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Participation and topics of discussion of Spaniards in the digital public sphere

Abstract

Since the seventies, in Western democracies, communication technologies and current social networks have attracted academic debate on the ability of these devices to promote an extension of the public sphere. The recent launch of Twitter, as well as other social networks, has produced an extensive discussion about their ability to promote the different dynamics of public participation to the mediated public space. This study seeks to explore the discussion on topics involving Spaniards in the digital public sphere, looking specifically at the participation in Twitter and two digital newspapers: *elpais.com* and *elmundo.es*. Through an analysis of their quantitative and qualitative content, 633 comments published on both Spanish most read online newspapers, and on their social profiles on Twitter have been studied. On the second phase, 240 Trending Topics have been collected, and their correlation with the themes of the barometers of the Center for Sociological Research (CIS) has been analyzed. Our research suggests that Spaniards do not generally discuss about their political concerns on Twitter. The main themes listed in the CIS Barometer –immigration, education, social issues, the government and individual parties or politicians, etc.– correspond to the topics registered in the online newspapers debate, but not in the social network. In general terms, the discussion of the Spaniards on Twitter is focused on soft news and the argumentation of their opinions is rather limited.

Keywords

Online newspapers, social networks, deliberation, Twitter, *El País*, *El Mundo*, trending topics

1. Introduction

The new role played by users in a wider and more participatory public sphere through social networks and online journalism has become the subject academic interest since last decades (Waisbord, 2012; Castells, 2009; Norris, 2012; Hanitzsch, Hanusch & Lauerer, 2016). For instance, among the classical questions for scholarly discussion, Dahlberg (2001) indicated that the Internet has the potential to expand such a public

space; however, this growth is influenced by factors such as the limitations of Internet access in some areas due to insufficient infrastructure. On the other hand, in Mazzoleni's opinion (2001), participatory democracy is opposed to the lack of interest of many citizens towards political, economic, and social issues.

Civic participation in democratic systems is not a contemporary precept whose appearance necessarily involves the use of the Internet. In fact, Held (1991) considers that guaranteeing public debate where people express their own preferences is a tradition that has remained since classical democracies. Thus, the choice of this digital context in order to perform an analysis of the public sphere does not provide an exemption from the study of classical theories about the role of media in democracy, which were written before the advent of the Internet. With this analysis, we intend to contribute to the larger debate on the impact of ICTs in the disappearance of the central role of the media from people's concerns (Waisbord, 2012). Furthermore, we wonder if the characteristics of this new Net debate are able to achieve Habermas' ideal of public discussion between divergent opinions that aim to reach an agreement (Dahlberg, 2007).

Exploring journalistic interventionism (Hanitzsch, 2007), this paper seeks to enquire the analysis on whether the public space on the Internet, which has not been influenced by newspapers, means a change in the participatory and deliberative behaviour of citizens. As a consequence, we have studied the main concerns expressed via social networks without the filter of the media and, by extension, without editorial hierarchy of news, bearing in mind the question raised by Davis (1999): Whether the greater amount of information accessible through the Internet generates more ethical commitment on the part of its users.

2. Background

Scholarly discussion has focused on the extent to which digital tools facilitate civic participation, without the monopoly of traditional newspapers, since the emergence of ICTs in the 1970s. In this context, authors such as Dahlberg (2001) or Fuchs (2013) consider it necessary to reclaim the classical definition of public sphere proposed by Habermas (1962), so as to prove its application to the new space in the Internet.

The space on the Internet where different social groups interact and communicate has been called "virtual" or "online community" (Fuster, 2012b). Meanwhile, Rheingold (2000), who was among the first authors to use this term in 1993, identifies a virtual community as a dynamic entity in the social network space where users meet and exchange information and knowledge.

Although conditions have changed since the early theories of O'Reilly (2005), Norris (2012) argues that the functions of the mass media had been overtaken by the interactive communication of social media. These platforms have been designed to allow not only individual interactions, but also more complex ones.

Global platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube, as well as their equivalent social networking sites in different local areas, clearly reflect the public face of social media (Norris, 2012). Therefore, recent studies have focused on the phenomenon of social networks as tools capable of developing communities, rather than on the informative intermediation in newspapers.

Taking this context into account, the main objective of this article is the study of deliberation as a form of participation in social platforms of Spanish media. To do this, we analyze the relation between Trending Topics and issues published in CIS Barometer in order to answer if political concerns engross debate in decentralized social networks. However, results show that these hashtags are not always related to political, economical and social affairs but also with sports, public figures and programs broadcasted in mass media.

In a second phase, we investigate comments of Internet users posted in digital newspapers (*El Mundo* and *El País*) and in their social profiles on Twitter (@elmundoes and @el_pais) with the goal of comparing with characteristics of Habermas' concept of public sphere. Firstly, we analyze the coherence of messages. In general terms, dialogue is focused on the main topic discussion. Secondly, we check the interaction between users and we point that there are a scanty interpellation, but replies normally disagree with their interlocutor, which is a dynamic close to Habermas' normative model of public sphere.

