Democracy and social media: Between the dialogue and the strategy

This study analyzes the role of traditional news media and social media in public deliberation within democratic systems. Using the concepts of Understanding Orientation (consensus-oriented, communicative rationality) and Strategic Orientation (goal-oriented, instrumental rationality), proposed by Jürgen Habermas, this study looks at the public space in a digital context to explore how the news media can either contribute to the existence of rational communication in the public debate or, conversely, promote interventions of a strategic nature.

To estimate the influence of traditional news media and social media on the orientation to engage in dialogue with others within a framework of rationality and equality, this study relies on a two-wave online panel survey conducted in Chile before and after the constitutional referendum, held on September 4, 2022, a period of intense political polarization. The first wave (T1) received 2,117 responses, and the second wave (T2) received 903 responses.

Results show that Understanding Orientation is a predictor of political situations linked to public deliberation, such as Political Participation and Political Interest. However, news consumption in both traditional news outlets and social media is not associated with the presence of Understanding Orientation, but rather with Strategic Orientation. These results support a more pessimistic view of the contribution of the news media and social media to creating a rational public sphere, where reason should predominate in interactions between citizens to strengthen democracy.