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THE TRUTH IN A BUBBLE THE END OF 'AUDIENCE DEMOCRACY' AND THE RISE OF 'BUBBLE DEMOCRACY'¹

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Abstract

This article sustains that the so-called 'post-truth' phenomenon also depends on the characteristics of the new 'hybrid' communicative scenario. The thesis is that this new scenario is substantially different from that of the 'party democracy', protagonist of significant part of the twentieth century, and from that of the 'audience democracy', defined by Bernard Manin in the mid-nineties. The emergence of new media entails a series of consequences, including the fragmentation of the audience into a plurality of self-referential segments, politically polarized 'bubbles', devoid, at least potentially, of a common communicative sphere. Taking into account such developments, the article seeks to construct the 'ideal type' of a 'bubble democracy', marked by the mistrust of institutions, fragmentation of the audience, disintermediation, homophilic tendencies, and polarization.

Keywords

Party Democracy; Audience democracy; Post-truth politics; Echo-chambers; Filter Bubble; Polarization; Media and Democracy.

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Resumen

Este artículo sostiene que el así llamado fenómeno de la “posverdad” también depende de las características del nuevo sistema de comunicación “híbrido”. La tesis es que este nuevo escenario es sustancialmente diferente a lo de la “democracia partidaria”, protagonista de una parte significativa del siglo XX, y de la “democracia de audiencias”, definida por Bernard Manin a mediados de los noventa. La aparición de nuevos medios de comunicación tiene una serie de consecuencias, entre ellas la fragmentación de la audiencia en una pluralidad de segmentos auto-referenciales, “burbujas” políticamente polarizadas, desprovistas, por lo menos potencialmente, de una esfera comunicativa común. Teniendo en cuenta estos desarrollos, el artículo trata de construir el “tipo ideal” de “democracia de burbujas”, marcada por la desconfianza de las instituciones, fragmentación de la audiencia, desintermediación, tendencia a la homofilia, y la polarización.

Palabras clave

Democracia de partido; Democracia de audiencias; Política de la posverdad; Eco-cámaras; Filtro de Burbuja; Polarización; Medios de comunicación y Democracia.

The ultimate truth

In many of his novels, Philip K. Dick stages an intricate maze of plots and manipulations that leave his reader quite disoriented. One such novel is *The Penultimate Truth*, published in 1964, in which Dick imagines, in an unspecified future, that a nuclear war between Western democracies and Asian communist regimes has forced most of the planet's population to take refuge in large underground tunnels, or 'ant tanks', where the main activity is the production of androids to fight the war on the earth's surface, now contaminated by radiation. Via television screens, daily messages from the American president reach the population motivating it to support the war effort and updating it with news of the conflict. However, the reader gradually discovers, page after page, that the entire economic and political system is based on the systematic falsification of reality. The war has, indeed, ended many years ago, with the two political blocks eventually reconciling, the soil only partially contaminated, and the androids used as servants in the luxurious villas of the ruling class. The images of war transmitted by television are only fiction, just as the supposedly ongoing war between East and West is a lie. Even Talbot Yance, the United States president who appeals to the underground workers every day, urging them to work harder, is simply a mechanical puppet, reciting scripts crafted by professional writers.

Over the last few years, in our own world, the spectre of systematic lies has likewise cast its shadow over the political stage. From 2016, following the double shock of the outcome of the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump's electoral victory, many observers have argued that one of the greatest dangers for Western democracies comes from 'fake news', 'post-truth', or the systematic falsification of reality, to which certain 'anti-establishment' political forces resort. To explain the fortune of today's 'populisms', many hypotheses have been formulated, including references to socio-economic factors and cultural components of the 'revolt against liberalism' (Palano, 2017, 2018, 2019a). However, in a non-episodic way, the discussion has turned to the irrationality of 'digital swarms', to their indifference in the face of rational arguments, to their inability to distinguish between truth and lies. In this scenario, the concept of 'post-truth' has become an almost constant reference in many reflections on the impact of the abundance of lies circulating on the Web, on processes of polarization, on mechanisms of manipulation of public opinion, and on strategies of disinformation used by emerging authoritarian regimes.

