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Contemporary Politics, Communication, and the Impact on Democracy



Dolors Palau-Sampio, Guillermo López García, and Laura Iannelli



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Contemporary Politics, Communication, and the Impact on Democracy

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A volume in the Advances in Public Policy and
Administration (APPA) Book Series

Published in the United States of America by

IGI Global
Information Science Reference (an imprint of IGI Global)
701 E. Chocolate Avenue
Hershey PA, USA 17033
Tel: 717-533-8845
Fax: 717-533-8661
E-mail: cust@igi-global.com
Web site: <http://www.igi-global.com>

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Palau-Sampio, Dolores, 1974- editor. | López García, Guillermo, editor. | Iannelli, Laura, editor.

Title: Contemporary politics, communication, and the impact on Democracy / Dolores Palau-Sampio, Guillermo López García, and Laura Iannelli, editor.

Description: Hershey, PA : Information Science Reference, [2022] | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "This book uses a multidisciplinary and multi-national approach to analyze the relationships between communication, politics, and democracy regarding the challenges and threats faced by contemporary democracies while disinformation, polarization and populism have a main role in the present hybrid communicative scenario"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021026760 (print) | LCCN 2021026761 (ebook) | ISBN 9781799880578 (Hardcover) | ISBN 9781799880585 (Paperback) | ISBN 9781799880592 (eBook)

Subjects: LCSH: Communication in politics. | Democracy. | World politics.

Classification: LCC JA85 .C6885 2022 (print) | LCC JA85 (ebook) | DDC 320.01/4--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021026760>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021026761>

This book is published in the IGI Global book series Advances in Public Policy and Administration (APPA) (ISSN: 2475-6644; eISSN: 2475-6652)

British Cataloguing in Publication Data

A Cataloguing in Publication record for this book is available from the British Library.

All work contributed to this book is new, previously-unpublished material. The views expressed in this book are those of the authors, but not necessarily of the publisher.

For electronic access to this publication, please contact: eresources@igi-global.com.



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ISSN:2475-6644
EISSN:2475-6652

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The last 10 years or more will be remembered as a time of perpetual crisis. Against this backdrop, there is an urgent need for effective leadership and for citizens of the world and their leaders to come together to achieve collective goals. However, various studies have highlighted the deleterious effects on democracy of the current trajectory political discourse is taking. Increasing voices in academia call for a shift towards a more citizen-centric political communication. The authors respond to such calls by proposing a new model for political communication that focuses on three dimensions, namely service ethos, inclusivity, and empathy (3D model). In this chapter, the authors conceptualise these dimensions and build a normative model for their application while discuss the relevant shortcomings and current issues as they relate to contemporary political communication.

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The concept of public spheres is based on the classic notion of deliberative democracy. The emergence of a European Public Sphere (EPS) at the European Union (EU) level has been widely discussed in the literature. However, the deliberative quality of this sphere is questioned because of its weak connection with citizens. This chapter explores how recent research addresses the EPS. Three categories are defined: (1) political and public communication of the EU, (2) citizen participation through technologies, and (3) the growing politicization and polarization of the European project. The methods in use, as well as remaining challenges in research, are also analyzed. This study contributes to discussions on the future of EU democracy, arguing that politicization and the interrelation of digital platforms and legacy media may enhance a true public discussion in Europe.

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Contemporary Populist Representation and Its Implications for Democracy: A Theoretical Assessment From a Realist Point of View 37

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This chapter aims to shed light on the connections between populism, democracy, and democratic theory by providing a theoretical assessment of contemporary populism and populist representation as an alternative form of political representation to party government or as a corrective of it. The chapter summarizes the conceptual background relating to democracies, populism, and contextual surroundings. Then, it proceeds to investigate how they relate to each other in present-day politics. The author argues that populism is a strategic political style that exploits the gap between the promise and the actual performance of democracies thus reflects on democratic reality. Hence, it embodies what realist democratic theory has argued for quite some time now about the nature of politics. Namely: voters are irrational, our notions of democracy are delusional and populist politicians seem to have realized it first..

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The Dynamics of Polarisation in Australian Social Media: The Case of Immigration Discourse 57

Ehsan Dehghan, Queensland University of Technology, Australia

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This chapter provides a case study of a public debate attracting highly polarised and antagonistic participants within the Australian context and examines the dynamics of polarisation, information flows, discourses, and materialities shaping these dynamics. Twitter conversations about immigration policies of the Australian government and detention of asylum seekers in offshore camps attract a great deal of polarised debate. The authors show how the affordances of the platform constitute, and are constituted by, the discourses of the users, and how users strategically discursify and give meaning to these affordances to further make their own political positions visible, amplify antagonisms, and at times, join each other in the formation of larger agonistic communities.

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Integration between digital platforms and news organizations has produced a substantial platformization of news. This phenomenon has been accompanied by a growing political polarization of journalistic content, exacerbated in Italy by the high level of partisanship that traditionally characterizes the national media. This chapter outlines one part of a wider study on the debate about the regularization of migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study, based on mixed methods and a two-level analytical approach, considers articles and posts published on Facebook by 12 different news providers (top-down) along with users' comments on this content (bottom-up). The authors here present the investigation into the coverage of migrant worker regularization by discussing the findings of the evaluative assertion and news frame analyses carried out on the selected articles and posts. Using this multidimensional approach, the study highlights the persistent nature of polarization within a highly fragmented public sphere.

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What Drives Selective Exposure to Political Information in Spain? Comparing Political Interest and Ideology..... 93

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Communication research underlines two types of selective exposure to the media: one guided by ideological-partisan affiliations and one guided by interest in politics. This work will compare both motivations in the consumption of political information through three media types (digital press, television, and radio) by Spanish citizens during the 2019 November General Election. Through multinomial logistic regressions applied to a representative post-electoral survey, results show that ideological-partisan orientations are the most important variables governing selective exposure, especially for the digital press and the radio. Besides confirming ideological selective exposure, the data highlight an important tendency towards selective avoidance of news media perceived as ideologically incongruent. For television, however, both socio-demographic trends and ideological orientations exhibit a similar explanatory weight, which suggests that political segmentation of the Spanish television market is still being deployed by communication groups, in comparison with the press and the radio.

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Semi-Private Spheres as Safe Spaces for Young Social Media Users' Political Conversation: Virtual Haven or Digital Bubbles?..... 113

Raquel Tarullo, Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, CONICET, Argentina

The incorporation of social media as spaces for political participation performances—especially among youth—has brought various issues into debate, including the formats of these practices and, at the same time, the significances of these repertoires for public conversation. In order to address this topic, this chapter explores the digital practices of political participation among young people in Argentina. Based on a qualitative approach in which 30 in-depth interviews to people from 18 to 24 years old were carried out, the findings of this research note that these segments of the population join the discussion of issues on the public agenda using emojis and hashtags and prefer reduced digital spaces to talk with their close contacts about polarized issues in order to avoid the aggression and violence that they say they observe in the digital space.

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The Mirage of Truth: The Instrumentalization of Fact-Checking to Spread an Ideological Discourse..... 133

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Fact-checkers have grown recently, facing the decline of journalism and the acceleration of disinformation flows on the internet. Due to the recent scholarly attention to these journalistic outlets, some authors have pointed to diverse critics such as the political bias and the low impact of fact-checking initiatives. In line with the research approaching the weaponization of disinformation in politics, this chapter reflects on the instrumentalization of verifying practices as a fact to consider when studying fact-checking. The investigation applies a combined methodology to compare Bendita and Maldita initiatives. While the

latter is internationally recognized as an entity of fact-checking, the second one arises as an imitation of it and lacks recognition and scholarly attention. Conclusions suggest that fact-checking implies more complex activities than refuting specific facts, while alt-right positions can instrumentalize fact-checking for political objectives. The authors call for the importance of definitions that exclude this type of misuse of verification.

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Populism, Its Prevalence, and Its Negative Influence on Democratic Institutions..... 153

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Simon Kruschinski, Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz, Germany

Populism is presented as a severe challenge to democracies as it delegitimises the institutions and processes on which democratic society is built. The infectious nature of populism within a system drives a shift in the public mood. The authors investigate this phenomenon through a content analysis of party posts on Facebook during the 2019 European parliamentary elections across 12 countries. They find almost a quarter of posts contain some form of populism, with anti-elitism the most common trope. Populist appeals are most likely to accompany critiques of labour and social policy, labelling elites or minority groups as causing inequalities which disadvantage the ordinary people. Both forms of populism enjoy high levels of user engagement suggesting they gain higher levels of reach within social media platforms. As support for populism rose in the wake of the economic and migrant crises, the authors suggest post-pandemic this increase is likely to continue.

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Europe and Euroscepticism on Twitter During the 2019 European Parliament Elections: An Analysis of the Spanish Candidates 171

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Jose Gamir-Ríos, University of Valencia, Spain

The purpose of this research is to analyse the activity on Twitter of the eight main candidates who stood in the 2019 European election in Spain. The analysis was developed throughout the electoral campaign and established based on two methodological perspectives. First, the content analysis allowed to observe which topics each candidate spoke about and from which perspective (pro-European or Eurosceptic). Second, the discourse analysis allowed to further explore the political communication strategies developed. This analysis is based on two hypotheses. The first (H1) is that European issues and approaches will not be a priority in candidates' discourses for the European Parliament, given the context of political polarisation in Spain and the fact that these elections can be read as a second round for the April 2019 general election. The second (H2) is that Euroscepticism will have a marginal presence in candidates' messages. The results confirm H2 but reject H1.

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Intermedia Agenda-Setting Effect of Latino Television in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election: A Comparative Study of Telemundo and Univision..... 186

María de los Ángeles Flores, The University of Texas at El Paso, USA

In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared a global health crisis from a viral disease known as COVID-19 caused by a coronavirus named SARS-CoV-2. The world population went into a mandatory lockdown and obligatory use of face masks to prevent the virus from spreading. Within this epidemiological context, in late August 2020, on the first day of the general election campaign period, the United States had reached about 6 million cases of COVID-19 and approximately 190K deaths, according to its Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Against all expectations, voter turnout to elect the 46th President set a civic participation record that had not been observed in over 100 years. The aim of this study is to examine the journalistic information disseminated by U.S. Spanish-language television media to Latino voters which motivated them to get out to vote. The theoretical foundation is Agenda-Setting theory focusing on the intermedia agenda-setting effect between Telemundo and Univision by measuring the level of salience emerging from their own news agendas.

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Will Live Streaming Platforms and Influencers Consolidate or Disrupt Democracy? A Case Study of Taiwan's 2020 Presidential Election..... 209

Yowei Kang, National Chung Hsing University, Taiwan

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New communication technologies have enabled politicians to interact and engage with their constituents constantly and unmitigated by mainstream media. Among them, emerging live streaming platforms rise as an essential political communication tool. However, in consolidating politicians' base, these technologies similarly run the risk of polarizing the society, resulting in disruption and healthy development of democracy. This case study describes and examines the role of live streaming platforms and influencers in generating political participation to account for the success of President Tsai Ing-wen's 2020 re-election campaign in Taiwan. This study focuses on the roles of live streaming platforms and influencers in contributing to the growing and alarming global phenomenon of populism and polarization associated with politicians' campaign strategies. This study also discusses whether the employment of live streaming influencers as a viable political communication tool in this campaign may ultimately contribute to the democratic deepening in Taiwan.

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This chapter examines the discourse of the Portuguese right-wing populist André Ventura and compares it with his close counterparts, Santiago Abascal, Marine Le Pen, and Matteo Salvini. The empirical analysis is focused on the 2021 presidential campaign and looks at Twitter and YouTube as parts of an integrated political communication strategy that are used as tools of exposure and message dissemination. The results show how André Ventura appropriates the features of right-wing populism but adapts those to the Portuguese specific context as a strategy to gain both wider media visibility and popular support.

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Managing the COVID-19 Crisis 257
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Adolfo Carratalá, University of Valencia, Spain

This chapter analyses the institutional speeches of six European leaders (N=19) to identify the emotional and rational frames used when explaining the measures implemented to address the first wave of COVID-19. The results of the analysis show the importance of frames of different categories, and the trust and leadership shown by political leaders, who sought to give speeches that would provoke a feeling of security in citizens based on their capacity to lead. Emotionality, built on values such as protection, gratitude, social sacrifice, and citizen unity, is rounded off with a rational approach based on science and economics. With none of the leaders being populist, their personalities were heterogeneous, from Merkel's empathy to Conte's confidential tone, Johnson's instructive discourse, Macron's commitment to Europe, and Sánchez and Costa's pedagogical vocation.

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Mario Mangas Núñez, University of Valladolid, Spain
Mónica Melero Lázaro, University of Valladolid, Spain

This chapter addresses the creation of political conflict on Twitter in a comparative study between Brazil and Spain. Based on an analysis of the political debate on dealing with two countries' health crises, it analyses the most retweeted messages published during the first week of vaccination in Europe and the Americas. Firstly, it analysed the general characteristics of the online debate on the immunisation of COVID-19. Secondly, it carried out an analysis of information disorder in each country. Although governmental positions in both countries are opposed, the results allow establishing common patterns of polarized profiles in both countries that question the management of the pandemic. It can be seen how political polarization is shaped as a characteristic of disinformation in both countries. That reveals that, after the health crisis, there is a crisis of democratic institutions that impact public health actions, but specifically to combat COVID-19.

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Italy was the first Western democracy to experience mass lockdown in response to COVID-19. In the early stages of the pandemic, citizens’ trust in the government increased and journalists “indexed” to institutional sources; however, elite polarization was not long in coming, in tandem with an infodemic. Rooted in this context, this longitudinal study investigates Italian citizens’ positions on an issue which lies at the very heart of democracy: the balance between public health and individual freedoms. Findings indicate that citizens’ opinions did not polarize between extreme communitarian and libertarian stances. On the contrary, a significant majority of citizens expressed strong beliefs in the primacy of public health over their freedoms. Extreme libertarians were only a minority, and their positions were driven by a completely different vision of the news reliability of “older” and “newer” media arenas, different attitudes toward the “official truth,” and different levels of trust in the government to those of extreme communitarians. Implications are discussed in the conclusion.

Chapter 17

Citizens’ Political Discourses on Climate Change and Vaccines: A Comparative Study Between Spain and Poland..... 329

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The main objective of this chapter is to compare the political discourses of Polish and Spanish citizens on science issues such as vaccines and climate change expressed by the citizens participating in the public consultations held in València (Spain) and Łódź (Poland) during the autumn of 2019. As the general elections were held very close to the public consultations in both countries, it was expected that there would be references to election campaigns, political parties, or public policymaking during the debates. Then, those statements explicitly expressing political views on climate change and vaccines were selected from the debate transcripts before applying five specific frames and variables for analysis and interpretation. The results show that more political opinions were expressed in the debates on climate change than on vaccines. Moreover, the citizens’ views on the science-politics dichotomy mainly were negative, with the men mixing science with politics more than the women.

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Preface

CONTEMPORARY POLITICS, COMMUNICATION, AND THE IMPACT ON DEMOCRACY: AN INTRODUCTION

This book aims to analyze the relationship between politics and communication in the current context of increasing polarization and their disruptive effects over democracy (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). Taking an interdisciplinary approach, the book intends to offer an overview of the threats faced by traditional and stable democracies in a hybrid communicative scenario (Chadwick, 2017) in which disinformation (Guess, Nyhan & Reifler, 2018) reaches worrying levels.

The loss of credibility in traditional media and democratic institutions points to major challenges for the democratic system. This book endeavors to contribute to the academic debate with an in-depth reflection on how the traditional forms of political representation are being questioned, while polarization and political atomization (Stroud, 2010) undermine consensus over key issues. Crisis of political leadership and populism has deepened divisions. In this vein, the proposal is to explore the interaction between communication and political and social change processes to understand their implications.

In the contemporary hybrid communicative scenario, political news making is still dominated by traditional news media but more inclusive for non-elite media actors (Chadwick, 2017). Social networks allow elite and non-elite actors to disseminate their messages, spread through multiple channels and with an oft-confusing origin (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2020), actively taking part in disinformation processes (Giglietto et al., 2019) and hate speech (Pohjonen, 2019). In this context, far from promoting consensus around democratic values, the present communicative scenario risks contributing to polarization and disintegration (Sunstein, 2019), as well as a greater presence and visibility of political positions that directly confront democratic principles. The emergence and growth of extreme right-wing parties in different countries raises the need to reflect on an interrelated scenario of politics, society and media and its implications on the democratic system (Akkerman, De Lange & Rooduijn, 2016).

Contemporary Politics, Communication, and the Impact on Democracy addresses relevant issues that involve a multidisciplinary approach, including communication and politics and their impact on democracy. Combining both theoretical and applied approaches, this collection of studies reveal how different democracies around the world address similar challenges and confront them.

This book will be of interest for scholars developing research in political communication, political science, and media, particularly those involved in studies dealing with polarization, populism, disinformation, trust in institutions and the effects on democracy. Potential audiences for this book cover critical media scholars involved in mainstream academic organizations, such as the International Communication Association (ICA), the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), the

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European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA), the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) or the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR). Also included in this group would be undergraduate and graduate students, as it will be used as a reference book in areas such as political communication, political sciences, journalism, and communication studies. One of the strongest features of this book is its multinational approach to the topics.

The book includes a collection of international studies that represent leading contemporary research focused on Politics, Communication, and the Impact on Democracy. It involves almost fifty co-authors from 13 countries offering theoretical background and comparative applied research relating to European, American, Asian, and Australian cases. *Contemporary Politics, Communication, and the Impact on Democracy* contains 17 chapters and is organized into four sections addressing several issues. It starts by providing a theoretical approach to the dimensions of political communication and their implications on democracy. It then offers an analytical approach to the dynamics of polarization and selective exposure before giving a set of studies focused on the effects of the current hybrid communication context in electoral processes in several countries. Finally, there is a set of research dealing with the challenges posed by the pandemic and climate change in terms of polarization, disinformation, and trust in institutions.

The first section of “Contemporary Politics, Communication, and the Impact on Democracy” includes three chapters that present an overview of the main questions concerning contemporary politics and communication, such as the need of leadership in connection with social common goals, the enhancement of a true public discussion and the role of populism in the present context.

In Chapter 1, “Proposing a Three-Dimensional Normative Model for Political Communication,” Anastasia Veneti and Darren G. Lilleker reflect on the urgent need for effective leadership and for citizens to come together to achieve collective goals. Considering the deleterious effects on democracy of the current trajectory of political discourse and the calls for a shift toward a more citizen-centric political communication, this chapter proposes a new model for political communication that focuses on three dimensions (3D Model): service ethos, inclusivity, and empathy. The authors conceptualize these dimensions and build a normative model for their application while discussing the relevant shortcomings and current issues as they relate to contemporary political communication.

Chapter 2, “Achieving a Representative Democracy in Europe: The Politicization of the European Public Sphere,” by Rubén Rivas-de-Roca and Mar García-Gordillo, discusses the concept of public spheres linked to the European Union and how the deliberative quality is questioned because of its weak connection with citizens. By exploring three categories—political and public communication of the EU; citizen participation through technologies; and the growing politicization and polarization of the European project—this chapter offers an overview of the remaining challenges in research and argues that politicization and the interrelation of digital platforms and legacy media may enhance a true public discussion in Europe.

“Contemporary Populist Representation and its Implications for Democracy: A Theoretical Assessment from a Realist Point of View” (Chapter 3), by Renáta Ryoko Drávucz, analyzes how democracy and populism relate to each other in present-day politics. The author provides a theoretical assessment of contemporary populism and populist representation as an alternative form of political representation to party government or as a corrective of it. The chapter argues that populism is a strategic political style that exploits the gap between the promise and the actual performance of democracies, thus reflecting on democratic reality. Hence, it embodies what realist democratic theory has argued for quite some time now about the nature of politics.

The second section affords a more in-depth look at the roots of some of the main phenomena that threaten the deliberative and representative idea of democracy, such as polarization and selective exposure. This context also affects the activity of the fact-checking platforms through the weaponization of the verification practices.

In Chapter 4, “The Dynamics of Polarization in Australian Social Media: The Case of Immigration Discourse,” Ehsan Dehghan and Axel Bruns provide a case study of the polarized debate on Twitter about the immigration policies of the Australian government and the detention of asylum seekers in offshore camps. Through a mixed-method investigation of conversations about these topics within the Australian Twittersphere, the authors examine the dynamics of polarization through a discourse-theoretical lens. The chapter argues that the polarization often observed in political debates on social media is not necessarily an effect of the technological structure of the platforms, but rather the result of the strategic engagement of users with the platforms’ affordances. Twitter users in Australia strategically discursify and give meaning to these affordances to make their own political positions more visible, amplify antagonisms and, at times, join each other in forming larger agonistic communities.

Chapter 5 sees Emiliana De Blasio, Rossella Rega, and Michele Valente analyze how the platformization and the growing polarization of news sources in Italy—a country that faces a traditional phenomenon of polarized pluralism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004)—influences the journalistic representation of the topic regarding the regularization of migrant workers in the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. By considering 12 news media sources of different political persuasions, and their articles on Facebook, “Polarization and Platformization of News in Italian Journalism: The Coverage of Migrant Worker Regularization” highlights the persistence of a strong polarization in news frames, prefiguring a highly fragmented public sphere.

In Chapter 6, “What Drives Selective Exposure to Political Information in Spain? Comparing Political Interest and Ideology,” Lidia Valera-Ordaz and María Luisa Humanes Humanes delve into the selective exposure to three media types (digital press, television, and radio) by Spanish citizens during the November 2019 General Election. Through multinomial logistic regressions applied to a representative post-electoral survey, this work shows that ideological-partisan orientations are the most important variables governing selective exposure, especially for the digital press and the radio. Besides confirming ideological selective exposure, the data highlight an important tendency toward selective avoidance of news media perceived as ideologically incongruent. For television, however, both socio-demographic trends and ideological orientations exhibit a similar explanatory weight.

Raquel Tarullo offers qualitative research in Chapter 7 focused on the practices and formats used by young adults for political participation through social media and the significance of these repertoires for public conversation. “Semi-Private Spheres as Safe Spaces for Young Social Media Users’ Political Conversation: Virtual Haven or Digital Bubbles?” explores the digital political participation practices among young people in Argentina. Based on 30 in-depth interviews with people between 18 and 24 years old, the findings of this research note that this segment of the population prefer reduced digital spaces to talk with their close contacts about polarized issues, to avoid the aggression and violence they say they observe in the digital space.

“The Mirage of Truth. The Instrumentalization of Fact-checking to Spread an Ideological Discourse” (Chapter 8), by María Díez-Garrido, Dafne Calvo and Lorena Cano-Orón, reflects on the weaponization of fact-checking practices. The study applies a combined methodology to compare two Spanish fact-checking initiatives: Maldita—internationally recognized—and Bendita, which arose as an imitation of Maldita and lacks recognition and scholarly attention. Conclusions suggest that fact-checking implies

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more complex activities than refuting specific facts, while alt-right positions can instrumentalize fact-checking for political objectives.

The third section is devoted to the institutional moment that represents the ultimate expression of democracy and how populism finds a breeding ground in a hybrid context of communication, by observing both supranational electoral processes—the 2019 European Parliamentary Election—and national presidential elections in the U.S., Taiwan, and Portugal.

Darren G. Lilleker, Márton Bene, Delia Cristina Balaban, Vicente Fenoll, and Simon Kruschinski investigate the populism phenomenon in Chapter 9 through a content analysis of party posts on Facebook during the 2019 European parliamentary elections across 12 countries. The authors of “Populism, Its Prevalence, and Its Negative Influence on Democratic Institutions” rely on the fact that the infectious nature of populism within a system drives a shift in the public mood. Research found that populist appeals are most likely to accompany critiques of labor and social policy, labeling elites or minority groups as causing inequalities that disadvantage ordinary people. Both forms of populism enjoy high levels of user engagement suggesting they gain higher levels of reach on social media platforms.

Chapter 10 focuses on the Twitter activity of the Spanish candidates in the 2019 European Election. “Europe and Euroscepticism on Twitter During the 2019 European Parliament Elections: An Analysis of the Spanish Candidates,” by Guillermo López-García, German Llorca-Abad, Vicente Fenoll, Anastasia Ioana Pop, and Jose Gamir-Ríos is based on a content analysis to observe which topics each candidate spoke about and from which perspective (pro-European or Eurosceptic) and a discourse analysis to further explore the political communication strategies developed. Results show that, unlike previous elections, the issue of Europe was given greater priority in 2019 by the candidates analyzed. Moreover, Euroscepticism has a marginal presence in candidates’ messages.

In Chapter 11, María de los Ángeles Flores offers the research “Intermedia Agenda-Setting Effect of Latino Television in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election: A Comparative Study of Telemundo and Univision.” This research reveals that in the final phase of the election campaign, the ‘horse-race reporting’ effect was stronger and both television newscasts were influencing each other, with the reporting being similar but not identical. However, the predominant flow of influence was from Telemundo to Univision. In terms of Trump’s intermedia agenda setting effect in the initial phase, the correlation was strong and positive between Telemundo and Univision, while in the final phase it was moderate and positive, indicating that Trump’s issues evolved in the second period. The directional flow of influence dynamic was reciprocal between the networks showing that Telemundo and Univision were reporting almost the same electoral issues regarding Trump.

Yowei Kang and Kenneth C.C. Yang analyze how the emergence of live streaming influencers modified Taiwan’s 2020 Presidential Election in Chapter 12. In this case study entitled “Will Live Streaming Platforms and Influencers Consolidate or Disrupt Democracy? A Case Study of Taiwan’s 2020 Presidential Election,” the authors describe and examine the role of live streaming platforms and influencers in generating political participation to account for the success of President Tsai Ing-wen’s 2020 re-election campaign. The study focuses on the roles of live streaming platforms and influencers in contributing to the growing and alarming global phenomenon of populism and polarization associated with politicians’ campaign strategies. It discusses whether the employment of live streaming influencers as a viable political communication tool in this campaign may ultimately contribute to the democratic deepening in Taiwan.

“Placing Portuguese Right-wing Populism into Context: Analogies with France, Italy, and Spain” (Chapter 13), by Afonso Biscaia and Susana Salgado, examines the discourse of the Portuguese right-

wing populist André Ventura and compares it with close European counterparts, such as Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini, and Santiago Abascal. The empirical analysis focuses on the 2021 presidential campaign on Twitter and YouTube as part of the integrated political communication strategy. Results show that André Ventura appropriates the features of right-wing populism but adapts those to the Portuguese specific context as a strategy to gain both wider media visibility and popular support.

The fourth section of this book includes several studies that analyze how political leaders and citizens deal with the challenges of the pandemic, as well as climate change and vaccination in a context of polarization and instrumentalized disinformation.

Chapter 14, by Dolors Palau-Sampio and Adolfo Carratalá, focuses on the institutional speeches of six European leaders when explaining the measures implemented to address the first wave of the pandemic. “Emotional and Rational Frames Contained in Institutional Speeches: Six European Leaders Managing the COVID-19 Crisis” shows the importance of combining emotional and rational frames by political leaders, who sought to give speeches that would provoke a feeling of security in citizens—rounded off with a rational approach based on science and economics—without refusing emotionality, built on values such as protection, gratitude, social sacrifice, and citizen unity. With none of the leaders being populist, their heterogeneous personalities clearly influence the vocation and tone of their discourses.

Chapter 15 addresses the creation of political conflict on Twitter dealing with the health crisis, in a comparative study between Brazil and Spain. “Discourse and Disinformation on COVID-19 Vaccination in Spain and Brazil: A Case Study on the Twitter Debate,” by Claudio Luis de Camargo Penteadó, Eva Campos-Domínguez, Patrícia Dias dos Santos, Denise Hideko Goya, Mario Mangas Núñez and Mónica Melero Lázaro, analyzes the most retweeted messages published during the first week of vaccinations in these two countries. Although governmental positions in both countries are opposed, the results of the online debate on the immunization of COVID-19 allow common patterns of polarized profiles to be established in Spain and Brazil that question the management of the pandemic and it can be seen how political polarization is shaped as a characteristic of disinformation in both countries. This reveals that, after the health crisis, there is a crisis of democratic institutions that affect public health actions, specifically in combating COVID-19.

Laura Iannelli, Giada Marino, Danilo Serani, and Augusto Valeriani use Chapter 16, “Citizens, Polarization, and the Pandemic in the Italian Hybrid News Media System,” to offer a longitudinal study developed during the first phases of the pandemic, when Italy experienced the first mass lockdown activated in Western democracies in response to COVID-19. The study investigates Italian citizens’ positions on an issue that lies at the very heart of democracy: the balance between public health and individual freedoms. Despite the increasing divergence between government and opposition regarding restrictions on personal freedoms, findings indicate that citizens’ opinions did not polarize between extreme communitarian and libertarian stances. On the contrary, a significant majority of citizens expressed strong beliefs in the primacy of public health over their freedoms. Extreme libertarians were only a minority, albeit a minority that took up a position far from the average and radically opposed to the mainstream debate. Extreme libertarians’ positions were driven by a completely different vision of the news reliability of “older” and “newer” media arenas, different attitudes toward the “official truth,” and different levels of trust in the government to those of extreme communitarians.

Chapter 17, entitled “Citizens’ Political Discourses on Climate Change and Vaccines: A Comparative Study Between Spain and Poland,” compares the political discourses of citizens on science issues such as vaccines and climate change, after public consultations held in Poland and Spain in 2019—very close to general elections in both countries. The results of the exploratory study carried out by Carolina

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Moreno-Castro, Małgorzata Dzimińska, Aneta Krzewińska, Izabela Warwas, and Ana Serra-Perales show that more political opinions were expressed in the debates on climate change than on vaccines. Moreover, the citizens' views on the science-politics dichotomy were mainly negative, with men mixing science with politics more than women.

This book offers an overview of the burning topics in areas of political communication, political sciences, and communication studies. It constitutes a valuable contribution regarding the current threats faced by traditional and stable democracies while disinformation, polarization and populism have a main role in the present hybrid communicative scenario.

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Section 1

Chapter 1

Proposing a Three-Dimensional Normative Model for Political Communication

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ABSTRACT

The last 10 years or more will be remembered as a time of perpetual crisis. Against this backdrop, there is an urgent need for effective leadership and for citizens of the world and their leaders to come together to achieve collective goals. However, various studies have highlighted the deleterious effects on democracy of the current trajectory political discourse is taking. Increasing voices in academia call for a shift towards a more citizen-centric political communication. The authors respond to such calls by proposing a new model for political communication that focuses on three dimensions, namely service ethos, inclusivity, and empathy (3D model). In this chapter, the authors conceptualise these dimensions and build a normative model for their application while discuss the relevant shortcomings and current issues as they relate to contemporary political communication.

INTRODUCTION

In 1995, Michael Gurevitch and Jay Blumler highlighted the emergence of a crisis of public communication in liberal democratic societies. In his most recent article, Blumler (2018) contends that this crisis still persists but with a clearer focus on what he calls a “crisis of communication for citizenship” (p.83). Focusing on political communication Blumler (1997) highlighted a number of developments which he argued to be negative. Campaigning was becoming increasingly permanent, calculated attacks were made more frequently, journalists pour scorn on politicians and their publicity machines, personalization is

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8057-8.ch001

increasing and deepening with media playing a central role in making and breaking political careers. He argued that political communication failed to meet the standards required of a democratic society and suggested the practices and tenor should be measured according to clear criteria. Does it serve citizens more than politicians and journalists? Does it offer meaningful choices between governing teams and agendas? Does it promote a broad sense of participation in government? Does it satisfy our symbolic commitment to the notion of democracy? In 1997 Blumler had hope that the pluralism afforded by digital democracy, the popular will to create better democratic structures and a return to professional codes of journalism might better align political communication with the principles of democracy. However, writing in 2018, Blumler argued each were exacerbating the problems. Digital technologies had proven to have some positive effects but far more negative ones. The popular will seemed to be moving towards a more populist position. Journalists increasingly offered blaring headlines or played devil's advocate necessarily opposing but also hectoring parties of every political colour. The crisis was worsening as a "so long as it works, anything goes!" infected politics leading to the simplification of messages and emotional manipulation of citizens. Despite the election of Trump in the US and Brexit in the UK, both of which exemplified the downturn in the quality of political discourse, Blumler remained hopeful for the emergence of a "more authentic-seeming and citizenship-oriented model that favours visions and ideas for large-scale social change" (2018: 90).

Perhaps, however, the crisis is deeper. It is not simply a crisis of political or indeed public communication but part of a wider crisis facing democratic institutions. The last decade (and a bit more) will be remembered as a period of almost perpetual crises; there have been economic crises that have brought down governments; climate change and poverty are an ever present threat to societal stability; crises of international relations and national identity (e.g., Brexit) expose divisions; of privacy and technology (e.g., the scandal of Cambridge Analytica) which damage public trust; the refugee crisis, natural disasters (e.g., Fukushima nuclear disaster) and most recently the Covid-19 pandemic. Each of these have had negative impacts for public trust and support for democratic processes. Among the most malign consequences of such crises, we have witnessed the upsurge in terrorist attacks, external influences in western elections, a growing distrust of institutions and the mainstream media, increased socio-economic inequality (exacerbated by the pandemic), the growth of populism, and widespread diffusion of fake news and conspiracy theories. In particular, the current pandemic should be seen as a dual crisis: on the one hand a palpable health crisis, and on the other the economic tsunami that is just around the corner which could threaten the ability of many global citizen's access to their basic needs: food, a home, and in many cases even life itself. An interesting observation is that in the midst of this crisis we see the crucial role that the state (re)gains. Without dismissing their shortcomings, we all appreciated the financial support to businesses and employees, the significance of the National Health Systems, the overall importance of the welfare state. In a very insightful article juxtaposing the 2008 financial crisis and the current health crisis, Moschonas (2020) highlights how Keynesianism, in time of crises, rescued (as in 2008-9) and could rescue again economic (neo-) liberalism. He argues that massive state intervention is already taking place as the state alone has the ability to act "as the guardian of societal interests". While in the 2008 financial crisis state support was primarily directed to elites and the saving of banks, the pandemic demanded a more citizen-centric approach.

However, in view of such developments, it seems that most governments have been unable to communicate efficiently with their public. Scholarship (Sanders & Canel, 2013; Blumler, 2018) has long pointed to the significance of government communication for human well-being. While today's visibility of government communication issues and their urgency (financial crises, the rise of populism, Covid-19

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and more as mentioned above) has never been greater, governments around the world still struggle to produce effective communication, to reach, inform and mobilize citizens. While new ways of communicating with citizens, that draw on opportunities provided by new media technologies has generated considerable optimism, considerable failings in these communication practices quickly tempered the initial enthusiasm (Margolis & Resnick, 2000). Private data breaches, extreme microtargeting, hate speech and extremism, soundbites replacing political discourse, and long standing issues such as mediatization, and the excessive marketization of political communication are among some of the developments that have triggered warnings with regards to the future of political communication. As early as 1999, researchers were calling for public administrators to no longer rely as much on the media and to develop new tools and strategies for public communication (Lee, 1999). Today, against the backdrop of a digital media ecology, Davis, Fenton, Freedman, & Khiabanv (2020) argue that more attention needs to be paid to the negative impacts of developments in communication technology that tend to have the greatest impact upon political discourse and in turn trust in the institutions and processes of democratic statecraft.

The unfortunate results of the failings in political communication are the growing appeal of populism and conspiracy theories especially among lower sociodemographics, as well as further and widespread “disillusionment with conventional politics” (Blumler, 2018: 87). Moschonas (2020) aptly argues that “the response to a crisis is so important that it becomes – technically – an integral part of the dynamics of the crisis and a component of its very nature”. Hence, we argue that communication is a fundamental and central aspect of the processes of responding to a crisis. All things considered, in order for citizens to understand and work out how best to correspond in such cases, government communication is vital, as they depend heavily on the information and interpretations they receive.

With reference to such developments, various scholars call for the need to rethink and revisit current political communication practices, along a more citizen-centric approach (Blumler, 2018) and to “re-embed an ethical code into politics” (Lilleker, 2021). In this chapter, we respond to such calls by suggesting a shift in political communication by defining this around three fundamental and interrelated dimensions: service ethos, inclusivity and empathy. In the following sections, we conceptualise these dimensions and build a normative model for their application while discussing the relevant shortcomings and current issues as they relate to contemporary political communication.

A NEW PARADIGM FOR A CITIZEN-CENTRIC MODEL FOR POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

In what follows we present and discuss those dimensions that we see as necessary for a shift towards a more citizen-centric political communication. We argue that the new paradigm should focus on three dimensions, namely: service ethos, inclusivity, and empathy (henceforth referring to the 3D Model).

Service Ethos

“Persuasion is achieved by the speaker’s personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible”. (Aristotle Rhetoric)

Ethos is a word of Greek origin that means morality, showing the moral character / nature of a person, group or institution (Aristotle, Book 2). The most popular use of the concept, specifically among politi-

cal communication scholars, is the ethos of rhetoric as introduced in Aristotle's treatise on the art of persuasion. In "Rhetoric" (4th century BCE), Aristotle argued that persuasive communication depends on three elements, namely *logos* (reason in arguments), *pathos* (appeal to emotion), and *ethos* (the speaker's character). While many consider rhetoric as deceptive and manipulative, a tool of demagogues, Aristotle recognized that rhetoric itself is neutral: it can be used for good or evil, to tell the truth or to deceive (Leith, 2011). While a detailed discussion of rhetoric goes beyond the scope of this chapter, what is of interest here is Aristotle's conceptualization of ethos as the role of the character of the speaker within persuasion. In his line of thought, persuasive communication can be accomplished if the speaker appears to be credible. If this is achieved then the speaker is regarded as a point of authority and their arguments are accepted as true by the audience. However, Aristotle highlights the significance of the good character (the moral stance) in his explanation of how a speaker can appear as a credible person; he argues that they should display three things (a) practical intelligence (*phronêsis*), (b) a virtuous character, and (c) good will (*Rhet.* II.1, 1378a6ff cited in Stanford, 2010). As Mshvenieradze (2013: 1940) suggests "the impact of ethos is often called the argument's 'ethical appeal' or the 'appeal from credibility.'"

Other scholars have approached the concept of ethos by focusing on civic society. The importance of citizens' participation in public affairs has always been a vital element of democracy as clearly stated by Thucydides in his explicit quote "*Andres gar polis*", which translates as "for the *polis* is the men" (cited in Castoriadis, 1983: 100-101). Drawing on this, and by referring to the community of citizens' (the *demos*) participation in public affairs, Castoriadis (1983: 98) explains that "this participation is not left to chance, but actively promoted both through formal rules and through the general *ethos* of the *polis*". This ethos becomes an important pre-requisite for the existence of a meaningful public space; with its decisive qualities being courage, responsibility, and shame (*aidos, aischune*). As Castoriadis puts it (1983: 104) "Lacking these, the "public space" becomes just an open space for advertising, mystification, and pornography". Similarly, Wilson and Banfield (1971) highlighted the obligation of individuals to participate in public affairs. Drawing on, what they called, the middle-class Anglo-Saxon Protestant ethos, they conceived politics as embedding "the interest of the whole" and in that a "good government" should be characterized by "honesty, impartiality, and efficiency" (p. 1048).

Another interesting approach related to ethos is Helms' (2012) argument about democratic political leadership. Although Helms (2012) does not explicitly refer to ethos, his discussion about authenticity and responsibility as important elements to understand democratic leadership, basically draws upon the moral aspects of the concept. He argues that authentic leadership "requires that the political actions of a leader are consistent with his or her convictions and beliefs" (p.655). Helms (2012) recognizes the importance of authenticity in the making of good democratic leadership (and as a vehicle to gain democratic legitimacy), but he also acknowledges the dangers related to this. Various scholars have pointed out that authenticity can be performed, following politicians' quest to play the role of someone real in order to appeal to their audience (Caza & Jackson, 2011; Coleman, 2011). Such arguments are enhanced by those who are dubious of the conception of authenticity as the idea of one being true to oneself, and rather understand authenticity as a social construct "encompassing the degree to which someone is and remains true to himself or herself" (Lubke, 2020:2). The concept of authenticity has attracted wider scholarly attention in political communication and very much so in examinations regarding populist leadership (Enli & Rosenberg 2018; Shane 2018). With reference to populist leadership, De Beus (2009:100) suggested we witness a 'new political culture of authenticity'.

As for Helms' (2012) approach to responsibility, he highlights the significance of integrity and consistency between words and actions. This aligns to the concept of a public service ethos which implicitly

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is at the heart of the ideal representative democracy. However, he presciently argues that even though politicians are aware they are being closely monitored by the media, and even more fiercely exposed through social media, they quite often fall into actions of irresponsibility. The accusations that Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis violated his government's pandemic restrictions, revealed in a viral video showed the Greek PM attending a lunch during a visit to a Greek island that far exceeded the limit on gatherings at a time that government had further tightened restrictions to reduce virus transmission (Holroyd, 2021). Similarly, Dominic Cummings, special advisor to British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, was revealed to have broken not only the spirit of rules but the law during national lockdown, yet he was subsequently defended by Johnson and kept his job. The examples are illustrative of these leader's failure to adequately perform authentic leadership and responsibility (as described by Helms, 2012), and offer the impression that rules applied to the masses do not apply to those in or close to government. Despite both governments attempting to explain the situation, Mitsotakis and Johnson faced mounting anger both from media and opposition parties, and a growing distrust from the general public. The inconsistency between the PM's rhetoric (numerous public addresses emphasizing the importance of individual responsibility) and their subsequent explanations of clear breaches of their own rules and guidance defined the people's perceptions. The Covid-19 pandemic has stressed, more than ever before, the need for effective and consistent public communication, especially as political leaders are under constant scrutiny.

What the above examples emphasize is an issue that goes to the heart of the crisis for democracies: public trust. Political leaders may follow Aristotelian guidelines when performing authenticity, however their performance of governance can appear, or be, at odds with their rhetoric. While the media spotlight may make politicians appear corrupt and venal due to blaring headlines, the fact that there are real instances of corrupt practices, cronyism, broken promises and failings in accountability demonstrate that the performed ethos is inconsistent with actual behaviour. Hence, we stress the need for honesty instead of authenticity. The literature discussing authenticity shows it to be a vague and contested concept with a strong link to the fabrication of a public image. Honesty better captures the qualities required in our communication model. That is we espouse that ethos should follow what Mshvenieradze (2013:1940) argued to be a composition "of correct attitudes, respect [...], ethics". Returning to the classical definition of ethos, honesty is about moral character that includes or relates to other traits which the public seek in their representatives, in particular integrity, truthfulness, responsibility and accountability. Integrity, as Lubke (2020:3) argues comprises the "idea that individuals act according to their principles". Political actions should be consistent with one's values and beliefs. Also, Helms (2012) discusses responsibility as not just taking responsibility, a core part of being seen to be accountable, but also being a responsible leader. Here we can connect responsibility to the Greek concept of practical intelligence (*phronêsis*) but perhaps also include the notion of emotional intelligence which is at the heart of the pathos dimension of Aristotle's model for the rhetorician. Finally, also important are courage and shame (Castoriadis, 1983). It takes courage to take bold decisions, related to responsibility, but these have to be communicated and understood as for the good of the general public. Similarly, demonstrating the ability to feel shame means a leader shows they understand their responsibilities and is willing to be held accountable, again this relates to an ethos of integrity and demonstrates having a good and moral character. Thus, ethos needs to be placed at the heart of political communication but ethos cannot simply be performative. An ethos of integrity, truthfulness, responsibility, accountability, courage and shame, an ethos imbued with morality needs to be at the heart of governance. If this is lacking, communication can never appear to be honest and governments who are perceived as lacking this ethos will not be trusted to act on behalf of the greater good of their citizens.

Inclusivity

As discussed above citizens' participation in public affairs has always been a crucial element for a democratic society. Drawing on this premise our second dimension is the need for inclusivity in political (public) communication. The idea of inclusivity and an *inclusive society* has been widely discussed by both political and communication scholars. In a 2009 report, United Nations defined an inclusive society as a "society for all in which every individual, each with rights and responsibilities, has an active role to play" (p.7). In an inclusive society, regardless of their backgrounds (race, ethnicity, religion, gender, social status, (dis)abilities, or sexual orientation), all citizens are equally able and motivated to participate in civic, social, economic and political activities. This report also discussed the critical elements necessary to create an inclusive society, and in the importance of various actors amongst which the media and governments hold a crucial role. For the scope of this chapter, we are concerned with two things mapped out in this report:

- (a) The creation of the conditions that would enable all citizens to participate in every aspect of life as well as in decision-making processes;
- (b) The importance of well-informed citizens as a condition to maximize participation in public affairs. "Publication/information sharing and increasing the accessibility of the community's activities will eliminate doubts and suspicions which could otherwise create a sense of exclusion" (UN Report, 2009:15).

While in principle many democracies have policies in place to ensure all citizens have the practical means and education to participate in politics these are uneven and proven to be unsuccessful. Kemmers (2017) argues that one of the key explanatory factors for citizens to abstain from voting or vote for populist parties is their perceived lack of agency and empowerment. Put simply they feel that political parties and state institutions are not interested in responding to their concerns, and so feel marginalized and disenfranchised. Well-cited examples of US presidential candidates arguing that 47% of the population are not part of their electorate or describing an opponent's supporters as a basket of deplorables are used to demonstrate the use of exclusionary language which reveals the thinking within that bipartisan system (Blake, 2016). Exclusionary references may just reinforce perceptions of citizens that one party or another does not see them as valuable at elections. However, it is argued that many communities, due to myriad characteristics including social class, ethnic background, religion or culture, feel excluded from the system (Bay & Blekesaune, 2002). While their guidance particularly pertained to the crises caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the team of social psychologists who authored *Together Apart* highlighted the importance of we-ness as a central concept for governance. Political leaders need to establish themselves as a central unifying figure able to embody 'representing us', 'doing it for us' and 'crafting and embedding a sense of us' in all communication (Jetten, Reicher, Haslam, & Cruwys, 2020: 25-30).

The link to our conceptualization of a normative perspective of ethos is obvious here. While most important in times of crisis, though one may argue that many governments have faced perpetual crisis for the last decade or so, the inclusive notion of we-ness should be at the heart of democracy. Put simply, if the tone of any language or impacts of any policy do not offer inclusive benefits, and marginalize some groups, the policy and government may be viewed as illegitimate. As democracy rests on the legitimacy of elections and a utilitarian philosophy of governance this is crucial. We-ness is encapsulated by Jetten et al (2020) as clear, coherent and empathic communication which unites all people behind a common

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goal, with behavioural change facilitated, underpinned by clear evidence to support decisions taken. As highlighted when discussing ethos, leaders must stand as exemplars for the emotional and behavioural responses that should be adopted across the community. Reflecting on the handling of the pandemic in the UK, one of the team of authors of *Together Apart*, Professor Stephen Reicher, tweeted in summer of 2020 that Boris Johnson had trashed all the principles within the work. To some extent this is an assessment that applies to many leaders (Lilleker, Coman, Gregor, & Novelli, 2021).

Inclusivity is perhaps of even greater importance as the nations of our world emerge from the pandemic. Studies show that social inequality has increased during the pandemic and the most socially disadvantaged have been hit worst (Social Mobility Commission, 2021). There are serious disparities between nations, *The Guardian* reports that “coronavirus could turn back the clock 30 years on global poverty” (Spinney, 2020) but also within nations. Not only have those existing on or below the poverty line been more likely to die of Covid-19, they are also most likely to feel the worst effects of the locking down of the economies and the collapse of businesses during that period with fears many could find themselves homeless and jobless once government support mechanisms end (Degerman, Flinders, & Johnson, 2020). Those who fall into the worst hit demographics are also found to be those with lower trust in democratic institutions and to whom populist, nationalist and anti-democratic arguments most appeal, in other words they are demographics whose practice is shaped by perceived political marginalization (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Hence those who already feel marginalized are likely to experience a further and more devastating set of experiences.

At times of crisis, and in particular when a crisis coincides with a period when a nation has become politically polarized, leaders need more than ever to develop an inclusive and uniting mode of communication. Feminist studies have provided us with useful insights regarding communicative action as a more inclusive concept and have allowed for a better understanding of the (dis)functioning of the public sphere in contemporary societies (Pajnik, 2006). Bickford (1996) extends Habermas’ theory of communicative action by enriching his concept of speech action with that of political listening as an activity. Her conceptualization of this activity involves an active willingness to construct relations of attention and implies that the speaker and the listener are ‘different but equal’ (Bickford, 1996: 23-24). Following her argument, like-minded scholars argue that this can be recognized as “a practice of citizenship, which is based on attention to the perceptions of others and at the same time on the redirection of attention from the subject to the world” (Pajnik, 2006: 391). In the same vein, feminist scholars proposed the concept of the ethics of care as an alternative to the Habermasian ethics of justice in an attempt to achieve greater openness and inclusivity in communication. Their approach suggests further that the polyphony of voices and rational argumentation, which constitute fundamental components of Habermas’ communicative action, should recognize the importance of emotion and mutual understanding (*Verstehen*) as a process (Pajnik, 2006). In this context, Chambers (1995: 176-177), who argued for public debate as a ‘democratized forum’, called for the active engagement of excluded voices, the opening of opportunities for action, the politicization of the depoliticized. To extend political communication along these lines, Young (2000) proposes three modes of action, namely, greeting and public acknowledgement, affirmative rhetoric and narrative and situated knowledge. Greeting is an expression of acknowledgement of discourse that “implies a recognition of individuals in their particularity” (Pajnik, 2006: 394). Affirmative rhetoric refers to rational argumentation together with emotion and performative politics. In this case rhetoric “relates to reflexivity in the sense of active listening to various speakers”; bringing inclusiveness into communicative action “since it is based on the active recognition of the specificity of context and the positioning of political actors” (Pajnik, 2006: 394). Finally, narration and story-telling

are proposed as a powerful strategy to uncover injustice and systemic mistakes; a way to give voice to marginalized groups, for example migrants.

So, while a more inclusive and ‘representative of all people’ approach needs to be adopted by politicians, further action needs to be undertaken in order to secure those necessary conditions that would enable, as well as motivate, citizens to feel sufficiently empowered to participate in public affairs. Civic participation lies at the heart of democracy, and for that a vivid public sphere where citizens exchange views and knowledge, based on equal rights and obligations, constitutes a pre-requisite for a healthy community (Habermas, 1989). However, as Castoriadis (1983:104) rightly ponders: “The existence of a public space is not just a matter of legal provisions guaranteeing rights of free speech, etc. Such provisions are but conditions for a public space to exist. The important question is: What are the people actually doing with these rights?”. To answer this question, Castoriadis (1983; 1991) points to education and more specifically to *paideia*. *Paideia* is a term that originates in ancient Greece, it refers to an all-round civic education that encompasses a life-long process of character development (Fotopoulos, 2005). *Paideia* is a much broader term that goes beyond academic credits, as it “involves becoming conscious that the *polis* is also oneself and that its fate also depends on one’s mind, behavior, and decisions; in other words, it is participation in political life” (Castoriadis, 1983: 104). Societies operating in this way will adopt the view that politics is an activity undertaken by every individual, as opposed to being seen as the preserve of a very particular political class.

To attain such a society, the operational rules of the entire information environment need to be considered. For citizens to actively participate in public affairs, and to be in a position to interrogate laws, reflect and deliberate, they need to be adequately informed; and in that, the role of the media is of equal importance to that of politicians. Discussions around new media’s task to provide all citizens the information they require in order to participate in democratic governance has long been central in political communication studies (Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1995; Davis et.al., 2020). Media’s role is to ensure that citizens can draw upon a ‘diverse marketplace of ideas’ in order to form opinions, vote for candidates and engage in political life (Stromback and Kaid, 2008 cited in Rugar, Owen, & Baker, 2015: 5). As Rugar, et.al. (2015) argue, such information diversity “associated with the spectrum of political options and equal access to political and media arenas, promotes the idea that virtues of tolerance and respect for ‘otherness’ allow harmonious functioning of society and put a barrier to discrimination on any ground.” However, news media have long been criticized for failing to appropriately respond to their role in society. A disproportionate pre-occupation with personalities over policies, an obvious preference for conflict over discussion, frequent propagandistic rhetoric, favouritism towards specific politicians, and the marginalization (if not silencing) of anti-establishment voices are among the many criticisms that have been attributed to political journalism (Curran, Iyengar, Lund, & Salovaara- Moring, 2009). For an inclusive society, media should overcome corporate interests and political biases, and fulfill their normative role, which is to provide accurate, fair and impartial information. Information sharing and accessibility, the nourishing of a forum for public debate can facilitate and promote citizens’ participation in public life.

Empathy

Empathy derives from a Greek word meaning “to make suffer” and requires personally feeling and speaking to the emotions of another person. Empathy should not be conflated with sympathy, a feeling of compassion, but denotes understanding and sharing feelings within a particular context. Hence, Hoffmann (2000: 4) describes empathy as a self-aware congruence of emotions which acts as a guide on

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behaviour. In other words, in order to be a good and moral leader, that leader must experience empathy for the people they serve (Hoffmann, 2000: 17). Empathy is thus crucial for inclusivity, as it permits a leader to understand the entirety of those they serve through their performance of governance while also ensuring communication from leader to citizen invokes the crucial pathos dimension at the heart of Aristotelian rhetoric (Shogan, 2009). People seek leaders that *inspire* them, as well as seeking coherent and convincing explanations of decision making to help them understand the workings of their society, especially under extraordinary circumstances (Jetten et al., 2020). Aligning empathy with pathos suggests a strategic construction of the tone of communication to reflect the mood of a specific audience. While a natural part of the rhetorician's toolkit, scholars point to a broader definition suggesting that empathy is not simply a reflection of a mood but the values of the people (Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015). There is evidence of leaders, and particular candidates for office, telling people what the values of the nation are, should be, or will be if they as candidate are elected (Waheed, Schuck, de Vreese & Neijens, 2011). However, research suggests that effective leadership, trusted and transformational, is built through the communication of 'we-ness'. In other words, there is no separation between leader and follower, leaders represent everyone, act in the way anyone would and demonstrate how 'we' is reflected within word and deed (Van Dick, et al. 2018). In many ways this goes beyond communication and to the character of the leader, they cannot see themselves as exceptional or above the masses but of and as one with the people (Jetten, et al., 2021: 28). This aligns empathy with authenticity, but not as a device of communication but as a philosophy of performing the role of leader.

Perhaps this highlights the problem, leaders through their performance must bridge the roles of ordinary person and that of the superhuman with the ability to provide the leadership the people need at any given time. The challenges of performing both simultaneously, and the scrutiny that their performances are given, contribute to what appears to be a crisis in terms of perceptions of leaders and the degree of empathy they possess. Firstly, research shows that political and economic elites are perceived to lack empathy due to them being seen as remote and out of touch with the masses in a society (Reiser, 2018). When they express empathy, it is viewed at best as sympathy (as they lack understanding of the lives of ordinary people) or a rhetorical device designed to manipulate. With the widespread knowledge of the revolving door between politics and business and the self-sustaining nature of elites within nations (Verzichelli, 2018) the perception is reinforced that those in power are a cabal who promote their own shared interests as opposed to concerning themselves with those of the people. Such feelings if they spread within a society fuel mistrust, support for anti-elite populism and provide a basis for beliefs in conspiracy theories about corruption and the machinations of deep state forces (Castanho Silva, Vegetti, & Littvay, 2017).

The cataclysmic repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic have highlighted more than ever before the significance of empathy in political (public) communication. Research (Yang & Mutchler, 2020; Cooke, Eirich, Racine, & Madigan, 2020) has demonstrated fundamental behavioural changes and rise of negative feelings (such as increasing stress, uncertainty and fear) amongst the population following the perpetual lock downs, social isolation and economic insecurity. During such times, public communicators need to engage with the emotional mood of the public and, as stated above, turn 'sympathy' into empathy. As in every crisis (but not only during crises), political leadership needs to be able to appreciate and understand people's feelings, and that should be reflected both in decision-making as well as through communication. Various political consultants have now grasped this need. As Tsaoussakis (2021) aptly suggests, political communication ought to "be built on values of collective good, to position the citizen and their needs in the center". And in that we totally agree, as it is exactly this ability and flexibility to

understand the citizens and the fluctuations in their feelings that can make for an effective and sustainable political communication.

Therefore, while the pandemic has harshly tested the communication and leadership abilities of political leaders globally, it comes as no surprise why New Zealand's Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, has been widely praised as the most effective political leader primarily thanks to her empathetic approach. It is most possibly Helen Clark's (former New Zealand's PM) response to *The Atlantic*, when asked about Ardern, that best explains Ardern's successful approach: "People feel that Ardern doesn't preach at them; she's standing with them" (Friedman, 2020). As McGuire et al. (2020) research demonstrate, Ardern understood the citizens and was equipped with the necessary flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances. According to their findings, Ardern's crisis leadership was discerned by different phases defined by the conditions, in that in the early phase, she sought to "reassure the public in relation to the government's decisiveness and evidence-based approach", while during the later phases, she shifted "towards a more empathetic approach encouraging solidarity among the community and a common understanding on how people should make sense of the situation" (McGuire, Cunningham, Reynolds, & Smith, 2020:374). McGuire et al., (2020) highlight that Ardern's quality is not just appearing authentic but acting authentically as the comforter and counsellor, displaying human fears and vulnerabilities without appearing weak, and speaking a shared code of language.

We therefore argue that there are two interrelated aspects within empathy that we need to consider in order to fully comprehend and practice it in political communication, that is (a) the need to initially understand how people feel, and (b) to communicate the messages in an empathetic way. With regards to the first aspect, this cognitive process of understanding citizens' emotions constitutes a pre-requisite to then move on to the second process which is developing a language and tone for communication. Knowing and understanding one's people can then guide the construction of clear consistent messages to be communicated in an empathetic manner. The appropriate language and tone can help frame a shared reality and allow sensemaking especially during critical situations (Whittle, Housley, Gilchrist, Mueller, & Lenney, 2015). Empathy can be a powerful tool for building perceptions of effective leadership. As Shogan (2009: 860) argues "Empathy has the power to alter opinions, strengthen relationships, and foster an understanding of unshared circumstances or experiences."

Empathy is thus a crucial component of the ethos of political leadership, and at the heart of honest authenticity. Through empathy the leader demonstrates their emotional intelligence and pathos, a core component of persuasive but trustworthy communication which builds a relationship between the speaker and audience based on shared understanding and experience (Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2018). But as with ethos and inclusivity it cannot simply be a rhetorical device. Public policy should champion collective interests ensuring no-one is left behind (Steffens, Mols, Haslam, & Okimoto, 2016) and this is as stated even more crucial as economies and societies emerge from the pandemic. Importantly however policy cannot adopt a one size fits all approach. Empathic policy making involves building an understanding of the contexts of each community within a nation into decision making. Hence there are strong links between empathetic communication and policy making, a demonstrable ethos of honest and moral governance and inclusivity.

CONCLUSION

This chapter constitutes a response to increasing voices in academia (Blumler, 2018; Davis et. al., 2020; Lilleker, 2021) calling for a need for change, pointing to a range of empirical studies which highlight the deleterious effects on democracy of the current trajectory political discourse is taking. Beyond academic discussions, it is reality itself which emphatically points to the need to do things differently. The last ten years and more will be remembered as a time of crises; of poverty, migration and population displacement; of international relations; of privacy and technology; and of public health. Some crises are long lasting and unsolved global problems that will only exacerbate unless drastic measures are undertaken. Others incrementally undermine and erode trust in national and international institutions. Cumulatively, however, the confluence of crises is like nothing we have experienced before outside of wartime. Against this backdrop, there is an urgent need for effective leadership and for citizens of the world and their leaders to come together to achieve collective goals. In doing so, as Jetten et. al., (2020: 32) argue people would “look to others — and to leaders in particular — to help them understand what they should be thinking and doing, as well as how their actions contribute to a concerted societal response.”

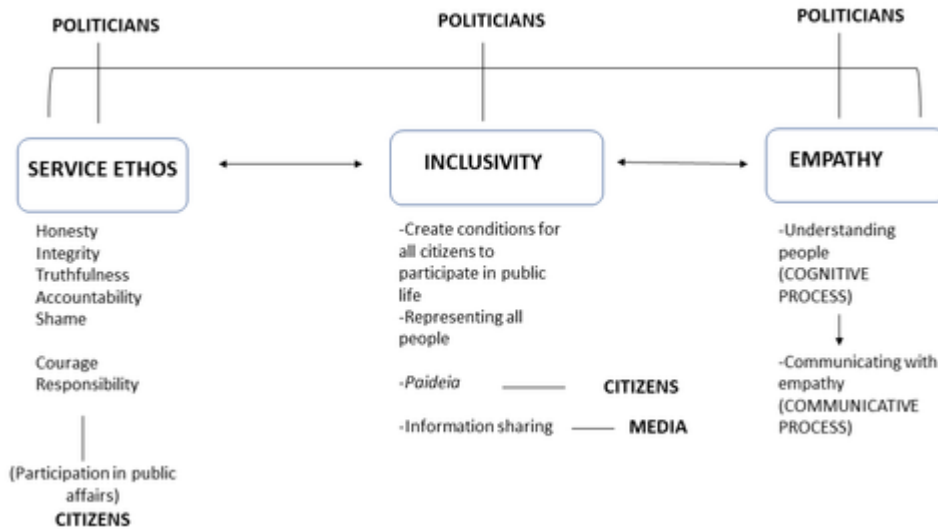
Coming together to generate a concerted, globally relevant societal response is ambitious and challenging. But we argue such initiatives need to begin at a national level. It is not only a matter of changing policy but also the nature of political discourse. It necessitates ensuring politics is something everyone can and wants to engage in. Drawing on such arguments, we propose the three-dimensional (3D) normative model for political communication (see Figure 1) that emphatically points to a more ‘ethical’ turn in communication processes, in the sense of inviting all actors involved to undertake responsibilities as well as re-positioning the citizen at the center of public life and political communication. Our suggestions are based on the premise that we need a more *sustainable* political communication; one that will be able to respond to the challenges ahead of us.

The three-dimensional model highlights the three principles that need to permeate political communication, namely: service ethos, inclusivity, and empathy. While there may be other possible dimensions that could secure a sustainable model of political communication as well as good and effective democratic political leadership, we argue that the above three appear to be of particular relevance to the current state of affairs. The suggested dimensions are interrelated and should be read as such.

Our conceptualization of service ethos draws primarily upon the character of the speaker (as per the classic conceptualization by Aristotle), and the need for politicians to espouse honesty, integrity and accountability (Helms, 2012; Mshvenieradze, 2013), but we also embrace those approaches that focus on the role of the civic society. In that, the obligation of citizens to participate in public affairs is of paramount importance in a democratic society. Albeit in different ways, all actors involved should perform their rights and obligations in society by taking responsibility for their actions, by taking the courage to actively participate in public affairs. Yet, it is largely the responsibility of politicians to create those conditions necessary for the people to participate in public affairs. To secure a more inclusive society - one where all people feel they are properly represented - politicians and leaders should embrace the notion of we-ness (Jetten et. al., 2020). We acknowledge that total inclusivity is a major challenge and may never be actually achievable, there is plenty of space for politicians to foster inclusivity. However, it represents a core criterion for government to earn political legitimacy, and it can only be earned through interaction with the citizens, listening to them and responding following a process of understanding. A sense of belonging has proven to be a trigger for active civic engagement and political participation (Lehavot, Balsam, & Ibrahim-Wells, 2009; Ball-Rokeach, Yong-Chan & Matei, 2001). For that to be

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Figure 1. 3D normative model for political communication



achieved, inclusiveness should permeate the overall communication philosophy and subsequently be demonstrated through the act of speaking. Concurring with Young (2000), an inclusive model of political communication should embrace emotion in the form of empathy (including emotion and expressiveness) and marginalized groups’ voices and relevance (such as migrants, LGBT etc.) should be appropriately politically acknowledged. Top-down rhetoric from leaders expressing their own exceptionalism, and the distillation of complex societal issues into simple messages have been proven to be inadequate in contemporary multicultural and diverse societies.

To further cultivate such an inclusive and democratic environment, political actors should nourish and promote civic participation through the broader education of the citizenry (as encapsulated in the concept of *paideia*), and by providing citizens with access to impartial and reliable information. To achieve the latter, media should play their role in serving the public interest. Finally, empathy is key to inclusivity as it allows a leader to understand those they serve. Empathy can be achieved through a two-level process; it initially requires the understanding of one’s peoples’ feelings, and subsequently the emotional intelligence to communicate in an empathetic way. As such, empathy lies at the heart of the ethos of political leadership and of honest authenticity, and so suggests a change in the philosophy of leadership.

We suggest that political communication is currently mono-dimensional, there is too much focus on the performative dimension. Political communication involves communicating the brand values deemed necessary to beguile citizens, appear better than the opposition and to win elections. But too often there is a lack of delivery, and the rhetoric is not sufficiently espoused through policies or experienced by citizens. Hence, we propose that political communication must not only be performative, embedded in codes of rhetoric, but it needs to be made real. Our three dimensions are experiential, citizens should feel their leaders are public servants, that the nation is one nation in which no-one feels marginalized or disenfranchised, and where all the diverse needs of a diverse community are understood and met as closely as possible. Where there are gaps between the service ethos rhetoric and delivery they need to be

discussed and explained honestly and transparently. This more accountable mode of leadership necessitates a more three-dimension form of political communication.

CONTRIBUTION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Whilst we understand that our thesis here may sound very optimistic and idealistic, we have the steadfast opinion that a more sustainable model of political communication is achievable and needed. At the heart of our argument, we do consider the conflictual nature of politics, the hard interests in societies and the continuous political struggle inherent to political life. Various studies have meticulously examined these implications (Beaufort, 2018; Schedler, 2021) as well as citizens unwillingness or inability to actively engage in public affairs (Hartley, 2010; MacKenzie & Moore, 2020). Conflict and sporadic mass participation are core features of representative democracy, the problem is when these appear to be the default setting for civic engagement. As Schudson (1998) aptly suggests in his study *The Good Citizen*, it is the failure of the American press and political communication to facilitate a healthy political culture that have further weakened citizenship and the public sphere. It is in this context that we argue that a synergistic effort by all agents involve (political actors, media, citizens with different and varying responsibilities) is imperative to achieve positive change. In the current state of affairs (constant crises), there are political leaders who have understood the need for a more inclusive and empathetic communication (for example Jacinda Ardern), and studies have shown that citizens are more eager to participate in public life when they feel that their voices are heard and they feel part of a wider community (Chambers, 1995; Lehavot, Balsam, & Ibrahim-Wells, 2009). Obviously, our model can only be applied in democratic societies where the political system and culture allow citizens' voices to be heard and where media can, at least to some extent, function independently of political interests, although perhaps we posit that our model should also be built in as a normative blueprint for democracy within transitional societies.

Hence, the intended contribution of this chapter is to further contribute to the conversation about re-imagining political communication and ensuring that it promotes trust in democratic institutions. We share the view of many researchers that the trajectory it is on is undermining trust, however arresting that trajectory and proving empirically how differing strategies can advance democratic culture is more challenging. Studies of political leadership and communication style and rhetoric can however add important insights, particularly in relation to the communication styles around specific events. A few studies have highlighted differences in leadership style in relation to terrorist attacks, in particular the empathetic solidarity displayed by New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern after the 2019 attack on a Christchurch Mosque (Besley & Peters, 2020). Similarly, work has surveyed the communication styles of a variety of leaders facing the Covid-19 pandemic (Lilleker, Coman, Gregor & Novelli, 2021). However, work structured specifically around the three dimensions of service ethos, inclusivity and empathy across a wider range of contexts would be insightful for understanding the links between leadership style and public attitudes. The latter aspect is particularly important in this respect. Linking not just public opinion data to the handling of crises or events of national significance, but a broader range of attitudes towards leaders and institutions would provide firmer grounding for understanding the role of leadership style in shaping the broader mood of a nation's citizens. Such research is needed as we need a normative model, perhaps a gold standard, against which the political communication of leaders can be measured. Censuring leaders for poor communication practice is often warranted and worthy, but often can be read as partisan point scoring. Having a standard which leaders should aspire

to, and can be judged against, highlighting why failing to meet the standard does not just undermine the office of the leader but all the institutions of governance is a goal the academy should have in its sights. Therefore, through this intervention, we hope to start a conversation and a research agenda in order to reconfigure the thinking which shapes our political communication environments.

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Chapter 2

Achieving a Representative Democracy in Europe: The Politicization of the European Public Sphere

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ABSTRACT

The concept of public spheres is based on the classic notion of deliberative democracy. The emergence of a European Public Sphere (EPS) at the European Union (EU) level has been widely discussed in the literature. However, the deliberative quality of this sphere is questioned because of its weak connection with citizens. This chapter explores how recent research addresses the EPS. Three categories are defined: (1) political and public communication of the EU, (2) citizen participation through technologies, and (3) the growing politicization and polarization of the European project. The methods in use, as well as remaining challenges in research, are also analyzed. This study contributes to discussions on the future of EU democracy, arguing that politicization and the interrelation of digital platforms and legacy media may enhance a true public discussion in Europe.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of public spheres has been widely studied in relationship to the European Union member states (Baisnée, 2007; Gil de Zúñiga, 2015). The idea of a European Public Sphere (EPS) is based on the European Union (EU) as a political system, which calls for specific media, politicians, and public. Journalism plays a key role in the emergence of this discursive political participation, presenting

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8057-8.ch002

and redefining EU news (Méndez et al., 2020). However, reporting on the EU is more difficult than ever before. The European debt crisis (Hubé et al., 2015) and/or Brexit presents legitimacy problems (Krzyżanowski, 2019). It is even stated that exposure to media content has decreased EU performance evaluations (Gattermann & de Vreese, 2020), revealing distance among citizens.

