

Political influencers/leaders on Twitter. An analysis of the Spanish digital and media agendas in the context of the Catalan elections of 21 December 2017

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Abstract: A new politics, linked to the influencer/leader and to the empowerment of the public on social networking sites, is currently marking the media agenda. In light of this, the aim of this study is to gain further insights into the polarization and influence of political messages on Twitter and levels of user participation, in a context marked by social movements and the counter-power of citizenship. Based on a triangulated methodology of quantitative and qualitative-discursive content analysis, all the tweets were quantified (3,562), selecting only those pertaining to the elections (526) posted by the pro-independence and constitutionalist candidates of the parties obtaining the highest number of votes, plus 144,382 user engagement metrics and 68 front pages of the mainstream Spanish and Catalan press. The results point to a unidirectional use of Twitter by political leaders, a higher user response rate, and the influence of the digital political agenda on its media counterpart.

Keywords: Influencer, political agenda, Twitter, elections, independence process, media agenda, digital users

Introduction

The ways of conveying political messages on the web urgently need to be reviewed. The tweets posted on Twitter are currently characterized by their polarized and unidirectional nature not only thanks to political influencers/leaders and their parties (Fernández-Gómez, Hernández-Santaolalla, & Sanz-Marcos, 2018; Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011) but also with the collusion of new digital audiences: fan and anti-fan communities alike (Castells, 2009; Sampedro, 2014). Given this situation, the mass media has designed a parallel agenda involving the publishing of tweets, previously posted by political candidates on their personal accounts and then disseminated by their followers with “likes,” retweets, and/or comments. This alliance decides what is newsworthy on the Internet.

In this digital platform context, the type of communication that is established between users has shaped a singular hybrid public sphere (Benkler, 2015; Chadwick, 2013; Jenkins, 2008), in which hegemonic and counter-hegemonic groups vie for visibility in order to make themselves heard by employing the different mediatization processes (Hjarvard, 2013; Holton et al., 2014) available to them (Scolari, 2008).

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The independence process in Catalonia is the most recent political conflict in Spain and a determining factor in its future organization as a state. On October 1, 2017, a referendum was called with the aim of asking the region's citizens whether they were in favor of Catalonia's independence and "disconnection" from Spain (Carrasco-Polaino, Villar-Cirujano, and Tejedor-Fuentes, 2018). Despite the combined efforts of courts and law enforcement agencies to halt the poll, nearly 2.3 million people (43 percent of the electoral roll) turned up to cast their votes on 1 October [16]. The voting, nevertheless, came with unusual scenes of violence. Digital platforms satisfy a major communication need in any form of activism — spreading open information to mass-scale audiences. Yet, they also fall short of guaranteeing private, secured communications between activists when coordinating their actions in hostile environments (Poblet, 2017).

According to a report released by the Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió (CEO) in 2017, 40.2 percent of the respondents believed that Catalonia should be an independent state, 27.4 percent an autonomous community, 21.8 percent a federal state, and 4.6 percent a region (CEO, 2017). When compared with the poll performed the year before (CEO, 2016), it can be observed that the number of those favoring independence and even other territorial models over the established constitutional model had increased. Besides the political parties, civic associations such as the Asambleu Nacional de Catalunya (ANC), advocating for an independent Catalan state, and Sociedad Civil Catalana (SCC), defending quite the opposite, also intervened in the debate in Catalonia. On social networking sites, they served as nodal actors and communication channels between those in favor or against a new Catalan state (Cramery, 2015; Balcells and Padró-Solanet, 2016). This situation of uncertainty came to a head with the application of Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, the dissolution of the Catalan parliament, and the calling of elections on December 21st. The independence process reached a higher level of visibility in a context of mediatization and digitization than ever seen before.

Against this background, the counter-agenda promoted on social networking sites (Aruguete, 2017; Meraz, 2011; Sung-Tae and Young-Hwan, 2007; Wallsten, 2007) activated a bottom-up mechanism implicating the citizenry and civil society, with the ability to condition the media agenda (Perales-García and Pont-Sorribes, 2018) thanks to the impact and reach of its message on social media. A study on the geographical distribution of media representations in the European referendums analyzes more than 70k mentions about the Referendum of Catalonia (2017) and shows that transnational corporations from a few Western countries dominate the technologically-mediated division of space (Toth, 2018).

In turn, Twitter has become a political tool for disseminating information (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011), mobilizing the electorate (Gainous and Wagner, 2014), interacting with the public (Stromer-Galley, 2014) and individualizing and personalizing the campaigning style of political candidates (Vergeer, Hermans and Sams, 2013).

In light of the foregoing, the main objective of this study is to analyze the ways in which the political agenda affects its media counterpart on Twitter; a process that conditions the news appearing on the front pages of the press and leads to a transfer of agendas between the conventional media and their social counterparts. The intention here is to determine politicians' Twitter usage: the issues that they broach and how they influence users and the conventional media.

Employing this approach, an analysis was performed on the Catalan elections held on 21 December 2017 (21 D), in the context of the independence process (*procés* in Catalan) (Balcells; Padró-Solanet, 2019), focusing on the thematic similarities between the digital and conventional media agendas, promoted by influencers/leaders in collaboration with a civic activism fostered by the internet (Corominas, 2017).

