

Social networks and public administration: The challenges and opportunities of governments in the era of digital communication

*Redes sociales y administración pública: los desafíos
y oportunidades de los gobiernos en la era
de la comunicación digital*

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Abstract

In recent years, a series of social changes have resulted in a good challenge for the social sciences. The rise of digital tools that have modified the way in which people interact and assimilate social life has led to various academic investigations aimed to understand a phenomenon that continues to advance today. In this article we focus on studying the relationship between digital media and public administration. For this purpose, a qualitative methodology derived from an analysis of the information that considers some of the most important studies of recent years. In the same way, official reports that contribute to explain the most important transformations in the matter of the last twenty-five years were reviewed. It starts from a political approach. A tour of recent changes in contemporary democracies, political institutions, institutional changes and what has been their relationship with both conventional media and digital partner networks is carried out. The research proposes some elements to consider both theoretically and in practice, taking into account that there is a historical process that will deepen in the following years, given the advance of digitization. Good practices and the strategic use of technology can lead to the strengthening of democratic expressions, as well as good governance processes.

Keywords

Social networks, public administration, digital transformation, governance, citizen participation, government, digitization, social sciences.

Resumen

En los últimos años se han desarrollado una serie de cambios sociales que han resultado un formidable reto para las ciencias sociales. El auge de las herramientas digitales que han modificado la forma en que las personas interactúan y asimilan la vida social ha dado lugar a diversas investigaciones académicas que han buscado comprender la esencia de un fenómeno que sigue avanzando en nuestros días. En este artículo de revisión nos enfocamos en estudiar la relación entre los medios digitales y la administración pública. Para ello, se ha utilizado una metodología cualitativa derivada de un análisis de la información que toma en cuenta algunos de los estudios más importantes de los últimos años. Asimismo, se revisaron informes oficiales que contribuyen a explicar las transformaciones más importantes en la materia de los últimos veinticinco años. El punto de partida es un enfoque eminentemente politológico. Se realiza un recorrido de los cambios recientes en las democracias contemporáneas, las instituciones políticas, cambios institucionales y cuál ha sido su relación tanto con los medios convencionales como las redes socio digitales. La investigación propone algunos elementos a tener en cuenta tanto en terreno teórico como en la práctica, teniendo en consideración que se vive un proceso histórico que se profundizará en los siguientes años, ante el avance de la digitalización. Las buenas prácticas y el uso estratégico de la tecnología pueden derivar en el fortalecimiento de expresiones democráticas, así como de los procesos de buena gobernanza.

Palabras clave

Redes sociales, administración pública, transformación digital, gobernanza, participación ciudadana, gobierno, digitalización, ciencias sociales.

Introduction

The last 50 years have characterized by changes in all areas of society; therefore, the social sciences have faced the challenge of trying to describe, explain and predict these changes from each of their scientific perspectives. Sociology, political science, international relations, political communication, economics and other social disciplines address a rich agenda that offers more doubts than certainty due to the complexity and speed of the changes generated worldwide and in all areas.

If considering the emergence of COVID in 2020, which accelerated and marked a breaking point in these processes of social transformation, then as the Spanish political scientist Subirats says (2016) we are indeed facing a change of time. We refer to a change in the sense mentioned above that involves the metamorphosis of the social system, i.e., it involves severe alterations in the political subsystem, the normative subsystem, the economic subsystem and the cultural subsystem. Because of the complexity of the changes, one of the main problems of the scholars of these topics is the lack of paradigms that allow us to glimpse the viable paths to face the challenges of the time change.

This paper aims to address these changes from Political Science and more specifically Public Administration and Political Communication. The proposed topic is the interrelationship between public administration and social networks. Although this connection is a relatively recent topic, especially because of the accelerated and at the same time eventful evolution of these social networks in terms of their study, regulation and impact on communication and the political system, the analysis of the topic involves the elaboration of a prior theoretical framework to define conceptual elements of democracy, governance, public management and eventually public policies.