In a third section, argumentation is considered, where conclusions point that conversations are far from reach a rational-critical ideal. Finally, we explore topics of most commented news in social networks and online newspapers, and their similarity with CIS Barometer and Trending Topics. Data determine that the pieces are more related with the sociological survey, even if they are published in Twitter. Theoretical frame of this fieldwork is developed in following sections.

2.1. *Participation of citizens via web tools*

Participation, understood as a public statement of actions and opinions of citizens, is considered a basic element in Western democracies: it is one of the basic conditions for citizens to organize and include themselves in political life (Held, 1991). The Internet has the potential to create the scenario for this participation and facilitate the interaction among its members. Hartz-Karp, Balnaves, & Sullivan (2012) argue that the Internet is increasingly being considered a way to connect people with politics.

Expectations for this new technology could result in greater ethical commitment on the part of its users, a growing interest in the debate, and a closer connection between politicians and their electorate (Hartz-Karp et al., 2012). However, the results of academic research differ on the relationship between users and the tools provided by the Internet, ranging from cybernetic optimism to technological scepticism.

Optimists such as Lévy (2004), welcomes the effects of new technologies, as they provide users more freedom of expression. He argues that the forums launched in the early years of the century, such as www.politik-digital.de, yougov.com or politique-digitale.fr, have allowed people to deliberate with other citizens. Lévy further argues that ICTs also increase users' interest in public affairs and strengthen their capacity to organize socially. Along these lines, Shirky (2011) states that free and global access to the dissemination of information has resulted in greater freedom of assembly: social tools provide a wider range of users with the necessary tools to share, cooperate, and coordinate their actions: the author takes the protest against a fraudulent election in Moldova, coordinated by text message, Facebook, and Twitter, who suppose the loss of power or the Communist Party as an example. The online communities created from these platforms can be understood as a sign of the reinforcement of civil society, which contributes to the creation of a more participative public debate (Fuster, 2012b).

Social media has become an essential part of the actual lifestyle, institutions, activists, NGOs, citizens, etc. (Shirky 2011). Consequently, Papacharissi (2002) defines the "essence of technology" as the ability of a network to connect users from different countries and cultures: the virtual public sphere reflects new dynamics of political discussion which involve the participation of a larger and more diverse number of agents. She acknowledges that the majority of the online political debate seems no different in form from face-to-face interaction; however, ICTs have managed to virtually gather people who otherwise would have never meet to discuss politics (Papacharissi, 2002).

Hartz-Karp et al. agree with Papacharissi, arguing that the development of relations between users, their coordination, and their cooperation do not depend on online participation. This is because all of them can also occur face to face, but "it rarely happens

due to the cost, time constraints and scheduling conflicts” (Hartz-Karp et al., 2012: 215-216). Online deliberation may therefore remove barriers for the engagement of citizens in political issues.

Others are more sceptical. Hartz-Karp et al. (2012) warn about the unlikelihood of a rapid change in the mechanisms for cooperation and decision-making. According to these authors, the changes generated by social networking sites are reflected on the role of citizens and institutions in the public sphere.

The idealization of the autonomy of citizens on the Internet has been criticized by Fuchs (2013), who thinks that the use of social networks could be employed as an instrument for coordination and cooperation between citizens, but will never replace direct action, which involve being physically present in a particular space and time (see also Vicente-Mariño, 2013).

Gladwell (2010) adds that actions and participations channelled through the Internet represent neither an effort nor citizens’ real demands for political decisions. Therefore, political participation through social networks does not succeed “by motivating people to make real sacrifice, but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make real sacrifice” (Gladwell, 2010: 4). He illustrates his statement with the economical effort of Internet profiles that donate money to charity in Darfur: “The Facebook page of the Save Darfur Coalition has 1,282,339 members, who have donated an average of nine cents apiece” (Gladwell, 2010: 4).

According to Davis (1999), mobilization through the Internet is more an exception than a rule, even though some cases of citizen participation and organization occur and must be admired and supported. However, there are very few and sometimes do not result from the use of new technology. Campos-Domínguez and Silván (2012) do not consider the effect that ICTs have caused on the participation of citizens in public affairs significant; although they do not deny the modest contributions made to date as well as the possible new ones. They also agree with Davis that the researchers’ pessimism about the potential of the Web is a reflection of the reality of human behaviour (Davis, 1999).

2.2. *Deliberation in the digital public sphere*

The analysis of the opinions expressed by net surfers and their interrelation with statements posted on several platforms is linked to the debate on the use of deliberative instruments provided by the Internet. In other words, researchers are analyzing whether the selection of online information done by users creates a polarization that is detrimental to deliberation or a mobilization that is beneficial to democracy (Sterrett 2012).

