CZU: 659.4:070:004.738.5 **https://doi.org/10.59295/sum11(6)2025_09**

PUBLIC DEBATE IN MASS MEDIA AND ON SOCIAL NETWORKS: CONCEPTUAL APPROACHES

Georgeta STEPANOV,
Moldova State University,

Aishath Shehenaz ADAM,
The Maldives National University

The article argues that public debates are social activities that take place within open systems, governed by general principles and specific rules determined by the contexts in which the exchange of opinions occurs, aimed at identifying solutions to the issues under discussion. These debates are also shaped by the communicative platforms on which they unfold and through which their outcomes are disseminated. The research problem lies in identifying the factors that influence public debates conducted across various communication platforms and in outlining the identity profile of this type of social activity. For the purpose of this study, two of the most commonly used communicative platforms for public debates were selected: mass media and social networks. In accordance with the proposed objectives, the forms and modalities of manifestation of televised debates and those occurring on social media platforms are examined through the method of comparative analysis, allowing for the identification of conceptual and functional dissimilarities.

Keywords: *public debate, issue, communication platform, television channel, social network,communicative acts,dialogic contexts.*

DEZBATEREA PUBLICĂ ÎN MASS-MEDIA ȘI PE REȚELELE DE SOCIALIZARE: ABORDĂRI CONCEPTUALE

În articol se argumentează ideea că dezbaterile publice sunt activități sociale care se desfășoară în sisteme deschise, conform unor principii generale și reguli specifice, determinate de contextele în care are loc schimbul de opinii pe marginea unor probleme, în vederea identificării soluțiilor de depășire a acestora, precum și de platformele comunicaționale pe care ele se desfășoară și prin intermediul cărora sunt diseminate rezultatele acestor dezbateri. Problema supusă cercetării rezidă în identificarea factorilor care influențează dezbaterile publice desfășurate pe diferite platforme comunicaționale și proiectează profilul identitar al acestui gen de activitate socială. În conformitate cu obiectivele propuse, formele și modalitățile de manifestare ale dezbaterilor televizate și ale celor de pe rețelele sociale sunt cercetare prin metoda analizei comparative, ceea ce permite constatarea disimilitudinilor manifestate la nivel conceptual și funcțional.

Cuvinte-cheie: *dezbatere publică, problemă, platformă comunicațională, post de televiziune, rețea socială,act comunicațional,context dialogic.*

Public debates are social activities carried out on open communication platforms, organized with the aim of identifying solutions to overcome real issues/conflicts, with very varied substance and dimensions, by involving the largest possible number of participants, direct and indirect ones, active and passive ones. The basic tools of debates are dialogues and verbal/written exchanges of data, arguments, opinions, attitudes, etc. on problematic topics put up for public discussion. Given that they are carried out on open communication platforms, debates are public in nature, what means that all those interested in the subject or who have information on the topic can get involved anytime and from anywhere to participate in these activities. Participants can express their point of view and manifest their attitude towards the parties involved in the conflict, towards the opinions of experts and even towards the opinions of other participants in public debates. The initiation and organization of public debates "have the following objectives:

- to raise public awareness, in particular by encouraging the circulation of information, opinions and points of view;
- to promote discussions in the public sphere between different actors, groups and individuals, including those who may be in vulnerable or disadvantaged situations;
- to consult the public, including target groups, and therefore take into account their interests and understandings, in order to make informed policy decisions" [1, p. 7].

Public debates are initiated with the aim of analyzing certain problematic topics with increased social value and utility and finding consensus to resolve them. "Perhaps the first question for those considering initiating a public debate concerns the reasons for doing so. Both organizers and participants benefit if the reasons underlying the process are clearly stated. Inevitably, there will be more than one reason for a particular initiative. Reflection on the nature and balance of reasons can help identify appropriate approaches. Public debate activities should not be undertaken without careful prior reflection, as a simple "check-mark" exercise, as this is unlikely to serve the interests of all those involved and could even lead to public distrust" [1, p. 13-14]. The topics subject to debate, in order to focus public attention and become points of maximum attraction, must be carefully chosen, developed in multidimensional dialogic contexts, attractively stated, in a language that arouses curiosity, interest of the public and stimulates the communicative acts of the actors. However, the quality of debates is often decisive for the quality of public mediation and its results.

