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The use of memes in the discourse of political parties on Twitter: analysing the 2015 state of the nation debate

Abstract

The transition between traditional politics to social media has given rise to new spaces, forms and languages for political communication. Visual aspects have been crucial in this process and political parties have tried to integrate them into their web presence. Those images are carefully selected in order to have an impact and foster engagement on Twitter, especially in the form of memes. This paper therefore analyses the use of images in the digital discourse of Spanish political parties on Twitter. Content analysis is used as the preferred research method to study how such visual content was used by the main political party accounts –typology of images, communication strategies, main hashtags, impact, etc – during the 2015 State of the Nation Debate in Spain. Likewise, content analysis was complemented with the thematic tagging of graphics memes by analysing the meanings of the text (image and text). Our work has revealed significant differences in the use of memes by political parties in the Spanish Parliament. The paper also highlights Twitter accounts with high memetic potential.

Keywords
Meme, politics, social media, political parties, communication, Twitter, Spain

1. Introduction

Internet has brought politics to a new level. Today, political statements have left institutions in order to create a complex environment where new and old media converge. This environment allows citizens to have a direct, more active and significant relationship to classical agents (Boulianne, 2009; Rueda Ortiz, 2009; Jenkins, 2008).

Politics 2.0 (a name derived from Web 2.0) implies a way of understanding the relationships between government and governed (Kruikemeier, 2014; Matud-Juristo, 2009) in platforms that are an extension of the public sphere (Westling, 2007). Internet has a large democratic potential due to the low cost of this communication tool,

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and the interactivity of digital media, which increases its capacity for engagement (Yoo & Gil de Zúñiga, 2014).

Social media have become remarkable spaces to create public opinion in the digital environment as they channel personal positions and help listen to other users' ideas, which in turn generate influence through infectious processes (González-Bailón et al., 2014). In these platforms, the concept of digital literacy is enlarged to include an assessment, modification and reconstruction of diverse texts (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007), thus becoming *prosumer* media (Berrocal, Campos & Redondo, 2014). "Proactive, media literate consumers have always been important, but today they have become prescribers thanks to their digital skills and to the fact that the new technologies enable a unique and also exponential interaction, especially across the social media and the web 2.0 tools" (Sánchez Martínez & Ibar Alonso, 2015: 88).

2. Meme. The cultural gene

Within the myriad of expressions used for the appearance, expansion and disappearance of ideas on the web, the term "meme" becomes especially relevant (Santibañez, 2011). This concept was coined by Richard Dawkins who, in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), uses "meme" in opposition to the biological gene to refer to minimum cultural information units transferred between individuals and/or generations, through processes of replication or transmission (Dawkins, 2006). According to this definition, memes can be songs, fads, catchphrases or images - any living structure likely to expand its scope.

Rushkoff (2010) also harks back to the analogy meme-gene introducing the variable of usefulness to explain the process of cultural selection. "[Memes] replicated if they were useful and powerful or died out if they were not. Just as a species can get stronger through natural selection of genes, a society gets stronger through the natural selection of memes" (pp. 100-101).

With the rise of the first viral phenomena –content that managed to get exponential dissemination in Internet–, the term "meme" was again retrieved to define any fragment of popular culture originating on the web (Stryker, 2011). In particular, Coleman defined on-line memes as "viral images, videos, and catchphrases under constant modification by users, and with a propensity to travel as fast as the Internet can move them" (2012: 109). Such content became a form of expression and participation of on-line communities (Vickery, 2014; Davison, 2012), through platforms of great connectivity and shareability that facilitate rapid consumption and propagation (García Huerta, 2014; Hernanz & Hernanz, 2012; Knobel & Lanshear, 2007).

In this sense, apart from the idea conveyed, the expression of the meme needs to be infectious, be it because it is appealing, satirical, humorous or universal ((Huntington, 2013; Chen, 2012; Hansen et al. 2011). Within the meme phenomenon, virality and appropriation become two realities that have mutual influence. It is the community that insufflates value to a meme when they disseminate it, create it or replicate its content, adapting it to their context or communicative needs (Vickery, 2014; Santibáñez, 2011; Knobel & Lanshear, 2007).

The digital essence of these memes, their potential virality and their capacity to create new content or remixes, generate a chain of creative feedback. This is a new language that allows for the maximum communicative potential using visual and simple content (Styker, 2011).

3. Memes in politics 2.0

The capacity of memes to synthesise an idea, situation or expression has resulted in their widespread use in the political context. Memes can condense a complex political fact in a brief, powerful and effective container that engages people (Re, 2014). This phenomenon

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that Gutiérrez-Rubí (2014) relates to practices of visual thinking –a leading trend on the web– is booming, infecting web communication and/or participation in politics.

Movements such as the Arab Spring or the 15M built their narrative through thousands of images disseminated on-line (Harlow, 2013). Recently, the cover of *Charlie Hebdo* "Tout est perdonné" and the drawing of a pencil became symbols of global rejection to the Paris attacks and support for freedom of expression, thus providing a reference framework to the slogan "Je suis Charlie".

