
Special issue

*Political communication in
Uncertain Times*

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Violent Conflicts and the New Mediatization: The Impact of Social Media on the European Parliamentary Agenda Regarding the Syrian War

Abstract

As key institutions in Western democracies, parliaments have gained importance regarding foreign affairs issues in recent years. Their increasing role as moral tribunes and discussion forums on conflict prevention and resolution have led to the parliamentarization of international affairs. The examination of the parliamentary agenda and the actors who shape it constitutes a fundamental part of agenda-setting studies as applied to the media and political systems. Among these actors, mass media must be highlighted, taking into account the complex process of information gathering for members of Parliament, particularly in cases related to international violent conflicts. Moreover, in the specific situation of the Syrian Civil War, social media have become increasingly important due to the difficulties faced by traditional media in performing their job on the ground. In order to know the impact and roles played by social media in parliamentary debates, we applied a computer assisted quantitative content analysis to 3,249 minutes from the parliaments of United Kingdom, Germany, France, Spain and the EU, as well as a qualitative analysis. The results show that, during the first part of the conflict, social media were regarded by European parliaments as positive tools for the dissemination of information whereas, in the second phase, the diffusion of jihadist propaganda by such media completely altered the attitudes toward them.

Keywords

Social media, social networks, parliamentary agenda, Syria, conflict, parliament, mediatization.

1. The role of social media during the Syrian War: the mediatization of conflict on social networks

The Syrian Civil War is part from the revolution that began in Tunisia in December 2010 and which is known collectively as the Arab Spring. However, the Syrian conflict is characterized by a series of features

which set it apart from the other upheavals. Together with contextual circumstances related to divisions among the various groups opposed to the regime and to a less precarious economic situation than in other countries in the region affected by the social uprisings (Rane & Salem, 2012; Cozma & Kozman, 2015), Syria and its war have assumed a prominent place at international political debates due to a number of especially sensitive issues and episodes. Namely, the chemical weapons attack on Guta in August of 2013, which claimed hundreds of victims, and the increasing power and prominence that Islamic State gained as the war progressed (Blake & Mahmud, 2013; Geis & Schlag, 2017). Similarly, despite the fact the use of social networks was also a determining factor during the protests and riots that took place in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya (Lotan et al., 2011), leading some commentators to refer to them as the “Facebook and Twitter revolution” (Miladi, 2016), it was in Syria where these new media played an especially crucial role, making this armed conflict the most social network-mediatized civil war in history (Lynch et al., 2014).

The heightened prominence of social media in the Syrian War completely transformed the mediatization of armed conflict, which had traditionally been covered by conventional communications media. Here, the horror of attacks and confrontations became part of a strange discursive procedure in which traditional media reporting drew upon messages produced and disseminated, often in amateur ways, on social networks (Rane & Salem, 2012; Geis & Schlag, 2017) as a result of the difficulties media faced when trying to work within the country (Harkin, 2013; Klausen, 2015). Indeed, only a few outlets managed to cover the war from within the borders of Syria itself, especially since the complexities posed by working on the ground (Kase et al., 2014) were compounded by restrictions and threats from both the official army and the armed revolutionary forces (Mast & Hanegreets, 2015). In fact, in 2016, Reporters Without Borders ranked Syria as the most dangerous country in the world for professional journalists to work in for the third year in a row, after 17 deaths were registered in 2015¹.

Given how risky this situation is for conventional media, applications such as Facebook and Twitter managed to establish themselves as essential communicative tools for the different actors involved in the conflict—as much for the rebel opposition, which often depended on exiled members to put into circulation abroad content filmed with mobile phones and make it part of the international media agenda (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013), as for members of ISIS, which stood out for the way it took maximum advantage of the propagandistic effectiveness of such media as YouTube (Veilleux-Lepage, 2016; Lieber & Reiley, 2016). Many actors learned to exploit the three principal roles of social media in environments of protest and collective mobilization: their use as a mechanism of dissemination—whereby they manage to establish themselves as sources of alternative and first-hand information for professional journalists—, as a mechanism for broadcasting—favoring direct and interactive channels of communication—, and as a mechanism for organizing—offering platforms with which to structure and coordinate connective action— (Dimitrakopoulou & Lenis, 2018). That their strategic use as tools was directed as much at inter- and intragroup communication as at propagating information during the Syrian war can be observed, for example, in data such as the 200,000 fans who followed the webpage “Syria Revolution 2011” (Rane & Salem, 2012) and the over 400 groups on the social network dedicated to matters affecting the country (Harkin, 2013).