Public debates conducted on different communication platforms have distinct identity profiles, despite the fact that there are a number of similarities between them determined by the use of the Internet as a space for disseminating information. The distinction between public debate conducted on one communication platform or another is manifested at the level of some characteristics, such as:

- the concept of debate;
- the structure of debate;
- the type of issue/conflict debated;
- the way of applying the principles of regulation/self-regulation;
- the nature of communication;
- the risks of debate communicative acts;
- the effects of public debate.

These characteristics can serve as indicators both for designing the identity profiles of different types of public debates and for carrying out a comparative analysis between them in order to identify the existing dissimilarities at the level of dialogic contexts, communication acts, actors' behaviors, public reactions, etc. In order to demonstrate the validity of statement in question, we have comparatively analyzed, through the lens of these indicators, two types of public debates – the televised ones and those on social networks, the television channels and social networks being, currently, the most frequently used communication platforms for such activities. The observations regarding the special conditions for the development of these two types of public debates and the results of the comparative analysis are presented in this study.

The first criterion of analysis is the *debate concept.* Televised debates are organized according to a certain logic – from general to particular or vice versa – but always from simple to complex, in order to outline the issue in the dynamics of its development through the prism of the cause-effect principle. Luminița Hoarță Cărăușu deduces, from the work *Le débat télévisé*, that the televised debate is "a broadcast or a fragment of a broadcast, animated by the objective of information and crossed by the polemical-contractual dimension of communication. Regarding the system of representation, this type of broadcast proposes a regime of visibility that is characterized by objectivity, but which does not exclude the spectacular", its credibility contract being based on "an ethics of live broadcast and truth that does not refuse either the dramaturgy of emotion, the performance of actor, or the activity of staging instance" [2, p. 56]. Televised debates are verbal interactions organized within television programs, with the aim of clarifying topics of public interest, problematic themes and highlighting the truth, whatever its configuration is. The concept of this type of activity is developed so as to correspond to the "staging of the word intended to discover the truth" [3, p. 81].

Unlike televised debates, the social network debates are structures not only of verbal exchanges, but also of written messages. In terms of the representation system, social network debates are not necessarily characterized by objectivity, since their purpose is rather to arouse the interest of as many viewers as possible in relation to the issue addressed through spectacle than to discover the truth. Given this fact, the dramaturgy of emotion is a principle condition of the respective genre of activity, the credibility contract not being supported by ethical principles or moral norms. Thus, the determining factors for the scale and duration of social network debates are the number of participants/viewers and their perceptions in relation to the issue being publicly debated.

The second criterion of analysis is the *debate structure*. Televised debates are determined in terms of time and space, the parameters in question varying according to the periodicity of the show and the platform where the debates take place. Noël Nel defines televised debate as a hierarchical structure of verbal exchanges, governed by institutional rules and rituals, tributary to a context of fixed elements related to the place where the debate takes place, as well as to conjunctural elements related to the participants in the televised debate. He argues that the televised debate is "a televised situation that places the speakers face to face, under the eyes of the viewers and causes them to address, at the same time, the people present and the audience" [4, p. 17]. From a structural point of view, televised debates are made up of several rounds/stages, each of which has very clear goals and objectives. Debate shows form thematic television cycles. All debates within a television cycle are organized according to the same conceptual and structural parameters.

Unlike televised debates, debates on social networks do not have well-defined structures, are not organized according to pre-established scenarios, are not governed by institutional rules, rituals, and do not depend on certain contexts of fixed elements (related to the place where the debate takes place) or conjunctural elements (related to the participants in the televised debate). Public debates on social networks do not place participants face to face and, as a rule, take place chaotically and in waves. At the same time, they are not determined either in terms of time or space.

The third analysis criterion is *the type of issue subject to public debate.* Any issue, conflict, incident or accident brought to the public agenda and debated with the support of the parties involved, but also with the participation of third parties, becomes the object of public debate. The subject of public debates can be both general issues that require the involvement of society in order to be effectively resolved and even eliminated, and particular situations that are to be developed in order to transform them into opportunities for moral development. The second approach "aims to strengthen the autonomy and receptivity of the participants. Each party has the freedom to decide whether or not they want to valorize this opportunity – it is, ultimately, their life, their choice and, implicitly, the responsibility to live with the consequences of the decisions made" [5, p. 47].