Social constructs evolve as social structures change. This means that concepts are “updated” according to the circumstances of reality. Therefore, the denotation and connotation of constructs such as democracy, government and public administration differ according to the historical context in which they are used. For this reason, before presenting the link between public administration and social networks, we will briefly develop the three transformations that structure the hypothesis of this working paper and which correspond, first, to the transition of government and governance, second, from public administration to public management and, finally, from traditional media to social networks.

Subsequently, it will analyze the characteristic elements of social networks in the political system in general and in public administration in particular, as well as some current trends in their application and, finally, it will outline some perspectives regarding risks in their indiscriminate application, and the pending agenda for a link that improves the functioning of democratic governance.

The emergence of social networks at the beginning of the 1990s led to an expansion of the spaces for dialogue and social communication between all social strata, in a transversal, horizontal and intermittent way where the same individuals and groups in society can be part of the information and also influence it, thereby achieving that these spaces have a higher level of communication than traditional media in terms of content, speed and volume of information.

Considering that social networks are the communication interface between society and government and between social actors, there is a synergy between both factors, society and institutions, which can contribute to the public administration to achieve its objectives more quickly.

Social networks as a tool for public management facilitate through the information and data they transmit, the fulfillment of their objectives and goals if used and exploited correctly and with legal, rational, and objective basis, and in accordance with the resources and capabilities of the public that use them and society itself. This paper briefly analyzes this relationship to outline a road map that will positively empower the use of social networks as an instrument to improve public administration.

For this purpose, a qualitative methodology will be used through an analysis of texts of the main scholars of these topics in the current context, as well as official documentation that contributes to explain the transformations that took place in the last quarter of a century and that illustrate what we call the change of time.

Approach to the problem: historical background of the change of time

Considering that the analysis approach is political, conventionally we can start the analysis of change of time from the perspective of democracy and political institutions and then analyze institutional change in public administration and finally in the media and the use of information technologies.

There is a broad consensus among scholars on the subject that the reform of the State initiated in the last quarter of the twentieth century was a consequence of the crisis of the welfare state worldwide that was accentuated from the loss of effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy of governments in their public policies, as well as the questioning of democracy and its results in good governance. Obviously, since this is a structural change, the transformations have an impact on all dimensions of the social system: political, economic, cultural and normative. Due to space limitations, we will refer to the first two.

Political dimension

Political change stems from a multiplicity of factors. On the one hand, from a global perspective, the causes are seen in the exhaustion of the welfare state model and the resurgence of the neoliberal model, in the modification of the correlation of forces due to the weakening of the Soviet model and the emergence of China, the deterioration of democratic systems and the resurgence of populism and the far right. To some extent, it is precisely the globalization process that triggers this transformation. It is a rupture that brings about the change of time. The fall of the Berlin Wall was a landmark in world history, symbolizing the collapse of communism and the victory of capitalism, but it gave rise to a sense of experiencing a breakdown of world order that does not seem to make sense. This is described by an internationalist (Laidi, 1997, p. 25), who asserts that, with the end of the cold war, the elements that give meaning to world history are dislocated: foundations, unity and purpose. He says, “market democracy succeeds, but it proves unable to sustain debate about its fundamentals. Political, economic and financial mismatches are less and less amenable to a common interpretation”.

On the other hand, from the local perspective there are also asymmetric transformations towards democracy, but also traditionalist social movements with authoritarian tendencies and social movements that disrupt the global system such as terrorism and migration, and more recently the COVID-19 pandemic. To illustrate the specific triggers of these specific historical references, the political crisis in the United States of America by the Nixon case, the Arab embargo and the emergence of OPEC, the fall of Allende in Chile, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the arrival to power of Ronald Reagan, and Margaret Thatcher in the USA and England respectively, the emergence of China on the world stage on the occasion of the arrival to power of Deng

Xiaoping and all subsequent repercussions in the geopolitical and economic field (Gerstle, 2022).

