Domesticated voices and false participation: Anatomy of interaction on transmedia podcasting

Voces domesticadas y falsa participación: Anatomía de la interacción en el podcasting transmedia

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ABSTRACT

Transmedia podcasting (transpodcast) is an example of a digital medium essentially promoted by a community of independent creators that arises from the technological advancement derived from the arrival of Web 2.0. This medium is considered to offer its users greater possibilities of participation and co-creation by abandoning the traditional communicative models based on unidirectionality. The objective of this work is to determine how audience engagement takes place in this medium, taking into consideration the analysis of its participation spaces. In order to reach this goal, a Mixed Method Research Design was used, integrating two case studies with a total sample of 2,490 units of participation generated by users on the iVoox platform, the blogs of the two selected projects, and messages on Twitter. The research was complemented with an ethnographic investigation through observational methods on the presence of the user's voice in the podcasts of a total of 19 transpodcast projects. Despite the fact that numerous and relevant voices have defended that the new media ecosystem causes the decentralization and democratization of the agenda-setting and empowers ordinary citizens, this study shows a less optimistic and more critical perspective about the possibilities of meaningful citizen participation in online discourse.

RESUMEN

El transpodcast (podcasting transmedia) es un ejemplo de un medio digital desarrollado esencialmente por una comunidad de creadores independientes que surge del avance tecnológico derivado de la Web 2.0. Este medio ofrece a sus usuarios mayores posibilidades de participación y cocreación al abandonar los modelos comunicativos unidireccionales basados en la lógica broadcast, propios del siglo XX. El objetivo de este trabajo es determinar cómo se lleva a cabo la interacción de los usuarios en este medio a partir del análisis de los espacios de participación que despliega el transpodcast. Para ello, se empleó una metodología mixta (Mixed Method Research Design), que integra dos estudios de caso con una muestra total de 2.490 unidades de participación generadas por los usuarios en la plataforma iVoox, blogs de los dos proyectos y mensajes en Twitter. La investigación fue complementada con un estudio etnográfico, ejecutado a través de métodos observacionales sobre la presencia del usuario en los programas en formato podcast de un total de 19 proyectos transpodcast. Aunque numerosas y relevantes voces han defendido que el nuevo ecosistema mediático ha causado la descentralización y la democratización de la agenda-setting y ha empoderado a los ciudadanos en términos comunicacionales, este estudio aporta una perspectiva menos optimista y más crítica sobre las posibilidades reales de participación ciudadana significativa en el discurso online.

1. Introduction

In its first fifteen years, podcasting has been configured as a practice that represents the best of digital media production on the Web. This medium can be characterized as a way to share content made in a personal way, as a niche and immersive medium, as a platform to disseminate information and research openly and, above all, as a challenge to the hegemony of the text and the image as prominent communicative languages in the digital age. The podcast is considered a participatory and collaborative medium (Löwgren & Reimer, 2013) that facilitates access into the communication arena to individuals without media experience, constituting a type of citizen journalism (Gillmor, 2004).

In recent years, numerous authors have analyzed podcasting as a powerful phenomenon within the digital media ecosystem (Massarelli & Perrotta, 2006; Sterne, 2008; Gallego, 2010; Cordeiro, 2010; 2012; Markman, 2011; Millette, 2011; Lindgren, 2014; Aguayo, 2015; Bonini, 2015; McHugh, 2016). One of the main perceptions coming from these studies is that the evolution of the podcast does not seem to be linked to technology. In fact, the technological tools applied to the podcast have evolved very little since the origin of the medium, whose development seems to be connected to the implementation of better user experiences and the creation of higher quality content. Not only are the media characterized by their technological specificities, but also by their textual differences, industrial practices, audience behavior and cultural understanding (Lotz, 2017). In that sense, podcasts are ontologically and culturally different from the rest of the media: they are made by podcasters and not by radio producers, for mobile listeners, and in search of niche content that is consumed on demand (Spinelli & Dann, 2019). These aspects, combined with its differential technological features, its specific financing mechanisms and the development of talent applied to the medium, has helped podcasting to outline its own cultural space (Berry, 2018) that, concomitantly, challenges the logic and effects of the mediation itself (Llinares, 2018). This own cultural space (López-Villafranca, 2019; Wade-Morris et al., 2019) has been promoted in a richer manner from amateur and independent production, which has managed to develop a powerful ethos of authenticity (Sullivan, 2018) with renewed bridging possibilities for its users (Swiatek, 2018).