Televised debates and those on social networks differ in the type of issue/conflict that is the subject of analysis in one case and in the other. The difference between them lies in the fact that the televised debate usually focuses on social conflicts, less often on group conflicts and very rarely on personal conflicts, while the debate on social networks, on the contrary, gives priority to personal conflicts, then group conflicts and very rarely on social conflicts.

The televised debate always focuses on phenomena, events and issues with major social value and public interest. The greater the public interest (not the interest of the public) in relation to a particular event is, the greater are its chances of coming to the attention of journalists and becoming the object of public debates. The preference of the mass media for debating social problems can be explained by its function of socializing people and creating social ties necessary for human existence. „Since it is primarily aimed at bringing relevant information to the public agenda for ordinary people, for representatives of the most diverse social, cultural, political, religious groups, etc., and to discuss the problems they face, the socialization function transforms newspapers and television from a neutral element into an element involved in public life, which tries to facilitate discussion between ordinary people and authorities and to identify solutions to the issues facing society. From this perspective, the activity of the media must create favorable contexts for initiating social dialogue in order to solve community or group issues; to ensure its continuity, to unite people in the process of negotiation and problem solving" [6, p. 132].

Debates on social networks, unlike those on television, tend to give priority to topics that "catch" the public - unusual events, sensations, hot, personalized events, etc. Or, as a rule, it is precisely these types of issues that arouse people's curiosity the most, constantly maintain their interest and determine them to actively engage in debates by posting comments, sending messages and even creating new content in relation to the debated topic. This can also be explained by the fact that, unlike journalistic activities, activities on social networks, including debates on problematic topics, do not have well-defined social roles and functions, therefore they can be initiated by anyone and in relation to any kind of event. The goal of those who initiate public debates on social networks is to involve as many participants as possible in these activities, either active or passive. This goal, however, can only be achieved if the topic under debate has major resonance, involves well-known people and is of great interest to the masses. Their interest in public debates depends, on the one hand, on the informative value of the debated issue (if it directly concerns them or those in their immediate habitat), and, on the other hand, on the way it is presented: style, language, form of expression, etc. "Informative value reflects, beyond the probability or improbability of the outcome, the social relevance of the event. What is important to someone may be unimportant to someone else, what influences someone may leave someone else indifferent" [7, p. 140].

The fourth criterion for analysis is *the nature of communication within the debate.* The platforms on which public debates are held influence not only the intervention method and the behavioral actions of the participants, but also the nature of the messages and information put into circulation. The nature of the messages conditions a certain type of communication, which influences both the quality and the results of the debates themselves. Given the increased degree of responsibility of the media for the impact and effects that it generates at the individual and social levels, any media activity must fall within the legal norms and ethical principles in force, and the products resulting from this activity must be objective, neutral and promote the truth. This principle is valid for all journalistic activities and products, including televised debates. For these reasons, communication within televised debates has, overall, a rational nature, as it is based on factual data and information, logical arguments and credible expertise.

Unlike televised debates, debates conducted on social networks do not impose rules that would condition the implications and behavioral actions of the participants, nor the character of their messages. For this reason, but also because the subjects of public debates on social networks become, primarily, spectacular events that can amplify the dramaturgy of emotion and intensify the acting performance of the participants, communication within these debates most frequently has an emotional character. This means that for participants in public debates on social networks, it is not a priority to seek and discover the truth, but to express their feelings, current experiences and their own opinions in relation to the debated subject. The emotional character is also due to the fact that social networks, being simple dissemination platforms, still without the status of a social institution, do not bear responsibility for the impact and effects of the information distributed by the participants. Thus, emotion and sensation are the elements that, as a rule, predominate in the messages of participants in public debates held on social networks, which often affects the quality of communication acts, but also the results of the debates themselves.