The viral component of this content is based on the fact that it is no longer an image, but rather an idea – a meme. As Gutiérrez-Rubí (2014: 34) claims, the power of memes, of *memecracy*, resides in the "Creative force of digital ARTivism for social ACTivism". The communicative value of memes has not only been paramount for social movements; it has also led political parties, leaders and institutions to integrate them in their strategies. Barack Obama has been labelled the *memecrat* par excellence due to his appropriation of such content for institutional and political communication. His team takes outmost care in the launching of all kinds of messages, including graphic ones, to be converted into memes (Rodríguez, 2013). Pictures such as the *Situation Room* capturing the moment Obama and his team follow the operation that killed Bin Laden are examples of the strategic use of these images. They are content that, although they have a known sender, play with the phenomenon of non-attribution typical of memes (Davison, 2012) to foster dissemination and appropriation by web users.

Looking at the most successful images on the web listed by Shifman (2014), two recurring types of on-line political strategies can be singled out: (1) Photoshop reactions, pictures that cause the public to act (dissemination, modification, relay, etc.) and (2) Macro images, characterised by an overimposed text (directly on the image or on a black frame). Apart from the pictures, the graphic content used by political actors on the web can be diverse, depending on the communicational needs of each moment.

Due to all these aspects, our study aims at analysing the use of graphic memes by the Twitter profiles of politicians during the Spanish State of the Nation Debate. Our initial hypothesis is that the evolution towards a more visual web has led parties and political leaders to integrate a series of carefully selected images into their 2.0 discourse, in order to spread their ideas and foster participation of web users in disseminating them, favouring their conversion into memes.

4. Materials and methods

Studying memes is a new approach to Spanish 2.0 politics. While their presence in the US presidential campaign raised some interest on the matter (see Foster, 2015; Burroughs, 2013, amongst others), in the Spanish context, such research is limited and closer to activism rather than political communication (Gutiérrez-Rubí, 2014; or Rodríguez, 2013).

4.1. *Defining the object of study*

The complexity of the analysis suggested led to a multiple definition of the object of study, depending on the social platform, type of content and timeframe, as well as political parties and leaders involved. Just like other studies in the field of Spanish 2.0 politics (Barberá & Rivero, 2012; Piñeiro-Otero & Martínez-Rolán, 2013; Peña-López, Congosto & Aragón, 2014, Esteve & Borge, 2014, amongst others), the sample of our study was limited to Twitter. This platform has reached wide social influence due to its public nature, the brevity of the messages and its expanding character that allows it to reach as far "as the network wants" (Congosto, Fernández & Moro, 2011). Despite the restriction of 140 characters, tweets can incorporate hyperlinks that allow them to expand content from other websites, as well as short videos or images embedded in the posting.

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Likewise, Twitter is a highly politicised social platform, with the power to help read public opinion (Kruikemeier, 2014, Peña-López, Congosto & Aragón, 2014; Barberá & Rivero, 2012). As Yoo and Gil de Zúñiga (2014, 44) state "Twitter did have an impact on the gap in offline political participation. This implies the relationship between Twitter use and participatory activities are stronger among the educated people". These peculiarities have led political agents to focus their main communication strategies on Twitter. In the Spanish context, this microblogging platform has become a key channel for political communication since the regional elections of 2011 (Ruiz & Bustos, 2015). Likewise, McKelvey and Menczer (2013) have defined memes as those sets of tweets that share the same hashtag, mention, hyperlink or phrase. This definition creates a common link between the microblogging platform and memes, while offering a perspective to approach our object of study.

Looking at the concept of the meme as a shared idea massively disseminated and collectively reconstructed, an analysis of a hashtag proves more adequate as it has more interaction and conversation rates than a specific channel or profile. On Twitter, hashtags (those labels preceded by the hash symbol "#") work as hyperlinks that gather a whole social conversation around a topic, i.e., the set of tweets that have incorporated a particular tag to its postings. In this way, hashtags allow for comprehensive and theme-based access to the conversation, while profiles only show their postings and direct interactions. In the social conversation developed around a hashtag, we decided to focus on images as they remain longer on the web and have therefore more capacity to become memes.

4.2. *Sample selection*

In the process of selecting a hashtag that could show the interaction of several political parties and leaders, #DEN2015, the official hashtag of the 2015 State of the Nation Debate (hereafter, Debate) was favoured. This parliamentary event where the annual performance of the government is discussed becomes one of the most important landmarks in Spanish politics. The Debate can be followed live through public radio and television.

Since 2013, the Debate has become a hit in social media, and it was one of Twitter's worldwide trending topics (Ruiz & Bustos, 2015). The relevance of this parliamentary landmark in the virtual political arena, and more particularly on Twitter, has been the subject of several scholarly articles such as those by Nadal (2013), Alchonchel (2014) and Ruiz & Bustos (2015). The latter becomes a clear reference for our study as it analyses the images disseminated by the two major parties and their leaders during the Debate in 2015.

Selecting the hashtag #DEN2015 helped establish a timeframe for the sample: the 24th and 25th of February 2015, the days the Debate was held in Parliament. The hashtag #DEN2015 was one of Twitter's trending topics on 24th February with a frequency of 6,870 tweets per hour. In the selected period, a total of 84,565 profiles took part in the social conversation, with around 329,792 tweets with the hashtag #DEN2015, 630 of which included some kind of image. These postings reached around 119,014,123 million accounts worldwide and generated a total of 1,364,071,308 impressions. During the Debate, the volume and frequency of updates of political profiles multiplied, reaching over 150 tweets/day – most of them outside the official hashtag (i.e., without the hashtag #DEN2015).