As a political system, the EU needs political communication through a constant exchange between politicians, mass media, and citizens (Häussler, 2018). A public sphere is necessary for the existence of such political communication. This sphere implies different normative theories (Walter, 2017b), but basically can be considered as a mediation process between the government and the public. The concept is mostly referred in the last decades as an arena for deliberation in the field of the European studies (de Vreese, 2007). Following the Habermasian notion, citizens in this common space work as holders of democratic legitimacy through the media (Habermas, 1962). Journalists serve as communicative intermediaries (Bruns, 2018); however, in recent years, social media has become a new field for EU public conversation (Michailidou, 2017).

The consolidation of digital platforms has changed political communication toward a hybrid communicative scenario (Chadwick, 2017; Vaccari, 2017). Still, legacy media remains important to society. The result is an era of politics grounded in the enhancement of interdependences (Carballo et al., 2018). The EU political system is also a part of this global trend (Hänska & Bauchowitz, 2019). It should be noted that digital technologies could reach the EPS due to their direct communication between citizens and representatives (Vesnic-Alejuvic, 2013). This is also a chance to avoid mistrust the EU has detected in the media (Goldberg et al., 2021).

The huge pro-European mobilization after the EU enlargement in countries like Spain did not bring better news coverage (Fajardo-Trigueros & Rivas-de-Roca, 2020). In the framework of an increasingly interconnected political journalism facing with post-truth phenomena, this communication deficit has been extensively studied in recent years by the literature (Strömbäck et al., 2013; Gattermann & de Vreese, 2020). The use of only national approaches is pointed to as the main cause of this mediated problem. Lloyd and Marconi (2014) revealed how it works: “Most news organizations, when reporting EU, produced coverage which is not aimed at Europeans, but at French, Dutch, Polish, and other national citizens. The subtext is: what is the EU doing for, and to, us.” (p. 5).

The EU objectives in the field of communication were primarily established in the Laeken Declaration on the future of the European Union in 2001 (European Parliament, 2020). The main goal was to enhance the engagement with the European project among the citizens, particularly the youth. The idea of “Europe” needed to be revalued in order to shape a European way of life. Despite good intentions, the results were slow to arrive.

The 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections saw its first increase in turnout in over 20 years, making it relevant to summarize the academic knowledge of a public sphere for Europe. Communication at the EU level is an opportunity to study and offer a valuable contribution to the emergence of transnational spheres. Moreover, digital technologies have fostered a more dynamic public conversation. However, disruptions by COVID-19 endanger the citizen support toward the European project. This chapter examines the principal findings regarding politicization obtained to date.

More specifically, the objective of this contribution is to identify recent lines of research in the EPS framework. First, the study provides a contextual background of the deliberative model of democracy and the EPS. Second, it defines three categories to present the findings: (1) political and public communication of the EU; (2) citizen participation through technologies like social media; and (3) the increasing politicization due to a progressive polarization. Likewise, the methods are also analyzed. Third, a range

of pending challenges in research are recognized. This is followed by recommendations and future research directions. This chapter is intended to identify unresolved problems in the literature, as is the mission of review articles (Codina, 2018). Tackling this issue can contribute to understanding how far the EU is from an information-based society.

BACKGROUND

The concept of a public sphere is based on a deliberative approach of democracy (Häussler, 2018). According to Habermas (2015), deliberative democracy involves a discursive procedure for the resolution of political conflict and decision making. This perspective seeks to find reasonable decisions for the community, which the media have traditionally played a key role (Ferree et al., 2002). The literature on public spheres is vast. Most of research is based on Habermas' works, conceiving the public sphere as an arena to deal with problems affecting the society (Habermas, 1962). This original approach was supported by the theory of communicative action, which understands language as the critical component of the society to achieve rationality (Habermas, 1981).

There is a huge number of studies on the EPS, but their findings are divided and sometimes contradictory (de Vreese, 2007). The need to make this ideal real brought different normative public sphere theories, which have emerged in relation to different democratic traditions: representative liberal theory, participatory liberal theory, discursive theory, and constructionist theory (Ferree et al., 2002). Regarding the EPS and the role of the EU news, recent research outlines the validity of the discursive public sphere theory according to the actor structure in EU news (Walter, 2017b). On the other hand, the EU has usually been an elite-driven project (de Beus, 2010; Weiler et al., 1995). Therefore, the emergence of a pan-EPS could be a solution for the so-called European democratic deficit (Habermas, 2009).

The European democratic deficit is a well-established phenomenon that resonates with remoteness from the EU (Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007; Sarikakis & Kolokytha, 2019). In this sense, the low turnout in the EP elections is a classic finding. Although the European institutions profess a commitment to democracy (Kelemen, 2020), there are some structural and cultural reasons that prevent the promotion of the EPS (Seoane-Pérez, 2013). One is the diversity of languages, political cultures, or media systems among countries (Henkel et al., 2019; Trenz, 2015). Hence, identities are linked to national contexts (Schlesinger, 1997; Vasilopoulou & Gattermann, 2020), explaining how many authors prefer to talk about the Europeanization of national public spheres (Gripsrud, 2012; Koopmans & Statham, 2010).

In recent years, the literature has also pointed to a growing gap between the EU elite and the public in national spheres, fostering a Eurosceptic movement that overlaps with a worldwide wave of populism (de Vries, 2018; Herkman & Harjuniemi, 2015). National and cosmopolitan values, attributed to the European project, now collide in many EU countries (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). The recent development of Eurosceptic narratives in Hungary and Poland is proof of the breakthrough of anti-EU discourses in Central and Eastern countries that joined the EU in 2004. These countries have similar historical experiences concerning communist heritage and late democratization, which explain why their societies are not interested in politics (Styczyńska, 2017). The parties in government (Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland) use a rhetoric that portrays the EU as an elite that attacks the popular sovereignty (Csehi & Zgut, 2021). This situation has also been triggered by the spread of fake news, affecting the health of liberal democracies (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2020). Consequently, opinions are more important than facts to determine public opinion in those countries (Pérez-Curiel & Limón-Naharro, 2019).

Nevertheless, the unprecedented crisis of the European project has brought high levels of visibility and controversy (Hubé et al., 2015). A cornerstone of the public spheres is the idea of inclusivity (Häussler, 2018), which requires a well-informed society to make decisions. The presence of EU topics in the media (i.e., immigration, trade, or Brexit) help to reach this participatory structure (Hutter et al., 2016). This finding explains the new role of public communication for EU institutions. The European Commission (EC) has moved to a more political approach (Dinan, 2016; Kassim et al., 2017), leaving behind its traditional bureaucratic nature.

In the past, the extensive benefits of the European integration in most countries caused great levels of public support, omitting the political reasons behind decisions adopted at the EU. This permissive consensus (Kaelble, 2010), as the management of EU topics was delegated by the citizens in the national authorities, boosted the feeling of disconnect toward the European project. In the last decade, massive problems of the EU showed how this lack of engagement has collided with reality because many current issues need a transnational explanation. It seems that citizens discovered that policies impacting their lives were applied in an indirect way (Krzyżanowski, 2019). These asymmetries demand from political action and increase the democratic legitimacy of transnational systems such as the EU. This phenomenon may lead to a new dimension in the shaping of a common public sphere in Europe (Habermas, 2012).

The formation of the EPS is a long-standing process related to the relationship between EU institutions and the civil society (Bärenreuter et al., 2009). The EP elections are assessed in academia as the essential moment of this interaction (Blumler, 1983; Fotopoulos & Morganti, 2021; Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2020), reflecting upon their ability to create the expected transnational public sphere (Boomgaarden & de Vreese, 2016). Some research on this topic is pessimistic, arguing that the EPS appears as a normative artifact because of its strong theoretical principles (Herkman & Harjuniemi, 2015). Europeanization would be a fact in countries with a huge intra-EU trade, such as Germany or the Benelux Union (Koopmans & Statham, 2010). However, the politicization of the EU is a consolidated trend in the literature (de Wilde, 2011; Risse, 2015), showing the need to structure systemically the relevant changes in the EU politics.

The latest development in the EU communication policy came from the Juncker Commission (2014-2019), which changed the president's relationship with DG COMM (Commission's Directorate-General for Communication) and the Spokesperson's Service. The latter body, which dates back to the origins of the European Communities, is made up of multiple spokespersons specialized by subject. The Spokesperson's Service is attached to the EC and had the President of the Commission at its core, together with the EC representations in the member states. Since Juncker nomination (2014), this Service is not only inserted in the hard core of the Commission, but is also at the same level as DG COMM, guaranteeing a single message (Caiani & Guerra, 2017).

THE POLITICIZATION OF THE EU

Political and Public Communication of the EU

As noted, the EU seems to be distant for most citizens across Europe. This problem was detected at an early stage of the integration, endangering the legitimacy of the EP elections established in 1979 (Blumler, 1983). They have been assessed as “second-order elections” because of their low turnout, being ignored by many people compared to national elections (Schneider, 2018). One of the main reasons is the inability

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to create an identification between representatives and represented at the EU level (Seoane-Pérez, 2013). Accordingly, “Europe” is hardly ever discussed, being displaced by national debates. This lies in the so-called “second-order effects”, since the EU politics are mostly approached by a utilitarian national perspective. As a reaction to these effects, the EU institutions developed a large public communication policy (Hix & Marsh, 2011). The White Paper on the European Communication Policy in 2006 and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU in 2009 work as the framework for these initiatives (Bijmans & Altide, 2007; European Parliament, 2020).

The EC is the principal executive body of the EU political system. At the EC stage, information is disseminated by the commissioners, the members of the Spokesperson’s Service, the representations in the member states, and the different directorates-general of the Commission. To simplify this plurality of voices, which made it difficult to configure a single European message, former president Jean-Claude Juncker reduced the number of spokespersons by half, setting the figure at 14 of the 28 commissioners that composed the EC (Dinan, 2016).

The new communicative dimension by Juncker and endorsed in the von der Leyen presidency (2019-2024) sought to address the recurring problems of multiple sources in the EU politics. These difficulties are reflected in the balances among institutions, being sometimes impossible to identify who makes certain political decisions. That explains why the EC is trying to develop a strong presidency that centralizes the communication of this institution (Kassim et al., 2017). Beyond that, the EC and also the EP are doing great efforts to communicate on social media in the languages of the member states (Rauh et al., 2020), but their communication policy still takes care of different domestic situations, showing the difficulties to share a truly common discussion.

The aforementioned approach involves that the communication problems of the EU can be solved through an effective communication policy, not only by the European institutions but by the media (Frangonikolopoulos & Papadopoulou, 2020). Defourny et al. (2014) highlight the need for the civil sector to contribute to reducing the democratic deficit at the local, regional, national and international levels. Journalism plays a key role in this process. Among the media, the digital newspapers have more space to contextualize the facts. For this reason, the local digital media could represent a hope to achieve a journalism that materializes its democratizing social function regarding the EU. Journalists, editors, and the audience should be considered as the actors to reach a public sphere.

This “communication gap” can be assessed as a mediation theory to analyze the disconnection between the EU and the public, as well as the deficits of the EPS. Some contributions state that proper coverage would enhance trust in the European project (Méndez et al., 2020; van Spanje & de Vreese, 2014); however, the EU political system lacks the usual patterns of national politics, making it difficult to understand (Baisnée, 2014). Hence, a structural reason explains the popular disengagement with the EU.

The way in which the EU has been created overlaps with characteristics of the EU news: a lengthy timeframe of the political decision-making process, scarce dramatic tension, and the absence of face-to-face meetings (Baisnée, 2014). However, the recent crisis of the EU (for example, the eurozone crisis, the handling of refugees, Brexit, or the response to COVID-19) has reinforced the newsworthiness of its news (Hubé et al., 2015; Oleart, 2021; Treib, 2021). This means an opportunity to overcome the antipopular bias of integration, achieving a more deliberative democracy in Europe. The main resistance could be the strength of the indirect way in governing the EU, because the literature highlights that this weak democratic equilibrium is supported by its own European institutions (Gripsrud, 2012; Kelemen, 2020; Sarikakis & Kolokytha, 2019).

Research on EU's political communication is clearly oriented in the media (Bijsmans & Altides, 2007; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019). Most studies use content analysis of news coverage (Blumler, 1983; Fotopoulos & Morganti, 2021; Herkman & Harjuniemi, 2015; Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2012); other methods like semistructured interviews (Frangonikolopoulos & Papapadopoulou, 2020) or panel surveys (Gattermann & de Vreese, 2020; Goldberg et al., 2021) are also becoming frequent. These new trends allow for the management of richer data to acknowledge EU politics.

Can Digital Technologies Facilitate the EPS?

At this point, the role of digital technologies should be kept in mind as a game changer of the EPS. This phenomenon has been discussed for years in the fields of European and communication studies (Risse, 2015). The public sphere was studied from the approach of the Europeanization of the media, which looks complicated because of the national dimension of journalism (Hanitzsch et al., 2016). Currently, social media is the platform where parties and candidates share their proposals (Bruns, 2018). The elections to the EP are not an exception. Despite the attempts of the EU institutions (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2013) to carry out conversations on digital platforms, the dialogue is not completely EU-oriented. Indeed, the discussion of political topics in social networks is far from being true European (Ruiz-Soler et al., 2019), but the digital infrastructure allows for the development of conversations beyond the national borders.

As stated, the feasibility of the EPS through a traditional mediatization faces many problems (Grill & Boomgaarden, 2017), linked to the nation state nature of journalism and the utilitarian idea of what can the EU do for my own community (Lloyd & Marconi, 2014). As a result, some literature prefers to discuss the Europeanization on national spheres rather than the formation of a single EPS (Fotopoulos & Morganti, 2021; Grill & Boomgaarden, 2017; Trenz, 2015).

The new digital communication without intermediaries enacts increasing levels of political engagement (Bossetta et al., 2017), which is a key element in the shaping of a representative EPS. There are conflicting findings on this matter. In several cases, the social media activity on EU topics beyond national boundaries is assessed as an example of a transnational public sphere (Hänska & Bauchowitz, 2019; Kermer & Nijmeijer, 2020). Meanwhile, other scholars emphasize their skepticism about this eventual "e-democracy" as online media are used in a vertical manner (Hennen, 2020).

The raise of new technologies brought about a great change in the world of public communication. Some authors assess that this digital revolution contributes to triggering a public opinion, since mobile technology is used for communication processes that are no longer unidirectional (Ohme, 2020). In the past, the digital possibilities were applied differently in each country or group of EU member states according to geographical criteria (Thomass, 2011). Nowadays, the progress toward a digital economy have been bigger in the Baltic countries than in Western EU member states (Karnitis et al., 2019). The different degrees of digitalization may arise democratic divergences among the member states, fostering social exclusion for some population not familiar with these novelties (Kwilinski et al., 2020).

Hereafter, most of the research is focused on national contexts (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Hänska & Bauchowitz, 2019), despite dealing with EU topics like Euroscepticism. The EP elections are considered as the momentum of EU's political communication (Boomgaarden & de Vreese, 2016; Christiansen, 2016). At the EU institutional context, the academia shed light on Twitter (Bouza-García & Tuñón-Navarro, 2018; Hennen, 2020; Michailidou, 2017), reflecting on the boost of a common sphere. By contrast, studies on the use of Facebook for European politics are rather scarce (Valera-Ordaz & Sørensen, 2019; Vesnic-Alujevic, 2016).

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Nevertheless, the different digital architectures of Twitter and Facebook promote mismatched types of engagement for consideration in the current academic debates. Bossetta et al. (2017) found that Twitter fosters an online transnational community; Facebook seems more appropriate for political participation. The methodologies are more diverse, showing a preference for politicians involved in the EPS, including national populist leaders (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2020). The European project faces turbulent times that have altered the political actors of the EU institutional context. This fact impacts other recent methods like the qualitative frame analysis (Fotopoulos & Morganti, 2021), the sentiment analysis on big data (Hänška & Bauchowitz, 2019; Ruiz-Soler et al., 2019), and the analysis of secondary material related to official documents (Braun & Popa, 2018; Fajardo-Trigueros & Rivas-de-Roca, 2020).

Polarization and Dissensus for the EU Integration

On this backdrop, the emergence of the EPS appears to be less mediated than national public spheres. Therefore, it is less dependent on media systems (Ruiz-Soler et al., 2019). This implies that the exclusion of EU citizens in the European project may be solved by a transnational use of digital platforms instead of a focus on journalistic coverage. Methods to achieve a European demos is one of the greatest questions for the academia. As a response, some institutional changes were carried out by the Treaty of Lisbon in 2007. One of these actions was the introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure in the 2014 and 2019 EP elections, by which European parties nominated lead candidates for the whole EU (Braun & Popa, 2018). The success of this initiative remains controversial. Its goal was to improve the legitimization process of the EP elections (Camonita, 2016). Some findings show that the *Spitzenkandidaten* system did not transform the EU's political communication; it enhanced the elite-driven dimension of the European integration as it strengthened the cooperation between the main European party families (Christiansen, 2016).

Moreover, the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure failed to boost popular support, being unknown for most of citizens (Gattermann & de Vreese, 2020). In contrast, the EC aimed to look more political in 2014 (Dinan, 2016), leaving behind its traditional bureaucratic image thanks to a more recognizable president (Juncker) and a more politicized agenda. Lead candidates at the EU level connects with the personalization of politics (McAllister, 2007). Indeed, some relevant literature highlights the increasing politicization of the EU (de Wilde et al., 2016; Hooghe & Marks, 2018), especially in areas like immigration, trade, and climate change. According to de Wilde et al. (2016), polarization is a main contributing factor for politicization.

Linked to polarization, some studies stress the idea that the debt crisis and the migration crisis contributed to the reinforcement of an EPS, as media reported in all the member states about common topics of interest (Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2012; Rauh et al., 2020). The scholarship also describes some inconveniences, since the presence in the media means more public attention, and notwithstanding, higher distrust in the EU (Brosius et al., 2020; Marquart et al., 2019).

As the EU institutions assume growth powers, a dissensus on several topics emerged (Caiani & Guerra, 2017). This means a Europeanization of the public sphere, being characterized as a symptom of a normal democracy based on political conflict. The controversial media discourses on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) are one example that could improve the legitimacy of the EU (Oleart, 2021). These ideas are embedded in the working of the Euroscepticism as a cleavage in a politicized EPS (Hooghe & Marks, 2018). The issues affected by Euroscepticism have exceeded the national borders, requiring a European approach. That explains why Euroscepticism has been established in recent years

as a center-periphery cleavage in the EU political system (de Vries, 2018; Treib, 2021), coming up with a normalization of the European political discussion. Following de Vries' (2018) contribution, the Eurosceptic movement is considered as a cultural reaction to European integration that is now fixed in the EU party system, defending national traditions at the economic and regulatory fields.

Other studies on this recent trend come to different and contradictory conclusions. The effects of politicization on representation in the EP elections between 1999 and 2014 were limited (Vasilopoulou & Gattermann, 2020). It did not improve party-voter agreement because of a large gap between politicians and citizen interest. The left-right axis, as well as the pro-anti EU dimensions, were hindered for most of the public. Goldberg et al. (2021) found the same in a context outside the EP elections, stating that it is unlikely to obtain responsible political attributions from the EU-related media coverage. These findings reveal a lack of a real politicization. However, van Spanje and de Vreese (2014) detected how media exposure to the EU affected the Eurosceptic vote. In fact, voters exposed to positive evaluations tended to be less supportive of a Eurosceptic party. Beyond that, some literature positively appraises the existence of politicization (de Wilde, 2011), which is linked to the emergence of a common European citizenship.

Hence, this chapter brings differing evidence in terms of politicization, although there is a rising consensus on its existence. The problem lies in its weak impact on society (Valera-Ordaz & Sørensen, 2019), putting into question the future of the EU institutions. More studies are needed to confirm that the EU matters to national contexts (de Vries, 2018), which would show the relevance of this topic in vote behavior. The politicization is a key element to build the EPS, but the research on this field is largely media-oriented through content analysis as a method (de Wilde et al., 2016, Hutter & Kriesi, 2019). National politics are prioritized (Goldberg et al., 2021). In any case, the importance of the social media in the shaping of the EPS has been previously underscored, in line with remarkable articles (Bouza-García & Tuñón-Navarro, 2018; Caiani & Guerra, 2017).

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The authors of this study have analyzed the issues and controversies surrounding the emergence of the EPS. This contribution moves from the political and public communication of the EU to the discussion of the politicization and role of digital technologies in this trend. The democratic consequences of this topic provide solutions and recommendations to enhance the quality of research on the EPS. Four steps are identified to move forward in the study of a more representative democracy at the European level.

1. **Broaden the focus of studies beyond a specific political context:** There is significant research on the EP elections (Grill & Boomgaardem, 2017; Schulze, 2016). The EU attention is unusually high at that moment. The daily activities of the EU institutions should be considered (Ruiz-Soler et al., 2019). Data should be collected over time and separate from political events.
2. **Analyze several platforms:** Research should combine both digital and legacy media to determine public opinion (Chadwick, 2017). Political communication research tends to focus on a singular network (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2016). This is especially ineffective regarding the EU politics because they do not have the traditional patterns of national politics. Understanding the working of the European citizenry demands multilevel approaches (Walter, 2017a).

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3. **Foster comparative studies on EU attitudes by country:** Concepts like national political cultures or media systems influence the European political systems, making it relevant in a joint analysis (Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2020). Most studies have centered on a unique country (Frangonikolopoulos & Papapadopoulou, 2020; van Spanje & de Vreese, 2014). Therefore, useful coincidences and divergences by state remain unattended.
4. **Reconsider methods:** Predominant content analysis techniques offer limited margins to spot potential discoveries in communication studies (Goyanes, 2020). Another problem is the media-oriented approach to study the EPS, as many articles focus on newspapers and television (Grill & Booamgaarden, 2017). Instead, it would be relevant to explore new strategies to identify problems because the political conversation in Europe is now marked by the consolidation of social media.

These research proposals try to facilitate the knowing of the EPS in an increasingly polarized context. The *Spitzenkandidaten* system meant an institutional attempt to politicize the EP elections. Although the European Council did not apply this procedure in the 2019 elections, overlapping with the “second-order” model attributed to the EU (Camonita, 2016). Thus, the politicization of the EU has not stopped (Oleart, 2021). The increasing relevance of EU topics must relate to the interdependencies of a globalized world, which triggers a shared sovereignty on issues. This politicization should be remembered as a framework to explore.

Due to a politicization of discourses, research on the EPS should broaden its samples, covering more countries and timeframes. In addition, it must evaluate digital platforms in an original way. Regarding this, engagement metrics (consider, for instance, the People Talking About This [PTAT]) are missed to measure the formation of the EPS. Thus, the main research recommendations seek to adjust the empirical works to the needs of a potential deliberative democracy.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The growing powers of the EU institutions, together with the consolidated character of the EU itself, make the EPS a good example for examining the impact of contemporary politics and communication on democracy. The future trends of this field are structured in the following three lines of research and opportunities.

1. **Line 1: The European civil society as an object of study for the EPS.** Until now, there was a strong academic association between the public and institutional framework of the EU. Many studies focus on the deliberative character of the EU institutions, paying attention to the actions of the EC, the Council, or the Parliament (Bärenreuter et al., 2009; Hennen, 2020). Despite this preference, the institutions are not necessary to mobilize a common sphere in Europe, as is evidenced by cultural phenomena outside the EU. The Europeanization of the international protests could be a point. Therefore, a wide perspective for the EPS is identified as a possible future direction on research.
2. **Line 2: Analyzing one-to-one platforms in the EU political debate.** Traditional social networks like Facebook and Twitter are overwhelmingly studied to observe the political conversation of the EPS (Scherpereel et al., 2017; Vesnic-Alujevic, 2013). These types of platforms work as the principal channel for political actors (leaders and parties); however, one-to-one platforms like WhatsApp or personal messages on Instagram (Parmelee & Roman, 2019) can analyze citizen communication

behaviors. The polarization is a key contributing factor for the politicization of the EPS (de Wilde et al., 2016). Therefore, narratives on these networks should be addressed.

3. **Line 3: Dealing with pan-European issues as the basis for the EPS.** Most studies have focused on countries' contexts because of the importance of national governments in the EU political system (Lloyd & Marconi, 2014). The emergence of a European civil society opposed to several EU policies is proof of how transnational topics are gaining visibility (Caiani & Guerra, 2017). Analyzing issues of common interest for citizens across Europe presents an opportunity to enhance the social value of research on the EPS. The idea of this potential public sphere is more attainable through digital platforms because media systems are still nationally oriented (Trenz, 2015).

The future of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure is another interesting object of study. This system of nominating lead candidates implied an institutional change to politicize the EP elections. However, the lack of support by the European Council questions its legitimacy. The “second-order” model of these elections is revisited because this strategy was only emphasized as some parties aimed to benefit from it rather than promote transnational candidates known beyond the borders (Braun & Popa, 2018).

As described, the digital environment has changed the framework for the formation of the EPS. Future research faces the challenge of providing insightful evidence on how the citizen conversation is oriented. The question is whether national political cultures still matter (Valera-Ordaz & Sørensen, 2019) or if it is a common European approach among leaders in EU politics. In a context of personalization, studies on other geographical areas (Pérez-Curiel & Limón-Naharro, 2019) find that candidates are increasingly seen as a brand image. This pattern has not been confirmed regarding the EPS.

As the authors previously noted, it seems that the resolution of the communication deficit (EU communications deficit) is not only a matter of information policies. The EU's structural weaknesses make insufficient this scope. However, the great increase in professionalization through the EC or the EP initiatives is noteworthy. The institutions have also shown to be aware that by themselves they cannot reduce the distance with citizens, which leads to the development of citizen dialogues (EC) or a new generation of participation campaigns such as *This time I'm voting* (EP), which involved to citizens and opinion leaders. This deliberative approach is the one that rules the European communication policy at the beginning of the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) that will regulate the EU's annual budget.

There are new objects of study to explore in line with the transformations generated by digital platforms. The breakthrough of COVID-19 has accelerated changes in the consumption of political information, affecting the EU system. Besides that, the EU itself has moved to a more ideological and, therefore, conflictive approach. This has also presented transnational political debates. These discourses empower the EU as the framework to resolve political disputes in Europe, opening interesting possibilities to evaluate the emergence of a true public sphere.

CONCLUSION

This study examined trends of the budding literature on the EPS to show how the politicization has consolidated the EU public and political communications. The turmoil triggered by crises surrounding the European project has brought a high degree of dissensus to the EU politics. Against the backdrop of a democratic deficit, this chapter offers insightful evidence in academia to conclude that the polarization

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and constant interrelation of digital platforms and legacy media may enhance a true public discussion in Europe.

First, the relationship of these two logics is complex. Citizens give different roles to the mainstream media for different issues; however, online political discussions have triggered their own public space. Further research is required to combine these approaches to broaden cutting-edge models. The question is whether this type of communicative scenario boosts a discursive political participation as demanded by the EU as a hypothetical representative democracy. The literature should address how these topics are launched and discussed, empowering a common European citizenry.

On the other hand, the politicization of the EPS (Risse, 2015) must be confirmed and revised in the forthcoming years. The EU institutions have traditionally followed the rules of diplomacy and corporatism, co-opting civil society instead of reaching it (Seoane-Pérez, 2013). In recent years the visibility of the EU is not marginal for many citizens thanks to the emergence of common concerning issues, which could act as cleavages for the EU political system (Walter, 2017a). Understanding the structure and development of this citizens' conversation is a rich opportunity to deepen the knowledge of the EPS. Thus, the focus must broaden beyond the EU institutions.

Furthermore, the politicization of the EU links to the raise of Euroscepticism, which is embedded in lively cultural debates between liberal and nationalist values (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). In a context of polarized societies worldwide, the EU topics are more present than ever. The research agenda on the EPS should further the understanding on the role of polarization, as stated in the recommendation and future research sections. The consolidation of the populist parties endangers citizen engagement with the EU. Even institutional initiatives like the *Spitzenkandidaten* are challenged. The EP elections continue to move on two stages. First, the national stage gets more attention among the citizenship. The second stage is transnational, with less impact on the European societies (Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2020).

The previous items must consider the true weight of the politicization of the EPS. The awareness of the EU political decisions is increasing. Additionally, resistances remain as the EU institutions seem to feel comfortable in a corporatist scenario (Kelemen, 2020). By contrast, this study shows the consolidated, and likely unstoppable, political character of the EPS. Many relevant contributions back this statement (Hutter et al., 2016). Looking at the European politicization, some academics suggest that media polarization at the EU level is quite similar to that happened at the national one, and both are necessary to generate a feeling of belonging to a common public sphere (de Wilde, 2011; Hutter et al., 2016). The question is whether the trend toward dissensus on the EU observed in recent years across Europe (Oleart, 2021; Treib, 2021) is equally affecting all citizens and which are the socio-demographic variables for this sort of political interest.

In short, the progressive politicization of the European project is a well-documented phenomenon. It has a discursive dimension that overlaps with the deliberative approach of the public spheres and, therefore, with the EPS as an ideal model. The use of digital technologies for EU controversial topics may serve as a channel to build a critical shared community. The visibility of these issues needs Pan-European and comparative approaches, as well as new objects of study (the civil society, one-to-one platforms, etc.) to assess the potential representativeness of the e-democracy at the EU level. These efforts could operate in overcoming the unpopular bias of the EP elections reflected on their low participation.

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Chapter 3

Contemporary Populist Representation and Its Implications for Democracy: A Theoretical Assessment From a Realist Point of View

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to shed light on the connections between populism, democracy, and democratic theory by providing a theoretical assessment of contemporary populism and populist representation as an alternative form of political representation to party government or as a corrective of it. The chapter summarizes the conceptual background relating to democracies, populism, and contextual surroundings. Then, it proceeds to investigate how they relate to each other in present-day politics. The author argues that populism is a strategic political style that exploits the gap between the promise and the actual performance of democracies thus reflects on democratic reality. Hence, it embodies what realist democratic theory has argued for quite some time now about the nature of politics. Namely: voters are irrational, our notions of democracy are delusional and populist politicians seem to have realized it first..

INTRODUCTION

The concept of populism seems to dominate the field of politics these days. Often, it is mentioned parallel to or contrasted with liberal democracy (see for example Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017a, pp. 79-96). Debates emerge about whether populism is beneficial or harmful for democracies. Some emphasize its adverse effects, such as disregarding the will of the minorities, eroding institutions, promoting the establishment of new political cleavages, or leading to the moralization of politics where it is complicated to reach agreements. On the other hand, proponents of populism argue that it gives voice to previously

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8057-8.ch003

invisible groups in politics and mobilizes previously excluded sectors of society while improving the responsiveness of the political system itself and increasing democratic accountability. Overall, depending on the perspective, populism can be understood as either a threat or a corrective of democracy; therefore, it cannot be established that it has a definite positive or negative effect on it (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017b). It all depends on the given perspective and on how its effects are assessed. However, one's point of view does not emerge from nowhere. Rather, it depends on our shared, culturally bounded understanding of what democracy is and how it should operate.

The purpose of this chapter is to shed light on this debate regarding the relationship between democracies and populism from a different angle, by stepping out of the original frame of the debate and offering a different aspect. This chapter argues and aims to demonstrate that present-day populism can be understood as a realist way of doing politics, where political actors observe the political reality surrounding them and – knowingly and unknowingly – reflect on that by using populist political communication strategically. Knowingly, because they make a strategic choice to do it for the expected benefits; unknowingly, because their environment – the political era they live in and broader trends in politics – affect them even if they fail to recognize it.

The chapter is organized as follows: first, it summarizes the theoretical background: different approaches to democracy followed by democratic ideals and democratic realities. This section also elaborates on how broader trends in politics affect modern democracies and summarizes the state of the art of contemporary populism. The second part introduces the main idea of the chapter, as it elaborates a new theoretical argument when it introduces contemporary populism as a realist assessment of democracy by summarizing strategic populism and populist political representation.

Finally, the chapter will reflect on the possible implications of the realist assessment of populism. The main argument of this chapter and the theoretical novelty that it suggests is that by looking at contemporary populism as a political style or strategy that reflects on democratic realities, it can be seen how it embodies what the realist tradition of democratic theory has argued for quite some time now. Namely: voters are irrational, our notions of democracy are delusional and populist politicians seem to have realized it first.

BACKGROUND

In the following section¹, the conceptual framework will be expounded: democracy, democratic ideals, and democratic realities, broader trends in politics, and the concept of populism will be introduced.

What is Democracy?

There are several approaches to democracy; the criteria for its definition often alters from author to author. The simplest way to define it is to say that democracy is the combination of popular sovereignty and majority rule or to simplify it even further: it is a political system in which the people rule. However, usually, when one uses the term 'democracy', he/she actually refers to liberal democracy, generating another task, which is to differentiate these two concepts. Again, there are different approaches to do this. According to Mudde and Kaltwasser, the main difference between democracy and liberal democracy is that the latter refers to a political regime with the extra ingredient of independent institutions specialized in protecting fundamental rights, such as the freedom of expression. These institutions aim to avoid the

emergence of a tyranny of the majority (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017b). Fareed Zakaria (Zakaria, 1997) goes further and lists the following as parts of liberal democracy: fair and free elections, the rule of law, separation of powers, and the protection of basic liberties, such as speech, religion, or property. Of course, these characteristics all refer to an ideal of liberal democracy, how it should be or how people would generally imagine it to be. Unfortunately, illiberal traits can be often found in democracies. For example, when individual liberty is limited, when there are breaches of constitutional liberalism with regards to the checks and balances, when there is a lack of equality and the rule of law is violated by oligarchies or corruption, or when there are ethnic or religious conflicts in which minorities do not get the necessary protection. Despite all these factors, illiberal democracies – and democracies with illiberal traits - are still legitimate since they are reasonably democratic.

Although there was a global surge toward democracy from the mid-1970s, the greatest acceleration took place from 1989 to 1991 when the collapse of the communist regime in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union led to a democratic wave throughout the region. However, since the mid-2000s, this trend has reversed itself. The recent upsurge of semi-authoritarian regimes seems to have come as a surprise when countries that were regarded as successful liberal democracies during the 1990s slid backward toward a more authoritarian government. This had been the case for example in Hungary, Turkey, and Poland (Fukuyama, 2018). Although democratic deconsolidation is a global issue to a certain extent, some countries and even regions are more in the spotlight than others.

Perhaps the most prominent and often-cited example of the ‘democratic deconsolidation’ is the East-Central European region, where the evolution discourse in which ECE countries continue to develop toward Europeanization and democratization has to be replaced with ones about the deconsolidation of democracy. As summarized by Ágh (2016), the result of this process has been referred to in many ways: as a semi-democracy, hybrid democracy, semi-authoritarian system, and transition to authoritarian rule, among other definitions. In his article, Ágh goes even further and labels the Hungarian system as “Potemkin democracy”, which refers to the following: on the surface, everything looks democratic and regulated by law; however, what one can see is a Potemkin façade that covers nondemocratic rule with authoritarian traits. This situation is often complemented by a one-party rule or a leader democracy; therefore, the new system can even be labelled as an “elected autocracy” (Ágh, 2016) or an “elected dictatorship” (Körösényi & Patkós, 2017). In summary, after a period of democratization that has been especially accelerated at the end of the Soviet Union, which was a “revolution of high expectations”, it seems that the democratic transition did not live up to the expectations of the masses (Ágh, 2013). This eventually led to tragic disappointment and the crisis of democracy, or at least of the romantic notions that have been built around it.

Democratic Ideals

Democracy is the dominant political ideology of our era, treated as a golden standard that every nation thrives to achieve. Nearly all contemporary political regimes claim to be a democracy of some sort to reflect on the needs of the citizens, who seem to have a remarkable enthusiasm for democracy – as demonstrated by the World Values Survey. When asked, ordinary people from several different countries claimed that it is “absolutely important” for them to live in a democratically governed country.² Nevertheless, it seems like citizens are not adequately equipped to judge how democratic their country is. Respondents of the World Values Survey were also asked “And how democratically is this country being governed today?” which revealed that perceptions of democratic reality were robust in unlikely

places as well, such as Rwanda, Malaysia, or Kazakhstan (Achen & Bartels, 2016a). However, to properly assess these data, one must begin by asking: theoretically speaking, what is democracy? How can it be defined? Is it something measurable at all?

Conventionally, democracy is about the voters: what the majority wants is translated into government policy. People are the rulers, and legitimacy derives from their consent. This approach highlights the centrality of the people within democracies, and it can be referred to as the “folk theory of democracy”. This represents an ideal about democracy, a way people in general would like democracy to be. However, the credibility of this ideal has been undercut by scientific evidence, which suggests a way darker view of democratic politics. Based on empirical evidence, it can be claimed that political reality has nothing to do with the folk theory of democracy and that voters generally pay little attention to politics. Instead, they vote according to how their life is going at the moment and where their political loyalties are (Achen & Bartels, 2016, pp. 1-6).

As summarized by Achen and Bartels (2016, pp. 2-4), there are two main contemporary theoretical approaches to democracy. The first model is about the populist ideal of democracy, and the second one is about leadership selection. The former emphasizes citizens’ role in determining policies (Dahl, 1998, pp. 37-38), and it can be referred to as a populist notion of popular sovereignty, which has inspired academic thinking derived from Enlightenment concepts of human nature and the political views of 19th-century British liberalism. As to how precisely the people shall govern, there are two different accounts, commonly referred to as direct democracy and representative democracy. In the first case, the people rule directly, meaning that they choose the policies themselves via initiative and referendum procedures. In a representative democracy, people decide political issues through the election of individuals who can carry out their will for them (Schumpeter 1942, p. 250). In this model, citizens’ preferences are the starting point; therefore, it is often labelled liberal, individualist, or intellectualist (Achen & Bartels, 2016, p. 213).

The second contemporary model is about the mechanism of leadership selection, which is basically identical to representative democracy, yet it is further from the populist ideal of democracy. According to Schumpeter (1942, pp. 284-285), democracy does not mean that people actually rule, but that they have the opportunity of either accepting or refusing their leaders, who are to rule them. This resonates highly with the “retrospective theory of voting” (Achen & Bartels, 2016b, pp. 90-146). According to this theory, the people base their votes on whether they approve of the actual performance of the incumbent political leader or not. This is just one of the possible democratic models that tries to reflect on the fact that not even the most well-informed voters base their political choices on policy preferences or ideology.

As said, the criteria for a democracy vary greatly among authors. Dahl (1971, p. 1) pointed out the importance of the government’s responsiveness to citizens’ preferences. Later, he elaborated this concept by specifying other criteria for a democratic process, such as voting equality or enlightened understanding (Dahl, 1998, pp. 37-38). Unfortunately, it seems to be impossible to find a government that fully measures up to these democratic ideals. Instead, they provide standards against which democratic governments can be measured. However, as Achen and Bartels point out: “Hopelessly naive theories are poor guide to policy, often distracting reformers from attainable incremental improvements along entirely different lines” (2016, p. 7). Instead, one must turn to realist democratic thinking.

Democratic Realities

As scientific evidence has pointed out, the ideal citizens from the folk theory of democracy do not exist, and conceptual contradictions characterize the folk theory itself. Several critical thinkers tried to put this

line of democratic thought under suspicion and were highly critical of it. Among them, one can find, for instance, A. Lawrence Lowell, Joseph Schumpeter, Walter Lippmann, and Reinhold Niebuhr. Common in these authors is that their critical thought has been largely disregarded in the era they lived in and even among subsequent scholarly generations. However, the reception of their thought had changed when new tools have emerged for investigating political behaviour. Especially scientific survey research has been essential, as it has proven that conventional thinking about democracy cannot be kept up in the face of modern social-scientific research. Now, these shortcomings could be actually proven. According to scientific evidence gathered through new social scientific research methods, people cannot live up to the standards that conventional democratic theory sets for them. Early analysts of electoral research and pioneers of survey research, such as Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues at Columbia University or Angus Campbell and his colleagues at the University of Michigan, have proven based on their research results that political behavior is mostly habitual and socially determined. Once again, it became questionable whether citizens can perform the role that the folk theory of democracy would require from them (Achen & Bartels, 2016, pp. 9-12).

Therefore, by the early 20th century, in opposition to the idealistic Enlightenment assumptions of liberalism, a strong realist tradition has risen in social science. Realists, in general, argued that the folk theory of democracy and rational choice liberalism are no more than scientific errors and had begun to seek alternative ways of conceptualizing democracies (Achen & Bartels, 2016, pp. 21 – 52). However, it must be kept in mind what Dahl has acknowledged: that there is not one single democratic theory, only democratic theories (1956, p. 1). Below, a summary will be provided about the more relevant turning points in the history of democratic theories; unfortunately, this section cannot cover all the approaches out there due to obvious limitations.

As said, there have been some recommendations on how democratic processes should be assessed upon concluding that the folk theory of democracy is not the answer. In the 1950s and the 1960s, new ideas from psychology and sociology were incorporated into political science (Hoggett & Thompson, 2012; Achen & Bartels, 2016b). The key statement of the period is that group memberships shape voters' choices. The group theory of democracy portrays citizens foremost as members of social groups with identities and group attachments, which affect their political loyalties and behavior more than anything else. Group theory emphasizes that instead of policy preferences or ideologies, it is group and partisan loyalties that matter when it comes to electoral voting. Group theory also points out the limits of individual rationality. In this view, human thought is conditioned by culture, including group subcultures. Competing, conflictual civil groups of all kinds can be identified: national, racial, ethnic, religious, and even professional ones. "Going your own way" or "thinking for yourself" turns out to be nothing more than just switching from one set of culturally conditioned ideas to another preformulated set, seriously reducing the significance of individuality and rational choice theory.

As illustrated by 'The American Voter' (Campbell et al., 1960), political identity and party identification are not only fundamental in our electoral choices but can shape our issue positions as well. As it had been pointed out before, it is group memberships that drive our policy views, and not the other way around, as the proponents of rational choice liberalism had previously anticipated it. Gordon Allport (1954) has found evidence for out-group stereotyping: drawing boundaries between a good 'us' and a bad 'them' occurs widely in social life, and as it can be seen, it is the actual basis of contemporary populist politics (Achen & Bartels, 2016, pp. 178 – 213).

By the 1960s, group theories had been replaced by pluralist ideas, and the theory of retrospective accountability has appeared. According to retrospective accountability or retrospective voting, voters

can have control over their leaders despite knowing little about their policies, simply by assessing the performance of the incumbent politicians, rewarding success, and punishing failure by voting to re-elect or replace them. In this model, the public judges retrospectively: it either approves or disapproves what has happened before. As Morris Fiorina argues, all retrospective voters need to know is how policies affect their own life; therefore, they only monitor their day-to-day experiences and general well-being. This theory raises many questions regarding the actual responsibility of the incumbent officials, as voters' choices reflect the competence and effort of leaders imperfectly. As Key (1996) pointed out, the difference in voters' interests and information or the orientation of their attention can significantly affect their perception of events and, consequently, their judgment about the officials' performance. Blind retrospection refers to a situation in which someone is blamed for little or no reason. For example, in ancient Egypt, pharaohs were being held responsible if the Nile did not flood. The best example of blind retrospection can be found in research results on natural disasters or accidents. Maybe voters do not blame the government for a disaster but for their failure to respond in a way they had expected them. In this case, retrospection is not entirely blind, yet not rational either (Achen & Bartels, 2016, pp. 116-146). Lastly, the social construction of blame has to be mentioned, as hardship itself does not create an electoral backlash. Political actors are the ones who construct – discursively - explanations and solutions for hardships, which the mass media can then amplify. Overall, blind retrospection is a significant challenge in terms of political accountability. Evidence suggests that voters are irrational in this sense, not being able to connect the incumbent's actions and their well-fare. Blind retrospection is an inevitable consequence of the complexity of our socio-political life and our cognitive limitations, pointing out the necessity of a realistic account of democratic politics. It seems that retrospective accountability also demands too much from ordinary people; therefore, it ultimately fails to give a realistic assessment of electoral behavior (Achen & Bartels, 2016, pp. 90 - 116).

In recent decades, beginning in the 1980s, a new concept became central: identity. Identities can be understood as emotional attachments that transcend thinking. Identity is partly shaped by the recognition of others, as it is constantly in dialogue with or struggle against the things the others want to see in us. The discovery of our own identity is negotiated through this dialogue, making our own identities dependent on our dialogical relations with others (Taylor, 1994). Fukuyama (Fukuyama, 2018) has recently argued that demands of identity are what foremost define current world politics. He defines this broader trend in politics as “populist nationalism” and lists Vladimir Putin from Russia, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan from Turkey, Viktor Orbán from Hungary, Jarosław Aleksander Kaczyński from Poland, and Rodrigo Duterte from the Philippines as prominent examples of it. He argues that the demand for the recognition of one's identity is a unifying concept in today's world politics which works hand in hand with the “politics of resentment”. In this case, a political leader mobilizes followers around the perception that the group's dignity had been affronted and implies that the humiliated group should seek restitution of it. He demonstrates this argument by some examples, such as the case of Viktor Orbán, who had stated in 2017 that his return to power in 2010 marked the point when “we Hungarians also decided that we wanted to regain our country, we wanted to regain our self-esteem, and we wanted to regain our future.” Another example, Vladimir Putin has spoken about the collapse of the former Soviet Union as a tragedy and despised the attitude of moral superiority of Western politicians. In China, Xi Jinping also uses the politics of resentment when he talks about China's one hundred years of humiliation and how the United States, Japan, and other countries were trying to prevent its return to the great power status it has enjoyed before. In all of these three cases and similar ones, there is a group that believes that it has an identity that is not being given adequate recognition. Much of contemporary politics are driven by the slogan

“take back our country”. These political actors usually base their politics on the argument that national identities are being overtaken on the one hand by newcomers with different cultures – migrants and refugees -, and on the other hand by the progressive left that attacks the very idea of national identity as racist and intolerant. The theory of identity added a crucial point to group theory and finally explained why people adopt the opinions of their group, thus providing the missing link in the theory. Even more importantly, identity highlighted that when we think about politics, it makes no sense to start from issue positions, as they are derivative from identity itself. This concept was widely adopted in political science and gave new importance to group theories as well. Eventually, due to the political turbulence of the time, all these approaches have gone into decline and gave room to the return of the folk theory of democracy, which held its position up until the new wave of populism and democratic illiberalism (Achen & Bartels, 2016).

This short historical overview serves to point out that in contrast to the beliefs of the proponents of the folk theory of democracy and rational choice liberalism, ordinary people do not act as politically well-informed, individual, rational figures. Simply, next to their daily duties, they do not have the capacity to be as well-informed in politics as these theories would expect them to be. Rather, evidence suggests that their political choices are bound by concepts of group theory, political loyalty, and identification with certain political actors or groups. Indeed, in this sense, they cannot be labelled rational voters. Their electoral voting is chiefly an ad-hoc activity, guided primarily by emotions and subjective opinions. This raises essential thoughts and questions if one connects these findings with the rise of the populist and the post-truth phenomena in contemporary politics. Overall, a realist theory of democracy driven not by desires but actual facts is very much needed to understand the contemporary political arena.

Broader Trends in Contemporary Politics

As times change, democracies change too. The contextual characteristics in which democratic politics take place cannot be left out. Several trends have taken place in politics from the 1980s to nowadays that affect contemporary democracies. These include citizens’ disengagement, the decline in partisanship, legitimacy problems, mediatization, presidentialization, and the aesthetic transformation of the public sphere characterized by personalization and the appearance of populist communication. These are global trends in politics that can change the nature of democracies, leading to an “audience democracy” (Manin, 1997) or a “leader democracy” (Körösényi, 2005). Both refer to the contemporary trend in politics where voters become less and less active and interested in politics, while democracies surpass the party system and are more and more centred around one individual: the political leader. Personalization refers to how gradually political leaders become central in politics vis-à-vis traditional party structures (Körösényi & Patkós, 2017).

Our current era might be referred to as the fourth wave of political communication, where party logic is replaced by media logic (meaning that now the media dictates political behavior), the media is becoming increasingly fragmented, and there is an abundance of information. As this environment is overloaded with information, politicians generally struggle for attention. Hence, to be heard and seen by the media and the public, they focus primarily on the appearance of their message rather than its content. This is also referred to as “attention-based politics”, where attention shifts from the content of a message to its ability to attract, maximize and keep attention (Merkovity, 2017). As politics are becoming increasingly popular, self-mediatization and spectacularization are crucial processes. Mediatization seriously affects responsible government, too. As parties’ actions are under constant scrutiny, they try to satisfy the me-

dia's demands and focus on proposals that can be sold on the media market with high visibility. Thus, it is fair to argue that the value of governing expertise is gradually replaced by communication skills and self-mediatization efforts (Caramani, 2017). Being constantly monitored by the people imports an aesthetic transformation of the public sphere, which affects representative democracy. According to some opinions, the radicalization of demagogical opinions can be understood as symptoms of a malfunction caused by television and new information technology (Urbinati, 2014).

As a matter of fact, the appearance of the new media, and especially social media had a great impact on political communication. As argued by proponents of technological determinism, technology can be the driving force behind the professionalization of political communication, as political leaders adapt their styles of communication to their technological circumstances. First, it was the television that became the key medium for political actors. It made politicians media savvy and drove them to package their narratives according to the logic of the news media. However, the appearance of a new technology does not mean anything unless the public uses that given technology (Lilleker, 2006, pp. 197-199). The further development of the information communication technology (ICT) has revolutionized access to the public sphere, as control over information has ceased to exist (Lilleker, 2006, p. 205). New online media technologies, especially social media, are a determinant factor in modern-day politics. With the appearance of social media – perhaps the politically most relevant ones being Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube – the nature of connection between the public and the politicians has changed drastically. Representation in the new media has become increasingly personalized, thus signaling a shift from program-oriented competition towards personalized campaign (Körösényi, 2019a, p. 291). In this new relationship political leaders fulfil a special role, as they provide a direct form of representation, which is primarily based on emotions. An emotional bond is born between the public and the political leaders, through whom the people can feel recognized and empowered (Block & Negrine, 2017b).

Speaking of emotions: quasi parallel to the appearance of the social media, the role of emotions in politics has been rediscovered, demonstrating that emotions affect political decision-making and thus putting aside the ideals about the “rational voter”. The idea of emotions being present in the political sphere is not something new, as it has been analyzed previously by the Greeks (the role of emotions in rhetoric), Machiavelli (the role of love and fear in exercising power) and Hume (the role of moral sentiments in human reason). However, during the last century their role has been much neglected, only to be discovered later as part of first the ‘discursive turn’ of social sciences in the 1980s, and recently as part of the ‘affective turn’ of social sciences. As in the realist tradition of democracy studies, the renewal of academic interest in emotions has also been influenced by scientific developments from the fields of psychology, neuroscience and sociology (Hoggett & Thompson, 2012; Brader, 2005).

The phenomenon of resentment – following Nietzsche and Max Scheler (1992) - is particularly relevant in modern-day politics, as it is often the foundation of reactionary and authoritarian forms of contemporary right-wing populism. Often, resentment is channeled through racism, nationalism and welfare chauvinism (Hoggett & Thompson, 2012, p. 10). Overall, politicians tend to appeal to emotions to stimulate their electorate's behavior by subverting rational decision making in order to reach their goals. As the emotion systems function outside of awareness, the appropriate selection of images, sounds and words that “tag personal experiences or deeply ingrained symbols of success, failure, or danger, can help unleash the desired emotional response in an audience” (Brader, 2005, p. 390).

Contemporary Populism

Although populism is the most current topic in political science and politics in general, it still might be a blurry concept for many.

Furthermore, it seems to carry many misunderstandings related to it. Therefore, as a final part of the background section, a short and straightforward clarification of the concept is necessary. I mention “short and straightforward” as this topic could be discussed endlessly. It is probably fair to say that populism is currently the most debated concept in political science; unfortunately, this also implies that there are several definitions of it. Even in the best-case scenario, these definitions only partially agree about the nature and essence of populism. For conceptual clarity, these will be summarized in a constructive manner below.

Broadly speaking, there are two main groups in populism studies. The first group refers to populism as an ideology, or specifically as a thin-ideology (Mudde, 2004), and regards it as something with at least some content related to it. Proponents of this definition often connect the emergence of populism to the new wave of authoritarianism and new nationalism, hybrid regimes, democratic and cultural backlash (Inglehart & Norris, 2018; Norris, 2016), Euroscepticism, and radical-right wing political actors. When they do, they argue that although populism has little substance to it – reference to the people and anti-elitism – it can easily be connected to other ideologies, such as nationalism or Euroscepticism, with which it usually appears together. The fact that populism emerged in the same period and along with radical right parties that combine its use with authoritarianism and nativism, these ideologies became inseparable in the eyes of many. Although these concepts are often used even as synonyms, there is no conceptual similarity in them. Overall, the thin-ideology approach can be understood as a minimal definition of populism, which captures its core.

The second approach is referred to as “The Contemporaries” by Pappas (Pappas, 2016), who summarized the different waves of the study of populism. This wave had followed three previous ones: “The Pioneers”, “Classical Populism”, and “Neoliberal Populism”. Pappas argues that as scholars could not agree about what populism actually is, a new trend has emerged in which instead of conceptualizing it further, they try to measure the degrees of populism. In this view, a populist actor is not either populist or not, but rather more or less populist ((De Cleen et al., 2018). In practice, this wave is connected to the communicative understanding of populism, as degrees of it are assessed via content or other textual analysis of the communicative materials, such as speeches, election manifestos, or populist discourse itself (Hawkins, 2009; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Pauwels, 2011; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011). To sum it up, this approach is rooted in the tradition of understanding populism as a style of political communication (Aalberg et al., 2016; Bossetta, 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Moffitt, 2016; de Vreese et al., 2018). In this view, what unites political actors from the wide range of the political spectrum despite their ideological differences is a particular political communication style, highlighting that populism is not a specific characteristic of either left- or right-wing politics.

Describing populism as a communicative phenomenon emphasizes that populism cannot be reduced and viewed only as a “symptomatic effect” of extra-political development such as economic crisis and migration. Instead, the focus shifts from the contents of populism to how it articulates them (De Cleen et al., 2018). This approach highlights the role of mediatization in our contemporary political arena, where the value of ideology has decreased, shifting attention to the communicative aspects of politics, such as image or rhetoric, and making actual political content marginalized (McNair, 2018).

In between these two approaches, we find Weyland (2017), who describes populism as a strategy. In contrast to the approach of scholars who describe populism through its communicative features and argue that there is absolutely no substance to it, he argues that populism is not only about what populists say but about how a political leader pursues and sustains political power. Therefore, it is fair to say that understanding populism as a strategy is somewhere in between the two main groups. This concept will be discussed in detail in an upcoming section.

This chapter argues that populism is a mixture of all these approaches, as all state something relevant about populism. Therefore, it suggests to define populism as a political style used strategically by political actors to achieve their political goals. It is easy to see how this approach connects to the one that sees populism as a “cultural backlash” (Inglehart & Norris, 2018). As Block and Negrine point out, the populist communication style has “deeper roots associated with identity and culture, a specific style of rhetoric, and savvy use of various communication channels [...] through which populists connect with the political feelings, aspirations, and needs of those who feel disenchanting, excluded, aggrieved, and/or disadvantaged by conventional center-ground politics or by social advances that threaten their ways of life” (2017, p. 179). With this in mind, it is obvious that these different approaches to populism do not entirely exclude each other.

Overall, the following might be argued: the surge of populist actors is fueled by a cultural backlash, as it is the disenchanting public whom populist actors try to appeal to via populist political communication, which attempt is heavily aided by the postmodern media environment (Block & Negrine, 2017a). Hence, on the one hand, we have the disenchanting public who has lost interest in politics and demands something that catches their attention and makes them feel involved. On the other hand, on the ‘supply side’, we have populist political actors doing precisely that, while the media is multiplying their messages, and they can reach further than ever before via their social media sites. Obviously, populist political actors discursively build on the topics that have relevance in their local political arena;³ thus, populism is contextual in this sense, while as it reflects global trends in politics, it is also local at the same time. “Each populist actor emerges because of a particular set of social grievances, which influences its choice of host ideology, which in turn affects how the actor defines ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ ” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017b). The author of this chapter argues that as a consequence of the aforementioned factors, populism can be described as something that is at the intersection of a cultural backlash (at the local level) and the weakening of the value of ideology (at the global level) in the postmodern media environment (McNair, 2018); thus it is bridging the gap between these essentially different definitions. This argument strengthens the core theory proposed here: that populism can be looked at as a tool of postmodern political communication, which goes hand in hand with the mediatization of politics and the parallel/subsequent weakening of value-based politics.

CONTEMPORARY POPULISM AS A REALIST ASSESSMENT OF DEMOCRACY

Until this point, the theoretical background has been summarized: namely, what we need to know about democracy, populism, and their wider contextual environment. Now the chapter will proceed to demonstrate how democracy and populism relate to each other and how this might shed light on the capacity of populism to contribute to realist democratic theory.

Populism vs. Democracy

The relation between populism and democracy is quite conflictual; moreover, they are both debated concepts on their own. Populism is often claimed to be harmful to democracy, leading to the undermining and gradual deconsolidation of it. Other times, it is praised as something overly democratic, as it has given room for ordinary people to be seen in politics at last. As presented above, democracy itself does not refer to more than a political system in which the people rule. Therefore, it would be hard to argue that populism is at odds with that. Populism is essentially democratic; however, it might be at odds with liberal democracy, as it defends extreme majoritarianism while it rejects pluralism and, within the framework of it, minority rights and their institutional guarantees too. As populists tend to distrust institutions, populism can eventually develop into a form of illiberal democracy. Among their most targeted institutions, we can find the judiciary and the media. In fact, populists in power have often transformed the media landscape by turning state media into propaganda machinery while making it as hard as possible for the few remaining independent media outlets to operate, as had been the case in Ecuador, Hungary, or Venezuela (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017b).

On the other hand, populism favors political participation as it speaks to those who feel invisible or underrepresented in politics. By doing so, it works as a democratic corrective. Furthermore, it might mobilize previously excluded sectors of society; thus, it improves the responsiveness of the political system and increases democratic accountability. Overall, it is fair to argue that the presence of populism can have both positive and negative effects on a given (more or less) democratic political system (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017b).

Another approach that gained popularity recently is the one that described populism as a “hybrid regime”. According to this view, populism can be found between democracy and authoritarianism (Weyland, 2017a). Regime change happens gradually as democracies slowly shift into electoral authoritarianism, if it occurs at all (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Therefore, a hybrid regime can be best described as a formally democratic system characterized by the presence and coexistence of democratic and authoritarian elements. This is what previously has been referred to as “Potemkin democracy”.

Another concept that can explain the relationship between democracy and populism has been put forward by Körösiényi, titled “Plebiscitary Leader Democracy” (PLD). PLD can be understood as a new type of hybrid regime that is formally democratic but substantively authoritarian. The empirical example he uses is the Orbán regime in Hungary, which produced the characteristics necessary to be labelled a plebiscitary leader democracy. It has democratic elections and legitimacy derived from it, yet strong elements of authoritarian rule can be observed simultaneously. PLD may incorporate populist and plebiscitary politics. The populist style of communication is used to disguise the gradual transformation of democracy (Körösiényi, 2019b).

Populism as Strategy and Personalistic Leadership

Contemporary populism is like a chameleon, as there are many different conceptualizations of it. These have been presented in the background section, but to mention them as a reminder: these conceptualizations can be ideology-centered, communicative-discursive, strategic, and of course, different variations of these. As discussed, this chapter argues that populism is foremost a style used strategically, but the strategic part must be elaborated further as it is essential for understanding the relationship between populism and democracy.

Understanding populism as a political strategy is connected primarily to Weyland (2001, p. 4), who defines populism as “a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers”. As he points out later, this conceptualization does not focus on what populists say but on what they actually do: how they pursue and sustain political power (Weyland, 2017a). The advantage of this strategy-based definition of populism is that it strips populism from the negative connotations added to it over the years when it was often merged with radical right-wing politics.

All conceptualizations of populism regard having a powerful political leader essential in populism, but Weyland describes vote maximizing personalistic leadership as the core of populism. As he points out, the leader has a quasi-direct, seemingly personal relationship with the people, built on uninstitutionalized connections. A deep personal identification can be observed, satisfying the needs of the people who long for the recognition of their identity by a community they can be a part of. This community is manifested in the political leader.

What distinguishes populist political leaders from other political leaders is that they focus on vote maximization, and in contrast to, for example, leaders of radical-right parties, they do not focus on ideological purity at all (Mammone, 2009). The driving force behind populism is not ideological but political, and its decisive characteristic is the presence of a personalistic, plebiscitarian leader who focuses foremost on vote-maximization. According to Weyland, it is for this reason that populism can be best defined as a political strategy that constitutes a coherent set of mechanisms for gaining and maintaining political power and governmental authority. The other distinctive feature of populism is that it is a political strategy that revolves around one individual and pushes aside other political actors, such as parties. Populism rests on “pure, opportunistic personalism, where the leader embodies a dogmatic ideology and acts as its monopolistic interpreter”. The legitimate base of populist rule is widespread mass support. In order to continuously mobilize their supporters, they put an emphasis on the illusion of a direct relationship, thus hold frequent elections and plebiscites, organize street demonstrations, frequently appear in the media, and are especially active in social media. This seemingly direct identification with their followers bypasses intermediation of all sorts, even party organization. Through these techniques, populist leaders achieve daily presence in the lives of their supporters and provide them “with a sense of belonging, which liberal, pluralist democracy with its reliance on ‘cold’ procedural mechanisms lacks” (Weyland, 2017a). The direct, seemingly personal link between the populist leader and the people built on identity formation and emotions is what makes populism unique and effective in terms of political success.

Personalistic leadership, in turn, has its effect on governance. The leader becomes the defining factor in politics without being committed to ideologies or parties. This is what gives populism a striking unpredictability and disorganization in governance (Weyland, 2017). As it can be observed in many countries where populists govern, populism is always embodied by one single political leader with whom the people can identify. The populist leader surpasses party organization and becomes the personally dominant factor in his party, not only in the people’s eyes but also in decision-making. Therefore, populism often ends up being a ‘one-man show’, as we could observe in many countries. A great example for this would be Nigel Farage, who has been the personally dominant leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) around the time that Brexit has taken place, which many directly attribute to him (see for example Mason, 2016). He has been extremely successful in connecting with his followers – “the Ukipers”, particularly by staging newsworthy events, as he has been regularly pictured in a pub with a pint and a cigarette (Block & Negrine, 2017b). As the BBC concluded back then: “for UKIP voters, Nigel Farage is UKIP”(BBC, 2015).

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Populists' techniques for gaining wide-ranging mass support include "confronting threats", acting in crises (also creating them), and taking on the people's enemies. As populism is an opportunistic strategy for reaching and maximizing political power, personalistic leaders communicate flexibly and shift when the circumstances seem to change. Populist leaders typically avoid committing to anything, let it be a discourse, worldview, or ideology. Rather, they tailor their political actions and communication to their wider surroundings: the needs of the people, the era in which they live in and broader trends in politics (Weyland, 2017b).

Overall, populist leadership is flexible, opportunistic, and non-ideocratic. While populism is often presented as a bottom-up mass movement, in reality, it is the exact opposite, as it rests on a top-down strategy for the maximization of acquiring and keeping political power. The strategic use of populism is characterized by top-down plebiscitarian, personalistic leadership coupled with bottom-up rhetoric.

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How can we characterize populist political representation? Of course, there are different approaches to this answer. One of them is that along with technocracy, populism can be understood as an alternative form of political representation to party government, in some sense as a "corrective" of it (Caramani, 2017). Populism relies heavily on symbolic representation and on emotional attachment, which goes hand in hand with the fact that it is incredibly leader centric. Symbolic representation is done via clothing, speech, or lifestyle (see for example the aforementioned case of Nigel Farage). Because it relies on symbolic representation, populism can be deemed irrational from the voters' side and rational from the political actors' side (Caramani, 2017).

This emotional bond between populist leaders and certain segments of the population is created by the leaders themselves, who present themselves as one with the citizens, allowing them to feel recognized and empowered through them (Block and Negrine, 2017). Again, an excellent example for this would be Nigel Farage whose communication style had been characterized by a "pint, fag and cheeky grin routine" (Robinson, 2015, p. 9) as he had often been pictured in pubs holding a beer and a cigarette.

Canovan suggests another possible way of looking at it when she argues that modern democracies are situated at the intersection between redemptive and pragmatic political styles, which are interdependent, despite being opposed. Populism appears in the gap between them (Canovan, 1999). This argument is highly relevant in democratic theory, as it highlights how populism exploits the gap between the promise and the performance of democracies, in some sense providing criticism for the romanticized folk theory of democracy. While there are democratic theorists who wish to strip democracy of its redemptive features and direct focus on the pragmatic ones, Canovan argues that any attempt to exclude the former will eventually be self-defeating. Redemptive elements cannot be disregarded, as contemporary democratic politics prove it.

Another concept that has been connected to populism is plebiscitary democracy (Urbinati, 2014). The origin of the concept can be traced back to Weber (Weber, 1978), who argued that plebiscitary democracy is a variant of charismatic authority, hiding behind a legitimacy that is formally derived from the will of the people. In "plebiscite leader democracy" (Körösényi, 2019b), where democracy (formal) and autocracy (substantive) exist simultaneously in a *sui generis* regime type, demagoguery plays a crucial role in the communication of political leaders. Crises come handy in this case, as it gives political leaders the chance to create their own crisis narratives and through them, legitimize their revolutionary

and radical politics. In plebiscitary democracy, communication becomes more emotional and aesthetic, building on polarization, ‘bad manners’, and identity politics.

Although charismatic political leadership is often presented as something that occurs naturally in populism, not everyone agrees with this. For instance, Weyland (2017) argues that charisma is not a necessary component of populist leadership; however, the widespread belief in the leader’s extraordinary capacities, salvational and redemptive qualities is (Zúquete, 2007). The concept of the plebiscitary leader democracy gives charisma a central role based on the work of Weber (Weber, 1978), who defines charisma as a bouquet of superhuman, supernatural powers and qualities that are assigned to an individual – in this case, the political leader. These qualities are not accessible to ordinary people but regarded as exemplary. Plebiscitary leader democracy (PLD) is a “routinized and institutionalized variant of charismatic authority” (Körösényi, 2019b). Charisma is activated when a crisis unfolds or an extraordinary event occurs, which requires those unique abilities and outstanding talent that the political leader supposedly has. Often, when there is no real crisis, political leaders construct one discursively, which can eventually even lead to “permanent crisis discourse” (Körösényi, 2019, p. 296).

This chapter argues that populist leadership can be best described as a unique mixture of charismatic exceptionality and ordinariness. Many scholars argue that charismatic leadership is essential in populist representation as “without the presence of a leader or a centralized leadership that seeks control of the majority, a popular movement that has a populist rhetoric is not yet populism” (Urbinati, 2014, p. 129). In this sense, charismatic leadership can be understood as a consequence of mediatization and a prerequisite for populism. However, other scholars do not entirely agree with this, and there is contradictory evidence as well: Pappas concludes in his comparative research that of 45 European populist party leaders, only five are found to be charismatic (2016). Turning to the work of Wood et al. (2016), one might find an explanation for that, as building on Street’s concept of “celebrity politics” (Street, 2004), they introduced two subcategories: superstar celebrity politicians and everyday celebrity politicians. Both categories are present in contemporary populist representation, and often, they become intertwined.

Politics where a dominant leader is the decisive player, whether we label it plebiscitary or populist, changes the nature of representation. The diversity of the parliament is replaced by one individual who directly represents the people. As Anton Pelinka, (1995, p. 2) wrote, “leadership exists if politics and policies without a certain person’s participation would be decidedly different.” It might be argued that this is typical in populist politics.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This chapter has served as an introduction to the idea of populism as a strategic response to democratic realities, as this topic is still an underexplored area of political science. While populism sometimes seems to be excessively researched, looking at it through the lens of realist democratic theory can provide valuable new perspectives for both populism- and democracy studies.

A realist theory of contemporary democracy is much needed, and it must be elaborated not based on our concepts and desires but facts. Contemporary populism is a perfect example of how our romantic notions of democracy are far from being objective and how this gap between our ideals and what democracy truly is has led to present-day populism. As the chapter argues, given the circumstances of our contemporary political arena, turning to populist communication can be regarded as a rational choice for a political actor; one that builds on the electorate’s political irrationality. Hopefully, this chapter

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contributes to the realist assessment of our contemporary political environment and democratic theories and will be followed by many others. The idea proposed by this chapter aims to contribute to the fields of populism- and democracy studies by providing a new theoretical concept that can be further developed both by theoretical and empirical approaches.

