
Political Leaders in (inter)Action. Twitter As a Strategic Communication Tool in Electoral Campaigns

Líders polítics en (inter)acció. Twitter com a eina estratègica de comunicació en campanya electoral

Laura Alonso-Muñoz

Silvia Marcos-García

Andreu Casero-Ripollés

Universitat Jaume I de Castelló (Spain)

The use of social networks, particularly Twitter, in the area of political communication is continually growing. Its capacity to foster direct and personal communication and interaction with the citizenry are two of the factors that explain its growth. The objective of this study is to analyse whether the principal Spanish political leaders (Mariano Rajoy, Pedro Sánchez, Pablo Iglesias, and Albert Rivera) dialogue and interact with the citizenry on Twitter. To that end, a quantitative content analysis is applied, taking as a reference the methodology of Kent and Taylor (1998) and its adaptation to Twitter by Ribalko and Seltzer (2010). The sample is composed of tweets published by the four candidates during the campaign for the general elections held in Spain on 20 December 2015. The results reveal that independent of variables such as number of publications, profile followers, or ideology, none of the political leaders

L'ús de les xarxes socials, particularment Twitter, dins l'àmbit de la comunicació política és cada vegada més alt. La seva capacitat per fomentar la comunicació directa i personal i la interacció amb la ciutadania són alguns dels factors que n'expliquen el seu auge. L'objectiu d'aquesta recerca és analitzar si els principals líders polítics espanyols (Mariano Rajoy, Pedro Sánchez, Pablo Iglesias i Albert Rivera) dialoguen i interactuen amb la ciutadania a Twitter. Per a això, s'aplica una anàlisi de contingut quantitativ prenent com a referència la metodologia de Kent i Taylor (1998) i la seva adaptació a Twitter de Ribalko i Seltzer (2010). La mostra està formada pels tuits publicats pels quatre candidats durant la campanya de les eleccions generals a Espanya del 20 de desembre de 2015. Els resultats revelen que independentment de variables com el nombre de publicacions, seguidors del perfil o la ideologia, cap dels líders

use Twitter to dialogue with their audience. Meanwhile, it is also shown that the use of this platform drives the hybridisation of political actors' communicative strategies.

Key words: *Twitter, political communication, social media, electoral campaign, dialogue.*

polítics no emprà Twitter per dialogar amb l'audiència. D'altra banda, també es demostra que l'ús d'aquesta plataforma impulsa la hibridació en les estratègies comunicatives dels actors polítics.

Paraules clau: *Twitter, comunicació política, xarxes socials, campanya electoral, diàleg.*

In recent years, the Internet and social networks such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter have changed the manner in which political communication is understood (Gibson and Römmele, 2001) and have positioned themselves as an emerging space in this field (Hendricks and Kaid, 2014). Concretely, the microblogging platform is one of the social networks preferred by parties and candidates, who use it to have much more direct and close contact with the citizenry (Tumasjan *et al.*, 2010; Parmelee and Bichard, 2011; Kruike-meier, 2014). Twitter has begun to break the existing barriers of traditional political communication, dominated by political actors and mass media in which citizens could barely participate (Micó and Casero-Ripollés, 2014). Currently, owing to the bidirectional model of communication that this type of tool offers, citizens and politicians have multiple channels to dialogue and interact more easily, without the need to pass through the media filter (McNair, 2011; Chadwick 2013).

Political leaders have particularly exploited this opportunity, using social networks as a potent channel to highlight their profiles and to show the more human side of politics (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011; Holtz-Bacha, 2013; Karlsen and Enjolras, 2016). Thus, going beyond their activity of disseminating political messages, they add music or film recommendations, publications with an emotional or humorous style, or photographs and videos from their daily routine. The personalisation of the candidate has become an important component of the campaign and a very useful resource that parties and leaders use to attract users' attention (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007; Adam and Maier, 2010). However, the interaction of parties and politicians with other actors on Twitter is practically non-existent, and on the few occasions in which it occurs, it is to initiate conversation with other politicians or journalists and not with citizens (Graham *et al.*, 2013; Jungherr, 2014a).

This is a reality that is particularly present in Spanish political communication (Alonso-Muñoz, Miquel-Segarra, and Casero-Ripollés, 2016; Segado-Boj, Díaz-Campo, and Lloves, 2016). Although parties and politicians set up numerous accounts on Twitter in 2011, their use was "opportunistic, artificial, and

with zero influence on electoral results” (Abejón, Sastre, and Linares, 2012: 131). The majority of these profiles were set up on the occasion of the electoral campaign and were abandoned and left inactive once it finished.

Previous research has centred on the use and type of content that is published on Twitter by parties during electoral campaigns (Golbeck, Grimes, and Rogers, 2010; Jackson and Lilleker, 2011; Alonso-Muñoz, Miquel-Segarra, and Casero-Ripollés, 2016) but there are still few studies that analyse the use of this social network by political leaders (López-García, 2016). Therefore, this study aims to fill an existing gap in the literature, broadening and complementing the knowledge of political leaders’ use of Twitter from the perspective of interaction and dialogue.

