore, the common space in which informed citizens discuss, argue about, question, and participate in—ideally on equal terms and without external coercion—the political life of their community. This social and communicative dynamics inherent to participating in the public sphere presupposes, however, some procedural rules. As a space for collective deliberation and reasoned public choice—and not a mere juxtaposition of monologues on public issues—participants are required to exert their rational capacity to give and listen to reasons, to evaluate opposing points of view, to submit the validity of their arguments to public criticism, and, if needed, to reach consensus on matters of public interest.

However, despite the theoretical advantages of the Habermasian model (Boeder, 2005; Dahlgren, 2005; Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002) and Habermas's reply to critiques prompted by academic debates about his original theoretical version (Calhoun, 1992), this rationalist perspective of the public sphere has been strongly called into question from diverse fronts for several reasons. It excludes certain groups or "counterpublics" from the space of discussion and political action (Dahlberg, 2013; Negt & Kluge, 1993). It does not recognize the plurality of public spheres (Butsch, 2007). It hypostatizes the rationality of the public sphere to the point that the latter vanishes into a phantasmagoria (Robbins, 1993). It idealizes a communicative rationality that does not take into account the empirical complexities of political reality and ignores communicative situations that do not necessarily lead to a consensus (see, e.g., Crossley & Roberts, 2004).

Furthermore, beyond these contested areas of the Habermasian view, an aspect that neither Habermas nor most of its former critics have clearly and explicitly addressed concerns the affective

dimension of communication and participation in the public sphere. This aspect is important because citizens do not enter the public sphere as mere disembodied minds engaged in arguing and deliberating under the normative constraints of an idealized communicative rationality. On the contrary, citizens who participate in the public sphere are individuals who bring to public discussion not only their beliefs, expectations, and argumentation abilities but their legitimate and socially relevant affective concerns. This neglected aspect of the public sphere has been recently highlighted by some authors who explicitly address the importance of affect and emotions as indicators of social and moral values and as powerful motivators for political mobilization (Abu-Lughod & Lutz, 2009; Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2001; Massumi, 2015; Nussbaum, 2013).

From an equally rationalistic perspective, the modern idea of the public sphere is linked to the role played by journalism and the media in promoting an informed citizenry capable of engaging in public discussion. As a professional practice based on pillars such as the search for truth, objectivity, freedom of expression, and the right of citizens to information, journalism has roots inherited from the Enlightenment (Ward, 2006) supporting the image of journalism as an activity rationally oriented to account for events in a detached way. The historical valuation of reason as an articulating axis of journalistic activity has contributed significantly to the conceptualization of journalists as rational individuals, capable of keeping the necessary distance between the facts they must communicate and their opinions about them, devoted to the search for truth and balanced reporting, able to be independent of external forces that can bias their professional activity, and skilled in the use of objective and dispassionate language (Schudson, 2003). This twofold image of journalism as an exercise of reason and of journalists as rational and objective communicators fits in well with the Habermasian view of the public sphere in which the ideal task of journalism and the media is to provide, objectively and dispassionately, the necessary information so that citizens can participate in optimal conditions in debates about the sociopolitical life of their communities.

However, this largely rationalist conception of journalism and the media has been criticized by theoretical and empirical approaches to the role of journalism and the media in shaping the emotional dimension of the public sphere (Lunt & Stenner, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002, 2015; Richards, 2007, 2010). As a result, the concept of the emotional public sphere has emerged in the past decade as an alternative to the hegemony of rationalist models of the public sphere and the media built on the basis of traditional—but also misleading—dichotomies such as reason/emotion, mind/body, private/public, and objective/subjective. This recognition of the emotional public sphere and how the media shapes it has contributed to the increasing questioning of models and perspectives that anathematize emotions as mere instances of human irrationality. Certainly, recognizing that emotions are an integral part of the public sphere does not force us to abandon any rational approach to the collective dynamics of discussion and participation in public affairs. What is involved here is an effort to reconceptualize the nature and function of affective experiences as part and parcel of individuals' rational actions in the public space. In the same way, recognizing that the media contribute substantially to the maintenance of the emotional public sphere does not necessarily imply falling into a mixture of emotional indulgence and exacerbated sentimentality that, for some, inevitably distorts the very nature of journalism as reporting facts. Although some media outlets do exploit the lives of celebrities, accidents and natural catastrophes, terrorist attacks, and economic crises from an overtly sensationalistic angle, we must recognize that not all reports and

news that represent and communicate emotional content are a priori sensationalistic—even though most of them estheticize and politicize the emotional meanings of those events (Rosas, 2015). For example, Pantti and Wahl-Jorgensen (2007) have shown that media affective narratives about natural catastrophes contribute to the maintenance of fundamental social norms and values such as solidarity and empathy. Furthermore, emotions are important aspects of public engagement with and trust in news (Rosas, 2013; Serrano-Puche, 2017) and ethical gauges of the journalistic profession (Rosas, 2016).