CONCLUSION

It has been argued at the beginning of this chapter that populism is often contrasted with democracy, especially liberal democracy. Accordingly, several scholars tried to assess what is the effect of populism on democracy in general and in some particular cases. This is primarily because the idea of liberal democracy is very highly regarded in modern societies. Every nation aspires to be democratic, and politicians generally want the people to believe that they live in a democratic country, especially because the costs of open authoritarianism are just too high (Müller, 2016). According to our democratic ideals, democracy should be about the people, reflecting and satisfying their needs, and executed by politicians as public servants. As discussed previously, according to this ideal, voters are rational, well-informed and generally interested in politics. Hence, they are able to make appropriate judgments in the polling cabin. Unfortunately, several events in politics have so far demonstrated that this is not quite the way democracies operate, causing a huge gap between the promise and the performance of democracies.

It is precisely this gap that politicians exploit and hence reflect on democratic reality. To be heard by disenchanting people who lost their belief and interest in politics in an era that is overloaded with information is undoubtedly a challenge for politicians. As argued by this chapter, a possible answer to this challenge is to turn to the populist style of communication and use it strategically for acquiring and keeping political power. The focus of populist leadership is on maximizing votes; hence it is a flexible, opportunistic, and non-ideocratic top-down strategy. As demonstrated, populist leaders reflect on the political reality that surrounds them knowingly and unknowingly at the same time. In a sense, it is their strategic decision to do so, but it must be kept in mind that democracies and politicians are affected by the contextual factors surrounding them, even if they are not aware of it.

The main proposal of the chapter is that contemporary populism is a strategic political style that reflects on democratic realities. It became a popular way of doing politics simply because it works. It acquires and keeps the support of the people who are not responsive to conventional center-ground politics. In this sense, it is true: populism brings into the political arena those who were previously excluded from it. Certainly, populist communication is not informative political content directed to politically well-informed citizens. Populist leaders consider the democratic realities, reflect on those, and are seemingly successful in doing so. Hence, the overall argument proposed by this chapter – which invites other scholars to reflect on this idea and contribute to this debate – is that contemporary populism might have brought us the final judgment about the folk theory of democracy.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Different democratic theories, both idealistic and realistic ones, have been summarized thoroughly by Achen & Bartels (2016) in their book “Democracy for Realists”. Therefore, the related part of this chapter will rely foremost on their work when summarizing the different approaches to democracy.
- ² Achen and Bartels. (2016) refer to these data from the sixth (2010-2014) wave of the World Values Survey. The data is available online at <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp>
- ³ Populism, if understood as something communicative, can be found both at the right and at the left side of the political spectrum. For example, as highlighted by De Cleen (2017), ‘inclusionary populism’ that focuses on equality and strengthening the political participation of lower classes and excluded groups, such as the poor and the indigenous people, can be typically found on the left. South America in general, and Hugo Chávez in particular would provide a great example for left-wing populism. Right-wing populist actors also tend to operate with common topics, but they tend to be more ‘exclusionary’ and combine populism with nationalism. Overall, as summarized by Policy Solutions & Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2016) the main difference between the left- and

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right-wing populist parties is the topics covered by them. In South-America and Southern Europe the most essential problems are poverty and inequality, hence populists are likely to be on the left side of the spectrum. In Europe, right-wing populism is more common, reflecting on issues such as anti-immigration or xenophobia. In 2016, common topics for European populists had been referendum, anti-corruption, anti-austerity, recovering autonomy and refugee and immigrant hostility. Common topics are relevant, as they can be the basis for future cooperation and unity among populist actors.

Section 2

Chapter 4

The Dynamics of Polarisation in Australian Social Media: The Case of Immigration Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides a case study of a public debate attracting highly polarised and antagonistic participants within the Australian context and examines the dynamics of polarisation, information flows, discourses, and materialities shaping these dynamics. Twitter conversations about immigration policies of the Australian government and detention of asylum seekers in offshore camps attract a great deal of polarised debate. The authors show how the affordances of the platform constitute, and are constituted by, the discourses of the users, and how users strategically discursify and give meaning to these affordances to further make their own political positions visible, amplify antagonisms, and at times, join each other in the formation of larger agonistic communities.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents a case study of a highly contested and polarising debate within Australia's socio-political domain. Through a mixed-methods investigation of conversations about the topic of immigration within the Australian Twittersphere, the authors examine the dynamics of polarisation in this space from a discourse-theoretical lens. The chapter uses this case as a pilot study for a broader and more systematic analysis of discursive struggles that lead to polarisation in social media. The study shows that the polarisation often observed in political debates on social media is not necessarily an effect of the technological structure of the platforms, but rather the result of the strategic engagement of users with

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8057-8.ch004

the platforms' affordances, in a bid to participate in democratic processes online through the reproduction, promotion, and dissemination of their discourses.

The interrelationship of social media and democracy has been approached from widely different perspectives. Initially, the majority of views on the impact of social media on democratic discourse were quite optimistic, and pointed to the potential of the participatory web for the creation, promotion, and evolution of better deliberative and participatory opportunities, potentially enabling citizens to engage in various forms of direct democracy (e.g. Wunsch-Vincent & Vickery, 2007). A number of events around the globe, such as Iran's Green Movement in 2009-10, the Arab Spring in 2010-12, or Occupy Wall Street in 2011, appeared to support this view, at least temporarily: they were seen as substantially organised and popularised via social media, with platforms such as Facebook and Twitter enabling protesters and activists to bypass the censorship of oppressive political regimes or the disinterest from establishment media, and to highlight and pursue citizens' interests from the bottom up, even in political and media systems whose structures were designed to sideline and suppress such grassroots activism.

The initial success of such protest movements in these and other contexts appeared to confirm the hopes and assumptions of early Web 2.0 theorists that better opportunities for participation would produce better spaces for political deliberation, and thus better democracies (see, for example Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2008; Shirky, 2011). Yet the subsequent faltering and failure of many such activities, due both to an inability of activists to sustain their protests over the longer term and to a concerted backlash from state authorities representing the status quo, called such hopes into question, and critics have pointed out that the simplistic characterisation of events like the Arab Spring as a "social media revolution" substantially underestimates the amount of conventional, in-person activism and organising that also fed into these protests (e.g. Morozov, 2011). In turn, however, outright dismissals of social media activism as mere "slacktivism"—a transient, inconsequential, and therefore meaningless expression of support via social media that does not translate into 'real' change offline, as Morozov characterises it—are similarly simplistic: more recent campaigns with a substantial social media presence, such as the global Me Too or Black Lives Matter movements, have not only served to substantially raise public awareness of sexual abuse and racial discrimination, but in a number of instances also produced substantive change in the political, corporate, and societal domain.

The communicative landscape that has emerged, then, is considerably more complex and contradictory than early hopes and fears about the impact of social media on public debate and democracy may have anticipated. Increased participation through social media also means an increase in the range and variety of voices expressed online, leading to an increased fragmentation of participatory opportunities and platforms, "with public spheres veering toward disparate islands of political communication" (Dahlgren 2005: 152). In later reformulations of his 'public sphere' theory, Habermas himself included the notion of "issue publics" (Habermas, 2006, p.422), to account for the presence of fragmentation. Although one can argue that the ubiquity of social media did indeed lead to more participation—or at least more opportunities for participation—this did not necessarily translate into a net increase in the quantity or, more importantly, the quality of deliberation. A national or global public sphere in the Habermasian sense, now drawing on these latest and most inclusive platforms for public deliberation, did not emerge from the public embrace of social media as tools for public communication; instead, what resulted from the growing use of social media across society was increased fragmentation. This fragmentation produced a wide range of communicative spaces of variable size, lifespan, and publicness, described and theorised variously as public spheres (Bruns, 2008), public sphericules (Cunningham, 2001), *ad hoc* publics (Bruns

& Burgess, 2015), affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015), personal publics (Schmidt, 2014), or privately public spaces (Papacharissi, 2010), to name just a few perspectives.

Although the theoretical and empirical works drawing on these and related perspectives to investigate the fragmentations and intersections of public discourse in various contexts approach these issues from different conceptual and methodological traditions, a common thread among the majority of media and communication literature investigating the interrelationship of social media and democracy is a reliance on the Habermasian conceptualisation of the public sphere (Habermas, 1962; 2006), and with it, on the normative ideal of achieving democracy through consensus. In other words, the implicit end goal for such projects is to understand and resolve communicative fragmentation in ways that can reintroduce a form of political deliberation that would lead to agreement, and consensual decision-making.

Public sphere theory, however, has received its fair share of criticism, not least for its pursuit of this ideal state in preference over less ideal but more realistic and achievable models for meaningful deliberation in a fragmented mediasphere. Indeed, some scholars argue that the ideal public sphere has always been “a convenient fantasy” (Hartley & Green, 2006, p. 346); others point to the exclusionary presumptions underpinning public sphere theory, which traditionally centres on a male, homogenous, bourgeois population and sidelines the voices of women, minorities, and counterhegemonic voices (Ess, 2018; Fraser, 1992). In effect, the consensus sought in a deliberative democracy that is founded on Habermasian principles is built on exclusionary practices, and cannot be seen as inclusive of all societal perspectives (Smith, 2017).

A further major criticism of such deliberative democratic models is made by Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Mouffe, 2000), who argue that consensus is a paradoxical situation in itself. Once there is consensus, there will be no further change, and societies will not progress. A consensus, furthermore, is always achieved against the backdrop of pre-existing power relations and hegemonic structures: thus, what might appear as consensus is in essence a consensus predominantly among the participants in hegemonic discourse, and does not involve the contributors to all discourses in a society. Therefore, any such consensus is ultimately achieved through the exclusion of all other discourses from the social order.

Because of these inherent limitations in deliberative democratic models, Laclau and Mouffe call for a radical, direct model of democracy, built upon the assumption that discursive differences and struggles—antagonisms—are ineradicable (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Mouffe, 1999). In this view, therefore, the “task of democracy” should not be to eliminate antagonism altogether in order to achieve a lasting but lifeless consensus; rather, it should be to “transform antagonism into agonism” (Mouffe, 2005, p. 24). In other words, an antagonistic struggle between *enemies* should be transformed into an agonistic struggle among *adversaries*, who acknowledge that their differences may never be resolved, but come together to achieve a common goal, usually against a common enemy. In a fragmented or polarised political or communicative setting, therefore, this pluralistic model of democracy does not aim to piece the fragments of ‘the’ public sphere together and make them whole again; it accepts that to do so is impossible, and thus futile. Instead, the aim is to bring the fragments together in a way that puts them next to each other, connects them, and facilitates interaction between them, but without merging them. In this setting, the discourses that may occur in each fragmentary space for public deliberation continue to maintain their identity, their values, and their norms, but they come together to achieve a shared goal. This interconnection is the fundamental building block of an agonistic politics (Mouffe, 2013).

We suggest that this pluralistic model of distributed deliberation with its agonisms and antagonisms among and between shifting combinations of discursive groups and communities maps remarkably well

onto the communicative realities of contemporary national and international mediaspheres. Since the heyday of Habermasian public sphere theory in the second half of the twentieth century, when print and broadcast mass media still commanded large national audiences that could be considered as credible if incomplete approximations of ‘the’ public sphere—providing an arena for public deliberation between political and societal elites to be played out before the masses—changes in technology, economy, politics, society, and culture have contributed to a steady and irreversible fragmentation of these mediaspheres, offline and online (cf. Katz, 1996); indeed, online, web-based media were always fragmented by design, and such fragmentation has only continued to increase with the growing take-up of web-based, digital platforms.

Notably, this is true even in spite of the overwhelming market position of leading social media platforms like Facebook: while these provide a unified institutional structure, user experience, and communicative framework, that very framework is designed to be fragmented by default. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, and other social media platforms do not serve as single, unified communicative spaces where users are able to observe everything posted by everyone else (even if a very early version of Twitter once provided users with the opportunity to follow the global ‘firehose’ of all tweets, before this grew too voluminous to be intelligible; cf. Burgess & Baym, 2020). Instead, they provide the tools for users to replicate their offline or establish new online social networks, which determine how information and communication flow between individuals and across the platform, and they offer a range of mechanisms for creating and maintaining small or large, temporary or permanent, private, semi-public, or fully public groups and communities, through the use of profiles, pages, groups, hashtags, direct messaging, and other affordances—and the specific implementation of these communicative features constitutes a chief point of distinction between these social media platforms.

The myriad groups, communities, and publics that have emerged on these platforms with the help of such affordances represent a wide spectrum of interests, values, beliefs, and ideologies; among this multitude, few are overtly and explicitly political, but (since they must necessarily define and express a shared identity, however implicit and normalised) all represent a politics, and serve occasionally as a ‘third space’ (Wright, 2012; Wright et al., 2016) for political discourse. Habermas himself appears to acknowledge the “wild flows of messages” and the “everyday talk in the informal settings or episodic publics of civil society”, but locates such activities “at the periphery of the political system” (2006: 415-6)—we would argue, however, that the widespread use of social media as platforms for everyday communication (including but not limited to explicitly political discourse) has shifted the centre of gravity of the overall system, or indeed fragmented the system to such an extent that a centre can no longer be easily located.

Instead, then, the inherently fragmented and networked structure of communicative spaces in social media (on individual social media platforms, and in the interconnections between them) presents a microcosm and an incomplete yet still instructive representation of the similarly fragmented and networked structure of communicative spaces, offline and online, across society—a structure that, from an all-inclusive perspective, has perhaps always existed, but that had been obscured by the Habermasian ideal of the unified, all-encompassing national public sphere. As this simplified projection of the more complex structure of communicative and deliberative structures in overall society, then, social media as such, and even individual social media platforms in isolation, present a crucial opportunity to empirically observe the agonistic and antagonistic processes postulated by Mouffe and Laclau in action. For any issue or topic of sufficient controversy, in other words, it should be possible to identify the key antagonists and their discourses—further, in different contexts such antagonisms may continue and even

The Dynamics of Polarisation in Australian Social Media

deepen without resolution, or may gradually, and perhaps only temporarily, transform into agonistic engagement that continues to acknowledge diverging views yet does not allow deliberative progress to be stymied by such differences.

The balance between steadfast antagonism and discursive agonism on any one platform is likely to be determined by a combination of underlying factors, including the identity and internal dynamics of participating users and groups, and by the wider societal and political environment within which their discursive struggle unfolds; but also by the suitability of the specific communicative affordances offered by the social media platform for meaningful and productive discursive engagement between groups, and the groups' adeptness at utilising such affordances. In other words, it is possible and indeed likely that some social media platforms lend themselves considerably more easily than others to a discursive engagement between antagonists that might gradually transform into a more constructive agonism among them, and also that some discursive enemies are significantly more prepared to become mere adversaries who acknowledge the other side's genuine commitment to the greater societal good even if they continue to disagree with their chosen path towards that goal.

The observation of such antagonistic and agonistic struggles on social media, and of the adversaries' use of social media affordances in the process, then, can shed important new light on the conditions under which constructive agonism—positioned here as generally preferable to steadfast antagonism—can thrive. This chapter presents a case study of antagonistic and agonistic discourses in the Australian Twittersphere as a model for this approach, focussing on highly contested public debates related to the country's immigration policy; while in isolation its ability to determine the most promising set of conditions for such agonistic engagement remains limited, of course, it nonetheless serves as a pilot study for a broader and more systematic survey of antagonistic and agonistic struggles that could extend across a wider set of issues and topics, a greater number of social media platforms, and a broader range of national contexts.

IMMIGRATION DISCOURSE IN AUSTRALIA

Although it is also home to the longest continuous Indigenous culture in the world, Australia has been dominated and shaped by migration throughout colonial and post-colonial years. Following the initial waves of British convict and free settler occupation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and an influx of migrant labour from Europe, Asia, and the Middle East during the Australian gold rush era in the mid-1800s, growing calls for a restriction of migrant inflows to selected 'desirable' ethnicities eventually resulted in the Immigration Restriction Act, passed in 1901 as one of the first pieces of legislation of the newly formed Australian nation state. This enshrined what has become known as the 'White Australia' policy, favouring a higher proportion of immigrants from Britain and Europe, and implementing cultural assimilation policies designed to protect the 'British' character of the new nation (Clarke, 2002). These policies were relaxed gradually only after World War II, to accommodate post-war refugees and general migration, and were formally replaced by a merit-based immigration policy in 1972. Further, the Racial Discrimination Act of 1975 outlawed any official form of discrimination based on ethnic identity.

Australia's official immigration policy since then has been multicultural, though this has been interpreted and implemented differently by governments of different ideological persuasions. In particular, the comparative prosperity of the country, its strong economy, and displacement of populations as a result of wars and natural disasters around the world—including the Vietnam war, conflicts in North Africa and the Middle East, etc.—have meant that groups of people from the various affected regions

have chosen Australia as a destination for seeking asylum. Such refugee groups, often attempting passage by ship across the comparatively narrow seas between Australia and its northern neighbours Indonesia and Papua New Guinea and sometimes referred to as ‘boat people’ even in official texts (Parliament of Australia, 2001), remain a matter of substantial controversy in Australian politics.

Public debate about the country’s policies towards asylum seekers is especially heated when global events result in increased numbers of refugee arrivals on Australian shores; increasingly, as is the case in other nations that are significant refugee destinations, public anxieties about the country’s ability to cope with such a heightened refugee influx have also been exploited by right-wing political actors in order to gain an electoral advantage especially at the federal level. Both major sides of Australian politics have at times courted such anxieties: in 2001, the conservative Liberal/National Party Coalition introduced the so-called ‘Pacific Solution’ to what was described at the time as a ‘refugee crisis’, establishing detention camps in the Pacific nations of Papua New Guinea and Nauru to which it would relocate refugees arriving in Australia while their asylum claims were processed; subsequent governments led by the centrist Australian Labor Party first dismantled these camps, and then re-opened them in 2012; since 2013, finally, the returning Coalition government has enforced a zero-tolerance border protection policy that has resulted in the mandatory and indefinite detention of asylum seekers in offshore camps (Federal Register of Legislation, 2013). Current Prime Minister (and former Immigration Minister) Scott Morrison is well known to display a plaque in the shape of a boat in his office, bearing the inscription “I Stopped These” to commemorate his role in the implementation of this policy (Davidson, 2018).

Although not unpopular with a substantial subset of the Australian population, the country’s treatment of refugees remains the subject of much controversial debate. The complex and multifaceted nature of the discourse on immigration in Australia is reflected in social media conversations about this issue as well. Citizens interested in politics, activists, partisan groups, civil society organisations, and political actors express their views in their social media posts, and promote news and opinion articles and other materials that support their political stance. As a platform especially suited to public rather than private debate, and one known to be widely used for ongoing political discussions in the country (Sauter & Bruns, 2015), Twitter plays a particularly prominent role in such discourse. This chapter, then, explores seven months of these conversations in the Australian Twittersphere.

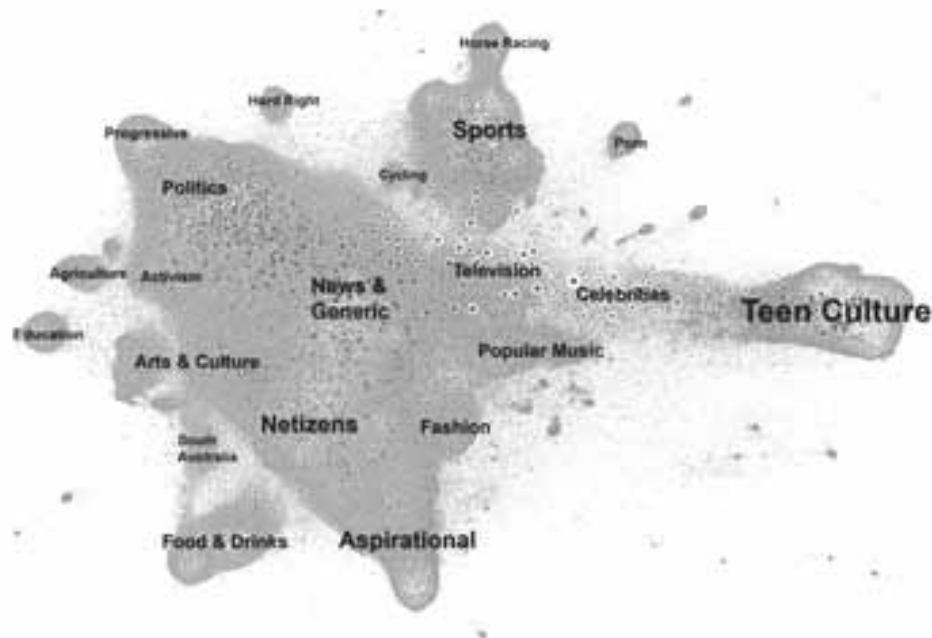
Of course, the choice to study Twitter also introduces certain limitations. One such limitation is that Twitter is not necessarily the most popular platform in or beyond Australia, with the number of users on platforms such as Facebook often surpassing Twitter’s. Additionally, data gathered from public conversations in the Australian Twittersphere necessarily include information drawn only from those users who chose to participate in these online debates, and indeed only from those who used the keywords employed in the data collection.

However, such limitations apply to any case study of public communication on social media platforms. In Australia and elsewhere, Twitter has nonetheless proved to be a fruitful venue for research into political debates; this is due mainly to its public nature, and its historical position as the platform of choice for responding to public issues (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010; Orellana-Rodrigues, Greene, & Keane, 2016), dissemination of emerging and/or critical news (Hermida, 2010), activism (Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff, & van’t Haar, 2013; Grant, Moon, & Busby Grant, 2010), or protests (K. Clarke & Kocak, 2018; Ess, 2018; Murthy, 2018). Importantly, too, Twitter more than Facebook is where public debates between journalists, politicians, activists, and other stakeholders have commonly unfolded (e.g. Parmelee, 2014).

METHODOLOGY

The underlying structure of the Australian Twittersphere (Figure 1) is comparatively well understood: by searching the entire population of Twitter at the time for accounts presenting as Australian, Bruns et al. (2016) developed a national database of accounts, and collected the tweets posted by these Australian Twitter accounts on an ongoing basis. Further, they conducted a large-scale network analysis of follower/followee relationships between these accounts, resulting in a comprehensive map of the Australian Twittersphere (fig. 1) and identifying the dominant clusters of highly connected, interest-driven communities in the overall network (Bruns et al., 2017).

Figure 1. Structure of follower/followee relationships in the Australian Twittersphere, as of 2016



The continuous collection of tweets from Australian accounts in this network provides a consistent and coherent dataset of specifically Australian Twitter activity. Initially encompassing tweets on any topic addressed by Australian accounts, it can be filtered for specific keywords and hashtags, and patterns of activity within such topical discourses can be mapped against the underlying network structure of follower relationships within the network to examine which pre-existing communities emerge as especially active participants in such discourses, and whether information and communication flow across the boundaries between these communities.

The dataset for the present study was extracted from the overall Australian Twittersphere collection. The authors queried this dataset to collect tweets containing one or more keywords and hashtags related to immigration discourse in the Australian Twittersphere. The terms used for this process were immigration, migration, immigrants, migrants, asylum, refugee, boat people, boat person, Manus, Nauru, people smuggler, CloseTheCamps, BringThemHere, illegal arrivals, and illegals. This resulted in a dataset of

1,028,955 tweets posted between 22 February and 18 September 2018. The collected data was then analysed using a recursive methodological pipeline, developed by Dehghan et al. (2020), starting from the examination of overall patterns of activity, moving on to processes of interaction and community building, and using the insights from these steps to perform an in-depth, qualitative, discourse-analytical investigation of key communicative events during this timeframe.

The initial steps in the methodological pipeline involved the use of advanced social media analytics to identify the dynamics of tweeting over time, the use of secondary hashtags, the presence of outside information sources, and the role of opinion leaders. Social network analysis of retweet and @mention networks further documented the formation of communities and clusters in the network, and traced the dynamics of information flows within, among, and beyond these clusters. This was done using Krackhardt's E-I index (Krackhardt & Stern, 1988), which provides a normalised comparison of the number of internal interactions *within* a cluster with the number of external interactions *between* the cluster and outside communities.

Once the dynamics of interaction within and among communities were established, the analysis focussed on the original tweets posted by each community, and used a combination of qualitative and computational textual analysis methods to examine the discourses in each cluster. The profiles and top tweets of the most active accounts in each community were examined qualitatively, and the corpus of tweets posted by each cluster underwent a keyword analysis (Baker, 2004). Such keyword analyses are often used in corpus linguistics: they compare a small sample corpus (in the present case, tweets from a particular cluster) against a larger reference corpus (all tweets in the dataset) and identify words that are more likely to occur in the distinct sample corpus. Once these keywords were identified, the authors then manually investigated the tweets containing these keywords to determine their discursive context and operationalisation.

FINDINGS

Given the significance of the topic of immigration for a multicultural society like Australia, it is not surprising that a large number of Australian Twitter accounts tweeted about this topic ($n = 67,928$). The location of these accounts in the underlying map of the long-term follower network of the Australian Twittersphere (fig. 1) reveals that several of the communities in this network tweeted significantly more actively than the rest of the Australian Twittersphere. Apart from 'political junkies' from across the Australian political spectrum, other communities that actively tweeted about immigration-related matters included groups focussed on issues such as education, literature, law, journalism, etc. More than 20% of the accounts in these clusters tweeted about immigration-related issues during the data collection period.

An examination of the most prominent hashtags used by the members of each community demonstrates how the different groups involved in these conversations about immigration in the Australian Twittersphere connect that discourse to the other issues, debates, and discourses that they deem relevant, and points to the diverging standpoints from which they approach the immigration debate. This interdiscursivity manifests itself in the use of secondary hashtags within tweets. For instance, hashtags like #BringThemHere, #EvacuateNow, or #HumanRights are among the top secondary hashtags used in immigration-related tweets by communities that represent progressive political perspectives: in using such hashtags, they call for the closure of Australia's offshore detention centres. In stark contrast, accounts in the staunchly right-wing community cluster in the Australian Twittersphere predominantly

The Dynamics of Polarisation in Australian Social Media

draw on secondary hashtags that connect the domestic immigration debate to the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ experienced by European countries during the timeframe covered by the dataset, and thereby frame the issue of immigration mostly from a national security perspective.

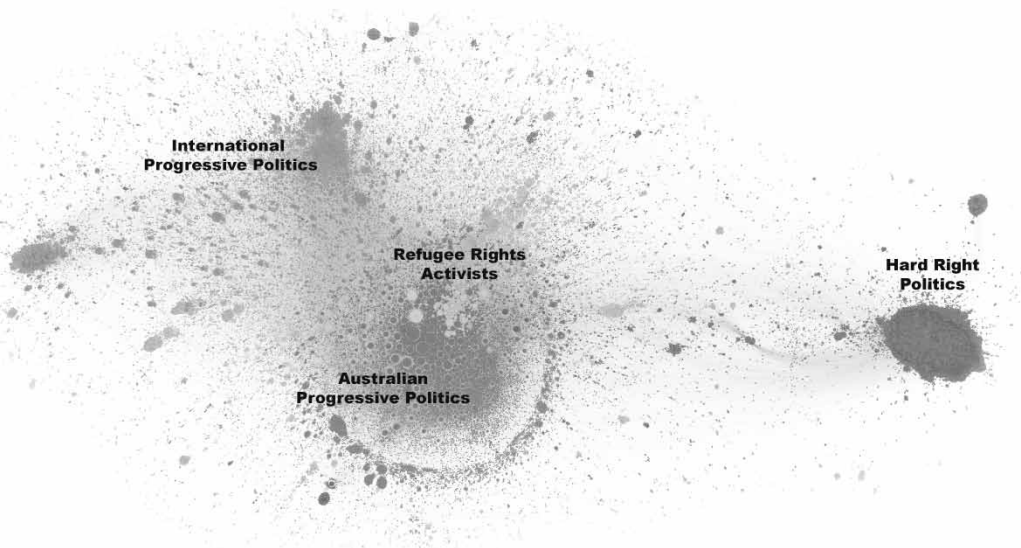
This argument is further strengthened by an observation of the themes, topics, and arguments put forward by each of the communities involved in the conversation. An analysis of the original tweets posted by accounts in each cluster shows that different communities in the overall immigration debate frame the issue from the perspective that is most discursively resonant for them. The community of lawyers and legal scholars, for instance, mainly addresses whether Australia’s immigration policies are constitutional, or whether they violate human rights. Educators and teachers mostly focus on the fact that children held in offshore detention centres do not have access to sufficient, quality education. Medical professionals in the Australian Twittersphere raise the fact that asylum seekers in these centres are in dire need of medical treatment. Contrary to these various pro-immigration discourses, meanwhile, the hard-right community takes a different approach and mainly embraces a national security perspective, arguing that some asylum seekers might be members of extremist and terrorist organisations and should not be allowed into the country.

A similar pattern is evident in the information sources on which the different communities rely, and which they amplify by sharing their content on Twitter. Content from mainstream media, such as the public service media organisation *ABC News*, is shared by almost all communities involved in the conversation, but content from media and websites with a more explicit political positionality, such as *Buzzfeed*, *The Guardian*, and *GetUp.org* (generally progressive), or *Breitbart*, *Daily Mail*, and *The Herald Sun* (generally conservative), is shared very predominantly only by communities that hold discursively resonant views.

The overall tendency of different accounts and communities to amplify information and discourses that resonate with their pre-existing worldviews is also evident in how they give visibility to other accounts and communities. An examination of the retweet network shows distinct clusters of accounts that actively retweet each other, and thereby endorse one another’s messages and give further visibility the discursive positions that such messages represent. From an overall perspective, the retweet network shows a polarised structure, formed by two major camps that represent pro- and anti-immigration discourses, respectively. At a more granular level, however, it is possible to observe a greater number of more distinct communities. Each smaller cluster in this network points to a particular discourse community. By qualitatively examining the profile information and tweets posted by the core—that is, the most active or most retweeted—accounts in each cluster, and also by locating these accounts in the follower network map of the Australian Twittersphere, it is possible to qualitatively interpret and label these discourses. From this process, it emerges that the anti-immigration discourse in this network is exclusively comprised of accounts from the hard-right cluster in the Australian Twittersphere, without significant further subdivision. The pro-immigration camp, however, shows a greater diversity amongst its constituent communities. Figure 2 shows the most active communities in this network.

Each cluster in this network has its own central accounts: these are its opinion leaders or, as Papacharissi calls them, “crowd-sourced elites” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 46), whose tweets are more widely retweeted than those of ordinary community members. Accounts within each cluster actively retweet these opinion leaders, and each other, to express their community membership and disseminate the community’s views across the wider Australian Twittersphere, and beyond. At the same time, however, a substantial amount of retweeting also occurs between communities that hold discursively resonant views: that is, users from one community retweet those from other communities, and in doing so form a tentative discursive al-

Figure 2. Clusters in the retweet network for immigration-related tweets in the Australian Twittersphere



liance between the two. Such alliances grow stronger with repetition: the more often members of two communities retweet each other's messages, the more they express their discursive alignment both to their fellow community members in each group, and to the Twittersphere at large.

Comparing the level of retweeting within and among clusters, it becomes evident that almost all communities in the retweet network display a mostly outward-facing retweeting behaviour: the number of retweets that amplify tweets from accounts outside the cluster generally exceeds that of retweets of accounts within the cluster. The exception to this overall pattern is the progressive politics cluster, which shows an almost equal number of intra- vs inter-cluster retweeting.

Further scrutiny of intra- and inter-cluster retweeting patterns also reveals that the two more extreme ends of the political spectrum in the Australian Twittersphere, the communities representing progressive and hard-right politics, have a higher tendency to amplify only those voices that are discursively resonant. In other words, although they show significant connection, via retweeting, to outside communities, such connections are predominantly to discursively similar communities beyond the Australian Twittersphere (such as international progressive or conservative communities on Twitter). *Within* the Australian Twittersphere, however, these overtly political communities' tendencies to amplify outside voices through retweeting no longer hold. The progressive community receives a large number of retweets from other communities in the network, which seek to ally themselves with progressive accounts by retweeting them. But this alliance is not necessarily reciprocal: while almost every other cluster in the network, except for the members of the hard-right cluster, retweets progressive accounts, the progressive community largely fails to return the favour and instead prefers to retweet its own members. The hard-right cluster, meanwhile, is even more isolated: no cluster within the Australian Twittersphere retweets its posts extensively, nor do its members retweet posts from other clusters.

These retweeting behaviours show that the interaction of discourse participants with the affordances of the platform constitutes a strategic discursive action. Each retweet represents a strategic choice, resulting from a decision- and meaning-making process that must consider whom to give visibility to, what to amplify, and whom to form an alliance with. The emergence of the different clusters in the retweet network, therefore, does not occur simply and straightforwardly as a result of particular platform design choices or algorithmically determined information flows. Rather, it is mainly due to the strategic discursification of the affordances of Twitter by its users: that is, it results from the intersection of platform designs and affordances with the individual and collective agency of users in adopting and adapting these technosocial frameworks for their own discursive purposes.

From this perspective, the patterns observed in the analysis of retweeting behaviours become especially interesting. Retweet functionality is explicitly designed to share and thus amplify the visibility of existing posts on the platform. Further, however, this also means that implicit in its design is the fact that retweeting will be more useful *between* than *within* the discursive communities that exist on the platform (cf. Bruns & Moe, 2014): if users are aware that, especially through their follower/followee relationship choices, they are part of an already well-connected community of interest on the platform, then to retweet a post by a member of that community produces little added visibility or amplification, since they can assume that other members of the community will already have seen the post in their own Twitter feeds. Conversely, the utility of retweeting is considerably greater for posts that originate from accounts that users do not consider to be part of their home community: by retweeting such posts from the outside, they make them available, highlight, and endorse them to members of that home community, thereby introducing new and previously potentially unknown information to the group (and possibly also increasing the retweeting user's status within their own community if this increases their perception as a source of valuable information).

On balance, then, it should be expected that retweet patterns in any community will always be more outward-focussed (not least also in comparison to @mention patterns: conversations via @mentions can be expected to occur more predominantly within rather than across communities). This expectation is met by most of the communities observed in the present retweet network, with the notable exception of the two most explicitly ideological groupings: these are either highly inward-focussed, with members mainly retweeting each other (in the case of the hard right), or at best display a balanced retweeting behaviour that does provide some amplification to outside accounts via retweeting, but directs that favour mostly to fellow travellers in the international Twittersphere, rather than to other Australian accounts outside its own community. For these highly politicised groups, then, retweeting primarily appears to be a tool for increasing the volume of their own voices, rather than a mechanism for facilitating their engagement and alliance with other discursive communities.

Perhaps in part as a result of this tendency not to acknowledge other, potentially politically aligned, communities within the Australian Twittersphere, the staunchly conservative side of the debate thus consists of only one discursive cluster that is unified in its support for and framing of the country's current immigration policies. The situation on the progressive side is more complex, however: here, the largest and most overtly political cluster exists alongside a number of more thematically specific, smaller communities that each frame the immigration debate from distinct and different perspectives but are aligned in their opposition to the current policy regime. This imbalance means that the larger, more generic progressive politics cluster exerts a certain hegemonic power, which also makes a discursive alliance with its community attractive for the smaller groups: even in spite of their potential disagreements on specific aspects in the immigration debate, they therefore engage with the larger cluster in

agonistic discourse rather than antagonistic struggle. Such engagement remains unequal, however, as the retweet patterns between these groups show: while the smaller groups demonstrate their willingness to suspend differences and form alliances by retweeting the content posted within the dominant progressive community, that community does not depend on such alliances to the same extent and therefore fails to reciprocate by retweeting the smaller groups' posts with comparable enthusiasm; its hegemonic position amongst the network of progressive communities remains secure without such efforts at further agonistic alliance-building. In turn, however, this uneven alliance of progressive forces is firmly united in its antagonism towards the hard-right community in the Australian Twittersphere, and barely even acknowledges its existence through direct engagement even though it is clearly aware of the opposing side in this debate; this demonstrates the deep and thus far unresolvable polarisation of Australian public debate on the issue of immigration.

DISCUSSION

The polarisation currently observed in various online settings is not simply a technological artefact: the communicative affordances offered by Twitter certainly provide the space for both antagonistic polarisation and agonistic alliance-building, as this chapter has shown. Rather, it is a social, human issue, caused mainly by the strategic discursive choices that participants in online discourse make at an individual and communal level, and expressed in part in how they discursify the affordances of any given platform. To be clear: this argument does not discount the role of platform algorithms in recommending discursively resonant content to users, and in thereby promoting certain discursive choices available to users over other directions they could take, but it would be overly simplistic to shift from acknowledging that role as a contributor to polarising tendencies to placing the blame for such tendencies squarely or even solely on technological factors.

Instead, it is evident that different communities do in fact come together to form discursive alliances, at least temporarily and in the context of specific events and issues, as a result of their strategic interactions with platform affordances. Our analysis of the information flows among and within the communities in the Australian Twittersphere that addressed the country's immigration policy shows that the members of these communities are indeed aware of the presence of other voices and perspectives, and show a level of awareness of the themes, topics, and arguments presented by other groups involved in the conversation. They do not exist in algorithmically created echo chambers or filter bubbles that prevent them from developing any awareness of converging or diverging views outside of their immediate community; yet they may actively choose to refrain from engaging with such groups in order to maintain an antagonistic stance, as the progressive and hard-right groups in this case study were observed to do; Dehghan (2020) describes this as a strategy of "active passivity". However, if there is some level of discursive resonance, alliances can and do form. Further, depending on the hegemonic position of a community within the platform's broader communicative space, such alliances may turn out to be uneven, with less powerful groups seeking to join forces with the dominant community, but not the other way around.

These observations demonstrate the potential inherent in applying an agonistic model of democratic deliberation to the discourses observable on social media. The affordances of platforms, and their technological designs—with all their flaws and biases—still allow for the formation of larger alliances of users with similar discursive positions. Agonism, however, does require a large degree of effort. If the communicative polarisation of discourses on social media platforms is to be eliminated, or at least

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mitigated, the communities of users that exist on such platforms will need to engage with the antagonistic ‘other’, however different those opposing groups may be. A strategy of avoidance, elimination, or silence—Dehghan’s “active passivity”—might help, up to a certain point, in cementing one’s own in-group identity, but eventually also deepens polarisation. In the Australian example, for instance, the bitter debate about the country’s immigration policy will not resolve itself if the two antagonistic sides in the debate simply continue to ignore and talk past each other’s positions.

Similarly, external interventions such as the modification of platform algorithms in order to expose users to the discourse of the other might at first appear useful, but are likely to backfire if they are implemented too simplistically and heavy-handedly: if users are unwillingly exposed to a dissonant discourse, they are likely to exercise the strategic choice not to interact with it, silence it, block it, or simply ignore it. In a more extreme scenario, already dissatisfied communities might even choose to, or be forced to, move to other platforms; this has been the tendency, at least amongst some members of the hyperpartisan right of US and international politics, that drove the temporary popularity of minor alternative social media platforms such as Gab or Parler, and the growth of ‘dark web’ spaces for even more extreme political groups.

Some argue that deplatforming strategies—temporarily or permanently banning users from a platform—can work (Rogers, 2020), and will indeed reduce the reach and visibility of certain problematic users, groups, and discourses. Yet this approaches the problem with the logic of mainstream social media platforms, which assesses the visibility and impact of users and discourses predominantly through a quantitative lens: the more retweets, shares, followers, likes, and comments an account has amassed, the more influence it is assumed to have. However, in the context of polarisation, depth is as important as breadth: it is true that deplatforming, or forcing problematic users to migrate to other spaces, deprives them of a more extensive reach in mainstream social media spaces, but it may at the same time lead to them accumulating a smaller, yet much more radical and extremist fanbase elsewhere. This could produce a real, and far more dangerous, echo chamber, where different hyperpartisan platforms cater for ideologically pure populations: some for the ‘lefties’ and ‘normies’, some for the ‘right-wingers’ and ‘alt-right’.

Although mainstream spaces will continue to attract the largest and most diverse userbases, and thus provide an opportunity for agonistic and antagonistic engagement across ideological lines, these smaller and much more dedicated, often largely unmoderated communities of ideologically united users therefore present a significant danger to mainstream society as they may promote further radicalisation, further polarisation, and further extremism. Some such spaces have already risen to substantial popularity: not least as a result of the considerable political antagonism of recent years, platforms such as Parler, Gab, and 4Chan have seen notable increases in their number of users. For many such users, being banned or blocked on Twitter or Facebook is in itself a marker of righteousness: they gain their social capital by referring to the fact that they are there because the mainstream platforms took away their accounts. In other words, they argue that they were silenced, so they must have spoken the truth. And on these platforms, amongst like-minded hyperpartisans, nobody is likely to disagree with that view.

At most, the deplatforming of such extremists, and their departure to dedicated, minor, hyperpartisan social media platforms where their ideologies continue to fester undisturbed, can therefore only ever constitute a temporary solution in the battle against the further polarisation and dysfunction of societal discourse. Polarisation cannot be reversed by simply excising more and more of the community from the mainstream; taking to its logical conclusion, this trajectory would only lead to the disappearance of mainstream discourse altogether, and the fragmentation of society into a myriad of individual groups

and communities, each on their own bespoke platforms, which no longer interact with each other in any meaningful way.

Some critics may claim that this irreversible fragmentation of society is already underway, and that irreconcilable polarisation and antagonism is an inevitable outcome of the decline of the Habermasian public sphere and its replacement by a multitude of publics, yet as the pluralistic model of deliberation proposed by Laclau and Mouffe suggests, and as this chapter has demonstrated, constructive agonism and the formation of discursive alliances between agonistic adversaries are also a common feature even of highly polarised debates. Such alliances form an at least temporary bridge between different groups, communities, and publics, and hold the potential for the development of longer-term cooperation even between partners whose views on many issues diverge—and the analysis in this chapter shows that the technosocial features and affordances provided by social media platforms do not inherently privilege antagonistic over agonistic engagement, or vice versa.

Instead, then, it is the choice of social media users themselves whether they want to contribute to polarisation and fragmentation—by actively antagonising their opponents, or simply by choosing to ignore and exclude them—or whether they want to engage them as agonistic adversaries rather than outright enemies. Admittedly, as noted, this requires much additional energy and commitment especially from those who are prepared to take the first steps towards their enemies, and will be considerably more difficult in the context of some topics and issues than others—but it will be crucial in any attempts to reverse the severe polarisation that now threatens many political systems. But to take those first steps, then, does not require better algorithms or other technological solutions; rather, it needs better strategies for turning antagonists into agonists.

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Chapter 5

Polarization and Platformization of News in Italian Journalism: The Coverage of Migrant Worker Regularization

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ABSTRACT

Integration between digital platforms and news organizations has produced a substantial platformization of news. This phenomenon has been accompanied by a growing political polarization of journalistic content, exacerbated in Italy by the high level of partisanship that traditionally characterizes the national media. This chapter outlines one part of a wider study on the debate about the regularization of migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study, based on mixed methods and a two-level analytical approach, considers articles and posts published on Facebook by 12 different news providers (top-down) along with users' comments on this content (bottom-up). The authors here present the investigation into the coverage of migrant worker regularization by discussing the findings of the evaluative assertion and news frame analyses carried out on the selected articles and posts. Using this multidimensional approach, the study highlights the persistent nature of polarization within a highly fragmented public sphere.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8057-8.ch005

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents an investigation into the news coverage of the political controversy in Italy that followed the regularization of migrant workers, mainly employed in the agricultural sector. The controversy related to one of the most sensitive and polarizing issues in Italian politics: immigration. In recent years, this has dominated Italy's media and political agenda, on account of the country's high exposure to migration flows in the central Mediterranean (De Blasio, 2020; Musarò & Parmiggiani, 2014; Pogliano, 2020).

The migrant regularization controversy was triggered by measures introduced by Giuseppe Conte's second government and arose during the first phase of the COVID-19 emergency, which heightened feelings within the debate. Although the public health emergency might have been expected to increase sympathy and unity amongst politicians and the media, the controversy instead intensified political divisions, with highly provocative news coverage and the emergence of 'memory-based' content accelerating the polarization dynamic.

The polarization seen at the time was intensified by news organizations' embrace of digital and social media, which has caused a platformization of news. This research thus comprises a broad investigation of the Italian media, focusing on both the polarizing trend that has distinguished it for years (Mancini, 2013) and the novel processes of news platformization. These processes seem to have further entrenched political divisions within a public sphere that is increasingly hostile and fragmented (Schlesinger, 2020; Sorice, 2020b).

NEWS MEDIA BETWEEN PLATFORMS AND POLARIZATION

While some common criteria can be identified in the content choices of news organizations (Gans, 1979; Harcup & O'Neill, 2016), the spread of digital media and, in particular, social media, has fundamentally changed journalistic practices and the speed of news production. The news industry has been forced to rethink editorial activities, including the ways in which the success or visibility of an article is measured. In recent years, the analysis of metrics (i.e., quantitative data on different aspects of audience behaviour) has become a valuable tool for news providers in several countries (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Nelson & Tandoc, 2019), a phenomenon also strongly influenced by substantial changes in the business model of news organizations.

Central to the debate about the current transformation of journalism is the impact of digital platforms on the news industry. Since the beginning of the 21st century, most news organizations have created social media accounts and pages, often 'making them part of the news experience' (Al Rawi, 2016, p. 706) by integrating them with their main websites. The shift of readers towards social media has forced newspapers to look for new business models and identify editorial strategies to maximize the use of digital platforms. The platforms, in turn, have presented themselves as an opportunity for news organizations to reach potential new audiences and generate extra revenue (Meese & Hurcombe, 2020; Napoli & Caplan, 2017). Indeed, platforms like Facebook and Twitter have increased the engagement resources available to newspapers, thereby playing a crucial role 'in connecting news outlets with increasingly social and participatory online audiences' (García-Perdomo et al., 2018, p. 1180).

An initial element of the transformation of journalism therefore coincided with a shift in how its relationship with audiences was managed and understood (Van Dijck, 2013). To analyse the scope of the

new interaction dynamics, it is necessary to understand that social media platforms do not merely enable a different and wider distribution of the content produced by newspapers; they also offer new communicative opportunities and redefine the practices of a multiplicity of connected actors (Paulussen, 2017). The possibilities offered by these platforms for audiences to react to, comment on and share news have changed the way in which journalistic narratives develop, helping to generate ‘affective news streams as news collaboratively constructed out of subjective experience, opinion and emotion, all sustained by and sustaining ambient news environments’ (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 32).

At the same time, one of the main characteristics of platform-based environments – that of being governed by algorithms – has had a decisive influence on the fundamental practices of journalistic work, which is increasingly oriented towards indexing and maximizing the visibility of the content produced. In fact, the visibility of news content depends both on automated mechanisms of selection and control and on the social relations that are activated on the new platforms. In the last decade or so, the increasing dependence of news outlets on platforms has forced them to confront intensified economic competition in a complex information environment, leading them to move towards ‘networked strategies to profit from platform networked effects’ (Nieborg et al., 2019, p. 91).

News organizations have therefore been driven to optimize and diversify their editorial strategies in order to attract new readers and increase advertising revenue. As content visibility on social media is highly dependent on audience activation and the number of interactions received by each article, the criteria underlying the selection and packaging of news have been progressively transformed, adhering to the logic of news feed algorithms (Lischka, 2021). Therefore, news journalism has become increasingly focused on publishing more and faster, and on attracting the ‘participatory’¹ behaviour of readers.

In contrast to the traditional publishing model, ‘click-based modes of evaluation’ (Christin, 2020) were built on the idea of journalism as an act of communication with readers: a piece of news can be quickly disseminated in a network if many users share it (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2018, p. 3). The increasing role that platforms are assuming in the editorial world thus poses fundamental questions about the guiding criteria of the journalistic profession. While platforms are owned by large corporations and conglomerates (‘big tech’), characterised primarily by business interests, journalistic activity has tried to hold together both the economic sustainability of its product and its public service ‘mission’ – or, at least, its role in ensuring a degree of transparency in representative democracies. This balance between the needs of a commercial enterprise and those of the community has always been a challenge for news media, with its role as the ‘watchdog’ of democracy having to contend with harsh economic reality.

The process of ‘news platformization’ (Van Dijck et al., 2018) can thus be understood in terms of the increasing editorial intermediation carried out by platforms. This has led to a redefinition of professional journalistic values and called into question the role that news media plays in democratic societies. It has also transformed production practices and timescales, and even the mechanisms of news validation and verification. Among the most critical aspects that needs to be highlighted in this respect is the acceleration of the news cycle and the concerns this has raised about ‘the erosion of the discipline of verification, and by implication, the professional legitimacy of journalism’ (Hermida, 2012, p. 661).

The speeding up of news production has caused the growth of a phenomenon, that of distortion, which has always been inherent in journalism and which has been widely studied as a structural feature of the transformation of the profession, including in the pre-internet era (Faustini, 1995; Schudson, 1996). In a news environment governed by algorithmic logics, information distortions are further amplified and represent an area of particular interest for our study. The combination of time pressures and ‘click-bait’ news criteria creates favourable conditions for the circulation of misleading (Himma-Kadakas, 2017) or

deliberately biased content to attract readers' attention, as well as activating news engagement dynamics (Giglietto et al., 2019; 2020; Marino & Giglietto, 2021). Not infrequently, these forms are also linked to the use of outrageous rhetoric by news outlets in order to increase public attention (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014). The consequences of these strategies include not only the amplification of negative emotions (anger, disgust, contempt) among audiences (Gervais, 2015), but also the increase in polarization and hostility towards divergent positions (Anderson et al., 2014).

Another theoretical perspective of great interest in the contemporary debate is Herman and Chomsky's (1988) interpretation of the propaganda model. This model has been taken up in recent years - with appropriate revisions - in the analysis of the mechanisms of media influence and manipulation in the construction of political consensus and the steering of voter orientation. An effective reworking of Herman and Chomsky's model, applying it to the web and to digital ecosystems in general, has recently been proposed by Fuchs (2018), who moves from the indisputable idea that online attention has become a *commodity*, to the claim that the measurement of followership is itself an indicator of social success and political legitimacy. If we expand on Fuch's first point with other reflections – such as those relating to the role of elites in determining the dynamics of attention and visibility in communication ecosystems, sometimes supported by 'bots' or groups of subjects that lend themselves to coordinated and inauthentic behaviour – we find ourselves within the problematics that are also represented by the processes of information platformization.

Even the partial symmetry of results between social media and news media moves in the direction of a substantial confirmation of the propaganda model. In this regard, we can speak of manipulation of context and agenda, dramatically emphasized by the different forms of 'information disorder' (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), including: disinformation (i.e., information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country); misinformation (i.e., information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm); and malinformation (i.e., information that is based on reality and used to inflict harm on a person, organization or country). Our objective is to investigate in an empirical way these three forms, thus widening the spectrum of distortions to include more than just false and fabricated information.

These issues become even more problematic if we connect them to the more general transformation of the highly polarized (Davis, 2019) and fragmented public sphere (Schlesinger, 2020; Sorice, 2020b). Indeed, it is precisely the process of the platformization of contemporary societies (Jin, 2020; van Dijck, Poell & de Waal, 2018) that has led to a transformation of the spaces of public debate. The new centrality of platforms – including those that offer communicative and informational connectivity, such as social media – has fostered the emergence of phenomena such as 'information disorder' and brought back into public and academic debate 'traditional media studies concepts such as manipulation and influence' (De Blasio et al., 2020, p. 2).

In this very complex context, which we have only briefly described here, values such as journalistic independence and factual accuracy are called into question. These values are sometimes more ideal than substantive, and were already being challenged before the proliferation of digital platforms. However, considering the pressures typical of a platformized ecosystem, the traditional principles of journalism as understood within the profession, such as the emphasis on facts and impartiality (Waisbord, 2018), are now clearly in crisis.

For the purposes of this study, it is interesting to empirically investigate how the elements that primarily concern the accuracy and reliability of news present themselves in a specific context such as Italy, where journalistic distortions could have an even greater impact given the low level of trust in public

information and the high partisanship of news organizations (Newman et al., 2020). Factors such as these may ultimately contribute to the erosion of the information pact between citizens and news outlets in moments of deep social uncertainty, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study aims to make a further contribution to the debate about journalism during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lewis, 2020). Beyond the systematic dissemination of manipulated and false content by extremist and denialist groups (Marwick & Lewis, 2017), we believe that the responsibilities of the most authoritative actors in the information ecosystem, namely news media, must be considered. Although the number of studies on journalism and misinformation has grown in recent years (Tsfati et al., 2020), there are still few scholarly reflections on the role of major news outlets in worsening information distortions, and on how this affects their audiences and the wider public sphere. As such, this study aims to empirically investigate how major Italian news media have contributed to a vicious circle of information distortions during the COVID-19 emergency.

By monitoring the news coverage of the pandemic in Italy, we engaged with many divisive issues in the national debate, including immigration (Binotto et al., 2016) and the vaccination plan (Lovari et al., 2020). We did this to understand how national news media exacerbated polarization through the dissemination of biased or manipulated content. Our hypothesis is that the spreading of news through Facebook and the phenomenon of ‘news engagement’ (Giglietto et al., 2020) have contributed to an increase in the polarization that has traditionally characterized Italian news media.

Aware of the fact that the increase in disinformation during the first phase of the COVID-19 emergency (Agcom, 2020) can be attributed to multiple factors, we considered it appropriate to understand the role played by the most influential news outlets in this context and their use of social media (Al-Rawi, 2016; Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2018). We therefore investigated the modalities by which news items were developed on Facebook, using primarily a frame analysis on the sample of articles collected. We monitored the Facebook pages of the main Italian news outlets for four months (from 9 February to 9 June 2020, encompassing the entire period of the first national lockdown) and collected data on several news stories related to the COVID-19 crisis. These ranged from health-related stories, about matters such as the funding of vaccine trials by Bill Gates and the controversy over 5G technology, to stories about social issues, such as discrimination against Chinese people and the regularization of migrant workers.

This chapter focuses specifically on news articles and posts concerning the measure to regularize the status of undocumented migrants, as set out in the so-called ‘Relaunch Decree’ (Decree-Law No. 34/2020). Approved by the Council of Ministers in May 2020, this measure was intended to address the crisis triggered by the pandemic in economic sectors such as agriculture and care for dependent persons, which have a largely number of foreign workers. The debate on regularization caused disagreements within the parties of the then centre-left majority (Pd and Italia Viva against M5S²) about technical aspects of the measure. It also attracted fierce criticism from the centre-right opposition (especially its most radical wing, represented by the Lega and Fratelli d’Italia³), which outright rejected the provision and launched harsh attacks against members of the executive. This political dispute, which came at a critical time in the COVID-19 emergency, exacerbated the stark polarization that characterizes the immigration debate in Italy, which mainly stems from the country’s high exposure to migratory flows in the Mediterranean. Well before the pandemic, during the 2018 general election campaign, hostile and

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sectarian rhetoric on migrant-related issues had already reached worrying levels (Amnesty International Italia, 2018; Rega & Marchetti, 2021).

In this study, all the content published on the issue of the regularization of migrant workers by 12 Italian news outlets of different political orientations⁴ (*Corriere della Sera, Repubblica, Fanpage, Il Fatto Quotidiano, La Stampa, Il Giornale, La Verità, Libero, Il Messaggero, Sky Tg24, Ansa, TgCom24*) were taken into account. Overall, the dataset consisted of 202 posts, 184 articles and 1,941 comments manually collected⁵. Given the salience of the regularization issue in the Italian news agenda during the second phase of the COVID-19 crisis, we considered how it had been covered by the 12 news outlets and the way in which their individual coverage differed.

The use of manipulated frames and information distortions was considered as a decisive factor in increasing the polarization of the grassroots debate on migrant worker regularization. In support of our hypothesis, we noted that users' comments contained widespread and generalized forms of hostility, such as incivility, hate speech and populist rhetoric against specific target groups (e.g., migrants, women and institutional figures). We reflected on how different forms of distortion or manipulation by the news media, often very subtle and sophisticated, had encouraged such negative grassroots reactions.

Based on a mixed methods approach, this study firstly took into account news outlets' posts and articles in order to analyse the journalistic discourse on migrant workers regularization, detecting any kind of information distortion and manipulation in the content published by the news providers on Facebook (*top-down approach*). Secondly, the ten most popular user comments under each post (*bottom-up approach*) were considered in order to assess the association between hostile comments and manipulated and distorted news frames. The idea behind this approach is that a double level of analysis (posts and articles published by news outlets along with user comments) better reveals the ways in which news providers try to create a sort of communicative complicity with users. In other words, this analytical approach enables us to identify the impact on readers of certain headlines, language choices, metaphors, phrases and effects.

Previous studies have sometimes underestimated a very important issue that accompanies the dissemination of false information; that is, the various forms of distortion of the news. These are often subtle and indirect, and can hardly be identified only through an analysis dedicated exclusively to the headline of an article or post. We have therefore developed two different analysis sheets to investigate, respectively, the two levels of investigation.

With regard to the first level of analysis, concerning posts and articles from news outlets, we recorded elements such as the title of the Facebook post, the title of the article on the relevant news outlet's website, the incipit (i.e., the first few words) of the Facebook post, the relevance of the image with respect to the text, the tone of the content (i.e., positive, neutral or negative) and the possible presence of a specific form of information distortion (i.e., disinformation, misinformation or malinformation).

In the presence of a negative tone, we identified the target person or group from among the following options: scientific or economic elites; national or supranational institutions; politicians/party members; the media/journalists; migrants; NGOs; the Pope; poor people/benefit recipients; others. We also noted the main theme(s) of the attack (discrimination based on race, gender or economic status; delegitimization of politics; the media; science; criminalization of solidarity) and the type of discourse (populist rhetoric; uncivil or sarcastic discourse; innuendo; conspiracy theories). As for the second level of investigation, concerning users' comments, we followed the same modalities used for news items and recorded the targets and themes of attacks, along with the types of discourse.

Following this initial step, we conducted an in-depth investigation on the first level of analysis by performing a frame analysis on the entire sample of articles collected (N=184). The concept of frame has been empirically applied in many different ways in the social sciences, and communication science research is indebted to social science techniques (de Vreese, 2005, p. 53). As far as the study of journalistic and media representations are concerned, frame analysis can be defined as a theoretical and methodological tool for the analysis of the news construction process (*framing*); that is, the process through which media professionals bring order to events, sequence them, give them a meaning, identify a guideline and finally make them news (Barisione, 2009, p. 31). Thus, framing as a process of discursive construction of a theme or issue (de Vreese, 2005) leads us to consider individual news items in a broader sense-making perspective, revolving around ‘a central organizing idea, or frame, for making sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at issue’ (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 3).

To empirically analyze the news frames, we selected some of the main framing devices identified in the literature – including metaphors, examples, catch phrases, depictions and visual images (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Van Gorp, 2005) – in order to identify which one had been most used by the news outlets in their coverage of the regularization debate and what differences there were between the different news providers. Furthermore, we tried to trace ‘the presence or absence of certain key-words, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts and judgements’ (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

An additional level of investigation then led to the selection of articles concerning three specific news stories on the most prominent public actors in the regularization debate (N=27), including:

- the Minister of Agriculture at the time, Teresa Bellanova, who first promoted the regularization measure and who received violent political and gender-based attacks (10 articles)
- the leader of the right-wing opposition, Matteo Salvini, whose strong criticisms of regularization were widely reported by the media, adopting mostly distorted frames (12 articles)
- Pope Francis, who was the target of hostile attacks on account of his attitude of solidarity towards immigrants (5 articles)

We carried out this part of the research using a particular type of content analysis, the Evaluative Assertion Analysis (EAA), which represents an important step beyond the traditional classification of Janis (1949) and provides a powerful tool for the analysis of political communication (De Blasio et al., 2017). EAA is based upon the idea that language is never neutral and for this reason, it always produces a possible interpretation (or more than one) of the source’s attitude. Starting from this idea, it becomes possible to assess the position, and/or attitude, of the author of the text under analysis. Usually, these evaluation modes are binary (i.e., favourable/opposite, likes/dislikes, positive/negative, to be shared/to be rejected, etc.) Although the dichotomous assessment produces an inevitable reduction in complexity, it still allows us to obtain clearly interpretable classifications and to identify the elements that define the attitudes present in our selection of texts. We thus proceeded, exactly as in other studies (De Blasio & Sorice, 2018; Pauwels, 2014), to reduce the complexity of the evaluation assertions and to identify the components of every assertion (the semantic differential). We thereby produced a first measurement that could be used in further studies, allowing for a more analytical and potentially replicable evaluation index.

FINDINGS

Our analysis of the selected articles and posts shows that the centre-right newspapers (*il Giornale* and *Libero*) give prominence to Matteo Salvini's positions on the regularization of migrant workers. While openly supporting the positions of the leader of the League, these outlets use a respectful tone and make extensive use of inverted commas to report his statements. Salvini plays an active role in the narrative, as evidenced by a wide range of words indicating his power and dominance ('thunder', 'affirm', 'declare', 'announce', 'attack', 'threaten'). More generally, *Il Giornale* shows a positive attitude towards the position taken by the centre-right parties against the measure (e.g., 'dismantle the part concerning the amnesty'; 'put the government in difficulty'). The main target in the narrative of *Libero* and *Il Giornale* about Salvini's offensive against the provision is the former Minister of Agriculture Teresa Bellanova. *Libero* often resorts to macho rhetoric that patronises her displays of emotion ('The tears of Teresa Bellanova for the "sanatoria" of immigrants also trigger Matteo Salvini, who goes on the attack without making discounts'), while the right-wing news media also disparaged her alleged elitist attitude ('she prefers the leftist and very snobbish lounge of Otto e mezzo⁶'). *Il Giornale* harshly criticized the government's attitude towards regularization, attempting to expose the 'sanatoria' as a dangerous fallacy ('the majority insists on flaunting it as mere regularization'; 'a *sanatoria* for a vast number of migrants'). Additionally, *Il Giornale* decries the inability of some of the most sceptical members of the majority (M5S) to oppose the adoption of the measure ('bending to "diktat renziani?"').

The news outlets that can be placed on the centre-left of the ideological divide contain discursive modes with some critical elements. The perspective is mostly descriptive and there is recourse to quotations, even in reports about the political right. *Fanpage*, for example, has an overall neutral position. In its description of a press conference by Teresa Bellanova, it sometimes uses an emotional register that could be considered gendered ('Tears', 'Visibly moved', 'Teresa Bellanova was moved'). However, it highlights the positive action of the former Minister in the fight against exploitation ('she had suggested regularizing migrant workers in the primary sector'; 'fight against "caporalato"⁸ and exploitation in which many migrants fall'; 'regularize migrants without residence permits who work in the fields'). *La Repubblica* also highlights Bellanova's proactive role in regularization ('Bellanova explains the situation point by point, sector by sector, and what needs to be done'; 'It is also with the EU that the minister strikes a blow'), while the *Corriere della Sera* highlights what could be seen as her more militant aspects ('Activist against illegal work'). *Ansa* and *Sky Tg24* adopt a mostly descriptive perspective and a neutral tone, resorting however on several occasions to the term 'sanatoria' instead of regularization.

In general, it can be said that the news media of the centre-left area give Bellanova the same amount of attention as Salvini and avoid harsh criticism. The emotion of the former Minister is described without adopting ironic tones and few links are made with the case of the former Minister of Labour Elsa Fornero, who cried when presenting pension changes in 2011⁹. The centre-right newspapers, on the other hand, focus precisely on Bellanova's tears, constantly producing comparisons with Fornero and even reproducing Matteo Salvini's term 'Fornero 2'. In other words, the centre-right newspapers attempt to delegitimize their ideological opponent in the government, through an ironic register and questions about competence. Bellanova's tears are used both to imply a false or duplicitous attitude (as in 'crocodile tears') and to identify a 'weakness' linked to gender stereotypes.

The figure of Pope Francis appears less present (or at least not in the foreground) than those of Matteo Salvini and Teresa Bellanova. The Bishop of Rome's support of the regularization of immigrants is reported only by a limited number of newspapers in our sample (*Il Giornale*, *La Verità*, *La Repubblica*,

La Stampa). The Pope's statements were strongly criticized by the right-wing newspapers (*Il Giornale* and *La Verità*), which highlighted the possible negative implications ('sea of controversy') of a statement in favour of rights for irregular migrants at a time of more 'important' issues, namely COVID-19. In the coverage by these right-wing newspapers, the use of a register of delegitimization towards the pontiff prevails. For example, they make recurrent use of expressions that recall the Pope's 'foreign' origins – 'Argentinean Pontiff', 'Former Archbishop of Buenos Aires', 'South American Pontiff' – instead of the expressions traditionally used to describe the Pope in Italian newspapers (Bishop of Rome, Holy Father, etc.). In this way, the personal attack on the Pope is itself an extension of the heated immigration debate, based on the classic polarizations of Italians versus foreigners and left versus right.

Il Giornale describes the Pope's speech on regularization as typical of a speech 'by a trade union leader rather than a spiritual guide', while *La Verità* uses an ironic register to ridicule the Pope's proactive attitude towards regularization ('To complete the circle, the small letter¹⁰ to the CISL'). A common trait in the coverage of the right-wing newspapers is a marked anti-solidarity language and a sort of 'negativization' concerning both the measure itself ('sanatoria' instead of 'regularization') and the subjects involved ('illegal immigrants' rather than 'irregular workers'). In this regard, the newspaper *La Verità* jokes about the alleged negative effects of the regularization measure supported by the Pope ('a large army of cheap workers to be exploited in accordance with the law'). In order to delegitimize the pastoral figure of Francis, the same newspaper systematically shifts the focus from regularization (always referred to it as an 'amnesty') to the issue of the celebration of Mass (suspended at the time for health reasons). Strategically exploiting this shift of focus, *La Verità* gives a glimpse - without ever mentioning it explicitly – of an 'internal' conflict within the Curia (the court and government of the Roman Catholic Church. At the same time, the newspaper makes clear reference to the Church's 'external' conflict with the political right on the return of religious services ('restarting with the rites could have favoured the right-wing parties: Francis has pulled the handbrake by inviting caution and respect for prohibitions'; 'the faithful should stay at home and watch the conferences organized by Bonino¹¹').

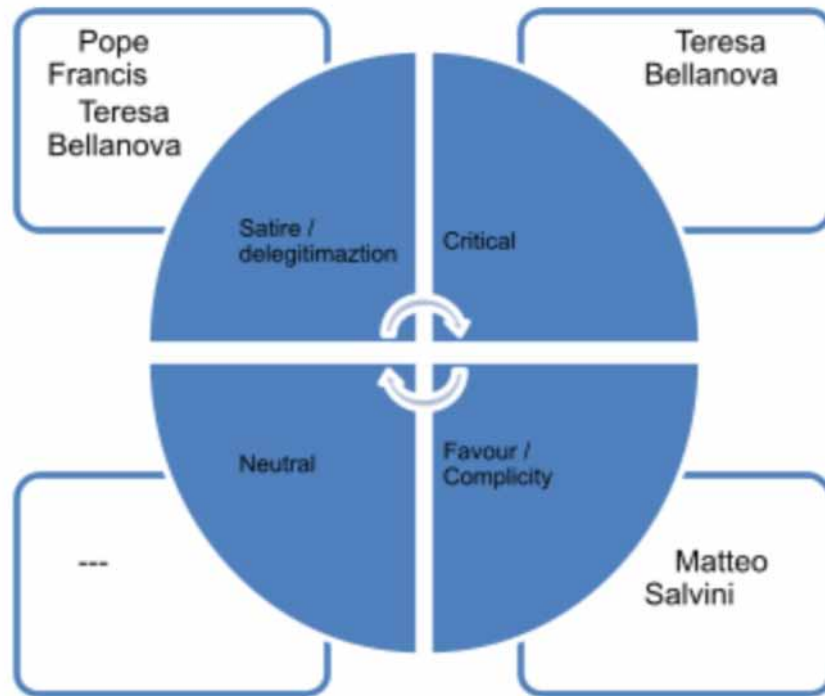
As for the centre-left newspapers (*la Repubblica* and *La Stampa*), the Pope's declarations are placed in the foreground and journalistic intermediation is minimal. A mostly descriptive perspective is adopted, with neutral tones and ample recourse to quotations or Vatican sources. Unlike the centre-right news outlets, *la Repubblica* and *La Stampa* thematize the Pope's speech within a framework of solidarity and workers' rights ('It is not the first time that Pope Francis has come to the defence of workers'; 'a clear appeal, let us work in favour of "dignity"').

Figures 1 and 2 show in graphic (and inevitably simplified) form the evaluative attitudes of the centre-right and centre-left news media. Perhaps the most interesting aspects are the 'absences'. In fact, in the sample under examination, the centre-right newspapers show a substantial absence of neutral tones in relation to the investigated topic, while those of the centre-left show the absence of satirical and/or delegitimizing tones. While this second trend may highlight an internalization of 'politically correct' language by some news outlets (especially those of the centre-left), it also clearly shows strong political polarization.

