Virtual communities and the challenge of connecting with audiences

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ABSTRACT

The first communication studies were born flawed by the obsession to control the behavior of audiences. However, as the North American school of communication consolidated, they understood that there were social components that influenced the response of broadcasters and that the media could exert an overall influence with the rest of the social institutions. The media of the 20th century, designed for mass communication, could not fulfill the dreams of a hypodermic theory that ensured that every member of the audience was "attacked" by the media message. Digital social networks have come to revolutionize every aspect of modern society. Now, the messages arrive in a personalized way to each subject of communication, and artificial intelligence dominates the production of content. This paper proposes a review from the classical theory of networks to the particularities of digital social networks. In addition, it approaches the virtual community as a way to create niches of resistance in the cultural struggle, through the segmentation of audiences that allows to achieve a connection between audiences and the posts published by the media, in this specific case, the newspaper *Vanguardia*.

Keywords: communication, cyberjournalism, digital social networks, virtual communities

1. INTRODUCTION

In the times of the fourth industrial revolution, where reality is constructed virtually, as a kind of parallel world to physical space, there is more and more talk of social networks. For many, this is a new issue, but those who consider it so are unaware of a powerful previous theorization, which lays the foundation for understanding how even social networking sites work on the Internet.

The origins of social network theory can be traced back to the 1930s and 1940s. However, already at the end of the 19th century, sociologists Émile Durkheim and Ferdinand Tönnies noted the importance of interactions between subjects in understanding social phenomena and assumed a non-individualistic explanation of the social fact. At the dawn of the next century, the German philosopher, sociologist, and critic Georg Simmel elaborated a contemporary concept of network, which asserts that society exists when a series of individuals interact. Already in the 1970s, a consolidated network theory assumes the analysis of networks as a method for the structural study of groups, through the use of various means, such as algebraic models and the computational development of graph theory.

After the advent of the triple W and especially of digital social networking sites, the world experienced a momentous change, which transformed the social fabric irreversibly. As a result, Cuba implemented a government policy that enhances the use and access to technologies. In a short time, WiFi access points began to be enabled, and in 2018, free trials were carried out for data service in

Internet access. Thousands of users have rapidly reached the network of networks to such an extent that, according to the report "Digital 2023: Cuba," there are 7.97 million users in the country so that more than 70% of the Cuban population is online.

During the quarantine imposed by COVID-19, these digital social networking sites reaffirmed their role in the social construction of reality[1] and provided all the information about that physical reality to which we did not have access.

From that moment on, Facebook became the favorite of the Cuban public. This is understandable if we take into account that, according to the article A census of the use of social networks in Cuba, published on the Cubahora website (https://www.cubahora.cu/ciencia-y-tecnologia/un-censo-del-uso-de-las-redes-sociales-en-cuba), the average age of the Cuban population is around 41 years old, right in the middle of the age range of Facebook users (from 30 to 45 years old). Therefore, it is important to study this social networking site, specifically from institutional media profiles. This is because today audiences are on these platforms, which become a space of dispute for the attention of recipients. Connecting with users depends on the effectiveness of the media and the quality of its influence.

Any study on the subject faces the challenge of taking on an almost unexplored topic. However, it is enough to

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1   Just as radio in its early days managed to create a kind of collective hysteria with the broadcast of the novel "The War of the Worlds," which led people to commit suicide after believing that it was a real alien invasion and not a radio episode, the public has not yet managed to create, for the most part, a critical stance to protect themselves against media manipulation and fake news in the midst of an unprecedented cultural war.

review the classical theories on the concept of social network and all the production[2] to find the functional bases of the modern platforms embedded in the network of networks. We can conceptualize social networks as a well-defined set of actors—individuals, groups, organizations, communities, global societies, and so on—that are linked to one another through one or a set of social relationships. The author Mitchell (1969, p. 2, cited in Miralbell, n.d.) states that the "characteristics of these ties as a totality can be used to interpret the social behaviors of the people involved".

Just such a description, although created long before the massive irruption of the Internet, reflects exactly what happens in a digital social network created to connect people and establish relationships.

