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Do Spanish political leaders interact with the media and journalists via Twitter?

Abstract

This paper analyses how the four candidates for prime minister in the 2016 Spanish general elections interacted with journalists and media professionals via Twitter, a social media platform considered by various experts (Bakshy *et al.*, 2011) to be a "natural laboratory" for the study of patterns of information dissemination. NodeXL software, a well known open source social network analysis tool (Hansen *et al.*, 2010), was used to capture activity corresponding to Twitter accounts maintained by these candidates and to identify the protagonists of online dialogues maintained during the election campaign as well as the characteristics and content of the messages they exchanged. Semantic relationships in the text and hashtags present in tweets were examined carefully in order to identify patterns of meaning. Findings indicate that the four politicians in question made a minimal effort to interact with journalists and media professionals via Twitter during the run-up to the 2016 elections. Analysis reveals that all used their Twitter accounts as an additional means of promoting their candidacies and publicizing party-related activities rather than a forum for discussing issues in depth. None appeared to be willing to enter into debates with journalists or the media through this particular social networking platform.

Keywords

Twitter, social networks, journalists and politicians, media, general elections, 26J.

1. Introduction

The close relationship between politicians and journalists that exists today has been described by some scholars (Manning, 2001; Lewis *et al.*, 2008; Brants *et al.* 2010) as an uncomfortable mutual dependence and by others as a dance (Gans, 1979; Vobič *et al.*, 2016; Boesman *et al.*, 2017). The fact is that politicians and journalists are condemned to understand each other. The former depend on the media to reach the public to the extent that "contact with journalists has become an integral part of politicians' daily routines" (Casero, 2008, p. 112). For the latter, elected officials are indispensable sources of grist for the journalistic mill (Shapiro & Hemphil, 2016).

“The primary causes of this development might vary from nation to nation. Common important factors are the power balance between the public and private sector (Garsten *et al.*, 2015), the character of the media sector/system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and/or the political culture (Schohaus *et al.*, 2016)” (as cited in Berglez, 2018, p. 18).

If offline contact between media and politicians has traditionally meant "going for drinks and dinner with sources" (Revers, 2014, p. 48), online communication favours the development of cross-professional relationships (Berglez, 2018).

If, from a historical perspective, close links between the worlds of politics and journalism are nothing new (Habermas, 1962/1989), as Ekman and Wildholm have pointed out, “the interconnections between journalists and politicians have been increasingly complex after the rise of political communication on and through social media platforms” (2015, p. 78). Politicians now use platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube (Macafee, 2013; Dou, 2014; Vesnic-Alujevic & Van Bauwel, 2014; Waishord & Amado, 2017) to disseminate messages, particularly in the context of electoral campaigns (Klinger, 2013), mobilize supporters, reach out to voters and gain the proximity they need to court the opinion of journalists. Picking up on a metaphor forwarded by Vobič *et al.* (2016, p. 2) assert this “journalist-politician dance choreography should be reconsidered with respect to the specificities of social media dancehalls”.

Government officials’ increasing use of social media is closely linked with a process of political marketing (Larrondo *et al.*, 2016; Manning *et al.*, 2017), by which politicians have attained the aura of celebrities (Street, 2012; Wheeler, 2013). This ‘celebrification of politicians’ (Driessens, 2013) has become a facet of today’s political communications that, among other things, “supposes a broadening of the range of spaces in which candidates construct their images in the direction of ‘alternative’ environments such as television shows and celebrity and gossip magazines” (Oliva *et al.*, 2015, p. 2).

Social media sites are increasing being employed as online vehicles for marketing the public identities of political figures and publicising their appearances in celebrity-oriented venues such as talk shows and popular magazines that blur distinctions between personal and professional life (Stanyer, 2013).

2. The state of the question

Social media is becoming an increasingly important channel of communication between politicians and journalists (Rodríguez & Ureña, 2011, p. 90; Noguera Vivo, 2013, p. 94) and recent a number of recent studies indicate that Twitter is changing the ways in which the two relate to each other. Researchers have examined the extent to which this platform fosters debate between politicians and the media (D’heer & Verdegem, 2014; Coddington *et al.*, 2014). Studies focusing on Donald Trump’s use of social media as a presidential candidate indicate that it was precisely Twitter, his social networking platform of choice, that permitted him to get his message across to American voters (Enli, 2017). Others, however, have noted that political parties enmeshed in electoral campaigns use microblogging platforms primarily for promotional purposes and that politicians’ interactions with others is minimal via these channels (López & Casero, 2016).

Ekman and Wildholm observe, “The study of politicians’ tweets as news sources discloses that Twitter unquestionably contributes to the ongoing process of increased personalization of politics, foremost by mediating the personal and private realm of politicians’ lives” (2015, p. 87). According to Casero *et al.* (2014, p. 3), politicians’ use of Twitter to reach out to voters reduces the distance between them and the general public but also contributes to the deterioration of democracy in the sense that their attempts to dominate the social media agenda suppose a sacrifice of personal privacy in the interest of gaining greater political exposure.

Some researchers (Berglez, 2018) stress the usefulness of academic studies that examine the ways in which politicians and journalists have forged cross-professional relationships via social media. Various scholars exploring this topic have focused specifically on Twitter due to its singular format, which not only provides an ideal vehicle for communication between politicians and journalists and a source of quotable content but also ensures a flow of “real-time, differentiated information that can be redirected to and received by a vast number of individuals” (Campos, 2017, p. 786).

A study by Verweij (2012) on a Twitter network comprised of 150 Dutch journalists and politicians revealed that “contacts on Twitter between reporters and politicians are no longer influenced by religious or ideological identity of parties and media” but rather driven by a mutual interest in sharing news and information. Verweij concluded that the particular network he examined did not constitute a niche community of political and media elites.