In considering the relationship between ‘politics’ and ‘truth’, the discussion on the so-called ‘post-truth’ phenomenon proposes arguments and themes extensively explored since the very origins of Western political philosophy. However, due to the reference to ‘truth’, the discussion often centres on a terrain in which different conceptions of politics and the relationship between politics and values are opposed rather than different interpretations of contemporary political transformations. In many ways, indeed, the manipulation of reality is a tool that politics has always used, since politics is also the product of a clash of antagonistic representations of reality (Jay, 2010). Naturally, there are notable differences between the propaganda of an authoritarian regime and the propaganda of a party that simply operates within a competitive scenario, but, most probably, the concept of ‘truth’, due to its specific implications, risks being an overly problematic reference for making distinctions between different degrees of information manipulation. Also for this reason, the theme of ‘post-truth’ will be approached, in the following pages, from a ‘minimalist’ perspective, which relativizes the ‘revolutionary’ role of social media, while recognizing that such tools have substantially changed the communicative scenario.

Rather than establishing whether the contemporary citizen is less critical today than in the past, or hypothesizing why public opinion is currently more exposed to the seduction of ‘post-truth’, this article focuses on connections between the new communication scenario and the functioning of contemporary democratic regimes. The thesis at the centre of the following pages is, indeed, that the new scenario, and, in particular, the widespread use of social media, favour very different dynamics, not only from those of the old ‘party democracy’, protagonist of a significant part of the twentieth century, but also from those of the ‘audience democracy’, whose distinctive features were identified by Bernard Manin almost a quarter of a century ago. However, the novelty does not consist in the fact that today’s political actors manipulate reality, because, even in the past, mass ideological parties, and television itself, proposed particularly partisan visions of reality, sometimes resorting to marked manipulations of information. In this sense, therefore, it is naive to think that the use of ‘fake news’ is a novelty introduced by Donald Trump, or by agencies through which Russia exerts its ‘sharp power’. The novelty must be sought rather not only in the ‘content’ manipulated by ‘fake news’, but also in the communicative and social context in which the ‘fake news’ is used and in the decline in the monopoly of ‘regimes of truth’ provoked by the processes of disintermediation. Indeed, the spread of social media triggers a fragmentation of the ‘audience’ into a plurality of segments that tend to be rooted in a common communicative sphere and the

formation of a myriad of 'bubbles', largely self-referential and potentially polarized. In this context, the so-called 'post-truth' phenomenon assumes a political relevance.

Taking into account the transformations in the communicative scenario, this article aims to build a new 'ideal type' of democracy, the 'bubble democracy', an alternative to 'party democracy' and 'audience democracy'. This new 'ideal type' takes into account, in particular, the relations between citizens, information and parties that establish themselves in the context of disintermediation. The essay does not aim, however, to argue that, today, we are already in a 'bubble democracy', or to suggest that Western political systems are necessarily oriented in this direction, but simply to elaborate a theoretical model that can help us to interpret emerging contemporary changes (Palano, 2019b, 2019c, forthcoming).

The rise and fall of 'audience democracy'

Philip K. Dick's novels were the fruit of fifties and sixties' America, of the cold war, of the emergence of the 'opulent society', of the spectacularization of politics under the presidency of Eisenhower and, particularly, John F. Kennedy, but, above all, of the centrality that television assumed in society in the period following the end of the Second World War. Among others, Dick had well understood that the introduction of television into the homes of Americans was irreversibly changing the logics of politics, since leaders could finally do without newspapers, party apparatuses and local intermediaries, to directly address individual citizens. While adopting the instrument of genre fiction, and projecting the story into the distant future, Dick proposed the same image of democracy that, in those years, had emerged from the analyzes of Charles Wright Mills, and from the complaints of Vance Packard regarding the role of 'hidden persuaders'. The most significant elements of the denunciation hidden in Dick's novels were most probably not in the simple idea that a sort of compact elite dominated the political scene, but rather in the fact that such domination resorted to a systematic deformation of reality, and that, accordingly, the façade of informative pluralism concealed the well-oiled machinery of an efficient propaganda apparatus. In this regard, Western democracy might not be so far removed from so-called totalitarian regimes, and the face of the mechanical simulacrum of Talbot Yance might not be so very different from George Orwell's representation of 'Big Brother'. However, the type of subject addressed by *The Penultimate Truth's* communicative machine is

the television ‘audience’, a ‘public’ distinct from that of the ‘masses’ controlled by ‘Big Brother’.