The result of the prominence gained by the new media and the hegemonic position—real and especially symbolic—that the traditional media still occupy in the structure of international communications favored an articulation of interests between them. This fact

¹ The detail about the threats to the freedom of press registered in Syria in 2015 can be consulted in the annual report published by Reporters without Borders on their webpage: <https://www.informeanualrsf.es/news/siria/>

could be observed in the way media organizations such as The New York Times, the BBC, and Al-Jazeera covered the Guta massacre by means of videos recorded with mobile phones and uploaded by Syrian activists onto YouTube (Geis & Schlag, 2017), evidence of the symbiosis benefitting activists and professional journalists alike. While the first attempted to penetrate, by way of social media, the discourse of traditional media in order thereby to amplify the impact of their message and gain the support of Western governments (Rane & Salem, 2012; Kase et al., 2014), conventional journalism found social media to be a valuable source of information, especially of iconic resources (Mast & Hanegreefs, 2015). Accordingly, although content produced and broadcast on social networks is still generally not widely used by large international channels, situations that pose challenges to journalistic coverage, such as the war in Syria, represent a clear exception (Nashmi et al., 2017). This happens despite the problems of verification and legitimacy that the content broadcast on such applications entail (Kase et al., 2014; Klausen, 2015) and which, in many other similar cases, explain why their use is limited (Elena & Tulloch, 2017). But traditional media are not the only organizations interested in social media as sources of information. Indeed, the strategic use that intelligence (Lieber & Reiley, 2016) and military organizations (Kase et al. 2014) can make of them widens the reach of their potential as mechanisms for the broadcasting of content to actors who are external to the communications field but who are nonetheless increasingly dependent on it, such as political actors.

2. Agenda-setting and the dynamics of parliamentary speeches

2.1. The influence of journalism on parliamentary work: a strategic use of mediatization

Research on the influence that media communications exert on public opinion, which has traditionally been focused on the theoretical framework of agenda-setting, has extended its reach in recent years. According to this model, the influence of the media agenda on politics is also to be studied. This change in the focus of further research elevates the importance of analysis, given that media influence on political actors is concretized in complex answers and decisions related to decision-making and the allocation of resources (Walgrave & van Aelst, 2006).

Despite the fact that the agenda of the Executive has been the center in a number of studies (Edwards & Wood, 1999; Walgrave et al., 2008), most research has instead been focused on how parliamentary agendas are shaped (Walker, 1977; Soroka, 2002; Davis, 2007; Chaqués & Baumgartner, 2013; Sevenans & Vliegthart, 2016; Melenhorst & van Aelst, 2017). As a key institution in Western democracies, parliament constitutes an essential forum for exploring the ways that the political classes build the agenda of topics that they believe sufficiently important within any determined context. The complex set of duties that members of parliaments perform—legislative, control of the government, diplomatic, work on commissions, etc.—requires that one differentiates between two kinds of responsibilities (Walgrave et al., 2008): those which, such as approving laws, have tangible and concrete effects (substantive agenda), and those which, such as the formulation of oral questions for the Executive, lack any direct political consequences but rather represent mere expressions of concern or interest in a determined matter (symbolic agenda). At any rate, both require parliamentarians to select topics from among the set of issues which impinge on social organization. Those matters which eventually comprise the agenda (debates, speeches, resolutions...) manage to make it through a highly competitive selection process (Cook & Skogan, 1991) and attract the attention of parliamentarians.

The complex network of relations that parliamentarians have with the external world explains how the configuration of issues on the agenda is influenced, along with real indicators of the incidence of other phenomena (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005), by a large set

of forces at play, among which public opinion and media coverage are especially notable (Walker, 1977; Soroka, 2002; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011). The impact of the journalistic agenda on the tasks of members of parliament should be regarded in light of the progressively increasing influence that the media has had in recent years on society in general and on political actors in particular (Couldry, 2008). This mediatization phenomenon explains how a mediatic logic has infiltrated politics and, consequently, why public representatives seek to respond to the necessities and rules of the media, with their communiques and staged appearances (Davis, 2007; Strömbäck, 2011).

The political field's growing dependence on journalism places communications media in a position of leadership when it comes to identifying and selecting the topics to which parliamentarians must pay attention. Still, this supposed influence has not always been verified in the research carried out in recent years, which has often been marked by contradictory results (Walgrave & van Aelst, 2006). Despite this and although the reciprocal influence between the institution of parliament and media has been demonstrated in diverse studies (Davis, 2007; Vliegenthart et al. 2016), other work has indicated it is the media which fixes the agenda of parliamentary politicians (Edwards & Wood, 1999; Walgrave et al., 2008), playing a double role as both a source of information and, to a lesser degree, an arena or forum for political debate (Melenhorst & van Aelst, 2017).

This media impact does not always follow the same pattern. Previous research indicated there are multiple factors determining how such influence is manifested. The most crucial thing is the strategic use that political actors make of journalistic discourse in order to advance their own ends. For example, submitting to the agenda defined by the media in order to attack the Executive with negative news about its performance (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011; Sevenans et al., 2015; Vliegenthart et al., 2016). Accordingly, it has been demonstrated that the influence of media on parliamentary work can be detected more strongly in its symbolic agenda than in its practical one (Walgrave et al. 2008). Furthermore, not all topics are equally viable for the political sphere after they have become important in media coverage. The impact on the parliamentary agenda is greater when it comes to topics with negative connotations, with matters that are prominent and easily observable (Zucker, 1978; Thesen, 2013; Sevenans & Vliegenthart, 2016), and issues that have been sensationalized or which involve international politics (Soroka, 2003; Walgrave et al., 2008).