Ausserhofer and Maireder (2013), on the other hand, have concluded that politically oriented microblogging activity in Austria is dominated by an elite corps of journalists, experts and well known political figures who make up their own tightly knit group within the overall social media community. Parmelee (2014) found ample evidence that tweets generated by politicians during the 2012 US presidential election campaign had a significant impact on the manner in which the press in that country covered the race. Ekman and Widholm (2015), who have studied the role of social media in Swedish politics, use the term “mediatized interdependency” to describe the new forms of interaction between politicians and reporters taking place in online environments.

Vobič, Maksuti and Deželan (2016) concluded in their analysis of Twitter exchanges between politicians and journalists in Slovenia that both groups employed and responded to mentions posted on a wide range of political, social and media-related topics in what nevertheless amounted to insignificant conversations. Other studies have attempted to demonstrate relationships between political agendas pursued via Twitter and conventional news coverage of election campaigns (Kreiss, 2016).

Also worthy of mention is the work on this subject carried out by Berglez (2018), who has analysed the ways in which social media have facilitated the development of deep cross-professional relationships between politicians and journalists engaged in the Swedish Twittersphere.

Consonant with these prior country-based studies, the research reported here has focused on determining which media outlets and journalists managed to sustain Twitter conversations with politicians during the Spanish general election campaign of 2016.

3. Objectives

The main purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which the four candidates competing for the political leadership of Spain in the 2016 Spanish general elections used their Twitter accounts as a vehicle for interacting with media organisations and journalists. This particular campaign was of special public interest due to the participation of two emergent parties on different ends of the political spectrum (Podemos and Ciudadanos), both of which presented candidates for prime minister that year.

This research was undertaken with two objectives:

- Identify the media outlets and journalists politicians maintained the highest volume of Twitter contact with during the 2016 campaign and examine the flow of information between them in terms of retweets, mentions and replies.

- Study the characteristics and content of tweets exchanged by these parties, paying special attention to semantic relationships between words in messages and hashtags.

4. Hypotheses

H1- Taking into consideration both prior research conducted by Padró-Solanet and Cardenal (2008), which indicated that social media tend to blur the distinctions between political parties, and previously mentioned work carried out by Parmelee (2014) and García and Zugasti (2014), which dealt with specific general election campaigns during which candidates employed a range of social media sites such as Twitter to engage the media and journalists, our first hypothesis was based on the premise that the leaders of emergent political parties involved in the 2016 Spanish elections such as Podemos and Ciudadanos would be more apt to use social media to mold the public images of their candidates than their more established rivals. Recent studies have shown that these newly parties led by Albert Rivera (Ciudadanos) and Pablo Iglesias (Podemos) generate higher levels of spontaneous, interactive social media engagement than traditional political parties (López García, 2016).

H2- Political parties would tend to use social media platforms as a means of keeping followers informed about the activities of their candidates (Zugasti & García, 2018) and to humanize these individuals in the eyes of the public as part of a process of “celebrification” (Richardson, 2015; Oliva *et al.*, 2015) designed to connect with younger people who pay little attention to traditional media. In the case of parties involved in the Spanish general elections of 2016, most would be more likely to regard social media as a means of connecting with younger voters than a forum for communicating their platforms and proposals to media outlets and journalists and establishing an ongoing debate with these players.

H3- The leaders of all four parties involved would be more apt to engage in dialogues with media outlets and journalists sympathetic to their ideological stances and the online interactions and relationships they maintained with them would be reciprocal.

5. Methodology

The decision to centre this research on Twitter was taken on the basis of findings of previous studies indicating that political figures tend to use this particular social media platform more than others, especially during major election campaigns (Rodríguez & Ureña, 2011; Enli & Skogerbo, 2013; Parmelee, 2014; Murthy, 2015; Larrondo *et al.*, 2016). Another consideration taken into account were assertions by authors such as Del Fresno *et al.* (2016, p. 29) that Twitter provides an excellent environment for studying the flow of information between users and clear data on the type of connections and functions supported by the site, the most relevant to this study being explicit connections (the most common), retweets (RTs), mentions, and replies. Authors such as Bakshy *et al.* (2011, pp. 65-66) have long described Twitter as a natural laboratory in which to identify patterns of information dissemination.

The scope of this study was limited to an examination of activity related to Twitter accounts registered in the names of the four main candidates competing in the 2016 Spanish general elections: Mariano Rajoy (@marianorajoy), Pedro Sánchez (@sanchezcastejon), Pablo Iglesias (@Pablo_Iglesias_) and Albert Rivera (@Albert_Rivera). Relevant data was extracted from these Twitter profiles using NodeXL, a widely used open source social media analysis tool (Hansen *et al.*, 2010) that has been used in previous studies such as those carried out by Lichoti *et al.* (2016) on African swine fever, Choi *et al.* (2014) on political discussions between Korean Twitter users, Verweij and Van Noort (2014) on the use of Twitter by 500 South African journalists and Dossis *et al.* (2015) on trending hashtags related to the recent Greek financial crisis.

The extraction of data from the four accounts of interest for the period 1 January –31 December 2016 was initiated at 3 p.m. on 24 February 2017. The NodeXL program captured data on 2,388 vertices (media-related accounts that with which the four candidates analysed

had interacted) and 13,820 interactions between these vertices. The scope of media organisations and journalists considered for study was then limited to those involved in at least five interactions with the accounts in question to ensure that the contact between them and the politicians examined was fairly constant and of a serious nature.