Although Gustave Le Bon had announced the advent of the ‘age of crowds’ in 1895, the twentieth century was above all the era of the ‘masses’ and of the ‘public’. With some simplification, one might also recognize a progressive shift, during the twentieth century, from the ‘masses’ to the ‘public’, an extreme example of which, in *The Penultimate Truth*, being that of the passive population of workers crowded in ‘ant tanks’ and anesthetized by television propaganda. Already in the 1960s, while Dick was developing his criticism of American democracy, some acute observers were beginning to argue that communicative transformations, together with changes in society, and the advent of economic well-being, were altering relations between citizens and politics. The main victim of such processes was, in many ways, the main organizer of the ‘masses’, that is the political party, Antonio Gramsci’s ‘Modern Prince’, or the ‘machine for producing passions’, as Simone Weil, in a way that was anything but benevolent, had called it. This is how Otto Kirchheimer saw it, for example, in the new ‘catch-all party’ within the context of the rapid metamorphosis of German social democracy (Kirchheimer, 1966). Beyond the specific circumstances that had fuelled such reflections, the starting point of the reasoning was the new political centrality of what was, for Gabriel Tarde, the ‘public’, an audience of individuals who, though physically separated, are exposed to the same communications flow, and to the same ‘image’ of the real world (Tarde, 1901). From a strictly political point of view, much more than in a context dominated by print media, the new television medium allowed aspiring leaders to ‘directly’ address voters, without having to use the party’s traditional communication tools, such as newspapers, flyers, rallies, proselytism, and so on. The communications apparatuses of the parties of the masses thus started to become obsolete, since they intercepted not the ‘public’, but only members and sympathizers, that is, those ‘separate worlds’ which were already showing signs of disaggregation.

Naturally, the establishment of the ‘public’ was anything but rapid. From a historical point of view, the resistance of the ‘mass’, or, better, of the ‘masses’, to social, political and communicative transformations turned out to be anything but episodic. In any case, the rise of the ‘public’ was much slower in Europe than in the United States, and experienced a significant turning point only in the 1980s and 1990s, coinciding with the growth in commercial television and the end of the Cold War, a political period which seemed to ‘unfreeze’ itself, freeing up voters from party identification. In the mid-nineties, it was Bernard Manin, in particular, who re-contemplated the

logic of transformation taking place, arguing that a new 'audience democracy' was now replacing the old 'party democracy'. In the conclusion of his 'Principles of Representative Government', Manin also dwelt on the 'metamorphosis' that representative government had undergone in little over a century. The starting point, in such a discussion, was the disappearance of the relationship of identification that in the past bound citizens to parties. On the basis of such news, Manin proposed three 'ideal types': 'parliamentarism', 'party democracy', and 'audience democracy'. Each of these constructs, which differed in the type of trust relationship, the autonomy of representatives, the freedom of public opinion, and the fora of public discussion, identified three stages affected by the metamorphosis of representative government from the end of the nineteenth century (Manin, 1997).