It should be noted, however, that the best results are recorded by public debates that use both rational and emotional tools. However, if the negative, uncontrolled emotionality of the participants blocks their communication, transforming it into open conflict, positive emotionality, on the contrary, brings benefits to any public debate. "... The total lack of emotionality is not useful in public communication. If it is obvious in the sender, the receiver will be less interested in a person who speaks without emotion, considering him/her boring" [7, p. 140].

The next criterion for analysis is *the normative framework of public debates*. The activities and actions of the actors involved in media debates, including televised ones, are regulated both by normative acts of a general nature, such as: the Constitution, the Civil Code, the Criminal Code, the Administrative Code, the Electoral Code, etc., and by specialized laws, applicable to the media, such as: the Law on Access to Information, the Code of Audiovisual Media Services, the Law on Related Rights and Copyright, the Law on the Protection of Children against the Negative Impact of Information, etc. On the contrary, public debates conducted on social networks are regulated only by general laws, just as the social activity of any individual is regulated; currently there are still no laws applicable only to social networks.

The sixth criterion of analysis is the self-regulation of public debates. Self-regulation as a mechanism for ensuring the quality of professional action has developed and operates within "mature" professions, with very clear functional profiles, including the profession of journalist. Given that communities/publics/groups on social networks do not form professional communities, their activity cannot be self-regulated, but only partially regulated. Thus, this criterion of analysis is valid and can be applied only in relation to televised debates. The provisions of the self-regulation principles, in this case, extend to both participants and journalists. However, the self-regulation principles are intended to ensure a balance between freedom of expression and the social responsibility of journalists, and through this - to ensure the quality of communication carried out within the debates, but also the responsibility of journalists for the way in which they manage the debates. "The functionality of media self-regulation contributes both to increasing trust in the media and to strengthening the relationship with the public, as well as to maintaining a balance between freedom of expression and social responsibility of media institutions in general and journalists in particular. Self-regulatory mechanisms favor the existence of the media in the long term, as they determine journalists to adopt deontological behaviors in the creative process and create favorable contexts for the affirmation of quality journalism" [8, p. 63].

In televised public debates, self-regulatory principles are used to guide the moderator's actions and shape the behavior of participants in order to ensure the efficiency of the debates as a tool for solving issues. The activity of participants in televised debates falls under the influence of the principles of self-regulatory media, recorded in various codes of conduct or professional ethics and integrity, at international, national and institutional levels. These are developed, accepted, assumed and respected by all members of the profession, as they offer solutions for situations that are not regulated by law. The primary objective of self-regulation lies in promoting transparency, accountability and integrity in the media industry, thus contributing to ensuring the quality of journalistic production and maintaining public trust in the media as a social institution.

The seventh analysis criterion focuses on *the public debates risks*. Regardless of the platform on which they are held, public debates are subject to certain risks specific to the actions taken in this regard. In televised debates, the most common risks are related to the following situations:

- the journalist or guest experts are not well-documented enough;
- the messages contain structural inaccuracies;
- the narrative is presented in a dry, emotionless language or vice versa;
- the arguments are not convincing enough, and the evidence is not clear;
- the opinions and views of the interviewees lack expressiveness;
- the parties may become aggressive;
- the participants may leave the televised set.

The major risk factors associated with public debates conducted on social networks are related to the impossibility of the following:

- to protect the personal data of the parties involved in the issue;
- to preventing identity theft;
- to verify the veracity of the information put into the public circulation;
- to identify the sources from which the information used comes;
- to thoroughly filter the flow of messages, due to which content aimed at harming the image of the actors, insulting and defaming them may appear in the public space;
- to change the aggressive nature of communication;
- to limiting the number of negative comments in which words with negative resonance prevail;
- to ensure the quality and coherence of the message contents;
- to prohibit the use of explicit language;
- to manage the emotions of the actors in order to reduce negative emotionality, etc.

"A free press plays an important role in society (as the 'fourth estate') as a means of exposing manipulation of information, challenging orthodoxies and evaluating new knowledge. Public media reach large numbers of people but are often seen as reporting from a particular 'angle' and trying to mobilise emotional

responses. They can be responsible for 'exaggerating' new developments or distorting the level of technical uncertainty. However, their role should not be underestimated as they are an important channel of information that is essential for public engagement. Social media can support and extend the function of public media but, to the extent that they produce self-referential 'information bubbles' or 'echo chambers', they can just as easily reinforce prejudice and misinformation and even spread disinformation. Another limitation is that not all people have access to the same information, as social media discussion groups tend to be members-only" [1, p. 16]. These risks should be taken into account and, as far as possible, minimized, otherwise they can generate negative effects and fuel division in society.

