

Introduction: the crisis of journalism in the post-media public sphere

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Over the past two decades, reflection on the crisis in journalism (Palau-Sampio & López-García, 2022) can no longer be framed solely in sectoral or professional terms. This was one of the central premises of the II Interdisciplinary Seminar on Communication Theory, organised by the Mediaflows research group at the Universitat de València.

The challenge is no longer simply the instability of the business model, the technological transformation of newsrooms, or the erosion of the classic routines of news production. Rather, what we now call the crisis in journalism points more broadly to a structural mutation of the contemporary public sphere (López-García & Valera-Ordaz, 2024): the reconfiguration of mediations, the fragmentation of audiences, the proliferation of actors competing for informational authority (Bartsch et al., 2025), the intensification of polarisation, and, ultimately, the growing difficulty of sustaining shared spaces of democratic discussion and intelligibility. In this context, journalism can no longer be conceived in isolation, since it cannot be disentangled from the broader crisis of representation, institutional legitimacy (Llorca-Abad & Gamir Ríos, 2023), and the forms through which meaning circulates in deeply digitalised societies.

The outcome of the Interdisciplinary Seminar held in Gandia on 25 and 26 September 2025, constitutes the core of this special issue, *The Crisis of Journalism in the Post-Media Public Sphere*. The ideas underpinning this proposal are shaped neither by nostalgia for a lost media order nor by an uncritical celebration of new communication technologies, but by the need to examine carefully the ambivalences of the contemporary post-media ecosystem. We are witnessing a scenario in which profound transformations in the production, distribution and consumption of information converge with processes of professional precarisation, political disintermediation, information disorder, the emotionalisation of public debate (Huber & Aichberger, 2020), and the emergence of new configurations of authoritarianism and anti-politics (Cammaerts, 2007). At the intersection of these complex, interconnected dynamics, journalism continues to occupy a central position, though one that is no longer exclusive or stable. Its role is being constantly redefined under the pressure of platforms (Poell, Nieborg, & van Dijck, 2019), new algorithmic logics, populist repertoires, economies of visibility, and new actors intervening in public debate without necessarily being accountable to the criteria, responsibilities or forms of oversight historically associated with journalistic practice.

The contributions brought together in this special issue allow us to apprehend these transformations across a striking plurality of scales, objects and methodologies, without any loss of thematic coherence. Far from proceeding from a homogeneous or monolithic understanding of the crisis, the articles collected here map its concrete manifestations across a wide range of domains: institutional communication during disasters (Calvo, Llorca-Abad & Cano-Orón, 2025), journalistic coverage on social media, the reconfiguration of labour

and professional culture, the political appropriation of digital channels, the circulation of far-right discourses through alternative infrastructures, the construction of techno-populist frames (Bickerton & Invernizzi Accetti, 2021) by influencers, and the automated reproduction of discriminatory biases through artificial intelligence. Taken together, the articles show that the crisis in journalism does not consist solely in the loss of centrality of the traditional media, but in a broader rearticulation of public mediation (Robles-Morales & Córdoba-Hernández, 2019) and of the very conditions under which legitimacy, credibility and belonging are produced in the contemporary public sphere.

A first cluster of contributions addresses a decisive question in any contemporary reflection on public communication: what happens when information ceases to be merely a symbolic good and becomes, immediately, an infrastructure for the protection of life. The studies focusing on the DANA weather event that struck the Valencian Community on 29 October 2024 are particularly revealing in this respect. The article by Raquel Pérez-Ejerique, Joaquín Aguar-Torres, Guillermo López-García and Laura Bellver-Carsí offers a meticulous reconstruction of the institutional communication deployed on that day and clearly traces a sequence that was as dramatic as it was politically significant: after an initial phase of relatively constant communication by the regional emergency services, an 'information blackout' occurred during the crucial hours in which the flooding intensified, precisely when citizens most needed clear, up-to-date and actionable guidance. The study not only documents contradictions, omissions and lack of coordination among the various communicative actors; it also suggests that communicative ineffectiveness was not a peripheral element of the crisis, but one of the factors that aggravated it, by preventing the population from correctly interpreting the risk and reacting in time. Particularly significant is the finding that, in the face of the silence or inadequacy of institutional channels, À Punt, the regional public broadcaster, played a central role as a sustained source of accurate and useful information.