With regard to the analysis of news frames, specific characteristics can be highlighted which confirm the picture which also emerges from the analysis of the evaluative assertions in the selected articles and posts. Table 1 highlights the main findings in an analytical manner. Analyzing the 'framing devices' in Gamson and Modigliani's (1989) and Van Gorp's (2005) categorizations, we can identify four discourse themes:

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Figure 1. Prevailing attitude of centre-right news outlets in relation to the most frequently mentioned public actors

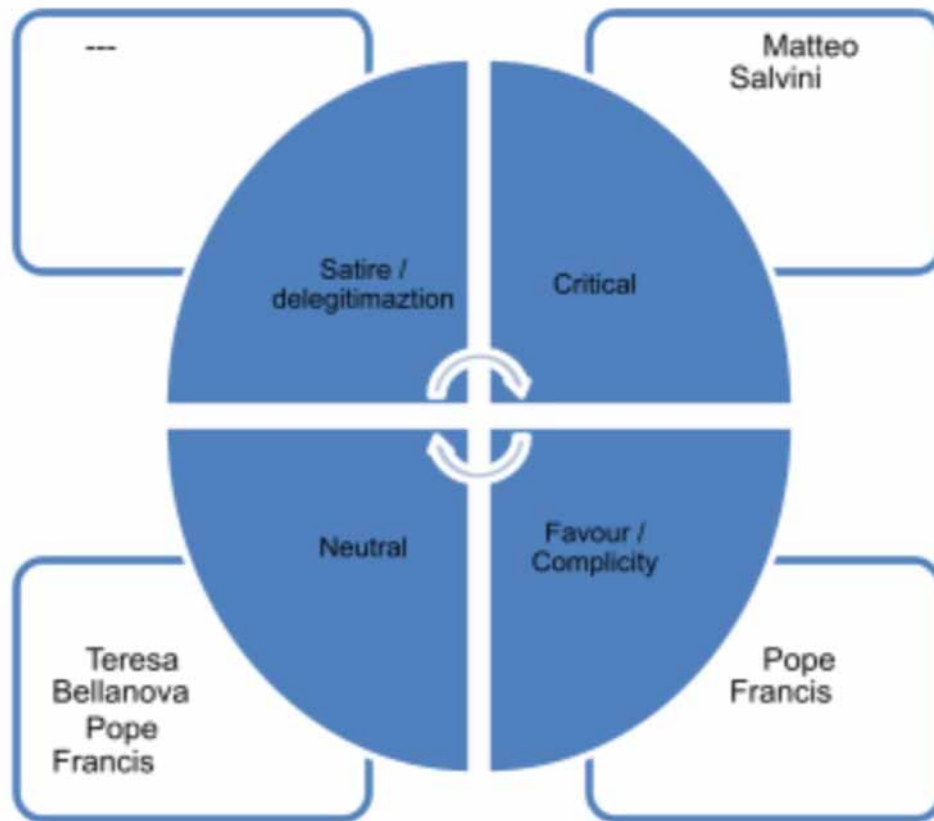


- 1) the regularization as an emergency measure in response to the COVID-19 crisis (73 articles)
- 2) the regularization as a polarizing controversy on migration (41 articles)
- 3) the discourse of political conflict (mostly exemplified by the clash between the Minister Bellanova and the leader of the League Matteo Salvini) (55 articles)
- 4) the broad and complex theme of solidarity and social rights (15 articles)

If the last theme is detectable only in a few of the articles analyzed, the other three dimensions comprise 169 articles, showing once again the ubiquitous presence of political polarization.

News frames are interpretative schemes in which news is framed; and it is through this process of framing that certain aspects of reality can be selected. They are presented by the news media in such a way as to suggest a particular definition of a problem, a causal interpretation or an evaluation. Within news frames there is raw information that takes on a specific meaning thanks to framing. Consider, in this regard, the linguistic battle between ‘sanatoria’ and ‘regularization’. The former suggests a clientelist operation and invites a condemnatory attitude, while the latter evokes legality and encourages a positive interpretation of the choices made by the executive. The news frames suggest interpretations of events, emphasizing certain aspects of the news while attenuating others, as clearly shown in Figure 3.

Figure 2. Prevailing attitude of centre-left news outlets in relation to the most frequently mentioned public actors



Framing effects, referring to the way topics are packaged in the news, are more complex than priming effects and agenda setting itself, since they induce inferences and associations about the selected information. Such inferences become part of what is made accessible by the framed message: a strong polarizing potential fosters polarizing dynamics. If political actors usually tend to privilege saturation mechanisms (functional to the manipulative logics underlying consensus building), polarization and oppositional reactions are very present in the dynamics of political mediatization.

It should not be forgotten that news frames have the capacity to suggest inferences and activate 'secondary' conceptual nodes; for instance, they can activate the memory of 'stories' (as in the case of the two female ministers' 'tears') and thus function as legitimizing procedures for judgement and learning practices. Lastly, in Figure 3, it is evident how the definition of the problem (the diagnostic frame) constitutes the activation mechanism about the issue of regularization. The different positions of the news media highlight the articulation of the prognostic process and make the underlying ideologies evident.

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Figure 3. News frames of the articles and posts under investigation

<i>Framing devices</i>	Regularisation as emergency	Regularisation as controversy	Political conflict	Solidarity
<i>Depictions/labels</i> (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989)	Agricultural workers, foreign workers, domestic workers, caregivers, migrants without a residence permit.	Irregular migrants, clandestine, Non-EU citizens, Africans, refugees.	Government members (mainly the Minister of Agriculture Teresa Bellanova) and opposition leaders (Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni).	Immigrant workers, exploited workers, discriminated people, Aboubakar Soumahoro (trade unionist), Pope Francis.
<i>Role of the actors</i> (Van Gorp, 2005)	Passive. Bureaucratized in the news coverage.	Passive. Marginalized in the news coverage.	Active. Prominent in the news coverage.	Active. Endorsed in the news coverage.
<i>Methaphors, catchphrases, exemplars</i> (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989)	"Marathon negotiating session" "Sound compromise" "Agreement on the regularisation" "Government finds agreement in the night"	"No to mass immigration" "The plan of invasion of migrants in the Decree Law" "Great amnesty for illegal migrants" "First permission, only after checks"	"Brawl grazed between Pd (Democratic Party) and M5S (Five Star Movement)" "Salvini versus Bellanova" "Domestic workers and migrants smash government"	"Human tide" "Breaking the chain of exploitation" "The strike of the discriminated" "Pope Francis in defense of workers"
<i>Visual images</i> (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989)	Pictures of foreign workers. Stock images of government members or opposition leaders.	Images of migrants (often decontextualized). Stock images of the Minister of Agriculture Bellanova.	Members of the government (Bellanova) and the opposition (Salvini). Stock images of workers and caregivers (to a minimum extent).	Agricultural workers in the fields. Workers on strike. Image of the Pope (to a minimum extent).
<i>Problem definition</i> (Van Gorp, 2005)	Regularisation as a procedure to ensure the functioning of the agricultural supply chain, dignity to foreign workers and counter undeclared work.	Regularisation as a controversial issue. Inadequate provision to provide the manpower needed for Covid-19 emergency. Negative effects of the measure (for instance, increase in migratory flows).	Regularisation as a political dispute between left-wing majority parties and right-wing opposition ones. Internal opposition to parties supporting the government (M5S vs PD and Italia Viva).	Regularisation as an emergency measure for market utility, not aimed at the protection of rights and against the exploitation of all irregular workers.
<i>Responsibility</i> (Van Gorp, 2005)	Government. Initiative of the Minister of Agriculture Teresa Bellanova. Criticism of the M5S (majority party) on the technical terms of regularisation.	Government. Initiative of the Minister of Agriculture Teresa Bellanova. Right-wing opposition parties harshly criticize the regularization and its eventual negative effects on migration. Needless measure to tackle the emergency according to farmers' representatives.	Government. Attack of the opposition parties against the government (in particular the leader of the League Salvini against the Minister of Agriculture Bellanova).	Government. Agricultural workers and trade unions reject the measure because it does not guarantee adequate and stable protection of rights, but only serves a temporary purpose.
<i>Items for each frame</i>	73 articles	41 articles	55 articles	15 articles

CONCLUSION

This study is part of a broader research project that aims to evaluate the existing relationships between incivility, information disorder and the mechanisms of polarization in Italian news media. The project starts from the consideration that we have now reached what has appropriately defined as the ‘fourth phase’ of political communication, in which – as Jay Blumler pointed out in 2013 – the level of the elites (basically *top-down*) and that of the masses tend to overlap. In this perspective, it is extraordinarily useful to adopt the analytical paradigm of crisis (Davis, 2019; Sorice, 2020b), considered as a structural and non-contingent element of contemporary societies and therefore of communicative ecosystems. In this framework, the strategies of communicative saturation, adopted by political actors, intersect with the mechanisms of polarization, as highlighted by the relationship between ‘traditional’ newspapers and social media. This double movement – saturation and polarisation – contributes to the fragmentation of an increasingly less-unified public sphere: a transformative process highlighted by several authors (De Blasio et al., 2020) and which has allowed many scholars to speak of the emergence of a transitional public sphere or post-public sphere (Schlesinger, 2020; Sorice, 2020b). In this respect, social media play an important role both as enforcers of the logic of news feed algorithms (Lischka, 2021) and as accelerators of the polarisation phenomenon.

It is within this framework that the analysis of the dynamics of information on sensitive and potentially divisive issues, such as those related to the processes of regularization of immigrant workers in a period of heightened crisis (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic), takes place. The picture that emerges can be summarized in the following trends:

- a) A highly polarizing narrative on the part of the information system, clearly accentuated in the synergy between news outlets and social media (in particular, Facebook).
- b) The logic of a double movement in which social media tend to empower both news credibility and polarization.
- c) The emergence of delegitimizing language, especially towards women involved in politics, with traits that sometimes highlight elements of more-or-less conscious ‘machismo’.
- d) The adoption by the newspapers of a specific positioning, which confirms the traditional partisanship of the Italian information system.
- e) The persistence of a potential welding between the logic of propaganda and new journalistic production routines.
- f) The development of a triadic relationship between citizens, the information system and politics that is increasingly complex and often difficult to understand in all its complexity (Sorrentino, 2009).
- g) The development, by traditional journals, of discursive modes that increasingly adhere to online platforms, confirming the phenomenon of information platformization – a process that is part of the more general affirmation of the ‘platform society’ and which accompanies the transformation of the public sphere.
- h) The emergence of the ‘saturation/polarisation’ double movement that accompanies the transformation of communication ecosystems and forces a rethinking of theories and approaches of political communication (Barisione, 2020; Davis, 2019; Morlino & Sorice, 2021).

In this scenario, a more accurate analysis of the news media and a critical revival of journalism studies appear necessary. The findings of our empirical research, in other words, invite a substantial rethink-

ing of journalism studies in the context of the transformations affecting contemporary democracies (Crouch, 2020), specifically the emergence of digital capitalism and the development of an increasingly platformed public debate.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Some authors have questioned the ability of platforms to generate effective forms of participation, criticising the 'techno-optimist' positions that were so prevalent in the first decade of the 21st cen-

tury. It is in this direction that those scholars who have preferred to distinguish between ‘access’ and ‘participation’ (Colombo, 2020; Sorice, 2020a), and those who have identified platforms as a speculative outcome of digital capitalism (Fuchs, 2020; 2021), have moved.

² *Pd, Partito Democratico* is the biggest centre-left political party. *Italia Viva* is a small political party born by a fracture in the Pd and led by the former Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi. *M5S, MoVimento Cinque Stelle* is the political party with the relative majority in the Italian Parliament (following the 2018 general election).

³ The *Lega* (formerly *Lega Nord*) is the political party led by Matteo Salvini, while *FdI (Fratelli d’Italia)* is a right-wing party. Both have both have ‘sovereignist’ and anti-immigration positions, albeit with different emphases.

⁴ The news media considered here present a broad spectrum of political positions. *Corriere della Sera*, the main national newspaper, holds a moderate-conservative position; *la Repubblica* has a liberal-left orientation; *Il Fatto Quotidiano* is an independent newspaper close to the 5 Star Movement; *La Stampa*, owned by the GEDI Group like *la Repubblica*, is a newspaper with positions close to the centre-left and with strong local roots (Turin and Piedmont); the same for *Il Messaggero* (Rome and Lazio), which has a centrist political line; *Il Giornale*, owned by the Berlusconi family, is close to the positions of the centre-right; *La Verità* and *Liberò* have a right-wing and anti-establishment orientation. Meanwhile, *TgCom24* (Mediaset) is close to centre-right parties and *Sky Tg24* is independent. *Fanpage* is an online-based outlet with progressive positions. Finally, *Ansa* is the main Italian press agency and has an impartial political orientation.

⁵ With reference to the data examined empirically, it should be clarified that the posts are the content posted by the news organizations on their Facebook pages, such as articles previews (with a cover picture and title and usually an incipit) as well as videos or photos; the articles are the journalistic pieces published by the news organizations on their websites and then shared on Facebook; and the comments are the users’ responses to the news media posts.

⁶ *Otto e mezzo* is a television programme of political information (which can be placed, generically, between the genres of *infotainment* and *politainment*) broadcast on the commercial generalist channel La7. On air since 2002, it has an average share in the 2019/2020 season of 7.56%.

⁷ ‘Renziani’ is a neologism indicating the followers of Matteo Renzi, the leader of *Italia Viva* and former Prime Minister.

⁸ ‘Caporalato’ (gangmaster system) is an expression (literally a system based on the control of the territory by ‘caporali’ (branches of criminal organizations) that suggests forms of ‘illegal hiring’ of workers, nowadays mostly immigrants. The phenomenon of ‘caporalato’ is more insidious for the irregular migrants because they are more difficult to protect through legal mechanisms (see Perrotta & Sacchetto, 2014).

⁹ In December 2011, explaining the pension reform that was born of complex economic constraints and that would cause much discontent, the then Minister Elsa Fornero was moved to tears during a press conference in which she presented the government’s measures. In an article published in the newspaper *La Stampa* in August 2020, Elsa Fornero, returning to the episode in which she was the protagonist nine years earlier, said: ‘My cry, after the pension reform, was a real emotion that marked me. It was a moment of weakness, but also of participation in everyone’s difficulties. Many understood it, others exploited it (...) ridiculing is part of a very misogynistic attitude in our politics.’

- ¹⁰ The diminutive ‘letterina’ (small letter) functions here as an element of mockery. The term refers to letters written by children (to Santa Claus, or the Italian ‘Befana’, and other popular mythical characters) asking for gifts. These letters are innocent and naive; attributing one to the Pope (who is also a head of state) delegitimizes his political role.
- ¹¹ Emma Bonino, leader at the time of the liberal +Europa party and former European Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Consumer Protection (1995-1999), is considered one of the historic leaders of the Radical Party and of the libertarian and civil rights battles in Italy. Considered fundamentally ‘anti-confessional’, the figure of Bonino is used here to suggest a cultural position that would be antithetical to traditional Catholicism.


Chapter 6

What Drives Selective Exposure to Political Information in Spain? Comparing Political Interest and Ideology

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ABSTRACT

Communication research underlines two types of selective exposure to the media: one guided by ideological-partisan affiliations and one guided by interest in politics. This work will compare both motivations in the consumption of political information through three media types (digital press, television, and radio) by Spanish citizens during the 2019 November General Election. Through multinomial logistic regressions applied to a representative post-electoral survey, results show that ideological-partisan orientations are the most important variables governing selective exposure, especially for the digital press and the radio. Besides confirming ideological selective exposure, the data highlight an important tendency towards selective avoidance of news media perceived as ideologically incongruent. For television, however, both socio-demographic trends and ideological orientations exhibit a similar explanatory weight, which suggests that political segmentation of the Spanish television market is still being deployed by communication groups, in comparison with the press and the radio.

INTRODUCTION

The perspective of selective exposure states that media consumption is determined by the preferences of the audience, which seeks to confirm or reinforce their opinions through media content. This idea-axis, which appeared in the early 1940s in communication research (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944), has been recovered in recent decades (Mutz, 2006; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Knobloch-

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8057-8.ch006

Westerwick, 2015) to explain the consumption of media messages by audiences in a media context characterized by a greater capacity for selection (Prior, 2007), by the growth of the Internet and social networks as a source of information (Van Aelst et al., 2017) and by customizing the information search (Valentino et al., 2009; Dylko et al., 2017).

In Spain, several studies have shown that the consumption of political information conforms to the argument of selective exposure oriented by ideological and political predispositions (Martín Llaguno & Berganza, 2001; Humanes, 2014, 2016), in accordance with the characteristics of the system of pluralist-polarized media (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). However, these previous works have not taken into account other variables - such as political interest - that can also explain selective exposure to political information (Skovsgaard et al., 2016).

Along these lines, the main objective of this chapter is to explore what factors explain selective exposure to political information in Spain, considering two types of variables: those related to selective exposure oriented by ideological and partisan predispositions, and those that are associated with selective exposure oriented by political interest. In addition, it is analyzed whether the explanatory potential of these two types of indicators varies across different types of media (digital newspapers, television channels and radio channels). To do this, the chapter relies on data from the post-election survey of the Spanish Sociological Research Center (CIS) on the general elections of November 10, 2019 in Spain, which includes several questions related to the consumption of political information during the electoral campaign.

THEREOTICAL BACKGROUND

Selective Exposure to Political Information

The selective exposure perspective holds that media consumption is determined by audience preferences, and that the audience seeks to confirm or reinforce its opinions through media content. This idea-axis, which appeared in the 1940s (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944), has been revisited over the past few decades (Mutz, 2006; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015) to explain the consumption of media messages by audiences in a high-choice media environment, characterized by greater selection capacity (Prior, 2007), the growth of the internet and social media as news sources (Van Aelst et al., 2017) and by the customization of the search for information (Valentino et al., 2009; Dylko et al., 2017).

Indeed, the hybridization of media practices (Chadwick, 2013) and the consolidation of high-choice media environments have sparked fears about fragmentation of online news audiences (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017), increasing political selective exposure (Bennett & Iyengar; 2008, Iyengar & Hahn, 2009), and the growth of news avoiders (Blekesaune et al., 2012; Ksiazek et al., 2020), that is, people who consume very little or no news, and who are basically heavy entertainment consumers.

The interest in selective exposure research has also grown given two phenomena associated with digitalization that have notably worried communication scholars for more than a decade: echo chambers (Sunstein, 2009), i.e. the balkanization of the digital public sphere in ideological niches where people basically expose to like-minded views, and filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011), that is, the communicative endogamy derived from algorithmic filtration in digital news consumption.

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Despite these initial fears, a decade of empirical research has shown that cross-cutting exposure is more habitual than it was expected in social media (Bruns, 2017; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016), and that incidental exposure to different types of online content helps people to be confronted with novel information that they would not have encountered offline (Barnidge & Peacock, 2019), and with more diverse news sources (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018).

Skovsgaard et al. have incorporated the concept of opportunity structures for selective exposure, which they define as “the availability of different media, media formats, media genres, and media content, and the ease with which citizens can select media and media content based on their personal preferences” (2016, p. 530) to explain the nature of selective exposure in different media systems. The increase in these opportunities to select media and contents based on individual preferences gives rise to two types of selective exposure: selective exposure guided by ideological orientations and selective exposure motivated by interest in politics (Skovsgaard et al., 2016). The media context will determine which of the two forms of consumption is dominant.

On the one hand, the majority of studies on consumption of political information, especially in the United States, point to the dominance of ideological selective exposure due to the recent consolidation of more politically biased journalism (Nechushtai, 2018), particularly in the most polarized individuals. For example, Stroud (2008) concludes in a study on the 2004 US electoral campaign that individual political predispositions predict consumption of radio discussions, cable TV and visits to websites. Iyengar and Hahn (2009) conducted an experiment in which they show news attributed to Fox News, CNN, BBC and NPR and demonstrate that ideological polarization between liberals and conservatives explains the selection of news on various topics. Stroud (2010) also found a close link between partisan selective exposure and political polarization. Rodríguez et al. (2017) conducted a longitudinal study using Pew Research Center data from 2000 to 2012 and found a sustained increase in partisan selective exposure in the United States. The same trend was confirmed around the 2016 presidential campaign for both Democrats and Republicans (Peterson et al., 2019).

On the other hand, selective exposure motivated by interest in politics implies that individuals with a high level of interest in political affairs consume more information regardless of whether it confirms their ideology or not (Boulianne, 2015; Dahlgren, 2019; Prior, 2007), while the so-called news avoiders increasingly concentrate on entertainment contents. This type of selective exposure leads to growing political inequality, since it allows individuals with low political interest to completely switch off from news, thereby reducing their political knowledge and political engagement in the long term, as shown by the influential work of Prior (2007). In contexts in which it is possible to consume information through media that are not partisan, that is, not clearly identified with political ideologies, -for example, in countries with strong public broadcasting systems that are independent from the government or media markets where political segmentation is still scarce-, this type of selective exposure could therefore be more prevalent and worrisome for democracy.

For instance, Strömbäck and Shehata (2010) argue that political interest better predicts information consumption through Swedish public radio and television than consumption through commercial television and print and digital newspapers. Strömbäck et al. (2013) confirmed this trend in their longitudinal study, which states that political interest increases its importance as a motivation for exposure both for general media use and for all types of media with the exception of tabloids. Dubois and Blank (2018) concluded in their study on Internet users in the United Kingdom that greater levels of political interest and a diverse news diet reduce the likelihood of “living” in an ideological bubble.

Although the literature on both types of selective exposure is abundant, very few studies of information consumption compare the predictive capacity of ideological preferences with interest in politics. In their work on selective exposure in Sweden, Strömbäck et al. (2016) showed that variables related to political interest are more important than ideological orientations for explaining exposure to televised interviews of leaders of the different parties. In a study that covered the period 1986-2015, Dahlgren (2019) demonstrated that interest in politics was a greater predictor of news consumption via Swedish public television than ideological-party orientation. These results, however, need to be interpreted in light of the Swedish media system, which falls under the democratic-corporate typology (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), and is characterized by lower levels of political parallelism and stronger and more independent public broadcasting systems in comparison with Southern European countries.

In the Spanish case, there has been evidence since the 1990s that audiences select their information sources based on their ideological and party predispositions (Gunther et al., 1999; Martín Llaguno & Berganza, 2001; Fraile & Meilán, 2012; Humanes, 2014; Valera-Ordaz, 2018). In addition, recent studies suggest media consumption effects on partisan polarization in Spanish electoral campaigns, so that restrictive media diets –that is, exposure to a very limited number of media outlets, often with highly partisan content– influence voting decisions and reduce tolerance for adverse content (Ramírez-Dueñas & Vinuesa-Tejero, 2021). Similarly, the consumption of political information through online and social media is more frequent among voters of new parties (Podemos, Vox and Citizens) than among those of traditional parties (Luengo & Fernández García, 2021).

At the same time, regarding interest in politics as an activator of information consumption, Meilán's longitudinal analysis (2010) states that it has a positive effect on political information consumption for all media types (print, radio, TV and internet). However, none of these studies have explored the importance of interest in politics as a motivation for selective exposure as compared to ideological predispositions in the Spanish case. Considering these data and starting from the argument that Spanish audiences follow a political information exposure pattern with a high level of partisanship that aligns with the characteristics of the pluralist-polarized media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 28), we expect the following:

Hypothesis One: Ideological-partisan orientations better explain selective exposure than interest in politics in Spain for all news media types.

Selective Exposure by Media Type

Media selection is not a behavior that should be considered in isolation. It rather takes place in a broader context (Garrett, 2013), and differences between media environments at the macro level have been theorized to influence individual exposure decisions (Clay et al., 2013; Esser et al., 2012), despite most research on selective exposure paying little or no attention to context. That is, various elements associated with the structure of opportunities (Skovsgaard et al., 2016) such as the media system (Goldman & Mutz, 2011), media market characteristics (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008) and the volume of the available offerings (Stroud, 2011) influence the individual decision and effective capacity of exposure to ideologically congruent news sources. In this regard, comparative studies have found that the more political parallelism in a given media environment, the more widespread is congenial news exposure.

In this sense, the intensity of selective exposure in function of ideological orientations also depends on the type of medium analyzed, as its scope is not uniform for all news media types (television, radio, print newspapers and internet). As such, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011) note that ideological segregation of audiences varies by media type and tends to be more pronounced in online media, while Fletcher et

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al. (2020) demonstrate how audience polarization -operationalized as the ideologically homogeneous composition of the audience of each media outlet- is significantly more pronounced in media systems with polarized pluralism (compared to democratic-corporate ones), and how selective exposure is slightly greater in the case of digital media compared to traditional ones.

According to the comparative study conducted by Goldman and Mutz (2011), which analyzed data from 11 countries, selective exposure based on ideological beliefs is more important in the case of newspapers. The theoretical explanation of these differences points us to the historic role of generalist commercial television as a catch-all medium in search of the largest audiences compared to the political origins of the press and its alignment with major political ideologies, especially in Europe (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). As such, television would be the most effective medium for guaranteeing exposure to a certain level of ideological diversity among the public compared to the press according to international research.

Along these same lines, it has been noted that the existence of strong public broadcasting systems subjected to criteria of impartiality and with autonomy from the governmental power in central and northern European countries limits the scope of selective exposure to television according to left and right-wing positions (Bos et al., 2016; Skovsgaard et al., 2016), providing some basic cross-cutting exposure and playing a nation-binding role. However, recent studies underscore the increasing polarization of the television market (Fletcher et al., 2020) such that partisanship has emerged as an increasingly important segmentation strategy in the North American cable television context (Stroud, 2008; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008) in order to confront the ferocious competition derived from the expansion of media offerings and the fragmentation of media consumption (Prior, 2007).

In Spain, some studies have identified selective exposure based on the audience's ideological-partisan orientations, particularly in the case of the written press, though few scholars have conducted comparisons of different types of media. For example, Martín Llaguno and Berganza (2001) analyzed the relationship between voting and the news media selected to follow political information during the 1996 General Elections in Navarra, and they made a clear connection in the cases of the national press (not the local press) and television. Their results show that voters from each party have a unique preference for specific newscasters and television channels. Gunther, Montero and Wert (1999) confirmed these results, noting that there was alignment between the party that one votes for and the preferred newspaper around the 1993 General Elections.

Along these same lines, Fraile and Meilán (2012) analyzed the ideological profile of audiences of the main Spanish media during three elections: the 1993 and 2004 General Elections and the 2009 European elections. Their findings reveal the politicization of audiences for all types of news media and their stability over time (including public media), which suggests that selective exposure for ideological reasons is a well-established phenomenon in Spain.

But the clearest empirical evidence of how the scope of selective exposure differences based on the media type in the case of Spain is offered by Humanes (2014), who uses data from the 2008 and 2011 electoral campaigns to demonstrate that newspaper, television channel and radio station selection is significantly associated with ideology, voting and proximity to a political party (2014, p. 788). Furthermore, Humanes compares the strength of this connection across media types and concludes that the print media is most strongly conditioned by selective exposure based on ideological orientations, which suggests that the audiovisual companies in Spain have not fully assumed political segmentation as a business strategy, at least in comparison with the Spanish national newspaper market.

Keeping in mind the empirical evidence accumulated regarding selective exposure across media systems, and given the historical segmentation of the Spanish newspaper market across the left-right divide as an example of the polarized pluralistic media system, we expect to find that exposure to the digital press is more influenced by the ideological-partisan orientations:

Hypothesis Two: Digital press consumption is more oriented by ideological-partisan motivations than radio and television consumption.

METHODS

Data Source

For this research study, we rely on the post-electoral survey conducted by the Spanish Center for Sociological Research (*Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas*) for the November 10, 2019 General Elections in Spain (study 3269), which involved a representative sample of 4,804 individuals and was conducted between November 29 and December 19, 2019. These data were used to conduct multinomial logistical regressions in order to explore which variables best predicted media consumption for three different news media types.

The Center for Sociological Research is a Spanish public research institute which designs its samples through a multi-stage stratified cluster sampling method, using municipalities as primary sampling units and random districts as secondary units. Respondents are finally selected by random routes within these districts, and by sex and age quotas. In other words, the sample is representative of the broad Spanish population.

Research Design

The above mentioned survey asked how respondents mainly accessed political information during the electoral campaign, considering each media type independently (printed press, digital press, television and radio). The survey included four spontaneous and open-ended questions aimed at registering the preferred outlet for each news media type (*What digital newspaper/print newspaper/television channel/radio station have you read/followed to stay informed about politics and the election?*). These questions were used to build three new dependent variables, one for each news media type.

First, we ruled out analyzing print newspapers because they generated very small sub-populations that were not adequate for performing regressions (Cea D'Ancona, 2004, p. 130). Respecting the existence of a sufficiently broad sample (15 cases for each independent variable), three dependent variables were generated—one for each media type—with the four most populated categories each. These four categories were selected considering the greatest audience frequency of each media. The twelve resulting media outlets belong to different media groups and are both privately and publicly owned. Likewise, they represent different political leaning according to their audience' ideological orientations (CIS, 2019), as presented in table 1.

The twelve media represent the main sources of media content consumption in Spain. Thus, the selected newspapers are among the top five by percentage of audience penetration among general information newspapers according to the Estudio General de Medios (EGM, 2020). The four radio stations account for 75.3% of the total share (EGM, 2020). Among the Spanish television networks, the four

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TV broadcasters studied had a 42.9% share in 2019, and Antena 3 and Telecinco were leaders for news programs (Barlovento, 2019: p. 48).

More broadly, it is worth mentioning that Spanish national newspapers have a strong focus on political information, while the radio and television markets are not so strongly news oriented. Still, most radio stations do offer news programs and popular morning shows on political information –from different ideological orientations-, while most television channels are rather oriented towards entertainment. The only exception in this regard is La Sexta, which offers a good deal of programs about news and politics.

Moreover, it is necessary to point out that in recent years one of the consolidated trends in the Spanish media landscape is the increasing distrust towards the media. This is shown by the 2018 Pew Research Center study, which shows that only 30% of Spaniards trust the media somewhat or a lot, compared to more than 60% of the Dutch, Germans or Swedes. Similar results are found in the Edelman trust barometers, in which a growing distrust of the media can be observed: if in 2013 50% of Spaniards trusted the media, in 2019 the percentage dropped to 36% (Edelman, 2013, 2019). Furthermore, mistrust also varies depending on ideology. Thus, in the Pew Research Center study mentioned, notable differences were found in trust towards the same media between those who placed themselves on left or right. For example, while 74% of citizens who declare themselves on the right trust the public broadcaster TVE, the percentage drops to 32% in those who identify with the left, a trend that is repeated for the newspapers *ABC* and *El Mundo* and the television channel Antena 3.

Table 1 includes the characteristics of the sample, namely, the sample size for each news media type and the identification of each media outlet, including the media group behind it, its audience share/penetration rate, and its political leaning. We have used an audience-centric measure for attributing the political leaning of each media outlet, which consists of calculating the mean ideological self-placement of the audiences on a 10-point scale (where 1 is extreme left, 10 extreme right, and 5.5 the perfect center) using the above-mentioned CIS survey.

Following the two approaches that may guide selective exposure, the independent variables were grouped into two blocs. As selective exposure indicators oriented by ideological-partisan predispositions, we included ideological self-placement in the left-right axis and the voted party in the last general election. We selected interest in the electoral campaign and interest in politics in general as selective exposure indicators oriented by political interest. Finally, we considered sex, age, education and subjective social class as control variables to be included in the specified regression models, in line with previous research (Stroud, 2011; Cardenal et al., 2019).

All of the independent and control variables were recoded as dichotomous (yes/no) variables so that they could be included in the multinomial logistic regression models (Cea D’Ancona, 2004, pp. 131-137). First, to eliminate the problem of zero cells, the categories of the original variables were regrouped to create final fictitious variables. This was the case of ideological self-placement in the left-right axis, where the values had to be merged for the center-right and right categories (only for the digital press), and the education variable, whose original 16 survey categories were recoded into four new variables to be introduced in the regression models (Table 2). In the case of voting, only state-wide political parties with sub-samples large enough not to generate zero cells were considered, including the major Spanish political parties: the Socialist Party (PSOE), the People’s Party (PP), Ciudadanos, Unidas Podemos and Vox.

Starting from here, and following the suppositions of logistical regression, the category variables were converted into dichotomous fictitious variables, always leaving one of the categories as a reference. Finally, our study includes a continuous variable -age-, which has been recoded into six fictitious vari-

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ables to avoid problems of non-linearity, and to observe in more detail how different age groups expose to different media outlets. Table 2 presents the operationalization of all of these variables.

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Media outlets	Response frequency	Media group	Political leaning	Audiences Shares 2019
<i>Digital press (N= 549)</i>				EGM (penetration rate)
<i>El País</i>	319	Prisa	Left 3,83	2.5
<i>El Mundo</i>	111	Unidad Editorial	Center 5,74	1.7
<i>La Vanguardia</i>	72	Grupo Godó	Left 3,88	1.4
<i>ABC</i>	47	Vocento	Center- Right 6,33	1.1
<i>Television channels (N= 2657)</i>				Barlovento (share %)
TVE1	852	Public ownership	Center 5,02	9.4
La Sexta	722	Atresmedia	Left 3,58	7
Antena 3	645	Atresmedia	Center 5,20	11.7
Telecinco	438	Mediaset España	Center-left 4,79	14.8
<i>Radio stations (N= 767)</i>				EGM (share %)
SER	310	Prisa	Left 3,63	29.7
COPE	192	Episcopal Conference	Center-right 6,23	24.6
Onda Cero	144	Atresmedia	Center-left 4,82	12.3
RNE	121	Public ownership	Center-left 4,76	8.7

Source: Own elaboration

RESULTS

The results of the multinomial regressions for the three types of media are presented below. Tables 3, 4 and 5 include the exponential coefficients of each regression model, which is to be interpreted as follows: When the values are greater than 1, there is a positive association between the predictor and the dependent variable -the likelihood of preferring the media outlet in question increases- while values lower than 1 suggest a negative relationship -the likelihood of preferring the media in question decreases. It is important to note that the coefficients should always be interpreted in relation to the reference category of the dependent variable for each type of medium. As such, in the case of television, for example, the effects of the independent variables on exposure to TVE1, La Sexta and Antena 3 should be conceived in comparative terms with respect to Telecinco (the reference category). The same occurs with the radio and written press with respect to RNE and ABC.

In the case of television (Table 3), ideology and voting are more important than interest in the campaign and politics as predictors of media consumption. However, socio-demographic characteristics (education, age and sex) are also important variables to explain news consumption. As such, center-left and left individuals are much more likely to choose La Sexta as a source of information than other channels. Voting for Unidas Podemos also increases the likelihood of preferring La Sexta as a source of political information. Curiously, the regression model does not only confirm selective exposure in ideological

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Table 2. Operationalization of concepts

Concepts	Variables
<i>Ideological predispositions</i>	
Ideological self-placement	Left Center-left Center (reference category) Center-right Right
Voting	Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) Partido Popular (PP) Ciudadanos (reference category) Unidas Podemos Vox
<i>Political interest</i>	
Interest in politics	None A little (reference category) A fair amount A lot
Interest in the electoral campaign	None A little (reference category) A fair amount A lot
<i>Socio-demographic characteristics</i>	
Sex	Male Female (reference category)
Age	18 - 25 years 26 - 35 years 36 - 45 years 46 - 55 years (reference category) 56 - 65 years 66 and over
Education	Primary education Secondary education (reference category) Higher education University education
Social Class	Lower class Middle class (reference category) Upper class

Source: Own elaboration

terms, but also signals the tendency towards selective avoidance. Specifically, Vox and Partido Popular voters avoid exposure to La Sexta, while PSOE voters reject Antena 3.

In regard to interest in public affairs, having a fair amount of interest in politics and the campaign only increases the likelihood of preferring La Sexta and does not impact the other channels. This is probably due to the greater proportion of programs related to politics in the latter case, especially in comparison with Antena 3 and Telecinco, more significantly oriented towards entertainment. The results also suggest that the three channels have an audience with a common socio-demographic profile, and one that is substantially different from Telecinco: their viewers tend to be more educated, mainly men and older.

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Table 3. Predictors of television consumption (cat. ref. = Telecinco)

	TVE1	La Sexta	Antena 3
	Exp (B)	Exp (B)	Exp (B)
Ideology (cat. ref.= center)			
Right	0.917	1.349	1.179
Center-right	1.296	1.299	1.372
Center-left	0.960	2.515***	0.959
Left	1.315	4.459***	1.662
Vote (cat. ref.= Ciudadanos)			
Vox	0.847	0.326**	1.277
PP	1.154	0.463**	1.241
PSOE	0.837	0.837	0.605**
Unidas Podemos	1.172	3.031***	0.771
Interest in politics (cat. ref.= a little)			
None	0.840	0.759	0.783
A fair amount	1.055	1.444+	1.037
A lot	0.718	1.184	0.633
Interest in the electoral campaign (cat. ref.= a little)			
None	1.028	0.682+	0.822
A fair amount	0.971	1.563*	1.010
A lot	1.012	1.380	0.901
Age (cat. ref.= 46-55 years)			
18-25	0.752	0.380***	0.854
26-35	0.650+	0.851	0.808
36-45	1.175	1.171	1.097
56-65	2.411***	2.118**	1.780*
> 66	1.652*	1.180	0.694+
Education (cat. ref.= secondary ed.)			
Primary ed.	1.175	0.879	0.836
Higher ed.	2.011***	2.232***	1.664**
University ed.	4.221***	4.015***	2.625***
Sex (cat.ref. = female)			
Male	2.521***	3.542***	2.366***
Social class (cat. ref.= middle)			
Lower class	0.956	0.953	0.878
Upper class	1.417	1.235	0.939
N	2,657		
R square of Nagelkerke	0,307		

Levels of statistical significance: ***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05; +p < 0.1

Source: Own elaboration

In the case of radio (Table 4), exposure is mainly motivated by ideological and party preferences and to a lesser extent by interest in politics, which is only significant in the case of COPE. However, in this case the socio-demographic variables have hardly any importance, which suggests a shared socio-demographic profile among the audience members of the four stations analyzed.

Specifically, voting for PP increases the likelihood of preferring COPE as a source of political information (compared to RNE), while voting for the Socialist Party decreases that likelihood. Socialist voters tend to prefer the station SER. In regard to ideological orientations, the models suggest that the phenomenon with the greatest scope is selective avoidance, as reflected in the coefficients with values of less than zero. As such, center-left and left-wing voters significantly avoid exposure to COPE and

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Table 4. Predictors of radio consumption (cat. ref. = RNE)

	SER	COPE	Onda Cero
	Exp (B)	Exp (B)	Exp (B)
Ideology (cat. ref.= center)			
Right	0.335	1.468	0.498
Center-right	0.528	1.353	1.122
Center-left	1.780+	0.428*	0.311**
Left	1.471	0.136*	0.130**
Vote (cat. ref.= Ciudadanos)			
Vox	0.484	1.760	0.500
PP	0.754	3.437**	1.092
PSOE	1.762+	0.472+	0.823
Unidas Podemos	1.477	0.583	0.714
Interest in politics (cat. ref.= a little)			
None	0.556	1.435	0.699
A fair amount	1.125	1.808	1.525
A lot	1.114	3.028*	2.008
Interest in the electoral campaign (cat. ref.= a little)			
None	0.759	0.485+	0.925
A fair amount	1.167	0.822	0.550
A lot	0.648	0.643	0.627
Age (cat. ref.= 46-55 years)			
18-25	4.632	3.500	1.853
26-35	1.093	0.812	0.317*
36-45	1.356	1.106	0.949
56-65	1.382	1.051	0.521
> 66	0.822	0.535	0.346**
Education (cat. ref.= secondary ed.)			
Primary ed.	1.045	2.143+	0.995
Higher ed.	0.871	0.925	1.481
University ed.	0.679	0.587	1.619
Sex (cat.ref. = female)			
Male	0.804	1.357	1.171
Social class (cat. ref.= middle)			
Lower class	0.716	1.049	1.039
Upper class	1.321	1.690	1.228
N	767		
R square of Nagelkerke	0,456		

Levels of statistical significance: ***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05; +p < 0.1

Source: Own elaboration

Onda Cero (compared to RNE). The only predictor that presents a positive association is the center-left orientation, which does increase the likelihood of choosing SER to consume political information.

Finally, the analysis of the digital press (Table 5) reveals that ideology and voting significantly segment exposure to political information, as we can expect from the newspaper market in a polarized pluralistic media system. Interest in public affairs is also a predictor of press consumption, through with less explanatory weight than ideological-partisan preferences. Furthermore, the limited importance of socio-demographic variables is noteworthy, with the exception of gender. Given the eminently male audience of *ABC* –the reference category–, gender emerges as a predictor associated with two heads, which suggests that women tend to prefer *El País* and *La Vanguardia*.

Having a center-left ideology significantly increases the likelihood of consuming *El País* and *La Vanguardia*, while identifying as leftist increases the tendency to choose *La Vanguardia* over *ABC*. Those who identify as right-wing are less likely to choose *El País*. In regard to voting, the results suggest that the logic of selective avoidance wins out over that of selective exposure. In other words, VOX voters avoid *El País*, *El Mundo* and *La Vanguardia* equally (compared to *ABC*), while PP voters do the same with *El País*, *La Vanguardia* and, to a lesser extent, *El Mundo*. PSOE voters are also less likely to prefer *La Vanguardia*. Having a great deal of interest in politics notably increases exposure to *La Vanguardia*, while having no interest at all decreases the likelihood of preferring *El Mundo*. Those who have a great deal of interest in the campaign tend to reject *El Mundo* and *La Vanguardia*.

Finally, we have replicated the regression analysis to observe the net explanatory potential of the three sets of variables through the stepwise regression procedure, that is, first introducing socio-demographic variables, then political interest indicators and, finally, ideological-partisan predispositions. In this way, it is possible to observe which percentage of variance each group of variables contributes (Table 6). The results clearly show that the variables with the greatest explanatory weight are ideological-partisan predispositions, which contribute 31.9% of the variance for radio, 30.1% for digital press, and 12.7% for television. The political interest indicators yield much more modest values: 4.9% of variance in television, 4.9% in radio and 6.9% for digital media. The socio-demographic characteristics are particularly important for television, contributing 13.1% of the variance compared to 8% for radio and digital press.

DISCUSSION

This chapter has compared for the first time the importance of political interest and ideological and partisan predispositions as drivers of consumption of political information in Spain. The work is based on the theory of selective exposure and uses the November 2019 general elections in Spain as a case study.

Due to the high political parallelism of the Spanish media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and audiences' partisan behavior (Humanes, 2016), the dominance of ideological selective exposure over that based on interest in politics was expected (H1). The number of significant predictors, the size of the coefficients and the percentage of variance explained by both ideology and vote confirmed the expectation: ideological selective exposure was more important than that based on interest in public affairs. In other words, the interest in politics and campaigns is not absent as a motivation for media consumption, but its role is secondary in comparison with ideological and partisan orientations. In this sense, this study supports the pattern of ideological consumption of Spanish audiences (Fraile & Meilán, 2012; Martín Llaguno & Berganza, 2000; Gunther et al., 1999), even after comparing the importance of the two types of motivations for selective exposure.

In addition, the analyses yielded an interesting finding related to the nature of selective exposure in Spain. Individuals do not only prefer ideologically similar media, but also selectively avoid exposure to those that they consider to be ideologically different. This is the case of Vox and PP voters with respect to *La Sexta*, *El País*, *El Mundo* and *La Vanguardia*, and that of left-wing and center-left individuals with respect to COPE and Onda Cero radio stations. While previous studies have questioned the phenomenon of selective avoidance of discrepant information in the United States (Chaffee et al., 2001; Garrett, 2009, 2013; Camaj, 2019), insisting that the preference for similar media does not imply systematic avoidance of sources perceived as politically discordant, our study clearly shows that the scope of selective avoid-

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Table 5. Predictors of digital press consumption (cat. ref. = ABC)

	<i>El País</i>	<i>El Mundo</i>	<i>La Vanguardia</i>
	Exp (B)	Exp (B)	Exp (B)
Ideology (cat. ref.= center)			
Right	0.211**	0.972	0.341
Center-left	4.686*	1.736	8.371**
Left	2.034	0.913	5.237+
Vote (cat. ref.= Ciudadanos)			
Vox	0.192**	0.120**	0.129*
PP	0.285*	0.344+	0.188*
PSOE	2.408	0.551	0.276+
Unidas Podemos	2.864	0.536	0.652
Interest in politics (cat. ref.= a little)			
None	0.869	0.136*	0.633
A fair amount	0.896	0.799	1.909
A lot	3.083	3.710	5.762+
Interest in the electoral campaign (cat. ref.= a little)			
None	0.908	1.716	1.803
A fair amount	0.621	0.519	0.687
A lot	0.113	0.120**	0.097**
Age (cat. ref.= 46-55 years)			
18-25	1.665	1.720	2.530
26-35	1.760	0.976	1.642
36-45	1.142	0.471	1.801
56-65	1.353	0.739	1.912
> 66	1.011	0.572	1.397
Education (cat. ref.= secondary ed.)			
Primary ed.	0.058*	0.333	0.394
Higher ed.	0.606	0.565	0.433
University ed.	0.619	0.526	0.601
Sex (cat. ref.= female)			
Male	0.402*	0.981	0.398+
Social class (cat. ref.= middle)			
Lower class	1.173	1.024	0.673
Upper class	0.795	0.567	0.928
N	549		
R square of Nagelkerke	0,452		

Levels of statistical significance: ***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05; +p < 0.1

Source: Own elaboration

Table 6. Variance explained by stepwise regression models (R-square of Nagelkerke)

	Television	Radio	Digital press
Socio-demographic characteristics	0.131	0.088	0.082
Interest in politics	0.180	0.137	0.151
Ideological-partisan predispositions	0.307	0.456	0.452

Source: Own elaboration

ance in Spain is comparable to that of selective exposure. In this regard, our results confirm Festinger's (1957) expectation that individuals actively avoid information where dissonance is expected to occur.

Furthermore, we found that this is the case for all types of media, probably due to the growing polarization of the Spanish political and media system, and the spiral effect associated with selective exposure and political polarization. In this sense, recent research has suggested that it is the most polarized citizens who are motivated to exert greater selectivity in their news consumption (Ramírez-Dueñas & Vinuesa-Tejero, 2021).

In regard to the second hypothesis, which expected digital press consumption to be more oriented by ideological-partisan reasons than radio and television consumption, the data only partially confirm this. The results suggest that digital press and radio are the media types that are most influenced by ideological-partisan predispositions, and that they are to a similar degree. The situation is different for television exposure. Television consumption is explained equally by ideological-partisan motivations and socio-demographic variables. The major difference found was thus not between print and audiovisual media, as it was expected, but between print media and radio on the one hand, and television on the other.

How to interpret these differences? They can be explained by a greater level of political parallelism of the digital press and radio -rooted in Spain's media system-, as well as greater political segmentation of these two media markets, as a result of the need to distinguish themselves from their competitors in order to increase loyalty among audience members (Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005). In this regard, some scholars conceive recent media polarization as a result of the dramatic increase of media offerings derived from digitalization (Steppat et al., 2020). That is, the availability of news media sources has grown, and with it the tendency towards more politically tainted content, since there are great incentives for news outlets to slant their contents to attract specialized audiences (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011). This is particularly important for media environments with historical paths of political parallelism, as it is the case of Spain., where politically oriented media consumption is well-established among the audiences.

The situation of Spanish television is different. The data suggest that it is moving through a transition from a business model of searching for massive audiences (Hallin, 2013) towards one of broader political segmentation. In Spain, there has been no increase in television offerings following the US model of segmenting consumption in accordance with ideological preferences (Stroud, 2008; Fletcher et al., 2020), and media groups have not yet fully assumed politicization as a business strategy in the television market.

However, the exception of the media group Atresmedia is an interesting one. Atresmedia has taken up political segmentation as an important strategy through its second brand, La Sexta, which has positioned itself as a news leader at critical times, such as election nights, during the exhumation of the dictator Franco and during the COVID-19 crisis. In addition, La Sexta offers a significant amount of television programs oriented towards news and politics, in comparison with the rest of Spanish broadcasters, which are far more oriented towards entertainment. As such, it has secured its market share by attracting and developing the loyalty of the left-wing ideological niche. In doing so, Atresmedia has achieved high levels of trust for its two television channels, Antena 3 and La Sexta (Reuters Institute, 2019).

CONCLUSION

Firstly, the results of this study support the ideological-partisan nature of political information consumption in Spain by comparing for the first time this type of selective exposure with a model of consumption ori-

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ented by interest in public affairs. The findings clearly indicate that, in contrast with democratic-corporate systems like that of Sweden (Skovsgaard et al., 2016), the Spanish media system offers a “structure of opportunities” that lends itself much more to ideological selective exposure, particularly partisan.

Furthermore, some of the findings -the selective avoidance of certain media perceived as ideologically discordant- underscore the need to expand the study of selective exposure on aspects that have not yet been sufficiently researched with regard to information consumption, related to the so-called hostile media effect (Vallone, Ross and Lepper, 1985), according to which individuals perceive news as biased when these do not agree with their points of view. Pfau, Houston and Semmler (2007) hypothesized in their study on the changes in presidential campaigns in the United States that selective exposure is related to the concepts of hostility and distrust towards the news media, which explains that individuals consume partisan messages, especially through the Internet (2007: 33). Future studies will have to further explore the scope of this phenomenon, analyzing whether ideological radicalism, attitude strength and intensity of the beliefs increase the tendency towards selective avoidance to the news media, or whether selective avoidance is a comparable phenomenon to selective exposure in media systems corresponding to the polarized pluralistic model.

Secondly, the results of our study allow us to conclude that, in general terms, television continues to be the news media least affected by both selective exposure and selective avoidance, when we compare its audiences with those of radio and the digital press. Still, ideological segmentation seems to be an increasingly relevant business strategy of private broadcasters, particularly exemplified by the case of La Sexta. Political segmentation might therefore increase in the Spanish television market in the near future, due to two circumstances: growing competition and market pressures, and the recent political polarization of the Spanish party-system, which has transformed from a bipartisan model to a significantly polarized multi-party system.

Finally, we point out several limitations of our study. The first limitation arises from the fact that this study does not include the consumption of information through social media, and therefore we have not been able to assess how incidental exposure can increase or mitigate selective exposure guided by ideological predispositions. Future comparative approaches will have to address these questions, analyzing people’s selective exposure patterns to a wider range of media (social platforms, traditional news media, digital media).

Moreover, longitudinal studies that shed light on long-term patterns of selective exposure are needed, as well as experiment designs that help to establish causal inferences on motivations of selective exposure. In addition, future studies will have to design surveys that allow us to develop new hypotheses and conduct analyses without the limitations introduced by working with secondary data.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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Chapter 7

Semi-Private Spheres as Safe Spaces for Young Social Media Users' Political Conversation: Virtual Haven or Digital Bubbles?

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ABSTRACT

The incorporation of social media as spaces for political participation performances—especially among youth—has brought various issues into debate, including the formats of these practices and, at the same time, the significances of these repertoires for public conversation. In order to address this topic, this chapter explores the digital practices of political participation among young people in Argentina. Based on a qualitative approach in which 30 in-depth interviews to people from 18 to 24 years old were carried out, the findings of this research note that these segments of the population join the discussion of issues on the public agenda using emojis and hashtags and prefer reduced digital spaces to talk with their close contacts about polarized issues in order to avoid the aggression and violence that they say they observe in the digital space.

INTRODUCTION

Political participation includes in its definition those practices that, from a personal and social significance, contribute to the making of the democratic ideal, pursue collective action and consider “interventions, as small as they might be, in power relationships” (Dahlgren, 2018, p. 25), all this in a scheme in which confrontation is a necessary part of the process (Dahlgren, 2005; Mouffe, 2013). The degree along with the modes of political participation are significant displays of the quality of democracy (Ohme, 2019).

With the growing use of the digital space to perform most of sociocultural habits, new manners of political participation are constantly incorporated to the digital arena (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017). In this sense, at the beginning of the century some scholars saw Internet as a hopeful opportunity to broaden

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8057-8.ch007

the public sphere (Castells, 2012; Jenkins et al., 2016) as engagement occurred mostly in open networks and websites (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017). However, with the platformization of the web (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Helmond, 2015) engagement has begun to be performed in private online spheres, more specifically on social media. In this regard those political participation repertoires that used to be part of the digital public space have migrated to the social media space, where expressions operate with a great autonomy, flexibility, creativity and potential for the utterances (Bennett, 2008, Bennett et al., 2011;) but at the same time they are private, individual and personal (Papacharissi, 2010). This is even more evident among young people, who have been born and have grown up within an entirely online media environment (Ohme, 2019) and are the ones who invest more time in the digital space (Statista, 2020).

Along with that, young people address their civic engagement in a way which is different from that of older generations (Bennett et al. 2010). This is in many ways. For instance, instead of worrying about traditional issues, such as finance, macroeconomy among others, young sectors have shown more interest on other political issues, such as the environment, gender, human rights and consumer politics (Jenkins et al., 2016). Along with that, if adult generations trust on traditional institutions, such as political parties, for performing their participative actions, young sectors prefer social movements for engaging politically, and horizontal interactions among peers are more significant than those vertical relationships that characterize conservative institutions (Bennett et al., 2011). Furthermore, they are more orientated to individual rights instead of civic collective duties (Bennett et al., 2011). These personal interests lead to participative adhesions that are more expressive and personal, fluid and volatile than those ones that characterize the traditional political participation practices, such as voting (Bennett et al., 2008). In this context, young citizens express their preferences and opinions in digital environments, as part of a society where social fragmentation and a decreasing collective loyalty have led to personalized politics in which the framework of collective action is displaced by connective action and individual expression (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). In this sense, practices encompassed in online political participation are described by some authors as repertoires typical of armchair activism in which a supportive selfishness is deployed (Resina de la Fuente, 2010). However, other scholars have observed that these novel practices are a different mode of being part of conversations and debates in the digital space (Jenkins et al., 2016; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017; Ohme, 2019).

In this sense, Papacharissi (2010) states that the social media environment is the space where the personal is connected with the politics, and the society and the collective actions turn into connective actions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2014), creating communities of affect (Dahlgren, 2018). So, affect becomes crucial for the activation of political participation repertoires (Dahlgren, 2018; Tarullo, 2018): while the postulates of rationality and objectivity have always been pointed out as fundamental for entering into the civic realm, the affective turn (Richards, 2004) gained space in the new theoretical and empiric approaches (Rosas & Serrano-Puche, 2018; Tarullo, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019), lightening the role that affect has in activating and shaping political participation practices (Dahlgren, 2018). In this regard, affect can be seen as a “dynamic collective emotionality that connects with people’s shared social experiences” and it “animates engagement and helps motivate participation” (Dahlgren 2018, p. 12).

In a networked public scheme (Papacharissi, 2010), feelings of affect facilitates the circulation and interactions amidst social media (Papacharissi, 2015). Scholars have observed that those digital political messages that contain hope, lead to more engagement amidst users, who react, share or comment these kind of content (Aragón et al., 2013; Tarullo, 2020a; Toret, 2013). In parallel, content that expresses or appeals for fear and for anger lead to more active digital adhesions (Just et al., 2007; Marcus, 2002; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019), and those emotions are the most used in relation to highly polarized topics (Wagner

& Boczkowski, 2019). Moreover, when polarized issues occupied the public agenda, different studies have observed that uncivil comments become part of the public digital interaction scene (Masullo Chen & Ng, 2017; Masullo Chen et al., 2019; Valera-Ordaz et al. 2017). Incivility has been conceptualized by Masullo Chen and colleagues (2017) as a continuum that goes from impoliteness to insults, negative expressions and offenses to the interlocutor and hate speech in the end. In this sense, uncivil comments, have been deeply studied in the academia in the last years and researchers have found that hate speech on social media is one of the primordial issues that undermine political participation and erode quality of the public debate (Masullo Chen & Ng, 2017; Valera-Ordaz et al., 2017).

In this scheme, this chapter examines the political participation repertoires that Argentinean young people perform on the online environment. In this sense, this study would like to know which are the digital spaces that this group choose for displaying their practices of political participation, the modes of these adhesions and the issues that induce participation. Trying to answer these questions, thirty (n=30) young people from 18 to 24 years old were interviewed in depth during October and November 2020.

BACKGROUND

Lights and Shadows of Political Participation on Social Media

Social media has changed the way through which people, especially young ones, interact in many, if not all, aspects of their lives. Two of these facets are in relation to news consumption and political participation both of which are constitutive variables of democratic societies (Norris, 2004).

In this regard, scholars have affirmed that social media pave the way to express opinions, which is essential in a deliberative democracy (Valenzuela et al., 2019; Valera-Ordaz, 2019). Nevertheless, concurrently, this also leads to political polarization (Garcia et al., 2014; Tucker et al., 2018). This happens because, among other reasons, each user has their own individual informative diet designed with the collaboration of the algorithm and a selective exposure (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2020; Humanes, 2019), both of which contribute to a fragmented news consumption (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). For some authors this collaborates to create ideological echo chambers (Sunstein, 2007) and bubble filters (Pariser, 2011) where partisans listen and read each other in an affective polarization environment (Suhay et al., 2018; Waisbord, 2020) congruent with schemes of confirmation bias (Wason, 1960) and cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962).

However, evidence about the consequences of the growing influence of social media on news consumption and political participation for the quality of democracy is far from being homogenous (Valenzuela et al., 2019). Even though the academic discussions in the last year have been dominated by opposing views (Waisbord, 2015), there are also moderate positions that try to skip these contrasting viewpoints and invest their efforts in conceptualizing different and alternative models of citizenship and their political participation repertoires. These perspectives try to interpret and understand transformations more than to identify a declination—or not— of the civic engagement, especially among young people communities (Jenkins et al., 2018; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017). Even if these frameworks come from different disciplines and some of them have only been developed empirically, they all identify the importance of social media as a central point in this transformation process in which political participation takes place (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017). Moreover, they agree on affirming that in a context where the digital

is reshaping the modes of being and acting in the society, being a good citizen also needs to be part of these definitions (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017).

Following this line, the models Dutiful Citizenship-DC-/Actualizing Citizenship -AC- (Bennett et al., 2011; Bennet et. al. 2010, Bennett et al., 2009); have been used for lightening many empirical researches about political participation practices and about modes of being a good citizen (Ohme, 2019). In this framework, DC is in relation to an obedient citizen, who follows the established norms and the codes. The DC model is a set of actions and definitions that perfectly applies to generations that used to participate throughout formal institutions such as political parties, the church, trade unions and other public and traditional organizations. In this model, citizens accomplish traditional practices, such as voting and being members of formal civic groups, follow the political news on traditional media, which is the channel for a “one-way consumption of managed civic information” (Bennet et. al. 2010, p.398)

On the other hand, the Actualizing Citizenship (AC) model has emerged in a global context and has gained space in relation to the DC model, especially among young people. In this framework, citizens choose new modes of political engagement, and social media play an outstanding role as a channel for achieving these practices and/or as a platform for amplifying them, as they offer many and diverse possibilities “to mobilize young people into a more active engagement with civic and potential life (Lee et al. 2013, p.19). Along with this, young people prefer to consume news in the digital sphere, designing their own and individual informative diet (Tarullo, 2020b), and digital peer communities collaborate and aggregate content and knowledge to this circulation of news, interests and young prosumers (Jenkins, 2017) as interactivity, participation, coproduction and social networking are fundamental features in the way through which young people implicate with Internet (Jenkins, 2006). In this sense, the AC model responds to the transformation of the interests that have migrated from public authorities and institutionalized groups and organizations –where those interests used to be settled– to a personal commitment to networks of peers who congregate and distribute information and lead political repertoires on social media, where expressions are more emotive and personal, and closer to their individual interests (Bennett, 2008). In this context, Bennett et al. (2009, 2010, 2011) state that young people do not seem to be interested neither in those issues that are promoted by the government nor by mainstream media. On the contrary, they deal with politics from a personal approach, engaging themselves in those topics that are close to their scrutiny and attentiveness, and peer-to- peer relationships –that occur principally on social media–become crucial. In this regard, young people are in “personally defined acts of engagement and involvement and prefer loosely organized and network-like forms of political action” (Shehata et al., 2016, p. 1143).

Moreover, getting informed and participating politically occur within these peer networks, characterized by truth and affect (Bennett et al., 2010; Dahlgren, 2018; Jenkins et al., 2018). In this sense, some studies have stated that far from political disaffection (Benedicto, 2016) which is closer to “generational differences and long-held stereotypes and anxieties toward young people” (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017, p. 1891) the youth participates politically in those issues that mobilize it and affect is vital in activating this interest (Paz García & Brussino, 2015, Tarullo, 2020a).

In the AC model, “creative civic expressions” (Bennett et al., 2010, p. 398) are at its core: some of them are designed in a collaborative way, within those peer-to-peer relationships, and are considered more meaningful and powerful than voting. Global activism and consumer politics are considered modes of these contemporaneous performs (Bennett et al., 2009, 2010, 2011) among other novel manifestations that have reshaped the modes of participation that young people carried out in the digital environment (Jenkins et al., 2018; Shehata et al., 2016).

Uncivil Comments: From Impoliteness to Hate Speech

Nonetheless, in the last years, this amplification of the space for political participation has been accompanied by unwanted situations that, sometimes, can discourage public involvement on public issues. Recent studies (Goyanes et al., 2021; Masullo Chen et al., 2019; Oz et al., 2018; Rosenberg, 2018 among many others) have found that in parallel to this participatory culture (Jenkins et al., 2016), digital public conversations about some specific topics (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019) include offensive comments and messages that instead of collaborating to broaden the public space and foster deliberation, demotivate confrontation and disagreement, which are fundamental in a participatory processes (Mouffe, 2013). In relation to this, scholars have noted that disagreement, even if it is cordial and positive, it can also drive people to experience negative emotions, such as sadness, fear and anger (Just et al., 2007; Marcus et al., 2015) and to focus attention in those points of view that are equal or similar to their own (Festinger, 1962). Moreover, when disagreement becomes uncivil, these effects are stronger (Masullo Chen & Ng, 2017; Masullo Chen & Lu, 2017), and the involvement in public conversation about political issues, which is fundamental in democratic societies, is dispirited (Valera-Ordaz et al., 2017). In this regard, Papacharissi (2004) has stressed that uncivil messages have the purpose of interrupting the democratic collective traditions

Uncivil comments in social media are facilitated by the anonymity that characterizes the online space (Anderson et al., 2018). This feature cooperates to inflame comments and messages, especially in relation to public issues (Rosenberg, 2018), damaging the possibility of a wide digital public sphere (Papacharissi, 2004) and creating polarized niches of opinions, especially in those persons that have previous strong predispositions in relation to a specific topic (Anderson et al., 2018).

Recently, scholars have suggested that in some contexts uncivil comments go beyond and derive in hate speech, which usually targets disadvantaged social groups such as immigrants, sexual minorities and women (Wilhelm & Joeckel, 2019). These hate speech messages, which consist of expressions that incite violence, discrimination, hatred and animosity towards a person or groups of people because of their religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, nationality, foster intolerance and hostility (Bustos Martínez et al., 2019).

GIVING THE WORD TO YOUNG PEOPLE

This chapter studies the political participation repertoires that Argentinean young people perform on the online environment. Following this aim, a qualitative research was carried out during 2020, based on the following questions: To what extent do young people use the digital sphere for their repertoires of political participation?, Which are the digital spaces that are most used by young people to perform their political participation practices?, To what degree do young people participate in public debates?, Which are the modes for expressing their political opinions and debate in the digital arena about controversial public issues? Which digital strategies are adopted by young people to debate agenda issues?

The scope of this research is exploratory, as it attempts to identify salient characteristics and properties of a phenomenon under study and to understand the “trends of a group or population” (Hernández Sampieri et al., 2014, p. 80) which in this case comprises young people from Argentina, users of social media and who recognize themselves as politically actives, but not necessarily members of social movements or political parties.¹

Argentina is a highly politicized and polarized country (Svampa, 2005), where historically young people have been outstanding actors in mobilizations and have performed different practices of political participation (Vommaro, 2015) influencing public policies. One of the last cases where young generations have played a central role, in both the urban and the digital space, was during the debate for the Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy bill that was finally approved in December 2020 (Peker, 2019).

To achieve the aims of this research 30 in-depth interviews were conducted. Due to the complexity of the constantly changing phenomena on which this research tries to reflect, qualitative data is clarifying and strategic (Fernández Pedemonte, 2010), as it allows to identify the repertoires of political participation through the words of the participants as well as their observations on the behaviour of their online peers, with whom they meet and interact during their digital routines. The qualitative methodological approach allowed the author of this research to identify the characteristics of political participation repertoires by young adults based on young people's own perceptions. This type of interviews collaborate to capture "the narratives, discourses, and rhetoric that come into play both in individual reflection on civic issues and in dialogue, a fundamental forum for the co-construction of meaning" (Haste, 2017, p. 17). In this exploratory study, the non-probabilistic sample (n=30) was based on the snowball technique and on the saturation of the information collected rather than on the representation of the number of individuals concerned (Mejía Navarrete, 2000). Participants are social science and Humanities undergraduate students from Pampean Region in the center of Argentina. Most of them are middle class and they live with fellow classmates in middle size cities.

An interviewer's guide was used for the interviews. This instrument was crucial for the final integration of the findings during the analytical process (Valles Martínez, 1999). The interviews lasted an average of one hour and 45 minutes. In a second stage, the interviews were transcribed in full by the author of this article and one assistant. In order to guarantee anonymity, the names of the participants are fictional. After reading the transcripts, a manual analysis of the results of the interviews was done. For the purpose of this research, the theme-centered analysis was chosen (Valles Martínez, 1999).

It should be noted that these interviews were conducted in 2020, the year when the World Health Organization declared a pandemic caused by the spread of the COVID-19 virus (OMS, 2020). The measures taken by different countries in order to avoid massive contagions –among them quarantine– modified social practices, including digital ones. Moreover, the pandemic topic began to occupy a large part of digital conversations, where issues such as the extension of the lockdown, the health-versus-economy debate, the COVID-19 vaccine, the origin of the vaccine, among others pandemic-related aspect, contribute to increase the polarization in an already polarized context.

ARGENTINEAN YOUNG PEOPLE AND DIGITAL POLITICAL PRACTICES

Young people interviewed agreed that the digital space constitute a primordial space for participation in public issues. However, they do not use digital open public spaces, such as the commentary section of digital outlets, blogs or other open online environment for expressing or involving themselves politically. They prefer their personal accounts on social media for carrying out political practices of participation, because there they can express individually and personally (Papacharissi, 2010, p.21).

In this sense, if previous research could see the use of the open web as the space for political participation (Carpentier et al., 2013), young people do not experience that behavior: they have never had the habit of participating politically on the web. They are sons and daughters of a platformized web, and

inside it they perform their civic practices. Moreover, in this research another mutation has been noted: the political participation practices occur inside the platforms, where young people utilize the tools that these channels offer so as to perform different practices of political participation, creating their own intimate spaces formed by strong ties (Johnson Brown & Reingen, 1987) –most of them friends– and in relation to those issues they are interest most. In this sense, they feel free, confident and safe for participating, sharing, debating and dialoguing about public issues because this occurs in intimate and controlled spaces of their own. This happens because, even though they agree that the digital space is a favorable environment for displaying manifestations of civic engagement and participation; it is in parallel, a recurrent setting for uncivil comments and violent aggression among participants in digital debates and conversations about controversial and polarized public issues.

The results of this research are presented as follows: in the first part, appreciations about the online space as an environment for political participation performances. Then, the role that social media play in the practices performed by the interviewees, along with the resources and the strategies they use for getting involved in those issues that are close to their interests. Finally, the perceptions that participants of this research have about uncivil comments in open digital conversations about general public issues are introduced together with the strategies they pursue for avoiding aggressive situations in the digital sphere.

The Web as a Place for Political Participation

Participants of this study were conclusive about the importance of the Internet for political participation repertoires and they see it as a powerful tool for promoting actions in relation to those issues they are interested in.

They are very important for amplifying voices and participation (Josefina, 19 years old, personal communication, November 3, 2020).

Thus, the web is seen by the interviewees as a great public agora where they can find whatever they want in relation to their motivations. Consequently, as researchers have found previously (Catalina-García et al., 2019; Paz García & Brussino, 2015; Tarullo, 2020b; Tarullo & Frezzotti, 2020b), participants recognize the digital environment as a public space that offers new paths for political participation practices, giving them the opportunity of being part of communities of shared interests and exchanging experiences and opinions amidst peer networks, with whom they share interests.

I could find groups of vegan activism from different places, in which I participate only online, trying to raise awareness about cruelty against animals (Priscila, 19 years old, personal communication, October 4, 2020).

I use the Internet all the time to search movements and information about feminist issues. In some cases we have created networks and we have designed some actions together, in different regions of the country or in even in different countries (Daniel, 21 years old, personal communication, November 23, 2020).

Moreover, if they participate in the urban space, those actions have their corollary in the digital space. Along with this, in this special context of quarantine, participants stated that the Internet has been the

only space for expressing and participating politically, giving them the opportunity to continue with their political participation practices in a specific moment when going out was not allowed.

The Internet provides other modes of participation. For example, currently, when we can't go out because of the pandemic, when on 24th March², we exhibit the white handkerchiefs in our balconies and windows, and then we post these actions on the web (Lucía, 22 years old, personal communication, November 5, 2020).

