Users' participation forms on the digital press. *Cubadebate* as case study

Formas de participación de los usuarios de la prensa digital. *Cubadebate* como caso de estudio

Formas de participação dos usuários da imprensa digital. Cubadebate como caso de estudo

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ABSTRACT | This paper explores how users of *Cubadebate,* the digital media with more visibility of the Cuban web, commented on the news about Covid-19 published in March 2020. The comments topic was used as an analytical category to classify user-generated content according to criteria from passive consumption to active production and fictitious or apparent production and real production. We selected a representative sample of 365 comments from 6,984 linked to 24 news published on the subject, in a context of 11 million visits during the period. The results reveal that users participate in cyberspace motivated by getting involved in actions that influence on the public sphere and thus build autonomous citizen participation spaces in the virtual environment; through the comments, they externalize their perception of the crisis situation, monitor the health management, institutional and governmental agents, and place issues in the collective debate that transcend the content of the news they comment on. However, passive consumption and symbolic production –which reproduces contents of previous messages– predominates over real production or production of original content.

KEYWORDS: online participation; user-generated content; digital news comments; prosumer; Covid-19; *Cubadebate.*

RESUMEN | *Esta investigación explora cómo los usuarios de Cubadebate, el medio nativo digital con mayor visibilidad en la web cubana, comentaron las noticias sobre la Covid-19 publicadas en marzo de 2020. Tomando como categoría analítica el tema de los comentarios, se clasificó el contenido generado por el usuario según criterios de consumo pasivo a producción activa, y producción ficticia o aparente y producción real. Se seleccionó una muestra representativa de 365 comentarios, de los 6984 asociados a 24 noticias publicadas sobre la temática, en un contexto de 11 millones de visitas durante el periodo. Los resultados muestran que los usuarios participan en el ciberespacio motivados por implicarse en acciones que repercutan sobre la esfera pública, y así construir espacios de participación ciudadana autónoma en el entorno virtual. Esto, pues mediante los comentarios exteriorizan su percepción sobre la situación de crisis, fiscalizan la gestión de los agentes sanitarios, institucionales y gubernamentales y ponen temas en el debate colectivo que trascienden el contenido de las noticias que comentan. Sin embargo, predomina el consumo pasivo y la producción ficticia o aparente –que reproduce contenidos de mensajes precedentes– sobre la producción real o producción de contenido original.*

KEYWORDS: *online participation; user-generated content; digital news comments; prosumer; Covid-19; Cubadebate.*

RESUMO | Esta investigação explora como os usuários de Cubadebate, o meio de comunicação digital nativo com maior visibilidade na web cubana, comentaram as notícias sobre o Covid-19 publicadas em março de 2020. Tomando o tema dos comentários como categoria analítica, o conteúdo gerado pelo usuário foi classificado de acordo com critérios que vão desde o consumo passivo à produção ativa e à produção fictícia ou aparente e produção real. Foi selecionada uma amostra representativa de 365 comentários dos 6984 associados a 24 notícias publicadas sobre o tema, num contexto de 11 milhões de visitas durante o período. Os resultados revelam que os usuários participam no ciberespaço motivados para se envolverem em ações que têm impacto na esfera pública, e assim construir espaços de participação autônoma dos cidadãos no ambiente virtual. Isto porque através de comentários eles externalizam a sua percepção da situação de crise, monitorizam a gestão dos agentes sanitários, institucionais e governamentais, e colocam questões no debate coletivo que transcendem o conteúdo das notícias que comentam. Contudo, predomina o consumo passivo e a produção fictícia ou aparente - que reproduz o conteúdo de mensagens anteriores - sobre a produção real ou a produção de conteúdo original.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: participação online; conteúdo gerado pelo usuário; comentários das notícias digitais; mídia digital; produtor-consumidor; Covid-19; *Cubadebate*.

INTRODUCTION

The participation of citizens in the online information sphere is an increasingly widespread reality, as a consequence of the mainstream media's loss of credibility (Domingo et al., 2008), or as a result of media advertising strategies that incorporate audiences into their productive dynamics (Fondevila-Gascón et al., 2020). Although it could be a practice that is more social than political, that responds to individual rather than collective needs (Paulussen et al., 2007), participation constitutes a category inherent to the communicative processes in cyberspace (Bruns, 2005; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Paulussen et al., 2007; Salaverría, 2019), represents challenges for the professional practice of journalism, transcends the strictly communicational, and can have repercussions on the sociocultural sphere.