SOCIAL NETWORKS IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The inclusion of the Internet and, particularly, social networks in the field of political communication has promoted its redefinition towards a new stage in which political actors, media, and citizens can communicate under equal conditions (Chadwick, 2013; Holtz-Bacha, 2013, Koc-Michalska *et al.*, 2016). Thus, the political context, previously dominated by the media elite, has transformed to make space for a new sphere, in which the citizenry has more opportunities to participate. Owing to these digital tools, citizens are capable of not only self-producing and self-distributing their own messages (Jenkins, 2006; Castells, 2009) but also becoming an alternative voice that is capable of regulating political and economic power (Casero-Ripollés, 2010; Feenstra and Casero-Ripollés, 2014).

In this sense, in this digital environment, politicians and parties find a way to approach their electorate and assess their opinions and comments more directly. Therefore, there are continually increasingly more political actors who incorporate digital media into their communications strategies, turning their use into something natural and everyday (Stromer-Galley, 2014; Lilleker, Tenscher, and Štětka, 2015). Despite continuing to use traditional tactics and tools, politicians exploit the new logic and potential of digital media based on hybridisation (Chadwick, 2013; Casero-Ripollés, Feenstra, and Tormey, 2016), particularly during electoral periods.

The degree of diffusion reached by social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, the capacity to access non-partisan and abstaining voters, and the potential to give the electoral campaign a touch of personal, interactive and fast style make these platforms an essential tool during campaign periods (Criado, Martínez-Fuentes, and Silván, 2013). Their use in this context is continually becoming more multifaceted (Chadwick, 2013; Stromer-Galley, 2014) because they are used by political actors both to inform people about their campaign activities and to transmit political declarations, share links to their own websites, mobilise party members and sympathisers, and publish personal content (Golbeck, Grimes, and Rogers, 2010; Lilleker, Tenscher, and Štětka, 2015).

TWITTER AS THE SOCIAL NETWORK OF REFERENCE IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Although social networks have become a necessary tool in current political communication, the peculiarities and potential that some platforms have make them much more attractive for political actors. Accordingly, Twitter has become one of the social media platforms of reference in virtual politics (Tumasjan *et al.*, 2010; Parmelee and Bichard, 2011; Jungherr, 2014b; Kruikemeier, 2014).

It is particularly political leaders who view Twitter as the ideal space in which to establish the interpersonal communication that they must maintain with their voters (Túñez and Sixto, 2011). Similarly, the ease of disseminating content and making it viral, consulting which questions focus political debate, and evaluating their performance in the events in which they participate are some of the characteristics that make this social network one of the most useful platforms for candidates (Rodríguez and Ureña, 2011; Chadwick, 2013; Larsson, 2015).

Twitter has become a new medium to promote personalisation in politics. In the case of leaders, this strategy has become one of the most practical resources, both to attract the attention of more users (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007; Adam and Maier, 2010) and to humanise and strengthen personal ties with other social actors (Rodríguez and Ureña, 2011; Bentivegna, 2015).

Meanwhile, political actors use Twitter as a marketing tool because the objective of a large part of their content is to inform about their campaign activities, offer political declarations, and share links to their own websites (Golbeck, Grimes, and Rogers, 2010). Similarly, other studies indicate that the general strategy of Spanish parties and leaders on Twitter is based on using this social network as another means by which to disseminate their messages, whose content is principally based on self-promotion (Alonso-Muñoz, Miquel-Segarra, and Casero-Ripollés, 2016; López-García, 2016; Segado-Boj, Díaz-Campo, and Lloves, 2016).

Thus, similar to what occurs with traditional media, political actors consider Twitter to be one more means by which to make their actions and proposals known and to be of interest particularly to influence media coverage and avoid the filter of journalists (López-Meri, 2016). This dynamic fits with the configuration of a hybrid media system in the field of political communication, in which, in their communicative strategies, politicians combine the use of new and old media, such as social networks, television, and the press (Chadwick, 2013).

TWITTER AS A SPACE FOR DIALOGUE AND INTERACTION BETWEEN POLITICAL ACTORS AND CITIZENS

Despite Twitter's multitude of advantages, its capacity to facilitate direct contact and dialogue between political actors and citizens is its standout potential (Rodríguez and Ureña, 2011; Sánchez Duarte, 2014). In fact, studies such as that by Fernández (2012) noted that one of the principal motivations of the citizenry

when following a politician on social networks is the possibility of having direct contact with him or her.

Twitter offers diverse formulas that favour bidirectional communication. Mentions and hashtags strengthen the creation of ties between diverse users and favour interactivity. For their part, retweets and favourites suppose a direct form of interaction, reaffirm users' interest in the content of the message, and amplify its virality (Larsson, 2015).

