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Extending influence on social media: The behaviour of political talk-show opinion leaders on Twitter

Abstract

Social media, especially Twitter, has become a strategic space for those users who try to extend their influence in the digital environment. This work focuses on opinion leaders who participate in political talk-shows. The aim is to analyse the use and the thematic agenda proposed by these actors on Twitter during electoral periods. The Twitter profiles of 20 opinion leaders (journalists, media editors and experts) of four Spanish television channels are examined. A quantitative content analysis is used on 2,588 tweets disseminated during the November 2019 general election campaign in Spain by them. Results show differences between the different types of actors who make up the sample. Journalists use Twitter to express their criticisms and reinforce their community of followers, especially using interaction and humour. Media editors are more neutral and promote their personal brand through the promotion of their media companies. Experts inform and analyse political news more than journalists, although they also criticise and respond to citizens' comments. Regarding the subject agenda, messages on electoral results and media content predominate. Thus, the data shows how opinion leaders take advantage of Twitter to freely show their opinions, especially negative ones, and boost dialogue with users.

Keywords

Influence, influencers, opinion leaders, political talk-shows, political communication, social media, Twitter.

1. Introduction

The use of the influencer concept has become popular in the digital context but, the existence of influential people capable of disseminating ideas and changing the opinions, attitudes and behaviours of others goes back a long time (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Terms such as opinion leaders (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1948), experts (Goldenberg *et al.*, 2006) and social connectors (Goldenberg *et al.*, 2009) have previously been used to refer to influencers. In all these cases, influential people are characterised by being well informed and connected within their network of contacts, having broad social connections, being respected by the public, being innovative and being highly involved in the public sphere (Rogers, 1962; Vishwanath & Barnett, 2011).

Opinion leader is the term with the greatest tradition, and it originates from the two-step flow theory (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1948). This theory understands that the influence of the media is carried out in two steps: first, influence reaches opinion leaders, who function as a filter, and then, they pass on what they consider important from what they read and hear to others. However, digital technologies have transformed this classic dynamic that did without citizenship. Nowadays, the public have an active role in shaping public opinion, via their ability to produce and transmit content to mass audiences through the internet and social media (Castells, 2009). Therefore, it can be said that the digital environment may empower people with limited influence in the offline world (Xu *et al.*, 2014) and redefine the concepts of community and personal influence (Anspach, 2017).

Research into influence on the digital environment is still at its early stages and there are hardly any conclusive results on how to measure this capability. In this context, the present research is focused on the figures of opinion leaders who usually take part in political television talks. The objective is to evaluate how these actors extend their influence in the digital environment by studying their communication strategies on Twitter.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. The influence on the digital environment

Studies on the exercise of influence in the digital environment cover three main areas: definition of new opinion leaders; relationship between influence and ability to disseminate information; and valid indicators to measure online influence, especially on social networks.

Regarding the first field of study, authors such as Bennett and Manheim (2006) consider that the internet has removed the traditional, opinion-leader role of receiving and interpreting messages for their followers. On the other hand, from a favourable perspective, public fragmentation may make it more necessary for opinion leaders to bring news items to the light (Mutz & Young, 2011).

Nevertheless, the offline influence of traditional opinion leaders is considered to be advantageous for influencing online discourse (Valente & Pumpuang, 2007), because they tend to be at the centre of discussion networks. On the other hand, their authority may be disputed because the digital environment dilutes the participants' identities and bloggers and activists can also become influencers (Papacharissi & De Fátima Oliveira, 2012). On the contrary to the most skeptical authors, Dubois and Gaffney (2014) indicate the importance of opinion leaders and identify three types of influencers according to their dominant trait: the number of connections defines the political elites (media and politicians); content quality and interactions identify political commentators and bloggers; and local grouping characterises ordinary citizens with a certain standing in their community.

The second line of research points out a relative consensus on the idea that influence on the digital environment is based on the ability to condition the flow of information (Bakshy *et al.*, 2011; Kwak *et al.*, 2010). In the context of the over-information that characterises digital communication, the most influential users are those who, in addition to capturing attention from the content they produce, manage to amplify their impact because others propagate their messages (Xu *et al.*, 2014).

Finally, in relation to measuring influence on social networks, most of the work focuses on Twitter and Facebook (Gruzd & Wellman, 2014). Specifically, Goggins and Petakovic (2014) conclude that the level of influence on Facebook is low as there is usually an agreement between members of a community, where the affiliation connection is reciprocal and based on mutual friendship. Instead, Twitter allows asymmetric connections between participants, because users can follow other users without being followed, and this imbalance alters the dynamics of influence.

2.2. Communicative strategies of opinion leaders on Twitter

The characteristics and interests of influencers interested in current political issues influence their communicative strategies (Dubois & Gaffney, 2014). However, the practices that opinion leaders or influencers carry out on Twitter can be grouped into four main functions: informing, opining, building a community and creating personal brands (Lasorsa, Lewis & Holton, 2012; López-Meri & Casero-Ripollés, 2016 and 2017).