Gatekeeping is replaced by the collective practice of gatewatching in Web 2.0, by pointing out the most outstanding news among the overabundance of information on the Internet (Bruns, 2005), and receivers or consumer audiences begin to be conceived as users and prosumers (Martínez-Rodrigo & Raya-González, 2015). However, Peters and Witschge (2015) refer to the importance of distinguishing between the possibilities offered by the media for audience participation and its transcendence, because even in the digital era "audience response is welcomed mostly after-the-fact as a possible citizen source or commenter" (p. 27). Thus, different authors distinguish three forms of user participation in cyberspace:

1. Collaboration requested by the media in the news' construction. It is called participatory journalism (Domingo et al., 2008; Suárez-Sucre, 2016; Thurman & Hermida, 2010), public journalism (Domingo et al., 2008), or crowdsourcing journalism (García de Torres, 2010). The selection and final processing of the information corresponds to the media. It differs from the so-called citizen journalism, in which the initiative in the production of information content lies with the users.

2. User intervention on the published content, without being able to alter the original message (Sal Paz, 2016). Through the actions of rating, sharing, and commenting on a news piece, the reader can get involved in the information hierarchy, incorporate relevant issues to the media agenda (Fenoll, 2011), and intervene in social interaction processes (Bucy, 2004). Comments to digital news stand out among the options preferred by media and audiences (Ruiz et al., 2013); they are conceived as a type of eminently evaluative discourse, which contains personal judgments in response to a news piece or the opinion of another user. They have a dialogic and interactive character (Sal Paz, 2016) and are oriented to the journalist signing the news, other user(s), fellow citizens, or public figures (Moya, 2015).

3. Creation of spaces for autonomous citizen participation through Web 2.0. The use of the digital sphere for personal, conscious, voluntary, and direct intervention in matters that concern the public interest or a social collectivity (Rendón, 2006, cited in Corrales-Mejías, 2015), to expand democracy (Aguirre, 2013) and seek empowerment (Corrales-Mejías, 2015), defend rights, and influence public policies (Aguirre, 2013; Corrales-Mejías, 2015). Although autonomous citizen participation occurs independently of cyberspace, the new configuration of the public space from the virtual environment fosters the interconnection between online and offline worlds (Sorj, 2016), and favors people to transcend their role as consumers of public services to join the decision-making processes also from the digital environment (García Guitián, 2016).

The objective of this work is to characterize the participation of users in their comments on digital news. *Cubadebate*, considered the most visible digital native media of the Cuban web and the most consulted .cu site by Internet users connected from Cuba[1], is selected as a case study. The analysis is limited to the information context generated by the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. This exceptional situation created the need to be permanently informed (Masip et al., 2020), and forced the mass media to become allies in the political and health management of the pandemic. Health crises also become social crises with a corresponding correlate in the press (Nespereira, 2014). Hence the relevance of studying how Web 2.0 users participate in the social construction of reality on a topic of collective interest.

CUBADEBATE AND CUBAN USERS IN THE DIGITAL CONTEXT

The research takes place in a context marked by the exponential growth of public access to the Internet in Cuba. If in 2013 only 25% of the population had had direct or frequent contact with the web, in January 2015 connected users totaled 3.9 million. According to the same source, in January 2021 the country had 7.70 million users, 68% of the population (Kemp, 2021).

Although these rates contribute to the fact that Cubans' online communicative practices tend to normalize (Reloba de la Cruz, 2020), limitations persist in access to the network, due both to the restrictive policies of the United States –blocking access to platforms and digital content, and making infrastructure acquisition more expensive and difficult– and to the Cuban government's legal framework for regulating telecommunications in the country, with high emphasis on cybersecurity and the State centrality (López García, 2019). However, following the

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1. https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/cubadebate.cu

increase in connectivity, recent research warns of the reconfiguration of the spaces of information and cultural production, distribution, and consumption in the Cuban digital environment (Somohano, 2019; Rodríguez-Fernández, 2019), which implies the progressive weakening of the State as a mediating entity (López García, 2019) and modifies the dynamics of social and political participation. Digital social networks and the blogosphere have become the main scenario for public debate, as evidenced by the study that compared the politicization of online conversations in user comments published by *Cubadebate* in 2012 and 2017. This accounts for the development of a culture of connectivity among Cubans that favors the passage of latent problems in the social imaginary to a public space of visibility and collective questioning (Ramírez-Hernández et al., 2018).

Cubadebate (cubadebate.cu) is precisely one of the Cuban platforms with greater user participation, thanks to the media's use of the Web 2.0's potential and the relative influence of the public agenda in the construction of its media agenda (Suñol Robles, 2019). This digital native media emerged in 2003, affiliated to the Cuban public and State media system, to make visible the reality of Cuba and the rest of the Latin American countries that, according to its editorial line, is silenced or discredited by the large capitalist media business groups (Suñol Robles, 2019). It is conceived as a site of sites (http://www.cubadebate.cu/) whose media agenda is structured, mainly, from non-exclusive journalistic materials, but rather selected from national or foreign media consistent with their editorial purposes, which respond to the information policy regulated by the Cuban State.