According to some authors, the conceptualization of the public sphere is marked by the fact that our contemporary societies also promote collective dispositions articulated within emotional spaces. As Innerarity (2006) puts it,

The emotional spaces originate from a specific social susceptibility: we live in a culture of affect, in an “experience society” (Schulze, 1995), which spectacularizes, dramatizes, and converts everything into a sensational experience. The media trigger the permanent emotional alert among society and thus maintain the necessary attention to arouse in each case the corresponding sentimental content. The emotional space is now the space par excellence, the substitute for the one we thought guided by ideological confrontation and articulated by the corresponding institutions. (p. 40)

In addition to Innerarity’s claim about the experience society we live in, it should be noted that most contemporary societies have developed a sort of susceptibility akin to the production and reception of affective content through the media. This susceptibility is due in large part to the high degree of mediatization in our daily lives. According to Hjarvard (2013), *mediatization* is understood as “the process by which culture and society become increasingly dependent on the media and its logic” (p. 17). It is important to note here that the concept of mediatization refers not only to the way in which the media is embedded in every corner of society and culture but to how the media itself has become an institution. A corollary derived from this conception is that each medium has a particular *modus operandi*, characterized by specific patterns of selection, production, and distribution of material and symbolic resources. In this sense, the susceptibility to the production and reception of affective contents through the media can be understood according to the mediatization patterns of radio, newspapers, television, and digital media. Each of these outlets not only opens spaces for the communication of affective contents but also imposes a rhythm and a logic of circulation of those contents.

When considering the relationships between news media, emotions, and the public sphere, many questions arise: What are the social and epistemological roles of emotions in the public sphere? In what ways do individual and social emotions shape collective action? How can information and communication technologies contribute to raising and conveying feelings of civic engagement? What role do emotions play in journalistic practices? How are emotions represented in different media outlets? What are the relationships between journalism education and practice and emotional literacy? What function do emotions fulfill in people’s sharing of news contents on social media platforms?

These questions were addressed at the International Workshop on News Media and the Emotional Public Sphere, held in 2015 at the University of Navarra, which was the starting point for this Special

Section. This workshop brought together international psychologists, sociologists, and media and communication scholars to reflect upon and gain insight into the role of emotions in the production and reception of the news as well as to assess the implications of journalistic representations and narratives of emotions for the public sphere. The workshop participants contributed high-quality theoretical and empirical papers that were later joined by post-workshop papers from other international scholars working on issues that are relevant for the general spirit of this Special Section.

### **Articles in This Special Section**

Barry Richards addresses the relationships between emotions and politics in his commentary, "The Emotional Public Sphere and Its Importance: Freedom of Speech as a Case Study." As a scholar who has extensively elaborated on the concept and political implications of the emotional public sphere, Richards' commentary is a twofold move aimed at reevaluating the theoretical relevance of the concept and testing its power to analyze one of the thorniest issues in most contemporary democratic societies. By drawing on theoretical tenets of post-Freudian psychoanalysis, the author posits that the dynamics of the emotional public sphere can be understood as a force field in which unconscious emotions play an important role. Richards examines the limits of freedom of speech in terms of emotional toxicity and suggests a consequentialist approach to making decisions on whether a certain type of speech should be censored based on a consideration of the emotional costs and benefits of increasing or decreasing toxicity. The author provides a thought-provoking view of the need for a serious media commitment to recognize and examine the emotional appeal of extremist speech and, in a similar vein to the therapeutic work, to identify its toxicity and contain it within the sociopolitical context.

In his commentary, "Public Sphere Participation Online: The Ambiguities of Affect," Peter Dahlgren provides an informed and multilayered reflection on affect as an important aspect of political participation within the context of the role of online media in democracy and public spheres. By putting forward a balanced account of the ambiguities of affect (i.e., gains and issues), the author highlights reasons to overcome traditional views squarely opposing reason and emotion to argue that they are deeply intertwined in collective action and political agency. Furthermore, Dahlgren elaborates on this perspective to understand the dialectics of political expression and political action in online platforms and how the features of online media either foster or thwart effective political participation. Finally, the author examines problematic developments of populism and how the affective appeal of this phenomenon can be increased through echo chambers provided by online platforms. Dahlgren delivers a stimulating article about the complexity of the relationships between affect, political participation, and the public spheres constructed through online media.

Karin Wahl-Jorgensen's article, "Toward a Typology of Mediated Anger: Routine Coverage of Protest and Political Emotion," examines the routine coverage of protest in newspapers in the United Kingdom during a two-month period in 2015 and finds that anger works as both a cause of engagement and a barometer of public feeling. Her analyses demonstrate that a typology of mediated anger can be established along a spectrum encompassing legitimate rational/anger, aggressive and/or disruptive anger, and illegitimate/irrational anger. According to the author, rational/legitimate anger is a discursive construction in which anger functions as an explanatory framework for understanding the protests.