Economic dimension

The evolution of productive forces over the past 50 years has had a striking effect on the global crisis. In fact, we could say that it is the trigger for the breakdown of the system. Nowadays it is spoken of in the age of the knowledge society and in this context, technological development has reached unsuspected advances that far exceed the control and regulation by the same human beings, as is the case of artificial intelligence. Alvin Toffler in his famous *Third Wave* already outlined the disruption caused by the digital revolution, which preceded *The Shock of the Future*, but had to complete his work with his ideas on *The Change of Power*, giving greater amplitude to the ongoing transformation, to the change of time. As Toffler says (1990, pp. 25 et seq.), “We live in a few moments in which the whole power structure that held the world together disintegrates and another one, radically different, happens”. And he concludes: “it is not a just a transfer of the same but a transformation”. In this context, his reference to the most important economic event that has contributed to the change of power, and that originated a new system for creating wealth that is based not on strength but on the mind, seems relevant. A dialectical relationship quoted by Toffler (1990, p. 32) derives from this idea, consisting in stating that the new economy is not based on working on things, “but on men and women acting on other men and women, or people acting on information and information acting on people”. These ideas focus on two fundamental aspects of our work that are, on the one hand, the transformation of power, i.e., the exercise of government, and, on the other hand, the importance of information in this same process and that can be empowered by social networks. Both dimensions imply some of the characteristics of governance.

From traditional administration to public management

Conceptually, public administration has been understood as the activity of the state. This general definition has been relatively agreed by specialists (Guerrero, 2019):

In Germany, Karl Marx referred to state organizing activity and Lorenz von Stein to state activity; the initiator of public administration studies in the United States of America, Woodrow Wilson referred to it as government in action, Luther Gulick on government work, and Marshall Dimock as a builder. (p. 37)

Despite the difference between the definition of public administration as an institution in the evolution of administrative thought contextualized in different countries, “it can be affirmed that virtually all definitions of public administration are generally understood from three different dimensions” (Gómez, 2016). These aspects consider the following characteristics: a structure, a function or activity of the State and a scientific discipline.

In this framework, Gómez (2016) states that public administration as a structure that manages resources is based on the legal framework and on the static description of the administrative apparatus of government. This is what we think of as the institutional approach. On the other hand, the consideration as a function of the state considers the public administration as a continuous action of the state apparatus that satisfies the needs and demands of society. Finally, “the consideration of public administration as a discipline is part of the affirmation of its consolidation as an autonomous scientific discipline” (Gómez, 2016, p. 23).

From these assumptions, it can be stated that “it is common to find notions of public administration influenced by law, political science or administration, which try to define and explain it according to the influence of each discipline” (Villarruel, 2016, p. 133). However, due to the transformation of the economic, political and social paradigms and especially globalization as an inevitable challenge, and due to its multidisciplinary nature, public administration continues today, trying to find its full autonomy and a definition to develop itself as an autonomous and specific discipline (Pardo, 2016, p.125 et seq.).

In the historical development of the study of traditional public administration it is seen that it has adopted different forms or objects of study, i.e., it has been analyzed and conceived with different connotations (Villarruel, 2016). The different senses given are:

- State as an integrative element of social forces.
- Government and its functional and operational structure.
- Power as an instrumental form.

- Executive power expressed in the exercise of public resources and attention to social demands.
- Institutional relationship between public authorities.
- Bureaucracy and its staff.
- Theory of public organizations (Uvalle, 2005).

From a more utilitarian perspective, the listed objects of study of traditional public administration provided a theoretical and methodological basis for North American administrative thinking in the twentieth century. “From the progressive vision of North America, the evolution of public administration began in this context, whose dominant paradigm was efficiency and the rational instrumental model in the decision process” (Berumen Villarreal and Medellín Mendoza, 2016).