Table 1. Interactions between Twitter accounts maintained by candidates and journalists and media outlets during 2016

Candidates	Other Twitter accounts	Total interactions registered
Iglesias	785	3,472
Rajoy	412	3,030
Rivera	549	3,283
Sánchez	642	4,035
Total	2,388	13,820

Table 2. Accounts with which Spanish candidates for prime minister interacted more than 5 times during the 2016 Spanish general elections campaign

Candidates	Media outlets and journalists	Interactions
Iglesias	36	381
Rajoy	9	71
Rivera	25	292
Sánchez	23	264
TOTAL	93	1,008

Analysis focused on three aspects of Twitter communication: activity, interaction and content.

a) Activity: Activity was measured in terms of the number of messages each politician posted on his account to engage the media and promote his candidacy.

-Number of messages: the number of tweets in which a politician made reference to a journalist, television or radio programme or media outlet.

- Account ownership: It was determined whether the accounts with which candidates interacted were registered under the names of specific media organisations, radio or television programmes or journalists.

b) Interaction: retweets, mentions and replies were analysed to determine how each politician related to the media outlets, programmes and journalists he interacted with.

-Reply: Public response to a mention or retweet. For the purposes of this study this term refers to the number of times a candidate responded to a tweet posted by a media outlet, programme or journalist – the greater the number of a candidate’s responses, the higher the level of his index of response.

-Retweet: For the purposes of this study this term refers to the number of times candidates retweeted a message posted by a media outlet, programme or journalist. The number of times that candidates retweeted media-generated messages was used as a barometer of their interest in interacting with the media.

- Mention: For the purposes of this study, mention refers to candidates’ inclusion of the user names (@ user name) of journalists, TV or radio programmes or media outlets in tweets.

c) Content: The content of tweets exchanged between politicians and media outlets, programmes and journalists was thoroughly analysed. Special attention was paid to the

presence of semantic relationships between words in the texts and hashtags contained in these messages in order to detect patterns of meaning.

c.1) Types of content:

1-News-related: messages referencing news and current events.

2-Opinion-related: messages that primarily conveyed the viewpoints of senders regarding issues of importance at the moment. Some messages contained links to content published elsewhere meant to explain the sender's position.

3-Recommendation: messages in which candidates recommended content published elsewhere to their followers.

4-Self-promotional: messages of a promotional nature related to the personal or public activities of candidates or the parties they were affiliated with.

5-Queries: messages requesting information or assistance regarding specific questions or issues.

6-Others

c.2) Words/topics: Associations between frequently paired words contained in tweets were examined to detect patterns of meaning.

c.3) Hashtags: Hashtags added to the end of tweets were another item analysed. The function of these tags, which consist of a number (hash) sign (#) followed by a keyword linking the message to a specific topic, is to raise the visibility of a given tweet, increase the probability that it will be found and read by other users and enhance interaction.

6. Results

6.1. Account activity messages.

The four political candidates examined for this study interacted with a total of 2,388 other Twitter users and generated a total of 13,820. Journalists and media outlets with which they interacted five or more times accounted for 93 of these users and 1,008 of the messages exchanged (see Tables 1 and 2).

The candidate who established contact with the greatest number of media outlets and journalists via Twitter (36) was the leader of Podemos Pablo Iglesias. Albert Rivera (Ciudadanos) and Pedro Sánchez (Partido Socialista Obrero Español) exchanged messages with fewer (26 and 23 respectively) and Mariano Rajoy (Partido Popular) with the least (9).

Journalists accounted for 42% of the social relationships established by the Podemos candidate Iglesias, who maintained Twitter "conversations" with serious news professionals such as Olga Rodríguez (journalist and co-founder of *eldiario.es*), Jordi Évole (a news presenter for *La Sexta TV*), Ana Pardo de Vera (editor-in-chief of *El Público*) and Pepa Bueno (the host of Cadena SER's radio programme *Hoy por Hoy*) but also occasionally interacted with media professionals on the other end of the scale such Ana Rosa Quintana, host of Telecinco's morning talk show *El program de AR*.

Journalists accounted for a much lower percentage of the social relationships established on Twitter by other three candidates (see Table 3). An examination of Pedro Sánchez's account revealed four: Luis Ángel Sanz (a journalist who covers political issues for *El Mundo*), Pepa Bueno (the host of Cadena SER's radio programme *Hoy por Hoy*), Susanna Griso (host of Antena 3's news show *Espejo Público*) and Carlos Alsina (host of Onda Cero's morning news and public affairs radio programme *Más de uno*). Albert Rivera established a Twitter relationship with only one journalist (Jorge Bustos,

a reporter for *El Mundo* who also contributes to the radio programme *Herrera en COPE*), the same number as Mariano Rajoy, who had contact with Antena 3's Susanna Griso.

Generally speaking, the candidates interacted more with accounts registered to media outlets and specific TV and radio programmes than those maintained by individual

journalists. In the case of Iglesias, these included *Fort Apache* (a television political talk show that he hosts), *La Tuerka* (another left-wing political talk show broadcast on Público TV that served as a springboard for Iglesias's political career) and *publico.es*. Rivera's Twitter activity was more heavily focused on mainstream newspapers and broadcasting networks such as *@elespanolcom*, *@el_pais*, *@sextanochetv*, *@voz_populi* and *@elmundoes*. Pedro Sánchez made frequent reference to two news organisations owned by the Prisa Group: Cadena SER's *@hoyporhoy* and *@el_pais*. Sánchez's followers included *@masdeuno*, Carlos Alsina's radio programme on Onda Cero, and *@lasmananas_rne*. The media outlet and programme most frequently referred to by candidate and incumbent prime minister Mariano Rajoy were Antena 3 and *@2diasymoche*, an Antena 3 public affairs interview show hosted by Susanna Griso on which he appeared in June 2016. Rajoy's Twitter followers included *@el_hormiguero*, another programme broadcast by Artesmedia on which he also appeared that June.

