

INTERNET, E - COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC OPINION: ANTI - WAR MOVEMENT IN THE INTERNET AND FROM THE INTERNET IN SPAIN

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The Iraq invasion commanded by American and British governments, and its diplomatic preface at the UN and other international institutions, provoked an enormous public opinion rejection in most countries, showing the force of a still incipient international public opinion. During all process, the role of the Internet acquired a singular importance, particularly in Spain, whose government strongly supported the invasion and where rejection of war was almost absolute (about 91 %).

We propose to develop here a study about the changes in the consideration of public opinion caused by the Internet irruption not only as a mass media, but also as an interpersonal communication media. Considering four public opinion representations (political parties, polls, mass media and social demonstrations, with cardinal importance at the II Gulf War, in Spain and in other countries), it is necessary to wonder how Internet affects to public opinion formation, how public opinion is affected by several communication channels developed in Internet (as e-mail, bulletin boards or "alternative" media), and what changes Internet creates in the different public opinion representations.

The study is limited to Spain, but it has a more ambitious objective: to wonder how much the Internet has been relevant to generate a series of political, mediatic, and social effects, that could change traditional consideration of public opinion and to generate a new model of international public opinion, remarkably related to the communication systems at Internet in their diverse degrees.

1) Introduction: social demonstrations against war

An international public opinion movement has suddenly appeared as main counterweight to hegemonic American power concerning the invasion of Iraq and their prolegomenons. This public opinion, expressed by massive demonstrations, is clearly differentiated to which has incipiently been developing in the world in recent years as protest against the economic globalization. If this kind of expressions have strongly been connected with diverse “antisystem” groups and its effective reach, even though many sympathies earned, continues being reduced, the demonstrations that we have seen, specially in Europe, but also in important number in the rest of the world, constituted a challenge and a notice to political representatives that supported the position of the United States, among them the Spanish Government and particularly its President, José María Aznar.

These demonstrations have incorporated citizens from all the social and ideological environments, but they do not support one or several political options in concrete. They are just defined by their opposition, by common refusal to the Government position. In this sense, the “No War” movement clearly transcends the environment of fight among parties and is constituted as an option for the immense majority of the citizens, if we judge by its shape in the diverse public opinion representations commonly considered.

2) Public opinion representations

We must say, firstly, that public opinion has not its only representation in massive demonstrations. In order to determine how they are modified and relocated in Internet, it is important to explain shortly which are the most important public opinion representations (concept usually complex and susceptible of complementary and even unlike interpretations). Basically, four interpretations are found:

- **The vote** and its effective representation in the Parliament, or what we could call “formal” representation. In fact, the opinion of the public crystallize in the vote to a specific political option that supposes the temporary transfer of “public opinion”. This would be the most important representation of public opinion, but its shortages, and also the characteristics of a healthy democratic system, require its supervision by other instances, particularly in this matter, where the simple majority that the Government of the Partido Popular enjoys in the Parliament generated a sonorous disagreement among the formal representation and other representations of the public opinion against the Government’s position.

- In the previous section, we referred to the little popular support to this war. **The polls** would be constituted in the second public opinion representation. In a mass society, the impossibility to ask directly to the public about their opinion to guide the political action (with counted exceptions, that is to say, the vote), has caused a not desired effect: to convert the polls, in the consideration of great part of political class and mass media, in a capable instance to replace voting. Obviously, this a false pretension. Polls cannot replace voting. However, they may become an approximation, a prominent indication of the public’s position concerning a specific matter. In this sense, individual positions against this war collect a nearby overwhelming support of 90% in the polls, and even upper in surveys so little “suspicious” as the CIS one.