With the update of its platform for Web 2.0, in 2009, interactivity with users began to give exclusivity to the published contents, since the site receives an average of 1,000 comments daily and the editorial team monitors the collective debate to include, within its daily agenda, topics of popular interest (Suñol Robles, 2019). Through user participation, certain topics are hierarchized and positioned, and openness to collective debate is appreciated (Ramírez-Hernández et al., 2018).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ON THE ONLINE PARTICIPATION OF DIGITAL PRESS USERS

A number of authors are interested in the five phases of news construction in which users participate: access and observation, selection/filtering, processing/editing, distribution, and interpretation (Bruns, 2005; Domingo et al., 2008; Hermida & Thurman, 2008). The empirical results of these investigations confirm that, except for isolated examples, participation occurs during the public's exposure to the news. Baños Moreno and colleagues (2017) note the limited implementation of tools for users to generate content in digital newspapers of international reference,

while Díaz-Cerveró and Barredo-Ibáñez (2017) warn that the media foster more the recirculation or promotion of their information in social networks than the modification or creation of new content by users.

Likewise, the validity of the term prosumer is questioned beyond the economicist dimension with which it was conceived (Aparici & García-Marín, 2018), and it is shown that the user mostly performs consumption actions to the detriment of a scarce production activity (Berrocal et al., 2014; Masip et al., 2015).

However, the role of cybermedia as agents of political socialization stands out, whose social function transcends the dissemination of information and the establishment of agendas to give rise to alternative spaces for deliberation and participation (Maltos-Tamez et al., 2021). This is combined with the public's desires for greater social interaction based on the dynamics of media consumption itself and the technologies' potential (López García, 2019). Thus, in practice, the interactivity between users and broadcasters and the globalizing effects of digital information technologies configures "new contexts for collective action", carriers of "new languages, new forms of socialization, and new ways of establishing interpersonal ties" (Rodríguez-Suárez et al., 2021, p. 49). The above shifts the research emphasis towards the practices of online participation and the characterization of the true scope of user action. In this regard, attention is drawn, for example, to the fragmentation of the digital sphere through the suppression of exposure to diversity, ideological homogeneity, and the increase in rude, disrespectful, and aggressive political discussion (Luengo et al., 2021).

This research is based on the Ladder of citizen participation proposed by Sherry Arnstein (1969), who classifies the forms of participation at the local level according to three ascending levels: 1) Non-participation: when the participatory action of the subjects responds to interests alien to their own; 2) tokenism (from token, which means symbol, deception): refers to merely symbolic or figurative acts, through which small superficial concessions are made without effecting a real change in the status quo, and 3) citizen power: where authentic forms of citizen participation are located, with a real impact on institutions. Following this author, it is then possible to distinguish between authentic or real forms of online participation and actions that only apparently denote the active character of the user and are classified as fictitious or apparent.

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to answer the following questions:

- What categories and indicators are feasible to characterize the participation of users who intervene on the news proposed by *Cubadebate*?

- How is this participation characterized in the comments to the news published by *Cubadebate* in the informative context generated by COVID-19?

- To what extent is the prosumer condition and the active character conferred to the contemporary user verified?

The analysis period covers the timeframe between March 11, 2020, when the first COVID-19 positive patients in Cuba were reported, and March 29, 2020. According to root@cd (2021), a research group that monitors *Cubadebate* statistics, in March 2020 the site received more than 11 million visits (a record for one month) and the 19 days covered by the study constitute a period of sustained growth of interest in the search terms "cubadebate + coronavirus" (Google Trends[2]). Framing the study in the first stage of the pandemic in Cuba allows appreciating part of the social debate generated by the audit on government management during a completely new situation for the population and public institutions. A corpus of 24 commented news pieces was obtained, with 6,984 comments for the total. A representative sample (for a confidence level of 95%) of 365 comments was calculated, chosen by systematic non-probabilistic random sampling. Between five and 50 comments were selected for each news piece, according to the proportionality ratios regarding the total (table 1).