From a complementary perspective, Miquel Camarasa Sanchis and Raúl Terol Bolinches analyse À Punt's use of Instagram during the same disaster, allowing us to explore in greater depth an issue of considerable contemporary relevance: the reconfiguration of public service media within platform environments. Their study shows that the Valencian public broadcaster did not merely transfer content to the digital sphere; rather, it used Instagram as a primary space of public service, combining useful information, guidance-oriented content, emergency updates and user-generated material within a professional editorial logic. Particularly suggestive is their observation that the coverage was organised into thematic clusters linked to the different phases of the disaster, as well as their analysis of the role of prosumers in broadening the news narrative. Ultimately, the article suggests that the digital adaptation of public service media can strengthen their civic function, provided that they succeed in balancing speed, verification, utility and social cohesion in environments shaped by fragmentation and disinformation.

The centrality of platforms in the reorganisation of public communication is also evident in Alberto E. López-Carrión's study of the official WhatsApp channel of the Spanish Government. The significance of this article lies in the way it shifts attention away from the most extensively studied social media platforms towards a messaging environment of enormous reach, which is becoming increasingly important for the everyday circulation of public information. Drawing on an analysis of the channel's first months of activity, the author identifies a predominantly informative, unidirectional and service-oriented model, marked by a strong presence of public-interest content, policy explanations and reactive messaging in times of crisis. Its contribution is particularly valuable because it invites us to reflect on a form of communicative institutionalisation that is well suited to the logic of news-finds-me, that is, to an information culture in which

part of the citizenry expects relevant information to reach them without actively seeking it out. At the same time, the article points to a tension that runs through the post-media public sphere as a whole: the very tool that extends the reach and accessibility of institutional communication may also reinforce dependence on the official narrative if it is not accompanied by robust mechanisms of traceability, neutrality and verification.

While the contributions discussed above make it possible to observe the transformation of public communication from the vantage point of institutions and public service media, other articles in this special issue turn to the profession of journalism itself and to the shifts affecting its cultural and labour frameworks. This is the context for the article by Marta Meneu, Maria Iranzo-Cabrera and Alicia Soria Salvador, which analyses perceptions and uses of social media across different generations connected to journalism, from pre-university students to senior professionals. Far from offering a uniform picture of digital adaptation, the authors reveal a clear generational segmentation in preferred platforms, modes of use and assessments of their professional demands. Whereas older journalists continue to identify X as a relevant space and acknowledge gaps in their understanding of these tools' possibilities, younger profiles place greater emphasis on work overload and the pressure of constant visibility, while shifting their preferences towards TikTok and Telegram. At a deeper level, the article points to a far-reaching conclusion: the transformation of journalism depends not only on technological change, but also on uneven forms of professional socialisation, different economies of attention, and the insufficient institutional capacity of news organisations to support that transition.

The mutation of the journalistic and media field is likewise brought into view in Lucía Márquez's analysis of the normalisation of labour precarity in the Spanish press. Her work shifts the focus from the material conditions of journalistic labour to the ways in which the media discursively contribute to legitimising new forms of precarisation across the wider world of work. The examination of terms such as emotional salary, workations, power nap and chief happiness officer reveals the press's capacity to turn into aspirational trends what, in many cases, amounts to a sanitised reformulation of insecurity, intensified performance and the individualisation of the structural problems of labour. The author shows that, with few exceptions, the newspaper titles analysed share remarkably homogeneous frames and contribute to the depoliticisation of precarity through narratives that displace responsibility onto individuals themselves, who are called upon to optimise themselves ceaselessly. This article's contribution to the special issue is particularly significant because it reminds us that the crisis in journalism cannot be understood solely as a crisis of credibility or of the production model; it also requires a critical examination of the ways in which journalistic discourse participates in the reproduction of neoliberal rationality and in the symbolic normalisation of structural inequalities.

