

Society, The Public, The Network - The Need for A New Theory

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Abstract

Opinion and the Crowd is published by Gabriel Tarde in 1901, in the context in which the written press begins to develop, after a century in which a series of social movements take place whose historical imprint remains strong. The nineteenth century can be described, albeit superficially, as a century of tectonic social movements generated by the technological revolution, industrialization, and the advent of the print media. What does not appear to be fundamentally different from the social movements of previous centuries is that they are larger, gather around them in a shorter time a larger number of people and, especially, at least for a significant part of them, is based on developed social projects. The twentieth century is the century in which audiences are rethought, reanalyzed and reinterpreted. Social networking theories seek to better understand the relationship between the "big world" and the "small world" between audiences in Tarde's sense and immediate social relations.

The 21st century shows with the utmost accuracy that the organization of social, economic, political life, and the organization of the world in general, is based on the model of networks. Society as a network, audiences as a network, need new theories to understand, to interpret them. The connection between the organization of the network and the public are practically two coordinates of the explanatory research that will help us to better understand the society.

Keywords: Audiences, Publics, Opinion, Social Network, Gabriel Tarde, Society, Social Media.

Introduction

Gustave Le Bon is the one who first theorized the concept of the crowd, with the interest of defining it, presenting and analyzing its mechanisms of formation, action, leadership. For Le Bon, "a large crowd is not enough to form a crowd. The special characteristics of psychological sets: the strict direction of ideas and feelings in the individuals of which they are composed and the disappearance of their personality. The crowd is always dominated by the unconscious. It is characterized by the disappearance of the cerebral life and the preponderance of the medullary one, by the intelligent diminution and the complete transformation of the feelings. Transformed feelings can be better or worse than those of the individuals who make up the crowd. The crowd is just as easily heroic or criminal." Gustave Le Bon defines the crowd psychologically by its characteristics. (Le Bon, 1991, p. 12)

For Tarde, the concept of the crowd was not enough to understand the social mechanisms, the social action and its effects.

He advances the concept of the public, for the first time as an independent concept subject to analysis. Although he acknowledges the importance of the concept of "crowd", Tarde criticizes the explanatory nature of this concept for the social reality of the early twentieth century. "I can't agree ... who says our age would be an 'age of the crowds.' It is the age of the public or of the public ... "Between the two [crowd and public] there are other different instructions that I have not indicated yet. We can belong to several audiences at the same time, and in fact we always belong to them simultaneously, just as we belong to several corporations or sects; we can only belong to one set at a time. Hence the much greater intolerance of the crowds." (Afternoon, 2007, p. 27)

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About the Public and the Crowd

Tarde considers the concept of public necessary and proposes the description of the new social reality in accordance with this concept, bringing as an argument the appearance, development and, especially, the social force of the press "..., but it certainly already sounds more and more despotism. great publicists a subjugated public. This creates opinion and leads the world to a greater extent than even some of the most important statesmen. " (Afternoon, 2007, p. 33). This analyzes the role of the control mechanism and the social influence that the press has, a press that is in full development.

There is a causal link between the concept of the public and the press. The press creates an audience (of certain ideas): "only when the readers of the same one are conquered by the idea or the feeling that it aroused, only then does it really form an audience" (Tarde, 2007, p.42).

Individuals who make up an audience do not necessarily know each other, what they have in common are ideas and opinions. In other words, the immaterial elements make people belong or not to a certain audience. But the public cannot exist without a mechanism for the remote distribution of ideas and opinion that is the press.

Opinion and public or public opinion

"Opinion is for the public, in modern times, what the soul is for the body" (Tarde, 2007, p.63), in other words, as it is believed that a soulless body cannot survive, nor can the public exist without his opinion. For Tarde, opinion is what defines and structures the audience. He considers opinion on the one hand as "the opinion itself, the totality of judgments", on the other hand "the general will, the totality of desires" (Tarde, 2007, p. 64). The preponderance in Tarde's analysis is "the opinion itself", namely that opinion which spreads and is formed through the press and is consolidated through conversation.

To explain the genesis of the public, Tarde introduces as an explanatory factor the printed book and the press: "There is no Opinion, but billions of separate opinions, without any continuous connection between them. This connection was provided first by the book, then by the more efficient newspaper. The periodical allowed the formation of an upper secondary aggregate whose units are closely associated without ever being known. " The audience becomes the "secondary group" in which "the voices can only be counted, not weighed" (Tarde, 2007, p.68). A fundamental distinction is made, which will play an important role in modern communication: the distinction between the "primary group", the one that comes into direct contact with the fact on which the opinion is formulated, and the secondary one, which obtains the opinion indirectly, without direct access to the facts.

The importance of public opinion generated by the press is also analyzed in terms of power relations between "parliaments" and "king". After the press appeared, the parliaments could be "equal, then superior to the king", "when they embodied as well as him, then even better, the national consciousness, accentuated by expressing the opinion and the general will already born ..." (Afternoon, 2007, p. 74).

Conversation, opinion and audience

The conversation, along with the press, is a "source" of opinion and, therefore, a source of crystallization of the public.

For Tarde, the conversation is "any dialogue without direct and immediate utility, in which one speaks especially to speak, for pleasure, for play, for politeness." (Tarde, 2007, p.77).

He distinguishes between two types of conversation: "conversation-fight" and "exchange conversation", the first of which is the main conversational engine in formulating opinion.