Parallel to the creation of amateur communities, the professional podcast has experienced a great evolution in the last five years. The podcast became a mainstream phenomenon in the United States thanks to Serial (García-Marín, 2019), a show launched in 2014 that completely changed the perceptions about this medium (Dredge, 2014; Hancock & McMurtry, 2018). Its success lies in the exploitation of this medium's specific characteristics (Sellas & Solá, 2019): mobility, narrative fragmentation, and cross-platform integration. The publication of its chapters with an unpredictable periodicity-possible on the grounds of the podcast's particular content distribution method and the complexity and richness of its storytelling -derived from the possibility of pausing and reproducing the audio as many times as the user wants- led its producers to go beyond the sound language to furnish their creations with elements built in other media languages, generating interactive experiences, impossible to produce on the radio. In fact, the podcast rarely exists as a single sound entity, but forms an intertextual ecosystem (Barrios-O'Neill, 2018) characterized by a legible complexity (Tierney, 2015). At the same time, the podcast is considered a user-centered medium where the listener must actively decide their consumption pattern since, unlike other media, the interaction user-podcast does not exist in a single possible manner. Thus, podcasting, supposedly, opens up new forms of interaction and participation, even reaching performative participation (Wilson, 2018), which involves the physical interaction of the listener with the space depicted in the show.

The podcast's multiplatform and cross-platform character and its distinct interactive possibilities have resulted in the birth of transpodcast, medium derived from podcasting. Analogous to the notion of transradio (transmedia radio) coined by Martínez-Costa (2015), the concept of transpodcast intends to describe those media projects that, having the podcast as a core medium, extend their storytelling and expand their communicative structure to other media, platforms and media languages, acquiring an evident transmedia nature (Wrather, 2016; García-Marín & Aparici, 2018). Despite all the innovations implemented by podcasting and transpodcast, a central issue in the culture of these media continues without being sufficiently investigated: the presence/participation of the user/listener on the different platforms used by both media. Has transmedia evolution applied to sound content generated greater participatory experiences for users/listeners? To what extent does transpodcast reproduce the old media

models based on one-way communication processes? How is the digital public space for conversations and debates constituted and promoted by the transpodcast producers? In connection with these questions, our research raises the following objectives:

1) Analyze the functions that, within this type of transmedia projects, the different digital platforms perform as spaces for participation and interaction between producers and users and between the users themselves.

2) Map the actions carried out and the contents produced by the users in these participation spaces, in order to determine to what degree the user's meaningful participation takes place resulting in the content co-creation in this medium.

3) Construct a taxonomy about the different models/levels in which the listener's participation in the shows is performed.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Case studies selection

The participation spaces in transpodcast are defined as the different platforms in which users and fans create any type of content and interact with the rest of members of their community. The analysis of these participation platforms was established through a Mixed Method Research Design and executed by analyzing two case studies. The two shows chosen for the analysis had to contain the following eligibility criteria:

a) Non-professional and independent character. The study focused on the amateur community due to its majority status within the medium in Spain and, presumably, opening greater participatory possibilities compared to professional podcasting.

b) Having a wide community of users derived from its high relevance in the podcastsphere.

c) Offering the possibility of commenting on chapters hosted in their blogs without previous registration.

d) The two podcasts chosen should focus on different topics and adopt distinct formats.

Considering these variables, the transcasting projects chosen as the two case studies were 'Vidas en Red' and Fans fiction. The former, focused on technological issues, is a monologue –published daily- presented by a single podcaster. The latter is an informal chat between two TV series and movie enthusiasts, with monthly frequency.