High participation of political actors around the hashtag #DEN2015 helped limit the sample to the profiles of political parties with a parliamentary group - Partido Popular (PP, @PPopular), Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE, @PSOE), Convergencia i Unió (CiU, @Ciu), Izquierda Unida (IU, @iunida), Unión Progreso y Democracia (UPyD, @UPyD) and Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV, @EAJPNV)- and their leaders -Mariano Rajoy (PP, @marianorajoy), Pedro Sánchez (PSOE, @sanchezcastejon), Alberto Garzón (IU, @agarzon)- or spokes person in Parliament -Josep Antoni Duran i Lleida (CiU, @ciuduran) and Aitor Esteban (PNV, @aitor_esteban). The selection of these profiles yielded a universe of 493

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tweets with the hashtag #DEN2015, 25.8% of them (127) disseminated images likely to become memes. During the Debate, Rosa Díez did not have a profile in this microblogging platform.

Chart 1. Tweets of main political actors on Twitter (24th and 25th February)
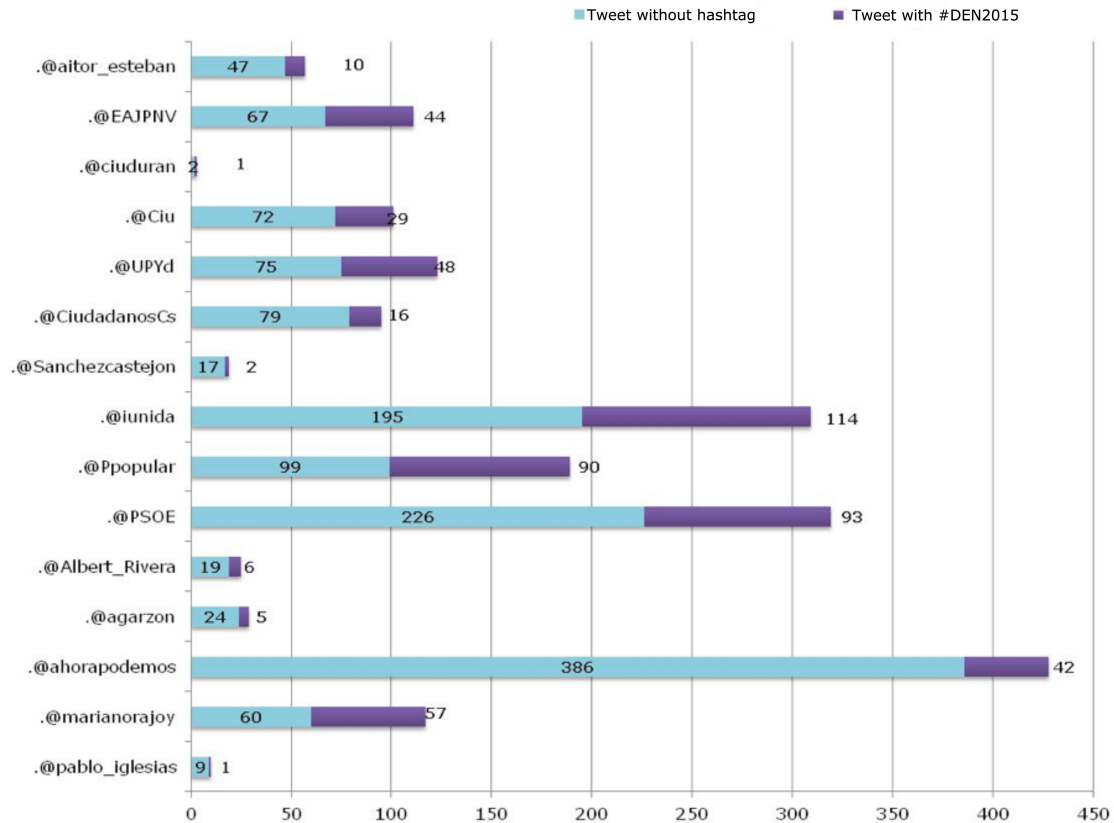
4.3. *Methods and tools*

In order to understand the use of these memes by the main parties and political leaders, an exploratory study of the images published with the hashtag #DEN2015 was performed, using content analysis as the research method. This method applies a systematic approach to examine "meanings" (theme-based analysis) and "form" (procedures, conventions, formal analysis) of any text and quantification in categories for statistical analysis (Igartua Perosanz, 2006; Sampieri, Collado & Pérez, 1998).

During this first phase, all tweets of the sample were retrieved by an advanced Twitter search of the hashtag #DEN2015, filtering the results per content, issuer and publication date. This process was repeated twice from different computers in order to minimise information loses due to Twitter's API. The images and tweets included were registered on a database with other additional information such as sender profile, publication time (day/time), number of retweets (times the user disseminated the publication in their community of followers) and number of likes (times the user marked the publication as content of interest). Apart from the information mentioned for each tweet, all hashtags used in the social conversation around #DEN2015 were registered. This register helped us have some first impressions on the content of the sample, essential to establish the different study categories.

