

Access and citizen participation. An update of indicators for the democratization of communications

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Abstract

Access and participation are concepts that emerged in the 70s as indicators of the levels of democratization of audiovisual communications. The work seeks to update these notions in a new scenario defined by the convergence between divergent sectors in the past such as audiovisual, computing and telecommunications. For this, is carried out a review of the most recent theoretical developments that address the changes in the broad sector of communication from the view of communication policy proposals and recommendations of legislation emanating from documents of international human rights. Reflection suggests that the actual technological potential to provide a converging universal service, providing internet, audiovisual and telephone services throughout Argentina, it can be seriously limited by onerous conditional modes of access, that can reproduce stratified communication citizenships. This work tries to generate indicators of access and participation that condense particular situations but with a historical look that also consider the increasingly rapid convergence process dynamics.

Keywords: Citizen access. Citizen participation. Democratization. Convergence. Universal service.

Indicators for the democratization of communication

The concepts of access and citizen participation appeared in the 1970`s during the international debates on media theory and policy which took place within the framework of the United Nations Organization regarding the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), which resulted in the remarkable MacBride Report entitled “Many Voices, One World” (MacBRIDE et al. 1987). These notions were presented as basic indicators for measuring levels of communication democratization and articulation between society and its own mass media. A meeting organized in 1977 by the United Nations Education, Science and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Belgrade (at that time a territory of Yugoslavia) was the scenario for consolidating efforts to define these indicators with precision.

The increasingly digitized new communications arena is characterized by the expansion of broadband Internet services to residences, educational settings and workplaces; by the widespread use of mobile telephones and smartphones for interpersonal communication and for accessing Internet and audio-visual productions; by the extended use of portable computers for receiving audio-visual contents; by the technological possibility for suppliers to provide triple-play services (Internet, television and fixed telephony); but also, by the continued presence of digital divides, which are always explained by the changing circumstances of historical social, economic and cultural exclusions. It becomes necessary to expand and renew the original definitions of access and citizen participation – initially designed for an analogical media context – to update their operationalization in the digitalization process of various signals, giving way to a dynamic convergence communications scenario where the audio-visual, computer and telecommunications sectors were once divided¹. That elemental report which defined these indicators warned that “access and participation are essentially related to society’s institutions: mass media communications, existence or lack of technology, or dependency thereof” (UNESCO, 1977, p.32 – Our translation). When read in the current digital context, this warning constitutes an invitation to rethink these concepts.

Precisely, the aim of this article is to revitalize these methodological tools for a better understanding and diagnosis of the different communication systems in the digital environment. The text revisits the Latin American tradition of studies on communication policy, to which it intends to make a contribution, and is complemented with observations regarding the right to information. For this purpose, a review is performed of the most recent theoretical developments produced at the crossroads of these fields of research and thinking. Furthermore, the latest normative recommendations in regional human rights international organizations documents are taken up. This conceptual update is organized according to the historic indicators being recovered. On that basis, a proposal of indicators is developed to tackle communications scenarios in the communications convergence process.

Citizen access

The aforementioned UNESCO document states that “access implies the capacity of the public to come closer to communication systems” (UNESCO, 1977, p.4 – our translation). It should be thought about at two levels: choice and feedback.

When discussing the choice of audio-visual transmissions, at the very least the aim is to guarantee the total coverage of the country’s territory and that the population may receive

¹ Convergence is understood as “an idea that rests on the standardization of mediums, products, broadcasting logics and consumption of info-communicational industries” (BECERRA, 2003, p.91 – Our translation).

at least one audio-visual signal through whatever medium at any geographical location. Consequently, ideal access is given by the existence of a variety of supports and media so that any person may choose among diverse forms of communication. This first level of access, therefore, accounts for the different types of media included in media systems, their share in the total media offering, their territorial coverage, and the different media supports available, as potential indicators of the variety of accessible offering to the audience. In this respect, the 2007 Special Rapporteurs for Freedom of Expression Joint Declaration² stated:

Sufficient ‘space’ should be allocated to broadcasting uses on different communications platforms to ensure that, as a whole, the public is able to receive a range of diverse broadcasting services (...) specific measures to promote diversity may include reservation of adequate frequencies for different types of broadcasters, must-carry rules, a requirement that both distribution and reception technologies are complementary and/or interoperable, including across national frontiers, and non-discriminatory access to support services, such as electronic programme guides.