Another of the central axes of this issue frames reflection around the growing entanglement of platforms, political communication and the phenomenon of disintermediation. Here we find several articles which, through different cases and methodologies, make it possible to map the reconfiguration of the relationship between leaders, publics, media and digital communities.

Eva Mestre's study of Donald Trump's discourse offers a particularly productive contribution by showing that the effectiveness of far-right rhetoric does not rest solely on negativity, aggression or simplification, but on the strategic articulation of affective polarisation and in-group cohesion. Through a corpus-pragmatic analysis, the author documents the predominance of negative emotional lexis and confrontation with the

out-group, but also the systematic use of resources of internal alignment, particularly through appeals to 'we', to shared identities, and to nationalist, anti-liberal and anti-globalisation repertoires. The significance of this finding extends well beyond the Trump case: it helps us to understand how contemporary discourses that erode the common public sphere operate, not only by excluding or stigmatising the other, but also by generating a powerful sense of belonging among their own adherents.

Along similar lines, albeit grounded in the Spanish context and centred on a different infrastructure, Marco Antonio Ruiz-Pérez maps the far-right ecosystem on Telegram and examines the extent to which it is accurate to speak of an articulated alt-tech environment in Spain. The scale of the corpus analysed, together with the study's systematising ambition, makes it a particularly valuable contribution. Its findings show that we are not dealing with an undifferentiated mass of channels, but with an ecosystem marked by stratified categories, diverse communicative strategies, specific cross-platform uses, and internal forwarding flows that help sustain communities, pseudo-media outlets, opinion leaders and politico-organisational actors. In doing so, the article sheds light on a decisive dimension of the contemporary post-media environment: the construction of relatively autonomous communicative infrastructures, capable of intensifying the circulation of radicalised discourses and of partially circumventing the rules of visibility and moderation that govern more conventional platforms.

The question of disintermediation re-emerges in a particularly illuminating way in Claudi Penalba's article on influencers and digital populism in relation to the DANA weather event that affected the Valencian Community on 29 October 2024. His study examines how several high-reach content creators acted as catalysts of political discourse in a context of crisis, mobilising anti-elite, anti-political and emotionally charged frames. One of the article's most original findings is its identification of publicly displayed assistance as a form of moral and epistemic authority: within these discourses, 'having been there' and 'having helped' operate as sufficient credentials from which to interpret the crisis, reassign blame and contest the legitimacy of institutions and the media. This observation allows us to think through a significant mutation in public authority within platform environments: credibility no longer emanates exclusively from expert knowledge or journalistic mediation, but also from the performativity of testimony, staged authenticity and the emotionalisation of the relationship with audiences. In emergency contexts, this may foster solidarity and mobilisation, but it may also contribute to the entrenchment of a generalised culture of suspicion towards democratic institutions.

The reconfiguration of the digital public sphere affects not only the new right or the charismatic figures of post-journalistic intermediation; it also reshapes the very relationship between media institutions and political actors. In this respect, the article by Michele Goulart Massuchin and Renata Copatti Salvador on Brazilian parliamentarians on X is particularly illuminating. Through an analysis of the media references mobilised by parliamentary actors, the authors show that, even in a context marked by strong anti-media discourse and the expansion of digital-native actors, traditional media continue to occupy a central position as sources of legitimation, argumentative support and political visibility. Yet this centrality coexists with a reorganisation of the media system in which alternative, hyper-partisan and regional outlets are gaining prominence, especially among actors on the right, while the left remains more dependent on the established mainstream press. The article thus helps to nuance overly simplistic diagnoses of the supposed collapse of classical mediations: rather than disappearing, they are being reordered, instrumentalised and combined with new infrastructures within relationships that are increasingly ambivalent and expedient.

