

Public Debates and the Reconfiguration of Politics

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Executive summary

Our research falls within the broad field of literature surveying the role of mass media in modern societies and their relationship with the functioning of democracy. Once they became almost mandatory practices for electoral campaigns and referenda in a substantial number of democratic states, televised political debates seem to be also both a symptom and a cause of political communication which is highly profiled nowadays. They represent one of the most spectacular illustrations of contemporary coverage of politics, which seem to compact politics to political communication while practicing politics is converted into a communication practice. Thus one is not surprisingly that for more than 40 years, broadcasted political debates have generated a significant amount of academic research which starts from theoretical perspectives and heterogeneous subjects and reaches to disparate and often divergent outcomes.

The *three main general objectives of our research* are as follows: framing televised political debates within the deliberative democracy theory, while presenting the challenges they are facing with and their role from such a perspective; the second objective is to demonstrate the need for reconfiguration of the idea of participatory democracy by means of the television and deliberative turn, and last but not least our third goal is to prove a link directly proportional between the political responsiveness/ (the *responsiveness principle*), and the public pressure exerted by means of public debates (the *accountability principle*).

Elections are nowadays less choices for the future and more judgments on the past. Election meaning has changed its nature. We are not dealing anymore with a separation and selection of candidates, but rather with a procedure to remove those candidates who once got elected they have disappointed their voters. We are the witnesses of a counter democracy according to Rosanvallon's formulation (2010: 185), and sanctioning the past has become the elections' paramount variable. One even occurred new terms to describe the evolution of politics i.e. *poison politics* or *negative politics* (Kamber, 1997). It seems that counter democracy seems to replacing the old project's democracies. In this framework, the most common manifestation of political participation - voting – moves itself away from the essence of participatory democracy.

Finding political reality in the terms above encourages us to abandon the limited categories of understanding political participation and to make room for a *multiform vision of democratic activity* and the main purpose of this paper is to argue in favour of televised political debates as instantiations of democratic practice (along with voting, civil society actions and so on and so forth).

To resume Michael Walzer's formula (2004), in a "society of removal" the material basis of social trust institution are melting, individuals trust less and less each others because they no longer know each other. Lack of trust in others and the lack of confidence in the Government may be correlated. The lack of sense of belonging to the same socio-cultural area, sharing the same values, memories, references, experience, languages or similar stereotypes are all grounds for making the common opinion difficult. Televised political debates, enjoying broad audience, can help overcoming the sense of alienation, mistrust and lack of community belonging. However, to have positive impacts, public debate must take place in a democracy perceived by political power and citizens as one purely deliberative and the deliberative practice must have a real influence on political decision-making.

One cannot state that there is always an influence of democratic deliberations on political decisions. For this reason, in our research we limit ourselves to examine the value and meaning of public debate and televised political debates. More and more people, members of the public or the so-called experts are invited at TV and radio stations to debate on the hot issues of the day. Is there is a purpose of these discussions or they provide just *entertainment* conceived to fill the broadcast schedules? Why do people go to TV debates and what kind of debate comes out of this? Why media broadcast provides increased opportunities for participation and how does it handle arguments presented? Is this a new form of public space or forum? Or is it just a travesty of political debate, without real consequences? Do such broadcasted political shows offer new opportunities for the public to interrogating the political power or are these shows only part of media diversion and a way of distracting public from the real social and political action? To answer these questions, one need to talk about spectators and participants in such television broadcasts in the framework of an interdisciplinary analysis which raises questions about the changing role of media in political debate, participatory democracy and public communication. In our research quest we opt for a combination of descriptive and normative approach of political reconfiguration in the context of deliberative democracy, and media, rhetoric and argumentation

theories as well as for an empirical methodological, textual approach for the two applications while using the text analysis and media monitoring.

Currently mass media supervises state institutions and they are actually forming the environment where conventional institutions are struggling to maintain their authority and effectiveness. Legitimacy and confidence as fundamentals of the theory of representative democratic government can not be granted only by means of electoral mechanism. One requires a continuous reconfirmation of them by deliberative mechanisms and manifestations of civil society. Political public debating is a form of instantiating civic deliberation and participation. In this context, authority is tuned cognitively, but it is also resented, and the rhetoric proves itself as useful and of present interest in the mass communication and media authority as it was in antiquity' debates.

The first part of the paper describes democracy as a framework for public debate. While discussing over the challenges the deliberative democracy is facing with we consider the problem of legitimacy and confidence gained during deliberations, the ideal of transparency of modern society, building public opinion and the possible conditions for public deliberations (see Chapter I). Between the two elements (apparently) contradictory - individual and mass - one should be created a bond and the crisis of social binder crisis arises from the difficulty of finding a new balance between these constituents. In the 2nd Chapter, we argue in favour of the fact that television is the main binder of the mass individualist society and it is the only activity shared by all social classes and all ages, and thus creating a connection between all. One talking about TV, from the public sphere perspective, one may find that the public sphere is partly shared by television. We shall try to identify the limitations, possibilities and conditions necessary for television-public sphere relationship in the context of the fast structural and technological development of television.

Complex configuration of television is well captured by the notion of *prismatic television* (Dahlgren, 2005:25), which emphasizes its three facets: it is simultaneously an industry, a collection of audio-visual texts and a socio-cultural experience. This perspective is related multidimensional approach of the public sphere where television industry is the focal point for the institutional dimension of the public sphere. Moreover TV industry is itself obviously shaped by some structural elements of our society, and the of television audio-visual texts, at least the journalistic ones, are key-elements to dimension the representation of the public sphere. Last but

not least, television as a socio-cultural space is simultaneously correlated with size of socio-cultural interaction.