	Headline and date of the digital news item	Comments analyzed
1	*Cuba reporta como positivos a la COVID-19 a tres turistas italianos que se alojaban en Trinidad* (Cuba reports three Italian tourists staying in Trinidad as positive to COVID-19) [11-03-20]	50 out of 1314
2	*Personas que tuvieron contacto con italianos enfermos están asintomáticos y en condiciones de aislamiento* (People who have had contact with sick Italians are asymptomatic and isolated) [12-03-20]	15 out of 275
3	*Cuba ante COVID-19: Asegura Minsap que hay un cumplimiento estricto de los protocolos* (Cuba and COVID-19: Minsap assures strict compliance with protocols) [13-03-20]	5 out of 27
4	*Covid-19: No existen nuevos casos confirmados en Cuba y los cuatro enfermos mantienen una evolución favorable* (Covid-19: There are no new confirmed cases in Cuba and the four patients are progressing favorably) [14-03-20]	8 out of 87
5	*Confirmado el quinto caso de COVID-19 en Cuba* (Fifth case of COVID-19 confirmed in Cuba) [16-03-20]	22 out of 339
6	*Confirman dos nuevos casos de COVID-19 en Cuba, suman siete pacientes* (Two new cases of COVID-19 confirmed in Cuba, seven patients in total) [17-03-20]	27 out of 621
7	*Salvar, salva: Atraca en puerto cubano de Mariel crucero británico MS Braemar* (To save, saves: British cruise ship MS Braemar docks in Cuban port of Mariel) [18-03-20]	23 out of 398

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2. https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?q=Cubadebate&geo=US

8	*Ascienden a 16 los casos confirmados de COVID-19 en Cuba* (16 COVID-19 cases confirmed in Cuba) [19-03-20]	24 out of 466
9	*Dos pacientes de COVID-19 se reportan como graves en Cuba* (Two COVID-19 patients reported as severe in Cuba) [21-03-20]	15 out of 284
10	*Díaz-Canel: El enfrentamiento a la COVID-19 es una tarea de todos* (Díaz-Canel: Confronting COVID-19 is everyone's task) [21-03-20]	6 out of 65
11	*Centro de aislamiento en Villa Clara: lo haremos bien, por el pueblo de Cuba* (Isolation center in Villa Clara: we will do it right, for the people of Cuba) [22-03-20]	5 out of 41
12	*Historias de la Operación Crucero: Héroes en cuarentena* (Operation Cruise Stories: Heroes in Quarantine) [23-03-20]	5 out of 18
13	*Ministerio del Transporte anuncia medidas para enfrentar la COVID-19* (Ministry of Transportation announces measures to address COVID-19) [24-03-20]	6 out of 64
14	*Reportan 8 casos nuevos con la COVID-19 en Cuba, para un total de 48 y un paciente es dado de alta* (8 new cases of COVID-19 reported in Cuba, totalling of 48, and one patient discharged) [24-03-20]	25 out of 476
15	*Cuba confirma 9 pacientes positivos a la COVID-19, la cifra de casos asciende a 57* (Cuba confirms 9 patients positive for COVID-19, number of cases rises to 57) [25-03-20]	27 out of 633
16	*Asumir con responsabilidad el aislamiento social que impone la COVID-19* (Responsibly assuming the social isolation imposed by COVID-19) [26-03-20]	7 out of 74
17	*Conversación con Jesús Álvarez López, primer recuperado del coronavirus* (Interview with Jesús Álvarez López, first person to have recovered from the coronavirus) [26-03-20]	5 out of 58
18	*Cuba confirma 10 pacientes positivos a la COVID-19, la cifra de casos asciende a 67* (Cuba confirms 10 COVID-19 positive patients, number of cases rises to 67) [26-03-20]	11 out of 162
19	*Cuidar en tiempo de coronavirus* (Caring in times of coronavirus) [26-03-20]	5 out of 15
20	*Cuba confirma 13 nuevos pacientes positivos a la COVID-19, la cifra de casos asciende a 80* (Cuba confirms 13 new COVID-19 positive patients, number of cases rises to 80) [27-03-20]	27 out of 657
21	*Primer evento de transmisión local de COVID-19 en Cuba, informa ministro de Salud* (First local contamination event of COVID-19 in Cuba, says Health Minister) [27-03-20]	27 out of 698
22	*Abrazo de despedida en el IPK* (Farewell hug at the IPK) [28-03-20]	5 out of 51
23	*COVID-19 en Cuba: Confirman 20 nuevos pacientes positivos, totalizan 139 en el país* (COVID-19 in Cuba: 20 new positive patients confirmed, 139 total in the country) [29-03-20]	5 out of 27
24	*Cuba no está en fase epidémica, hay que demorar la llegada a esa etapa, afirma ministro de Salud pública* (Cuba is not in epidemic phase; we must delay reaching that stage, says public Health Minister) [29-03-20]	10 out of 134

Table 1. Comments analyzed per news item

Source: Own elaboration.