2.2. Sample and procedures

The two projects selected as case studies are pioneers on podcast production dealing with technology and TV series. These topics are two of the most relevant and prominent in the Spanish independent podcastsphere. In the Spanish amateur context, they are regarded as reference podcasts due to their high number of listeners and monthly downloads. In addition, in the case of Fans Fiction, an entire network of podcasts about TV topics has been generated by adding other shows with alternative content to the central podcast. In addition, their formats (conversational and monologue) are the most representative ones in the Spanish context, and their hosts are popular figures: Converso (Vidas en Red) is a renowned technology specialist, while María Santonja (Fans Fiction) was one of the organizers of the 2017 national independent podcasting event in Alicante, and usually collaborates with major commercial radio stations, such as Cadena SER, as an expert in TV series. In both cases, the podcaster's popularity is a catalyst for their podcasts' visibility and relevance. Furthermore, the last element that justifies the representative and referential nature of these projects is the fact that their structure and central features have been copied by several independent podcasts. Both case studies focused on the analysis of the comments on the iVoox podcasting repository, messages on blogs, tweets generated by their communities, and the mode of listener's participation in both podcasts (sound content):

a) Study of the comments on iVoox. The sample was composed by the users' contributions published in the last 50 chapters hosted on the account of these podcasts. The study was carried out during three months (from November 2017 to January 2018).

b) Analysis of blog comments. All comments hosted related to the last 50 posts published on the blog for each of the two projects chosen were analyzed. They were studied between November 2017 and

January 2018.

c) Analysis of Twitter. All tweets addressed to the official accounts of the two projects during November 2017 comprised the sample. For data collection, the Tweetreach application was used, which is a specific tool for monitoring activity on social networks.

The messages and tweets were analyzed through "coding and counting", a quantitative method consisting in "encoding the data and then counting the occurrence of a coded item, together with content analysis" (Torrego & Gutiérrez, 2016). For the coding and classification of the data extracted on these three platforms, a registration sheet (Table 1) was used, including the following predetermined categories: textual (referred to comments related to the specific topic of the show), metatextual (those contents that are related to the project itself, with its authors or with its production process) and extratextual (comments that do not fit in any of the previous two dimensions). These categories were unfolded in 16 subcategories. The corpus of participatory units analyzed on these three spaces was formed by 2,490 comments and tweets, of which 1,058 (42.49%) were messages on iVoox, 680 comments on blogs (27.30%) and 752 contributions on Twitter (30.20%).

Table 1. Registration sheet for the quantitative study of comments on iVoox, blogs and Twitter		
Textual	**Metatextual**	**Extratextual**
Content extension	Production	Listening situation / circumstance
Request/query	About the authors	Personal reference
Emotional expression	Project news	Others (indicate the type)
Critiques/suggestions	Questions about the project	
Participation in contests/activities	General suggestions	
Others (indicate the type)	Advertising/promotion	
	Others (indicate the type)	

d) Observation of the listener's voice included in the shows. For its analysis, non-participatory observational methods were used for eleven months, between January 2018 and November 2018. In this case, a decision was made to expand the sample of transpodcast projects in order to include all the shows that received the 2017 Spanish Podcasting Awards. The number of shows studied in this stage was 19. In order to deal with the analysis, four categories, divided into a total of 16 subcategories, were established (Table 2). The four major dimensions to be observed were: a) the way in which listeners are asked to participate, b) their model of presence in the shows, c) the space occupied by the listeners within the shows, and d) the objective of the participatory act.

Table 2. Categories and subcategories analyzed through non-participant observation of the listeners' presence in the shows			
Participation request method	**Listener presence**	**Space occupied by the listener**	**Participation act's objective**
Placement of the call to request participation within the program (start, end, etc.). Format of the call to participate (pre-recorded announcement, live speech, etc.). Types and variety of participation modes. Possible incentives.	Reference from the podcast host. Reading of the listener comment. Pre-recorded transmission. Live intervention (phone call model). Presence at the time of recording with the rest of the hosts.	Time spent on listener participation. Existence of specific sections and when they are performed. Fan special show. Ongoing participation during the entire show	Possibility of participating (available for all listeners or only for those who accomplish specific requirements, etc.). Role of listeners assigned by the show's managers. Listener content type (content extension, critiques, advertising, emotional, etc.).
How is participation promoted?	How is participation executed?	When and where is participation developed?	What is the participation request for?