These tools are part of what is known as the dialogic potential, which analyses the form in which politicians interact and dialogue with the citizenry in the digital environment. In this sense, studies such as that by Kent and Taylor (2002) have demonstrated that online communication is the ideal method of constructing dialogic relationships between an organisation and its public, allowing for the creation of bonds of trust between both (Putnam, 1988). In their study, these authors divide the five principles that favour this connection into two groups (Kent and Taylor, 1998). On the one hand, there are those related to design, which incorporate elements such as ease of use, retention of visitors, and the use of the information shared. On the other hand, there are the components connected to the dialogic techniques that support the possibility of generating visits and dialogic loops (Taylor, Kent, and White, 2001). Here, there arises the analysis of feedback as an essential element to initiate conversation. This type of study demonstrates the great importance of dialogue and interactivity on Twitter as a method of enriching communication and as a fundamental element to create close ties with users (Ribalko and Seltzer, 2010).

However, although there are multiple formulas for fostering dialogue between political actors and citizens on Twitter, the political class only minimally exploits the potential of bidirectional rhetoric or language that is unique to this social network (Rodríguez and Ureña, 2011; López-Meri, 2016). Furthermore, on the few occasions in which political subjects do interact, they do so particularly to address mass media and political elites and not the citizenry (Jungherr, 2014a). In this sense, we can observe how the use that political organisations and their leaders made of Twitter during the campaign was more as a self-promotion tool and not as a means to relate to and dialogue with citizens (Alonso and Adell, 2011; Abejón, Sastre, and Linares, 2012; Alonso-Muñoz, Miquel-Segarra, and Casero-Ripollés, 2016; Segado-Boj, Díaz-Campo, and Lloves, 2016).

OBJECTIVE

The principal objective of this study is to analyse the degree of interaction and dialogue of the principal Spanish political leaders (Mariano Rajoy, Pedro Sánchez, Pablo Iglesias, and Albert Rivera) on Twitter during the electoral campaign of the general elections held on 20 December 2015. To that end, this study draws from the study of dialogic techniques performed by Kent and Taylor (1998), adapted by Ribalko and Seltzer in 2010 for Twitter.

METHODOLOGY

SAMPLE

The sample for this study was composed of tweets published by the leaders of the four principal Spanish parties, that is, Mariano Rajoy (Popular Party, Partido Popular–PP), Pedro Sánchez (Socialist Party, Partido Socialista–PSOE), Pablo Iglesias (Podemos), and Albert Rivera (Ciudadanos), during the campaign for the general elections held in Spain in December 2015. Specifically, the messages shared during the 15 official electoral campaign days, the reflection day, the election day and the following day are analysed.

There are two selection criteria for the sample. The first is the representativeness of the political leaders analysed, who are the four candidates of the parties that obtained the most votes and who jointly received 85% of the vote.² The second is the trajectory of the candidates and their organisations. Thus, two leaders who belong to political organisations with a long political trajectory, represented by Mariano Rajoy (PP) and Pedro Sánchez (PSOE), are combined with others who come from emerging political organisations that were recently created, such as Pablo Iglesias (Podemos) and Albert Rivera (Ciudadanos). This selection makes it possible to compare the use of Twitter in dialogic terms, noting the division between “old” and “new” politics.

The sample was taken using Twitonomy, an online Twitter analysis tool that, differently from other current tools, in its Premium version, allows a detailed in-depth analysis of the Twitter profiles that one seeks to monitor. Thus, Twitonomy has allowed us to select all of the tweets, retweets and replies of the analysed profiles. A total of 2,111 messages were downloaded, of which 869 were studied; these refer to the candidates’ own tweets and replies. In this study, retweets have not been considered because they only serve to redistribute information published by other users (Larsson, 2015), which renders them not useful for the objectives of this study.

The analysis was conducted using the statistical package SPSS (v.23). The encoder reliability was calculated using Scott’s pi, reaching a level of 0.97, which guarantees the reliability of the results obtained.

INSTRUMENTS

To respond to the objective proposed and, therefore, to observe the use that the four candidates made of Twitter in dialogic terms, a methodology based on quantitative content analysis is applied. The use of this research technique makes it possible to understand the messages (Igartua, 2006) and allows one to know the content of the tweets analysed objectively, systematically, and quantitatively (Krippendorff, 1990; Piñuel, 2002). This study draws from the methodology proposed by Kent and Taylor (1998), which analyses the dialogic capacity of websites, adapted by Ribalko and Seltzer (2010) for Twitter.