The first hypothesis (H1) is that there was a cause and effect relationship between the tweets posted by the political candidates on their personal accounts, the most viral tweets and

the topics covered on the front pages of the press. In parallel and from a content approach, ‘independence’ was one of the main frames of the polarized messages of the candidates and their parties, the community response, and the media agenda (H2). In this vein, those pro-independence parties with influencers/leaders (Montoya and Vandehey, 2009; Pérez-Ortega, 2014; Rampersad, 2009) – whose virtue lies in knowing how to combine their tasks as influencers with the attention to and management of their political identity in such a propitious space as social media (Labrecque, Marko and Milne, 2011; Marshall and Redmond, 2016) – have put Twitter to strategic use, placing the spotlight on the Catalan independence/state conflict and marking it the agenda of their own followers, the constitutionalist parties and the press.

By using a triangulated methodology of analysis of quantitative content and comparative qualitative-discursive content, a sample of the personal Twitter accounts of the leaders of the parties obtaining the greatest number of votes (Inés Arrimadas of Ciudadanos [Cs], Carles Puigdemont of JuntsXCat, Marta Rovira of ERC/CatSí, Mikel Iceta of the Socialist Party of Catalonia [PSC], Xavier Domènech of Catalunya en Comú-Podem and Xavier García Albiol of the People’s Party [PP]) was created, including user engagement metrics (‘likes’, retweets and comments) and the front-page news of some of Spain’s and Catalonia’s mainstream newspapers (*ABC*, *El País*, *La Vanguardia* and *El Periódico de Cataluña*) in the context of the 21 D Catalan elections.

Previous studies of the potential of Twitter in electoral processes (Noguera, 2013; Rodríguez and Ureña, 2012; Zamora-Medina, Sánchez-Cobarro and Martínez, 2017; Zugasti-Azagra and Pérez-González, 2015) concur that it is the most popular micro-blogging network among politicians and journalists, relegating Facebook and even their own websites to second place (Abejón et al., 2017), with statistics demonstrating the relationship between engagement and electoral success (Ballesteros et al., 2017), albeit with a unidirectional use (Graham et al. 2013) and many underused tools (Ballesteros et al., 2017; Cheng, 2017; Congosto-Martínez, 2014; Dader, 2017). There are thus more reasons in favor than against choosing Twitter as a platform, in line with the sample’s subject (who) and object (what). The options offered by Twitter versus other platforms for analyzing the online strategies of political influencers and user engagement metrics – summarizing direct messages with a maximum of 140 characters, stressing with hashtags and going viral as trending topics all influence and determine the political and media agendas – make it an especially appropriate object of study.

Leadership, influence and political strategies on Twitter

The visibility, speed, and immediate response capacity offered by social media are factors that multiply the impact of political influence. With Twitter, a channel that amplifies political communication above all at election time (Campos-Domínguez, 2017), it is possible to organize campaigns with a very broad potential reach relatively cheaply and swiftly (Karaduman, 2013; Thelwall and Cugelman, 2017). Furthermore, citizens participating in the political debate can be segmented or grouped according to their ideological leanings (Congosto, Fernández and Moro, 2011), thus offering the opportunity to engage and influence different audiences (Augure, 2015). But all these yields very different results depending on the candidate and the use to which digital tools are put. Nonetheless, previous research has revealed the functionality of Twitter in political communication strategies.

In this context, opinion leaders – nowadays influencers – not only convey the messages of brands, but also those of the mass media and even political parties (Fernández-Gómez, Hernández-Santaolalla and Sanz-Marcos, 2018). Moreover, there are resources (hashtags, images, links, videos, memes, etc.) for reinforcing each tweet and fostering audience

interaction. However, that the messages conveyed by opinion leaders are mainly unidirectional, paying little attention to or ignoring the ‘likes’ and comments of users, is remarkable (Mancera-Rueda and Helfrich, 2014).

Thus, in order to explain where the power of their influence lies it is necessary to examine the personality traits and attitudes of political candidates (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007; Sánchez-Murillo, 2005), as well as the propaganda and disinformation mechanisms of the fake discourse (Bennett and Livingston, 2018; Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Llorente, 2017) that explain where the power of their influence resides.

A snapshot of Catalonia before the 21 D elections reveals an initial scenario marked by conflict and confrontation with the central government, social unrest, the summoning of a divided society to the ballot box (i.e. the referendum held on 1 October 2017), and the application of Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, thus suspending Catalan autonomy. Collateral effects such as the imprisonment of pro-independence politicians holding public office and the flight from Spain of Carles Puigdemont, the then president of the Catalan regional government and the leader of the party Junts per Catalunya, marked the height of the conflict. Previous research (Pérez-Curiel and García-Gordillo, 2018; Carrasco-Polaino, Villar-Cirujano and Tejedor-Fuentes, 2018) has confirmed, on the one hand, that despite the fact that the institutions have the traditional propaganda machine at their full disposal, social networking sites in general, and Twitter in particular, are better managed by civic associations, and on the other hand that the pro-independence propaganda is much more active and effective in getting the message across than its constitutionalist counterpart.

The mediatization of politics (Mazzoleni, 2004) and the interest shown by political parties in highlighting the personality of their leaders over their ideology (Farrell, 1996) has become the driving forces behind the personality-building process facilitated by Twitter (Rodríguez-Virgili, Jandura and Rebolledo de la Calle, 2014).