Papacharissi (2002) can be found among the authors who exhibit a cyber-optimistic attitude to online deliberation. She values the Internet as an instrument to provide users with the necessary tools to interact with people from different regions, cultures or points of view during the debate. Likewise, Kim, Hsu and Gil De Zúñiga (2013) claim that interpersonal relations established in social networks enable dialogue via the Net. They insist that online debates have positive effects, especially for introverts and for those who are less politically active due to, among other reasons, the possibility of remaining anonymous. Using the data of the presidential election in USA in 2008, they show that “individuals low in extraversion tended to report higher levels of network heterogeneity when they reported greater amounts of social media use compared to those who are high in extraversion.” (Kim *et al.*, 2013: 508)

Campbell and Kwak (2011) consider that the levels of participation only increase when the links between different profiles show similar ideas. Therefore, both people who know each other and strangers tend to avoid the conflict in their political conversations (Eveland, Morey, & Hutchens, 2011). On the other hand, Sunstein (2009) argues that, when users

identify similar ideas on other net surfers, they tend to adopt a more radical position. It can be assumed that an effect of “polarization” occurs during debates i.e., users tend to adopt more radical points in order to confront opposite views so as not to seem vulnerable to the political tendencies of other users. Thus, participants tend to have more extreme ideas and join people with similar ideologies at the end of the debate. In the same vein, Wojcieszak points in her study that “among the 181 deliberators, the vast majority (88%) reported that their views had polarized during the discussion” and “substantially fewer participants either said that their views had not changed (7%)” or “reported moderating their priors (9%)” (2011:606).

Some authors suggest that selective web search is related to the development and cognitive reinforcement of individual opinions (Brundidge, 2010). Castells (2009) argues that people tend to select the information that specifically supports the decisions they were previously willing to take. He considers that the ability to choose between opposite pieces of information increases with the ability to use web tools appropriately. Dahlberg (2007) talks of “fragmentation” as the division of the Internet into groups with related political ideas. This attitude leads to the creation of small, uniform, and isolated departments where conflicts may be avoided thanks to the lack of interaction.

Thus, although Internet has provided new possibilities of obtaining a wider interaction among people without barriers of space and time, other facts related to the behaviour of netsurfers should be studied in order to examine the quality of the debate on the Net.

Moreover, although the methods of this investigation are similar for Twitter and cybermedias, it should be noted that each of these platforms have their own characteristics. According to Piscitelli (2005), the Net does not have a centralized structure, so the management of the information may depend on how this information is organized by platforms. Furthermore, social networks and digital newspapers present specific utilities for different public: in the last decades, because of the disappearance of traditional readers, electronic media has launched profiles in Twitter to allure younger users, among other characteristics (Lara, 2008).

2.3. The role of the media in the Internet

Waisbord (2012) indicates that new technological developments have threatened the central role of the media in public affairs. While political communication has granted the newspapers with a privileged position in the dissemination of information to society, researchers have warned of the possible reduction of the power journalists possess in this new online public sphere. The establishment of social media offers equal opportunities in the expression of speech and access to the debate to all users (Freelon, 2010). Gladwell (2010) argues that the emergence of the Internet, a non-hierarchical system with no authority exercising control, produces a horizontal and decentralized structure.

Criticism to the Internet as a public sphere also comes from the increasing but still limited evolution of its use in politics (Vicente-Mariño, 2013). According to a study, 28% of the themes that became Trending Topics in the social network Twitter in 2010 were related to entertainment, while 3% dealt with politics. The most used hashtags dealt with music and personal life (Fuchs, 2013).

Fuchs considers that as a consequence of this asymmetry in topics, the democratic capacity of this microblogging platform is limited due to the stratified attention and the specific characteristics of the capitalistic culture, which gives greater significance to what users find enjoyable and funny. Similarly, Davis (1999) considers that providing users with greater control and broader access to information with the Internet should not necessarily imply that their interests and political engagement increase.

A consequence of the decentralization of the web is the disappearance of an “inadvertent audience”, which Waisbord (2012) describes as the audience that discovers public affairs by unintentionally finding information about them. In this case, the problem that the Internet audience should face in order to obtain information about public affairs would not be the lack of information available, but the lack of interest to find it. Sartori (1998) believes that citizens’ lack of political concern comes from the habits and attitudes acquired with the use of television. According to him, a correct and interactive use of the Internet requires a mental capacity activated beforehand. Nevertheless, the exposure to audiovisual media has caused the arrival of culturally illiterate people who use the Internet to consume banal information, related, among other topics, to sports or pornography.

3. Research objectives and methods

Digital public sphere in Spain shows an interesting context of study, since the political and social situation of the country has led to increasing feelings of mistrust and disaffection towards institutions and their representatives (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Furthermore, technology in information and communication in Spain has been an interesting case of study because of the important role they play in political, economical and social issues during the 15M movement, thanks to their power of mobilization and protest (Fuster, 2012a; Sampedro & Lobera, 2014). Taking these issues into account and in relation to the themes set out in the literature review, we point to three different objectives: a) detect the extent or type of participation of users through social platforms, b) analyze what is the quality of the debate generated in the digital public sphere, and c) examine what discussion topics generate greater public activity on the social networks and online newspapers.