The function of informing, investigating and providing data, as well as linking news and reports is common in the case of traditional political elites, made up from journalists, media and politicians. Media and journalists tend to link their own content (Broersma & Graham, 2013) and rarely recommend competing articles (Noguera-Vivo, 2013). Self-referentiality also dominates the political class (Gainous & Wagner, 2014; Jungherr, 2014). Political actors basically use Twitter to report on their campaign events and political statements (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2018; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011).

The function of pointing out views is predictable among opinion leaders. Journalists are inclined to offer opinion and criticism on Twitter, regardless of whether they exercise the role of commentators or not (Fernández Gómez, Hernández-Santaolalla & Sanz-Marcos, 2018). They even display their ideology in controversial issues, especially editorialists and freelancers (Hunter, 2015; Vis, 2013). They are apparently neutral, although they allow their position to be seen when they retweet or share the messages and opinions of other participants (Molyneux, 2015). Parties and political leaders also express opinions, defending their proposals and criticising the management of their political rival (López-Meri, Marcos-García & Casero-Ripollés, 2017). However, while journalists take the initiative in the subject agenda, politicians participate in debates that have already got off the ground (Enli & Simonsen, 2018).

The role of community building is inherent to the interactivity and connectivity that define the nature of social media. It is an action related to the aim of increasing engagement, retaining followers and expanding the contact network to spread influence on a greater number of user profiles. In fact, both the degree of engagement and the level of influence are measured from the interactions that an account gets (Dang-Xuan *et al.*, 2013; Xu *et al.*, 2014). The practices geared towards community building are varied: interaction with users, personalisation and use of humour, are some features among others.

In terms of interaction, it has been demonstrated that political elites barely converse with users (Alonso-Muñoz, Marcos-García & Casero-Ripollés, 2017; Pérez-Soler & Micó-Sanz, 2015), and when they do so, the interaction is with other elites, especially among politicians and other journalists, but not with the public (Lopez-Rabadán & Mellado, 2019; Molyneux, Holton & Lewis, 2018). Traditional opinion leaders also turn to personalisation. This aspect consists of being appearing approachable to citizens in order to connect with them, for example, sharing their hobbies or aspects of their private life (Bentivegna, 2015; Hanusch, 2017), or employing a sense of humour (Canter, 2015).

Lastly, there is the function of personal branding, understood as the way to present the distinctive character and abilities of a person (Lair *et al.*, 2005). Everything a contributor does in the digital context leaves their mark and influences their personal brand. In this context, journalists strive to differentiate themselves from others (Bodrunova, Litvinenko & Blekanov, 2018). In this area, self-referencing takes on special importance, both in the text of the tweet and in the links or retweets of messages that speak of oneself, even when such comments are negative (Brems *et al.*, 2017; Molyneux, 2015).

The public can also influence other people in the digital environment, as well as political elites. Citizenry includes activists, experts, bloggers or civil society collectives. Within the digital environment, any user with political concerns may gain access to the traditional political sphere of communication and act as an upsetting, anti-establishment force (Feenstra

& Casero-Ripollés, 2014). However, in terms of influence, most studies concern themselves with traditional political elites. According to Dang-Xuan *et al.* (2013), the most influential accounts on Twitter are journalists, political parties, citizens and civil society groups or individual activists. All these profiles tend to publish negative critiques about political actors (Dang-Xuan *et al.*, 2013:818).

3. Objectives and methodology

The aim of this research is to learn about the strategies that opinion leaders who participate in political television talk-shows apply on Twitter. The following research questions are formulated and based on academic literature, which documents the practices of the most widespread traditional political elites on Twitter:

RQ1: What are the most prominent functions in the communication strategies on Twitter of the opinion leaders who participate in televised political talk-shows?

RQ2: What are the most relevant topics of the messages disseminated on Twitter by opinion leaders who participate in televised political talk-shows?

3.1. Sample

The sample for this research focuses on the general election campaign held in Spain on 10 November 2019. In this regard, the eight official days of the election campaign, the day of reflection, the election day and the day after have been studied. To be specifically defined, the messages disseminated on Twitter by twenty Spanish opinion leaders who participated in daily political talks have been analysed using quantitative content analysis techniques (Table 1).

Table 1: Research sample.