Separatism is thus framed in the electoral process and the influence of the citizenry resides in directly conveying messages to audiences and the media in favor or against the Catalan or Spanish political and legal institutions. This discourse has found its maximum expression in Puigdemont who uses Twitter tools (hashtags, mentions, links, audio-visual resources, etc.) strategically, posts messages with supplementary information and effectively engages users. He has thus managed to attract a greater number of followers who by sharing his tweets have converted his messages into front-page news in Spanish and Catalan newspapers.

This digital political communication and marketing strategy focusing on the individuality of the influencer/subject (Puigdemont) and the potential of the object (independence) and discourse propaganda, which allowed Puigdemont to eclipse the rest of the candidates – including Inés Arrimadas of Cs, the most voted candidate in the 21 D Catalan elections – on Twitter and on the front pages of the press.

Influencers can be defined as people who have the power to influence others through social or conventional media because of their knowledge, experience, credibility, and commitment. Citizens have ceased to be mere receivers of information to become prosumers, meaning that in addition to participating as spectators, they now also produce their own content (Rego-Rey and Romero-Rodríguez, 2016). The aim of these new online influencers is to attract as much attention as possible (Marshall and Redmond, 2016). In parallel, we are currently witnessing an irreversible process in which the traditional mass media are apparently being substituted by networks of individual influencers (Gillin, 2009) who are consolidating their position as political opinion leaders. In this long-distance race, the omnipresence of the influencer/leader, the ideological polarization, and the imposition of digital content on the agenda are all aspects of an information model that the media have been keen to reproduce.

The hybridization process of the media and the transfer and polarization of agendas

Some politicians still see social media as information sources more than anything else, but on such sites, it is important to listen, respond and update the latest news (Giansante, 2015). Social networking sites contribute to political processes and democracy, as far as they give voice to citizens and allow them to promote their own actions (Enguix, 2017), thus creating connected multitudes (Rovira, 2017). Nowadays, it is online users, converted into gatekeepers, who create bubbles of opinion in their own communities, with mutual preferences regarding political models. Accordingly, this has triggered a crisis in the field of journalism, which still has not known how to react to this new trend in which millions of news stories are shared and reproduced on the internet. As a result, these news stories tend to be more striking and superficial (Thompson, 2017). The internet and social media only corroborate the theoretical principles of first- and second-level agenda setting (Anduiza and Bosch, 2004; McCombs, 2005; McCombs and Shaw, 1972), in which the media not only decide on the newsworthiness of topics, but also assess the substantive (the ideology of political candidates, the stances that they take on certain issues and their credentials and experience or personality) and affective (the positive or negative public opinion on the topics broached by those candidates and their discourses) dimensions.

The Pew Research Center report (2010), which compares blog, YouTube and Twitter content with that offered by the media, concludes that the most important stories and issues on social networking sites differ substantially from those to which the conventional media give pride of place. Other studies have confirmed the alignment of political blogs with political stories in the press (Adamic and Glance, 2005; Reese, 2007; Scott, 2005), for instance, on Twitter, which substantiates the continued relevance of agenda setting for digital media outlets. On the other hand, those studies disputing this position (Roberts, Wanta and Dzwo, 2002) contend that digital media has contributed to set alternative and independent agendas. In this vein, Krane (2010) performed an analysis of the content posted on Twitter by three media outlets – *The New York Times*, *CNN* and *NPR* – which reinforces the assumption that there is a direct relationship between the digital content disseminated by the media and the subjects that are most often broached by users.

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to analyze the similarities between the tweets posted by politicians on Twitter and user engagement metrics, on the one hand, and the content disseminated by the conventional media, on the other, in the context of the 21 D Catalan elections. We believe that we can make a contribution to the state of the research in the field by examining the causality between the messages of the most influential political candidates vis-à-vis the Catalan independence process, the tweets most ‘liked,’ retweeted or commented on by the public and the issues making it to the front pages of the press.

The argument of the power of the conventional media to set the agenda, given the confidence and credibility that they enjoy among the citizenry, has succumbed to new processes emerging in the field of social media. This has reinforced the intermediate theory of agenda setting (Atwater and Fico, 1986), which examines the relationship between the media agenda and that set by emerging interest groups and/or social movements (Castells, 2012) in an attempt to transform ‘political, social and economic’ realities (Bermúdez and Gallego, 2011). In line with our research, their conclusions have highlighted three key aspects: the central role of institutions and/or organizations in setting the agenda; how the agenda is performed; and the participatory process (Vliegthart and Walgrave, 2008). In the social media context, the counter-agenda conditions sources and topics in the conventional media, notwithstanding the theory’s critics who hold that social media set an independent and alternative agenda (Roberts, Wanta and Dzwo, 2002) or who suggest focusing more on the interaction processes between the micro and meso levels established by political organizations (Bekkers et al., 2011). In short,

in the field of political communication, the conventional and social media agendas correspond to issues of interest to the centers of power, a trend that is ostensibly more visible at election time.

Methodology

The independence process in Catalonia has achieved an unprecedented political and social relevance in Spain. Therefore, from a methodological perspective it is essential to identify the sources (political candidates and parties, plus the government), the facts (topics) and online (social networking sites/Twitter), and offline (the media/press) communication channels as the main variables of this study.