It is reasonable to predict the availability of information that parliamentarians, who are usually surrounded with good sources that can be trusted (Melenhorst & van Aelst, 2017), have become accustomed to counting on, will be more limited when it comes to international matters and, even more importantly, to zones of conflict, where the production and obtaining of information is not always easy. Accordingly, although in the case of the Syrian Civil War the actions of the conventional media will also be key to understanding how certain political decisions were made (Cozma & Kozman, 2015; Brown, 2015; Makdisi & Pison Hindawi, 2017), one would expect to observe the notable influence of social media on the parliamentary agenda, given that these new media were the protagonists in covering the violent conflict, given the difficulties that confronted the traditional media. The impact that 13 videos showing images of the chemical weapons attack in Guta, selected by American intelligence services and uploaded to YouTube, had on a group of American senators (Geis & Schlag, 2017), gestures toward the new political mediatization enacted by social networks that this paper attempts to explain.

2.2. European chambers in the context of the parliamentarization of international relations

In the European context, research on the impact of the media in building parliamentary agendas has focused mainly on countries such as the United Kingdom (Davis, 2007), Belgium, and Holland (Sevenans & Vliegenthart, 2016; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011; Walgrave et al., 2008), and has limited its analysis to the influence of the traditional media. In the case of Spain, the relationship between the media and parliament has hardly been explored at all. Some research has taken as the object of its study the way in which the press has framed particular parliamentary debates of great political importance (Sádaba & Rodríguez, 2007). Others have suggested the media exerts a certain influence on the agenda of parliamentarian so as to illuminate, for example, why these actors have directed their attention in recent years to specific issues, such as domestic violence (Vives-Cases et al., 2006) or matters concerning the LGTB community (Platero, 2009; Calvo, 2013), although without empirical corroboration.

Other researchers have begun to explore the formation of the parliamentary agenda in the Congress of Deputies, taking into consideration the ways topics that have long attracted the attention of parliamentarians are related as well as those which, for example, have become prominent in surveys of citizen opinion (Chaqués Bonafont & Palau, 2011) or in newspapers with large readerships (Chaqués Bonafont & Baumgartner, 2013). These studies assess Spanish representatives in Congress have indeed paid attention to public opinion as it appears in polls while also turning an eye to what the press highlights on the front page of the dailies. In both cases, this correspondence can be observed particularly in the ways oral questions are approached.

The impact of social media on the construction of the parliamentary agenda is a matter of burgeoning interest that recent research has begun to tackle by means of a quantitative analysis of parliamentarians speeches on violent conflicts, such as the one in Syria or the one besetting Israel and Palestine (Jungblut et al., 2017; Herrero-Jiménez et al., 2018), in order to measure their presence in such debates as compared to that of other actors, such as the conventional media, NGOs, and public opinion. This approach allows to confirm that research on parliamentary agenda-setting has become a phenomenon of growing importance in recent years, given the parliamentarization of international affairs. This process broadens the field of action within legislative chambers, which have traditionally focused on affairs of state interest (while international affairs have been left to the Executive), granting them an increasingly important role on the world stage. In this way, parliaments have progressively assumed the role of protagonist in matters of foreign policy, as much by way of supranational assembly organs as by having established themselves up as important actors in the management of foreign relations (Stavridis & Pace, 2011). It is in light of this shift that one must interpret their performance as moral tribunes, a duty which allows them to exercise so-called parliamentary diplomacy with the aim of resolving conflicts and promoting democracy in the defense of human rights by means of dialogue and commitments (Beetham, 2006).

The present study deepens this line of research through the addition of new evidence to the literature of comparative analysis on the construction of the parliamentary agenda in different contexts (Vliegenthart et al., 2016) by including the case of the Spanish Congress of Deputies in the examination of representatives' speeches from the four main legislative chambers in the area—the British, French, German, and European Parliaments—about the Syrian conflict. This war has revealed, moreover, the importance that these representative institutions have acquired in recent years, so much so that, as in the case of the English parliament, their action was decisive at blocking the British prime minister, David Cameron,

from militarily intervening in Syria after the chemical attack in Guta in August of 2013 (Strong, 2015; Mello, 2017; Norton, 2017).

Although a poll led by Metroscopia in September 2013 indicated that 55% of those Spaniards interviewed thought that the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime would justify a military intervention by a third country, the Spanish Parliament did not discuss to carry one out at the time, as was also true in the cases of the German and French Parliaments. Still, the importance that the issue has acquired among the Spanish general public in recent years—the Barometer of the Royal Elcano Institute carried out in November 2015 (Real Instituto Elcano, 2016) revealed that 36% of those who claimed to be “very” or “quite interested” in international politics identified the Syrian War as the issue that most worried them (placing the conflict as the fourth most important issue among all the answers)—led one to expect that deputies might pay a notable amount of attention to the issue, and that the influence of social media can be registered in how those political actors build their speeches around such platforms. Likewise, the same result can be predicted in the other countries as well, where surveys also reveal that these factors have also influenced how parliaments have approached the Syrian conflict in recent years (Gaffney, 2014; Kaarbo & Kenealy, 2016; Peifer, 2016).