Participation scope	Participation indicator		Prosumer status	Extent to which the active character is observed
Involvement in news hierarchization	Add to total readings		Consumer	Low
	Like			
News dissemination	Share the news			
Content generation	Comment on news (including forum-discussions)	Conformism	Fictitious or pretend producer	Moderate
		Opinion polarization		
		Underlying content production		
		Original content production	Real producer	High

Table 2. Categories and indicators to describe user participation as an intervention on the cybermedia's content

Source: Own elaboration, based on Arnstein (1969), Berrocal et al. (2014), Lastra (2016), Linares et al. (2015), Peters & Witschge (2015), and Ruiz (2009).

As for the indicators for evaluating users' online participation, the criteria illustrated in table 2 were used.

Three forms of audience intervention on the broadcasters' content are recognized; two correspond to the actions of the cybermedia (ranking and dissemination of information), and the third is related to the production of content in the comments section. The indicators for measuring participation include the selection of the news to be read and its subsequent evaluation; criteria evaluated on the basis of the total number of readings and the number of likes, respectively, received by each news piece. In this case, the users do not produce content, but a set of data that denote their interests and are useful for the news media in the editorial order given their statistical implications on the informative hierarchization (Aparici & García-Marín, 2018).

Actions that transcend consumption are classified according to two criteria: 1) fictitious or pretend production: when the user makes some kind of concession with the environment, according to the level of participation described as tokenism in Sherry Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation, and 2) real production: when the user acts autonomously and creatively. A three-level scale is established to evaluate the active character of the user based on the visible marks of interaction

with the media: 1) Low: when it does not transcend the act of reading or approving the content read; 2) Moderate: when it has an impact on the news, either because it is shared on social networks or reinforces its content through approval, replication, or reiteration, but without distancing itself sufficiently from it or from what other users comment, and 3) High: when it contributes new content (data, arguments, or opinions) regarding the news or previous comments.

Likewise, participation indicators are agreed on the basis of the topic of the comments, according to the perspective of computer-mediated discourse analysis, which establishes the comments' global topic or theme among the characteristics inherent to the communicative situation (Herring, 2007). Also from linguistics, the relevance of the topic as a category that organizes the structuring of the text and its comprehension stands out (Brown & Levinson, 2013), and it has been described in three levels of organization and development: clause or local, paragraph or episode, and global text or discourse. Specifically, the global theme of the comments is assumed, determined following the methodology proposed by Van Dijk (2001), who suggests applying the so-called macro rules of reduction of textual information (suppression-selection, generalization, and construction-integration) to semantically construct the global representation of the text.

According to each the global topic, the following indicators of participation are established: 1) conformism: the message of the majority is reaffirmed (Sunstein, 2010, as cited in Berrocal et al., 2014); 2) opinion polarization: dissent is not admitted, but rather opinion is radicalized, the other's point of view is disqualified or offense and direct provocation are employed (Ruiz, 2009); 3) production of underlying content: adaptations or versions of existing content are offered in the news piece or in the rest of the comments (Lastra, 2016); 4) production of original content (Lastra, 2016): novel information and explanations with a certain degree of elaboration are included, which distance the comments from the digital news and from the preceding interventions.

To establish the relationship between the comments' subject and the participation indicators described above, different communication actions are proposed (table 3).

The analysis includes both quantitative and qualitative indicators. The percentage of production actions (commenting on the news) compared to consumption actions (reading the news, likes, and sharing) is determined in the first place. Subsequently, the macro rules of textual information reduction are applied to the 365 comments to determine an equal number of macro propositions that summarize the comments' global topic. These macro propositions are classified according to the criteria shown in table 3, in order to establish the participation indicator corresponding to each message.

Communication actions	Participation indicator
Approves the news topic	Conformism
Approves the topic of preceding comment(s)	
Offends, attacks, or provokes another user	Polarization
Reinforces an opinion as absolute truth	
Replicates the topic of the news item being commented on	Underlying content production
Replicates topic of preceding comment(s)	
Tells a life story that reinforces an opinion or argument expressed in the news piece	
Tells a life story that reinforces an opinion or argument expressed in previous comment(s)	
Tells a life story that refutes the opinion or argument expressed in the news piece	Original content production
Tells a life story that refutes an opinion or argument expressed in preceding comment(s)	
Tells a life story that incorporates a new opinion or argument regarding the news piece	
Tells a life story that incorporates a new opinion or argument regarding previous comment(s)	
Introduces new information (regarding the news item or preceding comments)	
Analyzes an event	

Table 3. Relationship between comments and participation indicators

Source: Own elaboration.