In the first 'ideal type' identified by Manin, 'parliamentarianism', the trust relationship has a predominantly personal character, the elected deputy enjoys substantial autonomy in his political conduct, public opinion manifests itself in channels that are structurally independent of representative parties and institutions, and public discussion among political parties takes place mainly in the parliamentary theatre (Manin, 1995). In 'party democracy', the second construct identified by the French scholar, the mechanisms of representation are rather significantly different. First of all, the choice of the individual citizen is no longer expressed by virtue of a relationship of personal trust, but only as a result of the trust placed in a given party, in the ideology or sub-cultural identity of which it is bearer. At the same time, it is the party organization that selects candidates, making its choices mainly within its own internal bureaucracy. The autonomy of action of the elected representative is strongly limited by the directives of party leaders. Public opinion appears to be structured in terms of a substantial parallelism with respect to the political framework, in the sense that the system is able to 'encapsulate' the voices reaching it from society. Public discussion takes place mainly between parties, or within parties, though outside of the representative assemblies. The distinctive trait of the 'party democracy', in any case, lies, above all, in the stability of electoral choices, which are almost entirely impervious to short-term considerations. On the other hand, in the 'audience democracy', the third 'ideal type' proposed by Manin, electoral choices return to being volatile, since they can change from one election to the next, as trust is mainly directed at candidates, and not at parties. The main drive behind the transformation, beyond changes in the economic and social context, is attributable, according to the French scholar, to the role of radio and television, which allow for

a 'direct' relationship between leaders and citizens. According to the new construct proposed by Manin, voters tend to resemble the audience of a show only allowed to react with either approval or dissent. For this reason, in the 'audience democracy', alternative leaderships face one another on the electoral stage by putting forward proposals aimed at triggering reactions in voters, just like in the theatre, where actors, in more or less successful performances, aim to achieve the resounding applause of an audience that is, in any case, quite separated from them by the lights of the stage. In this new political phase, political identities tend to dissolve, and 'the electorate appears, above all, to have an attitude which responds to the terms that have been presented on the political stage' (Manin, 1997, p. 223). Given that the parties no longer have any organizational or identity connection with society, convergence with the public therefore appears as the result of a constant process of interaction.

Despite certain limitations in this perspective, the 'audience democracy' formula allows us to understand a rather significant aspect. The centrality of the 'audience' did not, indeed, simply imply a consistent push towards 'personalization', but also a tendential convergence to the centre-ground of the main political actors, which, in any case, arose as a logical consequence of the centrality of television in the political game. The affirmation of such a great generalist media as TV, together with the weakening of party identifications, which 'liberated' votes from ideological conditioning, made it almost inevitable that the leaders of the big parties sought electoral victory in the 'centre'. It was therefore a given that the battle should be concentrated on an attempt to win over the voter from a central position between the two extremes of left and right. Precisely for this reason, as Kirchheimer had already foreseen, the big parties, unable to settle for their own pool of faithful and militant voters, then had to moderate their ideological appeal, attenuate the radical nature of their messages, and soften the intensity of their flag-waving.

The 'audience democracy' did not, however, materialize in all European political systems, and, today, this 'ideal type' manages to apply to very little of the dynamics affecting Western democratic systems. The drive towards personalization has not, in any case, been exhausted, the crisis of confidence in the political class and parties has not been stopped, and, indeed, disaffection has continued to grow, with all such factors being combined in a new communicative logic, which produces rather different consequences.

Towards a 'bubble democracy'?

While the construct of the 'audience democracy', despite its limitations, has managed to explain a significant number of the novelties of a political season, today, it has become clear that such a season has most probably ended. Starting from 2008, the year in which the financial crisis took on a global dimension, in which Barack Obama was elected to the White House, and at a point when social media began to modify the political campaign logic, the emergence of radical formations and of leaders usually defined as 'populists' has been seen in almost all Western political systems, to an extent much greater than in the previous sixty years, while polarization has started to become a constant in political confrontation. To explain this change, various structural dynamics can be called upon, including geopolitical changes, the economic crisis, the framework of the EU and the demographic profile of Western countries, but one cannot ignore that certain aspects have more to do with the new communicative scenario. The season of 'audience democracy', if at some point it existed, has most probably ended because, due also to the progressive affirmation of the Web as the main information channel, the environment in which citizens form their opinions and express their identities has begun to change. Thus, the same 'audience' is broken down into a myriad of bubbles, or into the ephemeral structure of the swarm.