By registering data from online newspapers and social networks, we have obtained publications related to the topics of discussion and the quality of dialogues on the Internet. Thus, we have analyzed a total of 240 Trending Topics and compared them to the 10 concerns of Spaniards according to the barometers of CIS. We have obtained 633 messages of users, 320 from the online newspapers and 313 from Twitter from the most discussed topics in the corresponding Twitter profiles of *El País* and *El Mundo*. In 3 cases, the sample is not larger because the total number of registered tweets does not reach 20.

During the first phase, we focus on the topics covered by the barometers of the CIS and Trending Topics. We test whether there were similarities between them, and if there is any correlation with the most commented topics on online newspapers and their social media profiles. Hence, we take the most regular top ten concerns of Spaniards in the barometers of the CIS from April to July 2014 –there are no CIS publications in August and September –. These themes were compared to the 40 Trending Topics collected during each of these months. The concerns expressed in Twitter were always collected during the same days of the week –Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday– from 22.00 to 23.00, when the largest Internet audience can be found, according to the 16th AIMC (Media Research Association) survey held among Internet users in February 2014.

During last decades, CIS has been carrying out periodic studies about the traditional mass media in Spain (Alcobendas, 1992). Mainly, scholars have been using these data as an information source in order to assess the influence of mass media on the concerns published on CIS as topics. However, the exploration of the relation between mass media and CIS is emerging, and this investigation attempts to approach the relationship between the Trending Topic in Twitter and the Spanish survey.

At this point, it should be noticed that the classical theory of agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) demonstrates the influence that mass media have in setting the parameters of public debate. Insights from this research can lead us to expect the topics prevalent on mass media platforms will be more closely correlated with the CIS. However, we want to check

how decentralization of the Internet (Waisbord, 2012), which is represented by Trending Topics, affects the preferences of users: if they continue discussing political, economic or social topics in the CIS, or they opt for another themes related with entertainment. To put in other words, we ask if media fail to introduce their issues on the agenda of the users on Twitter.

However, in line with the literature review, it should be noted that the probability of participation in newspapers reports and not news content are different: when the journalist who decides about information production, as in the media, the resource users and roles that can be purchased to select their preferences are limited (Sanchez-Gonzalez & Alonso, 2012). Therefore, this may affect the results of our analysis, in which we compare news with Trending Topics and CIS survey topics.

On the other hand, we analyze the characteristics of comments published by Internet users. To reach this goal, we identified discussions in Twitter and digital newspapers for four days in April and four days in September: on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. For each day, we select the new with more comments in the front page of the online newspapers mentioned before and the tweet with the largest number of replies published in the last 24 hours on @elmundo.es and @el_pais. We recorded 20 comments written in each piece, except in cases where the number of messages does not reach the maximum, as previously indicated. From each of the comments registered, we analyzed different features. The relationship with the piece –coherent comment or incoherent– their attitude to the issue of news –comical, critical, favourable or unfavourable– and their level of reasoning – non-reasoned comments, argumentative comments and argumentative comments with evidences– were the selected variables that allowed us to explore different results in this particular study, as it is detailed below.

Choosing Twitter as tool of participation of the newspapers is due to the appropriation of social networks that traditional newspapers have done, so they attempt to develop its potential, as Sánchez-Gonzalez and Alonso (2012) indicated. However, according to the same authors, it should be noted that these social networks create their own virtual communities in many cases. These groups do not have the same behaviour as media's readers, so it should be remarked that the kind of participation depends on the attitude of diverse sort of net surfers of social media (Davis, 1999). Thus, we select the news depending on the comments they have because this criterion is more related with the one studied in this article: deliberation, not other passive forms of political action, such as being informed. Despite of the limitations of this methodology, it affords us to obtain empirical data that we organize in relation to the structure or the theoretical part and research objectives.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Trending Topics are related to sports, entertainment and public figures

We have faced some difficulties when identifying coincidences between Twitter trends and the main concerns of Spaniards expressed in the CIS's barometers, collected from the information given by the platforms during six months. This is due to the fact that the concerns of the Barometer are expressed in general items, while Trending Topics refer to more specific topics.

Thus, the indicators of the main concerns of Spaniards rarely vary from one month to another, also in European Parliament elections (March, 2014). According to the citizens, "Unemployment", "Corruption and tax evasion", "Economic issues", "Political parties, politics, and politicians in general", "Health", "Education", "Social issues", "Immigration", "Cutbacks" and "The government, political parties, and specific politicians" are among the ten main problems of Spain and occupy the same position almost every month. It is only in

June when “The government, political parties and specific politician” is replaced by “Problems related to job-quality” in the ranking.