RESULTS

Predominance of consumption and fictitious or apparent production over real production

As it was not possible to have access to data that are not available in the site interface (such as the total number of readings and the number of times the news piece is shared), it was only possible to establish a comparison between the total number of Likes (consumption action) and the number of comments received by each news piece (production action). It was found that, on average, for every 100 likes, there were 0.08 comments. In the period under study, therefore, the user's status as a consumer predominates over that of a producer.
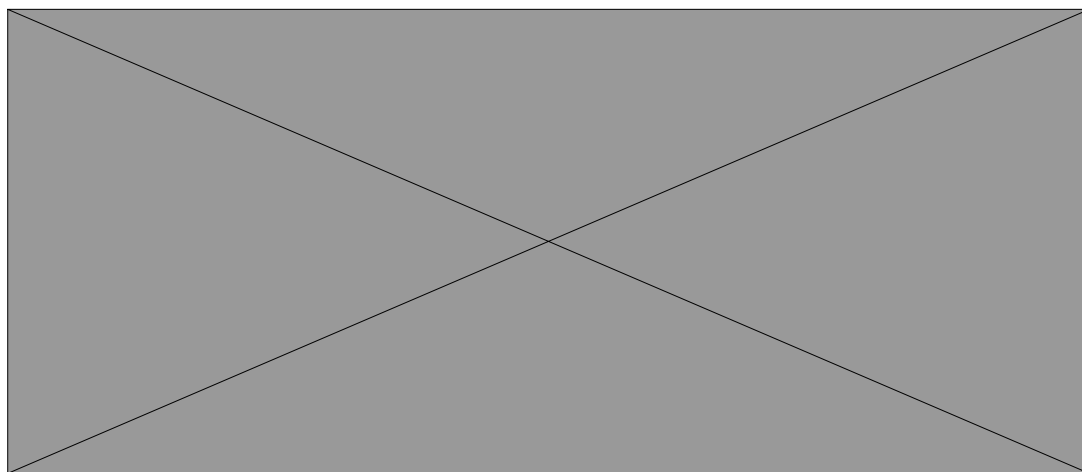
Figure 1. Participation indicators in comments

Source: Own elaboration.

When analyzing the content production actions, as illustrated in figure 1, 70.15% of the comments (n=256) constitute versions of preceding discourses. These include those that literally express the intention to reaffirm the message of one or several preceding comments (conformism; n=40); polarized messages that discredit the other's discourse or reaffirm one's own (opinion polarization; n=53), and comments in which the user intends to distance himself/herself from the preceding texts, but reinforces the argumentative line of the rest of the participants (underlying content production; n=163).

There is a predominance of comments classified as underlying content production, which tell individual experiences to illustrate arguments already expressed, without contributing new points of view, or constitute the expression, in different forms, of the same opinion. Most of them are related to the proposal of measures to prevent the spread of the disease, as illustrated in the following examples that correspond to the same news piece. The comments (in Spanish) are transcribed with the original spelling and wording, and in each case the date and time of publication and the news item to which they correspond (according to the numbering in table 1):

> [1] Si un viajero llega al aeropuerto asintomático, pero realmente es portador del coronavirus, a su entrada se detecta? Si en ese momento, obviamente, no se ha detectado puede transmitir el virus ante que aparezcan los síntomas? Muchos países ya han cerrado sus fronteras para evitar la propagación. Por qué no se toma esa medida en Cuba? (If a traveler arrives at the airport asymptomatic, but is actually a carrier of the coronavirus, is it detected upon entry? If at that time, obviously, it has not been detected, can he/she transmit the virus before symptoms appear? Many countries have

already closed their borders to prevent the spread. Why is this measure not taken in Cuba?) [16-03-2020; 20:32; news piece 5].

[2] Las personas entran y salen a otros países que tienen trasmisión sostenida del virus o de países que quizás no tengan buen control de todos los casos que realmente tienen; entran asintomáticos y se presentan en las unidades médicas a los días siguientes de comenzar los síntomas, durante ese tiempo cuantas personas saludaron, cuantos transportes montaron, lugares públicos visitaron y colas hicieron. De esta forma continuarán transmitiendo la enfermedad a los cubanos. En estos momentos donde la prioridad es protegernos de la pandemia hay que restringir al máximo las salidas y entradas por aeropuertos. Deben evitarse los viajes a toda costa de personas que se dedican a vender pacotilla. Muchos cubanos pensamos así y estamos pensando como país (People come and go to other countries that have ongoing transmission of the virus or countries that may not have good control of all the cases they actually have; they enter asymptomatic and present themselves in medical units within days of the onset of symptoms, during that time how many people they greeted, how many transports they rode, how many public places they visited and how many queues they queued up. In this way they will continue to transmit the disease to Cubans. At this time when the priority is to protect ourselves from the pandemic, we must restrict as much as possible the exits and entrances through airports. Travel should be avoided at all costs by people who dedicate themselves to selling junk. Many Cubans think this way and we are thinking as a country) [17-03-2020; 10:26; news piece 5].

