COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

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Introduction

Political influencers in the digital public sphere

Social media have introduced important changes in the field of political communication. One of them is the emergence of political influencers or 'digital' opinion leaders. They attempt to condition the configuration of the public agenda and the public opinion through the exercise of technologically mediated personal influence. For that purpose, they use new communicative strategies, along with dynamics in the digital public sphere. The objective of this special issue is to analyse the roles and characteristics of digital political influencers on the highly complex and hybridised current political communication landscape.

The study of opinion leaders comes within a long tradition of research that focused on how influence is exercised. This core issue grabbed the attention of the pioneer researchers working in the field of Communication. Classic authors such as Katz, Lazarsfeld, Berelson or Gaudet developed their researches in the mid–1950s, including *The People's Choice* and *Personal Influence*, to examine the impact of its presence in the process of public opinion formation.

These studies found that the change in citizens' attitudes and political opinions were more conditioned by personal influence than media influence. Moreover, the exercise of influence was in the hands of opinion leaders. This approach was greatly adopted in the field of Communication until it was disregarded as a result of the influence of media effects theories, which returned prominence to traditional media. These theories consider traditional media as the main actor in the communicative processes in our societies.

However, due to the emergence of social media, personal influence and the role of digital influencers became again a core issue, and an important topic of study. One of the main novelties introduced by digital technologies is the transformation of the exercise of social influence. Connectivity, interactivity, self-communication, and other attributes of digital platforms are redefining and broadening the concept of opinion leaders in a technologically mediated field. Today, other and more diverse actors are able to participate in the articulation of social influence to the point of aspiring to become influencers.

The nine articles compiled in this special issue address different types of political influencers and their communication strategies. They are divided into two large blocks. The first six articles are devoted to the study of political actors as influencers. The digital environment has opened new opportunities for these actors to redefine their communicative practices in the search for social influence. Some examples of these strategies can be seen in these articles. Subsequently, the second block is dedicated to three different types of influencers: participants in political opinion talk shows, intellectuals transformed into opinion leaders and executives of the top companies. Their analysis allows us to see how the concept of influencer is widening beyond its traditional limits.

In the article that opens this special issue, Pérez-Curiel analyses the communication on Twitter of three right–wing populist leaders from southern Europe and how from Twitter they influence users and the media. Her findings demonstrate that candidates publish more tweets related to the issue frame (thematic approach) than to the game frame (political and electoral strategies). Their digital communication focus on attacking the adversary and electoral agreements for the formation of coalition governments. In addition, they display

high activity of production and diffusion of messages but little interaction with users. Based on these parameters, their digital influence capacity is analysed.

Subsequently, Sintes-Olivella, Casero-Ripollés and Yeste-Piquer, analyse the communicative strategy on Facebook of the mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau. She comes from citizen activism and became ruler of this city in 2015. The findings of their study allow to identify a new specific modality within the populist political communication style which focuses on inclusion as the central axis. This inclusionary populist communication style enhances the defence of the rights of the weakest social groups. Its articulation is based on the frame of social justice and solidarity towards others.

Suau-Gomila, Pont-Sorribes and Pedraza-Jiménez analyse the role as influencers of two political leaders linked to emerging parties in Spain: Pablo Iglesias and Albert Rivera. To do this, they make a comparison between their communication strategies on Twitter between the electoral campaigns of December 2015 and June 2016. Specifically, they focus on analysing the influence capacity of these political actors to create online communities and to interact with the media. Their findings indicate that the two leaders were more successful in building and influencing the community in the 2016 campaign than in 2015.

Rivas-de-Roca, García-Gordillo and Bezunartea-Valencia explore the influence of the far-right in the public debate of political leaders on Twitter. To do this, they take as a case study the Andalusian regional elections held in December 2018. Their findings show that Twitter amplified the populist contents of the extreme right without Vox having to do a particularly proactive work and despite its status as an extra parliamentary party. In addition, they reveal the capacity of this social media to amplify the political declarations of the extreme right and place this political force as a central issue of the agenda on this platform, thus exerting high influence.

Subsequently, Arrieta Castillo and Berdasco-Gancedo analyse how the Spanish press builds the image of female leadership, taking the case of the former British Prime Minister, Teresa May. Through an approach based on critical discourse analysis and from a linguistic perspective, their finding shows that May appears as a victim of failure in the Brexit news and the media attribute to her the role of the culprit of this political situation. Also, the lack of courage or bravery acknowledged to this British politician connects with the tradition of representing women as individuals not suited for positions of great responsibility given a supposed lack of the necessary aggressiveness. This research shows the limits of the media representation of female leadership in the news.

Mancinas-Chávez and Ruiz-Alba analyse the case of Nayib Bukele, president of the Republic of El Salvador. His communication strategies through Twitter raise various innovative elements such as the use of humour or the dissemination of direct orders to the members of his Government. This communicative style enabled him to become a digital influencer, generating a high international impact by capturing the attention of the press and the Twitter user community.

Opening the second block of the special issue, Marcos-García, Alonso-Muñoz and López-Meri approach the study of participants in talk-shows as political influencers. Their goal is to know how these opinion leaders use Twitter and what thematic agenda they set on this platform. Their results show that their communicative activity varies significantly depending on the type of profile of these influencers (journalist, media director or expert). Generally, the main uses are information, analysis and criticism. However, they barely use Twitter to share personal subjects or content linked to their private life. Among the findings, it also stands out the use of these influencers of the interaction with other users, although this is done in a simple way and away from an in-depth political debate.

Thereafter, El-Ibiary and Attia analyse the communicative strategies of Egyptian political influencers, linked to intellectuality, and the role they play in public discourse through their Twitter accounts. Thus, they offer an approach to the role of influencers when it comes to

conditioning public opinion in the digital environment. Their findings offer two interesting contributions. First, unlike expected, these third-party actors display unidirectional communication with minimal interaction with other users. Second, the use of fact-based tweets generates a greater capital influence than opinion-based messages. These are two valuable contributions to improve the knowledge of the communicative incidence of political digital influencers.

Finally, Pérez-Serrano, García-Santamaría and Rodríguez-Pallares approach the analysis of the digital communicative activity developed by a different type of influencer: the executives of the top Spanish companies. Their findings indicate that these actors are not widely exploiting social media as an external communication channel, which results in a loss of visibility and engagement with their stakeholders. Likewise, they identify the main characteristics of their digital communication: prioritisation of their own content over those of third parties, importance of issues related to corporate social responsibility and absence of contents of their private life. Finally, they detect different types of communicative behaviours based on the use given to these communication tools which enables them to propose a classification of executive influencers.

At the end of the day, this collection of articles draws a rich and suggestive panorama of contributions that allow us to better understand and know the communicative strategies developed by political influencers in the digital context. In addition, this set of research claims the importance of studying how the exercise of social influence is changing in the digital environment. This is something that constitutes a new and exciting challenge for communication research.