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During a second phase, content analysis of the selected memes was performed. For this analysis, we considered both the content itself –graphic representation, theme and approach– as well as the formal elements in each image -image type, integration of text, font and text colour, integration of element(s) identifying a specific party (acronym, logos, websites, hashtag, etc.)

As Davison (2012) claims, all memes include three elements: manifestation (external phenomenon); behaviour (manipulation method of this manifestation) and ideal (conveyed concept). The sample limited the manifestation (images) and the behaviour of the meme, both in its creation (photo editing, design and graphic labelling) as well as in its distribution (Twitter posting). While the formal aspects of the image contribute data relative to the behaviour of the meme, this phase focused on the analysis of the ideal. In order to define the ideal of a meme, we labelled images according to their signification (image and text). When materialising a concept, theme and approach we considered the labels and other textual content integrated in the image to anchor its meaning.

Due to the exploratory character of this work, we decided to use open variables to determine the content of the publications and their theme framework. This procedure of analysis in line with Huntington's (2013) discursive perspective helped determine how concepts disseminated by memes converged in 2.0 political discourse.

Finally, in order to enable data processing and the classification of memes according to their ideal, recoding of diverse items of the study was performed. In this phase, several content variables were used, establishing common categories through an inductive process. In the same line, other variables such as image type, were used in order to better define the category "other", which acted like a general category.
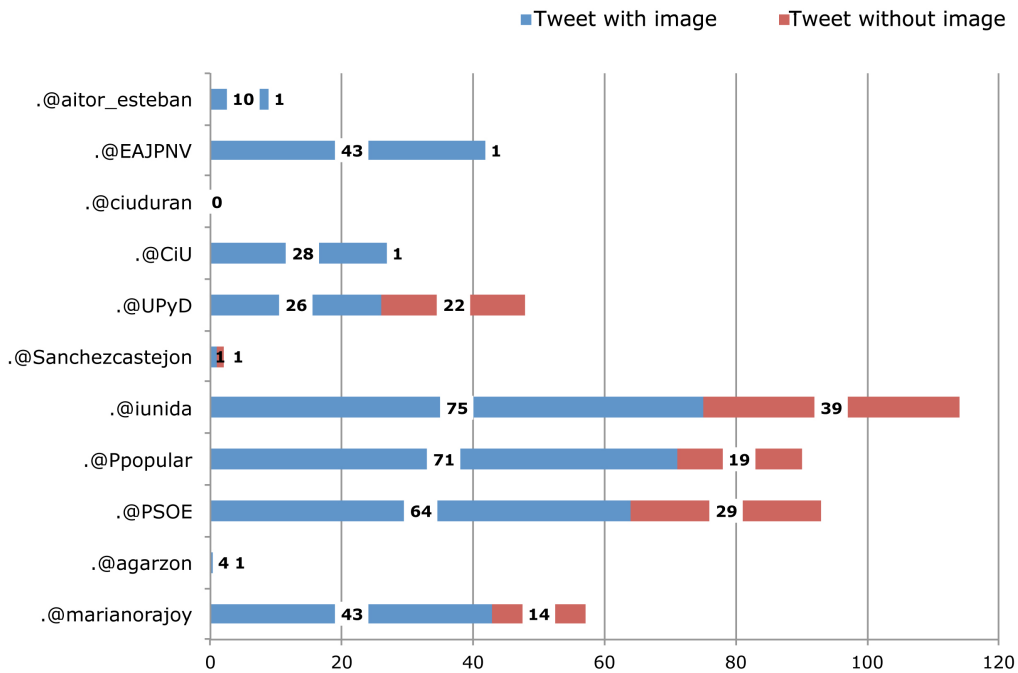
Once we realised that all graphic tweets were posted on the first day of the Debate, when speeches were taking place in Parliament, we recoded timing (time and date) in a single variable depending on the schedule issued by the Parliament. In this way, we registered who was taking the floor when the tweet was published or if it was posted before, in-between, or after the Debate. Apart from recoding variables, this phase focused on establishing the interaction rate of each of the analysed political profiles. This synthetic index helped relate the projection that the content published by a specific profile achieved (average number of retweets and likes) with the number of followers to determine the degree of engagement of the community with the sender.

In a nutshell, the methodological design was based on aspects that Gladwell (2002) deems key for the virality of content and its conversion into a meme: origin of the message (parties-political leaders), the message itself (content-formal aspects) and context (Debate-speeches in Parliament).

5. Results

The analysis of the social conversion around #DEN2015 has helped highlight the communicational strategies developed during the Debate by the main parties in Parliament. Profiles such as @iunida, @PSOE and @PPopular show much activity around this *hashtag* (114, 93 and 90 tweets respectively), in stark contrast with the participation of @UPyD or regional parties in this social conversation. Regarding the posting of images, the weight they have in the strategy of @UPyD is remarkable - this profile included graphic content in 45% of their tweets (22 postings). Visual communication is also quite relevant in the profile of @iunida, which included images in 35% of their updates (39 postings). The other end of the spectrum is shown by PNV and CiU, whose participation with the hashtag #DEN2015 is limited to the dissemination of each party's images.

