Editorial

New Frontiers for Political Communication in Times of Spectacularization

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Abstract
Political spectacularization is a broad global phenomenon challenging contemporary digital political communication under new features that define interactive digital narratives. In this sense, the use of politainment formulas in digital contexts to reconnect the electorate with political leaders and institutions through a more direct and interactive communication deserves further understanding of its implications on the devaluation of political information and the loss of democratic quality. This thematic issue sheds some light on how the spectacularization of political communication, which increasingly takes place in online contexts, affects and is affected by these processes, where entertainment is crucial to engage citizens. In this editorial, we provide a short overview of how research on politainment has started to shift its attention away from traditional media toward the wide array of lenses of politainment among digital platforms. The articles in this thematic issue reflect this shift but also show its consequences in terms of political engagement. Finally, we outline further research steps, which should establish a more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of the complex relationship between political communication, entertainment, and new digital communication formulas, which is crucial to advance knowledge in the field.

Keywords
digital narratives; digital persuasion; disintermediation; gamification; ideological polarization; online campaigns; politainment; political communication; political engagement; social media

Issue
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1. Introduction

The increasing complexity of the challenges faced by societies today highlights the critical importance of political communication research (Lawrence, 2023). In response to these concerns, we recognize the value of engaging in rigorous analysis of high-quality research published in respected journals, such as *Political Communication*, *International Journal of Press/Politics*, *Political Communication Research*, among others. Drawing upon the rich and diverse literature in these journals, our aim is to provide a platform for researchers to explore political communication through a media per-spective, with a particular focus on the phenomenon of *politainment*.

Through this process, we have been impressed by the quantity and quality of the proposals we have received, which demonstrate its interest and a wide range of perspectives and approaches. Notably, some submissions have offered new insights into the evolving landscape of media consumption, including the continued presence of politainment in traditional media and established social media platforms (such as Twitter and YouTube), as well as the emergence of new platforms that are capturing the attention of political actors, such as TikTok and Instagram.

Moreover, we are fortunate to have received submissions that enrich politainment phenomena with different perspectives, such as the role of audiovisual fiction, music, and digital games in shaping political communication. Together, the contributions in this thematic issue offer a comprehensive and dynamic snapshot of the intersection between political communication and entertainment.

2. Articles Included in the Thematic Issue

Humanes and Valera-Ordaz (2023) kick off this thematic issue by addressing the gap in the literature on selective exposure between ideology, vote, and media consumption by employing longitudinal analysis of three media types (television, radio, and newspapers) and exploring the variables that influence news choices (ideology or partisanship). Their findings provide strong evidence for the need to expand the boundaries of research in this area through the use of less commonly employed techniques.

Keeping with the previous theme, but jumping to the prevalence of social networks and platforms, we can find research that establishes their role in political communication. Martin Echeverría (2023) explores how social media users in Mexico engaged with political advertising during the 2021 federal campaigns. He identifies the importance of individual connections in capturing users' attention and forming their attitudes toward political content. He also highlights a discrepancy between citizens' information needs and the political content provided by the platforms and discusses the active role that users play in controlling political content. Overall, the study offers valuable insights into the user experience of political advertising on social media in Mexico.

The prevalence of these phenomena can be found in several articles that develop specific cases. Di Nubila, Ballesteros-Herencia, Etura, and Martín-Jiménez (2023) discuss how politicians—in this case, Brazil's former president Bolsonaro—leverage digital platforms to communicate with their voters and undermine traditional media. The use of these platforms has not only been a powerful tool for promoting populist ideologies but has also been linked to the spread of disinformation and the incitement of hate attacks against democratic institutions in Brazil. This populist concern is followed by Grapă and Mogoş (2023) in their analysis of George Simion and his use of politainment to gain visibility, especially through scandalization and tension against corrupt political elites. The authors state that Simion's multimodal performance reveals that his populist communication strategies are similar to other populist discursive approaches, but are adapted to the unique characteristics of Romania, an Orthodox Eastern European former communist country with Romanian-speaking populations living outside the current borders.

Two articles focus on Twitter to shed light on the engagement of politainment producers and the consequences of infotainment journalism in Spain. Berrocal-Gonzalo, Zamora-Martínez, and González-Neira (2023) studied tweets related to Spanish television programs covering the 2019 general elections and found that politainment programs achieve greater engagement when they include audiovisual documents, contain soft news, and introduce mentions, but not when they use colloquial language. The study emphasizes the need for further research on the consequences of spectacularized political information and its potential for establishing a frivolous or superficial perception of politics in the audience. Following this trail, Reguero-Sanz, Berdón-Prieto, and Herrero-Izquierdo (2023) analyzed the reactions on Twitter to "Ferresgate" and discussed how verbal aggressiveness and hate speech on social media can also target journalists. The study found that hate speech represented a low percentage of the tweets analyzed. So, further research is needed to determine whether this is a consequence or a media sign of the current time.