3. Objectives and methodology

3.1. Research Questions

This study analyzes the impact and functions that social media have acquired in debates on the Syrian Civil War in the European, British, German, French, and Spanish Parliaments. Taking into account what has been heretofore formulated, we define our research questions as the following:

RQ1. Given the distinct social media used by leading actors in the Syrian conflict, are there any significant difference among the mentions of each in parliamentary debates about the conflict?

RQ2: Given the different national contexts and the distinct positions that European countries occupy within the international sphere, are there any differences among the distinct parliaments in terms of the interest inspired by the Syrian Civil War? Moreover, are there any significant differences in the impact that social media have on debates when one compares each of the different parliaments analyzed?

RQ3: Given that, as we have seen, previous research indicates that the mediatization of the parliamentary agenda is uneven according to the type of discourse under consideration, are there any significant differences among mentions of social media when one analyzes, on the one hand, debates and oral questions, and, on the other, written questions?

RQ4: Given the distinct phases that the conflict has undergone, can one perceive differences among mentions of social media as the Syrian conflict evolves? What roles and functions do social media mentioned in parliaments acquire throughout the unfolding of the war?

3.2. Sample and procedure

An automated quantitative content analysis was carried out on the 3,249 minutes corresponding to all the parliamentary debates about the Syrian conflict which took place between January 2011 and June 2015². Five parliaments were selected: the European

² The present study was made possible thanks to funding received from the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (Project GSO2016-78187-R between 2017 and 2019) and by work previously carried out by these signatories (between

Parliament (n=720), the German *Bundestag* (n=1,113), the Chamber of Commons of the United Kingdom (n=1,034), the French National Assembly (n=209), and the Spanish Congress of Deputies (n=173). Between June and July 2015, two previously trained researchers downloaded minutes from the official webpages of these five parliaments in their original languages, the only exception being that of multilingual texts downloaded from the European Parliament, where the parliamentarians of different nationalities speak in their own languages. In these cases, whenever it was possible, the official English translations were chosen.

By means of a Boolean search, different types of minutes from the symbolic agenda (debates, oral and written questions and answers, Westminster Hall and the minutes of parliamentary commissions³) were gathered, provided that they included some mention of Syria in the differing languages. The texts were downloaded from the webpages in different formats (html, pdf), with metadata (parliament, document type and date) in their titles, in order to convert them automatically to txt (UTF-8) using specifically designed scripts on Python 2.7. The metadata of the titles were included as tags at the beginning of each document by means of another Python script.

Finally, given that parliamentary debates tend to be long and, in most cases, also tend to touch on different topics in mixed fashion, in order to avoid extra information that would exceed the content limits of the Syrian Civil War, the documents were manually filtered. Accordingly, irrelevant paragraphs that had no specific bearing on the conflict and its diverse ramifications were eliminated. Table 1 shows the filtered documents that were obtained by means of this procedure.

All of these minutes were downloaded and stored on the Jerusalem Server of the Amsterdam Content Analysis Toolkit (JAmCAT), where the necessary scripts were executed for the analysis of automated content.

Table 1. Distribution of the number of minutes about the Syrian conflict analyzed according to the type of document and parliament.

	European Parliament	German Parliament	British Parliament	French Parliament	Spanish Parliament	N
Oral questions	-	107	296	52	8	463
Parliamentary Debates	201	137	169	58	33	598
Westminster Hall	-	-	34	-	-	34
Parliamentary Commission	-	-	-	-	76	76
Written Questions	519	869	535	99	56	2078
TOTAL	720	1113	1034	209	173	3249

2013 and 2016) under the auspices of INFOCORE (“(In)forming conflict prevention, response and resolution: the role of media in violent conflict”, project of the 7th Framework Program of the European Commission).

³ The texts from Westminster Hall only refer to the British Parliament. This is a separate wing where parliamentarians have more time to debate matters that interest them. For their part, texts from the parliamentary commissions were only downloaded in the case of Spain, given the low number of debates, oral and written question from the plenary session of the Congress of Deputies were found.

3.3. Measurements

The INFOCORE (<http://www.infocore.eu>) European Project team created a dictionary adapted to the analysis of media and violent conflicts. Composed of 3,738 entries differentiated into categories defined by semantics, actors, places, and occurrences, these were translated into the eight languages used in the project. To analyze the presence of social media in the parliamentary debates, we selected several entities to create a category constructed and named as an indicator of the presence of social media. In order to create this indicator, we proceeded to analyze the average frequency of the entities composing it. Likewise, the reliability at indicating internal consistency in this way was also studied. Thus, the presence of social media was measured ($\alpha_C = 0,73$) by means of an indicator that grouped terms related in a generic way to social media as much as it did specific terms. Four entities were included: social media/social networks (generic); and Facebook; Twitter; and YouTube (specific).