To conduct the analysis, a list of indicators adapted to the object of study of this research has been elaborated. Thus, the analytical model applied is the following:

- *Generation of return visits Principle.* To analyse this principle, variables that favour direct and continued contact with users are included because, as Taylor, Kent and White (2001) argue, to develop a relationship between an agent and his or her public, it is necessary to have time and to maintain continued contact. Thus, in this principle, the following variables are included: links to party and/or candidate websites in which followers can ask for information; links to a page on the website that describes their own activities and the content of the campaign; links to information of journalistic interest about the candidate or the party; links to news about them in communications media, and links to discussion or debate forums. The use of hashtags and mentions is also included.
- *Dialogic loop Principle.* For this principle, essentially, two aspects are analysed. First, we confirm whether the candidates ask users questions through their Twitter profiles to stimulate dialogue. Second, we study whether they respond directly to questions or comments from followers. The quantity of retweets and favourites that the messages created by the political leaders received is also included.

RESULTS

METRIC ANALYSIS

The results extracted from the metric analysis of the profiles of the four political leaders analysed make it possible to extract the general tendencies of their Twitter activity. Table 1 shows a summary of these data.

Pablo Iglesias and Mariano Rajoy are the two candidates with the greatest number of followers in absolute terms, exceeding one million. Pedro Sánchez and Albert Rivera lag distantly behind, with 212,000 and 410,000 followers, respectively. Nevertheless, although all of the profiles received a generalised increase in followers during the campaign, it is the socialist leader (10.38%) and the Ciudadanos candidate (8.54%) who received a greater variation because they started with a lower number of followers.

With regard to the volume of messages shared by each profile (Table 1), Iglesias is the candidate who, on average, published the least tweets per day (12). Albert Rivera (26) and Pedro Sánchez (34) published more than double and Mariano Rajoy (38) triples the tweet output of Iglesias. Nevertheless, one must note that in the case of the Popular Party candidate, only 16 tweets were signed with the initials “MR”, indicating that those tweets were written by the leader himself.

Although Rajoy shared the most messages during the campaign (729), more than half (61.87%) were retweets, and he did not direct any of his publications to reply to other users. This datum shows that the popular leader used Twitter as a mere loudspeaker for his political ideology and rejected the communicative potential that this social network offers. In general, all of the leaders present similar data (Table 1).

Table 1. Description of the Twitter activity of the profiles of Mariano Rajoy, Pedro Sánchez, Pablo Iglesias, and Albert Rivera

		Mariano Rajoy	Pedro Sánchez	Pablo Iglesias	Albert Rivera
Followers, Beginning of Campaign		1M	212,000	1.34M	410,000
Followers, End of Campaign		1.04M	234,000	1.41M	445,000
Followers, Variation		+40,000 (4%)	+22,000 (10.38%)	+70,000 (5.22%)	+35,000 (8.54%)
Own Tweets	N	278	181	156	102
	%	38.13%	27.55%	67.53%	20.65%
Retweets	N	451	359	72	360
	%	61.87%	54.64%	31.17%	72.87%
Responses	N	0	117	3	32
	%	0%	17.81%	1.3%	6.48
Mean Tweets per Day		40.5%	36.5%	12.83%	27.44%
Total		729	657	231	494

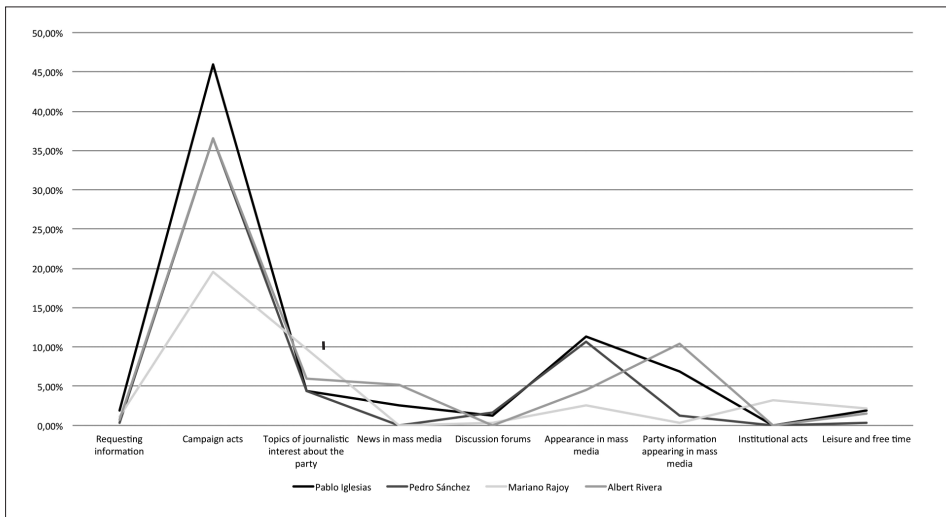
Source: created by authors.