The research instruments used (quantitative analysis and non-participant observation) were articulated by complementation, a strategy consisting in the aggregation of results derived from different instruments that address the analysis of the object of study from different perspectives (Callejo & Viedma, 2005). In order to code and analyze the data produced from the non-participant observation, the Maxqda software was used, which is a specialized tool to assist in qualitative research and mixed methods.

3. Results

3.1. Participation on iVoox

Regarding the Vidas en red podcast, a total of 618 comments were analyzed, of which the majority (58.41%) were messages that extend the content of the show (Table 3). These comments can be identified as a type of content relevant as a complement to the podcast's narrative. The users personal experience with the technological devices analyzed by the podcaster in his shows is the issue most dealt with by the community flourished around this program. Expressions of emotion or empathy about the show's content (18.60%) were the second content type most generated by users, while 15.85% were linked to critical messages about the content that the program offers. The most common criticisms focus on the abuse of off-topic chapters, which is a practice that many podcast users generally disapprove.

Figure 1. Research model
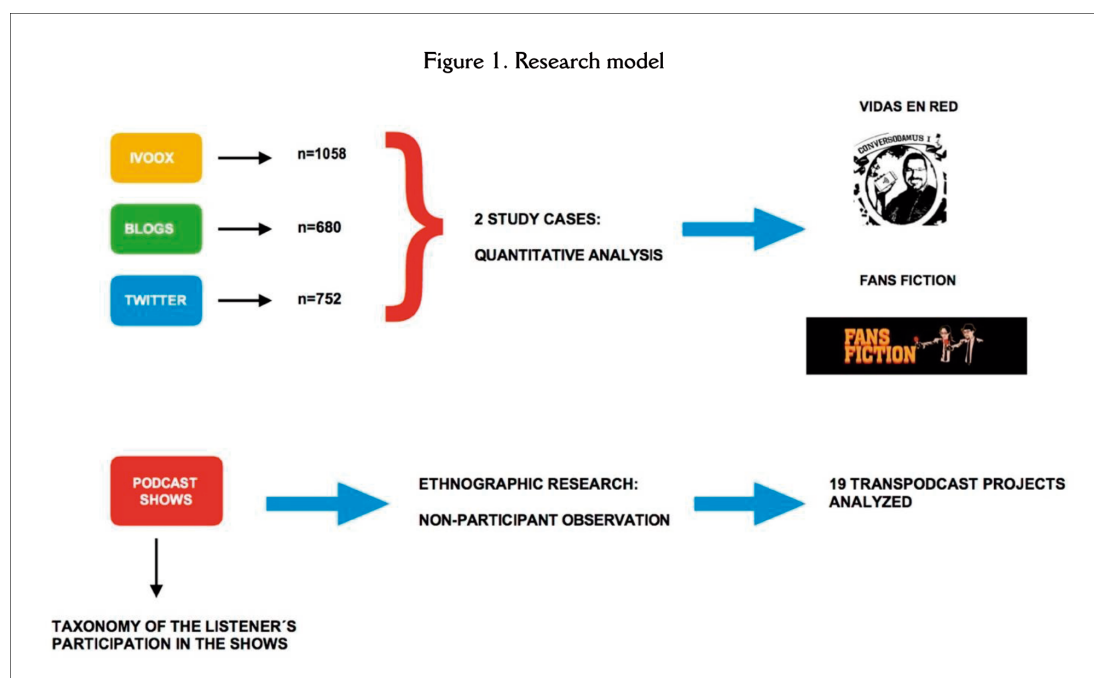
In the case of Fans Fiction, a smaller number of comments was produced (440); of which, unlike Vidas en red, the main content (47.04%) is connected to expressions of emotion or empathy towards the podcasters' discourse. This project receives a lower percentage of comments included under the label "narrative extension" (only 40.68%) and a lower average of critical messages (6.81%) than Vidas en red.