However, the evolution of the historical context, based on the different institutional needs, changed the focus of the study of the administrative phenomenon until reaching the current paradigms centered on a managerial method with the values of efficiency and effectiveness as basic assumptions. This means precisely the transformation of the public administration. From this perspective, according to American thought, the Western public administration has gone through the following seven stages (Arrellano, 2004, p. 101):

- Orthodoxy. Characterized by a scientific administration with a vertical and centralized hierarchical structure. The human component was not considered in the orthodox model.
- Heterodoxy. The human factor becomes important when establishing human relationships within the organization. The individual is considered strategic and with an impact on organizational objectives.
- Neoclassicism. Emphasis is placed on the decision-making process based on the limitations of the human factor. A process known as limited rationality (Simon, 1947).
- Public policy. “The set of activities of government institutions, acting directly or through agents, and which aim to have a certain influence on the lives of citizens” (Alcántara, 2004, p.106).
- New public administration. Structural redesign based on decentralization and delegation strategies, incorporating innovative methods based on pre-established objectives.
- Public management. It appears as a proposal to rethink public administrative discipline as a response to the administrative crisis and

lack of legitimacy (Cabrero, 1997). It is based on economic effectiveness and efficiency.

- New public administration.

This last integrated period after the management reform of the eighties is characterized by the application of seven premises (Hood, 1991): participation of professionals in the administration; specification of standards and evaluation of the performance of the agency; emphasis on the control of results; disaggregation of units in the public sector; change in competition among government agencies; emphasis on the use of private sector management techniques; austerity in the use of government resources. These guidelines were ratified by OCDE studies giving greater legitimacy to the change in management model (OCDE, 1997).

On the other hand, a problem that focuses more on the political element of the administration has begun more recently. The contemporary state proposed by Wolfe (1980) is characterized by a crisis of legitimacy, especially from the perspective of the results.

This crisis is a phenomenon derived from a universal problem: “More as a result of the social, economic and technological evolution of the contemporary world, than as a result of specifically ineffective governments or particularly inoperative regimes” (Cabrero, 1997, p.15).

It is presented as a response to citizen demands, seeking a state apparatus that serves society and not vice versa. In this order of ideas, Laufer (1982) suggests a new system of legitimacy, founded not by the ends, but by the methods of the exercise of power. It is a crisis of the state-society relationship, and “it is precisely the apparatus of the public administration that is the responsible bridge in that relationship” (Cabrero, 1997, p.17). It is here that the influence of social networks is seen as an instrument of connection of this relationship of government society.

The answer to the crisis of legitimacy posed is the modernization of public administration. In other words, the transition to new governance. According to Cabrero (1997), this modernization must involve three fundamental factors: 1) Efficiency. This aspect of modernization appears as a transformative process of an inefficient public administration, which wastes resources and organizational energy. Therefore, the need to recompose the input-output relationships is established. 2) Effectiveness. This dimension is based on the need for modernization due to the crisis in the performance of state

objectives. The traditional civil service is seen as an ineffective apparatus, incapable of achieving goals. It therefore requires solutions: a reduction in the bureaucratic apparatus and the rationalization of human, material, technical and financial resources. Finally, 3) Legitimacy. This dimension refers to modernization based on the process necessary to restore dialogue between the State and society.

Various and non-traditional mechanisms that allow for the fluidity of dialogue, communication, agreement and, above all, the participation and will of the citizenry. A participation not only in the level of demand but also in the management and monitoring of the policies and projects executed. (Cabrero, 1997)

Considering the necessary modernization proposed by Cabrero (1997), which in summary refers to the introduction of new public management that takes efficiency, effectiveness and legitimacy as fundamental axes, special attention will be paid to the emphasis on the axis of legitimacy, which establishes the need for mechanisms of communication and the continuous participation of society in the processes and decisions of public administration.

Like the public administration, the evolution of the media and the technological revolution caused a transformation from the “traditional” to the modern in the field of communication, having an evolutionary correlation that determines in a synergistic dependency between both. This is why social networks appear.