At the same time, it is necessary here to deal with the form of access to these media (paid or free of charge, and its variants such as combinations between free offers and paid services), the required technological equipment, both domestic and public, and the reception quality of services.

At this level the possibility of the democratic construction of an enriched and vigorous public sphere is at stake. For this, the population’s capacity to access contents that express cultural diversity and pluralist information needs to be increased. The ways of achieving this purpose are not unique or independent of their contexts. This is evidenced by the different paths that were selected during the second post-war period by the United States, on the one hand, and several Western European countries, on the other hand. While the United States chose to yield the exploitation of audio-visual licenses to private broadcasters in searching competition that boosts the generation of diverse contents, western European nations chose to create public service state corporations with the aim of informing, educating and entertaining, and with the inclusion of political pluralism on their screens (WILLIAMS, 1974).

In these historical constructions of audio-visual communication systems, the long-term “institutional debate on the risks that the concentration of information and cultural

² Joint Declaration of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Representative on Freedom of the Media, the Organization of the American States (OAS) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR) on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information. Available at: <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/expression/showarticle.asp?artID=849&IID=1>

industries have on democratic life” is highlighted. This concern crystallizes during the 70`s with the demands of the Non-Aligned Countries Movement “against the imbalances of global communication flows, the crisis of public monopoly and public service, as well as the cultural policies based on high culture, both confronted with the expansion process of transnational companies” (MATTELART, 2006, p.14 – Our translation). Furthermore, it can be said that “if it is clear that monopoly control is incompatible with democracy, the impact that oligopolistic concentration has over the pluralism of information does not seem so straightforward” (TREMBLAY, 2005, p.25 – our translation). As a matter of fact, the political and theoretical debate remains open about the consequences that the concentration of media ownership has over the achievement of pluralist information production and of making diverse, creative and innovative cultural expressions viable in the sector. From a legal standpoint, in its freedom of expression standards for free and inclusive broadcasting, the Special Rapporteurship for Freedom of Expression of the Organization of American States (OAS) indicates: “It is clear that the concentration of media ownership leads to the uniformity of contents that they produce and disseminate” (IACHR, 2009, p.31 – our translation). Along the same lines, the 2007 Joint Declaration states:

In recognition of the particular importance of media diversity to democracy, special measures, including anti-monopoly rules, should be put in place to prevent undue concentration of media or cross-media ownership, both horizontal and vertical.

Beyond the theoretical and legal debates, the economic, social and political significance of this phenomenon is undeniable, even more so if one considers that the potential technological convergence between the audio-visual, telecommunications and computing sectors “also meant the gradual inclusion of actors concentrated in one of these activities in new markets”, which gave way to “shared and crossed ownerships between the three mentioned sectors” (BECERRA, 2003, p.88 – our translation). Hence the need for a specific review of each individual national context with regard to the levels of ownership concentration and audio-visual production in their communication systems becomes imperative for the development of indicators to measure access and citizen participation.

With regard to feedback, there is a passive presence of the public in broadcasts, or within the limits or conditions imposed by the program or platform. In this regard, the inclusion of individuals can be seen in games, surveys, forums, debates, public interviews, and also – although with their particular characteristics – in reality-shows or talk-shows, where the media format conditions their appearance. Therefore, this indicator should not be confused with some of the forms of participation. However, at this level are also included

public interest advocates and specific media audiences or the audio-visual media system in general, by which people can channel complaints or criticisms, in the same manner that legislation mandates the opportunity to respond or the right of reply to all citizens involved in journalistic publications. The recent yet progressive incorporation of audio-visual broadcasts of messages left by individuals on digital exchange platforms (so-called social networks) and the use of amateur photographs and videos sent by the public for documenting an event form part of the situations encompassed by this indicator. A location in itself can be recognised by the comments posted by readers of website portals.