I could find special frames for my profile on the internet related to the #Niunamenos³ campaign. I could not go to the demonstration in the square, but I have the chance to participate in a different way in the feminist march that takes place every 3rd June in the whole country (Luján, 23 years old, personal communication, October 23, 2020).

Privatizing Political Practices Repertoires: From the Web to the Platforms

Even though the web is seen by the interviewees as an amplifier of the public space (Papacharissi, 2002), they prefer to congregate in their social media personal accounts for performing their political participation practices instead of involving themselves politically in public spaces, such as blogs or media outlets. This behavior was identified in previous studies that have recognized that citizens prefer to perform political participation practices in more reserved environments than in public online sites (Canavilhas et al., 2019; Valenzuela et al., 2019; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2018). In the case of young segments, this can be a consequence of other practices that they carry out on social media such as getting informed, a habit that is directly connected to political participation (Norris, 2004). Even more, scholars have found that informed citizens reveal a greater tendency towards political participation than those ones that do not consume news about public issues (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). In this sense, informants of this research recognized that social media is the place where they get that information that is connected with their motivations and interests. Moreover, they said that they could follow media outlets and journalists on social media accounts, but that they hardly consume information in the news websites.

I use Twitter and Instagram to consume news. I follow journalists who are specialized in socio environmental issues and activists who share reports about that issue (Santiago, 20 years old, personal communication, October 15, 2020).

I prefer Instagram for getting informed. I follow feminist movements such as Hartas, Mumala, and also the Campaña Nacional por la legalización del aborto, Ni una menos. I prefer them to news from media outlets (Cris, 18 years old, personal communication, November 3, 2020).

As I support a political party, I follow a wide range of political parties and politicians on social media: communists, socialists, peronists. The only ones that I don't follow are the liberals nor others that belong to the right wing sector. I used to follow them on Twitter, but currently they have open profiles on Instagram. I move there to see their posts (Fran, 23 years old, personal communication, October 20, 2020).

Instagram has been pointed not only as the digital place for consuming news, but also as the main space for political participation practices because of many reasons: journalists, activists and those opinion

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leaders that young people follow have their accounts on this platform, where the image is mandatory, and it has been the fastest-growing social media in the last two years in Argentina (Kemp, 2021). Furthermore, it is the favourite one amidst young communities for performing different types of practices: from socialization amidst peers to political participation, as it is observed in the results of this study.

On Instagram I can find my close friends and other close contacts, such as my university colleagues, my workmates, but also activists, leaders. All my people are on Instagram (Felipe, 19 years old, personal communication, November 8, 2020).

I prefer Instagram for doing all: having my first contact with new followers, uploading my status, following activists, consuming news or having my favourite singer's updates. It is the social media that congregates all what I need in only one place (Lucía, 22 years old, personal communication, November 5 2020).

Along with this, Instagram has been named as the place for performing digital political participation practices, as they prefer to avoid public spaces for expressing their own opinions. Moreover, instead of voicing their own ideas and opinions, they prefer to use other strategies for communicating their points of views about public issues. According to the interviews conducted, it was noted that young people promote a variety of causes using resources that social media offers. This re-appropriation of social media tools has led to novel formats of digital participation and activism: they follow or use hashtags and share emojis –especially the heart– in messages and comments or in the design of their profiles. Within this range of digital tools that are re-appropriated and re-signified as symbols of digital mobilisation and participation, this study has noted a preference for the sharing of emojis and joining hashtags. Among the emojis mentioned, the heart has been the most mentioned, which, in Argentina and according to its colour, is associated with the support of particular causes, mostly related to women's rights. The green heart is used for the pro-choice abortion bill supporters that was approved in December 2020, while the light blue one is promoted by people who oppose that bill. The purple heart is used by the feminist movement, #Niunamenos (Not one [woman] less) and the orange one is shared by those users that advocate the separation of church and state, in a country where the apostolic roman cult is the official religion. According to the interviews, the use of the heart emoji expresses publicly the political-ideological stance of the person who shares it:

For me it is very important to share a green heart emoji. It's very symbolic because I think that by putting a heart of a particular colour, one is sharing one's thoughts as well. If I see a light blue or green heart, it's not by chance that you put it there (María, 21 years old, personal communication, November 20, 2020).

I use the purple heart. Every time. On WhatsApp, on Instagram. I am with the feminist movement. I use it on my profile to introduce myself (Cata, 24 years old, personal communication, November 8, 2020).

Other emojis were also mentioned as symbols of participation: the rainbow –for sexual diversity–, the world and the recycling sign –for environmental issues–, the plant –for supporting veganism–, the raised fist –for supporting different causes and as a way of appealing to strength for continuing the struggle– and the shades of colour to indicate different ethnicities or skin tones.

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I wear the rainbow when it is gay pride day and also the raised fist. We all know what they mean and why we use them. The raised fist is a symbol of resistance, I use them a lot (Juan, 20 years old, personal communication, November 9, 2020).

When I use emojis that allow me to choose skin colours, I use the darkest ones [...] because I don't feel identified with white skin and to support other communities (Belén, 22 years old, personal communication, November 10, 2020).

The use of the hashtag was also considered by the interviewees as their way of expressing their opinion and is used as a symbol of civic participation:

With the environmental issue I participate with the hashtag that is being used to raise awareness. Now I am using #generacionesunidas (Alberto, 20 years old, personal communication, October 21, 2020)

For example, on Instagram I use #activarconciencia. In April, I used #inclusion, for the World Autism Awareness Day. I thought it was a form of inclusion and support (Lila, 20 years old, personal communication, November 22, 2020)

Regarding the issues that motivate online participation, young people said that they were moved by a variety of public interest issues, such as feminist, environmental, religious and public health and educational issues. Moreover, the pandemic was included in the list, particularly in those topics that are controversial:

On Instagram stories, polls were circulating about quarantine, yes or no. I have the emoji with the mouth cover on my profile (Héctor, 23 years old, personal communication, October 23, 2020).

I use political filters on my profile picture on Instagram and also on Facebook. Until last year I used "I support public health", and also "I support the new mental health law" (Leo, 19 years old, personal communication, November 8, 2020).

I put a green heart in favour of the legalisation of abortion on Instagram and Twitter because I'm interested in showing my vision about it and one doesn't have to be judged, neither by having a green heart, a blue heart or whatever colour heart you want (Alicia, 18 years old, personal communication, November 23, 2020).

Other formats of participation were presented as forms of involvement: generating their own content and making them circulate in configurations that are in line with the practices of socialization that characterize the uses that the youth carries out on the social media, especially on Instagram.

I post stories on Instagram about climate change. Only about that. I use surveys about this topic, trying to know what my contacts think about that issue (Rolando, 23 years old, personal communication, October 23, 2020).

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I upload content on my Instagram story, what I identify with, sometimes I use screenshots and then I add some information or my own opinion (Fernanda, 22 years old, personal communication, November 22, 2020).

About respect and animal care; that's my theme for uploading stories to Instagram or in WhatsApp statuses (Naty, 18 years old, personal communication, October 19, 2020).

In relation to this, participants of this research noted that the sharing of content, usually news, is a mode of political participation on social media. In this sense, the role of their peer digital networks is fundamental for getting information and trust on the information that they share on social media.

I take screenshots and share on Instagram the news that I read because I follow specialized journalists in animal rights (Dante, 19 years old, personal communication, October 21, 2020).

If I find it very interesting [the news], if it makes me feel something internal, if I say "I have to share this", I share it and try to send it to people I know are interested in it and I try to spread the word (Cris, 18 years old, personal communication, November 3, 2020).

However, commenting on content of general interest, especially news, is a digital practice that the literature on participation in digital spaces identifies as an indicator of civic engagement (Bennett et al., 2011; Dahlgren, 2011, 2018). The outcomes of this research showed that these young people choose not to comment publically, having in this case, passive behaviours in which the reading of users' comments prevails over expressing their own opinions and ideas.

I never comment, but I do read people's comments and it gives you an insight into what other people think, who may have a very different background to you, so I read it (Rolando, 23 years old, personal communication, October 23, 2020)

I don't like to give my opinion, but I'm interested in knowing what people think about the subject. I read three or four comments, not all of them just to know if they agree or disagree with the news or with what is being said (Alex, 20 years old, personal communication, November 14, 2020).

No, not that, practically nothing. I don't add comments. Sometimes I read the comments, especially when the article is a bit spicy, a bit polemic (René, 19 years old, personal communication, October 18, 2020).

I read what others write, but I never comment. I don't write, I don't feel comfortable. I don't want to be assaulted (Alejandra, 20 years old, personal communication, October 9, 2020).

Aggression on Social Media: New Strategies

The lack of expression and participation in public debates is attributed by the interviewees to the situations of aggression and even violence that young people identified in digital public debates, such as the comments section of newspapers and blogs, but also in open social networks, such as Twitter.

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When Garnica was evicted, I posted a comment on Twitter, and I got a lot of negative, aggressive messages, even from trolls. I never posted anything political there again". (Constanza, 22 years old, personal communication, October 28, 2020).

When I uploaded a photo for the day of remembrance, and they told me that there were not 30,000. I got very angry. I see violence on Twitter. And on Instagram, and also on the student centre's account, which is open. When we posted about the free student ticket, they wrote to us to go to work (Lila, 20 years old, personal communication, November 12, 2020).

I have seen very aggressive comments. For example, when there are femicides, men appear justifying the facts. I never get into an argument. It doesn't make sense (Luna, 18 years old, personal communication, October 24, 2020).

Participants agreed that they prefer to read than to comment as a shortcut for self-preservation in a context where uncivil comments, if not aggressive and violent ones, are present in many conversations that take place in the digital space and on diverse, highly polarized topics.

In this sense, one of the findings of this research is that young people use the stories of Instagram as a starting point for discussing controversial topics amidst close ties. "Sometimes I upload some spicy news to discuss among friends," confessed Priscila, 19 years old (personal communication, October 4, 2020). The debate takes place among these closed communities of "best friends", an option provided by Instagram to only share a specific story with selected contacts. Therefore, from the words gathered in the interviews, it is clear that when a topic merits discussion, young people decide not to discuss with others into the open sea of social media, especially on Twitter (Tarullo & Frezzotti, 2020b, 2020a); rather, it seems that they choose the stories as a kind of agora, albeit a private one, where there are few, close contacts. It is not ideological affinity that filters the selection of guests for discussion, but friendship, and it is this that prevents disagreement in conversation from turning into aggression. "I argue with my lifelong friends. We think differently, but it's all good," said Santiago, 20 years old (personal communication, October 15, 2020).

I shared on Instagram, in the section "best friends stories", a poll to find out who was for or against the wealth tax. And then we argued, but without attacking each other. It was good (Hernán, 20 years old, personal communication, November 22, 2020).

Thus, with the pandemic, the isolation measures taken by the Argentine government and their successive modifications and prolongations brought disparate voices into the public conversation. "On the quarantine-versus-economy discussion, I only discussed it with my best friends, on Instagram. I no longer participate in discussions on Twitter, there is a lot of aggression". Juana, a 22-year-old university student and member of a centre-left political group, confessed this: "I used to use Twitter, but not anymore, people fight a lot there, they tell you no matter what. I prefer my WhatsApp groups or Instagram stories, where we take care of each other among friends" (personal communication, October 11, 2020). These conversations are not open, but controlled and moderated between nuclei of affectivities that remain out of the public eye (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2018), which points out and targets discrepancies.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The findings of this study suggest that the model of AC needs to be reconsidered because it no longer encompasses all political participation practices that young sectors carry out throughout the digital space. This occurs in, at least, two different ways. On one side, young people prefer to participate politically immersed in peer digital networks by adapting, re-appropriating and re-signifying tools that social media offer, transforming them in symbols of political participation. These new modes of involvement could be seen as part of those creative expressions that Bennet and his colleagues noted in their early researches where the AC model was first presented (2008, 2011), but they specify more academic discussion, as these practices are novel and refer precisely to the social media realm. Even though hashtivism, has been studied in the last years by academics from different contexts, the use of emojis for outlining personal opinions, that can be named as emojiism, is a digital performance that needs more attention in the academia. On the other side, this study has found that although peer-to-peer flows continue to be the framework from which diverse practices of civic involvement are constructed and leading, they do not include all peers, nor just any peer: circulations of political participation practices are amidst close contacts, best friends and those who have known each other for a long time, with whom they interact to weave networks of participation, discussion and opinion. In this sense, while in the AC model, the digital came to complement and enlarge the space for participation and civic involvement of citizens, fundamentally young people, in this new context, the expanded space is once again limited to what is already known by peers and close contacts. This is another line for future research opportunities.

CONCLUSION

Findings of this research have noted that young people run conversations about public issues, but using other strategies and tools that are part of the resources that social media offer to interact and dialogue, such as the use of symbols to express their opinions. Instead of commenting on the public web, they prefer to outline their views using emojis and hashtags. In this way, they connect to conversations and performances of activism using digital shortcuts through which their peer network understand each other. These digital “creative civic expressions” (Bennett et al., 2010, p. 398) are deployed in highly polarized contexts as strategies for avoiding uncivil comments –if not hate speeches– that are usually found in contexts where affective polarization inflames discussions (Jane, 2015) and, consequently, hinder free conversations and civil debates (Valera-Ordaz et al., 2017) as practices of political participation. However, in this research it has been noted that young people perform digital dialogues, but in reduced spaces, where the eye of the unknown contacts cannot have access. In this sense, these private small agoras that young people erect in the digital space, call into question –once again– the use of digital environments as settings for extensive public conversation that was promised at the dawn of social platforms (Castells, 2008). Instead, they are more like digital micro-spheres (Winocur, 2001), akin to the polemics that arise in gatherings of friends in private places (living rooms) or reduced semi-public spaces (bars and cafés), where only the invited ones can be part of the meetings. Thus, the findings of this study seem to indicate that today the conversation about public and polarized issues among young people occurs between close contacts, amidst communities of trust –given by the affect–that are difficult to crack, even when the topics are polarized (Bustos Martínez et al., 2019; Tucker et al., 2018; Wilhelm, & Joeckel, 2019). Therefore, as discussions flow in circles in which affect is a constitutive factor, repertoires of partici-

pation are facilitated and activated (Dahlgren, 2018). These small private agoras can be understood as havens from the virulence of arising issues, such as those related to the pandemic, in which intimacy and affection create comfortable and safe that encourage participation in conversations on “spicy” topics, as participants of this research remarked. This traffic of opinions in more intimate, controlled and recognised environments aims at self-preservation and avoidance of situations of aggression and digital violence that led young people to retrace their steps and take refuge in the care and trust granted by the affection of what is known. Even though, at first glance, this practice can be seen as conformation of filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011) and eco chambers (Sunstein, 2007), both of which undermine the quality of democratic conversation, the findings of this research have noted that it is the proximity given by the affect and not by the ideology the variable that contributes to create havens more than bubbles. In this sense, it would seem that they do not have homophilic conversations (Valera-Ordaz et al. 2018) on this micro spheres, but that they confront and deliberate—both necessary processes in democratic participation (Dahlgren, 2005; Mouffe, 2013)—, only with those people with whom confrontation and discrepancies are not followed by aggression.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research was supported by the Universidad Nacional del Noroeste de la provincia de Buenos Aires (UNNOBA) [SIB 0556/2019].

I would like to express my gratitude to the editors of this book for considering this chapter for publication. I wish to extend my thanks to the reviewers for their valuable comments on my manuscript.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ In Argentina, digital access is unequal distributed: even though, on average the 70% the population of the country has internet in their homes, there are provinces that only 30% of their population has internet, while capital city of Buenos Aires, household connection is 130% (Enacom, Cabase)
- ² In Argentina, 24 March marks the anniversary of the last military coup.
- ³ “Not one [woman] less.”

Chapter 8

The Mirage of Truth: The Instrumentalization of Fact-Checking to Spread an Ideological Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Fact-checkers have grown recently, facing the decline of journalism and the acceleration of disinformation flows on the internet. Due to the recent scholarly attention to these journalistic outlets, some authors have pointed to diverse critics such as the political bias and the low impact of fact-checking initiatives. In line with the research approaching the weaponization of disinformation in politics, this chapter reflects on the instrumentalization of verifying practices as a fact to consider when studying fact-checking. The investigation applies a combined methodology to compare Bendita and Maldita initiatives. While the latter is internationally recognized as an entity of fact-checking, the second one arises as an imitation of it and lacks recognition and scholarly attention. Conclusions suggest that fact-checking implies more complex activities than refuting specific facts, while alt-right positions can instrumentalize fact-checking for political objectives. The authors call for the importance of definitions that exclude this type of misuse of verification.

INTRODUCTION

Fact-checking is a relatively new term (Graves, 2017) that has reached a timely fashion in the last few years to the point that some authors consider it an innovative form of news coverage (Nyhan et al., 2020). Initiatives for verifying information have exponentially multiplied all over the world (Dias & Sippitt,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8057-8.ch008

2020). Most of the countries, both from the North and the Global South, have active fact-checkers in the current times (Graves & Cherubini, 2016), and organizations that launch them are diverse, from media outlets to NGOs.

Although based on journalism practices and the verification values, fact-checkers differ from other media outlets (Singer, 2018, 2020), focusing on giving evidence about specific facts and claims (Amazeen, 2019). They can be embraced as a response to the recent disinformation context (Amazeen, 2019; Tuñón Navarro, Oleart, & Bouza García, 2019), tackling the existence of hoaxes and false news on the Internet. Their central visibility in political processes and media environment has attracted scholarly investigations that approach fact-checking from different approaches (Burel et al., 2020), compressing their dynamics, audience, and impact on public opinion.

However, fact-checkers are not free from criticism. Some studies have proved that one content could be differently verified (Lim, 2018) and recognize the need to evaluate their method of evaluation to gain effectiveness (Dias & Sippitt, 2020). Other authors have shown a minimal effect of their activity on the political behavior of citizens (Nyhan et al., 2020) and, in turn, have reflected whether users choose accuracy rather than ideological reinforcement (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Wardle, 2018).

This investigation aims to critically reflect on fact-checkers considering the weaponization of truth (Molina et al., 2019). That is, just as some political factions can construct their discourse pointing to the falsehood of political opponents' claims, the chapter suggests that fact-checkers could also be instrumentalized to expose certain viewpoints (i.e., alt-right ideologies), prioritizing the reinforcement of arguments over a journalism practice.

Combining qualitative and quantitative data, the investigation compares two initiatives that present themselves as fact-checkers: *Bendita* and *Maldita*. The latter is a verification project that has attracted interest from previous research (i.e., Magallón-Rosa, 2018; Bernal-Treviño & Clares-Gavilán, 2019; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019) that identifies it as one of the central fact-checking platforms in Spain. *Maldita* presents international recognition as well as is a member of the International Fact-Checking Network. Moreover, *Bendita* is a newer initiative that has not seconded the principles of IFCN, and its activity is yet to be investigated in Spanish scholarly literature.

This chapter aims to analyze the structure and content of two entities that call themselves fact-checkers by seeing if they meet the values that characterize them. This goal includes five specific objectives: 1) Examine the aesthetics of *Maldita* and *Bendita*. 2) Explore their structure and organization, 3) Analyze their activities and topics of fact-checking, 4) Identify the scrutinized subjects and the sources employed in their verification practices. 5) Measure the engagement of each message in their Twitter profiles. We consider this type of comparison to be novel in fact-checker research and expect that the results could lead to similar international work, including comparisons between different local contexts.

The chapter is structured as follows. The theoretical framework explores disinformation in the context of polarized alt-right discourse and fact-checking as a journalistic discipline with new responsibilities. Later, qualitative and quantitative analysis is explained in detail in the methodological section. The results are divided into two parts, with the qualitative and the quantitative data, respectively. Finally, conclusions suggest that the aesthetics of fact-checking can serve to disseminate an alt-right discourse. Comparing *Maldita* and *Bendita* proves that verification projects imply more comprehensive activities, deeper analysis, and more complex practices than merely reporting false information. This idea led the authors to suggest that media profiles such as *Bendita* could undermine the truthfulness in fact-checks and make citizens resistant to them.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Disinformation and the Alt-Right Discourse

The spread of disinformation through social media has received a great deal of interest in academic studies, especially since the US Presidential Elections and the Brexit referendum in 2016 (Bennet & Livingston, 2018; Humprecht, 2020). Following the incredible popularity of the term ‘fake news,’ Tandoc et al. (2018) pointed out that it is a trendy concept that has generated a great deal of media and political attention, although it is not something new. According to these authors, fake news stories have two main motivations, which are ideological and financial. In their literature review, the same authors stated that the term ‘fake news’ had been used to define very different content, such as propagandistic or deliberately false:

“Earlier studies have applied the term to define related but distinct types of content, such as news parodies, political satires, and news propaganda. While it is currently used to describe false stories spreading on social media, fake news has also been invoked to discredit some news organizations’ critical reporting, further muddying discourse around fake news” (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 138).

In contrast to the isolated concept of ‘fake news,’ Bennet and Livingston prefer the term ‘disinformation,’ defined as “intentional falsehoods spread as news stories or simulated documentary formats to advance political goals” (2018, p. 124). There may be an intention to create social gaps and create debates that are not based on reason, as Bennet and Livingston (2018) stated.

Several studies have shown concern about the risks that the consumption of political communication on social networks poses to citizens as the content is biased (Hameleers, 2020). Disinformation threatens the democratic decision-making order because “citizens and politicians can no longer agree on factual information that forms the input for policy making” (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020, p. 2). The current polarized context leads the population to consume content that confirms their beliefs. According to the same authors, this makes citizens potential victims of disinformation, as they are more likely to believe false information if it is in line with their ideological bias.

“Numerous studies support this statement by finding that individuals tend to recall more information that is in favour of their position and to evidence that confirms their hypothesis so that they require less hypothesis- confirming evidence to accept an idea than they need hypothesis-inconsistent information to reject it” (Spohr, 2017: 154).

The dissemination of false information has been fueled by the existing polarization in the political scenario and the existence of algorithms in social networks. The use of political bots contributes to the propagation of false and manipulated information, amplifying ideas that are marginal and receiving greater visibility in social networks (Resende et al., 2019). There are computational campaigns that promote false information with strategic objectives that endanger democratic systems. The algorithms present in social networks have led to the formation of the filter bubble and echo chambers (Spohr, 2017), which implies a selective exposure of users to opinions that validate their political convictions. Consequently, these technological features affect the political spectrum through the consumption of information, polarizing the population even more. These echo chambers can also influence political discourse and public information beyond what happens on social media.

Social networks can exponentially increase the effect of disinformation, but they can also mitigate it. Spohr (2017) argues that platforms such as Google, Twitter, and Facebook should be aware of their role and mission in public opinion, among many other technology companies. From his point of view, these

large corporations should be aware of the potential damage they are doing in terms of spreading disinformation and should assume responsibility for it. Therefore, he suggests algorithmic changes in these platforms that decrease disinformation. In the author's opinion, this fact should be added to a conscious and exhaustive search for political information by citizens. By bringing all these factors together, we can combat misinformation and have a better informed citizenry that actively seeks out more sources of information and broadens public debate.

It is indeed this polarization present on the Internet that multiplies the virality of manipulated or false content. According to a study carried out by Vosoughi et al. (2018), it takes six times longer for the truth to spread than false information, which also gets significantly more reactions from users. This phenomenon takes advantage of the 'economy of emotions,' which uses emotions to increase advertising revenue through displaying content on the Internet. Machine learning feeds on and learns from people's feelings, and this can be put to malicious use in a context of disinformation. This technology may confirm already existing political positions through automated fake content (Bakir & McStay, 2017).

Disinformation threatens democracy, according to Bennet and Livingston (2018), as it happened with the Brexit campaign and Donald Trump's communication. These campaigns have taken advantage of a racist discourse, which discriminates against certain social minorities and uses alt-right speech. Thus, Nielsen and Graves (2020) assure that disinformation does not affect all ideologies equally but that the radical right has profited from the viralization of these discriminatory and false contents. In a report analyzing the results of a UK survey, Chadwick and Vaccari (2019) noted that right-wing supporters have a higher tendency to share false or incorrect messages.

The specific technological, structural conditions that increase disinformation have a more significant impact in propagating fake content favorable to the radical right. Ferrara (2017) suggested that there is a market for political disinformation bots. Specifically, this author found evidence in both the 2016 US Presidential Election and the 2017 French Presidential Election of bots that propagated far-right discourse. There is, therefore, an environment and several technical circumstances in social media that increase the dissemination of disinformation close to the radical right.

2.2. Fact-Checking as a Journalistic Discipline

In a new scenario dominated by disinformation and by the existence of a datified society (Van Dijck, 2014), journalism finds itself in a crisis of legitimacy (Tandoc et al., 2018; Steensen, 2019), which pushes information professionals to update their routines to the new challenges of society. Steensen (2019) points to a new and more constructivist epistemological approach that inquiries into the authenticity of information sources and make the journalistic product more transparent. These outcomes will foster information literacy adapted to the climate of disinformation present in social media.

"It is when audiences mistake it as real news that fake news can play with journalism's legitimacy. This is particularly important in the context of social media, where information is exchanged, and therefore meanings are negotiated and shared. The socialness of social media adds a layer to the construction of fake news, in that the power of fake news lies on how well it can penetrate social spheres" (Tandoc et al., 2019, p. 148).

Fact-checking appears as one of the possible solutions to this problem, through which journalists confirm or deny information through a verification process. One of the objectives is to educate the audience since journalists provide the data they demonstrate or disprove. This goal can influence how users consume information (Amazeen, 2017). Likewise, fact-checking can promote a political change and an

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improvement in journalism. Thus, fact-checking aims to alert society to false manipulated or inaccurate information and has a democratic and pluralistic approach.

Traditional fact-checking evaluates the accuracy of statements made by politicians. Still, disinformation events in recent years have transformed this discipline and focused it on false content propagated mainly through the Internet (Choi & Haigh, 2019). This raises the ambition to create a democratic, open, and pluralistic information verification system that is decentralized, as Choras et al. (2019) stated. According to these authors, this ecosystem should combine the latest technological advances –such as data mining and machine learning–, index information, cross-reference content, consider websites’ the publisher websites, compare publications, other publications, and use semantic analysis to detect fake news.

The main objection to fact-checking focuses on its lack of effectiveness since the population is influenced by its prior beliefs and opinions (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020). These authors state that, even with the scientific potential of disproving false information and testing it, the population has an attitude rooted in its ideology that hinders the fact-checking efforts. There are two possible outcomes regarding fact-checkers’ work, according to Nyhan et al. (2020). On the one hand, people may accept the fact-checks and adapt their beliefs to them. On the other hand, they may oppose believing in these works when the fact-checks are opposed to their ideological interests.

Fact-checking has shown the potential to reduce political polarization; however, Hameleers and van der Meer (2019) point to a possible tendency for people not to expose themselves to fact-checkers that disagree with their previous opinions. Thus, communicators can take advantage of the credibility of fact-checking to spread more disinformation:

“This means that we have to place a critical side-note to the practical implications of fact-checkers. Although they may be extremely valuable tools to combat misinformation when in the right hands, communicators with the wrong intentions may profit from the legitimacy and perceived accuracy of fact-checkers and use their format to reinforce disinformation – hereby making falsehoods even more credible by allegedly verifying it with fake evidence” (Hameleers, 2020, p. 15).

This author warns that hoaxes using statistics, fake sources, and other false evidence are perceived as more accurate and confirm already existing opinions. This reason is why Hameleers (2020) advocates protecting the independence of fact-checking organizations. Dias and Sippitt (2020) also criticize that academic studies on fact-checking have focused predominantly on its persuasive capacity but not on its educational impact. This journalistic practice offers people information to think with their criteria. Therefore, these authors stress the importance of studying the contribution to the knowledge of fact-checkers and their ability to show who to trust and who not to trust.

Therefore, it is interesting to examine the effects of fact-checking, but Lim (2018) also highlights the importance of analyzing the performance of this discipline. This author found in a study that fact-checkers from different organizations rarely checked the same news, and when they did, they had a low match rate. In this line, Dias and Sippit (2020) criticize that academic studies assume that the role of fact-checking is persuasive and question its educational role. Thus, they ask whether fact-checks give people knowledge about who they should trust or not and help people develop critical thinking skills. They propose to delve deeper into the cultural changes that data verification can bring about. Therefore, Hameleers (2020) suggests combining verification with media literacy techniques.

METHODOLOGY

To analyze the *Bendita* case, it is performed along with an analysis of the fact-checker *Maldita*. It is picked this particular medium to compare their content and their activity because, first, *Bendita* clearly seems to imitate aesthetically *Maldita* (even its name - *Bendita* (blessed) - is the opposite of *Maldita* (damned), and second, because *Maldita* is one of the best-known fact-checkers at the Spanish national level and internationally recognized.

Mixed methods are used to conduct the research. Firstly, a formal analysis is carried out, taking into account both communication portals as a whole (content, communication, and graphic identity). This factor is important because the aesthetics of the project already prepares citizens to doubt or not the information they consume. Thus, if an online portal appears to be a media outlet, the user will take its contents to be truthful journalistic pieces. Specifically, it is addressed: a) the aesthetics of the project -what it looks like-; b) the frequency of publication; c) the format of the contents - what aesthetics does the content follow to denounce it as a hoax-; d) the platforms on which they have activity -where are they present-; and e) the entities with which they have collaborated publicly or have a consortium. For this, it is performed a qualitative analysis that explores the dimensions of the projects on all their platforms to compare them.

Secondly, to be able to make a more profound comparison of the content that *Bendita.eu* and *Maldita.es* published, and to be sure that this is done in equal terms -e.g., in the same platform, in the same period of time-, it is collected a corpus of all messages from their Twitter account that were published during a month (from 15th February 2021 to 15th March 2021). The period chosen contained several significant dates for Spain, such as the remembrance of the 11M attacks, which was already the subject of disinformation at the time, and the celebration of Women's Day on 8 March. This is a period in which we believe that the activity of fact-checkers can be intense.

The data was crawled with Facepager (Jünger & Keyling, 2019) from their main Twitter accounts (@*Maldita_es* and @*Benditapuntoeu*). Although both content creators have more than one Twitter account, they both have a generic account and thematically specific accounts, it was decided to analyze only their main account because both entities used that general account to support and promote all their content, as those tweets published in specific accounts (such as those specific to feminism or immigration) are also retweeted by the primary account to increase its amplification range. That is, more precisely, the corpus of tweets is composed of 34 tweets from *Bendita* and 551 from *Maldita*.

This content analysis carried out was focused on the variables shown in table 1. Categories were created *ad hoc* after a generic analysis of their contents made by the authors. The manual coding was carried out by two coders who, after several meetings and adjustments of the codebook, obtained an optimum result of their intercoder reliability. Krippendorff's alpha test for the variables was from 0,815 - 0,947. The agreements reached on various codification issues can be found in italics in each variable.

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Table 1. Variables and categories of the content analysis performed

Variable	Categories
a) the theme of the published hoaxes	1- Science / Health 2- Politics / Government 3- Migration 4- Feminism 5- Others
b) the origin of the source they refute	0-No refute 1-Government / Institutional 2-Parties or politicians 3-Media / journalists 4-Companies 5-International 6-Associations / activists 7-Famous people / influencers 8-Anonymous users 9-Others <i>When we find in the same tweet several mentions or denials of entities belonging to different categories, the media takes precedence over the politician or party because it is understood that it criticizes a discourse disseminated by many actors.</i>
c) the source used to refute	0- Does not give source information / Not applicable 1- Official documentation / Official data 2- Consultations with experts 3- Media 4- Blogs / websites / social networks 5- Other <i>When there are several sources of information used for refutation, the most important or most frequently used source is used for refutation.</i>
d) the viralisation of the message	This is a quantitative variable. It is set regarding the engagement (RTs and likes)

Source: Own elaboration

RESULTS

4.1. Aesthetical Analysis

Intending to explore the structure, aesthetics, and organization of *Maldita* and *Bendita*, we undertook a formal study of both cases, which began with an aesthetic analysis of the two platforms. It is evident the aesthetic imitation of *Bendita* to *Maldita*, starting with the name of the project –opposite words and meanings, which mean “damn” and “holy”, consecutively—and the sub-projects since *Maldita* was created from its birth several sections and *Bendita* has reproduced it making, in turn, several blocks, many of them opposed (Table 2).

The appearance is also very similar in both cases. *Maldita*'s logo is a capital “M” and *Bendita*'s logo is a capital “B”. The sub-projects of both platforms use primary colors and similar typography and aesthetics, as can be seen in Figure 1. The frequency of publication, on the other hand, is very different. *Maldita* distributes around ten publications every day, while *Bendita* publishes one, and there are even some days when it does not publish any at all. This highlights the more professional nature of *Maldita*, which has a technical team that allows this publication frequency to be higher.

Table 2. Maldita and Bendita’s accounts on Twitter

Maldita / Damn	Bendita / Holy
Maldito Bulo / Damn hoax	- No equivalence -
Maldita Hemeroteca / Damn News Archive	- No equivalence -
Maldita Ciencia / Damn Science	Bendita Ciencia / Holy Science
Maldito Dato / Damn Data	- No equivalence -
Maldita Migración / Damn Migration	Bendita Inmigración / Holy Immigration
Maldito Feminismo / Damn Feminism	Bendita Igualdad / Holy Equality
Maldita Tecnología / Damn Technology	
- No equivalence -	Bendita Justicia, Bendita Internacional, Bendita Historia, Bendita Cultura / Holy Justice, Holy International, Holy History, Holy Culture

Source: Own elaboration

Figure 1. Corporative image of Maldita and Bendita and their subsections. Source: Maldita and Bendita accounts on Twitter



Maldita and Bendita do not publish their information on the same platforms. Maldita has a complete website (*Maldita*), from where the user can access all their channels where they disseminate their contents. Vizoso and Vázquez-Herrero already explained that this website resembles any cybermedia: “Verifications are presented as a piece of news with headline, subtitles, highlights and a body where they explain data that contribute to the veracity or misrepresentation of information. Also, these texts are usually accompanied by supporting documentary evidence, videos and pictures, either true, false or even comparative analyses to help the user to understand differences” (Vizoso & Vázquez-Herrero, 2019, p. 135).

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Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Telegram are the main networks where *Maldita* communicates, although they also publish content in a channel on YouTube, TikTok, and LinkedIn. It should be noted that *Maldita* has an essential presence in other Spanish media.

Bendita, on the other hand, has fewer channels. This platform acquired the domain *Bendita*, which directly redirects the user to their Twitter account, where most of their activity takes place. From this account, users can access their Facebook and Instagram accounts, where they post precisely the same material as in their tweets (e.g., they only post screenshots of their tweets on Instagram).

The format of the fact-checks is similar since formally *Bendita* resembles *Maldita*'s tweets, although it has some limitations. In this sense, they use red crosses emojis to indicate that it is false information, they include the inscription "BULO" (hoax) in capital letters and then they deny it. In the case of *Maldita*, they also include a link to their website where the fact-check is explained, and sources are provided for each case. On the other hand, since they do not have a website, *Bendita* justifies itself through images and external links instead of giving a more detailed explanation, as *Maldita* does. In this sense, *Maldita* is more transparent in terms of its sources and methodology than *Bendita*.

We also conducted a review of the entities with which *Maldita* and *Bendita* have publicly collaborated or have a consortium. In this regard, *Maldita* is a signatory of the International Fact-checking Network Code of Principles since 2018. Therefore, they belong to this international fact-checking organization. *Maldita* also belongs to other international organisms, such as FactcheckEU (<https://eufactcheck.eu/>), a European initiative that emerged to disprove hoaxes during the European Parliament Elections in 2019, and LatamChequea, which collaborates with Latin American media to fight against disinformation related to the coronavirus. It also collaborates with other entities and organizations, such as Oxfam Intermón. As mentioned above, *Maldita* also collaborates with various Spanish media, such as Ondacero and Radio Nacional de España. Regarding *Bendita*, there are no known collaborations with other media or organizations. Moreover, as they do not have a website, they do not have a section to get to know the team and its activity, so nothing is known about who or what organization is behind this platform.

As a consequence, we observed that *Maldita* not only is transparent with their fact-checking journalism content, sharing their sources and methodologies, but also they are accountable to their audience about their financing, their collaborations and their personnel. In contrast, *Bendita* demonstrated opacity at all these levels, as we do not know what entities may be behind this organization, how they are financed, and what people constitute this organization.

4.2. Content Analysis

Quantitative data showed significant differences between the two profiles in Twitter in all the categories of the content analysis. In general terms, *Maldita* published more posts of a wider variety of themes and with various objectives. Between 15th February and 15th March, *Maldita* wrote 550 messages, while *Bendita* only had 34. Although *Maldita* presented activity all the days of the month, *Bendita* showed discontinuity. For instance, this last profile did not tweet between 1st and 10th March, and in total, it was inactive during 12 out of the 29 days analyzed (Figure 3).

Both accounts displayed peaks of activity during the month, partly matching key events in the Spanish agenda. Thus, *Maldita* remembered the Spanish coup d'état of 23rd February during those days. In mid-March, three events came together: the Womens' Day's celebration (8th March) and the call for elections in the Community of Madrid (10th March), and the anniversary of the terrorist attack (11th March). Both events pushed *Maldita*'s activity on Twitter: "✘ '11th March [attack] was ETA' was

Figure 2. Samples of hoaxes were denied by Maldita and Bendita on Twitter. Source: Maldita and Bendita accounts on Twitter

Maldita.es retweeted

Maldita Migración @m_migracion · 2 mar.

✖ No, este vídeo no está grabado en el metro de París ni es Policía deteniendo a "magrebíes" o "musulmanes" por toser o estornudar "en la cara a los viajeros".

👉 Es un bulo que vuelve: son ultras de un equipo de fútbol en Bucarest



No, este vídeo no está grabado en el metro de París ni es Policía d...
 Cuando hablamos sobre desinformación sobre inmigración, es habitual encontrarse con bulos que acusan a inmigrantes de ...

🔗 maldita.es

👍 10 ❤️ 11

Bendita.eu retweeted

Bendita Inmigración @Binmigracion · 7 feb.

🚫 BULO de @_anapastor_. "La historia de Iñaki Williams. De cómo sus padres llegaron a España saltando la valla de Melilla. Su madre estaba embarazada de él..."

✖ FALSO: Comenzó a construirse en 1998, tras los acuerdos de libre circulación de Schengen. Williams nació en 1994.



La historia de @Williaaams45. De cómo sus padres, sus aitas, llegaron a España saltando la valla de Melilla. Su madre estaba embarazada de él. Todo el cuerpo marcado aún de esos días

Puesto de guardia en la valla de Melilla

Comenzó a construirse en 1998, inicialmente era una sola valla y más adelante dos vallas paralelas de tres metros de altura. En 2005 se elevaron hasta los seis metros, en 2006 se realizó un tercer muro.

Campeonato: Primera División

País: España

Edad: 15/06/1994 (28 años)

Altura: 180 cm

Peso: 70 kg

Posición del jugador: Delantero

Ficha: 2024 4 / Más

Centro: Izquierda

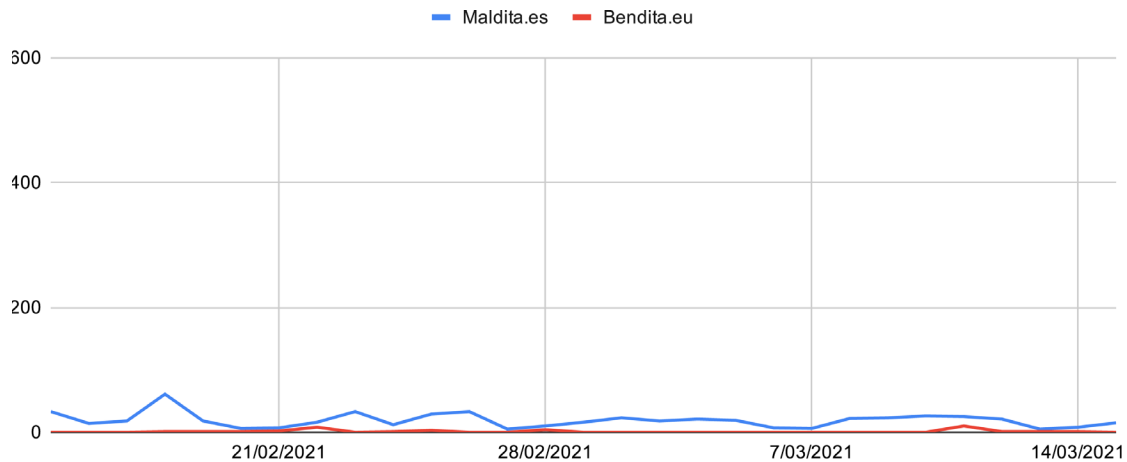
Pierna buena: Derecha

👍 226 🔄 3,1 mil ❤️ 5 mil

The Mirage of Truth

the most widespread hoax about the attacks for 17 years: we refute it and other hoaxes and conspiracy theories in #MalditaLaHora, our weekly podcast 🎧 Listen to it now! 📌 <https://t.co/Ud4RRYwiBL>.”

Figure 3. Tweets frequency of Maldita and Bendita. Own elaboration



Both profiles expressed a similar interest in approaching politics and political parties. 23.59% and 23.53% of tweets by *Maldita* and *Bendita*, respectively, were linked with this topic. Both profiles were mainly centered on national politics, although *Maldita* mentioned a more diverse set of parties (Table 3). Although in an exploratory fashion, we also identified a biased selection of the parties in the case of *Bendita*: almost all of the tweets cited left-wing political organization Unidas Podemos. Only one tweet mentioned the right-wing party Partido Popular, in order to note the veracity of one of its claims.

Politics aside, *Maldita* and *Bendita* differed in their topics of attention. *Bendita* is mainly interested in feminism, to the point that 76.47% of its tweets dealt with gender's questions. The profile was mostly dedicated to denying institutional data on gender violence. For example: “⊖ HOAX by @IreneMontero. ‘Consent has to be at the heart of our Penal Code.’ ✗ FALSE: Consent is already covered in the Penal Code (Article 181). <https://t.co/kEpR46jYpW>”.

In the case of *Maldita*, engagement with feminism involved only 5.99% and was mainly related to the Women's Day call. More relevant for this fact-checking was science and health, which filled 37.93% of the sample. In this case, most of the tweets were related to COVID-19, although health is a frequent theme. *Maldita* was dedicated to debunking myths related to remedies to cure diseases (“Does it help to leave a hole in the middle of food when microwaving it? <https://t.co/wCTV8Tfd6P>”) or to address issues of general interest, such as mental health (“🧠 Mental health on Twitch: How do you get out of depression? Why do you need to ask for help? When to seek help?”). 📌 <https://t.co/NDU79mownA>”).

30.13% of *Maldita*'s tweets are categorized as “Other.” In this case, its activity is dedicated to advertise its activity or ask support from its readers: “We need you more than ever to fight the hoax pandemic ✗ How? Two ways: 📌 Donate us your superpower. 📌 Become an ambassador. Log on to <https://t.co/xriDiskJgt> and help us win the battle against misinformation <https://t.co/rDJStHFYJ2>.”

In the previous question lies the main difference between *Bendita* and *Maldita*. *Bendita* presented a fact-checker aspect as usual: it was dedicated to pointing out the falsity or truthfulness of certain infor-

mation. In the case of *Maldita*, however, its activity extended beyond verification. The latter published informative articles shared its appearances in other media, and very frequently announced its lives on Twitch, which included interviews: “So much for the 23-F special of #MalditaTwitcheria! At 14:00h we’ll be back to talk about Nutriscore with @Maldita_ciencia and its coordinator @galatea128, don’t miss it [👉 https://t.co/xtz3rY5ado](https://t.co/xtz3rY5ado)”.

Table 3. Tweets from *Bendita* and *Maldita* regarding the topic addressed

Theme	<i>Bendita</i>	<i>Maldita</i>
Science and health	0,00%	37,93%
Institucional politics and government	23,53%	23,59%
General politics and political parties	0,00%	0,73%
Migration	0,00%	1,63%
Feminism	76,47%	5,99%
Others	0,00%	30,13%

Source: Own elaboration

This fact explains that in 81.67% of cases *Maldita* did not deny certain hoaxes, while in the case of *Bendita* this percentage dropped to 32.35% (Table 4). *Maldita* never refuted any group in more than 4% of the occasions, and *Bendita* focused on political parties and media. Together with Unidad Podemos, *Bendita* mainly referred to progressive television channel La Sexta: “⊖ BULO de @laSextaTV. “Ayuso manipula cuando dice que los hombres sufren más agresiones que las mujeres.” ✘ FALSO: Los datos demuestran que la mayoría de víctimas de homicidios y agresiones son hombres (Source: INE and Interior Minstry). <https://t.co/D77UindiYO> <https://t.co/wrgjEYqpiN>.”

This last tweet also demonstrated another of *Bendita*’s practices identified in the content analysis: the demagogic use of data to delegitimize arguments. In this particular case, INE’s data showed that the perpetrators of aggressions against men are other men, so there was no structural violence from women to men in this sense.

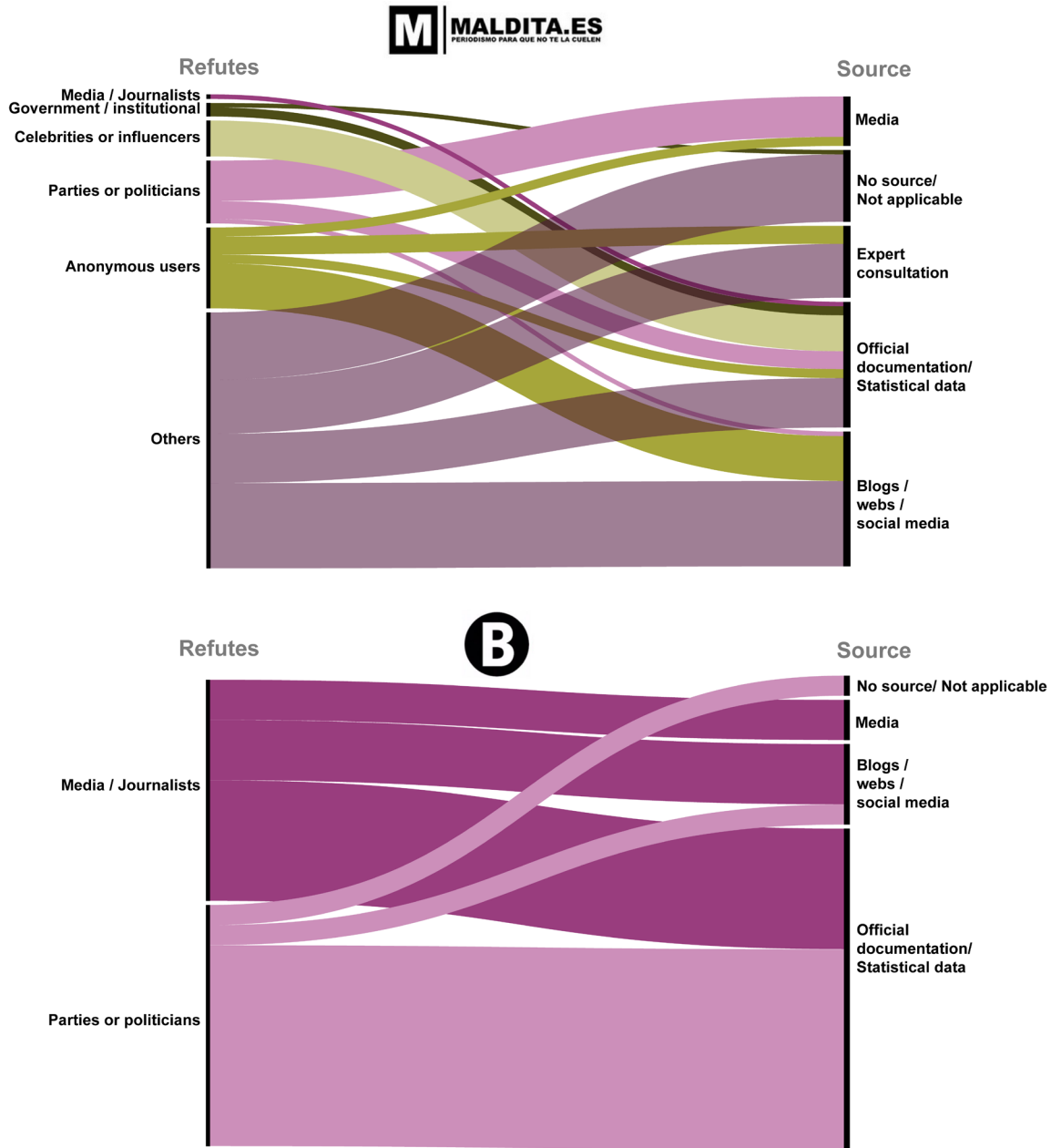
Table 4. *Bendita* and *Maldita* tweets regarding who they refute

Refute	<i>Bendita</i>	<i>Maldita</i>
Government / Institutional	0,00%	0,54%
Not Refute	32,35%	81,67%
Parties or politicians	35,29%	2,54%
Media or journalists	32,35%	0,18%
Famous people or influencers	0,00%	1,45%
Anonymous users	0,00%	3,27%
Other	0,00%	10,34%

Source: Own elaboration

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Figure 4. Sources employed to refute diverse subjects. Source: Own elaboration



When verifying, *Maldita* used a variety of sources in a balanced manner: blogs, websites, social networks (5.44%); official documentation (5.26%); Consultations with experts (2.90%), and the media (2.00%). In contrast, *Bendita* handled primarily official documentation (47.06%) as opposed to blogs, websites, social networks (11.75%), and the media (5.88%). This data would prove that *Maldita* executed a broader journalistic work, while *Bendita* retrieved the more available data as they were quicker to obtain. Additionally, data proves that *Maldita* adapts the type of source to the examined subject,

employing blogs and social networks when approaching anonymous users and media organizations to verify political parties and politicians' statements. In the case of *Bendita*, official documentation always remains as the principal source of verification although, the official sources used by *Bendita* were not always the most appropriate.

The partisan approach to *Bendita*'s activity on Twitter results in higher engagement: on average, their messages received 171 reactions. The publication with more interactions proclaim hoaxes of statements about gender equality. Thus, this interest in undermining the feminist movement pointing out the false information distributed by it generates large polarization in social networks. Indeed, the tweets with the highest number of interactions in *Bendita*'s timeline belonged to *BenditaIgualdad* and got more than 300 retweets and 500 favorites. Users who support these viewpoints share them to reinforce their arguments.

Engagement in *Maldita*'s account is remarkably lower, reaching nine reactions per message. The diversity of its activity may explain this tendency since not all the tweets are susceptible to being viralized, for instance, if it asked for financial support, reported media appearance, or announced an online event. No message surpasses 200 interactions, but recollected data also shows that hoaxes' publication frequently gets more interaction than the content with different goals. "Victoria Abril's false or unevicted claims about the COVID-19 vaccine. <https://t.co/5sEVEuVf5l>", for instance, had 53 retweets and 173 favorites. Again, the data demonstrates the ability of the disinformation to be shared on social networks, even when the publications debunk it.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In this research work, we aimed to compare two Spanish platforms that describe themselves as fact-checkers (*Maldita* and *Bendita*) to determine if they can be considered such or use the characteristics of fact-checking organizations to propagate an ideological discourse. In this regard, we wanted to explore whether these platforms are non-partisan and transparent with their methodology. We have investigated the information sources they use to debunk hoaxes and correct errors or manipulative information. We also examined the topics most frequently addressed by these organizations in their publications, as well as their viralisation. To this end, we conducted a formal aesthetical analysis of the two platforms and a content analysis of their Twitter accounts for one month.

After the formal analysis, we observed an evident imitation of all the aesthetic aspects of *Maldita* by *Bendita* (Objective 1). This imitation is transversal, as observed in the name itself (which is the opposite word), even in the subsections, in the corporate aesthetics (similar colors, typography, and images), and also in the way of expressing themselves on Twitter when they try to deny information (matching structure of the tweets, with similar sentences). This illustrates *Bendita*'s intention to have an image of a reliable fact-checking organization and to stand up to *Maldita*.

Also, *Maldita* has many more platforms where their content is disclosed. They do not only use their social media (such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, among others), but they also publish their content in a website where *Maldita* expands the information shared in social media and provides sources to ensure the transparency of its journalistic content and offer information with greater credibility (Objective 2). On the other hand, *Bendita* only publishes the text in the tweets and, subsequently, dumps the same content on its Facebook and Instagram accounts. Therefore, it does not expand the information to offer sources of information with which it has contrasted the news, so this content is more opaque.

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We also could observe that *Bendita* published far fewer verifications, as we only collected 34 tweets from this organization and 551 from *Maldita*. In fact, there were a total of 12 days out of the 29 days analyzed in which *Bendita* did not update the Twitter account. These data may indicate an absence of personnel and organization on this platform. Personnel and entities which may be behind *Bendita* are unknown, as they are not transparent about their structure or how they are organized. Therefore, we doubt the presence of professional journalists in *Bendita*. On the other hand, we do know the people behind *Maldita*, its economic independence, and its structure in general (Objective 2) because they are not transparent about it.

Furthermore, the activity of *Maldita* goes beyond verifying the veracity of hoaxes, as it also offers extensive information on different types of topics, such as detailed reports and Twitch.tv programs where they discuss some issues (Objective 3). We also concluded that *Bendita* is highly politicized and tends to promote radical right ideas so that its contents try to damage the image of left-wing political parties and media. Thus, *Maldita* mentioned more parties in its fact-checks than *Bendita*, which focused more on those who they wanted to harm with their content by presenting them as manipulators. These concerns are well-justified. Some research indicates, for instance, that people can be highly resistant to journalistic fact-checks (Nyhan et al., 2020).

In terms of the tweets' subject, it was very striking that 76.47% of the tweets on *Bendita* had to do with feminism. Simultaneously, in *Maldita*, there was a greater variety, with Science and Health as the most discussed topic (37.93%), since they were primarily related to the pandemic due to COVID-19. These results also demonstrate *Bendita*'s intention to highlight what they considered "lies" perpetrated by the feminist movement (Objective 4).

Similarly, *Maldita* used a wide variety of sources to verify or deny information, something that did not happen in the *Bendita* organization, which demonstrates their lack of professionalism (Objective 4). On the other hand, *Bendita* uses official data in a demagogic and unprofessional way to refute arguments against its ideology. This organization mainly tried to disprove information from left-wing political parties and media, while *Maldita* verified information from many different sources, including social networks. Therefore, *Maldita* carried out objective verification journalism to select the fake news, while *Bendita* chose the hoaxes strategically to provide a misinformative perception to specific sectors of society.

The polarization of the messages published by *Bendita*, which will be explained in detail later, resulted in their messages having a higher engagement on Twitter, with an average of 171 reactions per tweet (Objective 5). However, *Maldita* had a more subtle level of engagement.

The messages that obtained the most reaction in the form of retweets and favorites were those of *Bendita*'s subsection called *BenditaIgualdad*, which focused on posting messages against feminist discourse. *Maldita*, on the other hand, posted messages in which they not only denied hoaxes but also reported on the organization's activity, among others. The verification of information did get more reactions on Twitter than other content less likely to be viralized.

All these data confirm that disinformation, whether disproved or not, gets more engagement on social networks than other information. Therefore, fact-checking organizations can take advantage of this viralization to spread their message (Objective 5).

The first conclusion of this study is that *Bendita* cannot be considered a fact-checking organization like *Maldita*, despite multiple efforts by the first one to imitate the structures and aesthetics of the latter. It is simply to acknowledge that such scenarios eliminate the uncertainty that attends fact-checking work in practice. In the face of uncertainty, being objective consists of more than applying flawless reasoning to unquestioned facts. It also consists of using sources and methods that by consensus are seen as

reliable and rejecting those that aren't; it consists of becoming a source that can be taken for granted in this way and all kinds of work that entails (Graves, 2017).

Again, the professionalization of *Maldita* versus *Bendita* is one of the most interesting aspects that can be concluded from this study. This can be appreciated in the scarce sources of information used to carry out the verifications, the lack of objectivity in selecting the hoaxes they disprove and the hypocritical use of the data to transmit far-right ideas. In this sense, this organization could benefit from already existing attitudes and opinions in its audience to confirm them, as suggested by Hameleers and van der Meer (2019). As a result, they can take advantage of the tendency of some users to expose themselves to fact-checkers that are sympathetic to their political ideas.

In short, we can conclude that *Bendita* uses the aesthetics and structure of a fact-checking organization to propagate a political discourse linked to the radical right. We can affirm that they instrumentalize the fight against disinformation by fact-checking journalism to spread a radical discourse. This practice may imply a great danger, as it could increase the already existing political polarization. Moreover, the audience could be manipulated more efficiently, as this organization could capitalize on the formal aspects of fact-checking to gain greater credibility.

Hameleers warned in 2020 that specific organizations and individuals could use elements necessary to combat disinformation, such as fact-checking, for a harmful purpose and with the advantage of appearing more professional than anonymous users on social networks. As mentioned above, we do not know what entities may be behind *Bendita*, due to its lack of transparency. Therefore, we have a suspicion that they use an imitation formula of a fact-checking organization to make their publications appear more credible to their target audience.

Furthermore, *Bendita*'s superior engagement compared to *Maldita* also suggests that their polarized and less professional messages are more likely to have a higher chance of going viral. Therefore, the use of a fact-checking aesthetic coupled with the dissemination of a polarized political message could have a strong and dangerous impact on their audience.

Fact-checking journalism was born with the aim of putting an end to fake news and mitigating the effects of disinformation on the public. Information verification is a necessary process in any journalistic practice (Vizoso & Vázquez-Herrero, 2019), but its current impact is vital to reduce the negative consequences of polarization and the proliferation of misleading content on social media. Currently, disinformation puts democracies at risk. Furthermore, the public is mainly informed through the Internet, so they constantly receive viral messages, many of which are false. Therefore, serious fact-checking projects are an essential asset so that citizens do not make decisions based on hoaxes.

However, this central role is limited when considering the capacity of other political subjects to weaponize the verification activity for specific purposes. This bias can also be extended to internationally recognized fact-checkers. That is, it should not be assumed that *Maldita* does not share some weaknesses with *Bendita*. Research on these initiatives should focus on their methodology and professional routines for news and hoaxes selection. The journalistic criteria of fact-checking should be highlighted so that their work is perfectly distinctive from other initiatives with non-journalistic purposes, which try to instrumentalize fact-checking advantages and even mock these serious projects.

On the other hand, the use of techniques that imitate fact-checking can jeopardize the credibility of organizations that practice it rigorously. In addition, they can also be misleading to people who are less literate in these matters.

We are aware that the results obtained in the study are predictable but at the same time they are necessary to start building an academic basis on the instrumentalisation of the fact check to propagate

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political discourse and even disinformation. Therefore, we consider it essential to evaluate the work of fact-checkers to examine whether they are really trying to stamp out disinformation, verify or disprove information or, on the contrary, are trying to reaffirm beliefs already held by their audience for political purposes. In addition, fact-checking organizations should be objective in selecting the information they verify, using appropriate methodologies, and sharing the sources used to refute and correct information to demonstrate their reliability. Lastly, they should be transparent and accountable, not only in their journalistic processes but also in their structure and funding to demonstrate their integrity and be trustworthy to their audience.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research has been accomplished within the framework of the project entitled “Strategies, agendas, and discourse in electoral cybercampaigns: media and citizens” (CSO2016–77331-C2–1-R) from the University of Valencia.

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Section 3

Chapter 9

Populism, Its Prevalence, and Its Negative Influence on Democratic Institutions


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ABSTRACT

Populism is presented as a severe challenge to democracies as it delegitimises the institutions and processes on which democratic society is built. The infectious nature of populism within a system drives a shift in the public mood. The authors investigate this phenomenon through a content analysis of party posts on Facebook during the 2019 European parliamentary elections across 12 countries. They find almost a quarter of posts contain some form of populism, with anti-elitism the most common trope. Populist appeals are most likely to accompany critiques of labour and social policy, labelling elites or minority groups as causing inequalities which disadvantage the ordinary people. Both forms of populism enjoy high levels of user engagement suggesting they gain higher levels of reach within social media platforms. As support for populism rose in the wake of the economic and migrant crises, the authors suggest post-pandemic this increase is likely to continue.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8057-8.ch009

INTRODUCTION

Populism is not a new phenomenon, but it has gained increased attention over the last two decades as a number of controversial populist figures have gained influence and/or power within established democracies. Parties such as Alternative for Germany (AfD), the French Rassemblement National, and the UK's Independence party (UKIP) have had a significant influence on shaping public discourse and impacting election outcomes in their nations (Albertazzi & Vampa, 2021). Meanwhile, Poland's Law and Justice, Hungary's Fidesz, along with Modi in India, Bolsonaro in Brazil and Trump in the USA see the politics of a country take a fully populist turn (Ostiguy, Panizza & Moffitt, 2021). With populism becoming a global phenomenon, shifting the politics of countries to a more inward-looking and nationalist stance, there are fears this heralds a collapse of the post-war social democratic consensus (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018). These concerns are particularly expressed in studies of more fragile democracies, in particular the Central and Eastern European nations where the rise of populism has resulted in an erosion of trust in democratic institutions and processes (Eibl & Gregor, 2019). The related fear is not simply that populists may win elections within less stable democratic nations, but that the rise of populists leads to a rise in populist attitudes and the spread of populist conceptions throughout a political system.

There are also fears that the rise of populism, in particular due to the high correspondence between populism and Euroscepticism, will lead to a delegitimization of the European Union (EU) and its institutions (Call & Jolly, 2020). Populist actors have increased the politicisation of the EU, and their more controversial positions have attracted extensive media coverage (de Vreese, 2003; 2009). As more mainstream political actors are drawn into debates on the relationship between the individual state and the EU opposing advocacy coalitions crystallize and become more prominent, leading citizens to question the legitimacy of the EU (see Grande et al, 2016; De Vries, 2018; Blockmans & Russack, 2020). In particular, post-Brexit, it has been suggested that "right-wing populist politics – along with its ongoing attempts to, allegedly, 'reform' but effectively undermine the EU – would, it was expected, prevail in Europe in the foreseeable future, it should also be expected that the crisis of the EU symptomized and emphasised by Brexit was set to continue well into the future" (Krzyżanowski, 2019: 475). Hence, as EU technocracy is an easy target for criticism and gives succour to right-wing populism and its Eurosceptic variant (Schweiger, 2017), it is important to understand the extent populism is embedded within campaign discourse during EU parliamentary elections.

This chapter offers a framework for the analysis of populist discourse, drawing on the work of Mudde (2016) and Reinemann, Aalberg, Esser, Strömbäck and de Vreese (2016). This allows us to view populism as not simply an empty discourse but one that encourages sections of society to believe they have the right to greater influence over policy making, to view elected politicians as unworthy of trust, and to disavow the arguments of experts and societal elites. The more right-wing populist actors are found to increase the traction of illiberal and xenophobic arguments and harden anti-democratic attitudes (Wodak, KhosraviNik & Mral, 2013). We argue that when populist ideas gain traction the Overton window, the range of political views that are seen as normal and acceptable, gradually moves towards a more populist position (Giridharadas, 2019). The shift in the Overton window leads populism to become infectious. The spread of populism within society and political discourse is also facilitated by the information environment. Research suggests (e.g., Baldwin-Philippi, 2018; Engesser, Ernst, Esser & Büchel, 2017) social networking platforms (SNPs) like Facebook offer "opportunity structures" for populists. The propensity of populist messages to have viral qualities means they become more prominent to users and can shape the news agenda while bypassing the filters of editorial control.

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Our case study examines 8,072 Facebook posts from political parties from 12 nations collected during the 2019 European Parliament (EP) election campaign. We enquire, related to the above overview, how prevalent are populist appeals (RQ1), what forms of appeal are most prominent (RQ2), which policy areas are mostly likely to be the subject for populist appeals (RQ3), to what extent do populist appeals focus purely on immigration, causing social divisions or promote economic populism. The latter is argued to promote greater equality (Mouffe, 2018), but like their right-wing counterparts have an equal role in undermining trust in the establishment and the system (Guth & Nelson, 2021). Finally, we assess the extent populist appeals gain more attention from Facebook users, and through the analysis of use of emoticons how these appeals elicit emotions from their audience, such as anger (Jacobs, Sandberg & Spierings, 2020). Thus, we seek to assess which populist appeals gain greater prominence within online environments due to the engagement of users (RQ4). Our findings yield important implications for democracy on which we will reflect in the discussion.

POPULISM, ITS FORMS AND APPEALS

Populism is deemed to be a thin ideology, one that needs a host ideology in order to develop a political platform (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). Hence, we find that there are left and right variants of populism which both share the core message that they are the best representative of the ordinary people but diverge over what constitutes the ‘general will’. Due to the contrasting forms of populism, it is argued that increased populism in political or public discourse is not inherently bad for democracy, the notion of ‘we the people’ is at the heart of many progressive and revolutionary movements which have brought down corrupt autocracies (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2018). Similarly, movements which claim to represent the 99% versus the super-rich 1% arguably play a positive role in exposing inequalities even within functioning liberal democracies. Hence understanding the differing forms of populism, and the impact they might have is important. The form that Laclau (2005) and Mouffe (2018) argue as being a more positive force is left populism, these challenge neo-liberal thinking and highlight the dangers of unfettered capitalism as evidenced best in the discourse of Spain’s Podemos party, France’s Jean-Luc Melancon, Greek SYRIZA, the UK’s Labour party under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn and the platform of US Democrat Bernie Sanders during his 2016 and 2020 attempts to win the presidential nomination (Worth, 2019). Left populists have seen a rise in fortunes due to their opposition to the austerity policies brought in following the 2008 economic crisis and while they challenge established democratic institutions left populists likewise provide a necessary counter to the dominance of neo-liberal thinking

The form of populism that is of most concern is right-wing populism, not only due to the extent of its insurgency within many European nations conveyed through political parties but also due to the often divisive and xenophobic rhetoric such parties employ (Waisbord, 2018). Cas Mudde (2019) argued Europe was entering a fourth wave of right-wing extremism at the turn of the 21st Century. This fourth wave, he argued, was increasingly characterised by the political mainstream moving towards the right on immigration and security and far right parties becoming increasingly mainstreamed and normalized as parties of government or partners in coalitions. This process of normalisation would see the political and public agenda increasingly adopt the nativist, authoritarian and populist perspective that right-wing populist parties have long promoted (Mudde, 2004). While right-wing populist parties can be typologised as authoritarian, nativist, libertarian or revisionist they are all argued to promote positions that are incompatible with the democratic values of consensus and inclusivity (Pelanka, 2013).

Independent of the host ideology, socialist or conservative, and the approach parties take towards social and economic freedoms, populist parties share a rhetorical language which positions them as being the expression of the general will. Reinemann, Aalberg, Esser, Strömbäck and de Vreese (2016) developed a typology which supports researchers identifying the form that populist appeals take. The typology argues there are three distinct forms of populist appeal which can occur alone or in combination with one another. Firstly, empty populism is an appeal which includes an ill-defined construction of “the people” or the mass populace. Using this form of appeal, the populist claims to be the authentic representative of the disempowered ordinary (wo)man (Bracciale & Martella, 2017). Secondly, anti-elite populism juxtaposes the people with an elite, those who possess political, economic or social capital. The populist claims the elite further their own interests creating social exclusion, alienation and insecurity among the masses (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). Thirdly, exclusionary populism juxtaposes those who belong within a nation with those who do not. These appeals suggest societal inequalities are framed as a battle between a deserving in-group versus a demanding and insurgent out-group. The populists offer to reaffirm the status of the in-group by denying equal political or economic rights to the out-group or by removing them entirely (Marchlewska, Cichocka, Panayiotou, Castellanos & Batayneh, 2018). Broadly speaking right-wing populists tend to use a combination of all three forms of appeals; left-wing populists however eschew exclusionary forms of appeals although adopt a more inclusive view of society when pitting the people against domestic elites and supranational organisations (Otjes & Louwse, 2015).

The analysis of these appeals on SNPs offers particular insights into the communicative strategies of political parties in two ways. Firstly, SNPs offer a direct channel from the party to their followers and then to a wider network through their followers liking and sharing their posts (Bennett, 2012). This means parties will strategically craft their posts to maximise their appeal and their post content on social media, and in particular on the Facebook platform, can be viewed as a representation of their core messages (Bossetta, 2018). Secondly, when exploring populist appeals, we can detect how differing appeals co-occur within the posts of political parties and how these appeals are further combined with arguments centring on specific policy areas. These factors are argued to determine the extent of salience and valence that populist parties and their arguments have within the social media environment (Feezell, 2018). Research has shown that populists gain purchase over the public agenda by focusing on specific policy issues. Smith (2010) found right-wing populist parties carefully constructed appeals that played to the concerns of voters and in doing so increased the salience of crime and security while also developing a cognitive link between increased crime and immigration. The increased salience of immigration has also provided a stronger platform for populist parties (Moffit, 2018), but this is equally a two-way process. The increased salience of immigration not only increases the salience of populist arguments but in turn increases the prominence of populist parties; this is argued to partly explain the rise of support for UKIP in the UK (Dennison & Goodwin, 2015). However, the narrow focus on immigration ties the fortunes of the populist party to the salience of immigration as an issue which can wane and wax over time (Rydgren, 2010). Hence, right-wing parties need to diversify their focus and messaging while maintaining their ownership of the immigration issue. In this regard, right-wing populist parties are likely to maintain an exclusionary tone, but perhaps incorporating a wider range of issues than just immigration in order to maintain the salience of the party brand as well as the immigration issue which they are most likely to own.