3.2. Comments on blogs

Participation in this platform tends to be lower compared to that observed on iVoox. While the latter displays a greater amount of messages that exceeded a thousand interventions, in the case of blogs the number of comments was 680 (30% lower). This difference is especially meaningful in the case of Vidas en red, whose community was able to generate 618 comments on the last 50 chapters uploaded on iVoox and only 39 on the last 50 posts of its blog. Almost half of the posts (44%) of this transpodcast project did not receive any comments. The more technological profile of this community can cause its members to be more accustomed to content production from the iVoox app and using social networks (instead of blogs) in

parallel to the execution of another activity. Usually the comments posted on platforms such as websites or blogs are generated from computers, in a domestic environment or, at least, in a situation where the only activity being carried out is precisely the writing of such comment.

Considering Vidas en red, the texts produced by its followers are, mostly, extensions of the content produced in the podcast (43.58%), expressions of emotion/ empathy (35.89%) and, to a lesser extent, queries and requests to the podcaster (12.82%). In this case, the critical content appears in fourth place, with 8% of the comments produced.

This low percentage of critical content obtained in the study applied to Vidas en red podcast is also observed when analyzing Fans Fiction, whose community barely produces this textual category in the numerous comments posted on its website. Its followers tend to produce more significant content (narrative extension) in this space than in the iVoox service, since 68% of registered interventions serve to extend the podcast's storytelling. In addition, 31% of comments are linked to emotional expressions. The remaining categories are barely represented.

3.3. Twitter

The data obtained show the relevance of promotional messages (those that serve to advertise the general activity of the program, invitation of special collaborators, publication of new chapters, recording of special episodes, etc.) as content generated by the communities of the two podcasts analyzed. Although with nuances and with different figures and results, on Twitter there is a greater presence of this type of promotional content compared to the use of this category in comments hosted on podcast platforms and blogs.

Table 3. Statistical study of the comments on iVoox and blogs, and participation on Twitter communities of the two selected transpodcasts							
Comments on iVoox							
Podcast	**Content extension**	**Emotion**	**Critiques**	**Request**	**Production**	**Situation**	**Others**	**Total (n)**
Vidas en red	361 58.41%	115 18.60%	98 15.85%	14 2.26%	10 1.61%	1 0.16%	19 3.07%	618
Fans Fiction	179 40.68%	207 47.04%	30 6.81%	7 1.59%	7 1.59%	1 0.22%	9 2.04%	440
Total	540 51.03%	322 30.43%	128 12.09%	21 1.98%	17 1.60%	2 0.18%	28 2.64%	1058
Comments on blogs							
Podcast	**Content extension**	**Emotion**	**Critiques**	**Request**	**Production**	**Authors**	**General suggestion**	**Total (n)**
Vidas en red	17 43.58%	14 35.89%	3 7.69%	5 12.82%	0	0	0	39
Fans Fiction	437 68%	196 31%	2 0.31%	2 0.31%	2 0.31%	1 0.15%	1 0.15%	641
Total	454 66.76%	210 30.88%	5 0.73%	7 1.03%	2 0.29%	1 0.14%	1 0.14%	680
Participation on Twitter							
Podcast	**Content extension**	**Emotion**	**Promot.**	**Request**	**Off-topic**	**Others**	**Total (n)**
Vidas en red	268 44.34%	150 25.38%	89 15.05%	29 4.90%	26 4.39%	29 4.90%	591
Fans Fiction	23 14.28%	21 13.04%	95 59.00%	0	5 3.10%	17 10.55%	161
Total	291 38.70%	171 22.73%	184 24.46%	29 3.85%	31 4.12%	46 6.11%	752

The community of Vidas en red was much more active in the same period (November 2017) than the Fans Fiction community. The former managed to gather almost 600 comments created by its followers, a high number compared to the much more modest amount of 161 tweets that was generated by Fans Fiction users. This difference in tweet production can be explained by three relevant reasons.