In the telecommunications sector, access opportunities were addressed on the basis of notions such as universal access and universal service. Universal access may be thought of as a step previous to universal service. The first notion refers to the availability of at least one network at a public or communitarian level. The second notion aims at the provision of a telecommunications service in every home and of its quality. Three dimensions are considered under the universal service: a) equitable distribution, which stands for economically accessible services for users with scarce resources; b) geographical coverage, which aims at guaranteeing telecommunications services under the same conditions throughout the entire territory at competitive rates; c) physical and material equality, which covers the need to offer options for users with physical disabilities (ROSSI, 2012).

The requirement to fulfil these dimensions responds to the fact that companies³ can concentrate their infrastructure initiatives in economically profitable areas and disregard sparsely populated regions that do not guarantee a return on investment with the layout of the network. It is worth recalling that “network economies lead to economies of density: the greater the number of covered users, the lower the costs, and vice versa” (FONTANALS, 2015, p.4 – Our translation). In this manner, a universal service may be defined as guaranteeing citizens access to an:

intelligent network and basic services package which includes digital voice services, emergencies, public information, long-distance calls subsidized for low-income people, reasonable price rates and preferential connectivity for academic institutions and libraries (ROSSI, 2012, p.11-12 – our translation).

³ The fixed telephone network was originally built in a large part of the world with the installation of state-owned companies who had a monopolistic control of services. This arrangement was justified for economic reasons and efficient network use (the high costs of network layout and the long-term periods needed for a return on investment). The most notable exception of this model was the United States, where the service was handed over to a private monopoly. Since the 80's a worldwide liberalization process of the sector was initiated, with the formation of competitive markets in some countries and markets controlled by oligopolies in others.

Citizen access in the context of convergence

Ever since the technological possibility of triple-play⁴ in particular, and of the expansion of the convergence process in general, the regulation of the sectors analysed have entered a stage which is particularly challenging. They must now make decisions as to players' access boundaries (especially the more powerful ones) in the different services involved, so as to avoid potential negative cultural and economic consequences which are a product of property concentration processes that cut across the entire info-communicational sector. With regard to the inclusion of telephone companies as providers of various services in the concentrated telecommunications market, a few observations are worth considering when drawing out a map of citizen participation and access.

Firstly, the access mechanisms for new telecommunications service providers should guarantee the inter-connection and inter-operability of networks, in a way that the circulation of contents is not influenced by the utilized network. Complementarily, an open access regulatory dynamic, stemming from the requirement of sharing existing networks, can efficiently enable the entry of smaller players to the sector – such as cooperatives – which cannot afford to develop an infrastructure from scratch. The breakdown of networks can take place at different levels: a) force network controllers to set non-discriminatory prices; b) force the functional separation of different services within the same incumbent company; c) demand structural separation, so as to divide a single group into distinct companies in network control and delivery of other services. The demands to share infrastructure require scope specifications and implementation conditions, among which should be considered the existing asymmetries between same sector players⁵. Secondly, the definition of network neutrality – treated further ahead in this article – should be analysed, which should impede that Internet service providers favour, through different strategies, the circulation or visibility of contents associated with their groups. Thirdly, encompassing all of the above, key to any analysis of citizen participation and access in communication is establishing the existence or non-existence of any dominant position through which a company manages to impose unavoidable market conditions, for having a proven decisive impact on the means of access to the network, both for users and content providers.

⁴Refers to a unique digitalized network that offers audio-visual, telephony and data services.

⁵The warning attains greater significance when different size players must coexist, with regulatory differences at the beginning of their development and with unequal capacities in their economic and political action. "This initial asymmetry is what originates the need for the incumbent operator to be subject to different rules" (WOHLERS, 2008, p.18 – our translation).

Internet and citizen access

The new digitalized scenario, with “the preferred space of Internet as a route and a flow organizer, and as a new space” (ZALLO, 2011, p.125 – our translation) questions access universalization policies, no longer for just one telecommunications network or audio-visual signals, but also for a broadband Internet connection. This is all the more true if one considers that robust Internet connections allow the functioning of interpersonal communication programmes⁶, the viewing or listening of audio-visual contents⁷, the transmission of audio-visual contents in streaming or the uploading of audio and video productions. This places the network of networks as a communication platform which gives way and contains other forms of communication, both interpersonal and massive.