Left populist parties, however, largely focus on economic policy. US candidate for the Democrat nomination Bernie Sanders, UK Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and Spain’s Podemos party, among others, all focus attacks on the neoliberal system and the unfettered control of the market (Agustín, 2020).

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While right wing populists propose a people's solution to salient concerns, left populists offer an alternative future that is more equitable for the ordinary person. Some commentators have described this as post-capitalism or, due to its reliance on high-tech solutions to economic instability, data capitalism (Dyer-Witheford, 2020). Left parties, like their right-wing counterparts, may also focus on immigration; however largely they will promote the rights of minorities contesting socially divisive messages and promoting an inclusive national or global message (Huber & Schimpf, 2017). Left populists thus focus on challenging the current system and pitting the people against either or both the domestic or transnational establishment. As Yannis Stavrakakis, one of the architects of self-declared left populist party SYRIZA, which came to power in Greece after the global economic crisis, stated the party pits 'us/the people against them/the establishment' (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014: 138). Hence, left populist parties are most likely to combine a critique of economic policy with anti-elite populist appeals.

SNPs offer significant potential for populist arguments independent of the host ideology. They allow parties to publish content without editorial control, to speak directly to citizens, to gain reach within the networks of those who like and share their content and to influence voters (Ohme, 2019). Examining the extent that populist content is liked or shared, and the extent that certain combinations of populist appeals and issue positions gain more traction is thus important for understanding the potential flows of influence. Our research firstly offers insights into the extent that the most negative form of populism, exclusionary populism, is prevalent as a populist trope as well as the extent of its popularity among SNP users. In contrast to exclusionary populism, we compare this to whether economic populism, which calls for greater equality, is similarly prominent and popular. Furthermore, we examine the prominence and reach of populist appeals when they are related to a broader range of topics. Research demonstrates that populist appeals are rewarded by the SNPs' algorithms with greater prominence on the platform due to higher levels of user engagement (e.g., likes, shares, reactions). Research consistently finds populist appeals are liked and shared more than posts with no populist rhetoric (Hameleers, Schmuck, Bos & Ecklebe, 2020). The extent of user engagement is also mediated by the valence of the topic (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2018) and there are also granular differences in engagement as users can also express their sentiment through the use of reaction emoticons on Facebook. Recent research (Jost, Maurer, & Haßler, 2020) finds that exclusionary populist appeals coupled with negative portrayals of political actors gain 'Angry Reactions', anti-elite appeals and positive depictions of ordinary citizens in contrast earn 'Love Reactions'. Research further finds that populist appeals tend to be designed to stimulate strong emotional responses, often feeding the anger of their followers and the broader mass electorate (Jacobs, Sandberg & Spierings, 2020). Thus, we will examine the sentiments elicited by populist appeals (Eberl, Huber & Greussing, 2021), the extent to which we find evidence that angry populism gains traction (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018), as well as the broader prominence populist appeals are afforded.

Cumulatively we examine the prevalence of populist appeals (RQ1), what forms of appeal are most prominent (RQ2), and how they relate to key policy issues (RQ3), and to assess the extent populist appeals gain more attention from Facebook users, and through the analysis of use of emoticons, how differing combinations of appeal and issue elicit emotional responses from their audience (RQ4).

METHODOLOGY

The dataset contains the posts published on Facebook during the 2019 EP election campaign by political parties from 12 countries: Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Romania,

Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom (UK). This represents 82% of the EU28 population (Eurostat, 2019) and provides a cross-section of the election campaign. Data collection occurred during the four weeks prior to election day within each country (e.g., April 25 to May 23 in the UK; April 28 to May 26 in Germany) and were collected daily using the Facepager tool developed by Jünger and Keyling¹. Out of the total number of posts, a sample of $N = 8,072$ posts published only by parties that gained a minimum of 5% of the votes in their country in the 2019 EP election was used for the purpose of the analysis.

All posts, including text, images and videos, were coded on a survey platform (soscisurvey.com) by 29 coders. The variables were all binary coded (1 = a post contained a certain element; 0 = a post did not contain a certain element). Multiple answers were possible for individual posts as many different populist elements could be coded. Reliability was tested with the coding of 50 randomly selected posts by all 29 coders. The average Holsti's CR value of ≥ 0.86 demonstrates a common understanding of the categories.

The forms of populism are composites of a number of items included in the coding scheme except empty populism which is a binary variable based on when a party claims in a post to be 'of the people'. Anti-elite populism was measured using a four items indicator including the following binary-coded categories: blaming the elite, questioning the elite's legitimacy to take decisions, calling for resistance against the elite and their ideas, and accusing the elite of betraying the people or acting against the people's interest. Anti-elite populism was computed as a sum of all elements. Any post with a value higher than 1 was considered to include anti-elite populism. The sum index was transformed into a binary variable indicating the presence "1" or the absence "0" of anti-elite populism. Exclusionary populism was measured using a five items indicator including whether ethnic, group, masculine, and/or feminine stereotypes are included in the post or whether ethnic or cultural others should be viewed as a danger. Exclusionary populism was computed as a sum of all elements. As in the case of anti-elite populism, any post with a value higher than 1 was considered to include exclusionary populism. Complete populism contained elements of all three above mentioned forms of populism: empty populism, anti-elite populism, and exclusionary populism.

THE PREVALENCE OF POPULISM AND THE FORMS OF APPEALS

Analysis found 23.4% of posts contained at least one of the populist appeals from Reinemann, Aalberg, Esser, Strömbäck and de Vreese's (2016) typology. The most prominent, representing 14.6% of all posts included an anti-elite populist appeal. Given that populist parties, independent of the host ideology, require a powerful force to pit against the 'pure people' this is unsurprising. The establishment are frequently identified as failing to stem immigration, restrict the power of the markets or act in ways that benefit elites rather than the 'pure and honest' people within much populist rhetoric (Macaulay, 2019). Perhaps suggesting the spread of populist thinking across the party spectrum, we identified 10.3% of all posts containing empty populist appeals that talk of the will of the people. Exclusionary populism, the signifier of right-wing extremist populist parties appears significantly less than one might expect given the prominence these parties enjoy in a number of European states. Only 4.7% of posts target their attacks at minority groups and label them as a threat to society. Posts containing complete populism were even more rare, only 0.7% of posts combined all three populist appeals (see Table 1).

In line with the arguments that populism is infectious across the political spectrum we organised the parties standing at the European parliamentary election by their grouping. In terms of the empty

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populist claims to represent the will of the people as expected the European Conservative and Reformist grouping, which contains a number of Eurosceptic parties lead with 18.8% of their posts adhering to this type of appeal. However, the centre right European People's Party are not far behind followed by the Left/Nordic Green Alliance (GUE/NGL). Anti-elite populism similar crosses the spectrum but the more extreme parties in the independent or non-aligned groups lead the anti-establishment challenge along with the left parties demonstrating that this is more the preserve of the extremes, but again the margins of difference are not dramatic. The distinctions are however very clear for exclusionary and complete populism. The more right-wing parties are by far the most likely to make attacks on immigrants or those outside of the nation or classify political opponents as dangerous enemies.

Table 1. The average share of populist dimensions in parties' Facebook posts by EP groups

	Empty populism	Anti-Elite populism	Excluding populism	Complete populism
Overall	10.3%	14.6%	4.7%	0.7%
EPP	13.1%	12.8%	5.7%	0.9%
S&D	6.4%	15.0%	1.7%	0.3%
RE	6.5%	13.7%	4.1%	0.2%
ID	9.8%	28.7%	17.8%	3.3%
Greens-EFA	4.6%	12.1%	4.7%	0%
ECR	18.8%	27.5%	10.9%	1.9%
GUE/NGL	11.0%	30.4%	4.9%	0.2%
Independents	8.7%	43.6%	7.5%	1.2%

Therefore, when exploring the prevalence of populist appeals (RQ1) we find that just under a quarter of all posts contain some form of populist appeal. This finding suggests that populist discourse across European parties is moderately prevalent. By far the most prominent form of populist appeal (RQ2) are those which promote an anti-elitist perspective. Such appeals feature in 14.6% of the posts of parties from across all the European parliamentary groupings. Naturally the targets vary, ranging from attacks against governments who they oppose within their nations, to corporate elites or the European Union itself. The more xenophobic forms of populist appeals remain the preserve of the minority of far-right parties.

Table 2. Pearson's correlation coefficients of the three dimensions of populism

	Empty populism	Anti-elite populism	Excluding populism
Empty populism		.213***	.188***
Anti-elite populism			.172***

To identify the co-occurrence relationships of the different elements, we conducted pairwise Pearson's correlation analysis as the variables of interest are dummy variables. We find that on the whole posts are most likely to contain one single form of appeal. However, there is a moderately strong and

significant relationship between constructing arguments that make claims to represent the popular will and attacking the elite and slightly less so when focusing an attack on an ‘other’ (see Table 2). There is a slightly lower, but still significant’ relationship between anti-elitist and exclusionary populist appeals co-occurring within posts: 38% of exclusionary posts contain anti-elitist appeals, but only 13% of anti-elitist content use exclusionary rhetoric at the same time. The latter posts tend to focus on the dangers posed by immigrants and blaming either the domestic government or broader European Union for migration into the Union or between member states. Hence, populist appeals tend to follow ideological logic which may be further evidenced when examining the extent that populism co-occurs with a wider range of policy areas.

POPULISM AND PUBLIC POLICY

Based on the finding that 23% of all posts were populist, populist appeals were dispersed across party communication from all European parliamentary groupings, but populist appeals were most likely to be used by parties within left and right groupings, in the following we assess the extent that this is reflected in the political agenda of populist posts. Table 3 shows the simple percentages where populist appeals were linked to specific policy agendas. The most obvious finding, reflecting our expectations regarding right-wing populist parties, posts including exclusionary populist appeals or complete populism are most likely to reference immigration. Therefore, it is highly likely that these map onto the posts of the parties within the European Conservative and Reformist or Independent groupings which largely espouse a nationalist political platform. In contrast anti-elite populist appeals are most likely to co-occur with policy stances relating to labour and social policy or the economy. While not exclusive to left-wing parties, the majority of anti-elite appeals by parties within the Left/Nordic Green Alliance grouping fall within these categories.

Table 3. The share of different policy issues in posts containing populist appeals

	Empty populist posts	Anti-elite populist posts	Exclusionary populist posts	Complete populist posts
Economy	16%	22%	15%	7%
Labour & Social Policy	20%	26%	14%	9%
Immigration	14%	15%	23%	20%
Energy & Environment	7%	8%	3%	2%
N	828 (10%)	1175 (15%)	389 (5%)	55 (0.6%)

Focusing on the policy areas we find that when populist appeals feature in relation to economic policy they range from simple messages promising to make the economy work better for ordinary people, a typical empty populist claim, through attacks on the political or financial establishment to xenophobic comment. The latter focus on the alleged burden which migrants from within the EU or those entering the European Union as refugees place on national economies and how they lead to less resources being available for the indigenous populations. Similar themes arise when discussing labour and social policy.

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Again, empty populist claims offer to respond to the demands of the general will, while anti-elite appeals claim the political establishment are responsible for social inequalities. Exclusionary or complete populist appeals relating to labour and social policy see migrants blamed for high unemployment, increased waiting times for health care or the weakening of the social security safety net. These arguments tally with a wider populist agenda relating to immigration which includes attacks on the liberal establishment for not closing borders or on the EU open border policy which allows free movement within the Union. We find there are relatively few posts that combine populist appeals and discussion of energy or environmental policy. The majority focus on combining debates on energy prices with empty populist appeals or attacks on the establishment for their insufficient respect for the concerns of environmental campaigners. Some posts deliberately pit the establishment against the future generations, for whom the planet will be more prone to extreme weather and depleted resources. Hence, we find patterns in the political agenda of parties that employ populist appeals which reflect the ideology of the parties. Green parties attack the establishment for not protecting the environment, while Conservative populists challenge liberal immigration policies. Similarly, when focusing on economic and social policy, left populists see the capitalist system as the enemy of the people while the right give prominence to migrants and refugees as the cause of everyday problems the ordinary people face. In that regard, we are interested if these contrasting populist positions gain equal purchase among the followers of the parties espousing these claims as per Hameleers, Schmuck, Bos and Ecklebe (2020), or if some claims gain greater support and so are more likely to earn visibility within the Facebook environment as more granular analysis finds (Jost, Maurer & Hassler, 2020).

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND POPULIST APPEALS

Thus, finally, we assess the extent that populist appeals gain more attention from Facebook users. Firstly, consistent with previous studies of user engagement with posts containing populism, we find that posts which contain populist appeals gain more reactions in terms of likes and shares than posts which have no populist elements. In the initial phase we conducted simple analysis on the median scores for total reactions, likes, emoticon responses, comments, and shares. Our data reveals that posts containing empty populist appeals gained the most reactions, almost twice on average the reactions awarded to non-populist posts. The pattern is similar for likes and shares and the higher numbers of reactions are mirrored for all forms of populism although there are lower differences between the reactions, likes and shares awarded to exclusionary or complete populist appeals and those posts which contain no populism except in the case of posts categorised as complete populism.

The use of emoticons, an alternative to the thumbs up feature that denotes a “like” are emotional expressions. The emoticons are the heart denoting love, the angry face, the sad face and the laughing face, which is called Haha. Analysing these offers a sense of the way that different forms of populist appeals elicit emotions from their audience. Empty populist and anti-elite populists receive the most love from their audience, followed by non-populist posts and then exclusionary populist appeals, the latter also include some sad face expressions. Contrary to expectation the angry emoji is seldom used and is not found to be elicited particularly by exclusionary or complete populism, this does not mean that these posts do not feed or feed off public anger relating to the immigration issue (Jacobs, Sandberg & Spierings, 2020) but that the anger emoji is not used as a form of reaction often. Equally, while Haha is used more often in relation to posts containing populist appeals again there is minimal usage of this emoji overall.

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Table 4. Multilevel negative binomial regression on user engagement with populist appeals

	Likes	Love	Angry	Haha	Sad	Share
Anti-Elite (AE)	.05 (.04)	-.05 (.06)	.49 (.10)***	.25 (.07)***	.34 (.11)**	.19 (.05)***
Exclusionary (EX)	-.09 (.07)	-.11 (.09)	.09 (.14)	.04 (.11)	.18 (.17)	.10 (.08)
Empty (PPL)	.42 (.05)***	.55 (.06)***	.12 (.11)	.27 (.08)**	.38 (.13)**	.43 (.06)***
Economy	-.03 (.04)	-.15 (.05)**	.11 (.09)	.04 (.07)	-.34 (.11)**	-.00 (.05)
Labour & Social	-.06 (.03)#	-.09 (.05)*	.00 (.17)	-.03 (.06)	.11 (.09)	.11 (.04)*
Immigration	.33 (.06)***	.14 (.08)#	.97 (.12)***	.29 (.10)**	.39 (.15)**	.54 (.07)***
Environment	-.25 (.05)***	-.33 (.06)***	-.29 (.10)**	-.20 (.08)*	.09 (.13)	-.13 (.06)*
AE*economy	.03 (.08)	-.02 (.11)	-.02 (.17)	-.17 (.14)	.08 (.21)	.15 (.10)
AE*labour&social	.23 (.08)**	.51 (.10)***	-.08 (.16)	.10 (.13)	.18 (.19)	.32 (.09)***
AE*immigration	-.09 (.09)	-.01 (.12)	-.45 (.22)*	-.22 (.16)	.30 (.25)	-.22 (.12)#
AE*environment	-.10 (.11)	-.01 (.15)	.31 (.25)	-.38 (.20)#	-.00 (.30)	-.45 (.14)***
EX*economy	-.12 (.17)	-.10 (.21)	-.30 (.37)	-.66 (.29)*	.17 (.46)	-.05 (.21)
EX*labour&social	.40 (.17)*	.22 (.22)	1.29 (.36)***	.23 (.29)	.05 (.46)	.28 (.21)
EX*immigration	.03 (.13)	.14 (.17)	.11 (.28)	-.41 (.21)#	.15 (.34)	.01 (.15)
EX*environment	.09 (.31)	.35 (.42)	-.14 (.70)	-.17 (.54)	-1.24 (.88)	.13 (.38)
PPL*economy	-.42 (.10)***	-.36 (.14)**	-.49 (.22)*	-.40 (.17)*	-.82 (.28)**	-.65 (.13)***
PPL*labour&social	-.12 (.10)	-.32 (.12)**	-.10 (.19)	.02 (.16)	-.13 (.25)	-.14 (.11)
PPL*immigration	-.45 (.11)***	-.45 (.15)**	-.46 (.23)*	-.69 (.19)***	-.88 (.29)**	-.49 (.13)***
PPL*environment	.05 (.14)	.22 (.19)	.14 (.32)	.34 (.24)	.20 (.39)	.08 (.17)
Controls:						
negative camp.	.16 (.03)***	-.21 (.04)***	1.88 (.06)***	.82 (.05)***	1.30 (.07)***	.56 (.03)***
No of. followers	.00 (.00)***	.00 (.00)**	.00 (.00)***	.00 (.00)***	.00 (.00)***	.00 (.00)***
No. of posts	-.00 (.00)#	-.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)***	-.00 (.00)**	-.00 (.00)*	-.00 (.00)**
results	.02 (.01)*	.01 (.01)	.05 (.01)***	.04 (.01)***	.03 (.01)*	.02 (.01)**
constant	5.90 (.28)***	3.37 (35)***	1.67 (.39)***	2.51 (.39)***	.26 (.39)	4.32 (.28)***
variance of random intercept	.43 (.58)	.51 (.72)	.61 (.78)	.66 (.81)	.59 (.77)	.34 (.58)
Log-likelihood	-57569	-35303	-24163	-27532	-14796	-46894
disp. parameter	1.142 (.02)	.69 (.01)	.28(.00)	.44 (.01)	.20 (.00)	.79 (.01)
AIC	115212	70679	48400	55137	29667	93861
N Level 1/Level 2	8008/67	8015/67	8025/67	8014/67	8047/67	8013/67

While these simple median scores offer some insights, our research question necessitated more detailed and granular analysis in order to understand user engagement with posts containing populist appeals. Hence, we conducted multilevel negative binomial regression with random intercept at the party level with country fixed effects (Table 4). This analysis allows us to determine the extent that populism is indeed more popular but also what forms of populism, whether populist appeals relating to certain policy

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areas have greater popularity than others and so thus whether political discourse may be impacted upon by the flow of populist appeals within social media platforms.

First, focusing on the forms of populist appeals, we find no patterns of engagement relating purely to exclusionary populism. Anti-elite populist appeals are more likely to elicit angry or sad emotional responses as well as expressing humour or laughing by using the Haha emoji. These forms of appeal are also likely to gain shares however not to a level similar to posts containing empty populist appeals. These claims to representation of the general will appear most likely to elicit the positive Love or simple thumbs up responses as well as the sad face and again responses using the Haha emoji. The use of the Haha emoji is interesting here. While there is limited research on the use of emojis, studies of their use alongside posts by media organisations suggest that Haha can be used as a form of mockery of the post or organisation posting unless it is a response to a post designed to make the reader laugh (Bentivegna & Marchetti, 2019). Assuming that jokes are reasonably rare as a function of political communication we suggest that the Haha emoji is indicative of lower support for the party or their specific claim.

If we assume that reactions and shares are an indication of the salience and valence of a particular policy area as well as emojis being an indication of the emotional resonance we can also offer some indications regarding the power of certain policy areas as vehicles for the spread of populism. In terms of issue salience, during the 2019 contest labour and social policy and immigration gained higher levels of engagement, particularly in terms of shares. This data suggests these issues were of higher importance to party followers on Facebook. However, when focusing on resonance, when a populist appeal was included alongside references to either of these areas of policy there were higher levels of engagement than was the case where there was no populist appeal present. In contrast energy and environmental policy lacked salience and the inclusion of a populist appeal has only a negative impact. There are few statistically significant patterns of the use of emoticons. The strongest predictor of all reactions except love is immigration. The exception are posts referencing immigration, which are found to be salient and populist appeals on this topic appear to have resonance. The data on the use of emoticons suggest that the resonance is related to users having strong emotional responses. The emotional reactions of users shows populist interpretations of immigration policy elicit anger particularly, as well as sadness. This finding chimes with the notion of angry populism (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018) and suggests there are strong and angry supporters for populist arguments pertaining to immigration. Populist arguments on immigration are also likely to get a Haha response, this may suggest mockery but without close analysis of specific posts there are other possible interpretations.

When focusing on the combinations of populist appeals and policy topics, we find some interesting patterns. Anti-elitism is found to have a higher number of likes, and in particular responses using the love emoji when combined with discussion of labour or social policy. This combination of policy and populist frame is also more likely to be shared. Apart from a negative significant relationship between anti-elite populism, the immigration issue and the use of the angry emoji and with energy or environmental policy being shared less there are no other indications of how anti-elite populism gains traction.

A similar pattern for all posts including exclusionary populist appeals is found. By far the strongest relationship is found between users responding with the angry emoji when labour or social policy discussion is combined with exclusionary populism. These posts are also most likely to earn more general 'thumbs up' likes. This finding suggests that arguments which blame minority groups for the social problems experienced by ordinary people gain significant traction. Apart from a significant but negative relationship for eliciting Haha responses when discussing economic policy there are no further clear patterns relating to user engagement with exclusionary populist appeals.

Empty populism was found to get the most reactions (Table 4) but largely all the relationships with this form of populism when combined with a policy stance are negative. The strongest negative relationships are found for posts combining empty populist appeals when discussing economic policy or immigration. These data suggests that while empty populist claims appear popular, they are not when they underpin a party's stance on a policy. Therefore, we suggest that a general claim to be of the people or representing the general can gain traction but only as a basic statement of values.

In summary, therefore, we find that anti-elitist populism triggers negative emotions, particularly anger, sad, and the ironic or mocking 'Haha', and shares in itself, but when combined with labour and social policy it provokes more positive emotions, and the reach of these populist appeals increase as measured by the higher likelihood that such posts are shared in this context. Therefore, we suggest that user engagement does increase the reach of left-wing populism as they are the parties most likely to attack the elite whilst highlighting how social policies fail to tackle inequalities or combat poverty. Exclusionary populism appears to also gain higher engagement among users when it is combined with labour and social policy. This is especially true in the case of eliciting angry reactions. Therefore we find that while exclusionary populism in itself does not make people angry, it does when it is paired with social policy. These two findings suggest the high salience of labour and social issues, and the high resonance of populist claims surrounding this area of policy. The fact that both anti-elite and exclusionary populist claims to explain failings in social policy gain traction suggests that there is a general set of populist attitudes among users within European societies when considering this issue. We might assume that societies follow one of two courses relating to populist attitudes on labour and social issues. Societies could be highly polarised between people with strong anti-elitist and anti-establishment explanations of policy failure and those who blame social problems on migration. Alternatively, societies may be made up of people who blame migration for immediate shortages in the jobs market or in the provision of health and social services while also blaming the government and elites for allowing the problem or exacerbating the issues the people face. Either way the higher engagement can be read as reflecting higher valence and salience of the claim and so suggest that there is a prevailing general populist mood across societies.

Our analysis also reveals one further interesting and potentially important finding. Posts containing negative campaigning are highly predictive of eliciting responses that evidence anger, sadness and the 'Haha' emoji and negativity is predictive of receiving all forms of reaction and of posts being shared. This finding appears consistent with previous research on negative campaigning in traditional media (Mark, 2007; Iyengar & Ansolabehere, 2010) which shows that supporters of parties like attacks against their party's opponents provided we assume that most of a parties' engaged followers on Facebook are indeed their supporters which has been found the case in some contexts (Bartlett, Bennett, Birnie, & Wibberley, 2013). The Haha emojis do somewhat challenge the notion that all followers are supporters, however the fact that they are used reasonably rarely may mean they are of less significance.

DISCUSSION

Populist discourse was not dominant within the 2019 European parliamentary campaign, but some form of populist appeal was found in 23% of all the posts and featured in discourse across all nations and in the communication of parties representing every parliamentary grouping. Therefore, we would respond to our first research question saying populist appeals were moderately prevalent. Anti-elite populism is the most prominent form of populist appeal followed by empty populism; the most troubling variant,

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exclusionary populism, appears in only 4.7% of posts and is largely the preserve of parties on the Eurosceptic and socially conservative right-wing of the spectrum. Therefore, in responding to our second research question, we find that an anti-elitist tenor is the prominent narrative however the targets range from national government to corporate elites to supranational organisations depending on the ideology of the party. However, cumulatively, we suggest the prominence of this narrative may be contributing to the erosion of trust in political and democratic institutions so the concerns are not unwarranted. Answering our third research question we find the core tenets of left populism, an anti-elitist narrative relating to economic, labour and social policy appears to dominate, followed by an exclusionary narrative around immigration. However, anti-elitism is not purely the preserve of the left and cuts across ideologies (Macaulay, 2019). The two populist appeals which gain the greatest engagement however do seem to reflect the broad left right divide. Anti-elitist and exclusionary explanations of failures to address social issues gain the most shares and stimulate users to express strong emotions reactions, responding to our fourth research question.

Our data thus shows there are two major strands of populist attitudes: anti-elitist economic populism and an exclusionary and anti-elite populism which covers both economic and social policy; although claims to be representatives of the people, but not when linked to policy statements, are popular among supporters. Populist posts pit the people against elites and claims to better represent the people. Populist arguments elicit emotional reactions from their audience demonstrating their resonance and increasing their visibility and potential influence. The anti-elitist appeals which focus on economic policy and labour and social issues encourage more positive emotions and users show support for the populist claims. These arguments can have a positive role in giving voice to citizens who feel they have low self-efficacy. However populist narratives also create or strengthen the perception of divisions between the honest commoner and the selfish and remote elite. Anti-immigration populism, which equally targets the elite as the source of a problem, elicits anger which can be directed at outsiders as well as mainstream parties. The awarding of strong emotional reactions of love and anger demonstrates the potential for shifting the Overton window to be more distrusting of elites and to believe the people should have a greater say over the actions of their representatives. Coupled with the higher overall number of reactions and shares, posts with populist appeals are awarded with visibility on the algorithmic SNPs as they gain a significantly higher prominence than posts with no populist appeals. This highlights one of the most significant challenges populism on Facebook poses for the operation of representative democracy and for national and European political institutions as their legitimacy is questioned.

The economic collapse created the conditions for the rise of left populism, perhaps best evidenced in the Occupy and 15M movements which also informed the political stances of some parties (Dyer-Witford, 2020). The austerity measures were felt by many younger and poorer citizens, the fact that public funds had been used to prop up the financial system gave the impression that the people were being punished for mistakes made within the banking sector (Diamond, 2018). This opened a representational space for populism to occupy and gain purchase for its anti-elite appeal (Mudde, 2019). Longstanding disquiet about the impact of open borders within the European Union was exacerbated initially as membership was expanded and as many young Poles, Romanians and Bulgarians took advantage of the opportunities to find better paid work elsewhere (Mudde, 2004). The influx of migrants led to increased competition in the job market and increased the power of employees to introduce measures, such as zero-hours contracts, which lessened the value of individuals working in unskilled roles (Verwiebe, Wiesböck & Teitzer, 2014). The refugee crisis added an additional layer of concern, one that was stoked particularly by right-wing populists and their supportive media (Albertazzi & Vampa, 2021). It also exposed the

inefficiencies of the European bureaucracy to manage a crisis which disproportionately affected certain nations, in particular Italy and Greece as key landing points in the union. These factors opened up a wider space in which populism could flourish.

At the 2019 European parliamentary election it appears all these issues remained salient. While populism does not focus purely on a narrow range of policy areas, the combination of labour and social issues with anti-elitism (the left populist stance) and exclusionary populism (the right-wing populist position) shows the appeals that resonate most with the Facebook audience. The salience of economic populism seems to have waned somewhat, perhaps given the time since the recession, but the fact it remains on the political agenda of parties and the public suggests the impact of austerity on social policy continues to be felt within many nations. It is difficult to see the resonance of these positions waning. The global pandemic has affected the economies of every nation, national debt is at record levels not seen since the end of the Second World War (Makin & Layton, 2021). As national governments slowly emerge from the pandemic questions will arise as to how to reduce that debt and pull economies back on course. A further round of austerity is likely to bolster further the support for anti-elitist perspectives, especially if populists can make believable claims that governments are not acting in the best interests of the people. Furthermore, necessary restrictions on the movement of people globally to stem the spread of new variants of the Covid-19 virus have opened up new avenues for exclusionary populist positions that go beyond claims that migration places a burden on social services which have been stretched further due to the pandemic. Migration is now a health issue, and thus migrants can be labelled as a potential danger to public health as variants of Covid-19 spread around the world. These factors suggest that centrist political projects need to be vigilant as the threat posed by populism is unlikely to weaken, but that democratic institutions are likely to face serious challenges from both left and right. The alternative is to consider the extent that populists need to be listened to more, the fact their arguments have resonance and salience indicates democratic institutions are failing to convince citizens that they act in the public good. To truly combat populism a form of political communication and public policy must be developed that cements the belief that public concerns are at the heart of decision-making. Such initiatives should go some way to closing the representational gap that populists currently are easily able to fill.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Márton Bene received funding through the Incubator program of the Center for Social Sciences, Eötvös Loránd Research Network (project number: 03013645) and is a recipient of the Bolyai János Research Fellowship awarded by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (BO/334_20).

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ENDNOTE

- ¹ <https://github.com/strohne/Facepager>

Chapter 10

Europe and Euroscepticism on Twitter During the 2019 European Parliament Elections: An Analysis of the Spanish Candidates

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to analyse the activity on Twitter of the eight main candidates who stood in the 2019 European election in Spain. The analysis was developed throughout the electoral campaign and established based on two methodological perspectives. First, the content analysis allowed to observe which topics each candidate spoke about and from which perspective (pro-European or Eurosceptic). Second, the discourse analysis allowed to further explore the political communication strategies developed. This analysis is based on two hypotheses. The first (H1) is that European issues and approaches will not be a priority in candidates' discourses for the European Parliament, given the context of political polarisation in Spain and the fact that these elections can be read as a second round for the April 2019 general election. The second (H2) is that Euroscepticism will have a marginal presence in candidates' messages. The results confirm H2 but reject H1.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8057-8.ch010

INTRODUCTION

The May 2019 European Election took place in Spain in a unique context. There is normally very little turnout in these elections compared to other elections. There is usually an approximately 70% turnout a general election, and European Elections have traditionally been many percentage points lower, even reaching below 50% (44.9% in 2009 and 43.8% in 2014, the record low). However, on this occasion the European Election coincided with local elections throughout Spain and with regional elections in most of the country. This factor undoubtedly contributed to the increase in turnout (60%), as had also occurred the previous time this happened (in 1999, at 63% turnout).

These figures show the disinterest in the European Union compared to domestic affairs (disinterest that is not incompatible with widespread support for EU membership, as is the case in Spain so far), perhaps associated with the difficulty the population citizens have with following European Union issues, which they perceive as distant, and which cannot always be clearly associated with a recognisable ideology (Seoane, 2013).

It seemed especially difficult to dissociate the 2019 election from local politics, given that it was held only a month after the Spanish legislative election took place, in April 2019. These elections showed the high level of electoral polarisation and fragmentation in the country. The most voted party, PSOE, obtained only 27% of the votes, and the second, PP, 16%. This situation responded to a fundamental trend that had started in Spanish democracy in 2014, when the previous European Election was held: the erosion of political dominance by only two parties, and the dispersion of the vote among more electoral options. This is why the European Election is the ideal scenario, they do not penalise small parties: all the votes are distributed equally among a single constituency, and it is not necessary to obtain a minimum threshold of votes to obtain representation (as opposed to Spanish legislative elections, where a minimum of 3% is needed, or in the regional elections, where a minimum of between 3% and 5% is needed, depending on the region).

In addition, there were two significant differences in the 2019 election. The first was that an openly Eurosceptic political party, Vox, was participating in the election again but this time on the back of recently obtaining excellent results in the April legislative election, ranked as the fifth political party with 10% of the votes. The second was that there were two candidacies headed by the leaders of the two main Catalan independence parties: Oriol Junqueras, from Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, and Carles Puigdemont, from Junts per Cat. These leaders would participate in the election under strained circumstances after the failure of the attempted call for independence from Spain in October 2017. Junqueras had been on remand since November 2017 waiting for the trial to take place, Puigdemont was a fugitive from Spanish justice and resided in Belgium. These exceptional situations gave a very specific flavour to both candidates' campaigns.

The results of the European Election showed a general reinforcement of bipartisanship, since both the PSOE and the PP significantly improved their results compared to the legislative election held the previous month. Conversely, the smaller parties that had recently appeared as alternative options, Podemos, Ciudadanos and Vox, lost ground although, these three parties stood in the national election for the first time in the previous European Election in 2014. The candidacies and results—which correspond exactly to the eight candidates that make up the sample that we will analyse below—can be seen in Table 1.

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Table 1. Results for 2019 European Parliament election in Spain

Political Party	Candidate	European Parliament Group	Results
PSOE	Josep Borrell	Socialists and Democrats	33.18%
PP	Dolores Montserrat	European People's Party	20.35%
Unidas Podemos	M. Eugenia R. Palop	European United Left	10.17%
Ciudadanos	Luis Garicano	Renew Europe	12.30%
VOX	Jorge Buxadé	European Conservatives and Reformists	6.28%
Ahora Repúblicas	Oriol Junqueras	European Free Alliance	5.64%
Junts	Carles Puigdemont	Non-attached Members	4.59%
CEUS	Izaskun Bilbao	Renew Europe	2.85%

Source: Own elaboration

Having reviewed the base context, we will now formulate the Research Questions that we seek to answer with this study:

RQ1: Did the parties consider this election to be a second round of the Spanish General Election held in April?

RQ2: Did this change the parties' agenda?

RQ3: What role did Vox play during the electoral campaign?

RQ4: Did Oriol Junqueras (ERC) and Carles Puigdemont's (JuntsxCat) personal conditions affect the campaign?

BACKGROUND

The analysis of Twitter for the dissemination of political messages is an extremely useful tool to obtain an overview of the campaign developed by a political party or candidate (Campos, 2017). Because it is open to the public, captures their attention and has the capacity to set the agenda, and due to its nature—short messages, which spread quickly and that can be go viral through many different channels—Twitter is undoubtedly the best social network for political communication, which is the interrelation between three actors (politicians, the media and citizens) in the same space (López-García et al., 2018).

It is therefore not surprising that studies into Twitter are central in the very prolific field of political communication analysis, from very diverse perspectives: studies focused on the ability of Twitter to set the agenda (Vargo et al., 2014; Bastos, Raimundo, & Travitzki, 2016); analysis of the dissemination of political messages through this social network (Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson; 2014, Stier et al., 2018); studies that focus on the use that political leaders make of their Twitter accounts (Lee & Shin, 2012; López-García et al., 2016; Masroor et al., 2019); reception studies (Boerman & Kruijemeier, 2016); analysis of the monitoring of political content televised through Twitter (Vergeer & Franses, 2016; Márquez, 2017; Baviera, Peris, & Cano-Orón, 2019); etc. We can find a compilation of the most relevant studies at an initial stage of research, applied to many different countries and situations in Vergeer (2015).

Most of these studies conclude that both the political parties and the media use the same communication strategies on Twitter; one that is characteristic of conventional political communication: unidi-

rectional, uses programmed and prefabricated language generated from debates, lacks interaction and creates self-referential, ideological communities (López-García et al., 2016).

Twitter analyses have also occupied a relevant space in terms of their use by European Union institutions, and particularly the European Parliament. This includes the daily use made by parliamentarians themselves (Larsson, 2015; Scherpereel, Wohlgenuth, & Schmelzinger, 2016) and the Twitter analysis carried out during the different European Parliament electoral processes, but especially the 2014 Election (Nulty et al., 2016; Lilleker et al., 2016).

In regard to the object of study that concerns us, the 2014 European Parliament Election in Spain, we have several antecedents. Congosto (2015) contrasts the endogenous activity of the political actors involved in the campaign with the exogenous conversation generated on Twitter by citizens, and concludes that in both cases the role of the media and journalists, traditional mediators, are not very relevant. Ramos, Fernández & Pineda (2018) found that in these elections, Spanish political parties carried out a traditional campaign, i.e. a one-way strategy that lacks interaction with the public, where the debate occurs only between the politicians themselves.

Similar conclusions were also reached by López-García et al. (2015), whose study focused on the party leaders' accounts, not candidates. Furthermore, this analysis showed that Spanish politicians barely mentioned Europe or the European Union in their Twitter messages, focusing much more on questions of Spanish politics. Thus in the electoral campaign the European Election functioned as a kind of prelude to the Spanish General Election (which would take place one year later, in 2015), dismissing the European debate. The last study mentioned can be considered a direct antecedent of the one presented here, not only because it has the same research team and similar authors, but because the study methodology and the research focus are similar. This will allow us to explore whether the situation changed in 2019 and whether the European debate has been given more importance amongst the Twitter accounts of Spanish candidates, or conversely, whether it continues to function as a pretext to debate and to polarise the debate around national policy.

METHODOLOGY

Based on the need to respond to the research questions that we outlined above, we decided that our analysis would combine both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The following statements were made posed to shape the investigation into the two main research hypotheses:

Hypothesis One: European issues, Europe and the European Union as issues of public interest, would be less present in the candidates' Twitter discourse.

Hypothesis Two: Euroscepticism would continue to be a minor issue in Spain compared to other neighbouring countries, as it would only be a relevant issue for the far-right party Vox.

The main objective of this research study is to analyse the behaviour of political leaders on Twitter. Our focus is on the leaders of the Spanish political parties who obtained parliamentary representation in the 2019 European Parliament election. Below, from highest to lowest parliamentary representation, we present the name of the politician, the party and the European parliamentary group to which the analysed candidates are attached: Josep Borrell (PSOE-Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats), Dolores Montserrat (Partido Popular-European People's Party), Luis Garicano (Ciudadanos-Renew Europa), María

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Eugenia Rodríguez Palop (Unidas Podemos Cambiar Europa-European United Left–Nordic Green Left), Jorge Buxadé (VOX-European Conservatives and Reformists), Oriol Junqueras (Ahora Repúblicas-The Greens/European Free Alliance), Carles Puigdemont (Lliures per Europa-Non-inscrits) and Izaskun Bilbao (Coalición por una Europa Solidaria-Renew Europe).

Table 2. Tweets posted on Twitter during the 2019 European Parliament electoral campaign in Spain by candidates from the main political groups

Political Party	Candidate	Tweets	Retweets	Total
PSOE	Josep Borrell	113	118	231
PP	Dolors Montserrat	136	64	200
Unidas Podemos	M. Eugenia Palop	128	179	244
Ciudadanos	Luis Garicano	136	255	391
VOX	Jorge Buxadé	241	71	312
Ahora Repúblicas	Oriol Junqueras	25	74	99
Junts	Carles Puigdemont	104	140	244
CEUS	Izaskun Bilbao	134	729	863

Source: Own elaboration

The different methodologies used to carry out the research are based on other previous studies also focused in Twitter analysis (López-García et al., 2015; López-García, 2016; López-García et al., 2016).

First, we developed a quantitative content analysis that included the theme of each tweet in regard to the two hypotheses. To check whether the first hypothesis was confirmed, the candidates' tweets on Twitter were classified using the variable Subject: European Union and Spain, depending on whether the tweet was about European or local issues; Campaign, when the tweet was about electoral acts, such as rallies or debates; Personal, for personal statements or comments that are not related to political or campaign agenda issues, and finally, Other, tweets that did not fall into any of the previous categories.

To test the second hypothesis, the variable Europeism was used, which classified tweets about the European Union into one of the following categories: Europeanist, Eurocritical, Eurosceptic and Not included.

The corpus consists of all the tweets posted by the candidates during the four weeks immediately preceding the day of the European Parliament election (30/04/2019 to 27/05/2019). We downloaded the 1,017 tweets posted during the analysis period through the Twitonomy platform (Table 1). A database was created with the SPSS statistical analysis program, where the content of the tweets was stored and the two analysis variables configured, coded by two of the study's authors.

To ensure the replicability of the research findings, an intercoder reliability test was performed on 10% of the corpus. The Krippendorff Alpha coefficient for the variable Subject ($\alpha = 0.84$) and for Europeism ($\alpha = 0.82$) indicated a good reliability, above 0.70, which allowed us to validate the research study results (Igartua, 2006; Neuendorf, 2016).

Secondly, we also applied a qualitative methodology by analysing the candidates' Twitter discourse throughout the campaign. The timeframe considered was the same as the quantitative analysis, four weeks. This analysis focused on the observation of two variables: the presence of content development

(links, images, videos, or mentions) and the agenda included in the tweets. The approach was complemented by monitoring the candidates' accounts, which allowed us to analyse the most relevant posts periodically (every two days). This observation also allowed us to adopt a discourse analysis approach through which we were able to develop a more complex complementary account of the campaign delivered through Twitter.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Content Analysis

Most political parties published an average of four tweets a day. The only exceptions were the Spitzenkandidat of the European Free Alliance, and Oriol Junqueras, who barely published one tweet per day. Junqueras was in jail accused of secession during the electoral campaign. Conversely, the European Conservatives and Reformists candidate in Spain, José Buxadé, was the most active, with almost nine tweets per day, twice as many as the other candidates. Buxadé belongs to a populist far-right-wing party called VOX.

Table 3 shows the frequency of tweets published by each candidate according to the topic. Most tweets focus on issues on the political agenda, especially the European one (34.3%), which is almost the same percentage of posts dedicated to promoting the election campaign (34.1%). Moreover, the candidates addressed issues of local political current affairs in almost one in every four tweets published (23.9%). To a lesser extent, candidates also used Twitter to share personal information (6.2%) or other topics (1.5%).

The results of the Likelihood Ratio test¹ show that there is a significant association between the candidate and the theme of the tweet [$\chi^2(28, N = 1017) = 269.79, p < 0.001$]. The candidates of the national parties are those who devoted a greater number of their posts to talk about European affairs (issues). The analysis of the Residual Adjusted indicates that the national parties representing the centre-left (PSOE and Unidas Podemos) are the ones who devote significantly more tweets to the European political agenda, one out of every two posts. According to the statistics, the political centre-right parties devote approximately one third of their tweets to European issues. The results also highlight that party coalitions representing pro-independence or nationalist parties posted significantly fewer tweets on European issues than the rest of the statewide parties.

From a statistical point of view, it is remarkable that the candidates who dedicate the greatest number of messages to the Spanish agenda are those of the extreme right-wing populist formation of VOX and Junts, a coalition of Catalan independence parties led by Carles Puigdemont. At the time of the elections, Puigdemont was residing in Belgium and was a fugitive from Spanish justice.

As far as election campaign topics are concerned, a greater number of tweets were posted by candidates from parties that obtained a lower percentage of votes in the European Parliament (less than 7%). In fact, the candidate of the party that obtained the least representation in the Parliament, Izaskun Bilbao, is the one that posted a significantly higher percentage of tweets to announce the events of the election campaign. Moreover, CEUS the coalition of nationalist and regionalist parties led by Bilbao, won only one seat and 2.82% of the vote.

Regarding the tweets with personal information of candidates, they are statistically more frequent in Ciudadanos (literally Citizens), Unidas Podemos (United We Can) and Ahora República (Now Republic). The other candidates barely posted personal information on their Twitter accounts, especially the Vox

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Table 3. Frequency of tweets published by each candidate according to the topic*

		Candidates								Total
		PSOE	PP	C's	UP	VOX	AR	Junts	CEUS	
EU	Tweets	55	51	49	71	89	2	15	17	349
	%	48.7%	37.5%	36%	55.5%	36.9%	8.0%	14.4%	12.7%	34.3%
	Residual	3.4	.9	.5	5.4	1.0	-2.8	-4.5	-5.6	
Spain	Tweets	29	34	41	12	70	8	45	4	243
	%	25.7%	25.0%	30.1%	9.4%	29.0%	32.0%	43.3%	3.0%	23.9%
	Residual	.4	.3	1.8	-4.1	2.1	.9	4.9	-6.1	
Campaign	Tweets	21	39	29	29	76	11	34	108	347
	%	18.6%	28.7%	21.3%	22.7%	31.5%	44.0%	32.7%	80.6%	34.1%
	Residual	-3.7	-1.4	-3.4	-2.9	-1.0	1.1	-.3	12.2	
Personal	Tweets	3	7	16	15	5	4	8	5	63
	%	2.7%	5.1%	11.8%	11.7%	2.1%	16.0%	7.7%	3.7%	6.2%
	Residual	-1.7	-.5	2.9	2.8	-3.0	2.1	.7	-1.3	
Others	Tweets	5	5	1	1	1	0	2	0	15
	%	4.4%	3.7%	0.7%	0.8%	0.4%	0.0%	1.9%	0.0%	1.5%
	Residual	2.8	2.3	-.8	-.7	-1.6	-.6	.4	-1.5	
Total	Tweets	113	136	136	128	241	25	104	134	1017

*9 cells (22.5%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 0.37).

Source: Own elaboration

candidate, who is the politician who posts significantly the fewest tweets about personal issues. The larger parties, PP and PSOE, introduce other issues not directly related to Europe or Spain, such as the situation in Venezuela and other countries in South America.

Table 4 shows the frequency of tweets posted by each candidate according to their positioning towards the European Union. The majority of the tweets do not include specific references to the European institutions (55.6%). Furthermore, 21.2% of the candidates' posts reflect a Europeanist position. On a smaller scale, the candidates also express a Eurosceptic (13.6%) or Eurocritical (9.6%) position.

The results of the Chi-squared test show that there is a significant association between the candidate and the tweet theme [χ^2 (21, N = 1017) = 754.60, $p < 0.001$]. The analysis of the Residual Adjusted indicates that the candidates who post a higher percentage of Europeanist tweets belong to the most voted for parties in the European Union, as much in Spain as in the other countries.

Compared with other political tweets about Europe, the PSOE candidate has the highest percentage of Europeanist posts, almost one in two. Socialist Workers' Party candidate Borrell, who also defines himself as "Euro convinced" (Borrell, 22/05/2019), makes clear his position in the following tweet: "Europe is the place of political freedom, economic progress and social solidarity" (Borrell, 20/05/2019). Three elections and 15 years later, Borrell returns to win the European election for the Socialist Party.

Indeed, the tweets with a Eurocritical positioning are significantly more numerous in Unidas Podemos candidate, Ms Eugenia Palop's discourse. At least 50% of Palop's posts defend a more feminist, environmentally friendly and social Europe, which will depend less on economic power: "We want more

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Table 4. Frequency of tweets published by each candidate according to their positioning towards the European Union*

		Candidates								Total
		PSOE	PP	C's	UP	VOX	AR	Junts	CEUS	
Europeanist	Tweets	52	50	56	10	2	6	22	18	216
	%	46%	36.8%	41.2%	7.8%	0.8%	24%	21.2%	13.4%	21.2%
	Residual	6.8	4.8	6.1	-4	-8.9	0.3	0	-2.4	
Eurocritic	Tweets	14	2	4	64	1	2	4	7	98
	%	12.4%	1.5%	2.9%	50.0%	0.4%	8.0%	3.8%	5.2%	9.6%
	Residual	.5	-3.8	-3.2	15.2	-6.0	-.5	-2.1	-2.3	
Eurosceptic	Tweets	0	13	1	0	123	0	0	1	138
	%	0.0%	9.6%	0.7%	0.0%	51.0%	0%	0%	0.7%	13.6%
	Residual	-4.5	-1.5	-4.7	-4.8	19.4	-2.0	-4.3	-4.7	
Not included	Tweets	47	71	75	54	115	17	78	108	565
	%	41.6%	52.2%	55.1%	42.2%	47.7%	68.0%	75%	80.6%	55.6%
	Residual	-3.2	-9	-2	-3.3	-2.9	1.2	4.2	6.2	
Total	Tweets	113	136	136	128	241	25	104	134	1017

*2 cells (6.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 2.41.

Source: Own elaboration

cohesive and democratised European institutions, where we are all represented. This #26M we are going out to reclaim a Europe that is at the service of the people and not of the elites” (Palop, 11/05/2019).

The right-wing candidate of the Vox party monopolises the Eurosceptic messages, they are about 90% of all anti-EU tweets published by the candidates. Statistically speaking, in 51% of his Twitter posts Buxadé defends national interests over the European Parliament, which he describes as “Brussels bureaucrats” (Buxadé, 20/05/2019) subjugated to “popular, socialist or liberal parties” (Buxadé, 07/05/2019).

The coalitions of independentist or nationalist parties are those that mainly tweet without a clear position on the European Union. Junqueras, but above all, Puigdemont and Bilbao post most of their messages without specific references to the European project, since they focus their posts on talking about issues of the Spanish agenda and the electoral campaign.

Discourse Analysis

The discourse analysis allowed us to take a qualitative approach to analysing the content of the candidates’ accounts, and produce a complex interpretation of the use of this social network. This strategy also sought to further outline the topics that the candidates considered most relevant during the campaign period, as well as the specific use that they gave to their account. The results, which are presented below, provide answers to the hypotheses stated at the beginning of this chapter.

The PSOE candidate, Josep Borrell, is probably the candidate who mentions European policy the most and has a specific campaign for the European Election. His discourse not only focuses on European issues, but he is also clearly a Europeanist. This might be because he is a former president of the European Parliament and was at the time the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Spain. In fact, shortly after

this election, and in view of the upcoming renewal in the European Commission, Borrell would go on to occupy a highly relevant position in this institution: vice-president of the European Commission and High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

Borrell's discourse, almost always supported by audiovisual material (images or videos), was normally based on statements that Borrell himself had made to the media or at public events on European issues. Thus, and similar to many other politician accounts, Twitter was used as an indirect loudspeaker for content that was already in the media, but in this case the mediator is the political leader and candidate who had made those comments, responsible for re-broadcasting them (editing the content how they choose and thus re-framing it) through their social networks. The researchers also found tweets that refer to Borrell's activity as Spanish Foreign Minister, and that implicitly reinforced the suitability of his profile as a PSOE candidate for the election of a multinational institution such as the European Parliament. Finally, the authors found that critical references to the Catalan independence movement were always present in Borrell's discourse; in fact, he again took centre stage in this political issue in his role as spokesperson in the pro-Spanish march that took place in Barcelona in October 2017, in response to the Catalan pro-independent movement.

Dolors Montserrat is the candidate of the People's Party (PP). From an official perspective, her account timeline offers elaborate information. She frequently uses images and videos from campaign events and a careful selection of hashtags. From the perspective of content, the account reflects the issues that the PP has tried to put on the agenda for discussion throughout the electoral period. Firstly, the role of Dolors Montserrat as the head of the list of the winners, or the winning party. That is to say, an 'authentic' alternative to the left-wing parties and coalitions. This idea connects directly with the party messages launched during the April 2019 General Election campaign. She explicitly positions herself against the regionalist/nationalist movements present in Spain and other parts of Europe, as well as against the Europhobes of the ultra-nationalist parties. The candidate introduces issues specific to the Spanish political agenda into the European debate, such as the 'venezualisation' of the Spanish left-wing parties (in clear reference to the influence of Podemos on the PSOE) and illegal immigration, as a pan-European problem.

Luis Garicano was the candidate for Ciudadanos (C's). This candidate also makes elaborate use of information in his account. In addition to campaign images and videos, Garicano includes links to media content. In his account, unlike the others analysed, it is common to find long threads, which go beyond the short tweet. In regard to content, the tone of the tweets is similar to those coming from the PP such as the discourse about "those who want to destroy the prosperity and peace that the EU represents", in clear reference to regionalist /nationalist movements and positions of a Europhobic nature. It is worth noting here that C's has not yet suffered the catastrophic fall in popularity that resulted in the party obtaining only 10 members of parliament, down from the 57 obtained in the April General Election, with a consequent union with the PP, beginning with the post-electoral pacts made in various municipalities and, in particular, autonomous communities that have mixed PP and Ciudadanos governments (Madrid, Castilla y León, Murcia, following the Andalusian model). That is why the account presents the candidate and the party as the liberal and central option in Spain, in line with what is defended in the Spanish context. As an openly Spanish nationalist party, the candidate's interest is also focused on arguing for Spain's ability to be an influence in Europe.

Maria Eugenia Rodríguez Palop is the candidate for Unidas Podemos (UP). The authors have noticed that the candidate's timeline makes elaborate use of information, similar to the other candidates. However, in addition to the typical videos and images of the campaign, her own messages are more

often combined with retweets from other accounts. In this sense, only C's and CEUS surpass it. From the perspective of content, UP is an openly pro-European party and this is reflected in the issues that the candidate addresses. However, of note is that these European subjects connect with the party's strategic ideological lines at a national level. In other words, European issues are always mentioned from a feminist, environmentalist or socialist etc. perspective. Unlike the nationalist candidates, UP links and identifies Vox with other far-right European parties and movements, which it presented as a real threat to the European project. In this sense, nationalisms/regionalisms are approached from an integrative perspective. Generally speaking, Palop's speech is probably the most pro-European of those analysed.

Jorge Buxadé (VOX) has a clearly Eurosceptic discourse, in which Europe represents a threat to Spain's tradition and freedom. He uses the expression 'Brussels bureaucrats' to refer to the EU. This is a crude copy of discourse that runs contrary to the US federal government (Washington bureaucrats). The candidate believes that EU States, and Spain in particular, should be able to make their own decisions without interference from EU institutions. A clear example of this, to which he refers several times, in an obviously reference to the Catalan leaders of the Catalan independence movement, is that the extradition of fugitives from Spanish justice would be guaranteed. He references Spain's value and the threats posed to it by its supposed enemies (socialism, liberalism), closely associated with the European Union's current ideology. He particular focuses on the limitations of the People's Party, criticising them for having a complex for leaning right, being too moderate and not breaking from the Social Democratic mould.

Oriol Junqueras, president of Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya and vice-president of the Generalitat between January 2016 and October 2017, is the candidate for the *Ahora Repúblicas* coalition, made up of various left-leaning, republican and pro-independence formations, such as the ERC, the *Bloque Nacionalista Galego* and *Euskal Herria Bildu*. Junqueras had resigned from his position as vice president of the Generalitat on October 28, 2017, pursuant to the application of article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, he was one of the defendants in the Catalan independence trial that was taking place in the Supreme Court, and had been held on remand since 2 November 2017, so his public participation in the campaign was limited to a press conference offered from the Soto del Real prison, articles in the media, a short video recorded on 20 May in the Congress of Deputies when he was allowed to collect his credential, and being active on social networks. As a consequence of his imprisonment, his participation was limited and often indirect, he retweeted and posted a few tweets of his own content through collaborators. Junqueras fundamentally developed two lines of discourse, aimed at mobilising his electorate and focusing on the independence process: one line was related to the European election and the other to the Barcelona City Council election, held on the same day. Through the first, he encouraged the public to vote to place Catalonia at the "centre" of the European debate and "fight injustice and the lack of freedoms", as voting a "political prisoner" into the EU parliament was the "best way to condemn the repression of the Spanish State". Through the second, he asked the public to vote for his party's candidate Ernest Maragall for mayor, as his objective was to have a "pro-independent capital" instead of a "politically equidistant" Barcelona. In addition, he reflected an image of kindness through messages of appreciation and optimism ("1,000,000 thank yous", "we will meet again walking through the streets of Barcelona", "persevere, because we will win through perseverance", "be happy and make the most of life", etc.), combined with statements that his imprisonment had not changed his position or the intensity of his arguments.

Carles Puigdemont, President of the Generalitat [Regional Government of Catalonia] between January 2016 and October 2017, was the candidate for *Lliures per Europa-Junts*, a coalition that stemmed from the post-convergent political space between *Partit Demòcrata Europeu Català* (PDeCAT), *Convergència*

Democràtica de Catalunya (CDC) and Junts per Catalunya (JxCat), which in turn was a stable coalition that includes the first two and also the Crida Nacional per la República, an pro-independence party promoted by him. Puigdemont, who had resigned from his post as President of the Generalitat on 28 October 2017 under the same conditions as Junqueras, resided in Belgium because there was an arrest warrant issued for him and he had been declared in absentia by Spanish justice, so his public participation in the campaign was greater than that of the ERC candidate, but carried out from abroad, and limited to interviews, press conferences and participation at rallies via videoconference and his social media account activity. The candidate developed two main lines of discourse on Twitter: the categorisation of Spain as a non-democratic country and the indirect claim of his figure as the leader of the pro-independence movement and guarantor of the dignity of the autonomous institution of whose presidency he had stolen from him. The first line was developed throughout several tweets referring to the police and legality of freedom of expression, as well as through the repeated use of words and expressions such as “repression”, “injustice”, “censorship”, “persecution of ideas and freedoms” and “exile”, and, also, through the continued use of the hashtags “FreeTothom” (freedom for all) and “LlibertatPresosPolíticsiExiliats” (freedom of political prisoners and exiles), in many of his tweets. The second, through hashtags and references to prisoners such as Junqueras, and all the independence leaders, not only those who supported his views; in addition, by claiming that he would “never surrender” and emphasising the continuity of his international activity, which during the period analysed consisted of various meetings with parliamentarians in Slovenia and England; this also comprised an implicit claim of his usefulness while in “exile”.

Finally, Izaskun Bilbao (PNV), led the candidacy of a group of nationalist parties from various Spanish regions. Her discourse was Europeanist, a position that has not traditionally been associated with opposition to Spanish nationalism till now. She has been in the European Parliament for ten years and has many years’ experience in dealing with European policy issues. She constantly uses graphic and audiovisual media to highlight her tweets, which often serve to spread her interactions to the media.

As outlined, the candidates’ accounts show certain similarities that had already partially emerged in the content analysis. However, each candidate used their accounts during the campaign according to their specific interests and especially their characteristics. In this way, the campaigns of certain Spanish politicians, especially those who are now or have been members of the European Parliament, are more specifically directed towards that institution and how their work in it may be useful for voters. Conversely, other candidates use the focus of the elections and the European Union as a pretext to outline their political objectives, something that is particularly obvious with the two Catalan pro-independence political candidates.

CONCLUSION

The combination of the two analysis methodologies used in this research study—content analysis and discourse analysis—has shown that the campaign for the 2019 European Parliament election in Spain actually includes several campaigns in one: a more conventional campaign where European issues intersect with the traditional issues of each political party, and where it is also possible to see, albeit not intensely, the interest of each of the national parties in drawing parallels between the elections to the European Parliament and the domestic situation (RQ1 and RQ2). An openly Eurosceptic campaign by Vox, which is a novelty in the Spanish electoral context (RQ3) and a campaign focused on the indepen-

dence of Catalonia and the confrontation between the Catalan and Spanish institutions, from the two leaders of the Catalan independence parties (RQ4).

The latter campaign occurs in exceptional circumstances because both leaders, Oriol Junqueras and Carles Puigdemont, were accused of serious crimes by the Spanish justice system and their rights are limited in terms of campaigning (Junqueras campaigned from prison, and Puigdemont cannot enter Spain without risking arrest). For this reason, their campaigns focus on these issues and they set aside, more than any other candidate, the official purpose of their candidacies. It is worth noting that months later their status as MEPs would cause new problems for the Spanish justice system, being much more restrictive in the interpretation of Puigdemont and Junqueras' rights than the European courts.

Regarding the starting hypotheses of the chapter, the results reject H1 and endorse H2. From our perspective, this gives greater value and interest to the results of our study, given that it shows a significant evolution of Spanish political candidates' thematic axes and discourse strategies compared to the previous election, and more specifically to the 2014 election, when the European Election constituted a mere pretext to national issues (López-García et al., 2015).

Conversely, in the 2019 election, the issue of Europe was given greater priority by the candidates analysed. It is possible that because the election date coincided with the local and regional elections there was less focus on the leaders of the parties and coalitions who stood as candidates for the European election; this may have allowed them to further develop their European agenda, which was not so overshadowed by the national agenda.

This also left space for furthering the European debate in Spain, as, even though the majority of the discourses stemming from each party are Europeanist, each of them has different nuances. Furthermore, they now had to contrast with the Eurosceptic discourse, something that had not previously been necessary.

This is also an interesting novelty. For the first time, Spain had an openly Eurosceptic party, Vox, which obtained a significant percentage of votes, although it was not able to condition the electoral debate (H2). This situation, common in many other European countries, had not occurred in Spain. We can thus conclude that, although the majority of Spanish citizens are pro-European and support the European Union project, that is no longer unanimous.

This situation contrasts sharply with what had been seen in previous electoral processes, where the pro-European position was unanimous; it may have been because of that reason the parties did not consider it or any European issue a priority: the convenience of belonging the EU was taken for granted. Paradoxically, this was added to an interest in discussing and debating issues related to the European Parliament elections, replacing national issues (López-García et al., 2015).

The 2019 election presented an interesting evolution of the debate, probably derived to some extent from the emergence of a Eurosceptic party that could have implicitly conditioned the debate (explicitly, we have already seen that this does not seem to be the case). But also, and above all, derived from the evolution of the European framework, the problems associated with Europe and Spain's membership in the European Union. The existence of this debate can paradoxically be considered a symptom of the Europeanisation of the Spanish political class and society.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

A previous version of this study was presented at the conference 'Fragile Democracies: Polarization, populism and disinformation in a hybrid media context', funded by the Conselleria d'Innovació, Uni-

versitat, Ciència i Societat digital from the Generalitat Valenciana (Ref. AORG2020/054). The translation of this chapter also benefited from this funding. It is also linked to the R&D project “Ecology of disinformation: the construction of fake news and its impact on public space”, funded by the Conselleria d’Innovació, Universitat, Ciència i Societat digital from the Generalitat Valenciana (Ref. AICO2020/224).

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ENDNOTE

- ¹ The Likelihood Ratio test is used instead Pearson Chi-Squared test because more than 20% of cells obtain an expected frequency higher than five in the Crosstabulation.

Chapter 11

Intermedia Agenda–Setting Effect of Latino Television in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election: A Comparative Study of Telemundo and Univision

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ABSTRACT

In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared a global health crisis from a viral disease known as COVID-19 caused by a coronavirus named SARS-CoV-2. The world population went into a mandatory lockdown and obligatory use of face masks to prevent the virus from spreading. Within this epidemiological context, in late August 2020, on the first day of the general election campaign period, the United States had reached about 6 million cases of COVID-19 and approximately 190K deaths, according to its Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Against all expectations, voter turnout to elect the 46th President set a civic participation record that had not been observed in over 100 years. The aim of this study is to examine the journalistic information disseminated by U.S. Spanish-language television media to Latino voters which motivated them to get out to vote. The theoretical foundation is Agenda-Setting theory focusing on the intermedia agenda-setting effect between Telemundo and Univision by measuring the level of salience emerging from their own news agendas.

INTRODUCTION

The winner of the 2020 U.S. presidential election was democracy. Reuters reported that, according to the U.S. Elections Project at The University of Florida¹, “[the 2020 election] was setting the stage for the highest participation rate in over a century” (Reuters, 2020, p.1). The news outlet reported that by the end

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8057-8.ch011

of the last day of early voting, over 90 million citizens had voted, “the record-breaking pace, about 65% of the total turnout in 2016 reflects intense interest in the vote” (p.1). Every state in the nation has different early-voting end dates depending on their own state electoral laws but it usually ranges from seven days prior to Election Day, which was November 3, 2020, all the way to the day before the election. After the general election, DeSilver (2021) noted that citizens voted in record numbers in the presidential race reaching 158.4 million ballots, “that works out to more than six-in-ten people of voting age and nearly two-thirds of estimated eligible voters” (p.1). According to DeSilver, this number is approximately 7% higher than the previous presidential election in 2016 and “turnout was the highest since at least 1980” (p.1). He attributes this rise in political engagement to two key factors: first, the confrontation between President Donald J. Trump (Republican Party) and contender Joseph R. Biden (Democratic Party) which led to a record number of registered voters who felt the call to make their voices heard; and second, the COVID-19-pandemic emergency voting accommodations that many states put in place to keep people safe, such as expanding the eligible dates for mail balloting and early voting (DeSilver, 2021).

The Council of Foreign Relations reported that more than 159 million Americans voted, setting the record for the largest total voter turnout in contemporary U.S. history, “Voter turnout in 2020 was the highest in 120 years when measured as a percentage of the voting-eligible population: 66.7 percent” (Lindsay, 2020, p.1). The 2020 Federal Election Commission report announced that the Democratic candidate won the election with 306 electoral votes over the Republican candidate who obtained 232 votes. The agency explained that whoever obtains 270 electoral votes wins the presidential race. Regarding the nationwide popular vote, NBC reported that Biden won, obtaining 51% of votes followed by Trump with 47%, “Biden’s 4.5-point victory margin is the second largest since 2000, only Barack Obama’s 7-point win in 2008 was larger ... 81 million votes Biden won is by far the most any presidential candidate has ever received” (Chinni, 2020, p.1). Chinni, the NBC reporter, wrote that Biden won the popular vote by seven million, which came from two states, California (5 million) and New York (2 million). However, Lindsay (2020) argues that a close examination of “the smallest popular vote shift needed to give Trump a victory, 2020 was close. Indeed, it was even closer than 2016” (p.1). According to the CNN nationwide exit poll (2020), the voter distribution in terms of race was Whites with 67%, Blacks and Latinos tied at 13% each, and Asian and other racial groups with 4% each. Accordingly, Latinos were competing for the second voting power seat in the nation. The exit poll found that Latinos favored Biden (65%) with their vote over Trump (32%). Still, Sonneland (2020) explained that Trump did not win the majority of the Latino vote in any state, save Florida, where the Cuban vote played a decisive role. In addition, Agiesta (2020) pointed out that Trump increased the number of Latino votes in several battleground states. For instance, in Florida Trump captured almost half of the Latino vote, which represented a 35% increase from 2016.

According to the Pew Research Center study (PRC 2020), interest in this presidential election was higher than during the previous three elections, “in the midst of a pandemic that has taken more than 160,000 American lives and ravaged the nation’s economy, 83% of registered voters say it really matters who wins the presidency... engagement with the election is equally high among Republican and Democratic voters” (p.1). This study also provided some of the reasons citizens decided to support one of the presidential candidates. For instance, Trump’s backers maintained that their top three motivations were: good leadership/performance skills (23%), issue/policy positions (21%), and he is not Biden (19%)². In contrast, the top three reasons for casting their vote in favor of Biden were: he is not Trump (56%), leadership/performance (19%), and his personality/temperament (13%)³ (PRC, 2020). It is interesting to note that Trump’s support was based on his leadership skills, whereas for Biden the support was centered

on the fact that he was not Trump. Nevertheless, the fact that issue positions ranked second for one of the presidential candidates highlights the importance of scrutinizing the policies that were discussed in the Latino television news media to compare and determine if those same issues were the ones that captured the voters' attention, particularly in a health-crisis context.

The purpose of this research is to determine how Telemundo and Univision covered the 2020 presidential election, focusing specifically on their main daily national newscasts, *Noticias Telemundo* and *Noticiero Univision*. It is imperative to evaluate the role that the U.S. Latino-oriented media plays in the election dynamics of political communication. The 2016 Survey of Latino Adults by Pew Research Center found that television is the main source of news for Hispanics, followed by the internet, radio, and newspapers. For many years, TV has been the news source for Latinos but as Flores and Lopez (2018) observed "this activity has declined from 92% in 2006 to 79% in 2016" (p.1). They explained that in the meantime, news consumption through the internet has increased from 37% in 2006 to 74% in 2016. This internet variable comprises all social media platforms, digital websites, and smart phone apps. However, the use of radio as a news source is falling, from 64% in 2006 to 55% in 2016, as well as newspapers from 58% in 2006 to 34% in 2016. According to Flores and Lopez's study, this new trend of news consumption among Latinos is mirroring what is being observed across the nation.

Furthermore, Flores and Lopez documented that for foreign-born Latinos, television news is their most important source of information. Typically, most Latinos are bilingual (English and Spanish). This language ability reflects in their news-consumption habits, where Flores and Lopez found that 54% of Latinos get their news in both English and Spanish, 29% in English only and 17% in Spanish only. Furthermore, 89% of foreign-born Latinos prefer Spanish-language news sources. The United States Census Bureau estimates that the entire population is 328,239,523 of which 13.5% are foreign born. In terms of race, the Census Bureau data indicates that Latinos continue to be the largest minority group in the nation, representing 18.3% of the entire population. Additionally, Bustamante (2019) documented that in 2017 the Hispanic population represented almost 60 million individuals (58,838,000) with cultural heritage from Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America and Spain. Moreover, individuals with Mexican heritage are the largest group at 62% (36,634,000). The vast majority of Mexican Americans have citizenship (79%), about one third are foreign born (31%), speak English proficiently (71%), with a median income of \$49,000, 29% are high school graduates and 12% are college graduates (Bustamante, 2019, p.1).