Opinion polarization was most frequently found in messages expressing the speaker's psychological state and his/her reaction to an action already taken. It is seen in two forms: offenses, replies, or counter-replies to one or several users (example 3) and the defense of an opinion without arguments to support or substantiate it (example 4). These are conversations where subjectivity is used as a mechanism of argumentative force (Pano, 2018).

[3] Lo peor de la internet y su acceso extendido es que cualquier mequetrefe se cree capacitado para dar lecciones de epidemiología (…) (The worst thing about the Internet and its widespread access is that any fool thinks he/she is qualified to give lessons in epidemiology) [28-03-2020; 15:32; news piece 21].

[4] Lo que había que hacer desde el principio era quedarnos todos en la casa como se orientó. No se lamenten tanto y acaben de entender que la única solución es aislarse (What we had to do from the beginning was to stay in the house as it was oriented. Do not complain so much and understand that the only solution is to isolate) [28-03-2020; 12:49; news piece 21].

Only in less than a third of the sample (109 comments) is original content produced: they include new information, arguments, or opinions regarding the news piece commented on or to previous interventions. These comments are grouped around three fundamental thematic axes: the account of personal experiences or those of close people, which show the situation in Cuba (not only in terms of health, but above all from the social point of view); the analysis, with varying degrees of specialization, of events or processes associated with the disease, its confrontation and possible effects, and suggestions of measures to prevent the spread of the virus.

Such messages can be useful both for *Cubadebate*'s editorial management and for citizen and governmental action to the extent that they become the subject of journalistic coverage, suggest a novel approach to analyze an event, or guide the action of the institutions involved in confronting the epidemic. Future research could delve deeper into the repercussions of user participation for the professional practices of broadcasters and policy makers.

In these comments, the degree of autonomous elaboration of the arguments varies, as they are based on the speaker's individual wisdom and experience (example 5) or analyze information extracted from other media (example 6).

[5] En 8vo Grado corresponde segun el plan de vacunacion la Vacuna Anti-tifoídica. En Cuba esta vacuna es de un polisacarido, no contiene virus vivos atenuados. de modo que incluso si el sistema inmunologico esta debilitado, no es posible contraer la enfermedad contra la que proteje la vacuna. En la antitetanica el virus esta inactivado, de modo que tampoco debe tener ninguna contraindicacion. Salvo que exitan sintomas clinicos. No hay razon para no vacunar, maxime cuando en Cuba no hay transmision local de la enfermedad. Riezgo beneficio: El tetanos en pacientes sin vacunar tiene una mortalidad del 20% de los casos. El tifo hasta 10%. Covid en el grupo de edad de 13-15 años menos de 0.1% de los casos (The antityphoid vaccine corresponds to the 8th grade, according to the vaccination plan. In Cuba this vaccine is a polysaccharide, it does not contain live attenuated virus, so that even if the immune system is weakened, it is not possible to contract the disease against which the vaccine protects. In the tetanus vaccine, the virus is inactivated, so there should be no contraindications. Unless there are clinical symptoms. There is no reason not to vaccinate, especially when in Cuba there is no local transmission of the disease. Beneficial risk: tetanus in unvaccinated patients has a mortality rate of 20% of cases. Typhoid up to 10%. Covid in the age group of 13-15 years, less than 0.1% of cases [15-03-2020; 17:41; news piece 4].

[6] A ese ritmo el coronavirus será implacable con nosotros. La experiencia de Corea del Sur ha sido extraordinaria. Miles de test diarios lograron controlar la transmisión de la enfermedad. Hoy en noticias difundidas en Italia se dice que el número de personas enfermas es 10 veces real a lo que se tiene en cifras. Boris Jonson en Reino Unido subestimó al virus y su rápida propagación. Le pasó factura también a Bolsonaro y Trump y en cada caso los números de contagios y muertes van en ascenso, siendo EU el nuevo epicentro. Me parece que estamos subestimando también al Covid 19. Las personas asintomáticas son el riesgo mayor. A esos más de 30 mil que están en vigilancia debería hacérseles los tests (…) (At that rate the coronavirus will be relentless with us. South Korea's experience has been extraordinary. Thousands of daily tests succeeded in controlling the disease's transmission. Today, news reports in Italy say that the number of sick people is 10 times the actual number. Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom underestimated the virus and its rapid spread. It took its toll on Bolsonaro and Trump as well, and in each case the numbers of infections and deaths are on the rise, with the US being the new epicenter. It seems to me that we are underestimating Covid 19 as well. Asymptomatic people are the greatest risk. Those more than 30 thousand who are under surveillance should be tested (…)) [24-03-2020; 19:17; news piece 14].