3.4. Analysis

To answer our research questions, we carried out exploratory and descriptive statistical analyses as well as inferential statistical analyses. In this way, we carried out analyses of the average differences between pairs (t-Student) as well as ANOVAS (One-way and repeated measures) to confirm the differences among groups. Likewise, we created a temporal line with the average presence of the social media indicator grouped according to month and year. Finally, to carry out a deep analysis of those moments in which the presence of social media showed the highest values on the temporal scale, those minutes during the months concerned in which the indicator had a higher value than the monthly average were selected and read carefully. Afterward all the references to social media were extracted along with the context in which they were mentioned in the parliaments in order to create an exhaustive classification according to the social media mentioned and the motive, the goal, or the role by which they were introduced into the debate. Also taken into consideration was the temporal moment at which each of these mentions was made in order to discover if there were any differences in the way social media was perceived at different phases of the conflict.

4. Results

Before winnowing the results of the quantitative analysis, it is important to know the differences among the parliaments studied, as far as the number of documents found is concerned ($n=3,249$), partially answering our second research question (RQ2). Taking the figures of the total number of documents, the German ($n=1,113$) and British ($n=1,034$) Parliaments stand out as those that devoted the most time to the Syrian conflict. However, if we take into consideration those parliamentary debates that delved into the issue in the greatest depth, the European Parliament ($n=201$) turns out to be the one that met the most number of times to confront the problem, followed by the British Parliament ($n=169$), which, moreover, also held additional debates in the Westminster Hall wing ($n=34$). By contrast, the French and the Spanish Parliaments show less dedication to the issue, which is reflected in the number of debates held in the plenary session ($n=58$ y $n=33$, respectively), as well as in the total number of documents found ($n=209$ y $n=173$, respectively). These figures are much lower than those of the German, British and European Parliaments.

Our analysis of the 3,249 parliamentary minutes revealed there are no significant differences [$\lambda_w=1.00$; $F(2, 3247)=0.585$; $p>0.05$; $\eta^2_{\text{partial}}=0.00$] in the average presence of the distinct social networks analyzed (RQ1). Thus, the number of mentions of Twitter ($M=0.01$; $DE=0.19$), Facebook ($M=0.01$; $DE=0.17$), and YouTube in European parliaments during

debates about the Syrian War are similar and none of these social media appears to be more important than any other.

To finish answering our second research question, we studied the differences among parliaments (Table 2). The ANOVA test shows no significant differences [$F(4, 709.112)=0.601$; $p>0.05$] as far as the presence of social media in the different chambers is concerned, implying that, in all the parliaments studied, social media are similarly present when it comes to the Syrian Civil War. On the other hand, if we take into consideration each one of the specific social media analyzed, we find that, as for YouTube⁴ [$F(3, 3036)=0.619$; $p>0.05$] and Twitter [$F(4, 3224)=512$; $p>0.05$], no significant difference can be perceived among the distinct parliaments analyzed. By contrast, when we analyzed Facebook, the ANOVA test did indicate significant differences [$F(4, 700.802)=3.135$; $p<0.05$]. Specifically, the French National Assembly turned to Facebook significantly more often than did the British Chamber of Commons [$t(214.287)=2.530$, $p<0.05$; $d=0.27$] or the Spanish Congress of Deputies [$t(251.577)=2.267$; $p<0.024$; $d=0.21$], although the size of the effect can be considered small (Cohen, 1988).

Table 2. Measurements and standard deviations of the social media indicator and specific social networks in parliamentary debates

	Index Social Media		YouTube		Twitter		Facebook	
	M	DE	M	DE	M	DE	M	DE
European Parliament	.0139	.08932	.01	.111	.00	.053	.02	.193
German Parliament	.0115	.13341	.01	.099	.01	.189	.02	.214
British Parliament	.0111	.16934	.02	.280	.01	.258	.00	.070
French Parliament	.0227	.12412	.00	.000	.00	.000	.05	.255
Spanish Parliament	.0260	.18690	.02	.131	.01	.152	.01	.076
Total	.0134	.14083	.01	.179	.01	.188	.01	.173

If we take each parliament separately, our analysis reveals the difference in mentions among the distinct social networks specifically analyzed are not significant neither in the case of the German Parliament [$\lambda_W=0.998$; $F(2, 1111)=1.253$; $p>0.05$; $\eta^2_{\text{parcial}}=0.002$], nor the British [$\lambda_W=0.997$; $F(2, 1032)=1.486$; $p>0.05$; $\eta^2_{\text{parcial}}=0.003$], nor the Spanish [$\lambda_W=0.977$; $F(2, 171)=2.024$; $p>0.05$; $\eta^2_{\text{parcial}}=0.023$]. However, we did find differences in the Europe Parliament [$\lambda_W=0.972$; $F(2, 718)=2.930$; $p=0.054$; $\eta^2_{\text{parcial}}=0.008$] and significant differences in the French Parliament [$\lambda_W=0.966$; $F(1, 208)=7.360$; $p<0.01$; $\eta^2_{\text{parcial}}=0.034$]. In both cases, Facebook had a significantly greater presence in parliamentary debates in the two chambers. In the case of the European Parliament, significant differences were revealed with respect to Twitter [$t(719)=2.047$; $p<0.05$; $d=0.14$], while in the French case significant differences were found both with Twitter [$t(208)=2.713$; $p<0.01$; $d=0.277$] and with YouTube [$t(208)=2.713$; $p<0.01$; $d=0.277$], logical if we take into account the null presence of Twitter