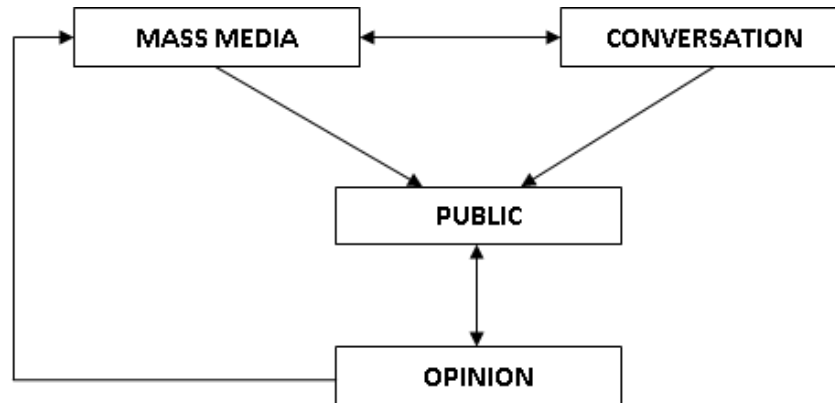
The sources of the conversation are considered by Tarde to be the ritual of submission on the one hand, and on the other hand the boredom "that loneliness induced in primitive man and, in general, the illiterate, when they had free time" (Tarde, 2007, p. 81) .

The way in which the conversation leads to the formation of the opinion is the fact that the topics of the conversations have as a source the press. Tarde discovers the function of socializing the press, considering that through conversation the opinion formulated by the press is consolidated and propagated.

The conversation also intervenes in the "game of Power": "the evolution of Power is explained by the evolution of Opinion, which is explained by the evolution of the conversation, which is then explained by the series of its different sources" (Tarde, 2007, p. 113). The instability of the Power depends on the changes of the Opinion.

The model of public opinion formation in Tarde's theory

Analyzing the way of forming the opinion and the public, Tarde offers a logical structure of this constitution in a causal chain.



Source: Autor

The press generates opinions and ideas that are transmitted to individuals. These ideas and opinions are selected through conversation and lead to their consolidation in various forms (by assuming these opinions or denying them). This forms the opinion of a number of individuals who constitute the public of that opinion or the public with those opinions.

Social networks - a model for understanding society

The structure and functioning of society is a fundamental topic to explain the relationship between opinion, public and media.

The concept of the network structure of society is not new: "There is general agreement on the origins of the analysis of social networks: the first studies were conducted by Jacob Moreno (1889-1974) on "sociometry" (1934) and Fritz Heider (1896-1988) on the analysis of the balance of the triad (1946)" (Martino, F., Spoto, A, 2006, p. 54)

But the development and interest in social media research has grown since the 1990s with the advent and development of the Internet followed by the explosion of social media. The social changes, the social innovations brought about by the development of these social networks attracted the need to understand them and therefore to study and conceptualize them.

The emergence of aggregate political and social mobilizations through social networks, the speed of reaction and contestation of power, the increase of social division and tensions in society, the emergence of so-called social bubbles, some of which come to hate each other, the phenomenon of fake news and propaganda based on it, the growing instability of legitimately elected political powers around the world threatened by widespread social movements, all seem to be the cumulative effect of many causes, including the structuring or re-structuring of society imprinted by new media.

Media mutations, reaction speed, reader / consumer capacity to be online, have led to a new structuring of media-consumer relations, but also between opinion leaders and network members.

Multiplication of media entities, the emergence of virtual social networks (with the microblogs within them), reduction of the costs of being online and communicating in both directions of communication (receiver-transmitter), are causes of the new social interactions, structures and movements.

The opinion expressed is no longer only of the opinion leaders, but also of the members of the networks who do not want the status of opinion leaders but only to manifest their existence within the network.

New media restructures social networks, amplifies them, expands them. These new networks become themselves audiences in Tarde's theoretical sense.

Social networks impose a new model of communicative behavior. To be a member, you have to express/communicate yourself, not only to listen. Failure to communicate your own content often leads to removal from networks. In one form or another, the new media are forcing network members to become opinion leaders, by simply sanctioning decoupling in the absence of their own content. In this new dynamic reality within networks changes, opinion leaders and opinion leaders (or network centrality) are volatile, their place being replaced by those who embody the best or creative at some point, the opinions of most network members.

Another important aspect to analyze is to increase the transparency of networks. Network members can evaluate opinion leaders, give them feedback, see who influences them, who is supportive and who confronts them.

If a member of the network you admire likes something - the member is also willing to do it
The fight for centrality in networks is taking place within the social networks that today are much more dynamic than those of the one-way media era

But what this article notes and aims to open as the research topic is how we can research society more efficiently by introducing the combined analysis of audiences-network, in the sense that to understand society and individually as part of it, the latter must be placed in categories (according to the theory of audiences) and in networks at once.

By analyzing the individual, as a public and as a network, we can better understand the great directions of development of society, the deep social currents that often escape even knowledgeable researchers.

Conclusions

Tarde defines the public as a number of individuals who have the same opinions and do not know each other. The opinion of this public has as a fundamental source the press and as a secondary source the conversation.

Or, if we consider the conversation as a factor of constituting the public and disseminating the opinion, considering that any conversation takes place between two or more people who know each other (they met at least once to carry on the conversation) then we can reanalyze the concept of audience.

From this perspective, the anatomy of the public reveals a remarkable fact: members of the public are structured as a network, in the sense that each has access to conversation and therefore to the opinion of others, mediated by other conversations with members of the public.

From this perspective, the relationship between the public and the network is that the public and, therefore, public opinion is formed and organized based on the rules of social networks. The inclusion / exclusion from the network leads with a high degree of probability to the entry / withdrawal from the public, assuming / not assuming or stating / denying a called opinion, corresponding to the opinion of that public.

Therefore, analyzing society by approaching the framing of individuals in the two coordinates, that of the public and that of the network, will bring a new light, much deeper on how it evolves.

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