

Understanding citizen information dynamics and barriers: Crossroads of Political Science and Public Policy

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Background

Citizen information plays a central role in democratic theories. It is not an exaggeration to recognize that the level of information is a fundamental element not only for decision-making through voting and popular participation, but also for the proper functioning of the political system. Authors such as David Held (1987) emphasize that in a liberal democracy, citizen information is understood as a precondition for collective decision-making, a constitutive element of the democratic machinery.

Despite the victory of liberal democracy in the 20th century, scholars note a disconnect between the levels of required information in democratic theory and the challenges that regular citizens face in obtaining it (Lutz, 2006). In the midst of technological advances, a series of authors also advance in the debate about the challenges of democratizing technologies amid the informational barriers that are exposed to users (Vaz, 2016). In other words, it would be possible to say that the informational responsibility placed on citizens by democratic theories is not in accordance with reality and is too burdensome. As an example, public opinion polls conducted mainly since 1930 reveal that the

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level of political information of American citizens was surprisingly low (Carpini, 1999). Moreover, it is possible to still notice a low political knowledge even in more advanced democracies. These findings reveal that although the internal logic of democratic theories points to the need for well-informed citizens and nurtures a theoretical expectation, it is not supported from an empirical point of view (Converse, 2000; Page & Shapiro, 1992; Carpini & Keteer, 1996; Asingo, 2012).

Critics of the positivist model of a 'well-informed citizen' argue that it expects too much from citizens, including high levels of curiosity, critical thinking, and mental effort to make rational decisions for the benefit of the community (Carpini, 1999). This would place standards so high for citizens that democracy wouldn't even be possible (Schattschneider, 1960). Given such a positivist conception of a 'well-informed citizen' and the technological challenges imposed on it, this short paper provokes a research agenda in an exploratory approach that relates such literature with authors of democracy and digital democratization and information disputes. In summary, "how do citizenship practices and technological aspects impose barriers to the viability of a 'well-informed citizen'?"

Approach

In a preliminary review, it is possible to find a series of authors who report aspects of the technological dimension that limit access, interactions and interpretations of citizens with existing information. To do this, the findings are organized into four categories described below:

1. Limitations of technological infrastructure

Limitations of access to the internet, quality computers and cell phones can restrict the ability of individuals to obtain quality of information (Vaz, 2016). Research shows how this barrier is more pronounced in groups of socioeconomic vulnerability, which often have limited access to advanced technologies due to financial costs and inadequate infrastructure (Silveira, 2011). Moreover, in rural and peripheral areas, the lack of telecommunications infrastructure is one of the main factors that impede access to the internet (Ribeiro et al., 2013). Additionally, the lack of investment in infrastructure in poorer areas contributes to limiting access to information, making it even more difficult to reduce social inequalities and democratize knowledge (Vaz, 2014; Parra Filho, 2018).

2. Limitations of technological handling

Once with access to the technological infrastructure, barriers limiting the use of such technological tools may still arise. Therefore, the studies by Jones-Jang et al. (2019) point out how the limitation of information discernment is significantly associated with information literacy. Also, Forster et al. (2021) points out the degree of literacy as characterizing the ability to discern the veracity and quality of a content. This limitation of digital skills can have significant consequences for citizen participation and informed decision-making. For example, in a study conducted in Taiwan, citizens with low digital skills were found to be less likely to make qualitatively informed decisions (Breit & Solomon, 2014). Furthermore, this barrier is even more pronounced in older age groups, who may be less familiar with technology. According to research carried out by Tavares and Souza (2012),

the elderly are one of the groups that face the most difficulties in adapting to technology.

3. Limitations of occupational overload

Even with necessary infrastructure and information interpretation skills, studies show that many citizens are occupied with daily tasks, such as work and school, leaving little time or interest to gather information on political issues (Achen & Bartels, 2016). Authors like Downs (1957), Schumpeter, and Olson provided important insights in the 20th century on how individuals navigate the public sphere and minimize informational costs for decision-making. The main argument is that citizens employ various approaches, such as strategies, heuristics, shortcuts, and calculations, when dealing with information in the public sphere.

4. Limitations of information overload

Although citizens have the responsibility to obtain information according to the model, it is a mistake to understand them in isolation from other actors and sources. Information sources are diverse, including governments, political actors, media, parties and communication channels, such as social media, television. That is, informational noise or informational disorders must be taken into account, which damage the credibility of information and obliterate the ability to make decisions based on facts, since citizens have different capacities to deal with large amounts of information (Forster et al., 2021), and those with less capacity may find it difficult to access what is seen as most relevant.