⁴ When the ANOVA test was carried out, the Levene statistic ($p>0.05$) showed that the sample lacked homocedasticity and, therefore, since the variations were not equal we asked the SPSS for the F Welch statistic. This test, however, could not be carried out either, given that, for the variable dependent 'YouTube', one group had variance = 0 (the French Parliament). Thus, the ANOVA test was repeated, putting to one side, for this occasion, the results given by the French National Assembly.

and YouTube in the French Parliament during debates about the Syrian Civil War. In both parliaments the size of the effect is small (Cohen 1988).

According to the type of document studied (RQ3), the analysis shows (Table 3) that mentions of social media were significantly higher in oral debates than in written questions and answers [$t(1588.626)=2.425$; $p<0.05$, $d=0.09$], although the size of this effect can be considered small (Cohen 1988). However, when we analyzed parliaments separately, it is only in the oral documents of the British Parliament where social media were mentioned significantly more often than in written questions [$t(498)=2.116$; $p<0.05$; $d=0.13$], while in the Spanish Parliament the effect in these cases are tendential [$t(116)=1.837$; $p=0.069$; $d=0.24$]. The size of the effect in these cases can be considered small and between small and medium respectively (Cohen, 1988). At any rate, it is interesting to note that in both Parliaments no mention of social media was found in the written questions and answers.

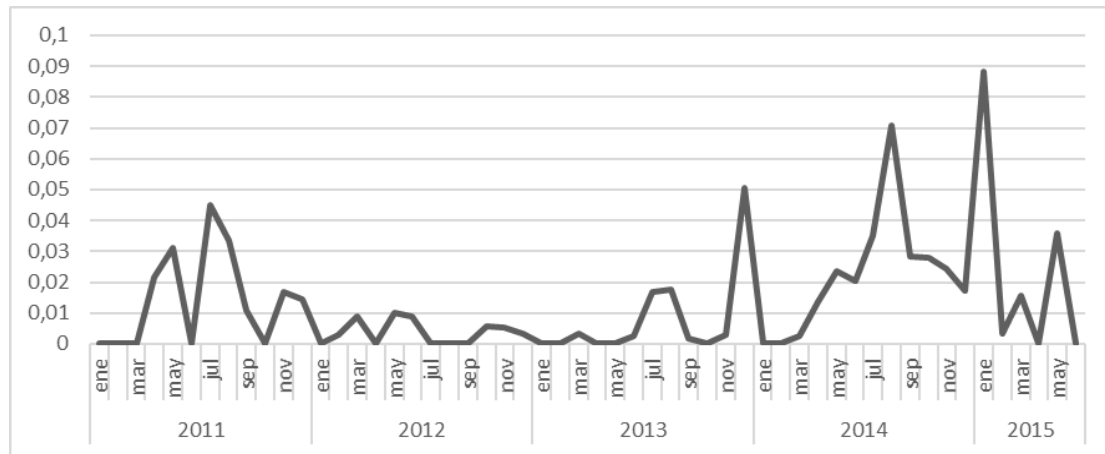
Table 3. Measurements and standard deviations of the social media indicator depending on the parliament and the type of document analyzed

	Total parliaments		European Parliament		German Parliament		British Parliament		French Parliament		Spanish Parliament	
	M	DE	M	DE	M	DE	M	DE	M	DE	M	DE
Oral documents ⁵	0.02	0.19	0.02	0.11	0.01	0.08	0.02	0.24	0.03	0.13	0.04	0.27
Written questions	0.01	0.10	0.01	0.08	0.01	0.14	0.00	0.00	0.02	0.11	0.00	0.00

When we studied the evolution of the presence of social media in parliamentary debates about the civil war in Syria (RQ4), the first thing we could detect was that there was, in no case, any constant evolution of such mentions, but rather that references to social media oscillated throughout time. Figure 1 shows the distinct peaks marking the presence (or absence) of social networks as the conflict evolved from its beginnings in March 2011 until the end of our study in June 2015. However, before analyzing the results of the qualitative analysis carried out to determine the possible reasons for the different peaks, it is necessary to point out that, at first viewing, one can perceive that, even if during the first moments of the conflict social media had a certain importance in parliamentary debates, especially in the months of May and July of 2011, their importance markedly increased starting in the final months of 2013 and during all of 2014 and 2015. Thus, it is worth noting that the presence of social media in European parliamentary debates increased as the conflict evolved.

⁵ For oral documents, we understand all those minutes gathered in debates conducted in an oral fashion, that is: parliamentary debates, oral questions, documents from Westminster Hall in the British Parliament, and the Parliamentary Commission of the Congress of Deputies in Spain.