In view of this, the research method employed here involved analyzing the influence of the topics broached by the candidates on the media agenda. To this end, a quantitative and qualitative-discursive content analysis was performed (Van Dijk, 2015; Callejo, 2010; Flick, 2004; Krippendorff, 2004; Wimmer and Dominik, 1996), following a comparative approach (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) and using triangulation: politicians/users/the media.

The study sample focused on the campaigning before the 21 D Catalan elections, with a time frame encompassing the campaign period (5-19 December), the elections per se (21 December) and the day after (22 December). The day before the elections (20 December) when no active campaigning was allowed was not taken into account for obvious reasons.

From among the total number of tweets (3,562) posted by the political parties and their candidates, 526 relating to the elections were selected. Following this, the user engagement metrics (144,382) and the most popular tweets (44) posted by the candidates (Inés Arrimadas of Cs, Carles Puigdemont of JuntsXCat, Marta Rovira of ERC/CatSí, Mikel Iceta of the PSC, Xavier Domènech of Catalunya en Comú-Podem and Xavier García Albiol of the PP) making it to the front pages of the press (*ABC*, *El País*, *La Vanguardia* and *El Periódico de Cataluña*) were analyzed. These political parties and their candidates were selected on the basis of the following criteria:

- They were the most voted parties in the 2017 Catalan elections, obtaining over 90 per cent of the ballots cast.
- They define themselves as pro-independence or constitutionalist parties.
- The politicians chosen headed the list of the candidates of their respective parties.

This approach allowed for comparing the Twitter use and strategies of the different candidates and the influence of their messages on users and on the front page news in the press, selected in terms of the following criteria:

- These are reference newspapers at national and regional levels.
- They respond to a conservative position of right-wing (*ABC*), moderate Catalanist (*La Vanguardia*) and socialist liberal (*El País* and *El Periódico de Cataluña*).
- On their front pages they have dealt with the subject of the Catalan “*Procés*.”

Twitonomy was used for data sampling, while IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 24, was employed for data processing. The margin of error was calculated with Scott’s pi, reaching a confidence level of 0.98.

A typology of variables, with exclusive categories for each one, was created for the analytical procedure (Graham et al., 2013):

Table 1. Analysis protocol and typology of variables

Variables	Twitter	Press
Quantitative Variables	-No. of tweets -Frequency -User engagement metrics ('likes', retweets and comments)	- No. of front pages - Percentage of space - Frequency
Qualitative Variables	- Topic of tweet -Resources (hashtags, links, mentions, images and videos) - Relationship with the election theme	- Topic of front page - Presence or absence of the politician (images or copy) - Relationship with current affairs (elections)
Discursive Variables	-Language and propaganda variables (candidate tweets)	-Equivalence on the frontpages

Source: own elaboration

Data coding was performed using the different types of variables figuring among the options offered by the software package (IBM SPSS Statistics 24). The numerical variables, whose sole aim was quantification, such as the number of related tweets (politicians/users) and the sub variables, i.e. the user engagement metrics ('likes', retweets and comments), were classified as scale variables. The categorical variables, with only two possible answers (yes or no) and the objective to quantify the percentage of affirmative and negative cases were coded as dichotomous nominal variables (yes = 1, no = 2). This type of variable belonged to that of 'the relationship or not with current affairs' and that of 'the presence/absence of the candidate on the front pages of the press' (one variable for each newspaper). The categorical variables that could only have one answer from among more than two possible ones were also coded as nominal variables, assigning a numerical value to each possible answer (1 = a, 2 = b, 3 = c). These corresponded to the 'theme' variable. The variables related to resources of the language of propaganda (Nocetti, 1990; Thompson, 2017) are: use of labels (1), use of fallacies (2), stereotypes (3), biased attributions (4), speaking from other sources (5), selection of information (6), opinions as facts (7), Others (8).

Results analysis and discussion

The traditional press tends to give front-page coverage to those messages posted by political candidates on Twitter that swell the numbers of their followers (whether as a result of acceptance, neutrality or rejection) and reproduce an information model that, if it works on the internet, should also do so for them. The research results have substantiated this initial premise.

An equation in which two related factors and contexts intervene was employed: *X* (politician/influencer on Twitter) and *Y* (offline press), both with the ability to influence a third supplementary factor (user/reader).

In view of the results, the design of the media agenda is determined by the relevance of a subject who, through the strategic use of online tools, manages to elicit an active and viral reaction from a number of followers, inversely proportional to the number of readers engaged by the press.

The methodological structure explains the cause and effect relationship, using triangulation to classify the results: quantitative, qualitative/discursive, and comparative/related.

Quantitative approach

The politician (number of tweet) and user engagement metrics ('likes', retweets and comments) demonstrate the action of the influencer/leader and the reaction of the new audiences on Twitter, plotting a political and media map relating more to the Catalan independence process than to other issues.

With the aim of testing H1—the influence of political candidates on Twitter—and H2—the extent to which the press covers the same topics—a total of 3,562 tweets posted by Spanish and Catalan political leaders or parties were selected, of which 526 relating to the candidates and the 21 D Catalan elections was analyzed. The aim was to focus on each one of the political leaders, given that they have a greater influence than their parties and governments [see Table 2].

Table 2. Candidate activity on Twitter between the 5th and 22th of December, 2017.