According to H el ene Landemore (2012), although theoretical and empirical arguments present in contemporary Political Science routinely support the view around “incompetent citizens”, politically apathetic individuals, with surprisingly low levels of information, it has to be questioned whether this competence is exclusively his. In a sense, we can fall into the error of attributing to individuals an informational task that cannot be performed only by their willpower and interest, but which depends on a series of interactions and flows that guarantee the quality of the information they obtain.

However, if this responsibility was already high, in the 21st century, in the midst of informational disputes (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Wardle, 2018; Wardle, 2017) it becomes something difficult. Conspiracy theories, denialism, fake news, rumors are just a few examples of informational disorders that have become increasingly common. Terms like infodemic, post-truth and disinformation arised and this new grammar seems to suggest that the search for information depends not only on a rational effort, but also on overcoming obstacles, noise and manipulations. In this context, the informational economy increases citizens’ responsibility in a democracy. There is a dimension of informational dispute that adds complexity to the obstacles presented above. It is not enough to be well-informed; citizens must also shield themselves from elaborate forms of disinformation and misinformation. Therefore, a fifth limitation is proposed:

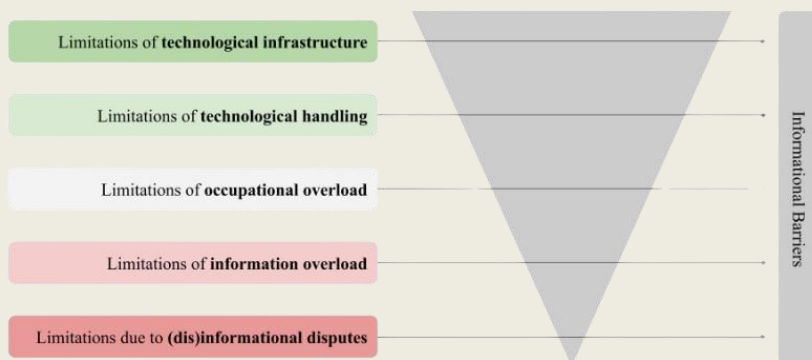
5. Limitations due to (dis)informational disputes Disinformation is defined as false and misleading information intentionally created to induce error, as pointed out by authors such as Di Domenico et al. (2021) and Lazer et al. (2018). This information can

be manufactured news with financial or ideological objectives, in which adherence is influenced by factors such as information literacy, individual limitations of the recipient, such as delusional ideation, dogmatism and religious fundamentalism, as reported by Bryanov & Vziatysheva (2021), in addition to belief, ideological or even biases memory, as highlighted by Damstra et al. (2021).

Psychological factors such as knowledge and skills, thinking style, confidence, emotion, value and group identity are also key to the effectiveness of disinformation, as listed by Nan et al. (2022) and Sadiq & Saji (2022). Demographic factors such as age, gender, education, income, race, geographic region and employment also influence susceptibility to health disinformation, as analyzed by Chowdhury et al. (2022). Disinformation is prevalent in society, making it challenging for citizens to access quality information, and making them more vulnerable to daily disputed narratives. Disinformation about the COVID-19 Pandemic (Silva, 2023) is an example of how disinformation can negatively impact society. It can promote behaviors that increase the risk of contagion, discredit public health institutions and specialists, and is often created to serve political or economic interests, rather than accurately informing the public (Gomes et al., 2020).

Finally, the following framework is proposed (Figure 1), summarizing the five points presented previously:

Figure 1. Informational Barriers



Source: Authors (2023)

Further Work

In this context, this short paper aims to show the lack of attention given to citizens' new skills, competences, and responsibilities in the face of new informational configurations in different spheres of society. There are a variety of issues to be deepened from this reflection. James H. Kuklinski (2000) suggests questions such as: what causes people to be incorrectly informed about political phenomena, what is the relationship between imprecision and trust, how widespread are incorrect information, what is the causality between beliefs and preferences and why people resist correct information.

Tatiana Dourado (2020) also suggests deepening and research agendas that seek issues such as the phenomenon of dissemination, involving reach and scale, as well as mega-audiences and super-propagators within the platforms. Achen and Bartels (2016) argue that it is necessary to rethink understandings that are divorced from reality by emphasizing very unrealistic ideals, such as the unattainable ideal of a sovereign and omnicompetent citizen.

The discussion on citizens' informational responsibility highlights the need to study disinformation adherence, fact-checking resistance, biases, and denialism. This brings the debate on technological challenges, such as regulations, governance, and accountability, to the forefront. For this work, it is proposed to deepen the literature review in order to position the debate on informational barriers and limitations to citizens in the face of transversely technological challenges.

Finally, these provocations raise questions for future research, including the impact of socioeconomic inequalities on access to technology, the effect of occupational overload on citizen participation and decision-making, and the influence of information sources on citizens' credibility and interpretation. Addressing these questions can lead to ways to improve access to information and enhance citizens' ability to interpret it, fostering a more informed and participatory society.

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