This research paper seeks to document scientific evidence regarding the political communication interplay across Latino ethnic news media outlets as well as identify those electoral topics that journalists from Telemundo and Univision highlighted in their political news reports concerning the presidential election. By applying Agenda-Setting theory as the theoretical framework and concentrating on the intermedia agenda-setting effect between Telemundo and Univision, the present study expands the agenda-setting body of knowledge regarding the Latino-oriented news media political reporting that strongly interconnects a variety of Latino voters during a specific electoral period. While many Latinos are bilingual and receive their information from Spanish and English news media outlets, it is essential to investigate what sort of political information is being dispensed by the two major Spanish-language television networks to Latino voters to cast an informed vote. This investigation focuses on three goals: first, to identify Telemundo's and Univision's news issues agenda and horse-race agenda; second, to measure the intermedia agenda-setting effect in terms of the degree of correlation between the electoral topics agendas of the television networks; and third, to determine, from a cause-and-effect perspective, the directional flow of news influence between Telemundo and Univision.

BACKGROUND

Agenda-Setting theory explores the intersection among mass media, journalism, politics, and public opinion, generally focusing on the communication dynamics of a variety of election campaigns. This theory studies the communication process from the point of view of its effect. Agenda-Setting theory was inspired by Walter Lippmann's (1922) description of the role that news plays in its audiences' perceptions of reality as their main source for developing the predominance of pictures in their heads, as explained in his *Public Opinion* book. As McCombs (2004), the intellectual father of this theory explained, "agenda-setting is a theory about the transfer of salience from the mass media's pictures of the world to the pictures in our heads. The core theoretical idea is that elements prominent in the media picture becomes prominent in the audience's picture" (p. 68). Public issues that are constantly present in the news media, marking them as important to pay attention to, over time, those same issues become important to the public.

Agenda-Setting theory highlights the learning process that takes place from the media to the public where the media is suggesting, through frequency of coverage (more coverage for important issues), what the most important public affairs issues are on a given day/week/month and the public, in turn, will regard those issues as crucial. Therefore, "the core finding is that the degree of emphasis placed on issues in the news influences the priority accorded to those issues by the public" (McCombs, 2004, p.68). Nevertheless, the outcomes of the original agenda-setting study regarding the 1968 presidential election showed that only one-third of the total election news coverage was about public affairs issues (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Consequently, agenda-setting studies contain two categories—public affairs issues and horse-race topics—where each one of them creates its own list of priorities known as news agendas. Still, public issues are the focus of agenda-setting theory in establishing the relationship with the public opinion.

The classic agenda-setting effect approach suggests that "the unit of analysis on each agenda is an object, a public issue" (McCombs, 2004, p. 69) which, over time, can vary in importance during an electoral cycle. Daily, objects are constantly competing for the journalists' attention, but only a few will make it to the news. In every city of the world, there are always many events taking place at the same time and all of them are competing for journalism coverage. Consequently, every day, news directors must go through a selection-of-information process by deciding 'what is the topic of the day?' to center their attention around that issue or event. During the presidential electoral cycle, there are significant events that can easily become the journalistic topic of the day, such as candidate registrations, primary election, political party nominations, debates, early voting, and election day. Accordingly, "the appearance of an issue ... or other topic on the public agenda means that it has granted substantial public exposure and [media's] attention" (McCombs, 2004, p. 70) like a cause-and-effect operation.

This effect on the public's perception takes place because many people do not have the opportunity to experience events first-hand (immediate experience), so they rely on the journalists who write news stories in which they describe and narrate those events to them, creating a sort of second-hand reality (beyond immediate experience). As McCombs (2005) stated, "this ability to focus attention on a few public issues—as well as many other aspects of public affairs—is the agenda-setting role of the press" (p.156) which operates at two levels. The first level focuses on attention, where news agendas are identified by a list of topics/objects, and the second level focuses on comprehension, in which those topics/objects possess attributes that can be understood as the description of their unique characteristics.

In short, as Cohen (1963) described, the news media inform their audiences what to think about through the constant development of their news agendas (first level) and how to think about by describing the object's attributes (second level). It is key to understand the term 'agenda' in the context of this theory, "agenda is a descriptive term for a prioritized list of items, the major topics found in newspapers, television news programs and other mass media messages" (McCombs, 2005, p. 156). Ideally, each news outlet should create their own news agenda unless the media are owned by a corporation which centralizes their news activity to one group of journalists. For example, several Mexican radio corporations have the tradition of producing 5-minute newscasts every hour to inform their listeners. Usually, the corporation has all of its journalists concentrated into one team, which produces one newscast for all of the corporation's affiliated stations, which, in turn, disseminate the same newscasts at the top of the hour. Clearly, in this case, there would be one news agenda for the entire corporation, but this is a special case.

This research examines the 2020 U.S. presidential election news coverage of Telemundo and Univision, focusing on the transfer of object salience from one network to the other. This investigation is a classic agenda-setting effect study, concentrating on the attention given to objects by determining the networks' agendas and the nature of the influence between both television newscasts. This study focuses on the first level of the Agenda-Setting theory by differentiating between television news agendas. The flow of political communication begins with the candidates, followed by reporter coverage of campaign activities and reporting of election news stories, which, in turn, are consumed by voters who choose the national newscasts of Telemundo and Univision as their major source for election news. Each of those election news stories centers its attention on a particular political issue and/or election topic. In the mind of the news consumer, the amount and frequency of coverage of a particular issue can increase the level of salience regarding a particular set of topics that the news media consumer perceives as significant (McCombs and Shaw, 1972).

This research expands on the ethnic viewpoint of the Agenda-Setting theory, particularly the agenda-setting effect observed in Spanish-language television. This presidential election provides a unique opportunity to test the contribution of Latino-oriented media to the electoral dynamics by applying Agenda-Setting theory to identify which television network set the 2020 presidential agenda in terms of election topics, political issues, and power of influence. This study also examines the political communication role of Latino-oriented media under this new presidential electoral setting by assessing the role that Telemundo and Univision played in the midst of a global health crisis known as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Latino Media Political Coverage

There is a limited number of studies which examine the intersection between Spanish-language news media and politics. Moran (2006) notes that "alternative voices in the US have been found in ethnic media outlets that provide information in languages other than English and focus on issues often ignored by the mainstream news" (p. 389). She conducted a comparative study of two television stations' local evening newscasts located in San Diego County during state election cycle. The English-language station KGTV, which is affiliated with ABC and the Spanish-language station KBNT, affiliated with Univision. Moreover, Moran found that the number of stories covered did not vary much between stations determining that the most frequent news story topic was crime, but KGTV aired more human-interest stories than KBNT. In terms of election news, Moran indicated that the Univision affiliate focused on stories about voter education, such as how to register to vote, the election process, and general information

about law amendments. While the ABC affiliated counterpart did not offer information concerning voting procedures. Moran observed that one of the major differences between the news stations is the issue of immigration, which is considered to be a Latino-themed newsworthy topic because KBNT focused broadcasts on this issue while their competition KGTV disregarded it.

Fowler, Hale, and Olsen (2009) conducted an assessment between Spanish-language (Telemundo and Univision) and English-language (NBC, FOX, CBS, ABC) local television newscasts to identify how those news media outlets represent and unite their local communities. Their results documented that legacy media's attention to Hispanic audiences is a task that would involve weighing the particular demographic and diversity characteristics of the target audience, the size of the media market, the particular market characteristics as well as the degree of competition among local stations. Their outcomes also indicated that "even under the most optimal circumstances, general market outlets provide minimal coverage of minority interest" (2009, p.232). In terms of their 2004 presidential election examination, Fowler, Hale, and Olsen found that election coverage on English-language television news is more prominent for about 30 seconds more than on Spanish-language television news. Also, their outcomes determined that Spanish-language newscasts were more likely than English-language stations to cover election news directly linked to Latino interests. Fowler, Hale, and Olsen determined that "minority media, therefore, often fill a void in the information environment by increasing the visibility of minority groups and highlighting issues associated with marginalized populations" (2009, p.8). Another interesting finding of this research was that Latinos tend to watch more news than their English-speaking counterparts. Moreover, Rosenstiel, Just, Belt, Pertilla, Dean, and Chinni (2007) found that the age of news consumers ranges from 25 to 54 years old.

Continuing with political coverage, Subervi (1992) assessed the Republican (Bush-Quayle) and Democratic (Dukakis-Bentsen) mass communication campaign strategies designed for Latino voters on Latino-oriented media during the 1988 presidential race. His outcomes indicated that the Republican party had a centralized strategy which was well organized and funded. As Subervi documented, the Republican party strategy consisted of three main efforts—surveys, outreach, and television ads in English as well as in Spanish (broadcasted at Telemundo and Univision). In contrast, Subervi found that the Democrat party failed to establish a systematic plan of action and allocated much less funding, but it was a remarkable improvement from the previous election. He was able to identify two Democratic party movements designed to win over the Latino vote by using free media and television advertising. Subervi explained that "it is evident that ample coverage was obtained for Dukakis in Spanish-language media. He noted that one reason may have been that Dukakis's fluency in Spanish was sufficient to enable him to understand Spanish-speaking reporters' questions and respond in that language. For the first time in American history, a presidential candidate addressed the Latino population in Spanish via Spanish-language media as documented by Subervi. The Democratic candidate had the capability to speak directly to Latino voters in Spanish.

Further investigation of local news regarding Spanish-language coverage focusing on the measurement of civic engagement through voter turnout participation records in local elections by Oberholzer-Gee and Waldfogel (2009) determined that local Spanish-language television newscasts increased Latino voter turnout by more than four percent. They contrasted outcomes regarding Hispanic voter turnout during the 1994 and 1998 elections with their content analysis of Spanish-language news and showed that Spanish-language stations were more likely to report on issues that matter to Latinos demonstrating that relevancy of information increases civic participation. Oberholzer-Gee and Waldfogel found that Latino

participation grew by 5.1% in local elections due to the local news quality, not quantity, concluding that Latinos who choose Spanish-language newscasts as their source of news are more likely to cast their vote.

Concerning the 2004 presidential election, Hale, Olsen, and Fowler (2009) documented that electoral coverage of English language national newscasts (26%) dedicated more airtime than their Spanish language counterparts (17%). They observed this same pattern in local newscasts, where English-language stations devoted more airtime (9%) to electoral coverage than Spanish-language media (7%). Hale, Olsen, and Fowler point out that Spanish-language journalists were more likely to offer a Latino perspective in their news coverage. Eshbaugh-soha and Balarezo (2014) suggest that U.S. “presidents can increase their likelihood of Spanish-language news coverage by speaking about issues pertinent to a Latino audience and visiting border states and Latin American countries” (p. 452). Moreover, Constantakis-Valdez (2008) affirms that Univision’s and Telemundo’s coverage of the 1988 presidential election dealt with the horse-race aspect more than the issues, exactly like their English-language media counterparts; the political coverage was no different in terms of journalistic practices. A few elections later, Flores and McCombs (2008) found the very same style of political coverage between the two major U.S. Spanish-language news media networks regarding the 2004 presidential election. Their findings indicated that Univision devoted 55% of their news coverage to discussing the horse race and 45% to discussing public affairs issues, while Telemundo dedicated 79% to horse-race reporting and 21% to public affairs issues. Also, Flores and McCombs documented that the top three issues for both Latino television networks were terrorism, war in Iraq, and the economy/jobs.

Regarding the 2008 election, De la Fuente (2012) found that the McCain-Palin and Obama-Biden campaigns dedicated 1% of their advertising budgets to Spanish-language television. By the next presidential election cycle of 2012, those expenditures have increased, especially for the Democratic party. Fabian (2012) stated that the 2012 presidential Democratic candidates (Obama-Biden) had spent almost 12 times more on Spanish-language advertising than their Republican adversaries (Romney-Ryan). With respect to electoral news coverage by Spanish-language media, Radalat (2012) observed that the top public affairs issues for Hispanics during the 2012 election were immigration, which received more frequent coverage, thus making the top position on the list, followed by jobs, the economy, and crime. Also, Radalat determined that Spanish-language media should be included as part of the political communication plan of action at any presidential campaign from two perspectives —producing political reporting and investing in political advertising— to reach Latino voters.

The present study continues the examination of the Spanish-language news media during election periods concentrating on national television electoral coverage from Telemundo and Univision. It also proves previous findings, such as the emphasis on covering horse-race stories over issues, immigration as the most prominent issue for Latinos, and the voter procedures information disseminated in newscasts, all of which tends to increase the civic participation among Latinos and the Latino vote turnout. This research extends the body of knowledge by testing three new variables while examining the general election campaign. First, it identifies the types of horse-race stories aired on both television networks, determining their degree of similarity, then determining the influence power of horse-race news between Telemundo and Univision. Second, it documents each presidential candidate’s political issues agenda determining their degree of similarity on both television newscasts and their power of influence in the networks. Third, it determines whether, in a health crisis, the issue of immigration remains as the top issue for Latino media or if the pandemic emergency takes over the Latino news agenda. However, there was one previous finding that was not tested in this study, which is that the ability of a candidate to speak

Spanish directly increases visibility in Spanish-language media, because neither of the presidential candidates —Trump/Biden— nor their vice-presidential running mates —Pence/Harris— speak Spanish.

Several research questions are guiding this study: 1) What was the horse-race topics agenda of each network?; 2) What was the intermedia agenda-setting effect between networks regarding the horse-race topics?; 3) From a cause-and-effect perspective, what was the influence on the directional flow of news regarding the horse-race topics between networks during the initial and final phases of the campaign?; 4) What was Trump's political issues agenda on each network?; 5) What was the intermedia agenda-setting effect between networks regarding Trump's political issues?; 6) From a cause-and-effect perspective, what was the directional flow of influence regarding Trump's political issues between networks during the initial and final phases of the campaign?; 7) What was Biden's political issues agenda on each network?; 8) What was the intermedia agenda-setting effect between networks regarding Biden's political issues?; And 9) From a cause-and-effect perspective, what was the directional flow of influence between Biden's political issues and both television networks during the initial and final phases of the campaign?

METHODOLOGY

This investigation uses a combination of methodological approaches to reveal all the agendas required to measure the flow of influence between Spanish-language television networks and each presidential candidate. To identify Telemundo and Univision's electoral news agendas a content analysis was conducted on each network. The time frame of the examination was determined by both political party's national conventions in which their delegates selected their respective party's candidate nominees running for the presidential seat. The Democratic Party celebrated their convention from August 17 to 20, 2020, and the Republican Party from August 24 to 27, 2020. Consequently, the data-collection period began the following weekday after the last convention, which was August 31, 2020, and ended on Election Day, November 3, 2020. The unit of analysis was every presidential election news story broadcasted by Telemundo's and Univision's main national newscasts, *Noticias Telemundo* and *Noticiero Univision*. Those newscasts air on weekdays (Monday to Friday) in the evening from 6:30 pm ET to 7:00 pm ET.

To establish the intermedia agenda-setting effect of horse-race news, each of the 310 election news stories found were content analyzed by two coders. While conducting the content analysis, the codebook asked coders to identify the main horse-race topics in each news report. The choices were voting education/procedures, polls, rallies or campaign activities, endorsements, debates, foreign election interference, journalism innovations of electoral coverage, transition of power, and other. Further, to establish Trump's and Biden's intermedia agenda-setting effect, the unit of analysis was identified as every issue mentioned by the reporter or the presidential candidate during each election news story aired by Telemundo and Univision. Coders were also instructed in the codebook to identify political issues to which candidates and reporters made reference during the election news reports. Their choices were: the economy, foreign policy, government accountability, immigration, national security, healthcare, veterans, the environment, law and justice, energy, social programs, trade, and education. The Popkin (1994) definition of an issue – an important campaign topic that is likely to propose a change in policy– was the definition used in this research. At the beginning of each coding session, the coders participated in a calibration exercise. The inter-coder reliability between coders was systematically monitored by calculating the intercoder reliability consistency of coders using the formula for calculating the coefficient of reliability to evalu-

ate reliability of Content Analysis coders suggested by Poindexter and McCombs (2000). The formula used for two coders is:

$$C.R. = \frac{2M}{N_1 + N_2}$$

where $C.R.$ is the coefficient of reliability, M is the number of coding decisions that the two coders agreed on, N_1 is the number of coding decisions made by coder 1, and N_2 is the number of coding decisions made by coder 2. “As a rule of thumb, an acceptable coefficient of reliability is 80 percent or above” (Poindexter and McCombs, 2000, p. 203); the results indicated a 93% coefficient of reliability between coders.

To allow for a time-lagged comparative analysis, the 47 examination days were divided into two time periods in which the middle of the general election campaign time frame marked the dividing line. The first period, called the initial phase, ran from August 31, 2020, through September 30, 2020, inclusive (23 days). The second period, or final phase, covered from October 1, 2020, through November 3, 2020, inclusive (24 days). The results were then organized by frequency and percentage, and then ranked to identify the top electoral topics of each candidate. The Spearman’s rank-order correlation coefficient ρ (rho) was then calculated to assess the degree of correlation between the candidates’ issues agendas for each pair of time periods. The formula used to calculate the correlation coefficient is:

$$\rho = \frac{\sum_i (x_i - \bar{x})(y_i - \bar{y})}{\sqrt{\sum_i (x_i - \bar{x})^2 \sum_i (y_i - \bar{y})^2}}$$

where x_i and y_i refer to the i^{th} rank of the candidates’ issues and \bar{x} and \bar{y} are the mean ranks of the issues of the two candidates being compared, for each time period being compared, or both. For example, Trump (x) and Biden (y) or Biden’s initial phase (x) and Biden’s final phase (y), etc. This formula was applied due to tied ranks in most cases. A correlation coefficient of +1 would indicate a perfect agreement; a correlation coefficient of 0, no agreement; and a correlation coefficient of -1 would indicate a perfect inverse agreement. The strength of the correlation between two variables is therefore determined by the value of the correlation coefficient. For values of $\rho \geq 0.700$, the correlation is strong; the correlation is moderate for $0.400 \leq \rho < 0.700$, low for $0.100 \leq \rho < 0.400$, and weak for $\rho < 0.100$. A positive correlation between agendas suggests that as the ranking of issues in one agenda increases, the ranking of the corresponding issues in the other agenda also increases. In contrast, a negative correlation between agendas suggests that as the ranking of issues in one agenda increases, the ranking of the corresponding issues in the other agenda decreases. The news agendas of the television networks were measured to assess similarities between the initial and final phases of the examination period (network autocorrelations) and to identify consistency in the presidential candidates’ issues agendas (candidates’ autocorrelations).

Lastly, to determine the directional influence of electoral topics between candidates, a cross-lagged correlation analysis was conducted. The purpose of the cross-lagged correlations was to explore all the possibilities in the flow of communication between the networks and the candidates. The aim was to scrutinize the two time periods to examine the directional influence regarding the news content of each

television network as well as the directional influence of issues between Trump and Biden. In these time-series analyses, two opposing hypotheses about the time order of influence are juxtaposed. The Rozelle and Campbell method (1969) for using cross-lagged correlations to determine the degree of causality between two variables over time was applied to this study. The Rozelle and Campbell method consists of computing three pairs of correlations: (1) autocorrelations ρ_{X1X2} and ρ_{Y1Y2} , where X1 is variable X at time 1, X2 is variable X at time 2, Y1 is variable Y at time 1, and Y2 is variable Y at time 2; (2) synchronous correlations ρ_{X1Y1} and ρ_{X2Y2} ; and (3) cross-lagged correlations ρ_{X1Y2} and ρ_{Y1X2} . The cross-lagged correlations are then compared to the Rozelle-Campbell baseline (RCb) statistic, which is computed using the autocorrelations and synchronous correlations, and is given by the formula (López-Escobar, Llamas, McCombs, and Lennon 1998: 233).

$$RCb = \left(\frac{\rho_{X1Y1} + \rho_{X2Y2}}{2} \right) \sqrt{\frac{(\rho_{X1X2})^2 + (\rho_{Y1Y2})^2}{2}}$$

If the cross-lagged correlations ρ_{X1Y2} and ρ_{Y1X2} are both above the Rozelle-Campbell baseline, this indicates that the two variables influenced each other reciprocally; one variable could be more predominant than the other. If one of the cross-lagged correlation values is above the Rozelle-Campbell baseline and the other is not (e.g., $\rho_{X1Y2} > RCb > \rho_{Y1X2}$), then the variable at time 1 with a cross-lagged correlation value above the RCb influenced the other variable at time 2, but the reverse is not the case. If both cross-lagged correlation values are below the Rozelle-Campbell baseline, the two variables show no causality at all—they are independent of each other, indicating that neither candidate's media issues agenda is influencing the other candidate's media issues agenda. According to Campbell and Kenny (1999), if X in time 1 causes Y in time 2 more than Y in time 1 causes X in time 2, then ρ_{X1Y2} should be greater than ρ_{Y1X2} and greater than the value of the RCb, then X is said to cause Y. Furthermore, to determine the statistical significance of Spearman's rank-order correlations, a two-tailed t-test was performed. The correlation coefficients that were found to be significant at the 0.01 and 0.05 levels are indicated in Tables 2, 4, 6, 7 and 8.

RESULTS

The outcomes determined that both television networks aired a combined total of 310 electoral news stories during the 47-day examination period. Specifically, Telemundo broadcasted a total of 131 stories, which represented 42% of the combined news stories, with an average of about three items per newscast. For its part, Univision aired a total of 179 news, which constituted 58% of the combined stories, with an average of about four reports per newscast. This comparative analysis determined that during the 2020 presidential election cycle Univision broadcasted election news content at a 16% higher rate than Telemundo. Regarding the type of news content, both television networks reported more frequently on horse-race matters (91% Telemundo, 91% Univision) than on issues (9% Telemundo, 9% Univision). Also, both networks preferred to inform viewers about the presidential election by having their journalists produce a larger number of news packages (59% Telemundo, 55% Univision) rather than having the news anchor read the news (41% Telemundo, 45% Univision). During the entire content analysis period,

Trump was quoted more frequently (63% Telemundo, 67% Univision) in Latino television electoral reports than Biden (37% Telemundo, 33% Univision). This results section is divided into four subsections, which address all of the research questions, in the following order: intermedia agenda-setting effect of horse-race news, Trump's intermedia agenda-setting effect, Biden's intermedia agenda-setting effect, and directional flow of news influence of presidential candidates by television network.

Intermedia Agenda-Setting Effect of Horse-Race News by Television Network

The first, second, and third research questions touch on horse-race news broadcasted in Telemundo and Univision. Specifically, those inquiries are related to determining the horse-race news agenda in both television networks, establish the intermedia agenda-setting effect between them as well as indicate their directional flow of influence during the initial and final phases of the examination period. Results determine that Telemundo's horse-race stories initially addressed eight topics: voting procedures/education, polls, campaign events/rallies, voting promotion, endorsements, debates, journalism innovation of electoral coverage and transition of power (see Table 1). In addition, outcomes indicate that, at the initial phase of the examination period, the topic of voting promotion, with 37%, ranked at the top of Telemundo's horse-race coverage followed by campaign events/rallies with 28%, and a tie between voting procedures/education and debates with 12% each. During the final phase, Telemundo's horse-race coverage was expanded to include the topic of foreign election interference, increasing from eight to nine themes. Outcomes demonstrate that voting promotion, with 37%, remained as Telemundo's top horse-race topic followed by debates with 21% and campaign events/rallies with 15%. The horse-race news correlation between Telemundo's initial and final phases showed a strong positive autocorrelation ($\rho_{T1T2} = +0.806$)⁴, indicating homogeneous news content over the entire examination period.

With respect to Univision, in the initial phase, its horse-race coverage consisted of nine topics: voting procedures/education, polls, campaign events/rallies, voting promotion, endorsements, debates, foreign election interference, journalism innovation of electoral coverage, and transition of power (see Table 1). Likewise, results determine that at the top of Univision's horse-race coverage was voting promotion with 37%, followed by campaign events/rallies with 16% and voting procedures with 13%. During the final phase, Univision's horse-race coverage did not report on the topic of journalism innovation of electoral coverage, diminishing their range of horse-race topics from nine to eight. In addition, its list of top horse-race themes changed somewhat where voting promotion remained on top with 53% followed by voting procedures with 13% —which used to be in the third position in the previous time period—and debates with 9% —a new topic in the top list. The horse-race news correlation between Univision's initial and final phases also showed a strong, positive autocorrelation ($\rho_{U1U2} = +0.727$), indicating indistinguishable reporting during both time periods.

In summary, the entire exploration period (initial and final together) of horse-race coverage showed a slight variation for both television newscasters. At the top of Telemundo's list was voting promotion with 37% followed by campaign events/rallies with 19% and debates with 18%. Similarly, Univision had voting promotion with 50% at the top of its list followed by voting procedures with 13% and campaign events/rallies with 10%. Accordingly, the intermedia agenda-setting effect comparing Telemundo and Univision at the initial phase showed a moderate positive synchronous correlation ($\rho_{T1U1} = +0.578$), documenting that horse-race topics were not completely alike between the newscasts (see Figure 1). However, in the final phase, the intermedia agenda-setting effect linking the television networks turned

Intermedia Agenda-Setting Effect of Latino Television in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

Table 1. Intermedia agenda-setting effect of horse-race news by television network

Topic	Initial Phase				Final Phase				Entire Period			
	Univision	Rank	Telemundo	Rank	Univision	Rank	Telemundo	Rank	Univision	Rank	Telemundo	Rank
Voting Procedures	13.4%	(3)	11.7%	(3.5)	13.4%	(2)	6.5%	(5)	13.4%	(2)	8.2%	(4)
Polls	6.0%	(6)	5.0%	(5)	5.6%	(6)	7.3%	(4)	5.7%	(6)	6.5%	(5)
Campaign Events/Rallies	16.4%	(2)	28.3%	(2)	8.6%	(4)	14.5%	(3)	10.1%	(3)	19.0%	(2)
Voting Promotion	37.3%	(1)	36.7%	(1)	52.6%	(1)	37.1%	(1)	49.6%	(1)	37.0%	(1)
Endorsements	4.5%	(7.5)	3.3%	(6)	1.5%	(7.5)	1.6%	(9)	2.1%	(8)	2.2%	(8.5)
Debates	4.5%	(7.5)	11.7%	(3.5)	9.0%	(3)	21.0%	(2)	8.1%	(4.5)	17.9%	(3)
Foreign Election Interference	7.5%	(5)	0.0%	(9)	1.5%	(7.5)	4.8%	(6.5)	2.7%	(7)	3.3%	(7)
Journalism Innovations	1.5%	(9)	1.7%	(7.5)	0.0%	(9)	2.4%	(8)	0.3%	(9)	2.2%	(8.5)
Transition of Power	9.0%	(4)	1.7%	(7.5)	7.8%	(5)	4.8%	(6.5)	8.1%	(4.5)	3.8%	(6)

Uni & Tet: Initial Phase $\rho = +0.578$ | Uni & Tet: Final Phase $\rho = +0.819$ | Uni: Initial and Final Phases $\rho = +0.727$ | Tet: Initial and Final Phases $\rho = +0.806$

out to be a stronger, positive synchronous correlation ($\rho_{T2U2} = +0.819$), indicating that their horse-race agendas were equivalent (see Figure 1).

In terms of their direction of news influence dynamics, as Figure 1 illustrates, both cross-lagged correlations between Telemundo and Univision are above the Rozelle-Campbell baseline (RCb) of +0.536, thereby influencing each other’s horse-race coverage. However, the predominant flow of influence was from Telemundo to Univision ($\rho_{T1U2} = +0.827$) rather than the other way around ($\rho_{U1T2} = +0.571$). In short, both television newscasts were influencing each other’s horse-race coverage. As a result, their horse-race reporting was similar but not identical. Table 2 shows the Spearman’s rank-order correlation coefficient matrix for the horse-race topics and indicates the correlation coefficients that were found to be significant at the 0.01 and 0.05 levels using a two-tailed t-test.

Trump’s Intermedia Agenda-Setting Effect by Television Network

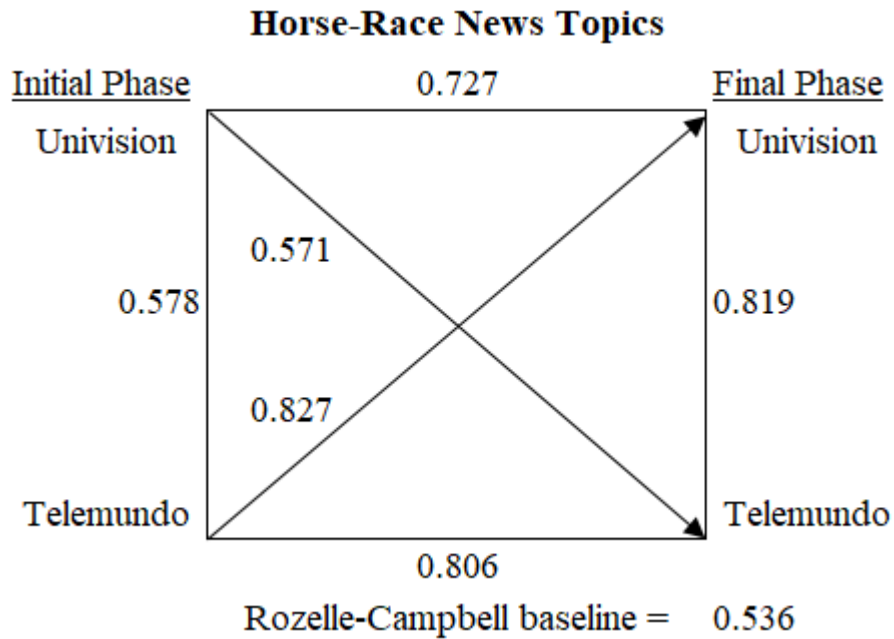
The fourth, fifth, and sixth research questions covered Trump’s political issues agenda in Telemundo and Univision. Those inquiries are seeking to identify Trump’s political issues agenda in both television networks, establish the intermedia agenda-setting effect between the networks and indicate their directional flow of influence. Outcomes show that during the initial phase, Trump’s news agenda in Telemundo consisted of eight issues: the economy, foreign policy, government accountability, immigration, healthcare, veterans, the environment, and social unrest (see Table 3). Results indicate that the

Table 2. Spearman’s Rank-Order Correlation Coefficient Matrix for horse-race news topics

	Univision (1)	Univision (2)	Telemundo (1)	Telemundo (2)
Univision (1)	1			
Univision (2)	0.727 [†]	1		
Telemundo (1)	0.578	0.827 [‡]	1	
Telemundo (2)	0.571	0.819 [‡]	0.806 [‡]	1

Note: (1) refers to the initial phase and (2) refers to the final phase. [‡] $p < 0.01$, [†] $p < 0.05$.

Figure 1. Cross-lagged correlations of horse-race news topics agendas between Univision and Telemundo



issue of immigration with 24% was ranking at the top of Trump’s list followed by social unrest with 17% and a tie between healthcare and government accountability, both with 14%. Regarding the final phase, Trump’s agenda in Telemundo was expanded by three issues—national security, trade, and education. However, his agenda was also reduced by one issue—veterans. Outcomes demonstrate that healthcare with 53% was Trump’s top issue at this time followed by immigration with 17% and economy with 9%. The comparative analysis within Telemundo showed that in the initial phase Trump presented eight issues then expanded to 10 issues in the final phase. The issue of immigration, which was Trump’s top issue during the initial phase, decreased by one position during the final phase. However, the issue of healthcare, which was initially located in the third position, moved to the top of Trump’s list during the final phase. Trump’s correlation between Telemundo’s initial and final phases was a strong, positive autocorrelation ($\rho_{T1T2} = +0.752$), indicating that his agenda in Telemundo was fairly consistent.

Furthermore, results indicate that Trump’s issues agenda in Univision during the initial phase consisted of nine issues: economy, foreign policy, government accountability, immigration, national security, healthcare, veterans, the environment, and social unrest. Outcomes document a tie at the top of Trump’s list in Univision with the issues of immigration and healthcare both at 29% followed by foreign policy at 13%. In terms of his final phase, Trump’s agenda at Univision consisted of eight issues, incorporating two new issues into the picture—law & justice and energy—but also eliminating three issues—national security, veterans, and the environment. Ranking at the top of Trump’s list during the final phase at Univision was healthcare with 67% followed by immigration with 11% and economy with 8%. The comparative analysis shows that Trump’s agenda at Univision was transformed; at the initial phase, Trump presented nine issues and at the final phase he had eight issues where healthcare, which was one of his top issues during the initial phase remained as his top issue in the final phase. Immigration, which was also one of his top issues during the initial phase ranked second in the final phase. Finally, the issue of

Table 3. Trump’s intermedia agenda-setting effect of political issues by television network

Issue	Initial Phase				Final Phase				Entire Period			
	Univision	Rank	Telemundo	Rank	Univision	Rank	Telemundo	Rank	Univision	Rank	Telemundo	Rank
Economy	3.2%	(7.5)	10.3%	(5.5)	7.8%	(3)	8.6%	(3)	6.3%	(4)	9.2%	(3)
Foreign Policy	12.9%	(3)	6.9%	(7)	6.3%	(4)	3.4%	(6)	8.4%	(3)	4.6%	(7)
Government Accountability	6.5%	(5)	13.8%	(3.5)	3.1%	(5)	3.4%	(6)	4.2%	(5.5)	6.9%	(5)
Immigration	29.0%	(1.5)	24.1%	(1)	10.9%	(2)	17.2%	(2)	16.8%	(2)	19.5%	(2)
National Security	3.2%	(7.5)	0.0%	(11)	0.0%	(11)	1.7%	(9.5)	1.1%	(9)	1.1%	(10)
Healthcare	29.0%	(1.5)	13.8%	(3.5)	67.2%	(1)	53.4%	(1)	54.7%	(1)	40.2%	(1)
Veterans	3.2%	(7.5)	3.4%	(8)	0.0%	(11)	0.0%	(12)	1.1%	(9)	1.1%	(10)
Environment	3.2%	(7.5)	10.3%	(5.5)	0.0%	(11)	3.4%	(6)	1.1%	(9)	5.7%	(6)
Law and Justice	0.0%	(11.5)	0.0%	(11)	1.6%	(7)	0.0%	(12)	1.1%	(9)	0.0%	(12.5)
Energy	0.0%	(11.5)	0.0%	(11)	1.6%	(7)	0.0%	(12)	1.1%	(9)	0.0%	(12.5)
Social Unrest	9.7%	(4)	17.2%	(2)	1.6%	(7)	3.4%	(6)	4.2%	(5.5)	8.0%	(4)
Trade	0.0%	(11.5)	0.0%	(11)	0.0%	(11)	1.7%	(9.5)	0.0%	(12.5)	1.1%	(10)
Education	0.0%	(11.5)	0.0%	(11)	0.0%	(11)	3.4%	(6)	0.0%	(12.5)	2.3%	(8)

Uni & Tel: Initial Phase $\rho = +0.860$ | Uni & Tel: Final Phase $\rho = +0.672$ | Uni: Initial and Final Phases $\rho = +0.682$ | Tel: Initial and Final Phases $\rho = +0.752$

foreign policy, which ranked in the third place at the beginning, was replaced by the economy at the end of the time period. Trump’s correlation between Univision’s initial and final phases was a moderate, positive autocorrelation ($\rho_{U1U2} = +0.682$), indicating that his agenda in Univision showed some variation.

In summary, outcomes concerning the entire examination period by television network demonstrate that Trump’s top two news agenda issues at Telemundo and Univision were the same, first healthcare and second immigration. However, the third position was different between networks; Telemundo focused on the economy and Univision on foreign policy. Additionally, Trump’s intermedia agenda-setting effect throughout the initial phase was a strong positive synchronous correlation ($\rho_{T1U1} = +0.860$) between Telemundo and Univision (see Figure 2). Moreover, Trump’s intermedia agenda-setting effect in the final phase was also a moderate positive synchronous correlation ($\rho_{T2U2} = +0.672$) between the television networks, documenting that the networks news agendas regarding Trump’s issues changed at some point during the second time period. In addition, results of the directional influence dynamic regarding Trump’s electoral issues document two reciprocal relationships of influence between the television networks. As Figure 2 illustrates, both cross-lagged correlations between Telemundo and Univision are above the Rozelle-Campbell baseline (RCb= +0.550), indicating that the networks dynamics influenced each other, but the predominant flow of influence was from Univision to Telemundo ($\rho_{U1T2} = +0.718$) rather than in the other direction ($\rho_{T1U2} = +0.645$). In short, both television networks were presenting almost the same electoral news content with respect to Trump’s issues because their information was very similar. Table 4 shows the Spearman’s rank-order correlation coefficient matrix for Trump’s electoral issues and indicates the correlation coefficients that were found to be significant at the 0.01 and 0.05 levels using a two-tailed t-test.

Biden’s Intermedia Agenda-Setting Effect by Television Network

The seventh, eighth, and ninth research questions ask about Biden’s political issues agenda in Telemundo and Univision. More specifically, those inquiries seek to determine Biden’s political issues agenda in both television networks, establish the intermedia agenda-setting effect between the networks as well as indicate their directional flow of news influence during the initial and final phases of the examina-

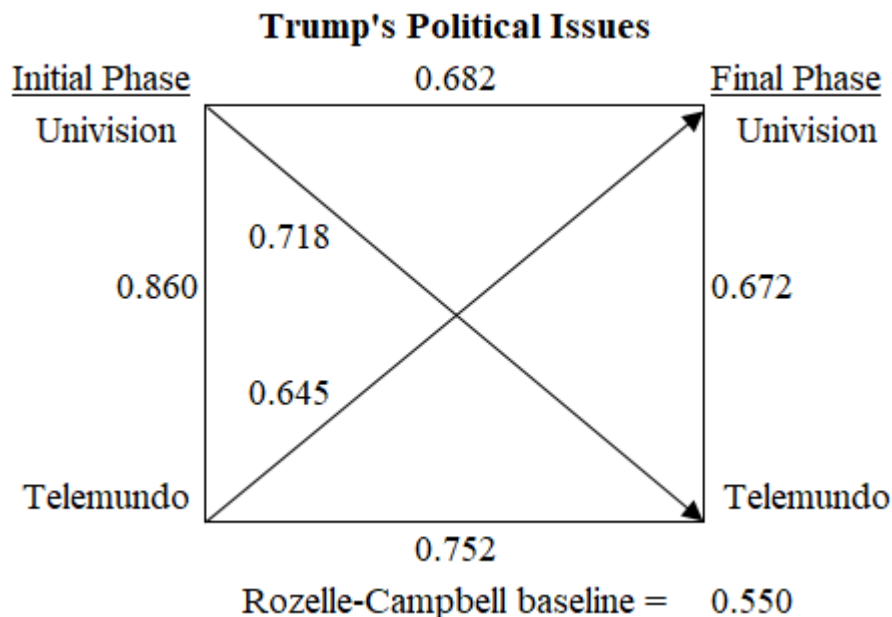
Table 4. Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation Coefficient Matrix for Trump's political issues

	Univision (1)	Univision (2)	Telemundo (1)	Telemundo (2)
Univision (1)	1			
Univision (2)	0.682 [†]	1		
Telemundo (1)	0.860 [‡]	0.645 [†]	1	
Telemundo (2)	0.718 [‡]	0.672 [†]	0.752 [‡]	1

Note: (1) refers to the initial phase and (2) refers to the final phase. ‡ p < 0.01, † p < 0.05.

tion period. Results document that through the duration of the initial phase, Biden's agenda presented at Telemundo consisted of seven electoral issues: economy, government accountability, immigration, healthcare, veterans, the environment, and social unrest (see Table 5). During this time period, ranking on top of his list was social unrest with 24%, followed by a tie between immigration and government accountability with 18% each. In the final phase, outcomes show that Biden's agenda was reduced from seven to five issues by eliminating the economy and veterans. Consequently, his issues priorities also shift. For example, social unrest with 17% that used to be at the top of Biden's list in the previous phase, went down two positions to third place. The issue of immigration with 28% holds the second place by remaining in that same position. However, a new political topic came into Biden's top electoral list ranking as his most important issue: healthcare with 39%. The comparative analysis within Telemundo showed that in the initial phase Biden presented seven issues when were reduced to six issues in the final phase. The candidate's top issue priority was modified between phases. Social unrest was on top of Biden's

Figure 2. Cross-lagged correlations of Trump's political issues agendas between Univision and Telemundo



Intermedia Agenda-Setting Effect of Latino Television in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

Table 5. Biden’s intermedia agenda-setting effect of political issues by television network

Issue	Initial Phase				Final Phase				Entire Period			
	Univision	Rank	Telemundo	Rank	Univision	Rank	Telemundo	Rank	Univision	Rank	Telemundo	Rank
Economy	7.7%	(5.5)	5.9%	(7)	4.0%	(6.5)	0.0%	(7.5)	5.3%	(5.5)	2.9%	(7)
Foreign Policy	0.0%	(8)	0.0%	(8.5)	8.0%	(4.5)	0.0%	(7.5)	5.3%	(5.5)	0.0%	(8.5)
Government Accountability	15.4%	(3.5)	17.6%	(2.5)	8.0%	(4.5)	11.1%	(4)	10.5%	(4)	14.3%	(4)
Immigration	15.4%	(3.5)	17.6%	(2.5)	12.0%	(3)	27.8%	(2)	13.2%	(3)	22.9%	(2)
Healthcare	30.8%	(1)	11.8%	(5)	48.0%	(1)	38.9%	(1)	42.1%	(1)	25.7%	(1)
Veterans	0.0%	(8)	11.8%	(5)	0.0%	(8.5)	0.0%	(7.5)	0.0%	(9)	5.7%	(6)
Environment	7.7%	(5.5)	11.8%	(5)	0.0%	(8.5)	5.6%	(5)	2.6%	(7.5)	8.6%	(5)
Energy	0.0%	(8)	0.0%	(8.5)	4.0%	(6.5)	0.0%	(7.5)	2.6%	(7.5)	0.0%	(8.5)
Social Unrest	23.1%	(2)	23.5%	(1)	16.0%	(2)	16.7%	(3)	18.4%	(2)	20.0%	(3)

Uni & Tel: Initial Phase $\rho = +0.728$ | Uni & Tel: Final Phase $\rho = +0.767$ | Uni: Initial and Final Phases $\rho = +0.775$ | Tel: Initial and Final Phases $\rho = +0.723$

issue agenda during the initial phase. Still, it was replaced by healthcare which ranked on top of his list through the final phase. Results documented that Biden’s autocorrelation concerning Telemundo’s initial and final phase was strong positive correlation relationship $\rho = +0.723$ between both periods indicating that his agenda on Telemundo was steady.

In regard to Univision, outcomes indicate that Biden’s agenda at the initial phase consisted of six issues: economy, government accountability, immigration, healthcare, the environment and social unrest (see Table 5). At the top of his list was healthcare with 31% followed by social unrest with 23% and a tie between immigration and government accountability with 15% each. At the final phase, Biden modified his agenda by incorporating two new issues—foreign policy and energy—and eliminating the environment, ending up with an agenda of seven issues. Biden’s top issues remained the same as in the previous phase where healthcare with 48% ranked at the top followed by social unrest with 16% and immigration with 12%. Biden’s comparative analysis within Univision shows that at the beginning of the examination period his agenda consisted of six issues but at the end there was a net increase of one, from six to seven issues. Both time periods presented the same list of issue priorities and within the same ranking starting with healthcare on top followed by social unrest and immigration. Outcomes indicate that Biden’s correlation between Univision’s initial and final phases was a strong, positive autocorrelation ($\rho_{UIU2} = +0.775$), indicating that Biden’s agenda in Univision was the same throughout the entire assessed period.

In summary, results in connection with the entire examination period show that Biden’s agenda was nearly the same in both television newscasts with the exception of the frequency of coverage. For instance, healthcare was Biden’s top priority in Univision with 42%, healthcare received a higher coverage than in Telemundo with 26%. The issues of social unrest and immigration held opposite positions. For example, in Telemundo immigration ranked second on the list with 23%, but in Univision this same topic ranked third with 13%. Similarly for social unrest ranking second in Univision with 18% but third in Telemundo with 20%. Biden’s intermedia agenda-setting effect between Telemundo and Univision during the initial phase shows a strong positive synchronous correlation ($\rho_{TIU1} = +0.728$), indicating a very similar news content (see Figure 3). Furthermore, Biden’s intermedia agenda-setting effect in the final phase also shows a strong positive synchronous correlation ($\rho_{TIU2} = +0.767$) between Telemundo and Univision, documenting, once again, that both networks presented very similar news content. In terms of the direction of influence dynamic concerning Biden’s electoral issues, results document the power of influence where only one of the two cross-lagged values is above the Rozelle-Campbell baseline, indicating one-directional flow of influence. More specifically, as Figure 3 illustrates, the comparative

Table 6. Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation Coefficient Matrix for Biden's political issues

	Univision (1)	Univision (2)	Telemundo (1)	Telemundo (2)
Univision (1)	1			
Univision (2)	0.775†	1		
Telemundo (1)	0.728†	0.429	1	
Telemundo (2)	0.924‡	0.767†	0.723†	1

Note: (1) refers to the initial phase and (2) refers to the final phase. ‡ p < 0.01, † p < 0.05.

examination between television newscasts clearly shows that the flow of influence was exclusively from Univision to Telemundo ($\rho_{UIT2} = +0.924$) since the Rozelle-Campbell baseline value ($RCb = +0.560$) is higher than the cross-lagged correlation from Telemundo to Univision ($\rho_{TIU2} = +0.429$). In short, Univision was very strongly influencing Telemundo's news coverage with respect to Biden's electoral issues. Table 6 shows the Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient matrix for Biden's electoral issues and indicates the correlation coefficients that were found to be significant at the 0.01 and 0.05 levels using a two-tailed t-test.

Directional Flow of News Influence of Presidential Candidates by Television Network

Outcomes showed that the directional power of news influence concerning both candidates at Telemundo where only one of the two cross-lagged values is above the Rozelle-Campbell baseline, indicating one-

Figure 3. Cross-lagged correlations of Biden's political issues agendas between Univision and Telemundo

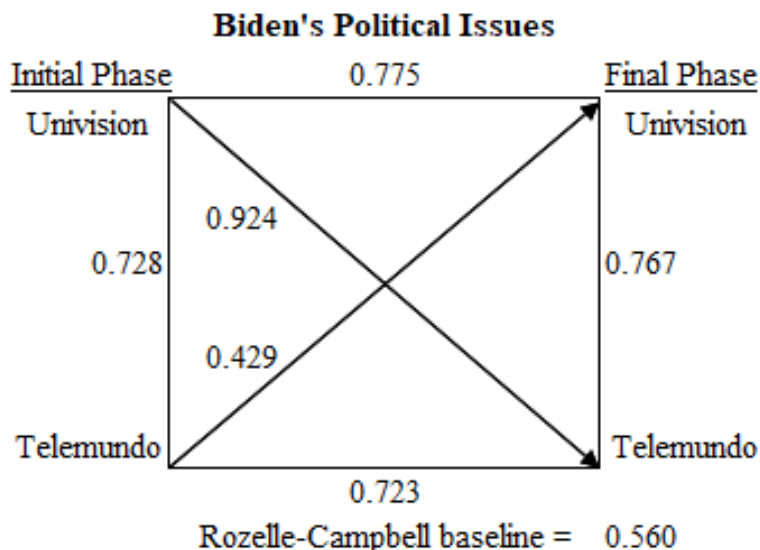


Table 7. Spearman’s Rank-Order Correlation Coefficient Matrix for direction of influence–Univision

	Biden (1)	Biden (2)	Trump (1)	Trump (2)
Biden (1)	1			
Biden (2)	0.776‡	1		
Trump (1)	0.727‡	0.806‡	1	
Trump (2)	0.617†	0.843‡	0.682†	1

Note: (1) refers to the initial phase and (2) refers to the final phase. ‡ p < 0.01, † p < 0.05.

directional flow of influence. As Figure 4 show, the comparative examination between candidates clearly shows that the directional flow of news influence was exclusively from Trump to Biden ($\rho_{TIB2} = +0.861$) since the Rozelle-Campbell baseline value (RCb = +0.624) is higher than the cross-lagged correlation from Biden to Trump ($\rho_{BIT2} = +0.498$) (see Figure 4). In short, Trump was very strongly influencing Biden’s news coverage in Telemundo electoral coverage. Results of the directional power of news influence dynamic regarding candidates at Univision indicated a reciprocal relationship of influence between the candidates. As Figure 4 illustrates, both cross-lagged correlations between Trump and Biden are above the Rozelle-Campbell baseline (RCb = + 0.573), indicating that the candidates influenced each other electoral coverage. However, the predominant flow of news influence was from Trump to Biden ($\rho_{TIB2} = +0.806$) rather than in the other direction ($\rho_{BIT2} = +0.617$). Summarizing, both candidates were presenting almost the same electoral news content at Univision because their information was homogeneous. Tables 7 and 8 show the Spearman’s rank-order correlation coefficient matrix for direction of influence for Univision and Telemundo, respectively, and indicate the correlation coefficients that were found to be significant at the 0.01 and 0.05 levels using a two-tailed t-test.

In short, both presidential candidates as well as the Latino television networks concentrated their efforts on the COVID-19 pandemic focusing on testing, spread of the virus, deaths, and vaccines. Latino television news media, Trump, and Biden, issues agendas all had healthcare as their top ranked issue. Overall, the Latino television news media and both presidential candidates were promoting healthcare as their top priority, as the most important problem facing this nation during the 2020 presidential electoral cycle.

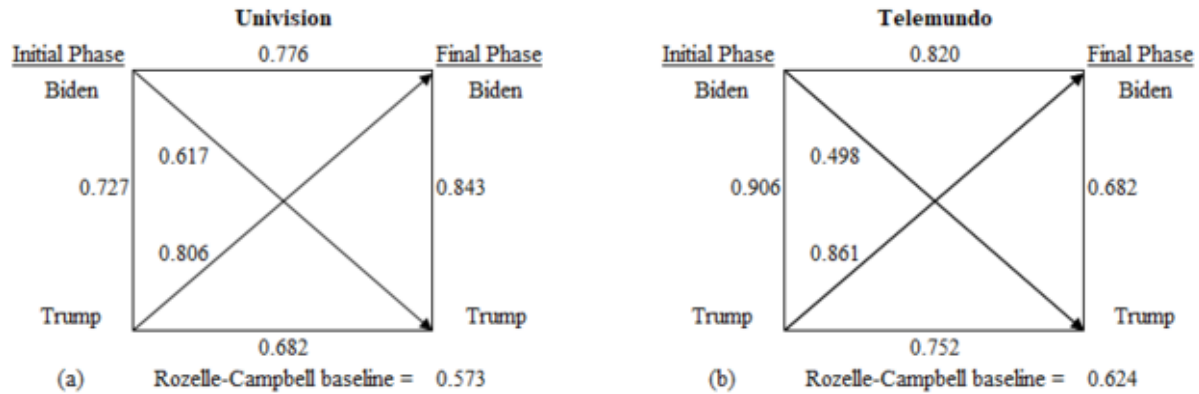
Table 8. Spearman’s Rank-Order Correlation Coefficient Matrix for direction of influence–Telemundo

	Biden (1)	Biden (2)	Trump (1)	Trump (2)
Biden (1)	1			
Biden (2)	0.820‡	1		
Trump (1)	0.906‡	0.861‡	1	
Trump (2)	0.498	0.682†	0.752‡	1

Note: (1) refers to the initial phase and (2) refers to the final phase. ‡ p < 0.01, † p < 0.05.

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Figure 4. Cross-lagged correlations of direction of news influence between presidential candidates by television network for (a) Univision and (b) Telemundo



CONCLUSION

The entire country went under a COVID-19 healthcare crisis emergency in the middle of March 2020 with approximately 227,658 cases and 5,164 deaths by the end of the month, according to the CDC. However, just five months later, when the general election campaign started, the numbers showed a 2,614% increase in cases and a 3,583% increase in deaths. Those numbers lead Biden to question Trump’s ability to handle the pandemic, which became his most predominant attack against his opponent along with racism. Trump declared that the end of the pandemic would be marked when the vaccine would be ready to be administered to the general public, and constantly discussed the advancements of the vaccines’ medical trials on individuals of different ages, gender, and underlying conditions. Consequently, the issue of healthcare became the top priority for both candidates on both networks. The second issue that was discussed during the election was immigration, which, from Trump’s perspective on the matter, remained the same from the previous presidential election when immigration was Trump’s top priority (Flores and Chávez, 2020). Trump claimed that borders should be secure to prevent illegal immigration, that undocumented people should be able to provide for themselves (be economically active to create income) and not to depend on social benefits to cover their basic needs, prioritize jobs for American people, support U.S. people and values, and no amnesty. However, Biden focused on promoting a possible way to legalize many undocumented individuals and to open the border for those immigrants seeking political asylum while frequently accusing his opponent of being against immigrants and of promoting racism toward them. During an exclusive interview with Telemundo, Biden promised voters that if he were elected president, he would not deport immigrants during the first 100 days of his administration.

Consequently, Biden’s intermedia agenda-setting effect during the initial and final phases showed a strong, positive correlation in both periods. Those outcomes determine that Telemundo and Univision presented very similar news content about Biden. However, the direction of news influence dynamic documented unidirectional flow of influence from Univision to Telemundo, indicating that Univision was very strongly influencing Telemundo’s news coverage regarding Biden’s electoral issues. Furthermore, results documented that the directional power of news influence in respect of Telemundo was a one-directional effect where Trump was strongly influencing Biden’s news coverage. With respect to Trump’s political issues, outcomes demonstrate that his top two issues were healthcare and immigration

in both Latino television newscasts followed by economy in Telemundo and foreign policy in Univision. Trump's intermedia agenda-setting effect at the initial phase was a strong, positive correlation between Telemundo and Univision, while in the final phase the correlation was moderate, demonstrating that Trump's issues evolved at some point during the second period. Results regarding the direction of news influence dynamic document two reciprocal relationships between the television networks showing that they were reporting almost the same electoral news content. Similarly, Biden's political issues were also the same in both television newscasts. Healthcare was Biden's top political issue followed by social programs and immigration.

The remarkable characteristic of this presidential election was that the strong clash between candidates created a politicized election, which incentivized people to pay attention, to have an opinion, and to participate in the democratic process. Additionally, Telemundo's and Univision's top horse-race reporting consisted of voting promotion and voting education, providing the fundamental information regarding who was eligible to vote, how to get registered to vote, voting procedures such as mail-in ballots, early voting, or voting on Election Day, along with voting locations, voting schedules, and the COVID-19 sanitary protocols of all voting venues, among other information. In terms of horse-race coverage, the Latino television networks' agendas varied. Telemundo's agenda listed voting promotion, campaign events/rallies, and debates, whereas Univision's topics were voting promotion, voting procedures, and campaign events/rallies. The intermedia agenda-setting effect comparing the two Latino television newscasts at the initial phase of the examination period showed a moderate, positive correlation, indicating that the horse-race topics were not the same. At the final phase, the intermedia agenda-setting effect was stronger, documenting that the networks' agendas were equivalent. Their direction of news influence dynamic was reciprocal because television newscasts were influencing each other, but the influence from Telemundo to Univision was dominant.

The aim of this investigation was to document the journalistic approach that Telemundo and Univision took to report on the 2020 presidential election focusing on the intermedia agenda-setting effect between their major newscasts *Noticias Telemundo* and *Noticiero Univision*. This research's center of attention was to determine the Latino Television networks' political news topics agenda, the intermedia agenda-setting effect between them, as well as the direction of news influence between Univision and Telemundo. This research expands on the study of Agenda-Setting theory in Latino media during a presidential election season taking place during the global health crisis. In previous elections, Spanish-language newscasts tend to provide information on voting procedures which increase Latino voter turnout. In addition, Spanish-language newscasts are more likely to present information that covers issues of interest to the Latino community such as the topic of immigration. However, the Spanish-language reporting has a strong emphasis on horse-race stories over issues-related information. Finally, the present study continues the examination of the role of Spanish-language news media during electoral periods. This investigation provides evidence that during times of health crisis, the issue of immigration falls from the top of the Spanish-language newscasts' agenda giving its space to the topic of the emergency at hand. This paper makes an important contribution to the scholarship of Agenda-Setting theory and Latino Media Studies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers who provided significant comments and suggestions that made this manuscript stronger. The author is grateful to Dr. Dolors Palau-Sampio (University

of Valencia), Dr. Guillermo López García (University of Valencia), Dr. Laura Iannelli (University of Sassari), Dr. Juan Homero Hinojosa (Texas A&M International University), and Enrique Treviño (Spanish Editors Association) for their suggestions on earlier drafts of this research. Special thanks to research assistant Juan Gerardo Madero Flores undergraduate student from The University of Texas at El Paso.

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ENDNOTES

¹ <http://www.electproject.org/home>

² Trump's other reasons were American people and values (17%), voting Republican (16%), DK refuse (13%), other (12%), and his personality (11%), as reported by Pew Research Center.

³ Biden's other reasons were DK refuse (14%), issue/policy positions (9%), voting Democrat (7%), American people and values (6%), and other (13%), as reported by Pew Research Center.

⁴ T1= Telemundo initial phase, T2= Telemundo final phase, U1 = Unvision initial phase, U2 = Unvision final phase.

Chapter 12

Will Live Streaming Platforms and Influencers Consolidate or Disrupt Democracy? A Case Study of Taiwan's 2020 Presidential Election

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ABSTRACT

New communication technologies have enabled politicians to interact and engage with their constituents constantly and unmitigated by mainstream media. Among them, emerging live streaming platforms rise as an essential political communication tool. However, in consolidating politicians' base, these technologies similarly run the risk of polarizing the society, resulting in disruption and healthy development of democracy. This case study describes and examines the role of live streaming platforms and influencers in generating political participation to account for the success of President Tsai Ing-wen's 2020 re-election campaign in Taiwan. This study focuses on the roles of live streaming platforms and influencers in contributing to the growing and alarming global phenomenon of populism and polarization associated with politicians' campaign strategies. This study also discusses whether the employment of live streaming influencers as a viable political communication tool in this campaign may ultimately contribute to the democratic deepening in Taiwan.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8057-8.ch012

INTRODUCTION

Live streaming platforms, commonly known as live video broadcasting (Yang, 2016) or social media streaming (Twitch, 2017), are defined by their technical capabilities to “broadcast videos to a remote audience in the instant that it is captured” (Juhlin et al., 2010, as cited in Rein & Venturini, 2018, p.3361). Streaming technology usually refers to “any audio or video content delivered over a network based on Internet protocols” (Kariyawasam & Tsai, 2017, p. 268). The rapid diffusion of live streaming platforms has prompted Nielsen to launch its streaming audience measurement service, *Gauge*, to monitor consumer television usage behavior (Nielsen, 2021). Streaming usage across all television households has climbed up to 26% of their television watching time (Nielsen, 2021). These platforms also enable live streamers to interact with their fans, followers, and other viewers in real-time through online chat or monetary donation (Yu et al., 2018). Streaming contents can be recorded and archived for asynchronous viewing later (Yang & Kang, 2021).

The rise of live streaming platforms has been found to impact voters’ political behaviors, engagement, and participation (Yang & Kang, 2021; Yu et al., 2018; Wilbert, 2020). As a result, politicians have rushed to capitalize on these technologies as a critical component of their political campaigning activities (Yang & Kang, 2021). For example, Donald Trump has relied heavily on social media platforms such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* to assemble and consolidate his loyal fans and followers to win the 2016 U.S. election (Pérez-Curiel & Naharro, 2019). Other candidates, such as the rising star in the Democratic Party, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC), from New York, once live-streamed on *Instagram* to share her home life (Thompson, 2019) to engage with young voters who watch more live streaming services (such as *Netflix*) and *YouTube* videos (McAlone, 2017). In 2020, AOC also teamed up with another member of the Squad, Ilhan Omar, to host a streaming event on *Twitch*; the event ended up as the third-largest in the history of this gaming platform with 430,000 recurrent viewers (Khan, 2021). AOC returned to *Twitch* in November of the same year to raise \$200,000 for charity causes (Khan, 2021).

Given the growing use of live streaming platforms in political communication, this study examines one rarely investigated phenomenon: the roles of live streaming platforms and influencers in contributing to the growing populism in politics. Additionally, will the employment of live streaming influencers in political communication ultimately result in either democratic deepening or disruption for a fledgling democracy in Taiwan? The interwoven relationships and dynamics among the emerging live streaming technology, populism, and democratic development will be discussed and described using Taiwan’s Presidential Election in 2020. In this chapter, Yang and Kang (2021) define live streaming influencers as those who have begun their careers by producing live streaming content and later gained prominence as potential influencers of people’s attitudes, beliefs, and opinions (Yang & Kang, 2021). These influencers interact with their fans and followers using live streaming or archived video content through various platforms. This study uses a descriptive case study method to examine the roles of live streaming influencers in Taiwan’s 2020 Presidential Election—a campaign of national and international significance (Rigger, 2020; Wang, 2020) and that has one of few national campaigns around the world that have ever enlisted live streaming influencers to play key a vital role of political communication activities. Even though some may criticize the roles of live streaming influencers in endorsing political candidates as unconventional, their emergence demonstrates how the growing populism and challenges to the status quo of mainstream/elite media outlets as the only credible source of persuasion in the political communication area.

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To be more specific, this case study would describe the rise of live streaming influencers in Taiwan to provide a detailed micro-history of the technological developments, influencer characteristics, their roles in mobilizing the political participation of their avid fans and followers, and in the potentially unanticipated disruptive effects on the polarization of society. The rise of live streaming platforms has also cultivated a list of celebrities who have a similar status as regular TV or movie stars (Hsiao, 2018) to endorse brands and political candidates. These celebrities also create a sense of intimacy with their fans and followers (Simon, 2019). In recent years, these live streaming platforms have been widely used by many Asian countries in political communication as a way to bypass the government's tight control over traditional broadcasting media. We would situate the present study within the influencer marketing and political communication literature and describe that the employment of live streaming influencers in political communication is a global phenomenon (Olenski, 2017). For example, VisualPolitik from Spain has discussed politics and world events since 2016 (Feedpost, 2021). Another example is Shri Shah Nawaz Chaudhary from Delhi, India also provided daily political commentary to shape public perceptions of many political issues (Feedpost, 2021). Similarly, Singapore's social influencer, Preeti Nair, touches upon taboo issues of race and religion in her parody video available via *Facebook*, *YouTube*, and *Instagram* (Han, 2020)

Considering the growing importance of live streaming influencers utilizing these platforms, the structure of this study is organized as follows. The chapter first provides an overview of live streaming platforms and their role in enhancing or disrupting democracy in political communication. Then, a review of past studies in influencer marketing and political communication, contributions to digital persuasion in political communication, and potential polarization and disruptive effects on democracy. After a detailed explanation of research methodology, this chapter concludes with discussion, conclusion, and future research directions in understanding the role of new communication tools in a democratic society. Based on the above discussions, this case study will examine the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What are the roles of live streaming platforms and influencers in political communication?

Research Question 2: Will live streaming platforms and influencers contribute to populism?

Research Question 3: Will live streaming platforms and influencers help the democratic deepening in Taiwan?

The Emergence of Global Live Streaming Platform Ecosystem

Live streaming platforms have emerged as an indispensable application in the streaming media ecosystem (Burroughs, 2015). Pundits have claimed that “[I]ive stream video has gone from a marketing tactic to an expected form of media consumption” (Vimeo, n.d., p. 3). In addition to these emerging platforms, real-time audio and video can be broadcast via social and gaming media (Burroughs, 2015), mobile (Garcia-Pineda, Segura-Garcia, & Felici-Castell, 2018), and videogame (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019; Ruberg, Cullen, & Brewster, 2019) technologies (Yang & Kang, 2021). Live streaming platforms enable content producers to facilitate “synchronous communication” between streamers and their fans and followers as new technology. These emerging platforms can deliver real-time audio and video via the Internet and social media (Burroughs, 2015). As a truly global phenomenon, live streaming platforms have been growing in popularity like wildfire worldwide.

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Live streaming platforms have become very popular in many Asian countries (Hutchins et al., 2019). It is claimed to be a multi-billion industry in China alone (Ruether, 2020). Before implementing stricter government regulation, China used to have more than 700 live streaming influencers competing for their audiences (Ruether, 2020). China has over 4,900 live-streaming apps developed by many of its local start-ups (Kang, 2018). *Tencent Video*, *DAZN*, and *Amazon Video* services have also taken advantage of the popularity of emerging over-the-top (OTT) and mobile streaming technologies (Hutchins et al., 2019). In Singapore, live streaming of sports events via peer-to-peer (P2P) broadcasting has generated concerns about digital piracy (Wong, 2016). Singapore already boasts her two homegrown companies in the space like *Bigo Live* and *BeLive*, while China supposedly has over 4,900 live-streaming apps. In China, about 50 million users have downloaded the country's most popular live-streaming apps, *Ingkee* (Roxburgh, 2016). The rapid ascent of China's live-streaming market (estimated to reach USD 5 billion in 2017) (Young, 2017) has also prompted over 200 start-ups and attracted about USD 750 million venture capital investment (Roxburgh, 2016). In Japan, live streaming hosts on *YouTube* have become sub-cultural celebrities; the famous Yuka Kinoshita is known as a "gluttonous beautiful woman" ("oogui bijyo") for her voracious appetite (Roxburgh, 2016). In Taiwan, the most popular video streaming platform is *YouTube* (87%), followed by *Vimeo* (11%), *TidalTV*, *BrightCove*, *Wistia*, and *JW Player Platform* (2%) (BuiltWith Pty Ltd., n.d.). With the rise of mobile platforms in recent years, mobile- and app-based live streaming platforms include *17Live*, *Lang.Live*, *Live.me*, *Uplive*, and *MeMeLive*, among others (Daily-View, 2017; Yang & Kang, 2021). The convergence of different media into a multi-platform streaming platform includes the recent application of using social media platforms in live streaming content; this new development has seen exponential growth worldwide (Arena, 2018). For example, in China, live streaming over *WeChat*, owned by *Tencent*, is an excellent example to demonstrate the convergence of mobile, social, and streaming platforms (Ruether, 2020).

In addition to gaming and live commerce content (Ruether, 2020), live streaming platforms are most attractive to viewers because of their synchronous and asynchronous video content, based on several surveys. For example, according to the Interactive Advertising Bureau (2018) questionnaire, 47% of live video streaming users worldwide are consuming more video content, and 52% of them access this content through social media platforms (as cited in Arena, 2018). Another survey has also found that the daily consumption frequency of video streaming content has increased from 37% in 2016 to 47% (The Center for Technology, Media & Telecommunication, 2017). In terms of live streaming video content viewership, survey findings from eMarketer.com (2017) have observed that Generation Millennial users account for the largest segment of users and creators of live video content; 63% have consumer live video content while 42% have produced these contents. Lastly, another survey has similarly found that Generation Z users also catch up with the consumption trend; over 65% of this age segment in the U.S. uses live streaming videos daily (The Center for Technology, Media & Telecommunication, 2017). This drastic shift of media consumption behaviors is particularly critical for political scientists when Vimeo reports that 85% of US adults, mostly older Americans, have received their news on mobile devices (van Moessner, 2017), suggesting the agenda-setting functions of traditional news media have dwindled. The following discussion answers the first research question.

Using Live Streaming Platforms and Influencers in Political Communication

Live streaming platforms have emerged as a communication medium to create many celebrities and personalities in advertising and marketing campaigns (Park & Lin 2020; Sun et al. 2020; Yang & Kang,

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2021). Over 10,000 celebrities were created in China due to the exponential growth of the live streaming market (Thibaud, 2017). Some Chinese live streaming influencers can make as much as RMB40 million a year from live commerce (Thibaud, 2017). Similarly, famous live streaming influencers in Taiwan include *Love Taiwan* (ranked 4th with an estimated yearly earning between USD 31.2K to USD 499.9K), *Potter King* (ranked 154th with an estimated yearly earning between USD 8.6K to USD 138.2K), and *Fitness Club* (ranked 71st with an estimated yearly earning between USD 15.2K to USD 242.8K) (Social Blade, 2020; Yang & Kang, 2021). The monetization of their rankings and followers has critical political implications when campaign managers enlist their popularity and celebrity status for various political activities. The political participation and involvement of these live streaming influencers can help them to “recalibrate” themselves to increase their “relatability” (Abidin, 2016) to their followers and fans who have similar political orientation and ideology as their endorsed candidates.

Political communication theories and practices have long been influenced by the emergence of new media (Savigny, 2002; Yang & Kang, 2021). From the coming of television in Kennedy-Nixon’s presidential debates to the influence of social media in Trump’s first and second campaigns, scholars in this area have often focused on the communication capabilities of these emerging platforms (Savigny, 2002; Yang & Kang, 2021). For example, Savigny (2002) claims that the Internet allows free and easy dissemination of ideas and discussions to shape public opinions in the political process. Additionally, new media also reverse the communication process from the top-down approach in traditional media to the bottom-up to challenge political elites’ control (Dahlgren, 2006). Because of the flipping of the flow of information, scholars have also claimed that greater political participation from the constituents can ultimately enhance the democratic process more directly (Dahlgren, 2006; Savigny, 2002).