- **Mass media**, as intermediaries among the public and the power, are representation, moreless simplified, but generally effective, of the “state of public opinion”. Media would decide what is considered socially “good” and they would exercise the role of “spokesmen

of the public opinion”. Nevertheless, the fact that mass media are barely detached to the interests of some lobbies, partially invalidates this pretension. In the Spanish case, where almost every reference communication media maintains intimate relations with a specific part of the political power, the media pluralism does not correspond to the existing one in the public opinion, although a kind of “formal pluralism” may be detected (based fundamentally in the diversity of visions of the present time that tinge powerfully, and in some cases –an electoral process, for example- even invalidates the “Agenda-Setting effect”). A pluralism that approaches to the different “public opinions”, also concerning the information related to the war, where with some exception (the newspaper *El Mundo*) the pro-Government media continued defending its position in this question, the anti – Government and neutral media criticised the Government support to war, and also was given a decanting, growing as it became evident the opinion of the public against war, in the same sense of opposition.

- Finally, the fourth public opinion representation is **social demonstrations**, direct expression of a state of citizenship opinion. The volume of the demonstrations, as well as its continuity, is a faithful reflection of an extensively majority state of the opinion against the war. Basically, the discontent concerning all the actions that around this matter carried out the Government has generated a movement in the mass media (responsible for transferring to the public these actions) and in the citizenship that has been reflected in extensive demonstrations (due to the verification of the citizens, through the polls, and through interpersonal communication, that the discontent with the Government actions was generalized, and therefore “they weren’t alone”). At the same time, this fact serve as reinforcement to the media, to the political opposition and to new polls, helped by the null correction of the Government, the image of the “Trio of the Azores”, the double language of the Government talking about the “Humanitary Action” and the elusion of the term “war”, the excesses of the police or the extemporaneous statements of Ana Palacio on how much the oil prizes were decreasing thanks to the war.

3) Internet communication models

MORRIS and OGAN (2002) design four different communication levels within the Internet:

- a) one-to-one asynchronous communication, such as E-mail;
 - b) many-to-many asynchronous communication, such as Usenet, electronic bulletin boards, and Listservers that require the receiver to sign up for a service or log on to a program to access messages around a particular topic or topics;
 - c) synchronous communication that can be one-to-one, one-to-few, or one-to-many and can be organized around a topic, the construction of an object, or role playing, such as MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons and their various transformations as MOOs, MUCKs and MUSHs), Internet Relay Chat and chat rooms on commercial services; and
 - d) asynchronous communication generally characterized by the receiver's need to seek out the site in order to access information, which may involve many-to-one, one-to-one, or one-to-many source-receiver relationships (e.g., Web sites, gophers, and FTP sites).
- (2002: 138)