Figure 1. Evolution of the presence of social media in parliamentary debates about the conflict in Syria



To carry out the analysis in depth, we analyzed minutes from months in which the presence of social media showed the highest values (above the 85th percentile of the monthly averages of the social media indicator). Thus, peaks in the presence of social media (percentile 85=0.0305) were found in the months of May 2011 (M=0.031), July 2011 (M=0.045), December 2013 (M=0.051), August 2014 (M=0.071), January 2015 (M=0.088), and May 2015 (M=0.036).

These values allowed us newly to confirm why there seemed to be two temporal periods. In the first phase, between May and July 2011, there is a notable presence of social media in parliamentary debates during the protests by the Syrian public as well as during the Syrian regime's repressive response. The second phase of peaks begins at the end of 2013, when the conflict had been transformed into a bloody Civil War in which the actors involved had multiplied along with the appearance of, among other things, jihadist groups.

These two temporal phases are also correlated according to the different roles attributed to social media by the parliaments at each moment during the debates. Thus, in the first phase of the conflict, they are referred to as having become the main and almost sole source of information during the period when foreign journalists were not allowed into the country.

From De Arístegui San Román (Spanish Congress of Deputies: 04-05-2011): At this time the information blackout in Syria is making it so that the only source of information we have of what is happening in that country are the photos and amateur videos recorded on mobile phones of the brutal repression.⁶

Michael Friser (German Bundestag: 07-07-2011): We are experiencing history repeated as, once again, a Baathist socialist regime is not only assaulting its own population but has no problem shooting it. [...] In the past, it was still possible to hide the fact that whole neighborhoods were being shelled by tanks. Now, however, the world can see what is happening, thanks to Twitter, photos, and videos.⁷

⁶ Translation from Spanish. The text in its original language: En este momento el black out informativo de Siria está haciendo que la única fuente de información que tengamos de lo que está ocurriendo en ese país sean las fotos y los videos de aficionados con teléfono móvil de la brutal represión.

⁷ Translation from German. The text in its original language: Wir erleben die Wiederholung der Geschichte, dass erneut ein sozialistisches Baath-Regime nicht davor zurückschreckt, die eigene Bevölkerung nicht nur zu drangsalieren, sondern auch über den Haufen zu schießen. [...] Früher konnte noch verschleiert werden, dass mit

The testimony of these photos, videos, and the words of Twitter users fulfill, as the claims of parliamentarians reveal, the role of documenting and giving information about facts taking place in remote places and, moreover, in special circumstances, such as the war in Syria, areas that journalists, traditional sources of information, cannot reach.

Likewise, social media is reflected in parliamentary debate as tools within countries at conflict with which to support protests and reach activists within the population.

Sajjad Karim (European Parliament; 06-07-2011): These online activists are connecting anti-government protestors in Syria and rallying support for the protest through social media networks and websites. They are using Skype to call protestors across the country and social media to stream live images to upload onto YouTube.

Guy Verhofstadt, (European Parliament; 11-05-2011): People tortured in the most brutal way in order to release passwords on Facebook and the names of comrades working on Facebook.

Accordingly, if social media have the function of convoking and coordinating protestors and offering information about the conflict both inside and outside the country, these social networks were identified as threats to the interests of the Syrian regime, which attempted to repress them. Given the violence of the Assad government, which clearly regarded social media as a threat, unlike European parliaments, which regarded them in a positive light, these last did not hesitate to express their repulsion and even criticism of European inaction before the facts which were believed to be verified on social media.

Guy Verhofstadt, (European Parliament; 06-07-2011): Mr President, I would like to ask Baroness Ashton whether she has seen the shocking images on YouTube in the past two days that show a man in Syria filming demonstrations in a street full of homes. [...] That man – and there are many cases like that – was killed because he was trying to make one thing clear: he was taking these pictures to put them on the Internet. [...] In the outside world – let us be honest – we are watching and doing nothing, or almost nothing, to prevent it.

However, after the first phase of the conflicts, the reasons why social networks were mentioned in parliamentary debates took on a completely different hue:

Minister of Security and Immigration, James Brokenshire (British Chamber of Commons, 21-01-2015): In this case, however, there is no need to see sensitive information to conclude that these [Jund Al-Aqsa, JAA] are terrorist groups. Far from hiding their activities, they are actively boasting about them on social media, using YouTube, Facebook and Twitter to spread images of the most horrendous violence, alongside messages justifying it. These are not groups that want to hide; these are groups that are actively recruiting.

Social networks were thus perceived, during this second phase, as dangerous weapons against European countries as well, because they were being used by jihadist terrorist groups to propagate their ideas. It was thus not a localized problem in Syria, but one that directly affected European countries, given the dissemination of jihadist publications among citizens of European countries in their own languages, even from within those same countries.

Panzern ganze Viertel plattgemacht wurden. Heute aber kann per Twitter, mit Fotos oder Filmen die Welt davon erfahren.