Table 3. Twitter accounts maintained by journalists, TV and radio programmes and media organisations with which candidates interacted 5 or more times in 2016

Iglesias	No .	Rajoy	No .	Rivera	No .	Sánchez	No .
fort_apache_	36	2diasy1noche	18	elespanolcom	37	hoyporhoy	30
la_tuerka	35	el_hormiguero	11	el_pais	25	el_pais	26
publico_es	25	susannagriso	9	sextanochetv	22	masdeuno	24
tribunadetoledo	24	euouncilpress	6	voz_populi	22	lasmananas_rne	20
eldiarios	18	euounciltvnews	6	Elmundoes	19	sextanochetv	15
thewarroomblog	16	24h_tve	6	espejopublico	17	espejopublico	15
olgarodriguezfr	16	8aldia	5	Europapress	14	mananascuatro	15
radiocable	13	herraencope	5	Elperiodico	12	herraencope	13
jordievole	12	masdeuno	5	lavanguardia	12	24horas_rne	11
pardodevera	11			libertaddigital	10	debatalrojovivo	10
el_pais	11			Okdiario	10	elprogramadear	9
pepabueno	9			abc_es	9	desayunos_tve	9
enricjuliana	9			Elsmatins	8	luis_angel_sanz	8
Ikaitor	9			reporte24es	8	elmundoes	8
ctxt_es	8			Lasextatv	8	elsmatins	7
monteroglez	8			24h_tve	8	revistamongolia	7
carnecrudaradio	8			elcascabel13tv	7	el_hormiguero	6
la_ser	8			lasmananas_rne	6	pepabueno	6
tableroglobal	8			ondacero_es	6	unidadeditorial	5
hoyporhoy	7			informativost5	6	informativost5	5
andresgil	7			sextanoticias	6	2diasy1noche	5
latemotivcero	7			Indpcom	5	susannagriso	5
elprogramadear	7			jorgebustos1	5	carlos_alsina	5
jitorreblanca	6			a3noticias	5		
debatalrojovivo	6			elconfidencial	5		
rubensancheztw	6						
sextanochetv	6						

rosamariaartal	5						
albertopradilla	5						
salvadostv	5						
desayunos_tve	5						
quiquepeinado	5						
cosmejuan	5						
revistamongolia	5						
mananascuatro	5						
anarosaq	5						

It is interesting to note that out of the 93 Twitter accounts with which the candidates collectively interacted, only nine (noted in red in Figure 1) were detected in the individual Twitter networks of all four candidates (see Table 4).

Figure 1. Candidate Twitter networks in 2016

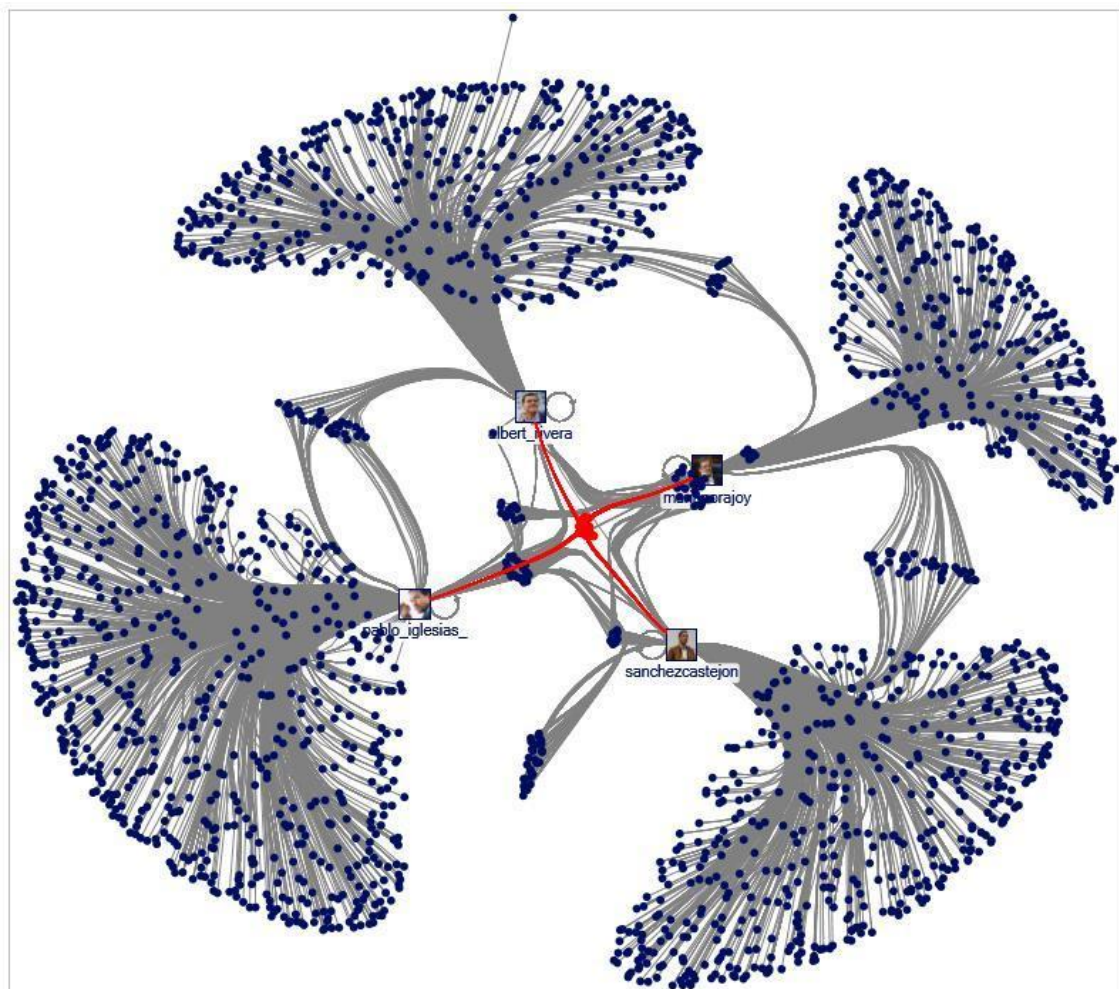


Table 4. Journalists, programmes and media organizations that figured in the Twitter networks of all four candidates in 2016