On the one hand, the Fans fiction Twitter community is more limited quantitatively when compared to the number of followers accumulated by the t Vidas en red account. On the other hand, the latter has enthusiasts with a more technological profile and more accustomed to creating content on social networks.

It should be noted that Vidas en red followers produced a lower volume of comments on the project blog in comparison to Fans fiction followers, which suggests that this community -Vidas en red- prefers to participate in a more synchronous way (when listening to the podcast), in contrast to the participation on blogs, regarded as more asynchronous. Finally, Vidas en red does not have a specific Twitter account, so the followers of the project must contact the personal account of its creator and single host (@Converso72), unlike Fans fiction, which when presented by several podcasters, has an official account with the name of the program, of a more corporate nature.

This difference is considered to be essential, since the official Fans fiction account can be perceived by its own community as less close and more impersonal compared to the perception of closeness that Vidas en red followers can experience. These differences reflect how the logic of connection and affinity built in these communities seems to be best achieved through the adoption of accounts that community members perceive as more personal.

Another element derived from the analysis of the use of Twitter is the greater generation of debates and discussions compared to the situation present in iVoox and blogs. This aspect is especially visible in the case of Vidas en red, where certain queries by the creator of the podcast generated conversations within the community for several days.

3.4. Listener participation on the shows

By applying the observational methods previously mentioned, the following five levels/models of participation within transmedia podcasts were found:

- Level 0. In this model, the communication mode is completely vertical, broadcast-style, identical to that of the radio. A clear differentiation is established between senders and receivers. There is no participation or co-creation by the user. The listener has no relevance in the show and there are no sections for their voice to be heard. Followers are not incorporated into the programs at any time.

- Level 1. The communication mode continues to be clearly one-way and hierarchical, although the hosts make some brief and superficial mentions of listeners who have contacted the program by any of the methods provided by the project. On certain occasions, conversations that arise from the participation in online platforms jump to the core media object, the podcast, introduced by the hosts. It is, however, a very subtle way of promoting the inclusion of the user's voice, since the references to these conversations usually occur very superficially, without detailed descriptions about the development of the initial interaction.

- Level 2. It consists of an evolution of the previous model: hosts introduce the opinions of their followers through the reading of comments coming from the different platforms provided by the project for that purpose. These comments are often read in a specific section of the program (of very short duration), usually in the final part of the show. The model continues to be absolutely hierarchical.

- Level 3. It is configured as a model similar to the previous one, with a main difference: the introduction of the user's voice after sending an audio message. The communicative model remains vertical, as there is still a clear imbalance between the time dedicated to the follower's voice and the subsequent comment of the podcaster regarding their contribution. The fact that users who participate with their audio messages are also podcast creators significantly facilitates their participation in other podcasts, either because they are able to produce materials with a higher technical quality or because this type of users are relevant or popular figures in the podcast community due to their creative work. For this reason, we observe the existence of a bias situated in the production and relevance within the community itself: users who contribute relevant materials to the podcastphere have more possibilities of being invited to co-create podcasts by others.

- Level 4. This model is linked to the creation of specific and exclusive chapters for the user's participation. These shows are designed as collaborative spaces completely produced with audio messages by listeners, through user comments read by podcasters and later commented by