	Puigdemont	Arrimadas	Rovira	Iceta	Albiol	Domènech
Tweets	88	66	52	174	75	71
Minimum	3	2	2	6	3	2
Maximum	29	21	17	36	27	25
Median	16,00	12,00	9,00	19,00	12,00	15,00
Average	5,50	4,12	3,25	10,87	4,68	4,43

Limited to the first 100 cases

Source: own elaboration

As to the tweets (88) and user engagement metrics (107,205), Carles Puigdemont (JuntsXCat) stood out among the rest of the candidates. Reaping the greatest number of 'likes', retweets, and comments, he was way ahead of Inés Arrimadas (C's), the candidate who obtained the highest number of votes in the 21 D Catalan elections. The number of tweets (174) posted by the socialist candidate Mikel Iceta (PSC) is also noteworthy, although it must be taken into account that his tweets were not new content but mainly links to press releases, photos, videos and documents from a third party [Table 3]. A formula that did not have a positive effect on user response rates or interaction.

Table 3. Number of tweets, followers and user engagement metrics (on the date of sampling)

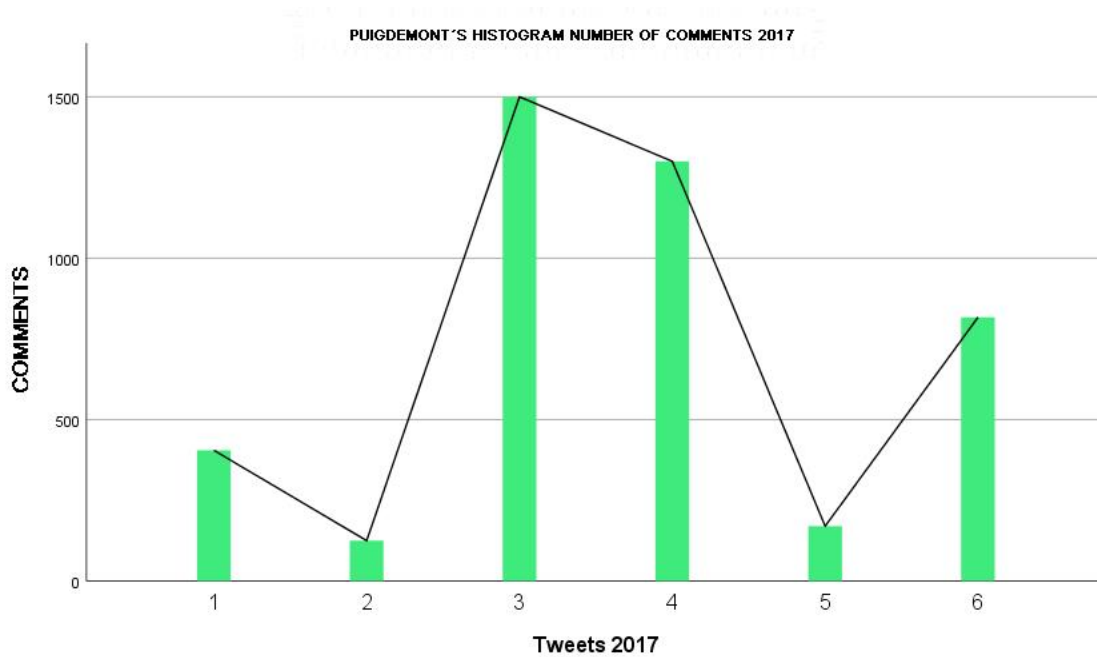
Candidates	Puigdemont JuntsXCat	Arrimadas Cs	Rovira ERC/CatSí	Iceta PSC	Albiol PP	Domènech En Podem Comú-
Tweets	88	66	52	174	75	71
Followers	670,056	401,319	164,232	81,210	63,160	62,345
‘Likes’	68,800	7,300	6,139	227	2,914	3,416
Retweets	34,000	3,282	2,405	216	1,988	2,117
Comments	4,317	1,549	1,235	79	2,855	1,865

Source: own elaboration

Without downplaying the ‘likes’ or retweets, comments permit the detection of (positive and negative) valences that increase depending on what is involved (topic), the tools employed (hashtags, links, photos, videos, mentions, etc.) and how these tools are employed (language resources and recourse to falsehoods, persuasion or propaganda). Comments also enable politicians to reply, thus fostering a two-way conversation, which is supposed to be one of the strengths of Twitter. However, the results reveal that the interactions between the candidates and the public were not proportional.