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Chart 2. Nr of Tweets by political parties and leaders with their own parliamentary group

The personal accounts of political leaders and spokespersons were neglected during the Debate, with minimal or no participation in the social conversation. The profiles of Sánchez and Garzón just published a picture of their time preparing their speech for Parliament: alone @Sanchezcastejon and with his team @agarzon. The exception in this case was @marianorajoy, an account with much activity during the Debate with 57 tweets; 24.5% of which included some graphic content (14 postings).

The presence of @marianorajoy in the social conversation around #DEN2015 can be linked to the fact that this is a joint profile –as the account itself claims, tweets posted there are by the President and his team– versus the personal [at least in appearance] character of the remaining profiles.

Table 1. Profiles by Nr of followers, average interaction and interaction rate[1]

	Followers	Average interactions	Interaction coefficient
.@marianorajoy	745.238	380	0,05
.@agarzon	320.661	269	0,08
.@PSOE	225.545	211	0,09
.@Ppopular	223.247	326	0,15
.@iunida	153.473	280	0,18
.@Sanchezcastejon	144.915	349	0,24
.@UPyD	122.779	58	0,05
.@CiU	65.441	41	0,06
.@EAJPNV	11.009	4	0,04

[1] In order to find out the interaction rate we used mean interaction values (mean of the sum of retweets and likes) divided by the number of followers of each profile.

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All tweets with images were retweeted and/or liked by Twitter users, that being the reason why we considered them memes. In this case, the most remarkable memetic potential was shown by the tweets issued by the profiles of the two major parties in Parliament (@PPopular-@MarianoRajoy; @PSOE and @Sanchezcastejon; and Izquierda Unida(@iunida and @agarzon). The images posted by these accounts reached a high level of web dissemination with over 200 interactions -with retweets and likes- per image.

In this sense, there is some correspondence between the number of followers and the influence of content on the web, even if this is not a direct relationship. Profiles such as @Sanchezcastejon @iunida and @PPopular show the most engaged communities in the sample, with a coefficient far superior to that of accounts with a higher number of followers.

5.1. *Timing of the interactions*

Even though the Debate took place in two days, the sample images were published during the first day; the day when the speeches of the parties analysed (except for PNV) took place. The moment of peak activity in the social conversation was during the speech by the President. In the development of their speeches, the parties in Parliament engaged in the social conversation, posting a total of 43 images.

The speech by Mariano Rajoy matched the moment of peak activity in the accounts @PPopular and @marianorajoy, who posted 9 and 13 graphic memes respectively. However, it was @PSOE who ranked first in such updates with the posting of 14 images criticising the government's performance. This criticism was shared by the tweets of @iunida and @UPyD during the President's speech (3 and 4 images respectively), a moment where these profiles were playing their role as opposition.

In the case of the @PPopular, this account only focused on criticising the PSOE. During the speech of the Socialist Party leader, this profile posted seven memes to undermine the credibility of Sánchez, while such postings did not happen for Garzón or Díez. The activity registered in @PSOE during the President's speech and at @PPopular during the Socialist Party leader's speech highlight how a two-party system is still very much expected in Spanish politics. This conception, which in the socialist strategy could fit their role as opposition, does not actually match the current political scenario of great vitality and new emerging parties. In fact, @UPyD criticises this conception of a two-party system when using an image of the pact between the President and the opposition leader to show their failure in implementing an antiterrorist policy.

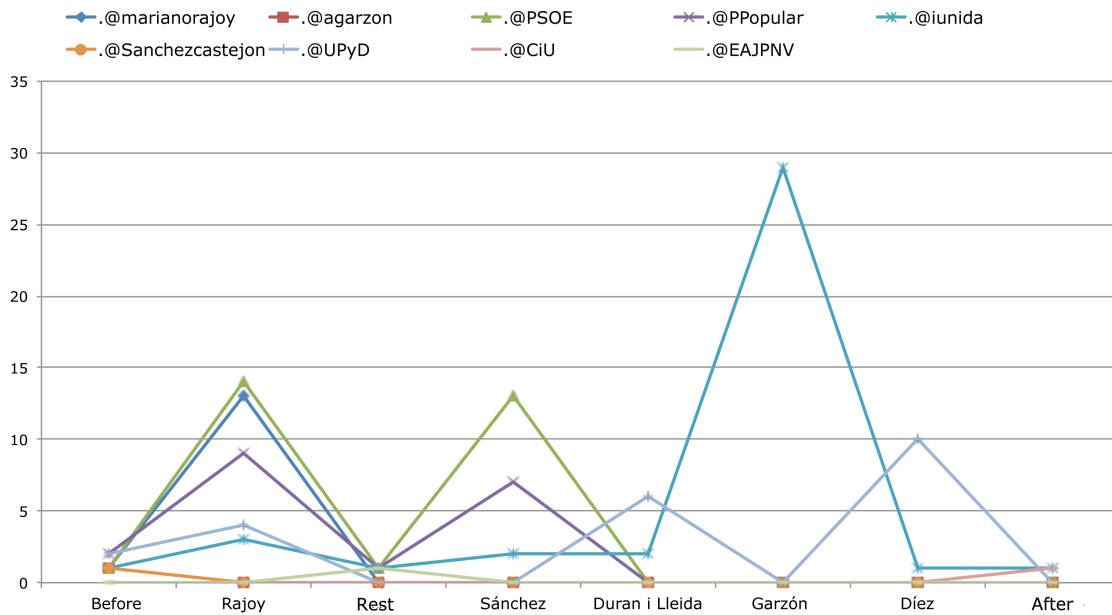**Images 1 and 2.** Original picture of the Pact against terrorism and meme