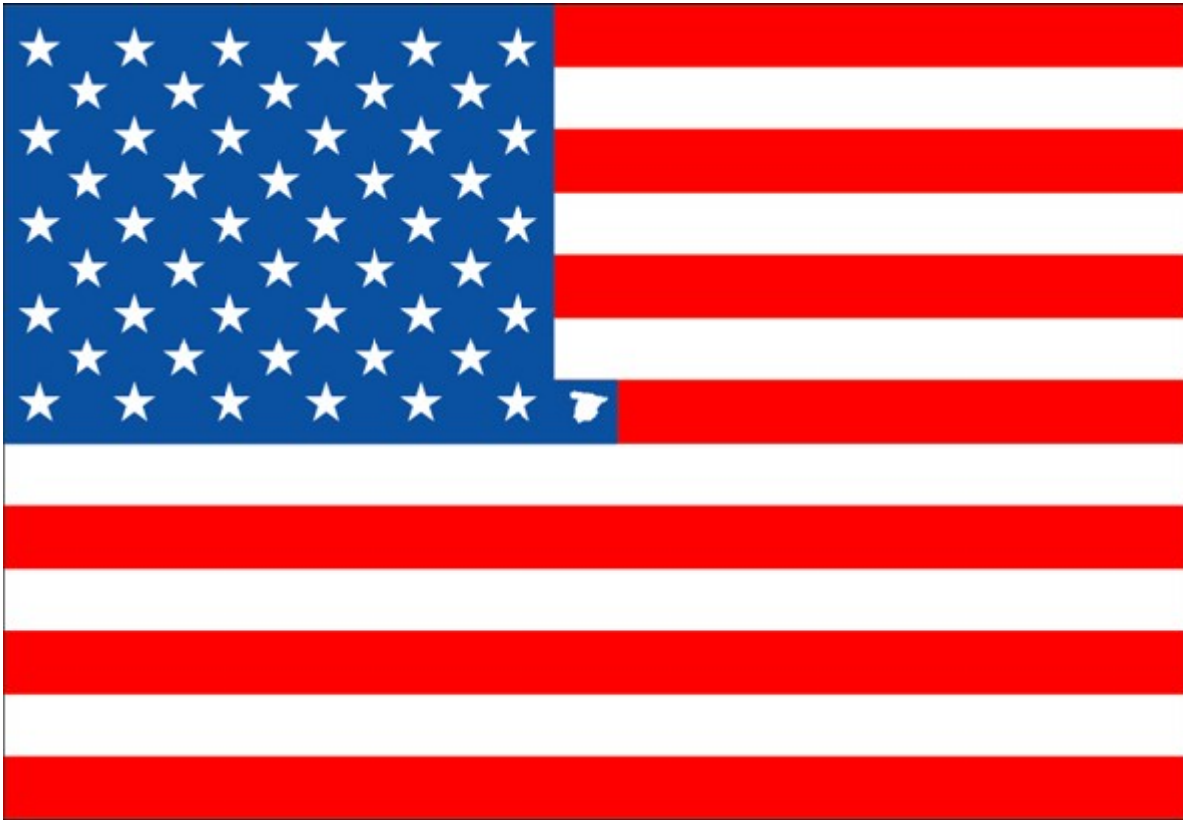
All these forms of communication in the Net had a singular importance in the process of formation of a determined state of the public opinion in Spain. We will see how each one worked in the matter that occupies us and the corresponding examples:

- **The e-mail:** The importance of this vehicle of communication in the broadcast of information and opinions relating to the war was very large. Moreover, since a principle was given not only as personal one-to-one communications, but also by the forward of diverse mail criticizing war and particularly the position of the Spanish Government in the conflict, through the network. For example the typical mail in which the receiver's sign and the forward of the message to acquaintances is required to support an specific opinion.

NO A LA GUERRA ASUNTO: NO A LA GUERRA. Estados Unidos está a punto de declarar la guerra. Nos encontramos en una grave situación de desequilibrio mundial que puede dar inicio a una Guerra devastadora y cruel de implicaciones impredecibles. Si tu estas en contra de esta guerra, la ONU se encuentra recopilando firmas para evitar este trágico acontecimiento

mundial. POR FAVOR COPIA este e-mail en un mensaje nuevo, firma al final de la lista que veras a continuación, y mándalo a todas las personas que conozcas. Si recibes esta lista con + de 500 nombres en ella, por favor envía una copia del mensaje a: unicwash@unicwash.org Incluso si decides no firmar, por favor se considerado y no elimines la petición. SÓLO REENVÍALO PARA JUNTOS HACER ALGO. Gracias. (Received February 7, February 18 and March 6 of 2003)

Or simply e-mails criticising the position of Spain relating to the military operation in Iraq, as occurs with the following image:



Received 13/03/2003 and 20/03/2003

It is difficult to calibrate how this type of e-mails had incidence in the widespread of opinions against the Iraq war, due to our lack of reliable statistical studies in this matter. However, it may be suggested that its role was important referring to the call to social mobilization. Through e-mail messages reporting the place and hour of successive mobilizations were diffused immediately, exclusively local mobilizations or related to greater reach demonstrations (for example the large public mobilizations that there were on

the 15 of February of 2003 everywhere).

- The **collective mailing lists and the bulletin boards** were an environment in which the distribution of informations, and the debate, were frequently given, specially in the most “formal” environments of debate (forums of political parties and not governmental associations), but also in discussion spaces less structured (bulletin boards incorporated to the most various media in Internet). The information and the relative opinion about process of negotiation in United Nations, and subsequently about the war, were abundant, feeding with the informations exposed in the main mass media or in the same webpages.