The effects of public debates represent the last criterion for analysis of the respective scientific approach. The impact and effects of public debate depend on several factors, among which three are considered the most important: 1) the actions, behavior and demeanor of the participants and the moderator; 2) the pecularities of the communication acts: the quality of communication, the credibility of the arguments, the language used, the complexity and expressiveness of the exposition, the credibility of the information, etc. and 3) the implications of the audience: the number of viewers, their level of general culture, the nature of the messages, the regularity of the comments, etc. The analysis of the way in which these three groups of factors manifest themselves in one case and another allows us to conclude that televised public debates generate, as a rule, medium but long-lasting effects, and those that take place on social networks – strong but short-lasting effects.

Therefore, public debates are social activities with impact, organized in an open system, according to general principles and specific rules determined by the contexts and platforms on which they are carried out, being oriented to analyze problems, identify truths, find appropriate ways and solutions to overcome conflict situations, etc. Currently, the most requested forms of public debates are televised debates and those on social networks, given their impact on the masses and their ability to transform target audiences into active participants in the debates. Despite the fact that these two types of debates, in general, have the same purpose – to help the parties involved in the conflict reach a consensus in order to solve the problem – they are distinct both conceptually and functionally, and from the perspective of the effects they generate in society.

Bibliographical references:

1. Ghid pentru dezbaterea publică privind drepturile omului și biomedicina. Consiliul Europei, 2020. Disponibil: https://rm.coe.int/guide-to-public-debate-ro/1680aebedd
2. HOARȚĂ CĂRĂUȘU, L. Un tip de interacțiune mediată controlată. Dezbaterea televizată românească actuală. În: *Limbaj și context.* Revistă internațională de lingvistică, semiotică și știință literară, 2011, nr. 1(III), pp. 56-63. ISSN 1857-4149.
3. CHARADEAU, P., GHIGLIONE, R. *La parole confisquée. Un genre télévisuel: le talk show.* Paris: Dunod, 1997. 176 p. ISBN 978-2100030132.
4. NEL, N. *Le débat télévisé.* Paris: Armand Colin, 1990, p. 17. 272 p. ISBN 9782200330439.
5. GORDIYCHUK N. V. Transformative mediation: basic concepts and premises. În: *Psikhologicheskaya nauka i obrazovanie* [Psychological Science and Education], 2014, nr. 2, pp. 41-48. ISSN: 1814-2052; E-ISSN: 2311-7273.
6. STEPANOV, G. *Bazele jurnalismului.* Chișinău: CEP USM, 2018. 193 p. ISBN 978-9975-142-74-8.
7. VASILACHI, O. Comunicarea și medierea interculturală. În: *Cercetarea în științe ale educației și în psihologie: provocări, perspective.* Conferință Științifică Națională, 16.09.2021. Chișinău: Institutul de Științe ale Educației, 2021, pp. 137-145. ISBN 978-9975-56-934-7.
8. STEPANOV, G., POPA, G., A. Autoreglementarea – indicator calitativ al culturii profesionale a jurnalistului. În: *Studia Universitatos Moldaviae.* Seria Științe economice și ale comunicării, 2025, nr.11 (5). pp. 62-70. ISSN 2587-4446.

N. B.: *This research was supported by a Marie Curie Research and Innovation Staff Exchange scheme within the H2020 Programme (grant acronym: LABOUR).*

Data about authors:
Georgeta STEPANOV, Habilitated PhD, University Professor, Vice-Rector for Scientific Activity, Moldova State University.
ORCID: 0000-0002-7884-8453
E-mail: georgeta.stepanov@usm.md

Aishath Shehenaz ADAM, PhD, Vice Chancellor, The Maldives National University.
ORCID: 0009-0004-8697-9981
E-mail: aishath.shehenaz@mnu.edu.mv

Presented: 08.09.2025