Opinion leader	TV Programme	Profile	Followers	Tweets analysed
Isabel San Sebastián (@isabesa)	El Programa de Ana Rosa (Telecinco)	Journalist	141,600	33
Ana Pardo de Vera (@pardodevera)	El Programa de Ana Rosa (Telecinco)	Media editor	127,600	105
Esther Palomera (@estherpalomera)	El Programa de Ana Rosa (Telecinco)	Journalist	109,900	104
Montserrat Domínguez (@MontDeMont)	El Programa de Ana Rosa (Telecinco)	Journalist	98,100	17
José Carlos Díez (@josecdiez)	El Programa de Ana Rosa (Telecinco)	Expert	95,100	129
Ana Pastor (@_anapastor_)	Al Rojo Vivo (La Sexta)	Media editor	2,000,000	411
Ignacio Escolar (@iescolar)	Al Rojo Vivo (La Sexta)	Media editor	971,200	362
Jesús Maraña (@jesusmarana)	Al Rojo Vivo (La Sexta)	Media editor	346,800	141
Antonio Maestre (@AntonioMaestre)	Al Rojo Vivo (La Sexta)	Journalist	309,500	422
Gaspar Llamazares (@GLlamazares)	Al Rojo Vivo (La Sexta)	Expert	281,800	224
Francisco Marhuenda (@pacomarhuenda)	Espejo Público (Antena 3)	Media editor	239,100	211
Elisa Beni (@elisabeni)	Espejo Público (Antena 3)	Journalist	128,200	156
Rubén Amón (@Ruben_Amon)	Espejo Público (Antena 3)	Journalist	116,500	26
Casimiro García-Abadillo (@garcia_abadillo)	Espejo Público (Antena 3)	Media editor	113,300	83
Toni Aira (@toniaira)	Espejo Público (Antena 3)	Journalist	54,500	72
Pedro J. Ramírez (@pedroj_ramirez)	Los Desayunos (TVE)	Media editor	533,800	13
Arsenio Escolar (@arsenioescolar)	Los Desayunos (TVE)	Journalist	138,700	12
Enric Juliana (@EnricJuliana)	Los Desayunos (TVE)	Media editor	106,000	52
Lucía Méndez (@LuciaMendezEM)	Los Desayunos (TVE)	Journalist	84,300	6
Nativel Preciado (@NativelPreciado)	Los Desayunos (TVE)	Journalist	42,100	8

Source: Own elaboration.

The sample has been selected based on three criteria: the political talk-show in which they participate, their numbers of followers and the frequency they publish on Twitter. As regards the first criterion, the profiles of opinion leaders who are routinely involved in the morning political talks of the main, private, general television channels and the national public channel have been chosen: *El Programa de Ana Rosa* (Telecinco), *Al Rojo Vivo* (La Sexta), *Espejo Público* (Antena 3) and *Los Desayunos* (RTVE). Cuatro (a private TV channel) has been dismissed because its current broadcast programming has no morning political talk-show. Based on the second criterion, the five opinion leaders with the highest number of followers per programme are included. In order to avoid repetition, when the same person is involved in more than one programme, their profile is chosen in relation to only one of the talks, the one they appear on in the greater number of occasions. In this selection, three profiles can be

observed among the selected accounts: journalists, media editors and experts. Finally, in terms of the frequency of publication, accounts that had not posted a message during the election campaign have been set aside.

The data has been obtained through the Twitonomy web application, which allows the downloading of the tweets, retweets and replies of the selected profiles in the paid for version. The sample amounts to 2,588 units, made up of tweets and answers, but without retweets, since answering the research questions requires the analysis of the self-production of messages and not the redistribution of content published by others (Larsson, 2017).

The results have been extracted using SPSS statistical software (v.26). The interceding reliability has been calculated using Scott's Pi formula, obtaining a result of 0.96.

3.2. Variables

Tables 2 and 3 show the analysis protocol applied in this research. On the one hand, to answer research question 1 (RQ1), 11 categories of analysis have been created for the functions given to Twitter by opinion leaders. These variables have been grouped into six major blocks: information, opinion, interpretation, community, branding and others (Table 2).

Table 2: Categories of analysis for the study of function.

Function		Description
Information	Giving information	Tweets whose main function is to inform in a neutral way, indicating the topic, highlighting some data or literally transcribing a quote.
Opinion	Criticism/Attack	Tweets whose main function is to criticise or attack one or more actors (politicians, journalists, entrepreneurs), initiatives, ideologies or certain events or arguments.
	Support for others	Tweets that defend, reaffirm or corroborate the actions of other actors (politicians, journalists, entrepreneurs, etc.), initiatives, ideologies or certain events or arguments.
	Self-defence in the face of an attack	Tweets in which the opinion leaders defend themselves against a criticism, attack or reproach from another user.
Interpretation	Analysis/Reflection	Tweets with reflections on initiatives, events and behaviours or opinions of other actors, but without being for or against. Messages that reflect on the causes or consequences of any event.
Community	Gratitude	Tweets that appreciate other users' comments, actions, or initiatives.
	Interaction with users	Tweets that answer other users or ask questions for other users to answer or comment on.
	Personal information	Tweets that show aspects of private lives, such as personal tastes, leisure activities, information or images with family or friends (more human, personal and intimate behaviour).
	Humour	Tweets that share jokes, gifs, memes, etc. Their main function being to entertain their followers.
Branding	Professional agenda	Tweets where information about their professional schedule is shared (participation in programmes, conferences, events).
	Self-promotion	Tweets that promote aspects related to their career (for example, if they have conducted an interview or published a news or report, published a book, etc.). In the case of media editors, sharing content from their own medium is also considered self-promotion.
Others	Others	Tweets that cannot be classified into any of the above categories.