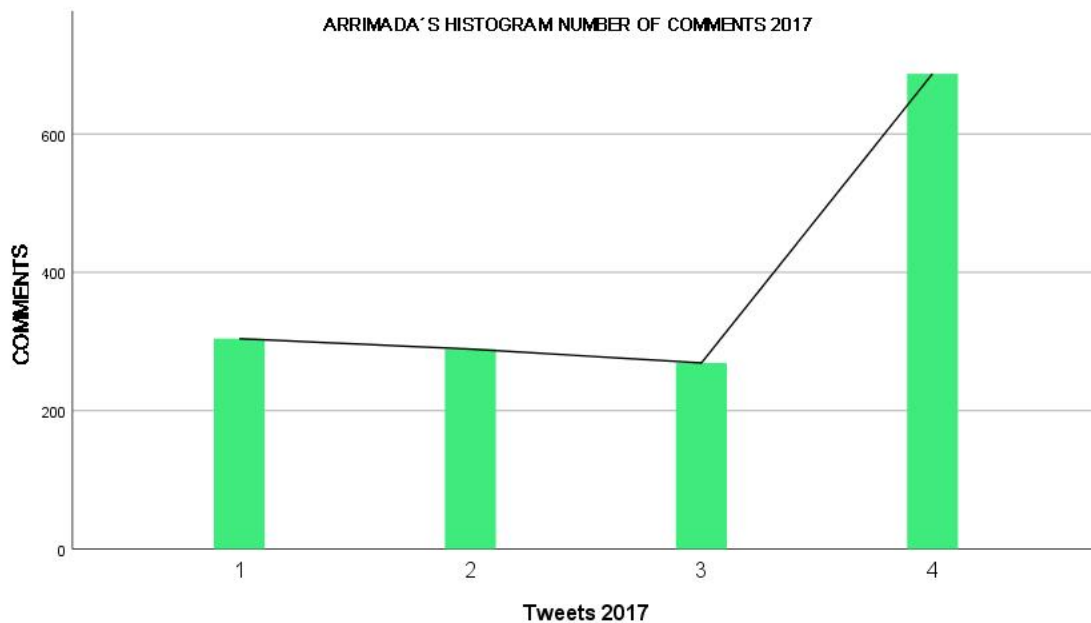
As to the accounts of the political leaders who obtained the best results in the 21 D Catalan elections, namely @InesArrimadas (36 seats) and @KRLS (34 seats), the histograms combining variables such as the number of tweets and comments received by both candidates are shown below. The peaks reveal that the pro-independence leader’s tweets elicited more than twice the number of comments (4,317) than those of the candidate of Cs (1,549), thus reinforcing the assumption that Puigdemont is more influential than his greatest rival and the rest of the candidates [see Figure 1 & 2]. Also significant is the number of comments (2,855) generated by the tweets posted by García Albiol, the PP’s candidate, versus those (79) elicited by Iceta’s, the lowest number of all. Similarly, the number of comments (7,417) corresponding to the pro-independence candidates (Puigdemont, Rovira and Domènech) surpassed that (4,483) of their constitutionalist rivals (Arrimadas, Iceta and Albiol). In other words, the higher level of participation of the followers of the pro-independence bloc did not lead to a higher level of political interaction with users.

Figure 1. Combined variables for Puigdemont’s tweets/comments



Source: IBM SPSS Statistics 24, own elaboration

Figure 2. Combined variables for Arrimadas’ tweets/comments



Source: IBM SPSS Statistics 24, own elaboration

In short, the user engagement metrics point to a high level of response on the part of the public, which is not usually the case with the tweets posted by political candidates. The tweets posted by the pro-independence candidates received a greater number of comments, which is also consistent with the data available on the interactivity of these candidates, especially

Puigdemont and, to a lesser extent, Rovira and Domènech. All of which evinces a lower level of political response and confirms the traditional model of the sole discourse, also in the digital realm.

Qualitative/Discursive approach

The subject matter of the tweets, considered to be one of the study's main variables, helps to identify what politicians talk about on Twitter and how they go about this, on the one hand, and makes it possible to verify equivalences or divergences with the topics covered in the front-page news, on the other.

What do politicians talk about on Twitter?

The variables of relationship between message subject matter (i.e. tweet content) and the role that it played were defined. These were then applied to the sample to answer two questions: what the candidates talked about on Twitter and on which topics they, the users and later, the media themselves, focused.

Table 4. Variables of approach and topic

Role	Topic
Ideology	Separatism/constitutionalism
Political agenda of the electoral campaign	Campaign rallies and election results
Electoral program	Proposals, advances, developments
Media agenda	News links, videos, images
Criticism of the central government	Messages against the state, unity or the performance of the Spanish government
Criticism of the opposition	Messages against the ideology, program or statements of parties and candidates
Interaction with users	Use of the mention @ and viralization of the message
Mobilising the electorate	Asking for their vote, the attitude towards abstention
Building the candidate's personality	Human values, private life, images of internal meetings and functions
Anecdotes, curiosities, irony, humor	Personal comments or those aimed at other leaders
Miscellaneous	Unclassified

Source: own elaboration

The application of the variables allowed for comparing the main topics broached in the tweets posted and, in turn, highlighted the issues on which each one of the candidates focused.

Table 5. Aim of the tweets posted by the candidates (%)

	Arrimadas	Puigdemont	Rovira	Iceta	Domènech	Albiol
Ideology	21.3	23.4	16.8	12.1	8.3	19.1
Election results	11.8	8.5	9.8	11.0	9.6	10.8
Electoral programme	10.3	4.0	10.0	4.3	8.5	11.4
Media agenda	2.3	3.2	1.8	13.2	1.9	4.6
Criticism of the central government	2.8	17.2	16.9	14.0	15.5	0

Criticism of the opposition	16.8	15.1	14.8	9.5	15.2	16.6
Interaction with users	7.3	8.3	5.8	7.6	8.1	7.3
Mobilising the electorate	13.3	14.1	10.7	10.1	12.2	10.3
Building the candidate's personality	11.3	4.5	7.8	11.1	8.9	4.5
Anecdotes, curiosities, irony, humour	2.3	1.3	3.8	7.0	5.6	9.4
Miscellaneous	0.5	0.4	1.8	0.1	6.2	6.0