The two previous examples show how, in this type of messages, users assume a guiding and instructive role, in line with the shared responsibility (Rivera-Berrío, 2011) demanded by health crisis situations of global impact.

Rather than commenting on the news, commenting on reality

Most of the comments are grouped around the following topics: 1) the indication (by way of advice, suggestion, or mandate) of the measures to be implemented by Cuban institutions and population to prevent the spread of the virus in the country (38.35% of the comments); 2) the expression of the subjectivity inherent to the health, social, political, and communicational processes related to the national and international epidemiological situation (33.70%); 3) the account of personal experiences, or those of third parties, that illustrate the social and health crisis situation generated by the disease (15.07%), and 4) the analysis of events or processes associated with the disease, its confrontation, and possible effects (8.22%). The topics of the remaining 17 comments refer to issues related to the specific communicative situation and suggestions for moderation.

It is noteworthy that none of the news pieces in the corpus refers to specific measures to be implemented in the face of the potential danger of the disease, but the topic is introduced through comments, which are based on the users' own

risk perception. In this regard, the communicative and social contexts have a significant influence (Van Dijk, 2016). On the one hand, the editorial policy of *Cubadebate* (affiliated to the Cuban State and government media system) influences it to prioritize the updating, as accurately as possible, of the epidemiological situation in Cuba and in the world, while the contents proposed by users may be mediated by other social and cultural conditioning factors, with direct impact on their interests, such as the Cuba's insularity and the economic crisis faced by the country since before the beginning of the epidemic.

In the first week, comments insist on the closure of international borders (the only way for the virus to enter the island); as the days go by and the number of confirmed cases increases, concern is focused on the propagation routes, and there are calls for closing schools and workplaces not directly linked to vital services, and for police or judicial intervention to ensure physical isolation. From the third week onwards, other concerns are incorporated, which go beyond the strictly health-related aspects. The request to regulate the sale of basic necessities through governmental mechanisms began to be reiterated.

It should not be forgotten, however, that not all the intentions of the speakers can be explicitly conveyed in the comments, since the media has the prerogative of filtering or moderating participation based on rules of courtesy and respect among users (Moya, 2015; Sal Paz, 2012).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The contextualized examination of the proposed indicators and categories questions the validity of generalizing the term prosumer to classify contemporary audiences. Not only does consumption widely prevail over production, but the analysis of the comments shows a major presence of messages that reproduce versions of previous texts, so that the type of production defined here as fictitious or apparent predominates.

Nevertheless, it should be recognized that the public establishes new reading agreements with broadcasters as it becomes involved in the public sphere and creates spaces for citizen participation. The actions of sharing content and commenting on news allow people to "influence with their opinions, express their interests, and participate in issues of public interest" (Márquez, 2018, p. 67). Through comments, relatively ignored issues gain notoriety for the press, novel information is contributed, and replies are triggered that help to complement points of view on certain issues (Sal Paz, 2016).

The peculiarity of the informative context has repercussions on the way in which users intervene on the contents proposed by Cubadebate. The disease, as a discursive topic, acquires a sudden interest, transcends the strictly sanitary, and generates a social debate (Bañón, 2007) with its respective expression in the comments, regardless of the content of the news commented. While Cubadebate adheres to an essentially informative protocol, users, as content producers, distance themselves from the news to share information about their own experiences with COVID-19, externalize their perception of the crisis situation, and express their opinions on health, institutional, and governmental management.

The communicative context ratifies that in risk scenarios, digital media facilitate effective communication, since they favor the exposure of citizens' opinions (Mora-Rodríguez & Melero-López, 2021). Comments to digital news externalize an attitude and positioning, mainly critical, regarding current events and public domain (Sal Paz, 2012). The fact that most of the messages analyzed reinforce the argumentative line of preceding texts allows us to assume that, through reiteration, users seek to draw the attention of the corresponding institutions to issues that require an immediate response.

Future research on the subject could focus on the levels of aggressiveness and discourtesy in polarized messages, and analyze social responsibility, ethics, and moderation. Considering that this work analyzes a Cuban cybermedia, it is recommended to complement the study with ethnographic research focused on the influence of the infocommunicational and technological context of the island on the modes of participation described here, in order to deepen aspects such as Internet accessibility, communicative competences, and other sociocultural categories specific to the country.

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