It should be clarified that the elevated number of replies that Pedro Sánchez (117) presents comes from the fact that he links their messages replying himself to his own tweets. Sánchez only directly replied to other users on four occasions. Similarly, it is notable that in Pablo Iglesias' profile, his own messages (67.53%) greatly exceed retweets (31.17%), despite being the user with the least activity. That is, whereas the rest of the leaders analysed generated a quantitatively large amount of activity in their profiles, disseminating publications from other users (in the majority of cases, from the political organisation to which they belonged), Iglesias prioritised distributing his own content, bringing added value and differentiating his Twitter communication.

GENERATION OF RETURN VISITS PRINCIPLE

The uses of links, mentions, and hashtags are the variables included in the principle of generating repeated visits. The two latter items are particularly relevant because they strengthen the links between the leader and his followers and, in addition, they favour interaction between both.

The majority of the tweets published by Pablo Iglesias (79.9%), Albert Rivera (66.4%), and Pedro Sánchez (58.4%) included links, whereas Mariano Rajoy included them 40.9% of the time. Nevertheless, independent of the number of publications, all of the profiles followed a similar strategy in relation to the type of links that they included in their tweets, which included, for example, images, videos, and websites, in addition to their content.

Graph 1. Content of the links included in tweets

Source: created by authors.

With regard to the content of the tweets, between 36% and 46% (Graph 1) of those shared by Pedro Sánchez, Albert Rivera, and Pablo Iglesias referred to campaign activities, whereas in the case of Mariano Rajoy, the percentage decreases to 20%. Despite the disparity of the data, they show that the four leaders bet on making visible their presence in the campaign activities organised by their parties. This aspect can be linked to the strong weight of images (photographs and videos) because more than 60% of the links had this type of multimedia resource.

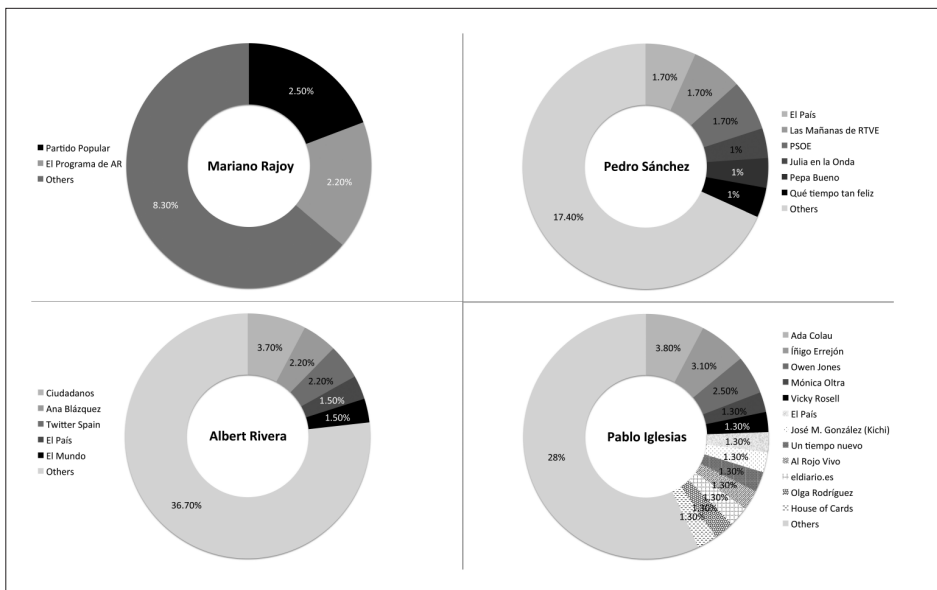
Links related to mass media also stand out, particularly those that corresponded to the leaders' appearances on conventional media, such as interviews or discussions on television and/or radio. Pablo Iglesias and Pedro Sánchez shared these types of links 11% of the time. Meanwhile, Rajoy (2.5%) and Rivera (4.5%) used them less frequently, although the leader of Ciudadanos opted in 10.4% of his tweets to share information from the party that appeared in the media, mainly in the press. This finding reveals the use of Twitter as a mechanism for broadened media reproduction (Thomson, 1998), on the one hand, and as a self-referential platform, on the other hand.

The use of links aimed at sharing websites with users in which they could ask for information was infrequent. Despite the residual percentages, Iglesias' profile presents a higher value (4.4%), although it is not very relevant if one takes as reference the data obtained for links aimed at campaign activities.

Regarding the use of mentions, two tendencies are detected. On the one hand, the two representatives of the new political organisations, Pablo Iglesias and Albert Rivera, used mentions in half of their publications. On the other hand, the leaders of the old parties used them at a lower level. Pedro

Sánchez used this resource in 25.5% of his tweets and Mariano Rajoy in 13%. In this sense, a very unequal use of mentions was produced among the four leaders.