Source: Telecinco.es and @UPyD

This tweet replicates the institutional picture of the Pact Against Terrorism signed by both leaders the weeks prior to the Debate to construct a new text gathering the connotations of the original meme, as part of their criticisms in the face of lack of resources by law enforcement to fight terrorism.

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Chart 3. Types of Images in #DEN2015 per posting time

Apart from the social interaction during the President's speech, the moment of peak activity in the profiles analysed happened when the different leaders took the floor (except for @CiU and @EAJPNV). Most of the graphic content posted by those profiles was used as highlights of the speech and visual support for the data, arguments or slogan of their spokesperson in Parliament. The activity of @iunida needs to be underscored in this light: this profile published 24 macro images with quotations during Garzón's speech. The communication strategy of the Partido Popular was to leave the account @marianorajoy to make comments about the President's speech, while @PPopular was kept for other types of content.
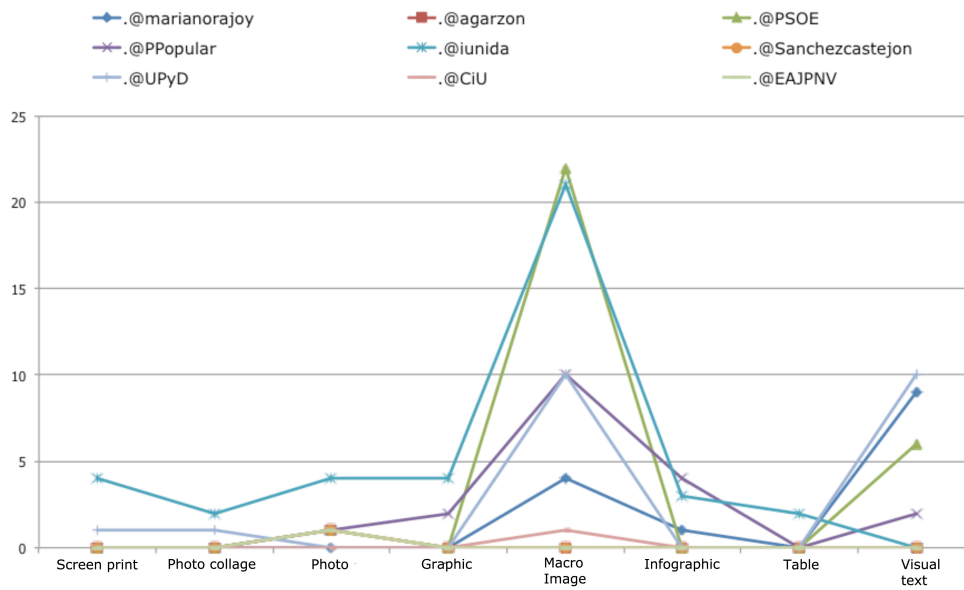
5.2. *Image type and content*

Same as for the web, the most recurring meme typology of politicians' profiles on Twitter are macro images, present in 53% of the analysed tweets (68 publications). The presence of these images in the 2.0 political discourse indicates appropriation by the analysed profiles of image and text compositions that are very stereotypical. Such appropriation is shown in the careful design of content and font use as a distinctive element of each political party, against the standard macro images generated by users and the use of Impact as the memetic [typographic] font (Brideau & Berret, 2014).

Ranking second in incidence in the sample are visual texts, present in 21% of postings (27 tweets). The value these figures, ideas or slogans of parties had in the Debate in the real world (off-line) were translated into the relevance of these visual arrangements in on-line discourse. These arrangements once again show how fonts are used as a distinctive element by political parties.
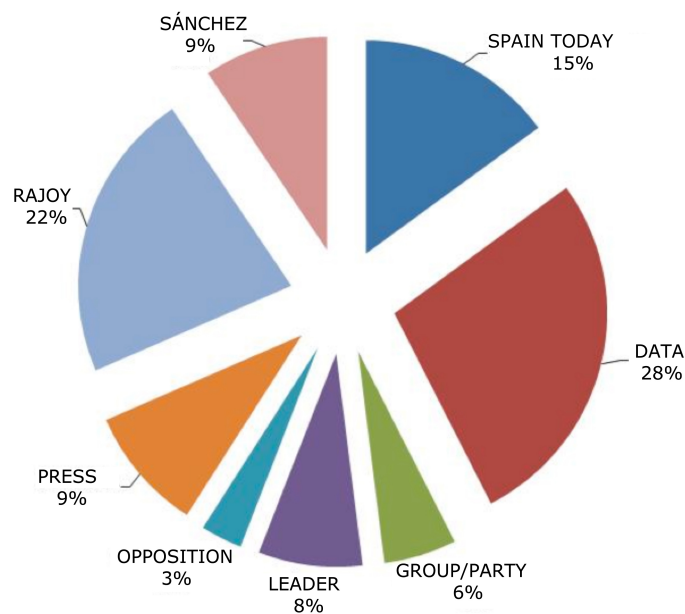
Despite their limited presence in the sample, the use of pictures (9 tweets) is remarkable for all analysed profiles (except for @CiU). These images can be casual shots taken during the preparation-arrival to the Debate, pictures of TV broadcasting or replication of memes.