In the new digitalized scenario, the levels and characteristics of broadband expansion, as well as the types of browsing experiences⁸, turn into critical elements while seeking to chart a complementary and convergent approach of the levels of citizen access to the communication system. On this point, the OAS Rapporteurship for Freedom of Expression indicates in its 2013⁹ Internet Report that “the principle of universal access refers to the need of guaranteeing connectivity and universal access, which is ubiquitous, equitable, truly affordable and of an appropriate quality, to the Internet infrastructure and to ICT services, throughout the country”.

A review of international experiences with broadband expansion plans shows that governments assume that market dynamics are not sufficient for universalizing the service, which is why they finance the development of infrastructure for less profitable areas (VALENTE, 2012). At the same time, it should be noted that there is a tendency to assume actual access to Internet as a natural consequence of the availability of the service, without considering the need to directly subsidize lower-income groups with the financial cost of broadband access and/or the cost of possessing the equipment required for navigating. Similarly, the 2011 Special Rapporteurs for Freedom of Expression Joint Declaration¹⁰ referring to the Internet noted that the States must:

⁶ Ranging from e-mails to programs such as Skype, all the way to real time chats.

⁷ This option comes in different formats that require varying connection qualities: WebTV or online radio, through the streaming of audio and video in available open signals, or IPTV (Internet Protocol Television) services offered in closed networks for a smooth transmission.

⁸ This refers to the forms of accessing contents, which involves the definition of network neutrality and the modalities (paid or free services) of the national or local contents offered.

⁹ Available at: <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/expression/docs/publications/Broadcasting%20and%20freedom%20of%20expression%20FINAL%20PORTADA.pdf>.

¹⁰ Joint Declaration of the United Nations Special Rapporteur, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Organization of the American States (OAS) and the African Commission on Human and Peoples` Rights (ACHPR). Available at: <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/expression/showarticle.asp?artID=849&IID=1>.

establish regulatory mechanisms – that consider price regimes, universal service requirements and license agreements – to encourage broader Internet access, including the poor and remote rural areas (...), and adopt special measures that ensure the equitable Internet access to people with disabilities and underprivileged sectors of society.

The concepts of network neutrality and digital divide allow the in-depth analysis of access to new communication and information technologies, within the framework of efforts to enhance citizen access as an indicator of the level of the democratization of communication.

The digital divide may be understood as the unequal possibilities and opportunities to access networks and in the quality of that access, but it must also emphasize the socio-historical context in which the digital culture is developed, which gives way to “a system of inclusion and exclusion which makes some individuals literate potential consumers,” (URANGA, 2009, p.16 – our translation) but leaves others behind because of their inability to become potential consumers.

To this we may add the divide relating to content generation and software development, since, if the expansion of connectivity and the improvement of the broadband service are not accompanied by the incentive of producing proprietary contents and software, citizens will have greater chances of consuming products that are created by other countries (MASTRINI, 2010, p.62 – our translation). Hence, to not assume the critical role that digital and media literacy have and will have means limiting the conditions of cultural intervention in the network and the value added founded on local knowledge.

Network neutrality is understood as a guarantee of free-flowing open networks, through which service operators should provide connections with equal treatment given to all contents, without discriminating by type of use, origin, or application. In relation to this notion, the abovementioned Special Rapporteurs for Freedom of Expression Joint Declaration proposes that “there should be no discrimination in the treatment of Internet data and traffic, based on the device, content, author, origin and/or destination of the content, service or application”. It also requires that network intermediaries “be transparent with regards to the practices they use to manage traffic or information”.

These definitions seek to prevent that network operators (generally telephone companies and cable operators) implement anti-competitive practices, differential pricing according to customer uses or that the Internet structure enable differentiated services in accordance with the payment capacity of content providers. However, the application of this principle is far from being commonly accepted by all network participants, among which stand out Internet connectivity providers who seek to generate returns from introducing different access levels and segmenting differential payments according to the uses made of

the network. In this dispute, ordinary users can be the most affected through the conditioning of their right to issue and receive information on said platform, with limitations imposed on their circulation on Internet in accordance with payment capacities and usage types.