Source: Own elaboration.

For the analysis of the agenda (RQ₂), 20 categories have been defined to collect all the topics proposed by opinion leaders during the election campaign (Table 3).

Table 3: Categories used for the analysis of tweet issues.

Issues	Description
Economy	Tweets on employment, unemployment, salaries, deficit, public spending, debt, crisis, taxes, entrepreneurship, contracts, self-employment, etc.
Social policy	Tweets on pensions, health, education, welfare state, social justice, equality/inequality (including gender violence), housing, births, etc.
Culture and sports	Tweets on cultural industries (cinema, literature, art, conventional media, social media, etc.) and sports.
Science and technology	Tweets on R+D+I and network infrastructure (fibre optics, ADSL, WIFI, etc.).
Environment	Tweets on pollution, fauna and flora protection or climate change.
Infrastructure	Tweets on transport services (railways, airports) and infrastructure such as roads.
Corruption	Tweets on political corruption in a broad sense.
Democratic regeneration	Tweets focused on democratic aspects that need to be renewed/abolished, such as changes in electoral law, ending the establishment and other privileges of the political class, etc. Messages about Franco's regime, the historical memory, law and the separation of powers.
Territorial model of the state	Tweets on the territorial organisation of the state, Catalanian independence and nationalism.
Terrorism	Tweets on terrorism in all its forms.
Personal topics	Tweets on personal lives.
Foreign affairs	Tweets on the European Union or other parts of the world.
Immigration	Tweets on national and international immigration (refugees).
Defence and justice	Tweets on the armed forces, military spending and national security, as well as judicial processes, changes in legislation, prisons, sentencing, etc.
Relationship with the media channels	Tweets that share information about opinion leaders' media appearances. Messages focused on the way the media works or about a person's participation in the media (for example, political party leaders in TV election debates).
Strategy and government pacts	Tweets focused on the different political parties' intentions to build a certain type of government, or on the creation of government pacts.
Voting and election results	Tweets focused on the act of voting, election results, and electoral polling.
Campaigning	Tweets on the election campaign organisation: comments and reflections on campaign events, participation of politicians in the media, official visits, behaviour of political actors or incidents in campaign events, such as attacks or threats to candidates.
No topic	Tweets composed of emoticons or a few words, which do not correspond to any specific topic and in which deducing what issue is being talked about is difficult. Brief expressions of courtesy or protocol (example: good morning, good night, thank you).
Others	Unclassifiable in the previous categories.

Source: Own elaboration.

4. Results

Analysing the tweets allows the identification of relevant trends in the use of Twitter and the type of content posted on this social network by opinion leaders.

4.1. What do opinion leaders use Twitter for?

Responding to RQ₁, the data shows that the most utilised function on Twitter by opinion leaders is giving information. Specifically, 25.54% of their messages (Table 4) focus on providing new data on a topic or providing breaking news. Therefore, these actors prioritise the use of this social network as an extension of their work in television programmes, since

they devote much of their tweeting to notifying or expanding current issues discussed in the talks they participate in, as shown in the following examples.

Ignacio Escolar (@iescolar). “A polling station president boasts of “not allowing the vote” to a supposed United Podemos representative, who eventually voted. <https://www.eldiario.es/andaluciahttps://www.eldiario.es/andalucia...>” (10/11/2019).

Gaspar Llamazares (@GLlamazares). “EPA dismisses the myth that foreigners take jobs away from Spaniards. <https://www.publico.es/economia...>” (4/11/2019).

This strategy is further enhanced by two complementary functions. On the one hand, the Analysis/Reflection function, present in 16.04% of messages (Table 4). In addition to providing information, they dedicate part of their publications to reflect, contextualise, anticipate or go in depth, on the behaviour, ideas or actions of other actors, initiatives or situations in a neutral way. It is a strategy that responds to the professional journalist’s typical pursuit of interpreting reality. In this sense, they not only wish to offer their users the latest daily news facts, but also try to explain their causes and repercussions, facilitating societal understanding of them, as José Carlos Díez and Ana Pardo de Vera are seen to carry out in the following tweets.

José Carlos Díez (@josecdiez). “The future of tourism in Spain is to increase the daily spending per tourist. If they do, they’ll be able to create more jobs and pay better salaries. Bringing more American and Asian tourists and less European low cost is the key. That’s what the industry is already doing” (4/11/2019).

Ana Pardo de Vera (@pardodevera). “PSOE technologists did the numbers well with the May data, but there is no modelling that is capable of guessing the ways the country still in crisis will swing. The problem is #Catalunya, no doubt, but there is more. The present times are having their say. From @EnricJuliana” (3/11/2019).

On the other hand, the function of Criticism/Attack is present in 17.5% of messages (Table 4). In this purpose, the electoral context is highly decisive, since these tweets focus on showing a negative point of view against the actions, proposals or ideas the different political parties and their candidates propose during the electoral campaign. This is a trend that shows that opinion leaders use Twitter as a space to directly show their disagreement and discomfort towards politics and politicians, who become the target of their accusations. In the following examples, while Antonio Maestre focuses his criticism on the right-wing parties, Elisa Beni attacks the Socialist leader, Pedro Sánchez.