them, or from a combination of messages of both types. In any case, although the presence of the user is introduced, the model does not cease to have a hierarchical structure: there is no dialogue between listener and podcaster since the latter has no possibility of replying to the comments of the hosts, so the relationship between both is not totally bidirectional. The presence of the user is limited to a single intervention and, in addition, the approach to managing participation is not open: podcasters stand as gatekeepers by selecting the participants and deciding which interventions will be included in the programs. On the other hand, these special shows are often organized as a solution for creating content in times when the podcaster has limited availability and/or little activity related to the topic of the show (holidays or summer period, for instance). They are configured as a strategy to exploit the free labour of fans in those periods of difficulties to generate new content.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The research data show the differentiated use that listeners of different transpodcast projects make of iVoox comments and Twitter posts. While the Vidas en red community create more meaningful messages that can be considered as narrative extensions of this podcast's storytelling, the content produced by the Fans fiction community tends to be more superficial, connected to the intention of advertising the show or showing personal feelings about the topics covered by its hosts. These differences in the use of the participation spaces lead us to consider that participation in the digital media is not performed in a homogenous way, even within the same medium. Each project has specific characteristics (related to their own listeners, the topics the podcasts cover, the features of the hosts, etc.) that generate different conditions for participation. As a consequence, it does not seem appropriate to regard participation as an aspect related to the medium itself, but an element connected to the specific ecosystem created by each project. Because of that, it is possible to assert that participatory media do not exist, what do exist are participatory ecosystems.

On the other hand, one of the main findings of our research is the very limited relevance of the user in the central transpodcast content, the podcast show. Despite the relevance of a significant number of interventions on iVoox, blogs and Twitter, this content is hardly included in the programs as part of their storytelling. In addition, the user voice's access to the shows is at least as restricted as on analog media. The transpodcast interaction model generally maintains the one-way logic characteristic of the traditional media. According to our research, all the models regarding the users' participation in podcasts present an unidirectional and hierarchical logic. The listener's voice is completely domesticated on the grounds that those participating in the shows are clearly managed by presenters, and what sounds like a conversation is actually a staged interaction organized by the editors to fit a pre-established framework (Pinseler, 2015). In order to reach a genuinely horizontal communication process and a true participatory ecosystem in transpodcast, the user/fan should be invited to be part of the podcast as a co-presenter. The participant would have a protagonist role and a continuous presence throughout the duration of the podcast and could enter into discussion with the usual hosts, so the model would be clearly more horizontal and less hierarchical than those previously analyzed. These programs would offer the sensation of breaking the barrier between those who emit and those who traditionally listen, generating greater freshness by introducing a different voice than usual. In their investigations on the participation in radio shows, Higgins and Moss (1982), Orians (1991), and Pinseler (2008) defend the lack of empowerment of the listener on a medium that creates the impression of being bidirectional communication, without really being bidirectional (Shingler & Wieringa, 1998). Our research concludes that exactly the same unidirectional dynamic is followed by transpodcast producers.

From the analysis of transpodcast user interaction, it is possible to raise issues related to the real communicational empowerment capacity of users in digital media. After the arrival of the Web 2.0 in 2004, many academics began to consider the possibilities of digital communication as an essential channel for the relevant participation of subjects in the public debate based on their coordinated and collaborative action in virtual structures open and lacking hierarchy (Jenkins, 2008; Shirky, 2010). After some initial years where the optimistic visions about the digital universe were hegemonic, the studies and contributions

of, among others, Prior (2007), Sunstein (2009), Pariser (2011), Turow (2011), Webster (2014), Han (2017), and Lanier (2018) offer a more critical perspective about the democratizing possibilities of the Internet. They define the digital spaces as a conjunction of closed structures that exploit and manipulate the user's social identities from the exploitation of a network of platforms whose business model is based on the commodification of user data (Srnicek, 2018). These perceptions about the Internet reject the former notions about the ordinary citizen's empowerment on digital environments.

Understanding how the grammar of interaction between senders and receivers is established is essential to construct processes that break the unidirectional and predominantly passive model that governed the media ecosystem during the twentieth century. Just as each medium defines its own content production language (based on years of evolution, practice and essay) significant participation in each medium (and each media project) also has its own language, which must be discovered through useful research in order to promote and nurture new relationship models between the different actors of communication so as to create truly horizontal and participatory processes.

Future research on the profile and role of audiences and their interaction with digital media should be carried out to determine whether the digital media ecosystem of the 21st century gives audiences a greater capacity to influence on the public debate; or if its voice, despite being shown, continues to have a subordinate role in the public sphere. That is, whether or not the expressive discourse (Allen, 2015) that the user produces on social networks and digital media has real possibilities of becoming influential discourse for transformative purposes.

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