Graph 2. Profiles most mentioned by the four leaders



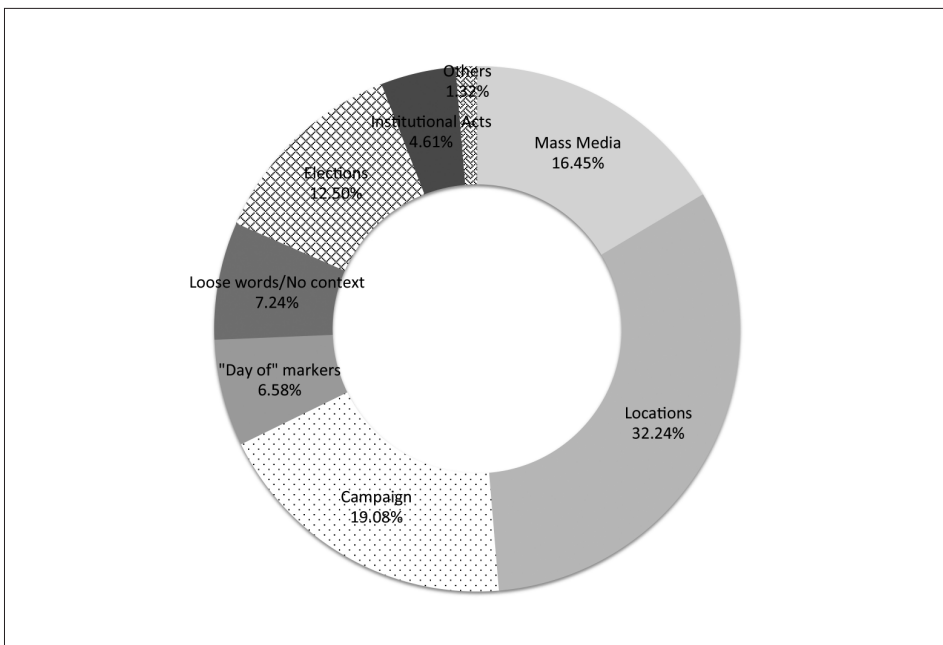
Source: created by authors.

In addition to using them to respond to questions and comments from other users, the leaders ascribed two functions to mentions: on the one hand, to implicate their party in the messages that they emit (Graph 2). This occurred with all of the leaders except Iglesias, who rarely expressly mentioned his political organisation, although on numerous occasions he cited his fellow ballot members and the members of his organisation or related organisations. On the other hand, they also used them to interact with mass media and/or journalists who, in general, had interviewed them or were going to interview them or who had written about them. This datum denotes the great relevance that mass media still retain during electoral periods, making clear the emergence of a hybrid system within political communication that combines new and old media. In this sense, Twitter is configured as a field in which the relationship between journalists and politicians also adopts a preferential role.

With regard to the use of hashtags, Iglesias and Rivera present similar patterns, given that they only included this resource in 35% of their messages and only one hashtag per message. Sánchez used them frequently (in 70% of his tweets) and, in the majority of cases, incorporated between one and two hashtags. Mariano Rajoy is the leader who made use of this resource the most, and he added between one and three hashtag to 95% of his messages.

With respect to the functions of the hashtags (Graph 3), it stands out that 32.24% presented the locations of the cities visited by the leaders, principally in their campaign activities (Figure 1). Their use helped determine in what locations these events were held, such that the citizenry could follow the schedule of campaign activities during this period. Some 19.08% of the hashtags referred to campaign slogans (Figure 1), such as #ConMiAbuPodemos (Iglesias) -#WithMy-GrandmaPodemos-, #UnFuturoParaLaMayoría (Sánchez) -#AfutureForTheMajority-, #EspañaEnSerio (Rajoy) -#SpainSeriously, and #AdelanteCiudadanos (Rivera) -#GoAheadCiudadanos-.

Graph 3. Functions of the hashtags used by the four leaders



Source: created by authors.

The hashtags connected to mass media also have great relevance (16.45%). The majority of them were hashtags that were placed into circulation by the media themselves, such as #PedroSánchezM4, #PabloIglesiasEnLaSER and #L6Ncalle-Rajoy, though sometimes they were created by the political leaders themselves, such as #debate or #GanaErrejon (#ErrejonWins), which refers to the winner of a debate in which members of all of the political organisations running in the elections participated (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Examples of the different functions performed by hashtags



Translation: Thank you #Santander for your kindness. I'm counting on you on #December20 to continue working for #Cantabria and #Spain.



Translation: We speak clearly and we do not hide. We will go to the debates. #AFutureForTheMajority #VotePSOE.



Translation: We Spaniards deserve a new political era, without sides, nor 'you more', without insults, looking to the future. Let's take note for #December20 #Debate.