Citizen participation

The referenced UNESCO document signals that “participation implies public involvement in the production and management of communication systems” (UNESCO, 1977, p.4 – Our translation). It recognizes three different levels of this dimension: production, decision-making and planning. The analysis of these three dimensions shows that the first one refers to the direct participation of citizens in the production of mass messages; the second one implies participation in decision-making in relation to the mass media; the third one involves the concrete contribution of citizens in the formulation of communication policies.

The production of programmes (first level) provides for programming spaces, adequate legislation for the inclusion of different forms of audio-visual expression (public, communitarian or indigenous media etc.), subsidies, competitive funding, loans or tax benefits for acquiring technical resources and professional training. This level also includes the promotion of independent producers in the generation of contents and the so-called community access experiences to give way to the expression of minority or marginal groups in traditional channels.

In this level close attention should be given to several indicators: the existence or lack of infrastructure resources and criteria for their use (from transmission facilities to spectrum reservations, going through must-carry rules for the conveyance of third-party signals); the financing rules, both general and particular; the implementation of promotion measures, production subsidies and promotion; and the main criteria applied to these measures. Furthermore, included in this level is the review of indications, if any, on the limitations on building networks, as well as the establishment of audience measurements for proprietary productions of local, federal or national broadcasters¹¹.

The establishment of these limits or obligations can support the decentralization of the production and participation of greater sectors of the population in the generation of contents (local producers, small channels, public institutions, universities or community organizations). Relating to the existence of different types of audio-visual expression as a path towards the creation of greater cultural and political diversity in contents, the IACHR Special Rapporteurship for Freedom of Expression indicates that “equality in the exercise of freedom of speech (...) requires three components: plurality of voices (anti-monopoly

¹¹ These indicators can also convey information about access to varying contents.

measures), diversity of voices (social inclusion measures) and non-discrimination (equal access to processes that apportion frequencies)” (IACHR, 2009, p.8 – Our translation). Additionally, the 2007 Joint Declaration of Rapporteurs analyses the reconversion process of broadcasting signals and lays out the following:

Consideration of the impact on access to the media, and on different types of broadcasters, should be taken into account in planning for a transition from analogue to digital broadcasting. This requires a clear plan for switchover that promotes, rather than limits, public interest broadcasting. Measures should be taken to ensure that digital transition costs do not limit the ability of community broadcasters to operate.

The second level of participation includes the institutional architecture generated by each country to regulate and control the functioning of private media – profit or non-profit – and to organize the management of state-owned media. The organization of institutions established for this purpose accounts for the existing forms of representation of society in decision-making regarding the media system. This design may include several forms of representation: from traditional political partisanship to different sectoral organization or civil society spaces. The complex equilibrium that these institutions must attain should harmonize plural participation – avoiding discretionary measures – with the capacity for conflict resolution – overcoming risks of inaction and indetermination.

A rigorous analysis of this aspect should take into account the political and cultural traditions of every country accounting for the relevance, effectiveness and depth of the participatory mechanisms for the monitoring, control and management of communication media. Important elements include the scope and the capacity for action of these authorities, the possible confusion or overlap of functions with other agencies, and the implications of their specific measures, beyond their objectives and legal obligations. Similarly, a central part of the analysis of this level is the review of the structure of these institutions, their formal or real dependence on other state institutions, the formal or real decision-making mechanisms and the transparency of their activities.

The deepest level of citizen participation (third level) aims at the intervention of diverse political and social sectors in the different formal and informal spaces where incidence on the planning of the audio-visual media system is contended. On this point, citizen participation in the elaboration of public communication policies should be placed in the real context that every country reveals about its political and economic fabric. It should be noted that participating does not guarantee having the power to influence as many may participate but decisions may be made by just a few and in opaque circumstances. It should not be dismissed that broad citizen participation can serve to legitimize final

definitions that do not necessarily stem from the debate triggered in the policy making process. In addition, to think about citizen participation implies incorporating the difficulty of reflecting about what is “public” as an encompassing dimension, but “in the framework of collective representations – as interpretations and evaluations – not always similar and shared, but also different, contradictory and even antagonistic” (EXENI, 1998, p.95 – our translation). This reflection also requires considering the economic and social context which grants – and historically granted – unequal access and participation possibilities, both material and symbolic, to the mass media and public space.