Alongside these transformations in political and media intermediation, this special issue devotes particular attention to the forms of exclusion and bias that traverse the post-media public sphere. In this respect, the article by Enrique Borba Romanelli and Jordi Rodríguez-Virgili on the Latino vote in Spain offers an indispensable reflection on the relationship between communicative segmentation and democratic inclusion. Their analysis reveals a particularly telling paradox: in a context marked by the increasing sophistication of electoral microtargeting strategies, the Latino electorate is systematically absent from, or relegated to marginal mention within, the communication of Spain's two main political parties. The conclusion is unequivocal: this is not merely a deficit of strategic outreach, but a form of symbolic exclusion that limits the political representation of a demographically significant group and weakens the inclusive quality of democracy. In other words, contemporary hyper-segmentation does not in itself guarantee greater pluralism; as this article shows, it may coexist with persistent forms of invisibilisation.

Reflection on exclusion and bias takes a different, though equally crucial, turn in the article by Juan Linares-Lanzman and Andrea Rosales Climent on visual representations of older people generated by Midjourney. At a time when generative artificial intelligence is becoming ever more deeply embedded in journalistic routines, this study offers a warning of considerable ethical and professional importance: image-generation systems are not neutral tools, but devices capable of reproducing and intensifying pre-existing stereotypes. The authors show that ostensibly 'neutral' representations tend to privilege young bodies, while older people are underrepresented, relegated to secondary roles and associated with subtle signs of fragility, dependency or decline. Moreover, age-based biases intersect with gender and racial biases, thereby reinforcing impoverished and discriminatory representations. The article makes a twofold contribution: on the one hand, it renders visible a largely overlooked form of algorithmic discrimination; on the other, it reminds us that the adoption of artificial intelligence in journalism cannot be separated from a rigorous examination of its ethical implications in terms of diversity, representational justice and inclusion.

Taken together, the eleven contributions gathered in this issue allow us to advance a central claim: the crisis in journalism within the post-media public sphere cannot be understood as a univocal process, nor as a mere technological or ideological shift (Štětka & Mihelj, 2024). What these articles show, from complementary perspectives, is a profound transformation of the regime of mediation that articulates institutions, media, platforms, political actors, publics and communities. In some cases, this transformation takes the form of a critical fragility in public communication, as when institutional silence during an emergency exposes the population to greater risks. In others, it appears as an intensification of public service in new digital environments, as a reconfiguration of informational authority, as the political exploitation of platforms, as the discursive normalisation of precarity (Castillo-González, 2020), as the symbolic exclusion of particular social groups, or as the automation of bias through artificial intelligence systems. Yet across all of them the same underlying question emerges: what material, technological, discursive and normative conditions make possible today a democratic, plural, inclusive and epistemically robust public sphere (Davis, 2021).

That question runs, in one way or another, through all the articles gathered here. And it is probably there that the principal contribution of this special issue lies. Not so much in offering a definitive answer to the crisis in journalism as in showing that this crisis can only be properly analysed when situated within the broader framework of the mutation of the public sphere. Against reductive diagnoses, the contributions that follow provide empirical evidence, conceptual tools and critical readings that help us to better understand the tensions of the present. In doing so, they not only illuminate urgent problems; they also open up

indispensable lines of inquiry into the new forms of mediation, legitimacy, visibility, exclusion and contestation over meaning in contemporary democracies. It is our hope, therefore, that this issue will contribute to enriching academic debate on the place of journalism within the post-media ecosystem (Susen, 2023) and, at the same time, to fostering a critical reflection on the conditions of possibility for a more responsible, more inclusive and more democratic public communication.

Acknowledgements / Funding

The II Interdisciplinary Seminar on Communication Theory, which made this special issue possible, was held through the collaboration of the Universitat de València, the Universitat Politècnica de València and the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. It also received support from the Cátedra de Análisis y Prospectiva del Audiovisual de la Universitat de València and the Cátedra de Análisis y Prospectiva del Audiovisual de la Universitat Politècnica de València. We would like to acknowledge funding from the Generalitat Valenciana and the Spheroflows research project (PID2023-151411NB-I00), as well as the support of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA), the Red de Investigación en Comunicación Comunitaria, Alternativa y Participativa (RICCAP), and the Unión Latina de Economía Política de la Información, la Comunicación y la Cultura (Ulepicc-España).

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