Antonio Maestre (@AntonioMaestre). “More serious than listening to VOX say that they are going to outlaw the PNV is hearing the thunderous silence of PP and Citizens. Fascism cannot prevail unless the right acts as its accomplice” (3/11/2019).

Elisa Beni (@elisabeni). “The cry of hollow controversies calls out from Sanchez’s and the prosecutor’s office. It’s as though Larena didn’t exist... nor did the Belgian judges” (6/11/2019).

Table 4: Function of tweets posted by opinion leaders.

	% total	% depending on the type of actor		
		Journalist	Media editor	Expert
Giving information	25.54	5.14	40.17	17.85
Criticism/Attack	17.50	29.91	9.64	18.13
Support for others	2.36	4.32	1.67	0.28
Self-defence in the face of an attack	5.06	7.13	1.67	13.31
Analysis/Reflection	16.04	9.00	17.91	25.78
Gratitude	2.59	6.54	0.80	0.00
Interaction	13.72	19.51	9.06	17.85
Personal information	2.16	4.32	0.73	2.55
Humour	2.90	7.24	0.65	1.13
Professional agenda	1.82	1.40	2.03	1.98
Self-promotion	10.12	5.26	15.52	0.85
Others	0.19	0.23	0.15	0.28

Source: Own elaboration.

At the mid-range level of occurrence, opinion leaders also use Twitter as a channel to interact with other users (Table 4). At a lower percentage (13.72%), compared to other functions, these actors take advantage of the platform's potential for dialogue to engage in conversation with their followers. For example, responding to the comments that users send them or even being those who raise the initial questions in order to start the debate on this social network off.

Similarly, opinion leaders also dedicate a portion of their tweets to self-promotion (10.12%) (Table 4). These are messages where they share journalistic or opinion pieces authored by themselves or where they promote aspects related to their career, such as if they have penned a book. In the case of media editors, these messages tend to link pieces published on their own medium, report the publication of special editions or invite users to subscribe. In this way, Twitter contributes to consolidating the personal brand of opinion leaders from a professional point of view, as seen in the messages published by the director of *Infolibre*, Jesús Maraña, who promotes his opinion piece; and by the journalist Antonio Maestre, who provides the publicity for his new book.

Jesús Maraña (@jesusmarana). "Here, I am leaving my first personal reflections on the results of the #10N: seven remarks and a footnote. ow.ly/TEj73opRPV8" (11/11/2019).

Antonio Maestre (@AntonioMaestre). "Tomorrow my book #FranquismoSA will be in all the bookstores. It's my first book and I can only assure you that such a lot, a whole lot of work has gone into it. I hope you like it" (3/11/2019).

In fact, it is significant that all the analysed profiles coincide in using Twitter from a professional perspective. On the contrary, contents related to their private life, such as personal tastes, leisure activities or family environment are hardly ever shared (2.16%). The use of more informal and straightforward resources, such as humour, is not common either (2.9%) (Table 4). Therefore, opinion leaders do not seem to approach their Twitter followers by humanising their figure.

Whereas, if the type of function employed according to the type of actor is looked at, some interesting differences come to light in relation to the general trends. First, the case of journalists is particularly significant, because they are the actors who most use Twitter to criticise or attack (29.91%) certain participants or issues, usually related to politics. At the same time, journalists are also the ones who dedicate the most tweets to community building (Table 4). In the main, they intensify this activity through three practices: interaction, humour and expressions of gratitude. Hence, this interplay is present in 19.51% of their tweets. Journalists are the ones who dedicate the most messages to interacting and conversing with other users

present in this social network. In addition to this, they also joke or share memes and quips (7.24%), although at lower prevalence than other purposes. Finally, they take advantage of their Twitter presence to express signs of gratitude (6.54%), especially towards the comments of other users where they are congratulated for their interventions or publications in the media, as well as for other aspects related to their professional life, such as publishing a book or obtaining an award or recognition, as can be seen in the following examples.

Antonio Maestre (@AntonioMaestre). “Reality is that fucked up. I’m glad you liked it ;-), in response to @montejo” (6/11/2019).

Ana Pardo de Vera (@pardodevera). “I am very honoured. Thanks to the Valladolid Press Association for counting on me 😊 [instagram.com/p/B4hdCRtKt...](https://www.instagram.com/p/B4hdCRtKt...)” (6/11/2019).

However, professionally associated tasks, such as providing information (5.14%) or analysis (9%), appear at a lower frequency compared to other functions. Seemingly, this demonstrates that journalists involved in political talks understand Twitter as a space to freely share their opinion, especially if it is a negative or critical one. This attitude differs completely from that shown by media editors, since the aim of close to half of their messages is to provide information (40.17%).