Table 1. Example of an analysis table

| 22:00 08/04/14 | | |
|----------------|---|----------------------------------|
| | CIS Concerns | Trending Topics |
| 1 | Unemployment | #wewanttovote |
| 2 | Corruption and tax evasion | Come on Dortmund |
| 3 | Economic issues | #UnilateralStatementIndependence |
| 4 | Political parties, politics, and politicians in general | #reAMUNTada |
| 5 | Health | #DebatConsultaTV3 |
| 6 | Education | Pepe and Illarra |
| 7 | Social Issues | #ABailarEH |
| 8 | Immigration | Reus |
| 9 | Cutbacks | Marta Rovira |
| 10 | The Government, political parties, and politicians in general | Signal Iduna Park |

Source: own elaboration

Trending Topics tend to switch with more frequency, since they show different topics every day. Furthermore, the results obtained from the CIS and Twitter show slight coincidence, as the topics of the Barometer are usually more open and they can include in their statements the specific proposals posted on the social network. Hence, trends such as #DeclaracioUnilateralIndependencia (#UnilateralStatementIndependence), Gonzalez* Pons (sic.), #bankianomanipulesmas (#bankiadonotmanipulateanymore), Carlos Fabra or #GallardónDimisión (#GallardonResignation) could be classified within “Political parties, politics, and politicians in general”, “Corruption and tax evasion” or “Economic problems”.

However, this is not the most common type of Trending Topics. In our record we have been able to observe a large number of comments dealing mainly with sports –#AtletiBarca, Unicaja– leisure, entertainment, and users’ personal information –#PelículasConBerenjena (#FilmsWithAubergine), #MiPreguntaTontaEs (#MySillyQuestionIs) – public figures –Hugh Jackman, Mariló Montero– programs broadcasted in mass media –#RioEnCuatro (#RioInCuatro), #UltimaHoraFinalSV (#LastHourSVFinal)–, etc.

In a tangential relation to politics, we observe Trending Topics dealing with parodies and humour about specific politicians, such as #InventaUnaMentiraSobrePabloIglesias (#MakeUpALieAboutPabloIglesias), #RajoyMariquita (#SissyRajoy). Therefore, while CIS’s barometers normally deal with political, social and economic issues, Spain’s most popular tweets are related to soft news and infotainment.

In summary, the type of participation of users through social platforms is not always related to political, economical and social affairs. These results place doubt on the extent to which social media is capable of involving people in political debates. The data show that a virtual public sphere is not essential to accomplish a political debate, but it depends on different factors, as the platform in which people decide to sign in. Although in a tentative way, it is possible to suppose that only net surfers who are previously interested in politics decide to participate in digital newspapers and comment in their news, more related to CIS Barometer (Davis, 1999).

These results may not be necessarily considered as a negative factor of a democratic discussion. According to Mansbridge (1999: 214), “snort of derision” is also a “political act”. The author states that “everyday talk” should be recognize as a part of deliberation, as in democracy is essential to incorporate citizens in the centre of public arena. Thus, concepts of “good” and “bad” topics of discussion must be heavily revised, and Habermas’ conception,

which works as normative model in this analysis, is not the only valid interpretation of deliberation.

4.2. *Quality of the debate: coherence and opposition are frequent, argumentation is scarce*

4.2.1. *Tendency to thematic coherence*

This analysis establishes evidence for the high degree of coherence present in the comments in relation to the pieces of news offered by media. This ratio of coherence remained consistent regardless of the platform or media examined. Thus, 70% is reached in the case of *El País* online; 80% in the online newspaper *El Mundo*; 83.4% in the social profile @el_pais; and 84% in @elmundoes. In general terms, users' contributions related to the piece represent 79.3% of the sample, while 20.5% are unrelated comments.

In fact, only in specific cases, the number of incoherent comments are as significant such as in "Bárceñas extends 'PP black money' to all provinces and regions," from elpais.com, where 65% of comments had no relation with the piece of news, or "Felipe VI in his debut at the UN: 'Count on Spain to defend democracy in the world'" from @el_pais, where the number of unrelated comments reached 50%.

After taking the variable of users' attitude into consideration, we find a significant difference between the comic mood in incoherent comments (23.3%) and in coherent comments (11.8%). However, while critic messages are usually coherent (11.8%), incoherent critiques are non-existent (0%). These data could be related to Sustein's (2010) theory, which states that a set of brief comments tends to reinforce the majority's dynamic in a online conversation.

Having a rational attitude and focusing on discussion topics are two of the characteristics of the deliberative model of democracy described by Freelon (2010), who is inspired in Habermas' theory, as the author recognizes. This is not the only prototype to measure dialogue on the Net and the existence of communitarian and liberal individualist model should be taken into consideration in further research. Other features of this communicative model pointed by the author, such as rational-critical argument, public issue focus, inter-ideological questioning, and inter-ideological reciprocity, are included in other sections. This normative model helps us to study the quality of de debate, understating this as a closer approach to the indicators of Freelon (2010).

4.2.2. *Opposition is the most common attitude among the interactions*

The results of analyzing the users' dialogues on online newspapers and social networks show minority number or interactions, as 57.5% of the pieces of news do not have any interpellation. Among comments with answer, opposition (19.7%) is more common than replies in favour of exposed arguments (8.7%). It is also shown a difference between platforms, as online newspapers have a higher number answers with a more focused aim. While in elmundo.es and elpais.com the percentage of comments without a reply reaches 47.5%, 67.7% remain without answers in @el_pais and @elmundoes. Furthermore, the most common replies in online newspapers show opposition (29.7%) while the majority of replies in social networks cannot be considered with the specific goal to agree or disagree their interlocutors (13.7%).