Citizen participation in the context of convergence

Any country`s national digital plan in transition towards a digitalized communications system should be developed in a participatory manner. For this, different entities and mechanisms need to be mobilized which express the local political traditions and favour the invention of new arrangements for the inclusion of sectors with difficulties to take part in these spaces, due to economical, geographical, linguistic or physical reasons. At the same time, the constant review of the implementations of these programmes require participatory, public and transparent audits. Contributing towards this goal is the multisector and intra-party formation between regulation and planning enforcement authorities, and the existence of internal citizen oversight agencies.

Increased citizen participation in the gestation, regulation and monitoring processes of communication policies socially legitimizes the definitions and contributes to raising awareness about the economic and cultural value of communication and culture technologies. It is worth highlighting here that while increased and plural citizen participation does not guarantee the effectiveness of that action, the way in which an issue is set in the institutional agenda will have consequences on the way it will be treated, on the actors summoned to the debate and the paths towards its resolution (CALIFANO, 2013). In the same way, the participatory public policy debate processes for the organization of a renewed communicational environment – a product of the digitalization of signals and of the expansion of Internet as a support of audio-visual contents – can contribute to the political and cultural – not only economical – questioning of the change occurring with convergence.

On this point, the challenge is big since it requires to think jointly of sectors that were historically regulated as separate entities, on the basis of different criteria¹² (CUILEMBURG; MCQUAIL, 2005), with differing enforcement authorities and with their own personal

¹² Historically, telecommunications were regulated based on predominantly technical and economic criteria (infrastructure development), while radio broadcasting was organized since its inception fundamentally on the basis of social and cultural types of considerations (freedom of expression, diversity).

operating logic. The challenge requires a comprehensive and complementary outlook on the vast info-communicational sector (telecommunications, audio-visual and computing) and political action in the same direction. Added to this is the articulation needed between organisations at various levels, with a renewed inclusive and participatory approach.

This challenging picture shows a highly dynamic info-communicational sector, with a growing disparity between the reality of its movements and the regulations applicable to it. There is a risk that legislation always lag behind the action of players to validate foregone situations. In order to respond to this complexity, a viable option is to provide enforcement authorities with the power to act allowing them to perform updates, adaptations or interpretations to the law when facing changes in the disrupted scenario. Towards this end, their activity should be clearly regulated by law and subject to specific conditions, by not contradicting the legislation it applies with its actions. In addition to the clarity and consensus required of the prerogative delegated to these authorities, they shall have a plural and representative composition, technical solvency backed by a corpus of research and trustworthy information about their field of work, and political and social legitimacy.

Sustainability for diversity and pluralism

The only way of addressing the issue of funding citizen participation and access in the media sphere is after having agreed that it is always the citizen who finances the mass media. He/she does so in different ways that can be direct such as the payment of a fee¹³ or the subscription to a cable service. They may also be indirect, such as the case of media that are exclusively funded through advertising, where the consumer, through every purchase, pays the cost of the ad which includes the final cost of the products being advertised. It is also society at large that funds audio-visual production when tax breaks are granted to private media, when regulations are enforced for the protection and/or the promotion of cultural expressions, or when state-owned media are maintained through earmarked budgetary funds.

The situation for telecommunications is simpler and clearer: each user directly pays for the services used, with previous access to the appropriate technological equipment. The challenge here is to recognize the dominant criteria that governs the access to a variety of services, the quality and geographical extension of these services, the consideration of the existence of differentiated offerings according to payment capacity and the typical usage patterns and geographical availability. Current debates about network neutrality convey the tensions that exist between different sector players over Internet financing and browsing and participation patterns in the digital environment.