Source: own elaboration

The confrontation between the separatists and the constitutionalists is a frame that defined the 21 D Catalan elections. The tweets posted by the pro-independence candidates (Puigdemont, Rovira and Domènech) chiefly revolved around ‘ideology,’ ‘criticism of the central government,’ ‘criticism of the opposition,’ and ‘mobilizing the electorate.’ For their part, the constitutionalist bloc candidates (Arrimadas, Iceta and Albiol), while ignoring or playing down the ‘criticism of the central government,’ also focused their messages on ‘ideology’ and ‘mobilizing the electorate.’ For Puigdemont (23.4 per cent) and Arrimadas (21.3 per cent), ‘ideology’ was the main issue on the agenda, being employed as a way of underscoring their stance and the division between their parties, rather than the most frequent topics, such as the ‘electoral program’ and the ‘election results.’ It is also important to note the percentage difference between the candidates of the most voted parties (Cs and JuntsXCat) with respect to the item ‘criticism of the central government,’ specifically 16.2 per cent in the case of Puigdemont versus 2.8 per cent in that of Arrimadas, a contrast also observable in the rest of the parties, reaching 0 per cent in the case of Albiol, the representative of the central government in Catalonia at the time. The percentages registered as regards the supplementary variables such as ‘mobilizing the electorate’ and ‘interaction with users’ on Twitter show that there is no direct or proportional relationship between them. Although mobilizing the electorate is a common feature of the discourses of leaders (all of the candidates dedicated an important number of tweets to doing just that, but Puigdemont stood out among the rest with 14.1 per cent), no correlation was observed in the interaction of the candidates with their followers. By and large, the results confirm the candidates’ low level of interactivity on Twitter (only Puigdemont registered a response rate of 8.3 per cent), as opposed to the monitoring and active participation of the public.

How do politicians talk about on Twitter?

The language of fallacy and propaganda is a strategy that defines the discourse of political leaders. These are mechanisms of influence that can sway the response of users and mark differences in the communication model of the candidates.

Table 6. Propaganda mechanisms on the political discourse (%)

	Puigdemont	Arrimadas	Rovira	Iceta	Albiol	Domènech	Puigdemont	Arrimadas
Use of Labels	20.2	6.5	0	23.4	0.3	18.3	20.2	6.5
Fallacy	29.8	22.1	6.3	19.6	25.7	17.4	29.8	22.1
Stereotypes	0	0.7	3.2	1.2	27.2	0.9	0	0.7

Biased Attributions	14.0	26.4	18.4	5.7	21.4	29.2	14.0	26.4
Speaking from other sources	3.1	3.5	25.3	28.1	3.1	25.7	3.1	3.5
Selection of information	5.6	16.3	27.9	3.2	5.2	4.2	5.6	16.3
Opinions as facts	25.7	23.7	16.6	16.1	16.5	2.1	25.7	23.7
Others	1.3	0.6	2.2	2.4	0.4	2.2	1.3	0.6

The percentages in bold correspond to the resources most used by each candidate

Source: own elaboration

The results confirm widespread use of these mechanisms by leaders. However, Puigdemont's role as a strategist is highlighted. The pro-independence leader especially uses fallacy (29.8), opinions as facts (25.7) and labels (20.2), which criticize the actions of the central government (f.e.see Image 1). To emphasize the message, he also uses hashtags, mentions, and links to information published in the media. As for her part, Inés Arrimadas stands out for the use of biased attributions (26.4) and opinions as facts (23.7), appealing for compliance with the law on the part of the pro-independence supporters (f.e.see Image 2).

Image 1. Fallacy and Opinions as facts



Source: [Twitter](#)

Image 2. Fallacy and Biased Attributions



Source: [Twitter](#)

Other politicians such as Albiol (PP) reach benchmark percentages in the use of stereotypes (27.2), focused on the campaign slogan: “Spain is the solution.” In addition, it frequently resorts to the issue of the exit of companies from Catalonia as a negative consequence of the conflict (see f.e. Image 3). In the case of Marta Rovira (ERC), the selection of information (27.9) and the use of other sources (25.3) stands out and focuses on the issue of imprisoned Catalan politicians. (see f.e. Image 4).

Image 3. Fallacy and Stereotypes



Source: [Twitter](#)

Image 4. Selection of information



Source: [Twitter](#)

A characteristic of Iceta (PSC) is the use of non-own tweets that include references to other sources (28.1), through links connected to the media (Image 5). Finally, Domènech (Comú-Podem) is characterized by the use of biased attributions (29.2) referring, above all, to the role of Citizens in the Catalan conflict (see Image 6).

Image 5. Speaking from other sources



Source: [Twitter](#)

Image 6. Biased Attributions and Fallacy



Source: [Twitter](#)

How does the political message on Twitter influence the media?

The analysis performed on the national and regional newspapers selected for the study (*ABC*, *El País*, *La Vanguardia* and *El Periódico de Cataluña*) revealed that of the total number of tweets posted (526) – mostly by Puigdemont (38.6 per cent), Arrimadas (31.8 per cent) and, to a lesser extent, the rest of the candidates (29.5 per cent) – the content of 44 was then published on their front pages.