As regards to attitude in interactions, the negative views are predominant both in comments showing agreement (58.2%) and showing opposing views (70.4%). Being pessimistic in their posture is a general tendency to the pots of users in social media, as comments without replies are mainly negative too (56.6%). However, in the case of

interactions that cannot be classified as agreement or disagreement, which have been grouped as “Other”, most of the attitudes are comical (37.1%). The reason for this is that in many cases humorous replies do not only support or refute an opinion, but also continue the joke or ironic comment of another user. This behaviour is close to the “cascade”, described by Sustain (2010) in previous section.

One example of that theory is the conversation of an array of Twitter’s profiles, as at first they ironically critique the topic of the news but later they write about a different subject with simply a funny intention: “I ask for tickets to all Champions’ final matches from here to eternity. And fried eggs”, says @Nurielles, and @martindonato answers her: “I want someone to film a TV series about Valencia C.F. Based on the true story. They would have already watched True Detective and breaking bad” (sic.).

This behaviour is in the same vein as results of Trending Topics explained above, such as #SissyRajoy. These also show a relation between a conversation about political arena and jokes and humour. Within the comments showing opposition and a negative attitude, it is necessary to emphasize the ones used to criticize and offend other users. For example, “@Larra_K_Ladra look, I do not usually say silly things, but I normally hear them anyway (read in this case), for example, from you”, by miguelmen. Insults are not directly related to better or worse reasoned comments.

Lines of argument are rather limited in all types of interaction – non-reasoned comments always exceed 70%. However, the percentage of reasoned comments in replies showing opposition is more remarkable. 11.3% of the messages which do not encourage any kind of interaction are reasoned, 12.7% of them are reinforcing comments, and 26.4% of them show opposite views. Therefore, it seems that contradicting a comment or a viewpoint facilitates users’ willingness to argue.

Opposition as a popular interaction is contrary to the above ideas of authors as Brundidge (2010), Castells (2009) or Dahlberg (2007), who argue that net surfers have a propensity to search people who support their own point of view. Furthermore, the percentage of opposite comments that show argumentation brings online debate closer to the ideal of public sphere described by Habermas (1962).

4.2.3. *Argumentation in the dialogues is scant, especially in social networks*

The information obtained in this particular study demonstrates that argument tend to be limited: 89.6% of the comments recorded are non-reasoned opinions, 13.6% of messages are argumentative, and 0.2% of them are argumentative comments with evidences. Thus, unreasoned comments are majority in all platforms; however, the percentage of reasoned comments is higher in online newspapers than in Twitter: 38.4% and 45.3% in the case of *El País* and *El Mundo* compared to 16.3% and 0% in their social profiles. In fact, *El Mundo* is the only social media platform that contains reasoned comments with evidences. Among news with conversations with better argumentation it may be emphasized “Spain supports a ‘Federal Europe’ and not merely a ‘union of states’”, from *El País*, with messages like the following one:

I think that Spain, as a state, has thousands of internal problems to ‘dream’ with a Federal Europe. The current government has not been able to get an ‘abortion law’, or to make complete reform of its education system despite the high percentage of school failure [...]. If García-Margallo likes so much the federal way, he must begin by making federal a divided Spain in which there is no intention to dialogue and public debate (aleluya1931).

As we point above, comments expressing pessimistic point of view far exceeded the rest, so this is the most common attitude of users, regardless of the level of argumentation they express. Among these negatives messages, it is possible to highlight those which are

also offensive with the lead role of the news –“Fucking scoundrel IU [UL, United Left]” by @arcoo309–, with media –“The sinister yellow press rages, but it never hurts, the tabloids are known and it enhances the character” (falcarzfer)–, or with another users –“Hahahaha. Do not pay attention to ‘anti-fascist-Islamicfundamentalist’; he is drugged”, by Victorsedov–.

More interesting results are related to the argumentation of comical and critical messages, as they clearly show a diverse grade of reasoning depending on these attitudes. The number of comical replies is higher in non-reasoned comments (17%) than in reasoned ones (3.5%). This would reinforce the idea of Sunstein’s (2010) “cascade”, where users do not become engaged in the debate, but continue the funny messages of other users. Moreover, critical opinions show an opposite trend: the percentage of reasoned comments (26.7%) is higher than non-reasoned messages (6.6%). Sometimes, critical posts focus on the information presented by newspapers, such as: “@el_pais it’s clear as day that you do not say that this is hipercor ‘cause they didn’t pay you for advertising”, by bakignatus. This sort of posts is also relevant to prove changes in the public sphere where users are able to interact with media through the Internet.

In general terms, the scant number of reasoned messages may be interpret in line with Gladwell’s (2010) opinions, as it is shown that netsurfers are just motivated to write comments saying their opinion, but not to make a real effort to write an argument that greatly support their point of view.