Naturally, all these transformations, which began, in fact, only a few years ago, are still far from totally transforming the previous scenario. Therefore, it is naive to think that there is no longer any trace to be found of the 'party democracy' or the 'audience democracy'. However, while it is probably not yet the case to definitively abandon such interpretative categories, it is, in any case, necessary to elaborate formulas to take into account the elements of radical novelty that have emerged. It is precisely with such a goal in mind that one can try to define the emergence of an alternative construct to those of the 'party democracy' and the 'audience democracy' in a new 'ideal type' provisionally defined as the 'bubble democracy', due to the importance of 'bubbles' in which the generalist audience is fragmented, and by virtue of the self-referential tendency that tends to mark the segments into which the 'audience' is divided. Of course, as always happens with the construction of 'ideal types', in accordance with Max Weber's school of thought, the features of the 'bubble democracy' are built through the 'extremization' of certain recognizably real facts, with the aim of emphasizing a trend and understanding its implications. Therefore, the contours of the 'bubble democracy' must not be

interpreted as a faithful representation of what western democracies are today, nor as a deterministic forecast of changes in voting behaviour, of choices of media consumption, or of the crisis in traditional media and generalist TV. The utility of this new construct is rather in understanding to what extent today's Western political systems relate to the models of the 'party democracy' and the 'audience democracy', or rather to this new 'bubble democracy'.

In outlining the 'bubble democracy', a first element may be identified in a distrust of the political class. This element is not necessarily in contrast with the construct of the 'audience democracy', even though its implications gravitate in a rather different direction. In all Western democracies, many indicators return the picture of an increasingly weak legitimacy of the parties and their political class (Dalton & Weldon, 2007). Various observers have also signalled the emergence, especially in the United States, of a singular convergence between electoral volatility and a high degree of polarization. This convergence, while apparently rather paradoxical, can, however, be partly explained by referencing the new communicative scenario (Pew Research Center, 2014; Campbell, 2018).

A second significant piece of the 'bubble democracy' puzzle comes from the reduction in the costs of disseminating information. As Yascha Mounk has pointed out, among others, the advent of the Internet has indeed changed the dynamics of the distribution of news, lowering the costs of disseminating information and points of view, while social media have further brought down barriers, allowing virtually anyone to form a position on any matter. Despite some forcing, Mounk's thesis captures an important aspect. As a result of disintermediation, the technological advantage once available to political elites, in pluralistic and competitive contexts, as much as in authoritarian contexts, has, at least in part, been eroded, and outsiders have thus gained access to hitherto inaccessible opportunities, both in African regions with problematic statehoods and in mature democracies in which institutions maintain a solid control of their territories (Mounk, 2018; Pierskalla & Hollenbach, 2012).

While the aspect reported by Mounk is undoubtedly significant, another comes from the fragmentation of the 'audience' caused by structural changes in the offer of communications, and by individual strategies for managing 'information overload'. Regarding the first cause, over ten years ago, several scholars had already indicated that the decline in generalist television announced the emergence of a new situation, very different from that which had marked Western democracies over the preceding forty years (Prior, 2017). However, the overall picture clearly had to be changed, in particular,

due to the irrepressible entry of social media into the logic of communications. Naturally, these changes have not yet obscured the role of the generalist TV, but certainly they have begun to significantly modify the scenario, since, in a 'hybrid' context, the same contents of generalist TV are 'fragmented' and used in media with an altogether different logic.

Another element connected to 'fragmentation' is the predictive 'profiling' technology used by platforms. In 2011, Eli Pariser, a pioneer of online activism and endorser of Barack Obama's first electoral campaign, promptly foresaw the implications of what was happening on the Web, as a result of the personalization of user searches introduced by Google on 4th December 2009 (Pariser, 2011). Put simply, from that moment on, the Page Rank search algorithm began to return results calculated to be better suited to the individual user, inaugurating the new 'era of personalization' of the Web. In his 2011 essay, Pariser was not drawing his readers' attention to the privacy risks that the 'personalization' of searches entailed, but rather to the risk of a disaggregation of the 'audience'. Indeed, algorithms do not merely predict individual choices, but tend to create around each user what Pariser called a 'filter bubble', that allows only the penetration of information from the outside world in line with the previous choices made by the individual user, and therefore only conforming to his or her already formed opinions, orientations and political ideas. Pariser observed that each of us, for this reason, tends to live ever increasingly inside a 'bubble', in which we see a 'personalized' world that is constructed, so to speak, in our own image and likeness. Everything that does not conform to our orientations, and, more properly, our past choices, simply ends up disappearing from view, held back by the filter surrounding our personal bubbles.