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Chart 4. Types of Images in #DEN2015 per profile of origin

Regarding the sender, @iunida becomes the profile that has published more image types and with higher frequency. In their social strategy, this party has only left out visual texts, a common resource for @UPyD, @marianorajoy, @PSOE and @PPopular (with 10, 9, 6 and 2 tweets respectively). The most widespread visual content disseminated by @iunida are macro images, present in 21 tweets; however, it is the @PSOE who is the leader for this type of posting (22 tweets). Regarding @UPyD and @marianorajoy, they rank first in the dissemination of visual texts, with 10 and 9 postings respectively. The weight this typology of graphic content has in @marianorajoy supports their strategic and differentiated use of this account versus @PPopular.

Chart 5. Content of images posted around the *hashtag* #DEN2015

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Just like in the Debate off-line, graphic tweets focused on different topics of the political and social agenda (labour, health, education, social benefits, etc.) These topics were addressed through a limited array of graphic representations. Factual data, present in 35 images, were remarkably present in the discourse of political profiles around #DEN2015. These arrangements were used to support the Government's performance (15 tweets by @marianorajoy and @PPopular), speak against it (18 tweets by @iunida and @UPyD) or undermine the previous government (2 tweets by PPopular). Political profiles of the opposition not only used concrete figures, but showed a snapshot of current Spain through visual references to the precarious economic and social situation (19 images) and headlines (12 tweets).

The role of Rajoy as leader of the PP and representative of the Government became a visual resource for 28 graphic postings, out of which 18 used images of the President critically and even ironically, with ridiculous postures or facial expressions, to disapprove of his performance. Likewise, the Socialist Party leader is a regular resource for memes in the sample (8 positive ones and 4 negative). This trend to use Rajoy and Sánchez as visual references once again underlines the polarisation between two parties in Spanish politics.

Despite the fact that the memes published by political profiles do not follow the principle of non-attribution typical of such content, we tried to analyse the inclusion of elements that may help link them to a specific party. This analysis unmasked how, although there is a balanced presence of identified and non-identified images, the latter have reached higher virality on Twittter.

Table 2. Memes with the Highest Repercussion

| PROFILE	DAY	HOUR	TYPOLOGY	CONTENT	IDENTIFICATION	RETWEET	FAVOUR.	TOTAL INTERACTIONS
.@marianorajoy	24-feb	12:10	Infographic	Figure	NO	653	208	861
.@Ppopular	24-feb	13:28	Image Macro	Rajoy	NO	565	212	777
.@iunida	24-feb	17:16	Screen print	Opposition	NO	552	157	709
.@Ppopular	24-feb	16:59	Infographic	Data	YES	579	92	671
.@iunida	24-feb	13:42	Photo	Lider	NO	465	205	670
.@iunida	24-feb	17:31	Image Macro	Lider	NO	392	164	556
.@marianorajoy	24-feb	12:33	Visual text	Figure	NO	425	128	553
.@iunida	24-feb	12:59	Image Macro	Rajoy	NO	372	168	540
.@iunida	24-feb	17:21	Image Macro	Press	YES	368	124	492
.@marianorajoy	24-feb	12:40	Visual text	Data	NO	389	102	491
.@iunida	24-feb	12:55	Table	Data	NO	396	93	489
.@marianorajoy	24-feb	12:36	Visual text	Data	NO	372	117	489
.@Ppopular	24-feb	16:48	Image Macro	Sánchez	NO	356	132	488
.@marianorajoy	24-feb	12:23	Image Macro	Rajoy	NO	352	94	446
.@iunida	24-feb	20:05	Photo	Presente	NO	326	112	438
.@PSOE	24-feb	16:15	Photo	Sánchez	NO	332	98	430
.@iunida	25-feb	20:40	Image Macro	Rajoy	NO	290	139	429
.@iunida	24-feb	17:28	Screen print	Lider	NO	293	103	396

The twenty images posted by the most relevant political profiles in #DEN2015 show a predominance of content without attribution (18 tweets). This predominance could lead to the conclusion that content not directly linked to parties can achieve wider dissemination on the web with the support of users without political affiliation.

However, if we look at the senders of those memes, there is a polarisation of web users around the Debate on-line. PP (@PPopular and @marianorajoy) and IU become the more influential senders, a fact that reflects the identification of web users of/with the messages sent.

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5.3. *Hashtags*

Hashtags are key components in 2.0 political discourse likely to become memes (McKelvey and Menczer, 2013). The inclusion of these labels in the images or associated text, offers some value for an analysis of the ideals of political memes.