4.3. Discussion topics in newspapers are closer to CIS Barometer

Checking the most commented topics on social networks and the online newspapers, it is found that online news bears a greater similarity with the concerns registered by the barometers of the CIS than with Trending Topics, even when the news are published in Twitter.

Table 2. Percentage of coincidence with CIS and Trending Topics

| | CIS Barometer | Trending Topics | Both CIS Barometer and Trending Topics | Neither CIS Barometer nor Trending Topics |
|-----------------|----------------------|------------------------|---|--|
| elpais.com | 62.5% | 12.5% | 12.5% | 37.5% |
| elmundo.es | 62.5% | 50% | 25% | 12.5% |
| @el_pais | 13% | 0% | 0% | 87.5% |
| @elmundoes | 50% | 12.5% | 12.5% | 50% |
| Average: | 47% | 18.7% | 12.5% | 46.4% |

An average of 47% of the pieces is related to any of the themes submitted by the Barometer: 62.5% in the case of elpais.com and elmundo.es and 50% in the case of @elmundoes. The profile of @el_pais is the only social media in which the relation does not reach 50% (13%). Headlines in connection with the barometers of the CIS mainly dealt with national policy and Spanish politicians –“The abortion law, the story of a failure” or “Esperanza Aguirre considers ‘out of proportion’ the argument about her traffic violation”– and characters related to corruption cases –“Bárceñas said that the PP [Popular Party] paid ‘always with undeclared incomes’ part of its electoral campaigns”–. Therefore, items such as “Political parties, politics, and politicians in general” or “Corruption and tax evasion”, given by the CIS, easily encompass all subjects.

In the case of Twitter's hashtags, the number of related news is lower (an average of 18.75%) and only in the case of *El Mundo* online does it reach 50%. *El País* and @elmundoes has a 12.5% of coincidence and in @el_pais this concordance is non-existent (0%). Thereupon, Trending Topics surprisingly have more similarity with online newspapers than with social profiles. The news linked to Trending Topics are scant, and they dealt with themes of strong popularity and controversy at this time in Spain, such as crimes –“Five perpetrated incidents and three failed attempts in less than a year”– or the independence of Catalonia –“Rajoy in the debate on independence: ‘There is an open door, and that is to start the initiative for constitutional reform’”–.

Therefore, it seems that CIS's barometers have more accuracy to encompass the topics of the media's agenda, since their proposals are more general than Trending Topics, which deal with more specific issues.

On the other hand, only 12.5% of analyzed pieces coincided with both concerns of Trending Topics and preoccupations registered by the Barometer. 12.5% of the pieces belong to @elmundoes and elpais.com and 25% to elmundo.es. Again, @el_pais does not reach a percentage in this variable (0%). Coincident news dealt with political issues and corruption with a significant impact on newspapers, such as a minister's resignation –“Gallardón leaves politics after being undermined in public by Rajoy”– or controversial corruption cases –“Pujol, in the Parliament: ‘I have not been a corrupt politician. I have never received anything apart from my salary as a president’” –.

Furthermore, 46.5% of the pieces of news are related neither to the Trending Topics nor to the main concerns of Spaniards in accordance with the CIS. In this case, @el_pais shows the higher percentage (87.5%), followed by @elmundoes (50%), elpais.com (37.5%) and elmundo.es (12.5%). Soft news generally constitute these last group of the analysis –“Brotherhoods ask the King and the Federation not to hold Final Cup on Easter”– along with sports –“Casillas pays his resistance to leave the club and Ancelotti replaces him with Navas against the Elche”– and also with international politics –“Kiev attempts to regain control in the East” or “Iranian President accuses western governments of favouring the spread of the Islamic State”–.

As in the previous sections, these results show how the topics of a decentralized platform have more subject variety than the concerns published in CIS. Thus, when newspapers have a central role in the debate on the Net, it is more likely to preserve a dialogue about political, economical and social concerns.

5. Conclusion and future research

Many of the results in this paper hold for pessimistic conceptions of participation and debate in the public sphere 2.0. Firstly, we have proved users' slim preference for issues related to political, social, and economic life of their country. Sports information, sensationalism, and soft news in general, are the types of news that generated higher levels of participation. This trend is more noticeable in Twitter profiles of newspapers, where the percentage of news related to the items of CIS's barometers is much lower.

It is worth mentioning that the presence of political content in Trending Topics is merely incidental. Thus, the concerns of Spaniards according to the barometers of the CIS are hardly represented on Twitter. As Fuchs (2013), we find that humour, entertainment, and other categories previously mentioned, usually dominate the discussion on this platform. This critique may be understood in line with an “oligarchic deliberative democracy”, in which a well-educated intellectual group decides the issued classified as common will (Tucker, 2008). However, focus on a public issue is one of the main characteristics of the deliberative model use in this analysis, which harbour a variety of topics as long as their deal with political and civic issues (Freelon, 2010).