Metamorphosis of traditional media to social networks

From the perspective of political theory, the countries with democratic systems, whose base is political liberalism, have as a fundamental axis the division of powers: executive, legislative and judicial. “The division of powers and guarantees of the governed are the two basic legal assumptions on which the modern constitutional structure of the western state is based” (Villanueva, 2014, p. 149). Such division involves depositing the public power of the state in different and interdependent bodies to carry out the actions and proper functioning of the government entity.

Parallel to the development of this tripartite model, and depending on the evolution that is developing in civil society, at the end of the eighteenth century, as a result of the French Revolution, the term of a fourth power began to

be used “to talk about the incipient means” of social communication (González, 2020, p. 9). This term comes from the English politician Edmund Burke who used this expression in the English Parliament, referring to the power of the press to promote political attitudes and criteria in society (Esquivel, 2013).

From that moment on, according to Castro (2006), the press was already a powerful instrument of subversion of order, morality, religion and strong influence in human society. “The press acted as a counterpower to the established powers, a function that was later recognized by society” (Galán-Gamero, 2014, p. 156).

For certain communicologists, the media “are the cornerstone in democratic societies, since they act as interlocutors between the state and civil society” (Blesa, 2006, p. 92) generating a space where problems of relevance to the community are addressed, and analyzed by political actors.

In a more recent theoretical context, this characteristic of the media in a democratic society coincides with the philosophy of Jürgen Habermas (1991), which specifies that the media perform its function as a “watchdog” in open and free societies. In the same way, they guide the audience towards the most important issues, thus generating an agenda and expanding public space (McCombs and Shaw, 2001). Such a public space is the core of a democratic society (Blesa, 2006).

More recently, Robert Dahl (1992) states that two basic institutions from the perspective of communication must coexist in any democratic system, in addition to other elements: plurality of information and freedom of expression; both are possible due to the very existence of mass media. Based on the above, it can be inferred that there is a correlation and interdependence between the media and democratic life due to their influence on civil society.

Unfortunately, traditional media (television, radio, press) have moved away from the ideological correlation with democratic life and “seem to have conveniently filled this gap by standing as the privileged interlocutors between the world of business and society, on the one hand, and business and politics, on the other” (Blesa, 2006, p. 93). According to this, there are two clear dimensions in the field of media: the commercial and the political-ideological, which predominantly prevail in journalistic activities (Cebrián, 2004).

Moved by economic and commercial purposes, the media “are hardly conceived in the traditional scheme of public space, but are defined as private spaces capable of influencing politics, state management and people’s private lives” (Luna Pla, 2003, p. 22).

The social and economic strength concentrated in the media is undeniable. Unfortunately, this new motivation, far from the original purpose of the previously exposed media, has a predominant characteristic: “the concentration of the media in fewer hands, which always belong to the economic and financial elites” (González, 2020, p. 13).

Because the traditional media have changed their purpose of dialogue between the state and society to seek economic profitability, “they are suffering a crisis of credibility” (Calvo *et al.*, 2014, p. 23). Audience perception of media credibility has declined since the 1970s (Pew Research Center, 2007).

In Mexico, the media has been distinguished by the total dominance of two television stations (Huerta and Gómez, 2013, p. 123) that “between both headlines have reached a total of 96% of the participation in the country’s screen” (De La Garza and Barredo, 2017, p. 97). These television stations had a monopoly on the symbolic management of public opinion. Despite the fact that Mexicans get their information about politics from various sources (family, work, educational centers), the media came to strongly influence the subject of politics (García and Huerta Wong, 2008).

The loss of credibility of the media, which indirectly caused political disaffection due to the same lack of confidence in the information transmitted by traditional media, is a reality that has changed due to the emergence and growth of social networks (De la Garza, 2020).