Translation: At 8:30 I'll be with @PepaBueno on @HoyPorHoy. You can follow at play.cadenaser.com. #PabloIglesiasOnSER

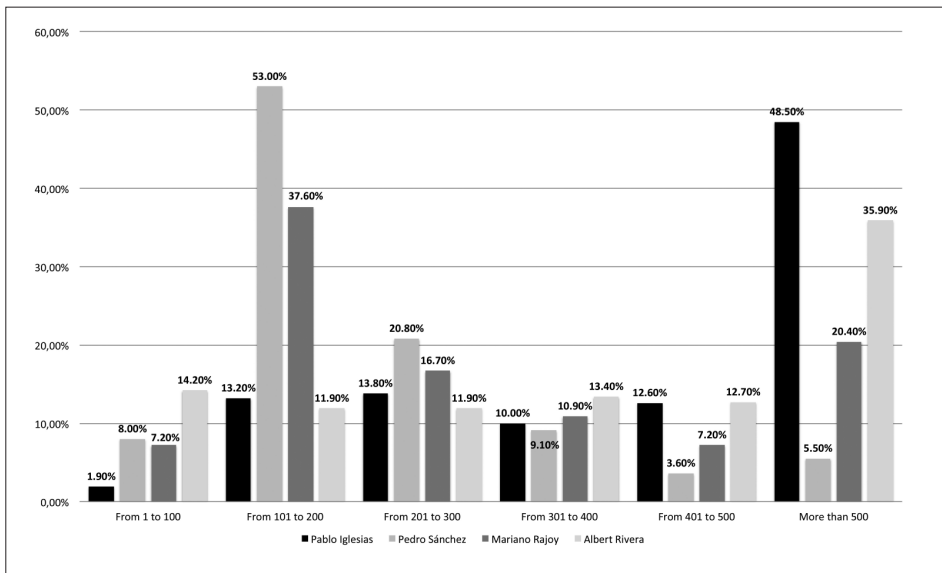
The remaining hashtags (Graph 3) have the function of soliciting votes or evaluating the results of the elections (12.5%), such as #5189333DeGracias (#5189333Thanks), used by Pablo Iglesias to thank his voters for their support. Other hashtags are composed of loose decontextualised words (7.24%). Among these are included, for example, some references to central issues on the political agenda, such as #Bienestar (#Welfare) and #Paro (#Unemployment), and to other types of more trivial questions, such as #Navidad (#Christmas), #ReyesMagos (#ThreeKings), and #TambiénLosHipsters (#AlsoHipsters). All are isolated terms and without context that cannot be understood without the text of the message and that do not have their own autonomy as a hashtag.

Some hashtags refer to specific days (6.58%), such as #DíaNacionalEsclerosisMúltiple (#NationalMultipleSclerosisDay) and #DíaDeLaConstitución (#ConstitutionDay). Others are connected to institutional acts (4.61%) such as #AcuerdoDeParís (#ParisAccord), in reference to the climate change conference celebrated in the French capital.

DIALOGIC LOOP PRINCIPLE

The possibility of interacting and dialoguing with the citizenry is one of the potentials that Twitter offers to political actors (Rodríguez and Ureña, 2011; Sánchez Duarte, 2014). Nevertheless, the data show how the leaders analysed, in their profiles, initiated conversation with other users during the campaign on rare occasions. Of the 869 tweets analysed, only 8 (0.92%) posed a question to their users, and only 32 (3.69%) answered comments or questions posed to them. These results show that the candidates did not foster dialogue with users on Twitter.

Graph 4. Number of retweets received by candidates' messages



Source: created by the authors.

Independent of the number of followers that each profile had and the type of message, all the tweets analysed were retweeted and favourited on at least one occasion. Examining the number of retweets (Graph 4), two tendencies stand out. On the one hand, the percentage of retweets received by the candidates who represented “old” politics (Pedro Sánchez and Mariano Rajoy) is concentrated in the range between 101 and 200 retweets. On the other hand, Albert Rivera and, in particular, Pablo Iglesias, both connected to “new” politics, are situated

at much higher level because they typically exceeded the range of 500 retweets. Therefore, it is observed that the mean response of users to candidates from parties with more recent political trajectories was greater than that to the leaders who represented traditional parties.

Nevertheless, of the five tweets that received a better response from users, three were published by Mariano Rajoy, one by Albert Rivera, and one by Pablo Iglesias. It is significant that two of Rajoy's and Rivera's messages thematically coincide. Specifically, these tweets refer to the attack that the Popular Party candidate suffered on 16 December 2015 as he was exiting a campaign activity in Pontevedra. A 17-year-old youth hit him in the face, causing him to lose his glasses. This assault was condemned by all of the candidates and had a large media dissemination.

Figure 2. Image of the most retweeted and favoured tweet of the entire campaign



Translation: I was going to ask the #ThreeKings for new glasses, but they tell me they've already found them.

Connected to this incident, the most popular tweet of the campaign was published by Rajoy himself two days after suffering the attack (Figure 2). The message shows an image in which the glasses are seen flying through space and is accompanied by a humorous text pretending to remove importance from what occurred. Because this occurred on a date close to the Christmas holidays, in the publication, the campaign team (it is not signed with the initials MR) jokes about the fact that Rajoy could have asked for new glasses from the Three Kings. The message earned 27,749 retweets and 18,581 favourites, becoming the most viral tweet of the campaign, including the messages from both the leaders and their political organisations.