Now, as never before, the media message could fulfill the dream of reaching audiences individually. This was the obsession of the first communication studies, which emerged in the United States at the beginning of the 20th century and focused on the effects they could have on audiences. However, as the American school consolidated, they understood that there were social components that influenced the response of broadcasters and that the media could exert a joint influence with the rest of the social institutions. The media of the 20th century, designed for mass communication, could not fulfill the dreams of a hypodermic theory that ensured that each member of the audience

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2 Its origins can be traced back to the 1930s and 1940s. The term "social network" is attributed to the social anthropologist John Arundel Barnes, who began to use it systematically in an article published in 1954, to bring together traditional social science concepts such as delimited social groups (e.g., tribes or families) and social categories.

was "attacked" by the media message. Digital social networks have come to revolutionize every aspect of modern society. Now, the messages arrive in a personalized way to each subject of communication, and artificial intelligence dominates the production of content.

The pandemic stage, with a peak of users connected to the Internet and a boom of new users on Facebook, demonstrated that groups on this social network manage to connect people with related interests, who collaborate in the function of a common goal (Strickler, 2019).

Since the 1970s, a current of study focused on unraveling the long-term effects of the media,[3] understood that the social categories (age, sex, school level, etc.) that the first researchers saw as a hindrance that limited the homogeneous effects they longed for, actually allowed reaching segments of the audience with success. In fact, since 1940s, those same empirical field studies[4] assured that a group of people with common social categories would also choose the same radio programs and have similar tastes.

If we take all this theory to the virtual space, which is the other geography, the network society that sociologist Castells (1999) talks about, we have to take advantage of

3   Studies on long-term effects that return to the interest in investigating the power of the media on audiences ensure that the effects of exposure to messages act in the area of knowledge and are sedimented over time. The media begin to be assumed as constructors of reality, through the provision of knowledge of realities that are only accessible in the media.

4   This current relates communicative processes to the social context in which they are produced. It is developed in two areas (Wolf, 1987): the study of the differentiated composition of audiences and their consumption patterns and research on the social mediation that characterizes such consumption. Its main figure is Paul Lazarsfeld.

these Facebook groups as a way to segment our audiences[5] to create communities[6] where users with common interests connect.

Therefore, we start with the following research problem:

- How do we generate virtual communities from the processes of participation of *Vanguardia*'s audiences on Facebook?

We assume the hypothesis:

- The virtual community is generated from the participation of the public in closed Facebook groups.

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5   Latin American researcher Guillermo Orozco, who has devoted himself to the study of television reception and audiovisual literacy, speaks of the existence of a multi-segmented audience with a personal and collective history that does not feel deprived of that legacy in front of the television set.

6   The Center for Community Studies of the University of Las Villas—in the work of 2004: "El autodesarrollo comunitario. Críticas a las mediaciones sociales recurrentes para la emancipación humana," as well as in several articles and research results—considers the community as: a social group that shares a space where the participation and cooperation of its members make possible the conscious choice of transformation projects aimed at the gradual and progressive solution of the contradictions that enhance its self-development. (…) "One of the features that distinguishes this conception of community is that it is not limited as a scenario of its existence to a space of immediate relations of the population, but the community is considered as a type of link in which participation, cooperation and involvement are combined in a way that facilitates the gestation of development and emancipation projects" (Camellón & Olivera, 2009). Moreover, this shared scenario can occur not only in the physical space but also in the virtual one.

We set as our general objective:

- To substantiate the processes of participation and the creation of virtual communities on the digital social network site Facebook.

2. METHODOLOGY

Social network analysis is assumed as the methodology. Data are collected through digital tools for the formal representation of a social network, in which data on nodes and their links are the result of interactions. This information would be visualized by means of graphs and seeks to explain not the relationship established between two users but between each user and a post or publication. In addition, we will use content analysis and participant observation. The results presented below are only the result of participant observation and Facebook's own statistics, which are not remotely sufficient to explain the magnitude of the phenomenon.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The *Vanguardia* newspaper was born on August 9, 1962, as a newspaper of the Communist Party of Cuba in Las Villas. Since 2000, it has had a presence on the Internet, and its website is one of the first in Cuba. More recently, it has reached social networking sites: Facebook and Twitter.