Although the emergence of social networks in the 21st century has been associated with extraordinary technological advances in communication, the concept is more remote and has its origin in sociological studies. In this sense, the concept of social network refers in a simple and clear way to social structures composed of individuals united by some type of relationship. In fact, it is even associated with another concept closely related to social networks, and that is social capital. The latter term refers to relationships established by social groups with common goals, and which are based on solidarity, loyalty, reciprocity and other factors that go beyond the mere exchange of information (Gómez and Portela, 2011).

Clearly, in the context of the knowledge society, the meaning of social networks is fundamentally focused on the use of technological platforms and the exchange of information, data and messages between people, while in social capital they have a more cooperative sense towards the collective goals (Gómez, 2016, p.110).

With the ICT revolution, on the other hand, the concept takes on a broader connotation in the 21st century with the boom given to these social relationships by the use and diffusion of the Internet. In this context, the social network acquires a more dynamic nature as a product of the Knowledge Society, facilitating interactions through various platforms (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, among others), with messages, content and videos, thus multiplying the possibilities of exchange between individuals and social groups. This phenomenon gives rise to this new meaning given to social networks.

With social (technological) networks, “the ways and frequency in which human beings communicate have changed, leading to a different form of citizen participation” (Ayala, 2014, p. 23). The new forms of interaction and participation of social networks have given rise to a new form of communicative organization in which people have access to direct and permanent information “but also the right to be participants in public discourse, which was restricted only to a power elite” (Ayala, 2014, p. 24), a circumstance very different from that observed in the days before social networks where traditional media predominated. This is what opens up an extraordinary opportunity for using social networks in public administration.

Social networks should be understood not only as simple technological tools for exchanging messages, but as authentic means of communication, interaction and global participation (García *et al.*, 2014, p. 36).

Social networks and public administration

Social networks are recent constructs that refer to an evolutionary phenomenon that is transformed at a high speed and that is heterogeneous. In 2019, 45% of the global population used social networks, with Facebook being the most used social network with more than 2.27 billion active users (Hootsuite, 2019). These networks have had a strong impact not only on society, but also on the public sector, due to their possible impact on transparency, participation and collaboration (Criado *et al.*, 2013).

In relation to the field of new public management, social networks allow to contribute to its objectives, i.e., community building, considering the aspects of transparency, legitimacy and participation. Social networks allow

easy and direct communication and interaction of public administration with other actors (Bonson *et al.*, 2015). This is because digital platforms favor the approach of the government with the citizen because of the spaces it creates.

Another window that social networks offer is disintermediation. “Technology causes the generation of more horizontal links between providers and recipients of public services” (Villorde, 2020, p. 377), thus benefiting the public administration with the collective intelligence of the citizen.

Social networks as a source of data are another opportunity to use them as a tool for new public management. Administrations can extract knowledge and information from the activities and relationships generated by citizens on the various digital platforms of social networks (Meijer and Potjer, 2018). The use of this data improves organizational efficiency, quality, trust and legitimacy of the public administration.

The use of social networks in public administration processes is known as the institutionalization of social networks (Villorde, 2020, p. 380).

It involves the convergence and establishment of a set of routines and procedures, the alignment of innovative practices as part of the mission and vision of the organization, as well as the integration of these digital platforms into the technological paradigm and public communication standards of the organization. (Villorde, 2020 citing Mergel, p. 216)

Therefore, institutionalization must be based on a rational model and an adequate planning of its implementation.

Depending on the complexity of the implementation and importance, there are certain strategies for using social networks in public administration that should be considered for their implementation in the field.

Each administration uses social networks in the way that best serves its objectives and within its possibilities depending on its circumstances (Villorde, 2020). Some administrations rely more on exploiting the information dissemination potential of networks, but others leverage platforms for more participatory and collaborative uses (Meijer and Thaens, 2013). Whatever the case, “social networks are invaluable useful tool” (Villorde, 2020, p. 383).