User names (@ + name of entity or programme)	P. Iglesias (tweets)	M. Rajoy (tweets)	A. Rivera (tweets)	P. Sánchez (tweets)
masdeuno	2	5	4	24
informativost5	1	3	6	5
elperiodico	1	2	12	4
susannagriso	1	9	2	5
espejopublico	1	1	17	15
sextanochetv	6	3	22	15
carlos_alsina	3	1	1	5
mananascuatro	5	1	2	15
lasmananas_rne	2	2	6	20
TOTAL	22	27	72	108

6.2. Interaction

An analysis of the ways in which candidates related to media outlets and journalists via Twitter revealed that only one – Pablo Iglesias – replied to tweets received from users in these two categories (see Table 5). He did so 18 times during the period examined. His messages to Alberto Padilla (a journalist who, like Iglesias and other members of Podemos, was heavily involved in the production of *La Tuerka* and to whom he responded frequently during the campaign) included “@albertopradilla @eneko_ortiz @eldiarios @ManoloMonereo Admit it, Alberto, you are nothing but a tourist in EH”. The other user he tended to reply to was *El País* reporter Juan Cruz Ruiz, to whom he sent tweets such as “@cosmejuan Perhaps I didn’t catch your drift, but accusing someone who writes about the boss’s business deals of being a bad journalist doesn’t make a lot of sense” and “@cosmejuan Escolar and *El Confidencial* said something else. Were they lying?” Other replies included the compliment to the magazine *Mongolia* “@revistamongolia you are great” and the appeal to the popular late night talk show host Andreu Buenafuente “@LateMotivCero The letter I’m dying to receive, Andreu, is an invitation to appear on your show”.

Rajoy, Sánchez and Rivera, on the other hand, were far more wary about responding to media tweets. None of their streams contained a single reply to a message posted by a media outlet or journalist. Rajoy’s interaction with the media was mainly limited to retweets of messages originally posted by journalists and broadcasting networks. Most of the content he recycled in this manner had a self-promotional edge, two examples being “RT @2diasymoche: Mariano Rajoy will appear on #2diasymoche with Susanna Griso tonight at 10:30 p.m. <https://t.co/jnoNxp181> <https://t.co/toAS31g...>” and “RT @El_Hormiguero: ¡¡EL HORMIGUERO IS ABOUT TO START!! Today’s show will feature the acting President of the Government and leader of the @PPopular... @marianorajoy...”

Albert Rivera retweeted far more messages (257) than his rivals (see Table 5). Two examples were: “RT @elespanolcom: Rivera announces that the first legislation he will propose [if elected] will concern the reform of [the competences of Spain’s] autonomous communities @CiudadanosCs <https://t.co/xY5hnqVq9B> Por...” and “RT @SextaNocheTV: ▶@Albert_Rivera: I believe a snap election will be avoided and hope that traditional parties will come to their senses <https://t.co/EnpHj...>”

There was a notable balance between retweets and mentions in Sánchez’s Twitter stream. His retweets, however, tended to be self-promotional messages such as “RT @PSOE: Tomorrow at 9 don’t miss the interview with @sanchezcastejon on @HoyPorHoy Live: <https://t.co/FlpQxfiMio> [http...](http://...)” and “RT @OndaCero_es: Tomorrow @carlos__alsina will

interview @sanchezcastejon on @MasDeUno #PedroSánchez On Onda Cero <https://t.co/dxB78FYVUQ> <https://t.co/...>”

Iglesias’s stream was the only one in which mentions (214) outnumbered retweets (149). He nevertheless retweeted more than twice the number of messages Rajoy retweeted and substantially more than the Socialist candidate Sánchez. Such messages included “RT @la_tuerka: Tomorrow Monday Pablo Iglesias will interview Chilean filmmaker Patricio Guzmán on *Otra Vuelta de Tuerka*: <https://t.co/hIbv4acrHo...>” and

“RT @publico_es: Radio SER forced to admit it misrepresented a statement by @Pablo_Iglesias_ on feminism <https://t.co/Uo4x9uZCOv>”.

Table 5. Types of tweets made by candidates

Candidates	Replies	Retweets	Mentions	TOTAL
Iglesias	18	149	214	381
Rajoy	0	64	7	71
Rivera	0	257	40	292
Sánchez	0	156	108	264

Table 6. Journalists, programmes and Media outlets Pablo Iglesias responded to during 2016

Iglesias	
Account responded to	No.
albertopradilla	4
cosmejuan	4
revistamongolia	2
quiquepeinado	2
elprogramadear	1
jitorreblanca	1
ctxt_es	1
carnecrudaradio	1
latemotivcero	1
rubensancheztw	1

Another way of boosting interaction on Twitter is to mention another user in a tweet. Embedding another user’s Twitter name (@user name) in a message automatically signals that person that he or she has been mentioned in another’s tweet (see Table 7). Albert Rivera sent more tweets featuring mentions associated with media accounts than any other candidate. During the period examined he embedded the user name of the newspaper *El Español* (@elespanolcom) in 37 messages including “European liberals consider Ciudadanos the spearhead of growth in the EU <https://t.co/kcLVULFwZw> vía @elespanolcom”. Iglesias employed the second-highest number. As was the case with the content this candidate retweeted, the user names of his own television programmes accounted for the bulk of mentions in his messages, which tended to run along the lines of “We took a look at the function and politics of the G20 in the latest episode of @Fort_Apache_ with @Haltozano @abrazopartio @tableroglobal and others . . . <https://t.co/cP4v83bCfo>”. Sánchez included the user name of Cadena SER’s programme *Hoy por Hoy* in as many as 30 messages, one of which was “Public opinion polls provide a snapshot. We need to rally our electorate because it’s worth voting for the @PSOE. @HoyPorHoy”. Rajoy used few mentions in his messages, 18 of which referred to an interview with Susanna Griso featured on *Dos días y una noche* and

one of which read “A pleasure to share the campaign on @2diasymoché with @susannagriso with stops throughout #España #Rajoy2D <https://t.co/Uow2xFAMV4>”.