The specific issues relating to the general topic that received that greatest amount of front-page coverage in the press included the ‘application of Article 155’ (27.63 per cent), ‘Puigdemont’s flight’ (24.43 per cent), ‘imprisoned politicians’ (21.31 per cent), and the ‘exodus of companies from Catalonia’ (9.51 per cent).

Table 7. Main topics on front-page (%)

Topic	<i>ABC</i>	<i>El País</i>	<i>La Vanguardia</i>	<i>El Periódico de Cataluña</i>	Total
Article 155	7.4	6.1	6.2	7.9	27.6
Puigdemont’s flight	7.9	7.1	7.2	2.2	24.4
Imprisoned politicians	3.2	5.7	5.3	7.1	21.3
Legal action	2.5	4.3	4.1	7.2	17.1
Exodus of companies from Catalonia	3.3	2.9	2.7	0.6	9.5

The percentages in bold correspond to the topics most used by each newspaper.

Source: own elaboration

The contingency between the variables (press/topic/candidate) reflects the relevance of the Article 155 issue in both newspapers, with Puigdemont (JuntsXCat) and Arrimadas (Cs) sharing first place. The central government's decision to apply this article led to other conflicts such as 'Puigdemont's flight' and the 'exodus of companies from Catalonia,' issues covered on the front page of *ABC*, and 'imprisoned politicians' and 'legal action,' front-page news in *El Periódico de Cataluña*. The rest of the Spanish (*El País*) and Catalan (*La Vanguardia*) press registered percentages more similar to the 'relationship with current affairs' variable, regardless of whether or not the news was related to the elections. Along these lines, the issue "Huida de Puigdemont" is highlighted on the front page with a significant percentage in both media (7.1/7.2). The application of 155 generated consequences linked to the electoral advance, the dismissal of the government of Catalonia, the imprisonment of its political representatives and the flight of Puiddemont, President of the Generalitat. All these issues occupy a protagonist space on Twitter and as a result on the front pages of the press.

Conclusion

The last elections in Catalonia (21D) were held in a context of confrontation and conflict between the political institutions of the state (the central government) and those of Catalonia (the Generalitat), between the pro-independence and constitutionalist parties, between the citizenry and also between the media themselves. The developments prior to the Catalan independence process (the referendum, the unilateral declaration of independence, the application of Article 155, the dissolution of the Catalan parliament and the election call) differed from the previous elections. In this respect, the results of this study point to the different stances taken by the candidates on Twitter, the unidirectional nature of their messages, propaganda discourse, the citizenry's level of response, and the transfer and polarization of the political and media agendas.

In view of the relationship observed between the tweets posted by the candidates (not their parties) on their personal accounts, those that engaged users most and the issues making it to the front pages of the press, H1 has been confirmed.

The conclusions linked to this hypothesis corroborate that Twitter is a platform with resources that promote information sharing, interaction, and mobilization (Gainous and Wagner, 2014; Jackson and Lilleker, 2011; Stromer-Galley, 2014). The messages most commented by users correspond to the leaders who enhance a discourse based on fallacy and propaganda. In this line, most candidates use resources (hashtags, mentions, links) to further emphasize the message. Puigdemont performance on Twitter, which attracted the attention of his fan community and multiplied the number of comments in favor of independence, stood out among the rest. However, in none of the cases analyzed here was the response of the candidates proportional to the active participation of the public. The unidirectional nature of the messages and the lack of interaction defined the political communication model.

As to the transfer of agendas (Aruguete, 2017; Casero-Ripollés, 2015; Chadwick, 2013), there was a three-point correlation: the topics that the candidates broached most (separatism/constitutionalism, criticism/support of the Spanish and Catalan governments and mobilizing the electorate) were, in turn, those that then went viral on the internet and made it to the front pages of the press. The latter focused more on very specific issues (the application of Article 155, Puigdemont's flight, imprisoned politicians, legal action, and the exodus of companies from Catalonia) than on topics inherent to any electoral process (the electoral program, the election results, or the political agenda).

H2 was also borne out. The independence process was one of the main frames of the messages of the candidates and Twitter users, on the one hand, and the news published in the press, on

the other. This main frame was characterized by the polarization inherent to political leaders and the news treatment of the media.

The conclusions relating to this hypothesis states that topics addressed most by the candidates, followed most by users and covered most in the press referred to the conflict arising from the independence process. Moreover, the mobilization of the electorate on social media (Balcells and Padró-Solanet, 2016) was a common aim of all of the candidates, although it was the pro-independence leaders, with Puigdemont at the forefront, who managed to influence and attract a greater number of followers.

The most viral messages were posted by the pro-independence candidates, who incorporated the idea of separating from Spain and the conflict provoked by the central government (the application of Article 155, the imprisonment of a number pro-independence politicians, Puigdemont's flights, and the legal action taken). The political leaders analyzed here encouraged the public to take an active stance on the matter (Montoya and Vandehey, 2009; Pérez-Ortega, 2014; Rampersad, 2009), reflected in the user engagement metrics and especially in the comments posted on Twitter. The Catalan elections on 21 December 2017 and the issues relating to this type of process lost ground to the independence process as a frame of the political and media agenda.

Our findings underscore that the role of politicians on Twitter during electoral campaigns depends on many factors pertaining to the political and social context and the extent to which the influence of the subject (leader) over the object (topic) is decisive in attracting voters and setting agendas.

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