On the other hand, Mergel (2013) classifies the uses of social networks in public administration into three categories according to their function:

- Push. The use of social networks as a channel for disseminating information for citizens. The administration is represented on social

networks with the main objective of positioning messages, avoiding direct interaction with citizens.

- Pull. It seeks information from the same audience, so it encourages user participation in their networks. It seeks interaction even though it is limited.
- Networks. Pursue the generation of horizontal and continuous communication, based on open exchanges with users.

In addition to the categorization of Mergel *et al.* (2020), and based on the aforementioned categorization, social networks complement the provision of certain public services and establish social transactions. Therefore, the authors (Criado and Villorde, 2020) classify the use of social networks in public administration in the following three categories:

- Provision of information. Aimed at disseminating basic information about the administration (activities, events, press releases, etc.).
- Citizen interaction. The administrations seek interaction with the citizen by establishing a bidirectional communication on the platforms.
- Provision of public service. Linked to the dissemination of information on public services provided by the administration (health recommendations, weather alerts, recommendations to care for water, calls to action, etc.).

The use of social networks as a tool for the new public management of current public organizations “is having a noticeable impact on many services and on different public policies” (Villorde, 2020, p. 384).

The communicative and participatory potential of social networks in public administration can be mainly seen in the management of emergencies and in attacking the erroneous information that exists in the same networks. Such dissemination is used by the administrations in their favor and achieve the objectives of the public administration itself towards society.

A catalog of good practices in the use of social networks in public administration requires considering certain basic principles:

- Train and educate public administration employees on the laws and regulations to follow, as well as the importance of using social networks for their functions, so that they are aware of their limitations and consequences in their actions.

- Publish a unified content preparation policy on social media and have control over it.
- Highlights the importance of not associating personal data with organizational data on social networks.
- Create a strategy for monitoring and verifying compliance and updating administrative processes performed on digital media.

As seen, the possibilities of using social networks are a powerful instrument to enhance the improvement of public management.

Social networks and government

Four different stages can be recognized when it comes to the rise of social media in the last decade and a half. In the first instance the first sporadic manifestations that occur in the second part of the 2000s when virtual social networks begin to become popular, first for recreational purposes, but later it is proven that they can have an important impact on public life (Loader *et al.*, 2014; Chen and Jacobson, 2022).

One of the most important precedents in terms of how social networks were used for a political campaign was certainly the 2008 presidential election in which they were capitalized on by Barack Obama's campaign which was quite a media success at the time. Later on, the appearance of *Wikileaks* (regardless of the valuation of its founder), will set an important precedent in journalism, because it is proven that digital media can dispute the narrative of events to traditional media (Saleh, 2013; Katz *et al.*, 2013).

Initially, the emergence of social networks in public life was disruptive and was mainly used to organize and make visible protest actions. The best example was the events that became known as The Arab Spring. In the case of Latin America, there are expressions such as the Chilean Winter and the #YoSoy132 movement. However, it was not clear at the time whether this new form of civic engagement would actually influence political life. The first stage of the emergence of social networks is characterized by their democratizing potential (Sola-Morales, 2016).

Over time, it became clear that these technological tools could articulate different social expressions, both for acts of protest and in political campaigns. An important precedent was what happened in the state elections of Nuevo León in 2015, which revealed new possibilities in terms of political

communication. The second stage is when these tools end up being assimilated by public and private organizations (companies, government agencies, political parties) (Berumen Villarruel and Medellín Mendoza, 2016).

This is when there is an exponential growth in the use of virtual social networks. Their use is not always strategic nature, and in many cases political actors (as well as some mainstream media strategies) fail to comprehend the scope of these actions. But they stop ignoring them, and arguably, they stop fighting an inevitable trend as well. At this moment, there is no more discussion about its relevance, and rather the intelligent use of social and digital networks begins to be key (De la Garza, 2020).