¹³ Historically, this was the case in several European countries in order to pay for public media.

The convergence scenario poses significant difficulties for the sustainability of a diversified map of audio-visual contents, with different types of media that support multiple formats. That is, the trends of the converging audio-visual context show the existence of multiple signals, from general to theme-specific, distributed via electromagnetic frequencies and cable and satellite television.

In addition to this, there is the implementation of digital TV with the possibility of multiplying the signals manageable by the radio channel, and the expansion of Internet television, which offers free and paid modalities, in broadcasts that are live and/or not programmed. It is possible to add to these options platforms for sharing audio-visual, professional and amateur contents such as Vimeo and YouTube. In the case of radio, experiences are less known, but podcasting represents a non-programmed option for listening to broadcast content services while radio stations that exclusively broadcast online have appeared¹⁴ and include multimedia contents in their offerings. That is, the communicational ecosystem under construction triggers an important quandary over the continuous funding of a diverse multi-support and multi-format media offering.

The difficulty in securing predictable and stable funding methods for audio-visual production can be explained by the specific economic characteristics underlined by several authors with regards to communication industries: high fixed costs and low variable costs; the need for work creativity and continuous renewal of offerings, as well as the randomness of demand (ZALLO, 1988); all characteristics which have led commercial media to implement economies of scale and which explain their trend towards vertical concentration (MATEO; BERGÉS, 2009).

From a perspective of the right to information, the need to promote media pluralism and diversity has been raised, allowing the sustainability of existing media but also boosting emerging media. However, the difficulty to find realistic solutions still subsists for each context in particular. In any case, it is suggested that “the funds allocated by the State must not exceed certain thresholds and the selection process must be transparent and participatory, and count with the involvement of stakeholders from civil society, among other considerations” (LORETI; LOZANO, 2014, p.170 – our translation).

Thus, it is imperative to sharpen the view on communicational maps which incorporate players with very unequal economical sizes, different objectives and different previous development conditions (historical advantages and disadvantages). At the present crossroads, questions remain unanswered on the elasticity of the advertising offer to sustain audio-visual expanded funding, on the social consensus needed to legitimize the sustainability of digital media and platforms with public funding, and on the dangers of

¹⁴ Online transmission mirroring the electromagnetic broadcasting signals are already a standard for different types of transmitters.

social stratification which would lead to the introduction of audio-visual systems guided by direct subscription payment models.

Concluding remarks

This article proposed rethinking the notions of citizen participation and access in the new communication convergence environment, as valuable categories for assessing and planning public communications policies. The theoretical proposal developed is an invitation to address discussions with the same intensity about legislation and State intervention in the audio-visual, telecommunications and Internet sectors, since with the integration of these three fields the construction of a media public sphere is at stake. The convergence process forces one to look at the media systems located in this integration, which implies a new perspective and must also recover historic requirements regarding citizen participation and access.

The technological opportunities highlight relevant changes in the modes of cultural reinvention. The ways in which these technologies are channelled institutionally (through policies, regulations and social appropriation) shall depend on the substance, depth, and direction (democratizing or not) of these transformations. The real technological potential of providing a universal convergent system across the country, through the provision of Internet, audio-visual contents and telephony services, may be limited by paid and/or conditioned access or participation modalities which reproduce stratified communication citizenships.

Creating favourable conditions for participation and access for diverse communicational spaces does not in itself solve the structural problems of social and economic exclusion. However, the establishment of deficient, unequal or discriminatory conditions can worsen this situation. This warning calls for the construction of indicators for citizen participation and access capable of synthesizing each situation from a historical perspective, which also contemplate the increasingly rapid dynamics of the convergence process. These indicators should be able to account for the characteristics and existence or not of mechanisms to solve inequalities in the capacity to access audio-visual, broadband, fixed telephony or mobile telephone quality services.

The road charted in this article tried to demonstrate that even definitions which at first glance seem merely technical imply valuations of an economic, social and political nature. This is why it is set forth that indicators applied to the digital environment must be able to assess the complementarity of economic, infrastructural, social and cultural criteria in the policies drafted for the sector.

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