Chart 6. Main Hashtags
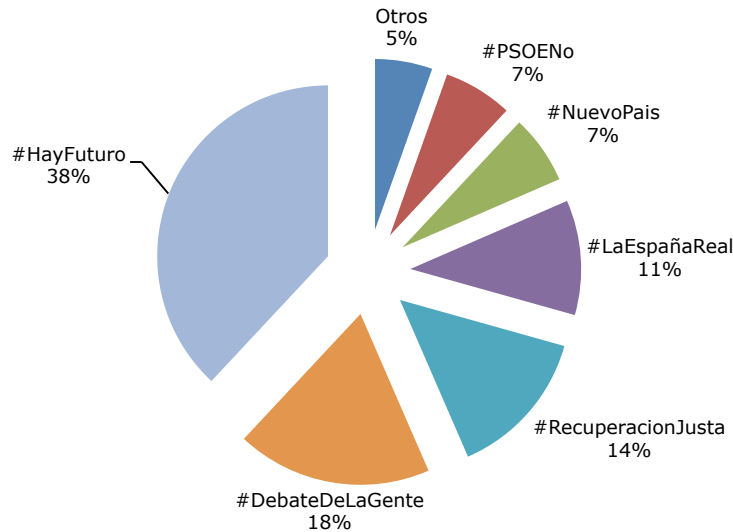
Apart from the promotion of humorous hashtags (#RajoyCaloret), the selection and use of these tags in the on-line Debate implies an ideological positioning, intention or reading of political matters. The on-line strategy of UpyD appeals to social participation in the Debate. Through different 2.0 tools, this party gathered citizen's issues that were disseminated on Twitter with the hashtag #debatedelagente (people's debate). The PSOE decided to organise its on-line discourse around two labels: #recuperacionjusta (fair recovery) and #laespañareal (real Spain). These hashtags refer two a double perspective on the economic and social reality of Spain: that of the party and that of citizens, who recall their own experiences with the health system, migration, unemployment, etc. to show #laespañareal. Regarding IU, they used the hashtag #nuevopais (new country). This label links the proposals for change advocated for by Garzón in Parliament with his party's campaign. This diversity of hashtags reflects the fragmentation of messages and communication strategies of the opposition and highlights its lack of unity, even when they are addressing similar topics.

Regarding the PP and their 2.0 strategy, they have articulated it around #HayFuturo (There is a future). This is a tag used by @PPopular and @marianorajoy to defend the government, bring to the table the proposals of the President in Parliament or to point towards the improvements made in comparison to the previous Socialist government. In this line, they have used other hashtags to announce their success #3MillonesEmpleos (3 Million Jobs) or criticise the role of the main opposition party #psoeno. The impact of #HayFuturo and its appropriation by the opposition in the on-line Debate has validated its position as meme. This label has lived a process of replication both by @PSOE as well as by @UPyD that has brought new meaning to the hashtag.

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6. Conclusions

Analysing the participation of the main parties and leaders around #DEN2015 has showed how images are strategically used on their Twitter discourse. Careful selection of themes and representation, their interest in the Spanish Twitter sphere, has favoured the dissemination of these images on the web, fostering their conversion in memes. These political memes present a more careful manifestation than other content on the web, although they emulate the structures and resources in the production of the original image, a process that allows for –more or less direct– sender identification. Their features are in contrast with the principle of collective creation and non-attribution that Davison (2012) considers inherent to memes on the web.

While political profiles have developed different communication strategies around #DEN2015, the analysis performed helped draw attention to two trends in the construction of a manifestation and ideal of memes: strengthening the ideas advocated for by their leader in Parliament, and criticising the Government's performance or, in the case of the Partido Popular, the main party in the opposition.

This struggle between PP and PSOE brings to Twitter the persistence of a two-party conception in Spanish politics at a time when great vitality and fragmentation are commonplace. The projection of this conception onto the on-line political arena is noteworthy, as this is a context that is apparently more plural, in which classical agents have lost importance against new actors –political forces, citizen's movements, users– who are spearheading the social conversation.

The hashtags translated into images show a polarisation in the political sphere already mentioned by Barberá and Rivero (2015). While the party in power gave prominence to its achievements through #HayFuturo, the opposition criticised their performance and presented their proposals under different hashtags not found in the discourse of other parties. The exception in this case is #HayFuturo, whose appropriation by the opposition implies resignifying the hashtag, which is in and of itself a meme according to McKelvey and Menczer (2013).

The divergence in how images are used by political profiles on Twitter, and their memetic potential, show some fissures regarding the statement by Padró-Solanet and Carenal (2008) that social media allow for a level playing field for majority and minority political forces. While @iunida and @UPyD have managed a better appropriation of the platform and visual language in terms of the scope and repercussion of their content, the majority political parties still rank higher than @UPyD, @CiU and @EAJPNV.

The memetic potential of some profiles is based on the size of on-line communities but above all on higher engagement of these followers with a specific party-leader. Such engagement matches the viral distribution model proposed by Dafonte-Gómez (2014): the convergence between the message disseminated and the psychological or emotional needs of potential resenders.

In a nutshell, in line with Knobel & Lankshear (2007), studying political memes allows for a concretisation of ways of thinking, behaviours and actions both in terms of the political party sending them as well as the community who attaches value to them.

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