Aggressive and/or disruptive anger is discursively constructed as a legitimate response to grievances, even if accompanied by aggression, disruption, or violence. Finally, illegitimate/irrational anger is a discursive construction that focuses on conflict and violence, and therefore discredits protesters and describes them as irrational. Based on these analyses, Wahl-Jorgensen highlights the extent to which mediated anger is performative (it has to do with actions performed by actors in the public sphere), discursive (it is narratively constructed by journalists), collective (it can be articulated by collectives in public), and political (it is aimed at addressing an injustice). The author provides a significant contribution to the understanding of news media, emotion, and politics by establishing the importance of studying mediated anger as a political emotion.

Tereza Capelos, Theofanis Exadaktylos, Stavroula Chrona, and Maria Pouloupoulou examine the links between individual, collective, and social emotionality in UK newspapers' representations of the European financial crisis from 2009 to 2012 in their article, "The Emotional Economy of the European Financial Crisis in the UK Press." Through an analysis of editorials from journalists and comments from experts, public figures, and opinion leaders, the authors provide a map of valence-negative emotions, such as fear, anger, and disappointment, and valence-positive ones, such as hope, pride, and compassion. They found that these emotions were clustered in levels so that anger and disappointment were experienced as social and individual rather than collective emotions, and hope, pride, and compassion were experienced mostly as collective emotions with fewer social-level mentions. According to their results, commentaries and editorials reflected the individual emotions of their authors, social emotions captured public sentiment, and collective emotions defined shared group experiences. This describes a multilayered environment of emotional communication, where elites and audiences diverged in their emotional experiences as they sought to grasp the unfolding crisis. This research provides a first and important glimpse into the emotional economy of a historical moment when the Brexit question was surfacing on the political horizon and allows for parsing the context in which political decisions and public actions are interpreted and shaped by mediated emotionality.

In his article, "Strategic Avoidance and Strategic Use: A Look Into Spanish Online Journalists' Attitudes Toward Emotions in Reporting," Omar V. Rosas investigates Spanish online journalists' attitudes toward emotions in reporting to provide insight into what motivates journalists to use (or not use) emotions in their stories and how emotions are represented in online news. Drawing on interviews with journalists from five Spanish online media, the author discovers that these journalists hold divided attitudes toward emotions: Some strategically avoid using emotions, while others use them strategically. These different attitudes emerge from journalists' perceptions and implementation of the objectivity norm as well as from their personal beliefs and professional convictions about the value of emotionality in the news. Journalists who strategically avoid using emotions appear to stick to the traditional view of objectivity, which operates in a rigid dichotomy between reason and emotion, and perceive the latter as something that needs to be sidestepped. On the contrary, journalists who use emotions strategically appeared to redefine the objectivity norm to align their beliefs about the newsworthiness of emotions. Furthermore, the author finds that journalists' involvement in the multimodal articulation (i.e., the combination of text, audio, photo, video) reveals that they are, to some extent, guided by two needs (aptly described by Donsbach, 2004): the social validation of perceptions and the need to preserve one's existing predispositions. Rosas provides a stimulating contribution to research on journalism and emotion,

highlighting similarities and differences between online journalists and those working in other media outlets (see Pantti, 2010; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013) when it comes to using and representing emotions in the news.

Alberto Dafonte analyzes the motivations behind users' sharing of news on social media and the role of emotions in that process in his article, "Audience as Medium: Motivations and Emotions in News Sharing." By adopting a multilevel approach, the author provides a deep literature review in which social behavior, personality factors, psychological needs, and emotions appear as key aspects to understand why and how audiences share news-related emotional content on online platforms. This research finds that digital users are motivated to share content for two reasons: psychological factors associated with the user and the message's content. Among the motivations that drive users toward news sharing, three categories can be highlighted: self-serving motives, altruistic motives, and social motives. These motivations converge as sharing fulfills two core functions for users: They express themselves in positive ways, and they strengthen their social bonds. With regard to the content of the messages, two variables influence the likelihood that they will be shared: valence and arousal. Regarding the former, news content that elicits positive or pleasant feelings is more likely to spread than negative and neutral content. However, items that involve a higher level of arousal—regardless of whether the content is positive or negative—correlate positively with the probability of being shared. Emotional intensity as a variable therefore increases the likelihood of news sharing. As Dafonte's article demonstrates, understanding this process, linked to phenomena such as emotional contagion and content virality (i.e., memes), is essential in the dynamics of production and circulation of contents that feed the emotional public sphere.

In sum, the articles in this Special Section make significant contributions to understanding the intricate relationships among news media, emotions, and the public sphere. In addition, these articles reexamine established concepts, raise new questions, and call for future developments in theoretical and empirical research on the topics addressed here. Finally, the authors of this Special Section show that interdisciplinary approaches are the best for shedding light on the impact that media representations of emotions have on the public sphere.

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