As seen in general trends, media managers complement information with reflection (17.91%) and self-promotion (15.52%). Unlike journalists, they present their reflections in a neutral way, usually without positioning themselves in favour (1.67%) or against (9.64%). This prevailing neutrality could encourage the promotion of traffic to their media, as the use of links and subscription information proliferates.

Finally, the two experts studied, as befits their condition, mainly use Twitter as a space to analyse and reflect in. For this reason, 25.78% of their tweets explain current news issues from an analytical perspective (Table 4). This strategy does not prevent them from dedicating another important part of their messages to criticising and attacking (18.13%). At the same time, they are the second most highly interacting agents with their followers and other users (17.85%), behind journalists (Table 4). Nevertheless, it is significant that they devote a considerable number of their messages to reporting, sharing news or data on different issues (17.85%). In this sense, they assume the role of journalistic professionals and exploit news content far above what journalists do.

4.2. What are opinion leaders talking about on Twitter?

Analysis of the thematic agenda posed by opinion leaders on Twitter allows some evidence of interest to be indicated.

Firstly, in response to RQ2, opinion leaders generally present a very fragmented agenda as they diversify their communication strategy by addressing a vast array of issues. Notwithstanding, two topic ranges are observed. The first group consists of topics that reach percentages between 14% and 20%. The most common issue is that focused on voting and election results (20.25%) (Table 5). In a context marked by the campaign period, everyone agrees to use Twitter as a way to comment on what the distribution of seats will look like after the final vote count, as well as the consequences voting has on political actors and society. For example, while José Carlos Díez takes stock of the increase or decrease in the number of votes obtained by parties compared to previous elections, Ana Pastor reports on the resignation of the Ciudadanos leader, Albert Rivera, after the loss of seats.

José Carlos Díez (@josecdiez). “Psoe -800,000 votes, PP +650,000, Vox +900,000, Podemos -600,000, C’s. -2,500,000” (10/11/2019).

Ana Pastor (@_anapastor_). “He has just this very moment announced this 🗑️ Rivera resigns after the 10N election disaster. Via @Newtral <https://t.co/ekbhElxPyE>” (11/11/2019).

The second most prominent topic is “Relationship with the media channels” (15.73%) (Table 5). Opinion leaders share information about their appearances in different programmes or offer their comments on the actions of the media or the attitudes of other actors who have featured in media content. Again, the data reveals how the electoral context in which this research is located directly influences the subject agenda of opinion leaders, because most messages revolve around the participation of presidential candidates and party spokespeople at the Congress of Deputies in Spain in the election debates broadcast on television, as the following examples illustrate.

Pedro J. Ramírez (@pedroj_ramirez). “Yesterday we experienced a frustrating debate, but we also saw some hope in emerging points of understanding between the three great constitutionalist forces. That had better be so” (5/11/2019).

Enric Juliana (@EnricJuliana). “Sanchez has not done as badly as in April, despite some stage errors (not looking at his opponents, for example). Presidential messages. The lists of the most voted will be a matter of reference for the next few hours. He has laid out the foundations for a nationwide policy of concerted action” (4/11/2019).

Table 5: Distribution of opinion leaders’ tweets according to issue.

	% total	% depending on the type of actor		
		Journalist	Media editor	Expert
Economy	4.48	1.99	3.19	15.58
Social policy	5.10	1.75	6.53	7.65
Culture and sports	6.38	14.84	2.10	2.55
Science and technology	0.93	0.12	1.23	1.70
Environment	1.20	0.12	1.60	2.27
Infrastructure	0.04	0.00	0.07	0.00
Corruption	1.31	0.58	2.03	0.28
Democratic regeneration	3.98	5.02	3.19	4.53
Territorial model of the state	4.87	2.80	5.87	5.95
Terrorism	0.08	0.12	0.00	0.28
Personal topics	1.70	3.27	0.29	3.40
Foreign affairs	2.94	1.05	3.92	3.68
Immigration	0.66	0.23	0.65	1.70
Defence and justice	2.32	2.57	2.61	0.57
Relationship with the media channels	15.73	16.94	18.42	2.27
Strategy and government pacts	3.98	3.04	4.86	2.83
Voting and election results	20.25	14.60	25.31	14.16
Campaign	6.14	4.79	7.61	3.68
No topic	14.26	21.96	6.96	24.08
Others	3.63	4.21	3.48	2.83

Source: Own elaboration.

The third topic with the greatest presence corresponds to the category of “No topic.” These are very short messages, composed of one or a few words, or emoticons, which do not conform to any subject and whose meaning is therefore impossible to deduce. This category also contains brief expressions of courtesy or protocol. The abundance of such messages connects with the significant presence of dialogue and interaction (Table 4), as opinion leaders often use these short expressions or emoticons to respond or interact with other users, as can be appreciated in the following tweets.

Gaspar Llamazares (@GLlamazares). “Thrown out” in response to @jossmad’s tweet “From the verb throw out” (5/11/2019).

Elisa Beni (@elisabeni). “👉” in response to the tweet of @David_iure’ “I only read the headline 😞” (11/11/2019).