CONCLUSIONS

The results obtained allow two major conclusions to be drawn. On the one hand, this study shows that, in practice, political leaders do not exploit the interactive potential of Twitter because they do not consider this social media to be a channel to dialogue with the citizenry. On the other hand, it confirms that the communicative strategies of political candidates on this platform strengthen the hybrid logic.

The results show the scarce use that political leaders make of Twitter in interactive terms. The negligible number of questions that the candidates ask and answer on their profiles, connected to the lack of links to websites in which people can ask for information, to discussion or debate forums, and to the low use of hashtags and mentions that they make, empirically demonstrates this tendency. All of the leaders analysed present similar patterns. Factors such as the number of followers, the number of publications, the ideology of the candidate (left or right), and the trajectory of the organisation that they represent (old or new politics) do not affect it and are not configured as conditioning and differentiating elements for the interactive strategies of the political actors studied. This finding is in accordance with the previous literature, which has already identified this dynamic in the case of political parties (Graham *et al.*, 2013; López-Meri, 2016; Segado-Boj, Díaz-Campo, and Lloves Sobrado, 2016; Alonso-Muñoz, Miquel-Segarra, and Casero-Ripollés, 2016). As a novel contribution, this study provides confirmation that this pattern is also reproduced in the case of individual political subjects. Therefore, we can affirm that, on Twitter, political leaders, more than being in interaction, are in action, launching messages but renouncing dialogue with the citizenry.

Although they do not interact with citizens, political leaders relate to mass media and journalists through this digital platform. This allows us to affirm that Twitter acts as a tool that strengthens the hybridisation between leaders' communicative strategies. Various pieces of empirical evidence sustain this conclusion. On the one hand, an elevated percentage of links that redirect to content published or broadcast by newspapers, television and radio is detected in the candidates' profiles. On the other hand, they use hashtags and mentions to establish a relationship with media and journalists. This occurs particularly when they participate in different media spaces such as discussions, interviews, and debates. Including hashtags or mentions, they aim to make these appearances and the contents tied to them go viral. This strategy aims to generate a broadened media reproduction mechanism (Thompson, 1998) that involves Twitter. In addition, it reveals that this digital platform is configured as a space in which the relationship between political actors and communicative actors (media and journalists) is preferential. This fact, added to the lack of interaction with the citizenry, creates a situation in which, in the environment of social media, the parameters of self-referentialism that are particular to political communication based on the prominence of conventional media are partly reproduced.

The bet on a hybrid logic in the political leaders' communicative strategies reaffirms the importance of the traditional media during electoral campaigns.

Twitter has neither displaced nor reoriented the interactions of political actors, who continue to address themselves predominantly to journalists and the media, renouncing direct dialogue with the citizenry. Their communicative strategies in the digital context bet on the combination of new and old media, connecting with proposals that are linked to logics of hybridisation in political communication. In this manner, these types of media constantly interrelate, creating a hybrid media system in which, at times competing and at times collaborating, mass media and Web 2.0 articulate the communicative flow. The centrality and the hierarchy of the former mix with the decentralisation and horizontality of the latter, creating a new communicative environment (Chadwick, 2013). Twitter plays a key role in the advance of these dynamics in reference to the communicative practices of political leaders.

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Laura Alonso-Muñoz (lalonso@uji.es) is currently pursuing her PhD in the Department of Communication Sciences in the Universitat Jaume I (UJI, Castelló) supported by a grant from the program FPI of the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness of the Spanish Government. Her investigation is done in the

field of the political communication and the journalism in social media. She is graduated in Journalism and graduated in Political and Administration Sciences by the Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF, Barcelona). Equally, she has a master degree in New Tendencies and Processes of Innovation in Communication.

Silvia Marcos-García (smarcos@uji.es) is currently pursuing her PhD in the Department of Communication Sciences in the Universitat Jaume I (UJI, Castelló) supported by a grant from the program FPI of the Generalitat Valen-

ciana. She is graduated in Journalism and has a master degree in New Tendencies and Processes of Innovation in Communication. Her lines of investigation centre in the journalism, the social media and the political communication.

Andreu Casero-Ripollés (casero@uji.es) is the head of the Department of Communication Sciences in the Universitat Jaume I (UJI, Castelló). Associate professor of Journalism. Co-Director of the master degree in New Tendencies and Processes of Innovation in Communication. He is member of the Institut d'Estudis Catalans. He has been the first director of the Degree in Journalism of the UJI.

He holds a degree from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) and a PhD from the Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF). He has been a visiting researcher at the universities of Columbia (United States) and Westminster (UK), among others. He studies the digital transformation of the journalism, the political communication and the impact of Internet in the democracy and the political activism.

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