The Federal Government (German Bundestag, 21-08-2014): Propaganda from Islamic State and its combatants, supporters, and sympathizers, distributed on the internet, plays a central role in the recruitment of new combatants for the war in Syria or Iraq. Above all, the increase in contributions of propaganda and publications by German jihadists must be noted. Mainly, these act on social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, and carry out their massive campaigns for jihad.⁸

Social networks, as they were understood in parliamentary debates during this phase of the conflict, had lost their positive qualities and now represented a threat not only to foreign but also to domestic policy, as far as they internationalized the conflict and trespassed Syrian borders and into the interior of European countries. Social networks continued to serve to connect citizens although, in this case, this function presented dangers to the security of European countries as combatants returned from Syrian territory.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The presence of social media within the symbolic agenda of the European parliaments studied indicates a new mode of political mediatization which is taking place along with the changes that the Syrian war brought to the mediatization of violent conflicts. If several previous studies had underscored the level of impact that traditional media had had on the formation of the group of issues to which parliamentarians dedicated their interest, as one more sample of the increasing dependence that the political sphere has developed with respect to the media system in recent years, this study reveals that social media have also begun to distinguish themselves as influential actors in the process of parliamentary agenda-setting. The media logic that had progressively displaced the internal rules of the political field is now finding its hegemony disputed as social media becomes increasingly prominent. From this perspective, the results obtained make the balance of forces appear to be more complex than they had been in previous studies, especially those focused on the influence of traditional communications media, allowing for a more precise examination of the diachronic evolution of an international political issue of prime importance. The fact that the Syrian conflict has been increasingly mediatized by social media explains the presence of those actors in parliamentary discourse and poses new questions about their penetration into other international or national political issues that new studies must explore.

The resulting analytical data likewise confirms that the civil war in Syria captured the attention of the European parliaments analyzed, although with unequal intensity, most likely because of their relative prominence on the international political stage. The crucial role the British and German Parliaments played in the conflict can be interpreted within the framework of the historical importance of the United Kingdom, together with the United States, in interventions in the Middle East, as well as by the ascent of the German administration during the recent, unstable years that European politics have undergone, respectively. Similarly, the high number of debates registered in the European Parliament appear to point to its increasing role within diplomatic activity by group of Member States after the approval of the Lisbon Treaty in 2007, which strengthened the parliamentarization of international relations process. Despite these differences, the presence of social media is very similar among all of them, which detaches its influence from the political influence of

⁸ Translation from the German. The text in its original language: Die Propaganda des IS/ISIG und dessen Kämpfer, Unterstützer und Sympathisanten, die im Internet verbreitet wird, spielt eine zentrale Rolle bei der Rekrutierung von neuen Kämpfern für den Krieg in Syrien und im Irak. Festzustellen ist vor allem die Zunahme von Propagandabeiträgen und Veröffentlichungen deutscher Djihadisten. Sie agieren hauptsächlich in sozialen Medien, wie etwa Facebook oder Twitter und werben massiv für den Djihad.

each chamber at the international level and therefore from their role as moral tribunes, with only some minor indications which point to the special incidence of the Facebook social network in the European parliamentary discussions examined, a particularity into which future studies should delve.

The presence of social media in the symbolic agenda studied provides an interpretation of this new mediatization in light of certain factors: on the one hand, the need for information made explicit by certain political actors, which recognize how useful such media are given the probable scarcity of information from confidential and intelligence services, as well as, above all, from conventional media. On the other hand, it is the political strategy observed regarding the mentions of social media especially high during oral questioning, which receives greater attention in traditional media coverage, in its role as a clear expression of political stagecraft. If social media are the object of attention for conventional media, politicians appear to make use of them to increase their chances of being covered by traditional media. In this way, political actors learn about and worry over the content which, freely circulating on the internet, is within the reach of the general public with whom they need to connect strategically.

This apparent willingness to show sympathy with the citizenry by referring to the content on social media to which it has access, also allows to interpret the two phases in which the impact of these actors on debates was especially high: in the first period, parliamentary actors found that alluding to the irruption of protests, transmitted and disseminated on social media, was politically expedient, and in a second much later phase, allusions to social media must be explained as an exercise in domestic affairs, given that they were revealed to be tools useful for the jihadist terrorism which also posed a threat to European populations. In this sense, the way that social media was introduced as an issue into parliamentary discourse is directly linked to their function as a mechanism of dissemination at first—they were information sources for politicians—and second, as a mechanism of diffusion/organization—they were instruments of interaction and coordination for terrorist organization such as ISIS—toward the end of the period studied. The mediatization of the parliamentary agenda by social media appears to underscore politicians' dependence on them, whether they are regarded as either an opportunity or a threat.

To know if the presence of social media in parliamentary debates has become a general phenomenon or is only a special feature of the Syrian War, future research must continue to explore the functions that they perform in parliamentary discussions on both the resolution of other violent conflicts as well as other current issues. And, in order truly to understand their importance within parliamentary debates, comparative analyses must be carried out of the presence of social media regarding other actors who might also be influential in discussions within legislative chambers, such as the traditional media, but also NGOs, which perform key duties in the prevention and resolution of armed conflicts. Likewise, in future studies, researchers must tackle how distinct media, traditional as well as social, are used in debates by the different parliamentary groups comprising the chambers, taking into consideration their ideology, populist nature or lack thereof, and their role supporting the government or opposing it.

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