Table 7. Journalists, programmes and media outlets most frequently mentioned by candidates in 2016

Iglesias		Rajoy		Rivera		Sánchez	
Mentions	No.	Mentions	No.	Mentions	No.	Mentions	No.
fort_apache_	36	2diasy1noche	18	Elespanolcom	37	hoyporhoy	30
la_tuerka	35	el_hormiguero	11	el_pais	25	el_pais	26
publico_es	25	susannagriso	9	voz_populi	22	masdeuno	24
tribunadetoledo	24	24h_tve	6	sextanochetv	22	lasmananas_rne	20
eldiarios	18	eucounciltvnews	6	elmundoes	19	mananascuatro	15
thewarroomblog	16	eucouncilpress	6	espejopublico	17	espejopublico	15
olgarodriguezfr	16	masdeuno	5	europapress	14	sextanochetv	15
		herraencope	5	lavanguardia	12	herraencope	13

How successful were these candidates’ media- and journalist-related messages? According to Pérez *et al.* (2015), the two most relevant metrics in the measurement of a social media account’s influence and impact are virality and like rates: “Whenever an account generates a lot of messages that end up being shared by other users, it’s a clear sign that users consider it a source of information worth keeping in mind (...) Another way knowing whether what one is tweeting is of interest to followers is to track the account’s like rate, which is based on the number of times each message posted is liked by other users” (2015, p. 150).

The most-liked tweets in the sample were a series of messages Iglesias exchanged with La Sexta TV’s news programme *Salvados* and its host Jordi Évole. The most successful, which received almost 6,000 likes, was a light-hearted message from Iglesias telling his “bro” Rivera that he was being “too intense” and he looked forward to joining him that night on *Salvados TV*. Like Iglesias’s quip to Rivera, Mariano Rajoy’s most popular tweet, which received 830 likes, had nothing to do with political issues. It was a thank you message for the “wonderful time” he had had being a guest on Antena 3’s show *El Hormiguero*. Albert Rivera’s most popular tweets, on the other hand, mentioned news articles. The first, praising “The Honour of ‘78” by *El Mundo* reporter Jorge Bustos, received 1,000 likes and the second, recommending an article in *El País* titled “The Language of Hate”, 539 likes. The most-liked tweets posted by Sánchez also differed in form and content from those of Iglesias and Rajoy. The most successful was a message stating he was pleased with the results of the Austrian election (liked by 1,103 followers) and the second most popular was a message expressing his sorrow over the passing of singer George Michael (liked by 903).

Messages posted by Pablo Iglesias were retweeted by other persons more frequently than those posted by the other candidates. The tweet in which he referred to his rival Rivera as “bro” was the most successful. Other widely shared messages posted by Iglesias were retweets of messages originally published by journalists Quique Peinado and Rubén Sánchez that Iglesias found interesting. The most-retweeted messages posted by Rajoy concerned his appearance on *El Hormiguero*, one of which was an announcement for the episode in which he was to participate retweeted from *El Hormiguero*’s Twitter stream and the other a public thank you for the wonderful time he had had on the show.

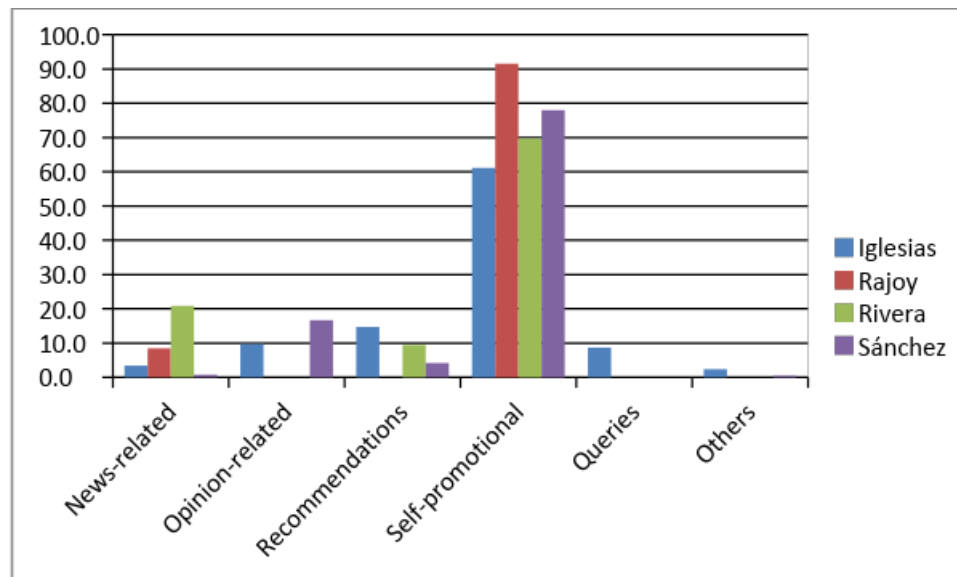
The most-retweeted messages posted by Albert Rivera and Pedro Sánchez were of a different tenor. Rivera’s followers tended to retweet messages focusing on issues germane to the election such as a retweet of a story originally posted by @el_pais reporting that the

price Podemos MP Ramón Espinar had received for a subsidized residential property he had sold in 2011 was 25% above the asking price stated in the petition for permission to sell that he had submitted to public housing authorities in the Community of Madrid and a retweet of a news message posted by @24h_tve in which Bill Gates compared Adolfo Suarez to Nelson Mandela and Mikhail Gorbachev. Sánchez's most-retweeted message (shared 835 times) was a link to an *El País* story about *Las Trece Rosas*, a film about the execution of 13 female political prisoners by the Franco regime at the close of the Spanish Civil War in 1939. Other highly shared messages posted by this candidate were a message congratulating the staff of *El País* on the newspaper's fortieth anniversary (829 retweets) and a link to an *El País* story about the results of the 2016 Austrian presidential elections (792 retweets).