- Due to the normally ephemeral character of **chats**, it is more complex to venture the presence of war as a matter of discussion and its incidence on the subsequent public opinion behavior. Nevertheless an important presence of the Iraq conflict might be detected in the channels of chat dedicated specifically to thematic discussions, where debates with specialists are usually celebrated, and whose contents are later maintained available for the public. For example, the Encuentros Digitales of the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* (http://www.elmundo.es/encuentros_digital) where the importance conferred to everything related to the conflict was notable. It is the case of the invitation made to Fernando Valderrama, former responsible for business of the Spanish embassy in Iraq that presented his resignation by his discrepancies with the political line adopted by the Government, who was interviewed on the 18 of March, eve of the outbreak of the war. It also transcended their political scope. For this reason, the guests in sections so differentiated as Music, Literature, Movies, etc., had also the chance to speak with the readers and show their opinion relating this subject.

All these communicative forms are a representation and a evolution in Internet of one of the factors that have best contributed, with no doubt, to extend the opposition to the conflict: The interpersonal communication, developed in the social comments relative to Iraq war. Although public opinion is declared in superior representations than the interpersonal dimension of communication, it is basically formed and developed in this

environment, molding a state of opinion, subsequently, that is declared in those representations, and that is influenced, at the same time, by the polls, mass media and social demonstrations.

It is very possible that the interpersonal communication, jointly with the massive forms of communication, has generated a process of “spiral of silence”, as designed by Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann, by virtue of which “La opinión que recibía apoyo explícito parecía más fuerte de lo que era realmente, y la otra opinión más débil. Las observaciones realizadas en unos contextos se extendieron a otros e incitaron a la gente a proclamar sus opiniones o a ‘tragárselas’ y mantenerse en silencio hasta que, en un proceso en espiral, un punto de vista llegó a dominar la escena pública y el otro desapareció de la conciencia pública al enmudecer sus partidarios. Éste es el proceso que podemos calificar como de ‘espiral del silencio’ (...) Cuando alguien piensa que los demás le están dando la espalda, sufre tanto que se le puede guiar o manipular tan fácilmente por medio de su propia sensibilidad, como si ésta fuera una brida. Parece que el miedo al aislamiento es la fuerza que pone en marcha la espiral del silencio. Correr en pelotón constituye un estado de relativa felicidad; pero si no es posible, porque no se quiere compartir públicamente una convicción aceptada aparentemente de modo universal, al menos se puede permanecer en silencio como segunda mejor opción, para seguir siendo tolerado por los demás”. (1995: 22 – 24)

Through opinion polls, the media perceive the generalized opposition of the public to Iraq war (about 90%), and then try to adjust their position to the position of the public (if previously differed). On the other hand, the individuals receive continuous informative impacts opposing to war in the mass media, but also, and above all, through their immediate environment, so much in the physical world as in the Internet.

- **Webpages:** Due to the enormous diversity of contents existing in Internet, and also in the “Spanish Internet”, the public had the opportunity of being nourished with informations from all kind of sources, official or officious, neutral or moreless favorable to some of the two main positions developed in the society. In order to make our results clear, the two

types of information will be commented separately. First, the information from “massive” media, as large digital newspapers and generalist portals. Second, the information obtained by secondary ways in the informative flow of the web, through pages without commercial purpose, personal pages or “alternative” media.