Another sign of the current time comes from the new platforms that emerge and their utilization within the realm of politainment. The significance of Instagram as a political tool (Ekman & Widholm, 2017) offers new insights regarding its contribution to the phenomenon of spectacular narratives in the Ukrainian war. Plazas-Olmedo and López-Rabadán (2023) conducted an analysis of how Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky employs Instagram in his digital communication strategy. This approach to spectacularization involves the meticulous staging and professional production of videos that strategically combine amateurism with international resources such as subtitles.

There is no doubt that among the different platforms, TikTok is the one that arouses the greatest academic interest as the fastest-growing application among young people. This is the assumption of Cervi, Tejedor, and Blesa (2023) where they examine the use of TikTok in the last presidential elections in Peru. They found that most of the candidates tend to use it as a unilateral tool for promotion, displaying a top-down communication style with almost no deliberative nor participative intentions. The findings confirm that keeping up with new cultural and technological innovations seems to be unfinished business for most Peruvian politicians. This scope is reinforced by Zamora-Medina, Suminas, and Fahmy (2023) when they discussed the TikTok singularity in Spain and Poland, and its contribution to a political personalization approach. Their findings reinforce political actors in these countries are not exploiting the full potential of TikTok's affordances and continue broadcasting their messages largely using traditional communication practices. So, political personalization on TikTok is far from being considered as part of their digital persuasion strategy. Finally, González-Aguilar, Segado-Boj, and Makhortykh (2023) examine how right-wing populist parties and politicians use TikTok to convey their ideology and values. In this sense, this research highlights how the use of humorists and entertaining videos reached higher

engagement and concludes that TikTok might contribute to downplaying the most controversial issues of the populist right.

The articles comprising this issue confirm the wide array of lenses of politainment that have burst beyond traditional lines or popular platforms, exploring new limits and frontiers. In this sense, Quevedo-Redondo, Rebolledo, and Navarro-Sierra (2023) analyze how music has been used as a tool for soft power by Spanish political parties and candidates during election campaigns. In their research, they question the level of awareness of the parties when compiling their Spotify playlists but offer a valuable contribution about how a digital music service has been used for electoral campaigning. Another perspective is introduced by Chicharro-Merayo, Gil-Gascón, and Baptista (2023), who examine the symbolic construction of politics in Spanish and Portuguese political television series. The article highlights the importance of politainment in the blending of politics and entertainment in media content and concludes that politics-based TV series produced in recent years in Spain and Portugal reflect the people's weariness and political disaffection.

Finally, game studies make their own approach to politainment in two stances. The first one by de la Cruz, de la Hera, Gómez, and Lacasa (2023) explores how political marketing and electoral propaganda were embedded in a popular video game—Fortnite—during the 2020 US presidential elections. The study points out the lack of understanding of the persuasive potential of the game in political strategies but concludes that procedural persuasion and textual persuasion were the most prominent feature used in Joe Biden's campaign in Fortnite to convey the political agenda of the campaign. The second one by Gómez-García and de la Hera (2023) offers an approach to how online mass media outlets use political newsgames to inform contemporary societies. The research found four distinct functions of digital games when covering political events: analytical reportage, commentary, critical scrutiny, and representation. As the authors conclude, by using newsgames, media outlets can engage audiences in a more interactive and immersive way, potentially increasing their impact as political actors in democratic polities.

3. Looking Ahead

The articles presented in this thematic issue point to four central trends in the field of political communication which are related to politainment phenomena. First, the expansion of spectacularized politics will continue. Accordingly, spectacularized politics leads to a greater fragmentation of society and contributes to an increasing distrust of the political system.

Second, digital narratives used to convey political information will continue to evolve, with a greater focus on interactivity and user participation in the creation of stories (Ryan, 2016). Technologies, such as virtual and augmented reality, will have a significant impact on digital narratives, offering new possibilities for user immersion and experience.

Third, information disintermediation will continue to grow, driven by technological development and changes in prosumer behavior (Benkler, 2006). In consequence, content production will be decentralized, and this fact could have an impact on the content diversity and the quality of political information available online.

Fourth, the presence of automatization and the irruption of artificial intelligence can be glimpsed. AI and machine learning systems will be used to collect and analyze user data, with the aim of offering more personalized and relevant content and services to achieve greater engagement (Marconi, 2020).

Overall, these mentioned tendencies need a deep critical reflection, given their ethical and social implications. Spectacularized politics in the media and the internet is a complex phenomenon with serious implications for democracy. Likewise, it is important to consider the consequences of digital disintermediation, including issues such as data privacy and algorithm control. Accordingly, it is necessary to find a balance between the freedom of content production and distribution and the maintenance of quality in journalism (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013).

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