6.3. Content

The overwhelming majority of the messages posted by all four candidates were self-promotional in nature (see Figure 2). Mariano Rajoy devoted 91.5% of the tweets he generated to this purpose, a prime example being his references to his interview with Susanna Griso. Although 78% of the tweets posted by Pedro Sánchez focused on his candidacy, 17% contained his opinions on a range of issues. Rivera posted proportionally fewer tweets of this type (70%) and devoted a substantial number to news and current events. Tweets posted by Iglesias followed a somewhat similar pattern: 61.2% were about his candidacy and 14.7% focused on content published elsewhere he thought might be of interest to his followers.

Figure 2. A breakdown of tweets by candidate and category



As the words most frequently employed by political candidates when interacting with media outlets and journalists via social media reveal much about their relationships with sector organisations and professionals, we studied associations between the words contained in messages posted by the candidates in question during the campaign to detect patterns of meaning (see Table 8). An examination of Pablo Iglesias's Twitter stream indicated that the words he most frequently linked together in messages were "os" and

“dejo” (the plural informal form of the noun “you” + leave); “dejo” and “aquí” (leave + here); and “aquí” and “entrevista” (here + interview) – combinations cropping up in 112 instances in a total of 381 tweets that reflect the self-promotional nature of his Twitter activity. The majority of the messages he posted were along the lines of one that read “Os dejo aquí la entrevista que me ha hecho Pepa Bueno esta mañana en el @HoyPorHoy de @La_SER. <https://t.co/J2eyM8gxGu>” (Here is [literally, “I leave you here”] the interview that Pepa Bueno conducted with me this morning on @La_SER’s [programme] @HoyPorHoy).

The language employed by Rajoy also reflected the self-promotional thrust of his interaction via Twitter. The most frequently employed word combinations in his messages were related to references to the European Council, which appeared 24 times in the total of 71 tweets he posted. The most repeated combination was “European + council”, which was detected in messages such as “RT @EUCouncilTVNews: European Council #euco President #Tusk @eucoresident meets Prime Minister of #Spain @marianorajoy <https://t.co/xf4u7...>” The second most repeated combination was “2diasy1noche + marianorajoy”, a telling indication of the importance he placed on his interview on the television programme *Dos días y una noche*.

Albert Rivera linked his user name with those of television programmes on 29 occasions, styled variably as “@espejopublico + @albert_rivera”, “@sextanochetv + @albert_rivera” and “@elsmatins + @albert_rivera”. The frequency with which these combinations appear in his messages is directly related to his habit of retweeting messages posted by these programmes containing statements issued by him or his party. One example is “RT @EspejoPublico: @Albert_Rivera: ‘Estamos utilizando nuestros escaños para cambiar la situación, no para asaltar el poder’ #AlbertRivera...” (We are using our seats in parliament to change the situation, not to storm the bastions of power).

An examination of Pedro Sánchez’s Twitter stream revealed some interesting combinations as well. The first was “vía + @el_pais”, a formula he used when recommending a news story published by *El País* to his followers. The second was “@masdeuno + #pedrosánchezenondacero”, a combination that appeared in messages publicizing interviews with him featured on Onda Cero’s programme *Más de uno* in April and June of 2016, one of which read: “RT @OndaCero_es: A las 9, @carlos__alsina entrevista a @sanchezcastejon en @MasDeUno <https://t.co/6Wo442AOPl> #PedroSánchezEnOndaCero <https://t.co/6Wo442AOPl>” Like Iglesias, he was fond of the expression “os dejo”, which he employed in tweets promoting recent media interviews, one example being “Os dejo aquí el audio de la entrevista de esta mañana en @MasDeUno con @carlos__alsina #PedroSánchezEnOndaCero <https://t.co/zY9zRUV55X>” (Here is [literally, “I leave you”] a recording of my interview this morning on @MasDeUno with @carlos__alsina #PedroSánchezEnOndaCero <https://t.co/zY9zRUV55X>).

Table 8. Word combinations most frequently used by candidates in 2016 Twitter messages related to journalists and media organisations

Iglesias		Rajoy		Rivera		Sánchez	
Word pairs	No.	Word pairs	No.	Word pairs	No.	Word pairs	No.
os,dejo	50	european,council	8	espejopublico,albert_rivera	13	vía,el_pais	16
dejo,aquí	34	2diasy1noche,marianorajoy	7	vía,elmundoes	11	masdeuno,pedrosánchezenondacero	15
aquí,entrevista	28	24h_tve,directo	4	sextanochetv,albert_rivera	10	os,dejo	12

mi,columna	22	presidente,gobierno	4	vía,el_pais	9	sextanochetv,sanchezcastejon	11
josegarmolina_mi	20	gobierno,funciones	4	vía,elespanolcom	9	todo,equipo	10
pablo,iglesias	16	eu councilltvnews, european	4	albert,rivera	8	entrevista,sanchezcastejon	10
entrevista,hecho	15	council,euco	4	voz_populi,directo	7	muchas,gracias	7
otra,vuelta	15	eu councilpress, european	4	elsmatins,albert_rivera	6	candidato,psoe	7
último,fort_apache_	14	council,conclusions	4	directo,rivera	5	presidencia,gobierno	7
columna,lunes	14	directo,marianorajoy	3	os,dejo	5	lasmananas_rne,sanchezcastejon	6

Another way of drawing attention to a tweet is tagging. According to Cooper (2013), the addition of one or two hashtags to a message boosts the possibility of other users noticing it and interacting with it by 21%. Mariano Rajoy added a hashtag to 80% of his messages, Pedro Sánchez to 46.2%, Albert Rivera to 19% and Pablo Iglesias to 8.5%.