A) Concerning the **reference media**, they faithfully continued the guidelines marked by the printed information of newspapers, televisions and radios, being even limited to reproducing it (notoriously the information of the EFE press agency, informative source of many of the digital newspapers and, above all, Spanish generalist portals). This first factor, alongside the process of privatization or mercantilization of the information that is being produced in the last months in great part of digital newspapers, diminished the relative impact that the digital reference media could have on the public, as long as the information offered was, in a great deal, information already known by the public or, in any case, information available in other media. Nevertheless, it is possible to define some elements of interest concerning our case, the mobilization of the public opinion against war. Such elements are the following ones:

- **Greater pluralism:** A pluralism that derives not only from the major number of accessible media for the public in comparison with any other communication system, but also from diverse entries dedicated specifically to collect information from the newspapers and generalist portals (as www.periodistadigital.com). This fact permitted to offer the public a general vision that escaped from the simple reproduction of agency informations or printed versions that characterized part of reference media.

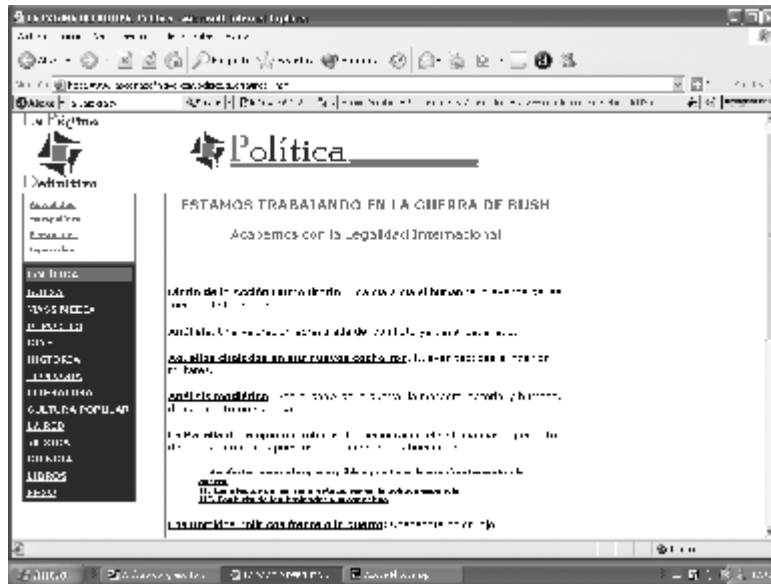
- **Greater information volume:** the most important media were not limited only to reproduce that already published in their printed version, but, in greater or smaller degree, they took advantage of two key characteristics of the digital media: their multimedia dimension and their potential to show information instantaneously, in order to offer diverse thematic Specials dedicated to mobilizations and to the conflict, as the newspaper *ABC* did (<http://www.abc.es/especiales/index.asp?tid=4&hid=3293&cid=3293>). And also to offer

refreshed information as soon as they knew new data (specially once the conflict had already been initiated).

- Finally, the international dimension of the conflict shows Internet as the ideal medium so that the public could gain **access to informations from all over the globe**, with the only limit of their linguistic competence. As a result, the public could configure a very broad informative “menu” in which there were media that showed diverse interests and opposite positions concerning the issue about the intervention in Iraq. In this sense, a Spanish reader could extract a very complete vision of the situation from the Internet, consulting American, British or French journals, but also, if desired, consulting the information generated (normally in English) in the Arabian world, such as the Al Yazeera TV webpage (www.aljazeera.net) that opened an English version in the last days of the war.

B) Concerning the **“alternative” media**, the panorama is much more extensive in their informations, and therefore, more plural (but also less reliable in many occasions). Their effect on the public opinion is more dispersed, due to the relative impact of each information on the audience, given their smaller visibility.

- **The counterinformation or independent information webpages** gave profuse information about the war and its prelude from an ideological, or simply informative, point of view, far away, usually, from the prevailing moderation in the reference media. For example, it is the case of La Insignia (www.lainsignia.org) and its critical articles against the military intervention and American foreign policy, or La Página Definitiva (www.lapaginadefinitiva.com). This one is a publication codirected by myself, and in which an extensive Special about the war was developed. It contained a daily summary of news about the conflict combined with diverse analysis mainly about the effects of the public mobilizations in Spain.