However convincing it may seem, the thesis of the pervasiveness of the filter bubble is problematic to prove empirically (Hannak *et al.*, 2013; Dillhaut, Brooks, Gulati, 2015). To escape such intractability, other scholars have developed a different, although not entirely alternative, hypothesis, which focuses on the conscious choices of individual users, and which helps to identify a further element in the 'bubble democracy', the tendency to homophily in communicative exchanges. According to the hypothesis of the 'echo chamber', it is not the algorithms that, without our knowledge, lock us into a 'bubble', but that we ourselves do it, through our daily choices in terms of media consumption. The algorithms, if anything, are limited to reinforcing mechanisms adopted spontaneously by network users, and, therefore, each and every one of us builds his or her own 'bubble', because each individual, at least in terms of social media exchanges, tends to interact mainly, and more frequently, with those who have similar opinions,

reducing to a minimum exchange with those who think differently. Then, by turning to sources ever closer to our own opinions, or interacting with ‘friends’ that share our own preferences, we enclose ourselves more and more every day in an echo chamber in which the same watchwords continuously rebound off its walls (Iyengar, Sood, Lelkes 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). From this point of view, the proliferation of ‘bubbles’ therefore constitutes a sort of ‘tribalization’ (Bartlett, 2018; see also: Bakshy, Messing, Adamic, 2015; Bessi et al., 2015a, 2015b; Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2016; Del Vicario *et al.*, 2016, 2017).

A further element defining the ‘bubble democracy’ concerns trust networks and the two crucial issues of ‘disintermediation’ and ‘post-truth’. In the discussion evolving over the past few years in relation to the phenomenon of ‘post-truth’, it has often been emphasized that the most glaring novelty introduced by social media, and, in particular, the falling costs of the production and distribution of opinions and news, has been the crisis of scientific and political authority. In other words, unlike in the past, everyone feels entitled to offer a vision of the world that proposes and claims to be ‘real’, without any ‘institutional’ legitimacy being deemed necessary, or without any intervening mediation by institutionalized ‘truth agencies’. In this regard, disintermediation is made ‘technically’ possible through the multiplication of information sources, while the reduction in opinion production and distribution costs shortens the distance between ‘high’ and ‘low’ opinions. The result is that disintermediation places the opinions of experts and ‘amateurs on the same level. Thus, any individual can aspire to present him or herself as an ‘agency of truth’. However, while trust in institutions, and in established ‘truth agencies’ is weakened, it does not lead to the overall erosion of trust. Rather, as happens precisely in the echo chambers, trust is distributed ‘horizontally’, in the sense that news reported by a ‘friend’ may be considered ‘more trustworthy’ than that reported by an authoritative source, whose trustworthiness is guaranteed by institutional mechanisms (Lorusso, 2018). If ‘post-truth’ is indeed tied to the individual’s perception of the trustworthiness of information sources, a significant element of the ‘bubble democracy’ is then the passage from a scenario in which trust is placed in institutional agencies to a scenario in which bonds of trust are more predominantly ‘horizontal’ or ‘distributed’, whether entirely ‘disintermediated’ or not.