During the beginning of the pandemic, due to poor management of the official Facebook page, it was not possible to take advantage of the boom in new followers that other national and provincial media did achieve. After July 11, 2021, digital social networks became a priority for the publisher, and one of the best journalists was placed

in its administration. Since then, the number of followers has doubled to over 10,000. The page stands out for the quality of each publication; however, we did not manage to encourage a participation that exceeds the reactions (I like it, I love it, and I am angry) or comments that go to a deeper or constructive dialogue. Such behaviors validate what was exposed by Strickler (2019) when it assured that users were fleeing from profiles and pages to take refuge in groups, more comfortable places to connect with users with similar interests.

Institutional profiles fail to connect people with similar interests and only generate mere interaction, translated into "likes" or comments. Users express their opinions when a topic interests them and affects their social reality or aspirations. The pandemic stage demonstrated that groups in this digital social network manage to connect people with similar interests who collaborate towards a common goal. Users in social networks do not participate[7] in social network profiles if they do not make use of the message they offer and if it does not respond to their interests and needs, even if the message is elaborated, taking into account good practices. To connect users, audiences must be segmented, and subjects with

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7 "Participation, understood as the 'active involvement, individual or collective, of people as subjects of the activity' (Alonso et al., 2015: 4), implies a series of requirements (Caballero and Yordi, 2004) also comparable to the Latin American approach and national contributions on participatory communication: individuals have to handle adequate and timely information, the community is conceived as the subject of development, and it must be a constructive, popular and encompassing process of multiple interests, capable of becoming an effective mechanism of socialization, to convince and motivate all sectors of a locality" (Nieves, 2021).

similar interests must be grouped together in groups associated with the main profile to generate communities and participation.

However, we cannot assume a position of pure gratification[8] to the communicative needs[9] of users, since as public media we have the mission of educating audiences and transforming them into active subjects of reception. We cannot be disconnected from their interests and needs. It is therefore essential to collect data on the topics that our target audience relates to before designing groups and their contents. This will enable us to create groups that offer our target audience the topics they seek and like, while also allowing them to appropriate the messages through the process that activates Latin American popular communities in the face of foreign forms of culture, consumer goods, and organizational structures. This process implies the allocation of new meanings, filtered through their own code and in a context of resistance (Neüman, 2008).

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8   The gratification of audience needs is one of the postulates of the Uses and Gratifications Hypothesis, the high point of mass communication research, which asserted that the media were effective if the audiences attributed such effectiveness to them, through the gratification of communicative needs experienced by the receivers. Although it assumes the active role of the audience, it does not weigh the power of the media and their influence on audiences, even in the formation of their own needs and tastes.

9   According to the Uses and Gratifications Hypothesis, the media satisfy five kinds of needs: cognitive (acquisition and reinforcement of knowledge), affective-aesthetic (emotional), integrative at the personality level (security and emotional stability), integrative at the social level, and escape (relaxation of tensions).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Institutional profiles fail to connect people with similar interests and only generate mere interaction, translated into "likes" or comments. Users express their opinions when a topic interests them and affects their social reality or aspirations. The pandemic stage, with a peak of users connected to the Internet and a boom of new users on Facebook, demonstrated that groups on this social network manage to connect people with related interests, who collaborate in function of a common goal (Strickler, 2019).

Users in social networks do not participate in social network profiles if they do not make use of the message offered and if it does not respond to their interests and needs, even if the message is elaborated taking into account the particularities of the social network and good practices. To connect users, audiences must be segmented, and users with similar interests must be grouped together in groups associated with the main profile to generate communities and participation.

Knowing the interests of the audiences is a defining starting point to achieve communicative products that connect with the audiences and make an effective segmentation of audiences, where virtual communities are generated. However, we cannot return to a merely complacent position with the audiences. We must go beyond the approach of gratification to the communicative needs to achieve a critical user before the media message that manages to activate a process of appropriation through the allocation of new meanings, filtered through a code of its own and in a context of resistance.

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