- **The weblogs**, currently an authentic boom in Spain, had a noticeable role not so much on the information about the conflict itself as much as in those arguments against war that would benefit the citizen mobilization through links recommendations, comments, and even opinion articles (for example in posdatas.blogspot.com). Arguments which mainly explained those reasons the author may had to be against this war. In a media so personalized like the weblogs, the value of the publication derives directly from the credibility of the author. In this sense, it may be guessed that the influence of these comments on the opinion of the public (even if this public was reduced) will be relevant. Specially if jointly with the posts diverse images were included. For example, that slogan contrary to the war that was extended with profusion by Internet. A fact present in part thanks to the campaign previously developed which demanded political responsibilities by the ecological Prestige disaster. The information provided by the weblogs had an important influence in Spain in the case of the following weblog in English: http://dear_raed.blogspot.com/. This weblog described the daily situation of the population in

Baghdad, and that concerning the author's himself, during the first days of the II Gulf War in March - April 2003.

- Finally, information and citizen mobilization carried out by several **webpages belonging to associations** of all types had also great importance. Ranging from political parties to citizen organizations created specifically to claim against war, and also, obviously, those webpages belonging to not Governmental Organizations should also be mentioned. Some of these pages finished having a direct clash with the Government, as it is the case of www.noalaguerra.org, whose owner, Juan Carlos Monedero, has to face an accusation promoted by the Partido Popular that can lead to up to five years of prison, by placing some images of leaders of the Partido Popular, accusing them of "murderers" by their support to Government, on this page.

4) New Public Opinion Paradigm

Although it is too soon to define fixed conclusions, some effects of against – war movement, particularly in the Internet, in the formation and characteristics of public opinion in mass society, are likely to be pointed out:

- The Iraq war and its prelude has begun to define a **new media model**, particularly a new reception model, where the importance of the large "traditional" mass media diminishes against a qualified public who is interested in acquiring information and do it through the most diverse sources, from the 24 hours information channels to the news distributed by the Network, and also those varied forms of interpersonal communication with great importance in the diffusion of the opposition to the conflict. The informative model of Internet, characterized by an active receiver that interacts with the issuer and decides his own information selection, is faced to the traditional model of mass passive audience, a model that pursues only a few reference media. In this context, the media panorama turns more dispersed and complex. Therefore it is not easy to venture how the public obtain the information and which effects are derived on their reception. Thus, the Agenda Setting

model can be put in crisis, and the selection is no longer done only by the media, but also by the public.

- As well as Internet has an effect on the communication media universe, also does on the **forms of interpersonal communication reproduced in Internet** through diverse channels, such as email, chat or bulletin boards. Internet is not a substitute, but an extension of the interpersonal communication. The individual forgets his traditional passiveness to become more active and capable of emitting information and decoding it according to his interests, interacting with other members of the public whom he talks. The apocalyptic consideration of the “mass” as a simple addition of individuals, and even of the “mass society”, is diluted, being partially modified by a new “publics society” .

- The active character of the public in Internet carries us to claim the central role of the Net in one of the most important elements of public opinion formation process: ***mobilization***. The structure of network communication is more complex than the asymmetric communicative model of mass media, and allows to both users and media to play an important role in the necessity of creating concrete answers to what is rejected through public demonstrations. This phenomenon has mainly been caused by diffusion of diverse demonstrations and the call to participate. In this sense, the Internet user is mobilized through the Network, but he also participates in demonstrations outside the Net.

- Finally, Internet confers to social demonstrations, and to the public opinion formation, its **international dimension**. This articulates all the mobilizations in a complex civic network without a center. In spite of not being particularly controlled or assembled by any superior instance, or perhaps exactly for this reason, public opinion constitutes in an international level and represents an important counterweight of traditional powers (in fact, we could talk about the existence of two “superpowers”: United States and the international public opinion). Although it is certainly very premature to consider that this incipient international public opinion will have continuity in future mobilizations of protest depending on the aparison of new problems in international politics, what is doubtless is that these

demonstrations will circulate, will be diffused and will develop basically through the only media authentically transnational, the Internet.

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