The hashtag most frequently employed by Rajoy (#rajoy2d, which he used 14 times) was unsurprisingly related to his interview with Susanna Griso. Sánchez made abundant use of the tag #pedrosanchezenondacero, created to promote his interviews on Artesmedia's radio channel Onda Cero. His second favourite was #26j – the only hashtag created by any of the four candidates that made direct reference to the June 26 general elections. Rivera and Iglesias added few tags to their messages, although the latter added one to tweets related to his TV interview with talk show host Ana Rosa Quintana (#IglesiasAR).

Table 9. The five hashtags most heavily used by candidates in 2016 Twitter messages related to journalists and media organisations

Iglesias		Rajoy		Rivera		Sánchez	
Hashtags	No.	Hashtags	No.	Hashtags	No.	Hashtags	No.
iglesiasar	2	rajoy2d	14	eeaniversario	5	pedrosanchezenondacero	17
pabloiglesias	2	euco	9	l6nalbertrivera	5	26j	8
lacafeterapabloiglesias	2	rajoyenondacero	5	riveraec	4	sancheztv3	6
pabloiglesiaslacafetera	2	rajoyencope	5	l6nrivera	3	pedrosanchezm4	5
latemotiv137	2	rajoyeh	4	debatedeinvestidura	2	pedrosanchezenla ser	4

7. Conclusions

The findings of this analysis of the Twitter interaction of the four candidates standing for the presidency of the Spanish government in the 2016 Spanish general elections support a number of conclusions.

Whereas previous research has established the willingness of politicians to respond to constituents and voters via Twitter (Shogan, 2010), the four political candidates examined for this study demonstrated surprisingly little interest in interacting with journalists and

media organisations by means of this platform in the context of the major election campaign in which they were immersed: only 4% of the messages they posted in 2016 were directly or indirectly related to the media. Pablo Iglesias made a greater effort to interact with the media via Twitter than the other candidates during the period examined, a finding that coincides with those of other studies that have underscored the importance of Twitter within his party's overall communications strategy (Marcos, 2017). Mariano Rajoy engaged in far less media-related Twitter activity than his counterparts, a somewhat curious outcome given recent studies indicating his proclivity for communicating via that particular social media platform (Gómez *et al.*, 2017).

Of the four candidates examined, Pablo Iglesias had the greatest tendency to maintain "conversations" with media outlets and journalists closely aligned with his party's ideology, which were, in his case, *Fort Apache* and *La Tuerka*, television programmes in which he is heavily involved. Albert Rivera interacted with *El Español* more than any other media-related Twitter account. Pedro Sánchez interacted heavily with Cadena SER and *El País*, and Mariano Rajoy made numerous references to his interview with Antena 3's Susanna Griso. The fact that every candidate nevertheless maintained some level of Twitter contact with, or made occasional references to, media outlets, programmes and journalists not aligned with his particular political ideology indicates that all attempted to use Twitter's exponential reach to woo voters traditionally affiliated with other parties.

Most of the interactivity between the candidates and media outlets, programmes and professionals in 2016 took the form of mentions (user names embedded in tweets meant to draw the cited media outlet or journalist's attention to particular messages) and retweets (the majority of which made reference to television and radio programmes on which candidates had been or would be featured and were thus promotional in nature).

Of great interest was the fact that Rajoy, Rivera and Sánchez refrained from responding directly to Twitter messages posted by media outlets and journalists. Iglesias was the only one of the four to do so, although responses of this nature constituted only 5% of his overall Twitter activity in 2016. This candidate's willingness to interact with media contacts is another reflection of the importance that Podemos places on social media within its overall communications strategy (Marcos, 2017).

The imbalance between promotional and other types of messages in every candidate's Twitter stream indicates a strong tendency on the part of all four to view Twitter as a tool for self-aggrandizement rather than a vehicle for sharing opinions, persuading voters or criticising rivals (Weeks, *et al.*, 2017). All of the candidates used Twitter as a promotional tool to advertise activities they or their parties were involved in rather than as a forum for discussing issues in depth. Generally speaking, none dared to initiate serious debates with journalists or media outlets, although Iglesias did publish a few tweets in which he expressed his opinion that included personal congratulations to a newspaper on its fortieth anniversary, sadness at the death of a pop star and his take on the results of the Austrian presidential election. It is also notable that the most-liked tweets posted in 2016 by the four individuals studied had nothing to do with political issues. This observation falls in line with recent studies indicating that politicians use Twitter for marketing purposes within broader strategies for constructing specific public images as candidates (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017). Spanish candidates participating in the 2016 general elections used Twitter to emphasise their media presence (talk show appearances, radio, television and newspaper interviews, etc.) and show the more human side of their personalities to voters, a tendency observed in other studies on the same topic as well (Quevedo & Portalés, 2017; Oliva *et al.*, 2015). Their approach to social networking via Twitter therefore appears to reflect an established pattern of user behaviour on the part of Spanish politicians that includes the use of novel communications techniques in specific contexts such as election campaigns, during which they employ the platform to publicise their appearances in media environments not

normally associated with political communication such as talk shows, morning magazine shows and celebrity and gossip magazines.

Future investigations could be conducted to determine the possible impact of candidate Twitter activity on the outcome of the 2016 election and whether the fact that they had established a social media presence was more important than the actual messages they generated via these channels. Another line of investigation worth exploring is candidates' motives for not entering into a deeper debate on issues that surfaced in the course of their Twitter interaction.

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