In some cases, they are used to measure the pulse of public opinion, to communicate administrative decisions or to position the image of a particular political or governing force. It is a process that occurs too quickly, in the second half of the 2010s and comes with risks (Stephens, 2018).

By the latter, we refer to the proliferation of false information that comes with the process. It is also evident that networks give voice to actors who do not necessarily construct positively. The political polarization that exists in most contemporary democracies is transferred to virtual media, and in many cases even ends up worsening. In this way, the possibility of public deliberation that allows collective construction of solutions is removed, leading to a third stage, which presents a clear uncertainty (Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021).

The effects of social media on democracies are uncertain, especially when cases like Cambridge Analytica emerge that expose the manipulation that new media can be subject to. On the other hand, in other cases, communication between rulers and ruled through cyberspace is more a simulation than a reality (Isaak and Hanna, 2018).

But a fourth stage of this reality is presented in the context of the pandemic. Even with the danger of disinformation and the most harmful effects of this reality, the Covid-19 health crisis shows that we are facing an irreversible process. In this case, there is a huge challenge to a reality that changes too soon and from which it is difficult to go back (Gottlie and Dyer, 2020; Clement *et al.*, 2023).

During the pandemic, the contradictions of the information age have to coexist: it is true that virtual media becomes a space where false information is spread and where social confrontation is promoted. But these tools also help to inform the population of the health risks, help people to keep in

contact at times of social distancing and help to carry out remote work that allows maintaining the physical integrity of people.

Towards the shaping of a digital strategy in the governance of the 21st century

As pointed out earlier in this article, social networks can help generate better governance processes, but this is still in the realm of the possible and not necessarily the real. In other words, there are few successful experiences of administrations (municipal, regional or national) that have successfully used technology to achieve more citizen participation, transparency that generates better accountability, among other possibilities (Bryer and Zavattaro, 2011; Perozo Martín and Chirinos Martínez, 2019).

But as the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated, accelerating digital interaction is a process that is irreversible. In the present paper, for example, we discuss the possibilities of artificial intelligence and the metaverse. Both public and private organizations face a major challenge to stay within a trend that has changed the way people interact, assimilate the world around them and even the way they express themselves (Kemeç, 2023).

For the same reason, it is perhaps common to state that what is required is more use of digital tools in public offices. The challenge today is that they can be used strategically. For example, how technology can enable strategic decision-making that is oriented to execute decisions (Maciejewski, 2017).

When talking about Big Data, we refer to the ability to process a wide amount of information that allows us to make predictive models, which can serve, for example, for big issues such as public health and safety, strategic planning of cities, environmental protection, among other possibilities (Lavertu, 2016).

But it also represents a huge responsibility on the part of public administrations to employ digital strategies. In the first place, there is a need to strengthen cybersecurity at a time when new forms of crime arise in these media. This requires a commitment to protect personal data, as well as institutional and legal mechanisms that protect the fundamental rights of citizens (Dava-ra Fernández de Marcos, 2016; Andraško *et al.*, 2021).

Considering that we are going through a historical process that will deepen in the next years, public administrations have the challenge of capitalizing on the opportunities presented, as well as preventing some challenges

presented by the information age. This is the breaking point: if the use of technology can lead to strengthening democratic expressions and strengthening governance processes.

Conclusions

As pointed out since the beginning of this text, studies on public administration have evolved over the last five decades, because of the theoretical transformation itself as well as the experiences that have emerged during this time. It is also true that the study of the media has had a significant development and rethinking following the emergence of digital media. To the extent that the information age has led to virtual tools being indispensable for citizens to be in touch, work, carry out transactions, among other indispensable activities and on the other hand public administrations face the challenge of building better governance processes that can give them legitimacy, there will be a need to find better ways to use technologies to achieve this end.

This is a process that is fraught with significant challenges and is unpredictable in nature, because technology changes too fast. The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated a process that we can observe since the past decade, which will surely represent a huge practical challenge for decision makers within the public administration but also from the field of academic research within the Social Sciences.

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