At a second rate of frequency, with percentages around 5% and 6%, tweets related to the election campaign, the organisation of events or the electoral programmes of the parties (6.14%) stand out in the opinion leaders' agenda. Moreover, topics such as culture and sport (6.38%), social policy (5.1%), the territorial model of the state (4.87%) or economy (4.48%), are more present than other areas such as infrastructure (0.04%), terrorism (0.08%), immigration (0.66%), science and technology (0.93%), all of them present in less than 1% of messages (Table 5). In this way, it is appreciated that opinion leaders maintain a subject agenda closely linked to the current news streams on Twitter. In this sense, tweets that comment and value the political process for the independence of Catalonia, the increase in housing rentals or tax reforms, among other issues, are common.

Francisco Marhuenda (@pacomarhuenda). "#Economy ☹️ Does employment return for Christmas? <http://lrzn.es/ell8r1>" (3/11/2019).

Isabel San Sebastián (@isanseban). "Independents want to terrorise constitutionalists, so they don't vote on Sunday. I hope they don't manage to!" (4/11/2019).

On the other hand, if the subject agenda of each professional profile is analysed, the data reveals some significant trends. The journalists and experts analysed are the actors who share the most "No topic" rated tweets. This connects directly with the idea that it is they who are the ones who most chat with users (Table 5). In addition, both profiles agree to comment on the development of voting and election results (14.6% and 14.16%, respectively). However, significant differences arise between them (Table 5).

Journalists give a greater importance to the interventions and participation of other actors in the media, or to the behaviour and actions of the media themselves (16.94%). Thus, as has been advanced above, they devote much of their messaging to commenting on the election debates broadcast on television. At a similar level, they present issues related to culture and sport (14.84%). In most cases, as the examples reflect, these are messages recommending film reviews, books or podcasts about television series, which in many cases they are the authors of.

Rubén Amón (@Ruben_Amon). "Anna Netrebko is really great. Yet what a frustrating recital. In @elconfidencial: The goddess Netrebko spoils her return to the Royal Opera" (2/11/2019).

Montserrat Domínguez (@MontDeMont). "With so much electoral noise, I almost missed this wonderful Martin Scorsese opinion page: about Marvel and the difference between cinema and entertainment (thanks, Carlos Boyero) <https://elpais.com/elpais/2019/11/06/...> vía @el_pais" (8/11/2019).

Although in a smaller number of publications, journalists also talk about democratic regeneration and historical memory (5.02%) (Table 5), specifically about aspects that need to be safeguarded or ought to be renewed.

Isabel San Sebastián (@isanseba). "Spain has a rule of law where governments do not illegalise political parties. That is a matter of justice. It's called democracy and I love it" (10/11/2019).

Elisa Beni (@elisabeni). "It is called freedom of expression and the right to information. Without it, there is no democracy" (3/11/2019).

The two experts are the only ones who prioritise issues related to the economy (15.58%). Primarily, they analyse aspects related to employment, salaries or public expenditure, together with others. At the same time, although at a lower rate, they are also the actors that most mention social policies (7.65%) or the territorial model of the state (5.95%) focusing mainly on the question of the independence of Catalonia (Table 5).

Gaspar Llamazares (@GLlamazares). The left has a serious problem if, in order to differentiate itself from Sánchez, it bases itself on a false account of Spain and on the discourse about the right to decide and the one-sided dialogue characteristic of independence. This stands as the antithesis of federal solidarity and internationalism” (2/11/2019).

On the other hand, the media editors are the ones who show results that most resemble general trends. In part, this is because this collective is the most prolific of the sample, since it publishes 53% of the researched tweets (Table 1). As a result, almost half its messages deal with two issues: votes and election results (25.31%) and media-related aspects (18.42%) (Table 5), specifically with the media channels they are the heads of, a fact which is connected with the self-promotion function (Table 4).

Ignacio Escolar (@iescolar). “The CIS asks in its surveys which newspaper you read to be informed about politics. It is a question that discriminates against the digital media, because a “newspaper” is associated with paper. Even so, we appear in the spontaneous answers. And @eldiarioes is the first of them all” (1/11/2019).

Jesús Maraña (@jesusmarana). “The @_infoLibre team is preparing its front page for its members. If you still do not receive it every night, join the media that supports committed readers. #journalism” (5/11/2019).

At a much lower rate, media editors discuss election campaign issues (7.61%), share messages without a defined topic (6.96%) and talk about social policies (6.53%) or the territorial model of the state (5.87%) (Table 5).

5. Conclusions and discussion

These research results are an approximation of the strategies implemented on Twitter by opinion leaders who participate in political talks on Spanish television. Their use of this social network and the issues they address in election campaigns identify some interesting trends to shed light on how these actors extend their influence in the digital environment. Moreover, some exceptions are also identified from general trends based on the profile of the opinion leader (journalist, media editor, or expert).

In relation to general trends, in answer to RQ1 on the uses and functions that opinion leaders assign to Twitter, it can be observed that providing news is prioritised, followed by analysis and criticism. Since the actors researched are mostly journalists and media editors whose work is based on interpreting, assessing and analysing political developments, this trend would be in line with their mission in the TV debates which they participate in. It can be argued that Twitter is a platform that they use to reiterate and amplify the practices they already develop on television.