Finally, a large piece in the ‘bubble democracy’ puzzle concerns the tendency to polarization, and, therefore, susceptibility to centrifugal forces. Unlike in the ‘audience democracy’ outlined by Manin, in the ‘bubble democracy’, the ‘audience’ is fragmented into a series of distinct segments, each of which is the addressed by an

information flow oriented to be 'partisan', precisely because political leaders turn to specific niches with the goal not of 'convincing' voters with moderate arguments, but rather of mobilizing them to vote by focusing on more rooted identities and radical issues capable of feeding into or exploiting the polarization mechanisms in echo chambers. In delineating the 'ideal type' of the 'bubble democracy', one can, indeed, already recognize today how, the increase in mistrust of parties, institutions and political classes and the 'fragmentation' of the 'audience' is accompanied, almost as a logical consequence, by a marked tendency to political polarization, and, more generally, to the radicalization of positions. Whether voluntary or not, the formation of closed bubbles seems destined to favour a process of increasing polarization. Several observers have, indeed, pointed out that not only are the bubbles self-referential, but they also tend to express extreme positions, and often wilfully disregard the degree of veracity of the information and any opportunities to verify that it has any basis in real facts. This aspect was highlighted, above all, by Cass R. Sunstein, who has long focused on the negative consequences, for public debate, of mechanisms driving the 'polarization' of groups (Sunstein, 2002; Schkade & Sunstein, 2007). Indeed, Sunstein has developed a sort of 'law of polarization', according to which, 'after deliberation, people are likely to move toward a more extreme point in the direction to which the group's members were originally inclined' (Sunstein, 2017, p. 68).

Of course, this view of polarization is closely connected with the hypothesis that social media favours homophily. Although several research studies confirm the idea that the homophily of users tends to restrict spaces for debate to individuals who share the same positions, opinions on the matter are not at all unanimous. Indeed, there are also scholars who dispute that 'ideological bubbles' exist, or that they have any role in orienting voting behaviours. The discussion is set to continue over the coming years, also since the relevance of 'filter bubbles' or 'echo chambers' should theoretically increase with, as many observers predict, the Web becoming effectively the predominant channel for accessing information for the majority of citizens. It is precisely these developments that will make it possible to assess more adequately the hypothesis that the loss of the 'audience' creates centrifugal forces in political competition, and, with communication and information flows no longer passing, or predominantly not passing, through the large-scale generalist media, that, for political actors, it will become indispensable to enter the 'tribal' networks in which 'bubbles' are aggregated, and to exploit the movements of 'digital swarms'.

Conclusion

This article does not propose an interpretation of the ‘crisis’ that seems to be affecting Western democracies, or of the roots of the ‘democratic recession’ that has emerged globally. Rather than within the constructs of old ‘party democracy’ and ‘audience democracy’, described by Bernard Manin, it has rather attempted to collocate the recent changes in the unprecedented political and communicative scenario of the ‘bubble democracy’. As we have seen, the ‘bubble democracy’ should not be understood as a faithful representation of the reality, since it is simply an ‘ideal type’ constructed by extremizing certain observations in contemporary politics. It would therefore be naive to claim to recognize, in reality, a manifestation of the ‘pure type’. Indeed, the utility of ‘ideal types’, as, for example, in the case of models such as ‘feudalism’ or ‘charismatic legitimacy’, consists in their capacity to offer up instruments for interpreting changes. Therefore, rather than ‘predicting’ future changes, the concept of the ‘bubble democracy’ can perhaps help to recognize a new logic already brought about by certain ‘structural’ modifications to relations between citizens, information and the political system. Clearly, however, it remains to be shown that our democracies are approaching the model of the ‘bubble democracy’. In addition, regarding precisely the hypothesis that we are heading towards an unprecedented ‘bubble democracy’, we certainly cannot dismiss the objection, radical if, in many ways, taken for granted, that television still remains the main channel of information for many citizens. In other words, according to such an objection, we should recognize that the political spectacle still unfolds on TV, and that the fragmentation of the audience into self-referential bubbles is a marginal phenomenon, limited only to niches and concentrated in younger age groups. It is indeed an objection largely well-founded, which cannot be ignored, and which warns us against the determinism of reckless forecasts. Looking at what has happened over the last decade, however, it is also difficult to liquidate forecasts that argue for a near future increasingly populated by ‘echo chambers’ and ‘digital swarms’. Precisely for this reason, though caution is indispensable, we must seriously consider the hypothesis that the ‘audience’, or ‘public’, is destined to disintegrate into a myriad of ‘bubbles’, and that the somewhat disturbing scenario of the ‘bubble democracy’ may soon become rather accurate model of reality.

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