Data we present in our paper demonstrates the increasing consumption of media in recent years. Thus we turn to the public sphere issue, wondering on the nature of the social space in where these debates and arguments take place. Is there “real conversation” in the TV debates? Does television generate, through its debates, a community of people who talk among themselves about matters of public interest? To answer these questions we should first clarify the space where the TV debates take place and thus our whole work is under the auspices of understanding television as an agora of the contemporary world.

There is a problem not only on issues that are currently debated, but also on how they are discussed. Therefore, *the second part of the paper* will be organized around two topics that influence public debate and deliberative democracy implicitly namely: setting the agenda for televised debates and arguments presented in these debates. We shall try to show the conditions for the discursive performance of televised debates and the construction of public debated agenda by means of two relevant case studies – i.e. the televised election debates, in UK (Brown-Cameron-Clegg, 2010) and France (Hollande-Sarkozy, 2012).

In the 3rd Chapter we argue that televised debates underpin the discursive bases of legitimacy of power and political action. Throughout the construction of political show, language is a fundamental ingredient and it is important to recognize the role of language in evoking political realities. Contemporary research has showed that language is the key-element, creator of the social worlds that people experience and not just a simple tool for describing objective reality. Throughout this chapter we take over the constituents of political performance as identified by Murray Edelman – social issues, political leaders and opponents - and describing in details regarding the manner these types of political shows causes essential public opinion in deliberative democracy. Political leaders are symbols of power, evil, nationalism, future promises or other virtues or vices and thus they help in creating some meaning in a confusing world. In assigning meanings to leaders, spectators define their own political standings. At the same time, faith in leadership is a catalyst for conformity and obedience. Leaders are controversial at their apogee time and thus remain as historical figures too, although their meaning changes as speeches and concerns change at their turns. Political opponents - other states, political leaders, social groups and so on - are inherent constituents of the political scene.

They confer to political show power to arouse passions, fears and hopes. Since invoking a threatening opponent can result in gaining political support for the expected goals, people build their own enemies to renew their commitment. But beyond the political show which mobilizes the constituents identified by Murray Edelman, the televised political debates are those that give shape and nuances to the social issues, political leaders and opponents, laying the discursive bases of legitimacy of power and political action. We deal with these topics this in the 3rd Chapter starting from the finding that television is part of our everyday reality, and it organizes and structures society in terms of daily schedule and limited interaction framework as well as a framework for collective perceptions. Throughout this chapter we shall to illustrate the relation between audience and the centrality of television in our semiotic universe, respectively. This position can be understood quantitatively (television's ubiquity) as well as a cultural legitimacy derived from the rise of television. *Agenda setting* theory describes "the ability (especially of news and televised public debates, in our case) to influence the prevalence of some topics on the public agenda" (McCombs, 2004). The essence of this theory is determining the correspondence between the news on a particular subject and perception of audience on the subject: the more the news insists on a specific topic the more audience will perceive the topic as more and more important. Therefore, this chapter attempts to prove the third objective of the paper – the ratio between *responsiveness* and *accountability* principles by means of *agenda setting* theory in the political debating area.

In the argumentation theory, a special attention is paid to the setting of criteria to show the quality of an argument, but the standards that those who argue have in their mind are not necessarily those of reasoning. Based on these criteria, the communicational performance and counter-performance will be subject to scrutiny in the 4th Chapter of our paper. However, scholars have highlighted four standards to be met in order for a communication to reach its goal: *clarity*, *honesty*, *efficiency*, and *relevance*. These are summarized in Communication Principle introduced by van Eemeren and Grootendorst, the later at its turn partly derived from Grice's cooperation principle. In this context we are concerned with certain rules of discursive connecting and interacting and ideal strategies as variables for achieving discursive performance at the political debate level.

The third part of the paper describes in detail the reconfiguration of politics in the era of mass communication, although possible reconfigurations of politics have been anticipated

throughout the other chapters of our research. In the 5th Chapter, we notice that the ubiquity of television leads to uncritical legitimisation: the television is so widespread that it merges with everyday life. While operating through economic, technological, cultural, organizational frameworks, the television is always actively involved in defining, shaping and building a new perspective of the world and thus it pre-structures viewers' understanding of the world. The more influence media obtained, the more it became more sensitive to the pressure of clearly defined private interests, whether individual or collective. Summarizing, we can identify three main difficulties associated with broadcasted democracy: 1) An increase public communication which is accompanied by greater difficulty of action, 2) Increased visibility of politics but which leads to a reversal of the balance of forces in favour of the mass media; 3) A public getting more informed but lacking the means to express discontent. Are these difficulties surmountable? Yes, as long as deliberative democracy is understood as participatory one. As a result, through the idea of reconfiguration of politics we suggest a rethinking of civic involvement through the television. At the same time the reconfiguration of politics involves debating on the relation between political practising and political communication, which outcome is the public agenda (both the action and speech) at the crossroad of political marketing, the television ratings and public opinion.

Because of the growing electoral absenteeism one requires a reconfiguration of the participatory democracy paradigm. Thus we may talk about a deliberative democracy project that progressively prevailed in the '90s, and which it was aware of the participation's constraints, ending to suggesting a more "qualitative" approach (and this development was called *deliberative turn*). This is the general meaning of the politics' reconfiguration we focus on in our work, and the broadcasted political debates are the deliberative tool by means of which citizens are able to remain permanently connected to the social and political reality, being civically involved civic and able to put continuous pressure on their political representatives in order for the later to observe their mandates. Televised political debates represent another form of democratic activity at least as of same effectiveness as voting. They are a way of establishing authority and legitimacy which source and end is the community itself.