This first conclusion coincides with previous literature that highlights the interest of journalists and other political elites in informing, evaluating and criticising (Lasorsa, Lewis & Holton, 2012; López-Meri & Casero-Ripollés, 2016). In the case of journalists, offering opinion is most evident when it comes to editorialists or freelancers (Hunter, 2015; Vis, 2013), profiles with common features to the journalists analysed in this study. In addition to this, in terms of criticism, the potential of Twitter to encourage opinion leaders to use this social network as a space to show their disagreement with and unease towards politics and politicians is appreciated (Fernández Gómez, Hernández-Santaolalla & Sanz-Marcos, 2018). In this sense, the fact that Twitter allows the autonomous spread of messages without having to pass through any kind of filter encourages opinion leaders to use this channel to show their views. This behaviour coincides with that of the public (Marcos-García, Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2017). On this subject, research on influence in social networks finds that opinions, especially if negative, generate more impact and reactions among users (Dang-Xuan *et al.*, 2013; Xu *et al.*, 2014).

To a lower degree, opinion leaders take advantage of Twitter for interacting and branding, understood as self-promoting their personal brand from a professional perspective. In this area, there is a difference from the previous literature, which has noted the preference for self-reference and branding (Broersma & Graham, 2013; Gainous & Wagner, 2014; Jungherr, 2014), but not the interaction. In fact, the dialogue between the elites and the general public has recorded in substantial percentages thus far (Alonso-Muñoz, Marcos-García & Casero-Ripollés, 2017; Pérez-Soler & Micó-Sanz, 2015). However, the interactions observed in this research are quite simple and emoticons are frequently used (Mancera-Wheel, 2014), so they cannot be considered a true conversation or an in-depth discussion either.

Finally, with very few exceptions, opinion leaders barely use Twitter from a personal perspective. They do not usually share details of their private life or hobbies and use humour infrequently, although the literature states that it is a good strategy to humanise and bring the audience closer (Bentivegna, 2015; Hanusch, 2017). Arguably, their commitment to building a community is limited to a dialogue with users, who are often responded to. In doing so, they usually ignore other resources that could generate engagement, gain user loyalty, and increase the numbers of followers.

With respect to the exceptions and differences according to the different opinion leader profiles, it is surprising that journalists devote less space to reporting and analysis than experts, but they are the ones who most criticise and put the greatest effort into strengthening their community of contacts on Twitter. These attempts to consolidate and expand their community come about through the prominent presence of dialogue and signs of gratitude to their followers, as well as in small doses of humour, especially through memes or gifs, resources that are useful for sympathising with the audience (Canter, 2015).

The two experts, in addition to reporting and analysing, also criticise and interact with their followers to a considerable extent. Like journalists, they take advantage of Twitter's features to clearly show their opposition and dissatisfaction with certain issues or actors, usually related to the world of politics.

For their part, media editors basically inform, provide analysis and promote content from their companies, to generate traffic to their web pages and get subscriptions. Unlike journalists with no position of responsibility, amongst whom criticism of political actors abounds, media editors avoid positioning themselves openly on Twitter. Although they link content that may contain some criticism, the approach of their tweets is mostly neutral. This could be due to their institutional position, which advises caution so as to reach a greater number of followers. However, they also implicitly position themselves when, for example, they retweet or cite messages that contain insults or criticisms directed at them, usually to expose users who anonymously pour their attacks on Twitter. This practice of self-promoting even negative comments might also be considered a way to promote branding (Brems *et al.*, 2017; Molyneux, 2015).

With regard to the subject agenda, in response to RQ2, there is a clear dominance of poll and voting result messages, aligned with the analysis period of the 2019 general election campaign in Spain. The importance that opinion leaders attach to media content, especially their own interventions and to the actions of political actors in televised election debates is also noteworthy. These findings fall in line with the subject agenda built by other influential journalists (Fernández Gómez, Hernández-Santaolalla & Sanz-Marcos, 2018) and the political parties and their candidates in election periods (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2018).

The other topics have hardly any bearing, except if the data is broken down by profile. In this way, journalists also introduce cultural topics, such as literary or film recommendations. Media editors include electoral campaign events and possible post-election pacts between parties, social policies, the territorial model of the state and the independence process of

Catalonia. On their part, the two experts deal with issues of economics, social policies or issues of democratic regeneration and historical memory.

This research has some limitations. The sample is restricted to the Spanish context and focuses on a single election campaign. In addition, as the profiles of the opinion leaders analysed are mostly journalists or media editors, expanding the fieldwork in terms of the numbers of experts appears necessary. However, the observed trends can be extrapolated to other contexts with similarities to the Spanish one. Moreover, some strategies and practices that confirm or contradict previous studies have come to light. These contributions could prove to be useful in furthering the analysis of the emerging influencer figure in the digital environment.

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