Nonetheless, some of the data analyzed is closer to the characteristics of the debates in the ideal public space proposed by Habermas (1962). One of these characteristics is the fact that the comments are generally related to the topic proposed by the piece. Spontaneous speeches are scarce and do not significantly impair the quality of online debates.

Despite this last optimistic conclusion, we could claim that dialogue between users is infrequent, which is a behaviour that differs from the ideal of public sphere. In this case it is also important to distinguish between platforms, not only because interactions in online newspapers are more frequent than in Twitter, but also due to the different quality of them. On the one hand, the predominant comments in *elmundo.es* and *elpais.com* are those showing opposing views, a result that would deny the homogenization of the debate. On the other hand, a tendency to humour and fun in the interactions is predominant in *@el_pais* and *@elmundoes* which, far from showing a willingness to generate discussions, resembles the idea of the cascade (Sunstein, 2010).

Non-reasoned comments are also far from an ideal public sphere, especially in the case of social networks. This proves the users' lack of intention to create a well thought-out message, with an argument that reinforces a particular point of view during the debate. Moreover, there are no additional evidences in the comments even when those could enrich both the debate and the opinions of those who are commenting.

However, this finding should not be interpreted in a totally pessimistic view, since this study only reflects the result of the expression of Internet users' opinions, but not the process that drives them to write comments in the discussion. Authors like Goodin & Niemeyer (2003) emphasize that there is an "internal reflection", in which users value their reasons before publishing their messages during participation process. This internal process has not and approach in this study, but it must be taken into account to consider these conclusions.

In sum, online newspapers presents a nearer discussion to the ideal definition of public sphere given by Habermas (1962) than social networks: the former have a higher number of pieces of news related to CIS, generate more interaction, a higher number of replies, and arguments of higher quality. These results lead us to consider that, in this particular paper, the platform with more hierarchical participation out of the ones analyzed promotes a better debate than decentralized social networks.

However, as we wrote previously, Twitter and cybermedia are different spaces of participation. The first of them is not limited to journalistic information, so there is a greater possibility of Trending Topics without direct relation with hard news. Therefore, these subjects may be further from CIS Barometer as this social network generates their own content and has its own users. A study of socio-demographic variables may enhance to create a more inclusive perspective of the practices in Twitter and the relationship between net surfers, consume of newspapers, and participation in social media, as a complement of this study.

This paper aimed to approach the digital public sphere in the context of online newspapers and social networks. Public space, as a channel for expressing public opinion, is a traditional field of research for communication theorists –Lippman (2003), Habermas (1962), Noelle-Neumann (1995), Price (1994) –, which has included the growing interest risen by the arrival of the Internet and, by extension, online dialogues. The advent of the Web 2.0 has raised many questions and issues for discussion among researchers about the different platforms and forms of communication between users.

Being aware of the challenges in conducting a comprehensive review of the digital public sphere, we decided to focus our analysis on users' participation and deliberation in two recognized newspapers –*El País* and *El Mundo*– as well as on the most commented pieces of news posted on two different platforms –online newspapers and Twitter profiles– from April 8th, 2014 to September 26th, 2014.

According to the results obtained from our fieldwork and the discussion of previous sections, we can state that this study constitutes the first approach to the digital public sphere. In other words, this paper offers responses that may help us in the future to assert whether social networks have involved a revolution in communication, especially in political communication. Furthermore, we considered it necessary to raise new questions that will enrich future research in order to obtain a wider perspective of public participation and online debate.

On the one hand, it would be interesting to reply to this same study –or to broaden it by including other social media networks –, and check whether there is a difference between the debate on digital newspapers and the one in social platforms or if the conclusions obtained in this study are limited to this particular case. In other words, it would be worth analyzing whether these results are temporary coincidences or if the same pattern is repeated. *El País*' or *El Mundo*'s Facebook pages or YouTube channels could be a subject for future research.

Including different types of media as the object of study, such a digital-native newspapers or blogs –*elconfidencial.com* or *Principia Marsupia* in the case of Spain– could represent another valid approach to the study of the digital public sphere. Thus, it would be possible to examine whether the ways of communication of traditional mass media exert any kind of influence in the forms of participation and development of online debates. In the same way, we could determine whether other ways of communication are closer to or further away from social media.

Focusing the research on a specific event could be another line of research, such as general elections in the specific case of Spain. Both events generated debate among Spaniards in both newspapers and social networks. Therefore, it could be possible to analyze users' behaviour in situations that potentially have an impact on media, and lead to the public expression of viewpoints, so as to check whether a similar political apathy to the one shown in this study is expressed in Twitter in these situations.

The basic question that this paper set out to explore, “is the Internet an appropriate tool to encourage participation and political discussion in the digital public sphere?”, remains an open one. Although tentatively, this article shows that the Net itself may not be able to enhance the characteristics of political deliberation between citizens. While it has to welcome the platforms that allow public speech of citizens, which generally shows coherence and interaction, the conversation maintained by users in the public sphere would depend on the specific platform which is being studied and, above all, on the relation with the main topics of the dialogue.

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