The recent rise of social media in the political context is an excellent example of summarizing what emerging media have done to influence the democratic process (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). Both *Facebook* and *Twitter* are claimed to increase the political participation of the electorate (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013) as an enhancing factor of democracy. Similarly, live streaming platforms can also enable politicians to engage directly with constituents without gatekeeping and mediation/remediation functions (Yang & Kang, 2021; Wilbert, 2020).

Despite the growing importance of live-streaming platforms in the political context, scholars rarely explored the roles of the emerging platforms in fostering or disrupting the political processes in a democracy (Yang & Kang, 2021) to help the democratic deepening in Taiwan (Wong, 2003). Additionally, the heavy reliance on live streaming influencers also has implications of populism that could disrupt the proper functioning of a healthy democracy when taking into consideration the international climate (Diamond, 2017) that is likely to be created by the global diffusion of live streaming platforms (Yang & Kang, 2021). These media technologies are based on social media platforms that rely on similar networking and outreaching capabilities. For example, a recent algorithmic study of hyperactive users’ influence on the political discourses on *Facebook* has found that social media can also distort the democratic process by over-representing their attitudes and opinions (Papakyriakopoulos, Serrano, & Hegelich, 2020). It can be reasoned that live streaming influencers and their avid fans/followers can become hyperactive users to threaten democracy. Their disruptive effects are likely to occur in particular when politicians over-estimate the supposedly public opinions in proposing policy initiatives to address the concerns of their constituents (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020). This alarming global trend of populist rhetoric winning the cyberspace has been well-researched and –documented by Hendrickson and Galston (2017) that few extremists (such as far-right movements or anti-immigrant groups) have often taken advantage of these

emerging technologies than conservative and established political groups and have often attracted a lot of likes and shares of their messages.

The theoretical foundation of this case study will be grounded in past research that examines the roles of new media in the political context (Blumer, 2015; Savigny, 2002; Yang & Kang, 2021). In addition to focusing on the facilitating effects of new media, such as creating a Habermasian technology-based public sphere to allow the free dissemination of discussions and ideas to influence public opinions and policies. Dahgren (2006) argues that this less constrained space created by the Internet will allow the “pluralization” of opinions and ideologies among various advocacy groups (as cited in Yang & Kang, 2021). The technological capabilities of these emerging media can foster the political process in a democracy by offering users “both informational and relational capital capable of affecting their political behaviors” (Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014, as cited in Yang & Kang, 2021). Social media platforms particularly have the fostering functionality to increase democratic participation (Velasquez & Quenette, 2018).

The live streaming platform is also known as live video broadcasting (Yang, 2016) or social media streaming (Twitch, 2017), and the streamed content are generally believed to be more effective because more than 80% of survey participants indicate that they prefer to watch videos over reading text-based posts (Wilbert, 2020). The ability to watch live-streamed or archived asynchronous video content can enable political consultants to monitor political candidates’ performance in events, focus groups, press conferences, speeches to develop more effective campaign strategies (Moody, 2015; Yang & Kang, 2021). Similarly, live streaming politics also depends on several technical abilities to succeed; these range from live countdown and recording, multi-destination streaming, security, social network, website embedding, and white label (Yang & Kang, 2021; Wilbert, 2020). For example, U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren and Congressman Beto O’Rourke have enlisted social media to connect with their fans and followers (Thompson, 2019).

BACKGROUND

Taiwan: A Model of Democratization

Taiwan is an island democratic republic located about 100 miles off China’s eastern coast (BBC News, 2018; Central Intelligence Agency, n.d.; Library of Congress, 2005). Taiwan ranks about 139 in the world (Central Intelligence Agency, n.d.). Taiwan has a competitive, fair, and vibrant democracy (Freedom House, 2019; Gallagher, 2020) and a free media system (Tiezzi, 2018; Yang & Kang, 2021). Elections in Taiwan are highly competitive and fair (Bush, 2021). In terms of its media and technology environment which will affect the success of live streaming platforms in the political context, this “technology island” due to its core manufacturing capability of the world’s much-demanded semiconductors and chips (Bremmer & Wyne, 2021), has 21.45 million Internet users (around 90% penetration rate) as of January 2021 (Kemp, 2021). About 19.79 million social media users, accounting for 82.6% of the population (Kemp, 2021). On the other hand, mobile penetration has reached 120.7%, reaching 28.77 million mobile accounts in January 2021 (Kemp, 2021).

Taiwan often represents “The Third Wave” democratization that swept many parts of the world (Bush, 2021). As a budding democracy, Taiwan regularly holds national and local elections and has experienced significant political reshuffling in the past 20 years (BBC News, 2018). The consolidation of Taiwan’s budding democracy has allowed the ruling *Nationalist Party (KMT)* to rotate its control of central and

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local governments with the *Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)* (BBC News, 2018; Krumbein, 2020b). Many scholars have claimed Taiwan as “the first and only Chinese democracy” (Krumbein, 2020a). According to Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), Taiwan ranks 3rd in Asia and 32nd globally in its 2018 Democracy Index (*Taiwan Today*, 2019).

However, just like any relatively new democracy, the democratic process in Taiwan similarly faces hurdles from increasing income gap, human rights protection, and accessibility of the public to the electoral process (Wong, 2003). Taiwan’s responses to these challenges will ultimately affect her democratic deepening process to strengthen her citizens’ faith in democracy. Additionally, threats to Taiwan’s success as a democracy include China who claims Taiwan to be part of its territory and has launched incessantly “public opinion warfare” (Dean, 2020) against Taiwan. This case study selected Taiwan’s Presidential campaign in 2020 as the example that ultimately elected President Tsai Ing-wen for her second term (2020-2024) as a DPP candidate, which is particularly critical to Taiwan’s future. Two out of three candidates (KMT’s Han, Kuo-yu, and PFP’s James Soong) are perceived as pro-China (Reuter, 2021). Therefore, President Tsai’s landslide victory of winning 8.2 million votes with a high turn-out rate (Bush, 2021) has been considered a referendum of Taiwan’s anti-China and pro-Hong Kong stance (Reuter, 2021).

Tsai’s elitist image as a traditional bureaucrat with a doctorate from the prestigious London School of Economics demonstrates an exciting example of how conventional politicians can make the most of these live streaming influencers. Compared with her two opponents in this crucial election, President Tsai has made the most of the emerging live streaming platforms by increasing her relatability, as Abidin (2016) described as accessible, authentic, believable, and intimate. This case study will examine how politicians can interact with their constituents directly through the live streaming platforms or indirectly through popular live streaming influencers to share video streaming content related to their political campaigns.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This case study is based on three areas of literature on political communication, influencer marketing, and populism to provide an interpretive lens. First, this study addresses the current gap between live streaming influencers as a political marketing instrument and subsequent viewers’ political behaviors. Second, this chapter also examines the characteristics and influence types of local live streaming platforms. Third, the study discusses whether the role of live streaming influencers could lead to the rise of populism to deepen or disrupt democracy, as demonstrated in Taiwan’s 2020 Presidential Election.

Influencer Marketing and Live Streaming Influencers in Political Communication

The term influencer marketing refers to “a type of marketing that focuses on using key leaders to drive your brand’s message to the larger market. Rather than marketing directly to a large group of consumers, you instead inspire / hire/pay influencers to get out the word for you” (Tapinfluence, 2015). Considering the rise of social media influencers in shaping public opinions on many political activities (Wilbert, 2020), the Reconnaissance of Influence Operations (RIO) Project by MIT Lincoln Lab collects and studies situation-relevant data to identify narratives, actors (influencers), and networks related to influence operations in a political campaign and to predict the effectiveness of countermeasures (*R&D World*, 2020).

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Political communication literature has traditionally examined the source effects of a political candidate that can predict the message's effectiveness. With the rise of social media, Xiao, Wang, and Chan-Olmsted (2018) found that trustworthiness, social influence, argument quality, and information involvement are also influential factors that could affect consumer perceived information credibility on *YouTube*. Live streaming influencers as an emerging political communication tool is an integral part of the new marketing funnel where traditional marketing, advertising, and sales have been replaced by the new influencer marketing, content marketing, and social selling to affect consumers' awareness, interest, consideration, intent, evaluation, and purchase (Influencer, 2018).

Live streaming influencers are defined as "a new type of independent third-party endorser who shapes audience attitudes" through live streaming platforms after the extension of Freberg et al.'s (2010) definition of endorsers (p.90). Past social influencer research mainly focuses on their effects on human behaviors as a source of persuasion in the endorsement process to influence their fans and followers (Yang & Kang, 2021). The growing importance of influencer marketing can be attributed to several practical concerns about its effectiveness compared to other marketing tools (such as social, mobile, video, omnichannel, and TV) (Williamson, 2019). According to Tapinfluence (2015), ninety percent of Americans ignore digital ads (Harris Interactive's 2015 survey); forty percent of digital advertising revenue was lost to ad blockers by millennials; (President of IAB); fifty-six percent of paid digital ad impressions are never seen (Google's 2015 survey). According to an eMarketer survey of 226 CMOs, 30.5% indicate that they plan to change their advertising media mix by focusing on influencers (as cited in Williamson, 2019). In China, among marketers and media agency professionals surveyed, 55% indicate that they will pay attention to a short video and live streaming as a viable marketing platform (Williamson, 2019).

The employment of live streaming influencers has gone beyond marketing and advertising activities (Williamson, 2019). It has spread to the arena of political communication (Yang & Kang, 2021). Live streamers have often become famous personalities that similarly function as traditional TV celebrity endorsers (Cai & Wohn, 2019; Park & Lin, 2020; Sun et al., 2020). Also known as social media influencers (Breves et al., 2019; Hughes, Swaminathan, & Brooks, 2019), or simply (live streaming) influencers, they have participated in different types of political activities to shape the political attitudes and beliefs among their fans and followers (Bond et al., 2017; Yang & Kang, 2021). Unfortunately, academic research on live streaming platforms and influencers in political communication has been sporadic (Yang & Kang, 2021). Examining live streaming influencers' roles as an enhancer or a disruptor of the democratic process is even rarer. In this study, Yang and Kang (2021) have digressed from the standard approach to study the source effects of live streaming influencers on consumer and voter behaviors (Hughes et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2020; Yang & Kang, 2021). This study attempts to fill the gap by exploring the roles of live streaming influencers as endorsers in political communication and speculating whether and how their political endorsement could affect a budding democracy like Taiwan (i.e., RQ2). Two theoretical foundations have help guide this study when studying this exciting phenomenon.

First of all, the effects of live streaming influencers can be approached from a media effects perspective when scholars often examine their impacts on agenda-setting for the public, the priming of the audience, and the framing of news events and issues to influence people's political behaviors in a political election (Blumler 2015; Yang & Kang, 2021). These antecedents to voters' political participation behaviors of their fans and followers are often empirically studied to assess the extent of their impacts (Zúñiga et al., 2014). The term, political participation, will be defined by four types of political behaviors: "voting, campaign activity, contacting officials, and collective activities" (Verba & Nie, 1972, as cited in Zúñiga et al., 2014, p.613). As an essential dimension of another concept, political engagement, composed of

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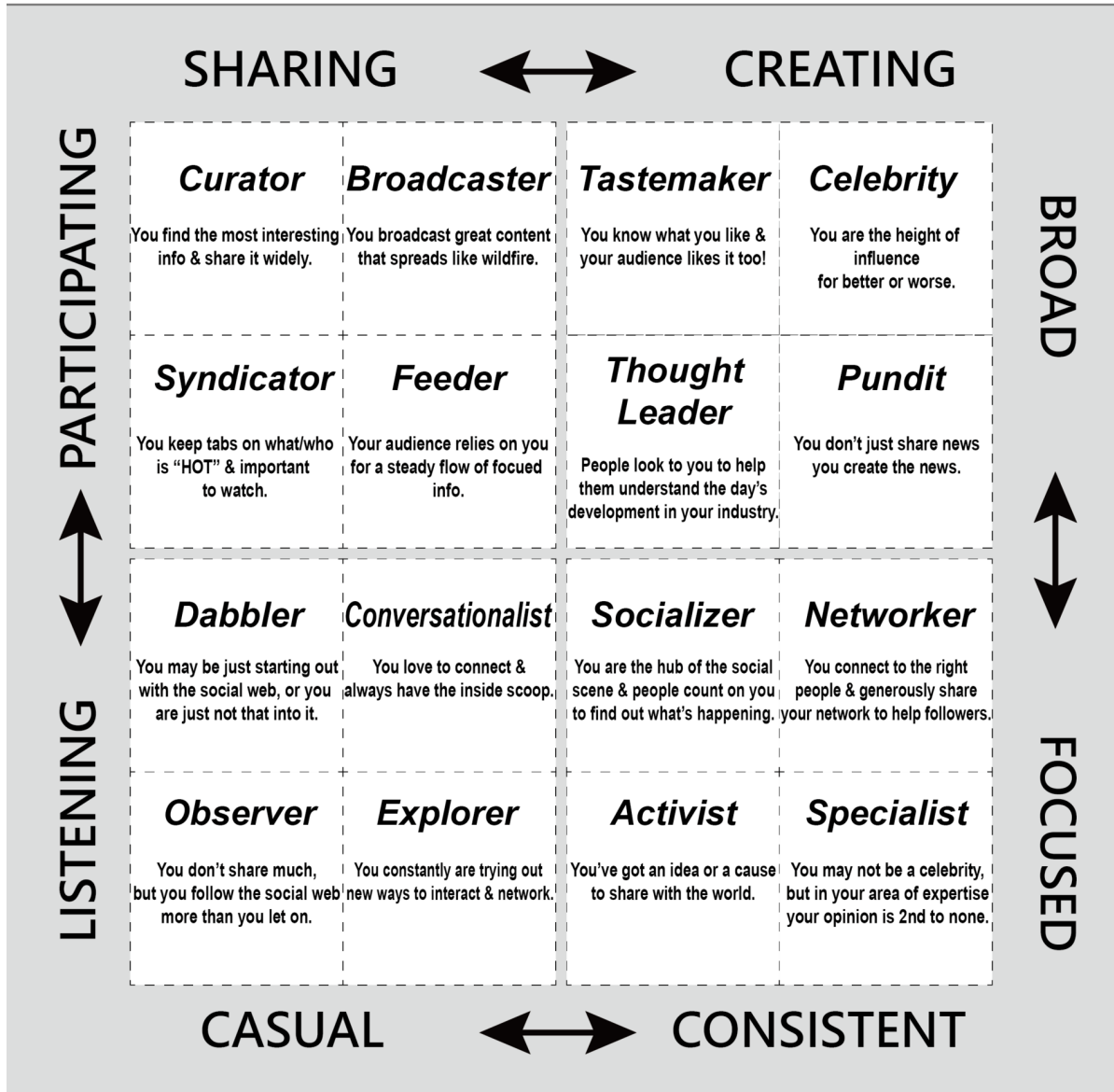
cognitive engagement, political participation, and political voice (Hargittai & Shaw, 2013; Yang & Kang, 2021). In this study, Yang and Kang (2021) will particularly examine if live streaming influencers could lead to the rise of populism and impact political participation and engagement of their fans and followers to deepen the democratic process in Taiwan (i.e., RQ3).

Remarkably, this study explores whether the rise of live streaming platforms and (source) characteristics of live streaming influencers may contribute to the rise of populism as seen in many democracies worldwide (Sorensen, 2017). Keane (2013, as cited in Sorensen, 2017, p. 137) observes that this “communication abundance” has revolutionized today’s communication environment by offering interconnected media and devices that facilitate the rapid sharing and dissemination of (political) information. For example, mobile, social, and traditional PC device media (Yang & Kang, 2021). The advent of live-streaming platforms and influencers will likely reshape how politicians interact with their constituents (Yang & Kang, 2021). Sorensen (2017) observed that one of the impacts is the remediation of the political communication process from politicians/constituents to politicians mediated by live streaming influencers before reaching their constituents. The (source) characteristics of live streaming influencers can play a significant role in the effectiveness of this communication process and if the extent of populism can be influenced. For example, Guo, Goh, and Abdelgayed (2019) studied screen presence and powerful emotion as two characteristics of live streaming influencers to generate subsequent consumer engagement. It is assumed that a perfect match between the live streaming influencers, message characteristics, and politicians is essential to the success of campaigning activities enlisting live streamers. Park and Lin (2020) observed that endorsements in live streaming platforms could influence consumer’s intention to buy if the endorsers are trustworthy (Park & Lin, 2020; Yang & Kang, 2021). Other empirical research has also supported that a live streaming influencer’s trustworthiness, but not their physical attractiveness, can predict viewers’ intention to buy (Park & Lin, 2020). Other essential source characteristics of live streaming influencers include the perceived expertise of an endorser (Breves et al., 2019) and identifiability with consumers’ lifestyle, attitude, and belief. Relevant characteristics also include authenticity, approachability, familiarity, likability, and relatability of the endorser (Amos et al., 2008; Schouten et al., 2020; Yang & Kang, 2021). The following section discusses whether different influence types will contribute to the rise of populism in Taiwan.

Influence Types of Live Streaming Influencers

Existing research on influencers and populism has rarely examined whether different types of influence live streaming influencers may affect communication and behavioral outcomes in the political context (Yang & Kang, 2021). Based on the findings reported in Yang and Kang (2021), political parties and politicians in Taiwan have taken an accommodative approach that describes their adaptation and adjustment of existing policies and positions to address better the needs of populists (Berman, 2021). Because of the gap in the literature, this study will rely on a popular descriptive typology of influencers’ functional categories to describe and conceptualize the types of live streamers’ influences and possible effects on the rise of populism. Yang and Kang (2021) have relied on Klout’s Influence Matrix, one of the most commonly used analytical tools in the influence marketing industry (Figure 1). This matrix has been developed to describe and examine influence types of social media influencers (Anger & Kittle, 2011; Morin, 2012; *TechNews 24H*, 2012; Yang & Kang, 2021).

Figure 1. Klout's Influence Matrix
 Source: Yang & Kang, 2021



Yang and Kang (2021) reason that each live streaming influencer could exert various types of influence over their fans and followers based on their roles and functions (e.g., listening vs. participating, broad vs., focused, sharing vs. creating, casual vs. consistent) (as cited in Rister, n.d.; Yang & Kang, 2021). Klout's Influence Matrix has included four large quadrants that embed four sub-categories of influence types. For example, the participating and sharing quadrant (in different green colors) includes four influence types: *Broadcaster*, *Curator*, *Feeder*, and *Syndicator*, while the casual and listening block (in different yellow colors) includes *Conversationalist*, *Dabblers*, *Explorer*, and *Observer* (Yang & Kang, 2021). The right-hand side is made up of another two quadrants: creating and broad, as well as consistent

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and focused; they consist of eight influence types: *Celebrity*, *Pundit*, *Tastemaker*, and *Thought Leader* (in different orange colors), while the focused and consistent block (in different blue colors) has *Activist*, *Networker*, *Specialist*, and *Socializer* (Yang & Kang, 2021).

Overlapping with Klout's Influence Matrix, live streaming influencers who actively participated in Taiwan's 2020 presidential election are likely to fall in the quadrant in blue colors and encompass *Activist*, *Networker*, *Specialist*, and *Socialist* influence types. Live streaming influencers as *Activist* mean that they "got an idea or a cause to share with the world." On the other hand, *Specialist* means that they "may not be a celebrity," but their expertise is treated with the highest regard (Rister, n.d.). In the following discussions, this chapter will apply Klout's Influence Matrix to analyze the role of live streaming influencers in affecting the rise of populism and the polarization of political behaviors among Taiwanese voters in the 2020 Presidential Election. For example, RayDu is known for his famous 15 minutes English lessons that many viewers rely on to learn English more entertainingly. RayDu has made the most use of his specialty in English but has extended his influence to become an *Activist* to raise millions of dollars to fund the placement of a protest ad on *The New York Times* (Staff Writer with CNA, 2020). Froggy, another live video streaming celebrity, was elected to become a Taipei city council member in 2018 without spending much (about USD 40,000) on his political campaign (Editorial Office, 2019). These examples of live streaming influencers have shown the abilities of these celebrities to transform their likes and shares into political mobilization and voting behaviors.

Live Streaming Influencers and the Rise of Populism

The advent of emerging media platforms, such as social media that can easily connect users worldwide, disseminate information, and even misinformation, has rapidly prompted researchers to explore whether it will contribute to the rise of populism (Postill, 2018). As a general term in academic and layman discourses, populism is defined as "a political movement or party emphasizing a Manichean, us-versus-them worldview" (Berman, 2021, p.72). Often carrying a negative connotation, this term is often used as a label "to refer to all those political phenomena considered to be dangerous, irrational and demagogic; populism as a politics that appeals to the basest sentiments of the populace makes impossible promises and panders to imaginary fears" (Taggart, 2002, as cited in Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 746). Furthermore, Postill (2018) claims that one of the tenets of populism is its strategy to appeal to voters by creating "an 'Other' (immigrants, refugees and so on for rightists; corrupt politicians and bankers for leftists)" (p. 757). Similarly, populists often assume the stance of us (people) versus them (the elites) rhetoric that claims "that the existing political system has ignored, neglected, or outright worked against the interests of the people" (Berman, 2021, p.73). As an essential term in political science research, the rise of populism in the West has been attributed to demand- or supply-side factors, ranging from cultural, economic, and social variables (Berman, 2021).

In the digital age, populism and populist appeals can be easily spread among supporters due to "the mass networking capabilities" of social media and other similar emerging media (Gerbaudo, 2018). In the same vein, this chapter will focus on the technical capabilities of live streaming platforms and influencers. According to Postill (2018) and Gerbaudo (2018), the global adoption of social media for populist movements in various countries seem to point out that traditional political theories on understanding the relationship between social media and populism have failed to provide a compelling argument that populism is associated with the media use. Additionally, Gerbaudo (2018) argues that "media have offered a channel for the populist yearning to 'represent the unrepresented', providing a voice to a voiceless

and unifying a divided people” (p. 747). For example, Postill (2018) describes that both far-right and leftist groups have used social media to advocate their causes. In the Indonesian presidential campaign of 2014, while the establishment candidate, Prabowo Subianto, has employed *Facebook* to recruit his followers, his rival, Joko Widodo, with a strong populist appeal, relies on *Twitter* for the same purpose (Abdillah, 2014, as cited Postill, 2018, p. 761). Emerging social and live streaming media seem to be used by candidates in political parties, political ideologies, and mass appeals. Therefore, Yang & Kang (2021) have refrained from discussing the origin and the categories thoroughly (such as Postill, 2018). Instead, this chapter will examine how live streaming platforms and influencers are applied in Taiwan’s politics.

Like other countries, the rise of populism in Taiwan is also attributed to many malaises related to a fledgling democracy that needs “democratic deepening” (Wong, 2003). Taiwan’s experience also echoes similar world trends of worsening economic conditions for a large population and the rise of social media (Postill, 2018). Despite her rapid democratization, Taiwan’s society similarly faces a widening income gap and wealth inequality when the Gini indices rose from 33.6/100 in 2016, 33.7 in 2017, 33.8 in 2018, to 33.9 in 2019. While the media ecosystem has been liberalized from her past authoritarian control under the decade-long Martial Law, recently empowered citizens often feel their voices are deprived and not adequately represented. With these political and economic backdrops, Taiwan’s society also has similar characteristics that technology-enabled populism is made possible. For example, social media and live streaming platforms can disseminate “voice for the underdog and the unrepresented” with the gatekeeping functions of mainstream media. In Taiwan’s 2020 Presidential campaign, KMT’s candidate, Han, Kuo-yu, had relied on populist rhetoric to assemble his crowd by attracting many DPP voters when he employed “evocative symbols”, narratives, and slogans (Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 748) that are traditionally DPP’s grassroots strengths and appeals to the mass.

RESEARCH METHOD

The Selection of the Case Study Method

This chapter employs a case study method that can analyze and describes a single phenomenon intensively and holistically (Merriam, 1998; Yang & Kang, 2021). This qualitative research method is “an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 544). The selection of this qualitative research method is justified because this study places much emphasis on comprehensive analyses of characteristics and influence types of live streaming influencers. This study provides analyses of their facilitating or disruptive effects on political participation and behaviors of candidate’s constituents as demonstrated in Taiwan’s 2020 Presidential Election. This study has chosen Taiwan because, in addition to its vibrant democracy, it is also the first country that relies on live streaming platforms and influencers in a national presidential campaign (Chen, 2020). Therefore, this qualitative case study analysis aims to thoroughly describe the role of live streaming platforms and influencers in facilitating or disrupting the political processes in a democracy.

Social Blade (founded in 2008) maintains a more comprehensive and reliable list of social media platforms and (social media) influencers (Social Blade, 2020). The selection of live streaming influencers for this study is from the Top 250 *YouTuber* List published by Social Blade on April 13, 2020. A total of 250 live streamers (known as *YouTubers* in Taiwan) was grouped into 17 topical categories by Social Blade; the categories range from *Auto & Vehicles, Comedy, Education, Entertainment, Film, Gaming,*

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How to & Style, Made for Kids, Music, News & Politics, Non-Profit & Activism, People & Blogs, Pets & Animals, Science & Technology, Shows, Sports, and Travel (Yang & Kang, 2021).

This study only selects influencers who have previously utilized their influence on political activities to indicate their political participation (Yang & Kang, 2021). This study also includes the comprehensiveness criteria to ensure that live streaming examples have met the methodological recommendations by case study researchers (Gerring, 2008; Seawright & Gerring, 2008; Yang & Kang, 2021). Additionally, we include the diversity criteria of choosing live streaming influencers based on their subscriber numbers, characteristics, content and topic types, and influence types (Yang & Kang, 2021). Based on the Social Blade's Top 250 *YouTubers* in Taiwan (2020, April 13), a total of 13 politically active live streamers has been selected; they are in general from the categories of *Comedy* (N=1), *Entertainment* (N=3), *Education* (N=1), *News* (N=2), and *People* (N=6). Among these live streaming influencers, *RayDu* ranks 3rd nationwide with his 2.57 million subscribers; *Love Taiwan* ranks 4th in the nation with his 2.42 million subscribers; *STR Network* ranks 46th in the list with his 1.17 million subscribers (Social Blade, 2020; Yang & Kang, 2021). Only professional live streaming influencers in Taiwan who have demonstrated their main consistent and focused characteristics (those in the blue) will be included when selecting these live streaming influencers. Table 1 shows a list of live streaming influencers included in this study. This study will not include those who are occasional political live streaming influencers or political figures part-timing as live streamers and commentators, and journalists who simulcast with live streaming platforms because their influence is often transient and hard to assess (Yang & Kang, 2021).

Table 1. A list of live streaming influencers in Taiwan

#	Live Streaming Influencers	YouTube Site	# of Subscribers	Content/ Topic Type	Country Rank
1	<i>ShaSha77</i>	https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCiWXd0nmBjIKROwzMyPV-Nw_	500K	People	216 th
2	<i>RayDu</i>	https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCeo3JwE3HezUWFdVcehQk9Q_	2.57M	Education	3 rd
3	<i>Love Taiwan</i>	https://www.youtube.com/user/kyoko38	2.42M	People	4 th
4	<i>Fitness Club</i>	https://www.youtube.com/user/kos44444	931K	News	71 st
5	<i>Big Star Ken</i>	https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZVCbj9weVNAWqXS9gnfm5A	971K	Entertainment	72 nd
6	<i>Potter King</i>	https://youtu.be/gAOYStMy3PI	618K	People	154 th

Source: Social Blade (2020, April 13), <https://socialblade.com/>

DISCUSSION

Will Live Streaming Platforms and Influencers Contribute to Populism?

This case method study will explore whether the rise of live streaming platforms and influencers will contribute to the growing populism associated with politicians' campaign strategies in Taiwan's 2020 Presidential Election (RQ2). For example, *Fitness King* (*Guan-Chang*), a live streaming influencer

turned gym entrepreneur, has partially contributed to the election of a less-known populist candidate, Han, Kuo-yu, to Kaohsiung mayor. Han, Kuo-yu had made the most of the endorsement from *Fitness Club* (*Guan-Chang*) and his live streaming platform on *YouTube*. During this one-hour fifteen-minute live streaming special interview (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mv6fgg9AsZQ>), Han promised that he would campaign with “one bowl of meaty rice street food” and “one bottle of purified water,” to show his folksy image and lifestyle—this usually appeals to those who are less privileged and often marginalized in society.

Fitness Club is an exceptional example of how these live streaming influencers can aptly accumulate their ability to shape public opinions and participate in political activities (Yang & Kang, 2021). According to Klout’s Influence Matrix, *Fitness Club* began his career as a Feeder to share his insights into the fitness industry, body-building tips, and related topical updates to establish his influence among fans and followers. 931,000 subscribers that *Fitness Club* has makes him the top 71st *YouTuber* in the country (SocialBlade, 2020). His ascent to celebrity status occurs in a short time partly because of his overtly honest and controversial comments to obtain free publicity among the mainstream news media. His fame and positive image have made politicians rush to participate in his daily live streaming programs, hoping to influence and connect with younger demographics (such as Gen. Z) (Yang & Kang, 2021).

Fitness Club is a perfect match for a populist candidate like Han, whose similarly grassroots and unorthodox campaign slogans have transformed the traditionally less engaging campaign approaches. Han has been said to be “Taiwan’s Trump” and has created so-called the “Han Wave” of followers and fans who chanted his campaign slogans and songs (Aspinwall, 2020; Reichenbach, 2020). Observers have compared Han’s campaign approaches to Trump’s regarding attending his (female) opponents and making unsubstantiated accusations about his opponent’s qualifications (Reichenbach, 2020). Han’s campaign approach is based on a populist strategy that uses less mediated messaging to censor coarse language. When criticized, Han adopted a similar strategy to Donald Trump to blame the established new media outlets and claimed these criticisms as fake news (Gerbaudo, 2018). For example, Han has projected himself as “an unabashedly folksy image” (Chen, 2019) to use folksy language to connect with ordinary voters. This populist image is demonstrated by Han’s speech at Harvard earlier in April 2019, with his Han-style topic, “The Power of Down to Earth: They Talk the Talk, I Walk the Walk” (Chen, 2019). Han’s campaign language is not on serious policy debates, but rather on “grandiose economic promises” that the ordinary people can understand, such as to bring Disney theme park and F1 racing track to the city of Kaohsiung that he characterized the harbor city as “old and poor” (Aspinwall, 2019). He continued to adopt the same approach when asked about how Taiwan can advance its current economy standstill. His famous slogan, “Let’s Merchandise Come in, Let’s People Go out (to Make Money),” simplifies the complexities of international trade to only the mere exchange of tangible products and people. Han’s presidential campaign slogan is “Make Taiwan Safe; Make People Rich” without offering any solid plan to solve the thorny issue of Taiwan’s national security challenges with its heavy economic reliance on China. Han literarily incubated and pet-named twelve eggs during the vital last 23 days of his presidential campaign. Han’s political promises have a robust populist flavor that represents the underdog’s concerns for their economic welfare and perceived social injustice. It seems that social media (and likely live streaming media) take advantage of networking capabilities to rally those traditionally geographically separate crowds to follow what an ‘empty signifier’ (Laclau, 2005) to “fuse disparate demands in a single platform and campaign. They attempt to overcome a situation in which people are fragmented along multiple class and identity lines, trying to make people aware of their common interests and common enemies” (Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 748).

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Han's rapid rise to be the mayor of Taiwan's second-biggest city, Kaohsiung, in January 2018, his short-lived bid to run as KMT's presidential candidate in January 2020, and his ultimate disgraceful oust from Kaohsiung mayoral office in June 2020 (Reichenbach, 2020) may characterize the temporary nature of populism in the political context. Han is the first-ever mayor that has been successfully recalled in Taiwan's democratic history (Aspinwall, 2020). In retrospect, the ebb and flow of the "Han Wave" (Rigger, 2020) is an example of while a politician may be able to take advantage of the live streaming platforms and bandwagon live streamers' influence, their acumen as an influential politician remains to be tested. Han's failure as a trustworthy politician can be viewed as an example that populism may backfire eventually. Unlike what Aspinwall (2019) has predicted that "regardless of whether he enters the race or not. The mayor, rapturous to some and noxious to others, is not going away anytime soon" (para. 14). Han's ambitious bid to enter the 2020 presidential race eliminates his possibilities to enter into politics in Taiwan again.

Gerbaudo (2018) has once observed a social media-empowered populist phenomenon, "elective affinity," which states that these emerging media often provide populists "a suitable channel to invoke the support ordinary people against" the establishment (p. 746). However, Han's demise suggests that the roles of live streaming influencers have only the capabilities to create short-term publicity of a political figure to assemble and mobilize the political participation of their fans and followers. The elective affinity can be easily mitigated when other "establishment elites" (like President Tsai) utilize live streaming platforms' networking and outreach capabilities. Yang and Kang (2021) attribute these effects to what Sean King proposed to create either competitive or complementing effects by associating a political candidate with live streaming influencers (as cited in Tan, 2020). For example, Han himself has previously relied heavily on various social media from *YouTube*, *Facebook*, and *Line apps* for his mayoral campaign. However, when he employed live streaming influencers for his presidential election two years later, much less traction on voters' political participation has been observed; this suggests a competitive effect of his source characteristics and influence types of live streaming influencers (Tan, 2020; Yang & Kang, 2021) that often distract the audience from his critical messaging. Han has been perceived by many young voters as a live streaming influencer himself due to his heavy use of the streaming platforms (Yang & Kang, 2021), including his own 3-hour farewell live streaming video on the last day of his tenure as Kaohsiung mayor. Like Taiwan, the self-correction mechanism of a healthy democracy is one of the laudable and unique features of democracy to allow people to correct their mistakes (Rijpkema, 2018). In other words, the relationship between live streaming platforms (just like social media) and the rise of populism seems to be more dynamic than what Postill (2018) has analyzed, using the traditional dichotomy of right vs. left, elites vs. grassroots, technocratic/centrist and theocratic populism. The case study of Taiwan's 2020 Presidential Election clearly shows that establishment elites (such as Tsai) can quickly adapt her campaign strategies to tackle the challenges of a populist challenger (such as Han). The enlisting of various live streaming influencers shapes her images and redirects her campaign agendas to appeal to the mass.

Will Live Streaming Platforms and Influencers Help the Democratic Deepening in Taiwan?

This study will also explore whether the employment of live streaming influencers in Taiwan's 2020 Presidential campaign activities ultimately enhance or disrupt the development of a budding democracy like Taiwan (RQ3) to help with her "democratic deepening process" (Wong, 2003, p. 235). Han's failed

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live streaming strategies for his 2020 Presidential campaign are a sharp contrary to President Tsai's success, due to her collaboration with many live streaming influencers. President Tsai's 2020 campaign has assembled a diverse group of live streaming influencers (including *ShaSha77*, *RayDu*, *Fitness Club*, *Love Taiwan*, etc.) to involve young and educate new media users, particularly at the last six months of her campaign (AsiaKOL 2019; Yang & Kang, 2021).

Unlike her opponent Han, President Tsai's appearance on *YouTube* has dramatically shed away her previous bureaucratic image; such a complementing effect has successfully enabled her collaboration with live streaming influencers to influence many voters' political participation (Yang & Kang, 2021). Final election results have further confirmed the importance of the complementing effects of living streaming influencers on the political participation of young voters on their involvement with President Tsai's various campaign activities (Yang & Kang, 2021). These young voters also actively share and like her campaign materials (Yang & Kang, 2021). Yang and Kang (2021) observed that President Tsai's symbiotic relationships with live streaming influencers ultimately benefit her campaign (Kuo, 2020) and made her party, DPP, the majority in the legislative branch.

The following discussion describes the role of several live streaming influencers that ultimately contributes to the consolidation and democratic deepening of Taiwan's budding democracy while reducing the disruptive effects of the rising populist mayor, Han Kou-Yu, in this historically significant campaign. Most noteworthy is the change of camp by *Fitness Club*, who used to be an avid supporter of Han but became his most vocal critic due to Han's change of heart to run for President only after three months as Kaohsiung mayor broke his campaign promise. *Fitness Club* has participated in various political activities as *Activist* and has shared his pro-Taiwan political agendas with President Tsai (Yang & Kang, 2021). As *Curator*-turned-*Activist YouTuber*, *Fitness Club* also publicly supported gay marriage and LGBT causes in Taiwan. His strong anti-Communist stance has led him to organize the *Anti-Red Media Protest* on June 23, 2019. This event has attracted over 90,000 to watch this live *YouTube* streaming event in downtown Taipei (Lou, 2019; Yang & Kang, 2021).

President Tsai Ing-Wen has enlisted *ShaSha77*, a significant live streaming influencer, in the *Activist* category that has capitalized on the live streaming platforms to deliver his message to champion his social causes. *ShaSha 77*, previously an influencer in the *People* category and currently has 500K subscribers (SocialBlader, 2020) and with a *Facebook* account of 23,353 likes and 25,458 likes, this 28-year-old college graduate began his career in graphic design. *ShaSha 77* has established his role as an *Activist* live streaming influencer. According to Klout's Influence Matrix, *Shasha77* can be categorized as *Curator* who filters through many current affairs and selects the most exciting topics to comment on.

For example, in the "Love is Equal" campaign, the animation video encourages people to vote for gay marriage and equality in the 2018 national referendums in Taiwan. The central theme of this campaign is that there are different kinds of love, but everyone deserves a family. The website project, "Coming-Out", delivers LGBT-friendly advice and messages about the experiences and benefits of self-disclosure (coming out) through traditional Internet and mobile platforms. In the studio's animation series, *Taiwan Animated History*, "Chiang Wei-Shui", the project describes the contribution of Taiwan's democratic movement by Dr. Chiang Wei-Shui, a famous historical figure during Taiwan's colonial period under Japanese rules.

The influencer status of *ShaSha77* has won him the opportunity to work with the presidential candidate, Dr. Ing-Wen Tsai, in her re-election campaign in 2019. In November 2019, *ShaSha77* joined two other *YouTubers*, *Froggy* and *EyeCTV*, to form a new political party, "Cannot Stop This Party" on November 5, 2019. Later, on July 13, 2019, *ShaSha77* collaborated with another influential live streamer, *RayDu*,

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to produce a video in Taiwan's Air Force One with the incumbent President Tsai. The success of *ShaSha 77* and many of his peer live streaming influencers in President Tsai's campaign has shown that their perceived credibility and trustworthiness as a communication source will affect their fans and followers to mobilize their support and resources to counter-attack the populist candidate, like Han, resulting in the consolidation of a budding democracy in Taiwan.

Most importantly, this case study has shown that using live streaming platforms and influencers in a national political campaign are instrumental to raising the political awareness and participation among younger demographics that are traditionally aloof to politics, resulting in low turn-out at the polling stations (Wang, 2020). Fans and followers of the live streaming influencers cooperate with youth volunteer groups to fight fake news campaigns prevalent in many social media platforms to fact-check criticisms about the ruling DPP. Populist appeals that KMT's Han attempts to share in the cyberspace to target young demographics most affected by a low job prospect and starting monthly salary at NTD\$22,000 (about USD 800) has encountered strong resistance. On the other hand, young voters have used social and live streaming media to organize the "Go Home to Vote" campaign to encourage people to go home to cast their votes to protect Taiwan's democracy (Wang, 2020). The mobilization and activism of young voters in this election help deepen the democratic process in Taiwan. A sense of "dried mango effects" to worry about the nation's doom under pro-China Han's leadership has mobilized many voters to cast their votes (Wei, 2020). Seven in ten voters in their 40's and 50's have cast their vote (Wei, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The advent of live-streaming platforms and influencers is instrumental to the planning and implementation of "live streaming politics", claimed to be an enabler and enhancer of democracy to allow politicians to engage with their constituents via real-time broadcasting of their campaign statements and responses to contenders' attacks (Yang & Kang, 2021; Wilbert, 2020). These emerging media platforms are like to affect the political campaigning processes and activities (Owen, 2018). While populist appeals that KMT's Han has attracted the attention of both mainstream and emerging media to create "The Han Wave," this case study has shown that more abstract and lofty campaign appeals will work that DPP's Tsai has used to let the world know "how much we cherish our free democratic way of life and how much we cherish our nation"—from an interview Tsai gave after Han conceded defeat (Wei, 2020). Live streaming platforms and influencers often serve as a buffer to prevent the polarization of political discourses in a country. Many young voters Han once attracted during his Kaohsiung mayoral campaign abandoned him en masse when he recanted his campaign promise to serve his full four-year term in his live streaming interview with *Fitness King*. Many have produced parody videos that are widely shared among young voters, resulting in Han's rapid downfall, and was ousted as mayor of the third-largest city in Taiwan in June 2020 (Wong, 2020).

This case study has shown the double-edged nature of the live streaming platforms for the rise of populism. Existing literature on populism and social media (Gerbaudo, 2018; Postill, 2018) may have ignored the well-known tenet of new technologies as "technologies of freedom" by Pool (1983); that is, the ingenuity of users still determine how technologies will be used. Like other technologies, the advent of live streaming platforms will contribute to the emergence of a "participatory culture" (Yang & Kang, 2021; Yu et al., 2018, p.1451). Live streaming platforms can create an information-rich communication environment to facilitate consumers' political decision-making processes (Sun et al., 2020). Audience

participation can help consolidate a democracy, despite some short-term disruptions similarly caused by the utilization of live streaming platforms (like in the case of Han Kuo-yu).

This case study has shown that live streaming platforms may not be solely valuable to populists; established elites may also benefit from these channels to share their campaign agendas and reshape their image as politicians. Similar to social media, the mobilization of voters can be easily facilitated by live-streaming platforms and influencers, as shown in the Anti-Red Media Protest organized by *Fitness King*. The existing fan and follower base of the live streaming influencers could help utilize the networking capabilities of these media platforms, resulting in more effective campaigns. This chapter supports that using live streaming platforms and influencers in political campaigns should contribute to voters' political participation and change their political behaviors. Additionally, live streaming platforms can be employed with other media technologies to create a high level of cross-platform synergy among different campaign components, generating more fantastic effects on the audience's political participation (Yang & Kang, 2021) and contributing to a healthier and stronger democracy by averting the harmful effects of populist appeals. The diversity of media platforms and the openness and easy accessibility of information may reduce the potential polarization of political discourses and opinions, as demonstrated in this case study, showing the resilience of a democracy that allows people to mobilize to fight against the rise of populism.

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Chapter 13

Placing Portuguese Right–Wing Populism Into Context: Analogies With France, Italy, and Spain

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the discourse of the Portuguese right-wing populist André Ventura and compares it with his close counterparts, Santiago Abascal, Marine Le Pen, and Matteo Salvini. The empirical analysis is focused on the 2021 presidential campaign and looks at Twitter and YouTube as parts of an integrated political communication strategy that are used as tools of exposure and message dissemination. The results show how André Ventura appropriates the features of right-wing populism but adapts those to the Portuguese specific context as a strategy to gain both wider media visibility and popular support.

INTRODUCTION

Portugal was for some time considered an exceptional case of resistance to radical right-wing politics (Salgado & Zúquete, 2016; Lisi & Borghetto, 2018; Quintas da Silva, 2018). Despite opinion studies demonstrating that the demand for RRP politics was already there, supply had been hamstrung by the absence of mobilizing, charismatic leadership (Marchi, 2013), as well as stigmatization related to relatively recent collective memory of the right-wing authoritarian regime of the Estado Novo (Salgado & Zúquete, 2016), and resistance in the news media to right-wing populist rhetoric and frames (Salgado, 2019). However, this idea of Portuguese exceptionalism has been challenged by the emergence of the Chega (Enough) party, led by André Ventura. Since its inception, Chega has risen quickly in electoral support. In the November 2019 general election, Ventura was elected Portugal's first right-wing populist MP having garnered 1.30% of the vote, but opinion polls generally show that his support has been on

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8057-8.ch013

the rise since then. This makes the case for looking at Portugal as an edge case in the European context, rather than an exception (Mendes & Dennison, 2020).

This chapter analyses André Ventura and Chega's political communication and positioning within the Portuguese political system resorting to empirical data collected during the 2021 presidential election campaign. It examines how social media platforms have been used to as tools for spreading right-wing populist rhetoric and compares André Ventura's populist approach to those of his French, Italian and Spanish counterparts, discussing whether it entails any noteworthy specificity.

Given the centrality of social media in Ventura's political communication strategy, our approach relies on YouTube and Twitter as data collection resources to analyze his rhetoric and overall media use strategy in his 2021 presidential candidacy. Prolific political communication moments, electoral campaigns are prime opportunities to systematically collect data and examine the political parties' positioning in relation to other national and European political actors, particularly new parties, such as Chega. The methodological approach is based on the content analysis of tweets published by the candidate's official account during the campaign period, as well as of the videos uploaded to Ventura candidacy's YouTube channel since it was first publicly announced, on February 8, 2020. As these kinds of texts, as Wodak points out, can be inherently ambiguous, and "cannot be fully understood without considering different layers of context" (2015, p. 51), i.e., their situatedness, our approach provides two separate levels of analysis: namely the entry-level analysis of the thematic dimension of texts – using discourse topics as a central analytical category –, and the in-depth analysis of the specific text's genre, discursive strategies, and argumentation schemes. This thorough analytical process relates different levels of contextualization and allows for richer results from a limited number of texts. We then compare Ventura's media use, rhetoric, and issue positioning to those of candidates from the same European party family in other Western European countries, particularly Santiago Abascal (Vox – Spain), Marine Le Pen (Rassemblement National – France), and Matteo Salvini (Lega – Italy).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This approach to the study of populist political communication is fundamentally grounded in the success of the so-called "fourth wave" of radical right-wing populist politics (Mudde, 2019) that has been happening in tandem with major shifts in the media systems. While, in the mass media age, successful campaigners vied for media attention mainly by being the subject of news reports and participating in debates and interviews on media channels that were, effectively, information gatekeepers, today they must be able to operate within what Chadwick (2013) has termed the hybrid media system, i.e., an increasingly complex and fragmented media system where old and new media logics continuously interact and reconfigure each other. They must be able to cut across increasing informational noise, and networked, often polarized, political information flows, all of which contribute to diminishing citizen attention to any particular channel, calling into question the centrality of legacy media in frame building. Populist actors recognize this and are adept at adapting to the current media environment, by benefiting from aid given by mainstream media outlets which overhype populism (even if there has been occasionally some resistance to elements, such as nativism or homophobia), amplifying and often trivializing its messages (Brown & Mondon, 2020; Salgado, forthcoming). In this process, the impact of social media in politics is leveraged, by reaching, courting, and mobilizing voters through digital means (Vaccari, 2013), and then acquiring extra salience in the mainstream media (Baldwin-Philippi, 2019).

Political leaders operating within contemporary hybrid media systems must possess a diverse set of skills to achieve and maintain relevance and popularity. Populist leaders sometimes need to overcome the resistance by traditional media gatekeepers who often find their message and political goals reprehensible (Salgado & Zúquete, 2016; Salgado, 2019), have extra incentive to accomplish this, since mainstream media visibility entails the normalization of their discourse, as opposed to its usual stigmatization. Gerbaudo (2019) defines the leaders most suited to operate within this context as hyperleaders, that is, those who are attuned to “the centrality of the media system as the decisive battlefield in the struggle for power” (2019, p. 149). The success of this kind of leader depends on their ability to constantly get their image and words across to supporters and sympathizers, while being charismatic and highly visible rallying points for their movements and engendering empathy and affection. These dynamics often result in personalized political movements since the leaders are thought of as an embodiment of the political movements themselves.

Like other European right-wing populists, André Ventura is a modern-looking, media-savvy politician. A former municipal candidate backed by Portugal’s largest center-right party, PSD (Partido Social Democrata), who courted notoriety as a football pundit on a popular cable news channel, he tried to influence party positioning towards right-wing populism. After his efforts proved unsuccessful, he left to form a more radical alternative in Chega (Marchi, 2020). Despite its youth, Chega has already been placed among the European radical right-wing populist movement (Rooduijn et al., 2019), which is reinforced by its adhesion to the Identity and Democracy group in the European Parliament (Chega, n.d.). Ventura was a candidate in the 2021 presidential election to gain further visibility and disseminate his ideas and rhetoric. His candidacy could therefore be seen as part of a larger political communication strategy to garner support for his ideas and mobilize voters for the upcoming (local and parliamentary) elections. In Portugal’s semi-presidentialist system no incumbent president has ever been unseated and the incumbent, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, was extremely popular and perceived as unbeatable. Ventura was nevertheless the presidential candidate with the most extensive social media presence, with active accounts on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Parler, uploading videos assiduously and generating more engagement than any other candidate on YouTube, Portugal’s second-most used social media site for finding news (Newman et al., 2020); in contrast, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, the incumbent, has uploaded just one video to the YouTube channel set up in 2015 for his previous campaign and is not active on any other social networks.

Since right-wing populists no longer think of themselves as mere protest parties, are, in many countries, seasoned participants in parliamentary politics and do not wish to lose that influence, they must tend to their electoral base. Thus, they are presented with a conundrum: on the one hand, they are aware that if they constantly step into explicitly illiberal discourse, they may become stigmatized by the media, losing some of their appeal among their more moderate voters (van Spanje & Azrout, 2018); on the other hand, they also know that the more explicitly exclusionary facet of their rhetoric has desirable effects, like maintaining feelings of relative deprivation, and keeping the most extreme among their base content. Thus, they need to express exclusionary ideas in coded language (Billig, 2006), by employing discursive strategies that signal more than one audience at once, such as calculated ambivalence and provocation, euphemisation, victim-perpetrator reversal, and shifting blame to convenient scapegoats (Wodak, 2015).

The conceptual division between an in-group, i.e., the idealized, homogeneous “pure people” and a demonized out-group constituted by treacherous elites or racialized groups who threaten the former’s interests and well-being has been characterized as a rhetorical and ideological element of those political actors for some time (Mudde, 2004; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018). The

targets of this rhetoric have varied according to the protagonists articulating it and the historical contexts within which they have operated: for instance, if Jean-Marie Le Pen tried to capitalize on antisemitic sentiment (Mayer, 2018; Wodak, 2018), his daughter Marine Le Pen cannot do the same as some of her supporters present themselves as strong supporters of Israel (Rossinow, 2020), and this would also portray her movement as neofascist and, so, out of democratic bounds. Thus, new targets necessarily emerge, particularly national minorities, migrants, and refugees, who are often framed through security and welfare sustainability points of view (Mudde, 2007; Ennser-Jedenastik, 2017; Mudde, 2019), while religious bigotry has almost entirely shifted from anti-Semitism to Islamophobia (Sengul, 2020; Aiolfi, 2021).

Arguments pitting native citizens against various types of outsiders have been shown to effectively increase feelings of (relative) deprivation among citizens, making them more likely to be persuaded by right-wing populist rhetoric (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Spruyt et al., 2016). Despite their racist underpinnings, these discourses' subtleties can sometimes lend themselves to euphemisation and trivialization in the ways they are discussed in the mainstream press, amplifying, and normalizing them as an acceptable element of democratic politics (Brown and Mondon, 2020). Furthermore, as Castelli Gattinara and Froio (2019) point out, mass media outlets in the "Mediterranean model" (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) tend to reward even small radical right-wing political movements with coverage when they make claims related with migration, adopt protest strategies, engage in confrontation, and especially so if their actions generate movement/countermovement dynamics.

Previous Portuguese far right leaders, particularly those associated with the party formerly known as Partido Nacional Renovador, now called Ergue-te (Rise Up), have unsuccessfully tried to leverage Islamophobia as a political issue (Marchi, 2013); Ventura's political interest in Islam has, so far, been limited to a few occasional vague mentions of a threat, namely when he welcomed Marine Le Pen on the presidential campaign trail. His preferred targets for exclusionary rhetoric are the Roma community, which is explicitly contrasted with the "righteous Portuguese" and portrayed as naturally inclined toward criminality.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This research assesses how these frames are articulated by the right-wing populist André Ventura, analyzing his political communication on Twitter and YouTube. To capture the different layers of meaning and context, namely the explicit and implicit messages in Ventura's political communication or, as Wodak (2015) suggests, the topics on the one hand and the discursive strategies and argumentation schemes on the other hand, the texts collected were first analyzed through content analysis and then further examined using a discourse analysis approach. Such substantive analytical approach allows an in-depth understanding of Portuguese right-wing populism, allowing for comparison with its most close European counterparts' rhetoric and issue positioning, i.e., the way in which ideas are communicated, the topics chosen to amplify and their positioning.

André Ventura's presidential candidacy kept updated official profiles on Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and Parler during the 2021 election campaign. The first three accounts gathered significant followings, with more than 1000 subscribers on YouTube and over 58.000 on Twitter, for example, contrasting with those of the other candidacies and in particular the incumbent's which uploaded a single video on Youtube and only reactivated the institutional Twitter account of the Presidency (@presidencia) on March 13,

2021, after his reelection (Agência Lusa, March 13, 2021). Currently, the @presidencia Twitter account boasts around 12.400 followers, and the YouTube channel has 164 subscribers.

Ventura's use of social media clearly illustrates his keen interest in the digital realm as a way to reach potential voters and influence debates. Thus, this research looks at his Twitter account and YouTube channel. The Facebook and Parler accounts were left out because posts on Facebook duplicated the ones made on Twitter, and despite Parler's association with the global right-wing movement and its push for relevance in early 2021, it was not relevant among Portuguese internet users, only less than 0.8% of its traffic in 2021 came from Portugal (Alexa, 2021).

Twitter's API has long attracted research (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2018; Tucker et al., 2018) and its advantages and limitations are well-known, but despite YouTube's popularity among users there is still a dearth of research on its political uses. In fact, YouTube's increasing relevance, especially in news seeking behavior by citizens (Newman et al., 2020), and the quasi-commonsense perception that its algorithm contributes to the overall success of far-right discourses have not yet translated into systematic research into how politicians and citizens use its affordances (Munger & Philips, 2020).

Tweets posted to André Ventura's official account (@AndreCVentura) were collected from December 18, 2020 (when his presidential campaign became official) to January 24, 2021 (the Presidential Election Day), which resulted in a sample composed of 130 tweets. The YouTube sample included 38 videos uploaded between March 2, 2020, and January 22, 2021, to the channel "André Ventura – Presidenciais 2021". The timeframes differed due to the accounts' different relationship with Ventura's presidential candidacy: since Ventura's Twitter account was started in February 2019, and is his main digital communication channel, it made sense to limit the analysis to the presidential campaign timeframe; conversely, the presidential campaign's YouTube channel was created for this purpose, and therefore it is logical to fully include its contents. The videos' full content was coded for genre, manually transcribed, and then broken down into 141 distinct, timestamped, utterances. These videos showcase how Ventura chooses to be portrayed and include his appearances in mainstream media (e.g., interviews and debates), endorsements from people ranging from Lega leader Matteo Salvini to Portuguese comedian Maria Vieira, and a series of "Campaign Diaries" detailing the candidate's activities.

These tweets and YouTube videos' fragments were coded manually by a trained coder, following a codebook that included three types of dimensions, which are summarized in Table 1. The variables within these dimensions were dichotomous, i.e., they could only be coded as 0 (absence) or 1 (presence), except for "Issue" in the main topic dimension and "Target" in the dangerous Others subdimension of populism.

Additionally, the tweets were coded for the presence/absence of links to external sources, including mainstream news media, other references (such as quotes or screen grabs) to mainstream news outlets, the concrete outlet referred to, and links/references to non-mainstream news sources (Table 2). This information allows for a better understanding of the way André Ventura relates to and integrates the different types of media and other external sources in his political communication strategy.

RESULTS

In terms of frequency, Ventura posted 3.42 tweets/day and 1.02 YouTube videos/day during the official campaign period –from January 10, 2021, to January 22, 2021– less than Matteo Salvini's average of tweeting 4.84 times a day during the 18 months period analyzed by Bracciale and Martella (2017). Ventura seems to be aware of the advantages of the hybrid media system to get his message across, as 108

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Table 1. Content analysis - dimensions and variables

Dimensions	Variables	
Register (Bentivegna and Marchetti, 2017)	Referential/ Neutral	
	Aggressive/Provocative	
	Humorous/ Ironic	
	Conversational/ Participatory	
Main Topic	Issue	
	Policy Proposal	
	History/Memory Politics	
	Attacks towards political opponents	
	Attacks towards democratic institutions	
	Defense of favored institutions	
	Campaign/ Political strategy	
	Victimization	
	Self-Presentation	
	Religion	
Populism	Subdimensions	Variables
	Appeals to the people (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Bracciale et al., 2021)	Socio-economic
		National Identity/ Ideal Nation
		Norms and values
	Hostility towards elites (Mudde, 2004)	Attributing blame
		Discrediting/ Delegitimizing
		Emphasizing Indifferentiation
	Anti-system/Anti-establishment (Zulianello, 2019)	-
	Dangerous Others (Wodak, 2015)	Target
		Dramatization
Criminalization/ Securitization		
Blame-shifting		

out of the 130 tweets he posted contained either direct links, screenshots or other references to content produced by mainstream news media. These included for example news articles, favorable op-ed columns, interviews with him, or endorsements by Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini. In total, 23 different outlets' materials were shared by Ventura during the campaign, with the most popular outlets being the TV net-

Table 2. Twitter link analysis

Link Analysis
Links to mainstream news sources
Other references to mainstream news sources
Links to non-mainstream news sources

work *TVI*, the online newspaper and radio station *Observador*, and the tabloid *Correio da Manhã*. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2020) places these media outlets, as the 7th, 9th, and 3rd most popular in Portugal. Tables 2 and 3 summarize the results of the Twitter content analysis.

On Twitter, Ventura clearly favored the aggressive/provocative communication style, mostly by antagonizing opponents. Most of the time (62 tweets out of 66), attacks were directed at opponents on the left, like Ana Gomes and Marisa Matias (“Ana Gomes and Marisa Matias speak with one voice, they don’t give a damn about the presidential elections and the country, their only goal is getting a better result than me. January 24th will be a bitter night for them!”, tweet posted on January 5, 2021), but also those on the right he saw as insufficiently tough on minorities, like Iniciativa Liberal’s candidate, Tiago Mayan Gonçalves (“This is what a supposed anti-system right has to offer Portuguese people... attacking those who are not afraid to prod where it hurts and stand against the rotten system. Tiago Mayan is trying to take votes away from Ana Gomes and Marisa Matias, “not me”., tweet posted on January 6, 2021). He also attacked some democratic institutions, such as political parties and government (“Were you expecting this candidacy to leave everything as is? That it would leave the Left unchallenged, like it has been for 45 years? Get used to it, I came to leave no stone unturned in the rotten, corrupt system of government”, tweet posted on January 3, 2021), while positioning himself as a defender of others, such as the police and Immigration and Border Services (“The same problems that other candidates say don’t exist in Portugal! Sometimes I feel ashamed! With me, there will be no exception to the rule of law!”, tweet posted on December 27, 2021).

Ventura broached a wide range of topics, allowing a glimpse into his priorities: the campaign itself and his political performance and strategy (“RTP/Universidade Católica poll. Thank you, Portugal! Despite all the attacks, the maneuvers, and name-calling, we’re still strong! Thank you!”, tweet posted on January 21, 2021) took up a large part of his tweets (49.2%), namely when promoting campaign events and reacting to polls. Victimization (“This candidacy frightens the regime more than ever, never has the system fought so hard to destroy a candidate. But I’m here for the regular Portuguese people, so I cannot give up!”, tweet posted on December 19th, 2020) (22.3%) and positive self-presentation (“Portugal needs a new hope, someone who believes in and loves their country. I humbly hope that the Portuguese people will grant me that opportunity”, tweet posted on January 18, 2021) (10.8%) were also frequent. Memory politics (“Today I spoke in front of the Guimarães Castle and felt the enormous responsibility of winning back [“reconquistar”] Portugal from socialism and corruption which are killing our Nation”, tweet posted on January 17, 2021) and religious appeals (“I will never be [afraid of speaking about God], because I’m absolutely certain of the mission that has been entrusted to me in order to save Portugal. The day I am afraid, I’ll let someone else take my place”, tweet posted on December 19, 2021) featured less frequently in Ventura’s tweets and the least frequently raised topic was that of policy proposals: in fact, this happened only once in this sample (“We definitely need restrictions and the fight against this pandemic is crucial, but we need to stay rational and avoid the absurdities that have destroyed jobs, businesses, and are killing the Portuguese people for reasons other than COVID-19”). Regarding the specific features of populist discourse, Ventura mostly focused on attacking the elites. In fact, he attributed blame and attempted to discredit or delegitimize (“Despite two or three ridiculous demonstrations, we were strong in Castelo Branco, saying no to corruption, precisely in the municipality where a socialist mayor lost his mandate because he made deals that benefited his family. Shame!”, tweet posted on January 14, 2021) the elites with 23 and 18 tweets, respectively, and emphasized what he sees as their undifferentiation, i.e., he portrayed other parties and politicians as similarly apathetic towards the authentic people he claims to be the true representative of (“As the election draws closer, it becomes clear that only [my]

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Table 3. Content analysis (Twitter) - results

Dimension	Variables	Absolute Frequency	Percentage	
Register	Referential/ Neutral	37	28.5%	
	Aggressive/ Provocative	66	50.8%	
	Humorous/ Ironic	10	7.7%	
	Conversational/ Participatory	19	14.6%	
Main Topic	Policy Proposal	1	0.8%	
	History/Memory Politics	4	3.0%	
	Attacks on opponents	62	47.7%	
	Attacks on democratic institutions	6	4.6%	
	Defense of favored institutions	7	5.4%	
	Campaign/ Political Strategy	64	49.2%	
	Victimization	29	22.3%	
	Self-presentation	14	10.8%	
	Religion	2	1.5%	
Populism	Subdimensions	Variables	Absolute Frequency	Percentage
	Appeals to the people	Socio-economic	4	3.0%
		National Id. / Ideal Nation	22	16.9%
		Norms & Values	14	10.8%
	Hostility towards the elite	Attributing blame	23	17.7%
		Discrediting/ Delegitimizing	18	13.9%
		Emphasizing indifferenciation	17	13.0%
	Anti-system/Anti-Establishment	-	15	11.5%
	Dangerous Others	Dramatization	16	12.3%
		Criminalization/ Securitization	8	6.2%
Blame-shifting		3	2.3%	

Table 4. Twitter content analysis: external links

Variable	Absolute Frequency	Percentage
Links to mainstream news sources	81	62.3%
Other references to mainstream news sources	27	20.8%
Links to non-mainstream news sources	1	0.8%

candidacy is growing and can trigger political change in Portugal. Everyone else is just against me, nothing else!”, tweet posted on December 28, 2020) in 13% of his tweets, while also articulating anti-system or anti-establishment sentiment (“The system is still obsessed with trying to silence me and condition my presidential candidacy. They’re pitiful, they don’t even respect the Portuguese people! They’ll have their response on January 24th!”, tweet posted on January 1, 2021) in 12% of the tweets.

The campaign videos uploaded to the official YouTube channel included a wider variety of voices: beyond Ventura’s interviews and debates and high-profile supporters’ endorsement videos, the channel released a series of “Campaign Diaries” videos, detailing its activities and featuring rank-and-file Chega supporters who both praised the candidate’s political prowess and uprightness in comparison with his rivals, and voiced their expectations for a country presided by Ventura. Furthermore, unlike in tweets, the broader assortment of media in the YouTube channel also means that Ventura is shown in situations where his ability to set the terms of the conversation is limited. A summary of the results is presented in Table 4.

The content analysis results show positive self-presentation as the most frequent category, present in almost half (46.1%) of utterances in YouTube videos. Attacks on opponents remain a crucial feature of the discourse in videos uploaded to Ventura’s channel, present in over a quarter of utterances, mainly directed at the incumbent Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, and the left-wing candidate Ana Gomes. Prime Minister António Costa, other cabinet members and the governing Partido Socialista were also targets, with Ventura taking aim at what Rebelo de Sousa and Costa have called “institutional solidarity” between the government and the Presidency. Other relevant features of the discourse contained in the videos are the election campaign and strategy, memory politics, religion, or policy proposals elements. They reveal how Ventura uses mentions of religion and religiosity: they are mobilized to convey an intimate relation between it and Portuguese history and identity, excluding those with different beliefs; at the same time, Ventura also used a retelling of his spiritual journey as a seminarian whose calling faltered due to falling in secular love to present himself as “ordinary”.

The impact of increased media diversity can also be felt in Ventura’s specifically populist discourse features, particularly in his critique of elites, which was attenuated in favor of a higher relative emphasis on more general anti-system arguments, mainly articulating a wish to disrupt the political system or found a new republic (“Chega is a presidentialist party, the President should lead the state” – presidential debate with Vitorino Silva). His efforts to emphasize undifferentiation among the elites was frequently directed at Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa and the PS government, but also at other political parties with parliamentary representation.

Ventura also frequently appealed to national identity or the concept of an ideal nation (present in 16.9% of tweets and 18.4% of utterances in YouTube videos). Crucially, he frequently appealed to the “portugueses de bem” (“righteous Portuguese people”), which were contrasted with allegedly treacherous left-wing supporters and with the “dangerous Other” represented by the Roma community (“Yesterday’s shooting in Seixal, which left two wounded policemen, once again involved members of the gypsy community. The state must not close its eyes. Recognizing and knowing the problem is the first step”, tweet posted on December 23, 2020). This community was portrayed as abusing welfare benefits while benefiting from undue protection from “politically correct” politicians such as Ana Gomes, who Ventura dubbed “the gypsy candidate”. Although less frequently, other groups were also targeted with demeaning or disparaging language, such as Bairro da Jamaica inhabitants¹, welfare recipients, migrants, insufficiently patriotic Portuguese people, or “leftists” in general. When Ventura made this kind of utterance, he employed a mix of dramatization, criminalization, and blame-shifting.

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Table 5. Content analysis (YouTube) - results

Dimension	Variables		Absolute Frequency	Percentage
Main Topic	Policy Proposal		6	4.3%
	History/Memory Politics		9	6.4%
	Attacks on opponents		37	26.2%
	Attacks on democratic institutions		18	12.8%
	Defense of favored institutions		3	2.1%
	Campaign/ Political Strategy		22	15.6%
	Victimization		16	11.4%
	Self-presentation		65	46.1%
	Religion		7	5.0%
Populism	Subdimensions	Variables	Absolute Frequency	Percentage
	Appeals to the people	Socio-economic	18	12.8%
		National Id. / Ideal Nation	26	18.4%
		Norms & Values	29	20.6%
	Hostility towards the elite	Attributing blame	6	4.3%
		Discrediting/ Delegitimizing	6	4.3%
		Emphasizing indifferenciation	21	14.9%
	Anti-system/Anti-Establishment	-	22	15.6%
	Dangerous Others	Dramatization	18	12.8%
		Criminalization/ Securitization	7	5.0%
Blame-shifting		2	1.4%	

These claims are also frequently articulated with appeals to the norms and values the “righteous Portuguese” purportedly share. Supporters featured on campaign videos also frequently appealed to the concept of an ideal nation, suggesting that this kind of appeal resonates among Ventura voters (e.g., “I support André Ventura because he stands for the Portuguese people’s values and principles. Portugal!”, *Diário de Campanha – Algarve*, January 11th, 2021).

The “Righteous Portuguese” and the “Others”

One of the last videos uploaded to the YouTube channel, just two days before the election, was an endorsement by Matteo Salvini, the leader of Lega, Chega’s sister party in the Identity and Democracy group in the European Parliament. Salvini is filmed staring straight at the camera, in front of a wall cluttered with artworks and an Italian flag, and struggles to pronounce the first sentence in Portuguese, which is “André Ventura, presidente dos portugueses de bem” (André Ventura the president of the righteous Portuguese), before wishing Ventura luck and characterizing his candidacy as standing for honesty, change, family,

security, labor, and the future. Ventura characterizes the “righteous Portuguese” in much the same way, although he frequently does it by contrasting them with others. For instance, when he was confronted by antifa groups, in the city of Coimbra (Lusa, January 19, 2021), he sent two tweets out:

In Coimbra, I knelt before D. Afonso Henriques’ tomb, and I promised to fight for Portugal and the righteous Portuguese until my last breath (January 20, 2021)

If welfare scroungers, the complacent and the far left think they can discourage me, they’re absolutely wrong. They’re only giving me more strength to fight on behalf of the righteous Portuguese. Tomorrow, I’ll be in Setúbal, a town of good, hard-working people (January 20, 2021)

When nationalism is evoked by right-wing populist movements, it is frequently with the intent of rewriting foundational myths of the “pure people” (Wodak & Forchtner, 2014). Ventura employs this discursive strategy by emphasizing the connection between himself, the righteous Portuguese and Portugal’s first king, D. Afonso Henriques (seen as not only the first Portuguese, but also as a brave warrior and leader). Just like Portugal’s first monarch, Ventura purports to tirelessly defend the “good, hard-working people” from outside threats, be they freeloaders or those who do not believe Portugal needs the radical changes promised by Ventura, including “the complacent” and “the far left”, meaning the antifa groups who demonstrated in front of the Igreja de Santa Cruz, where Afonso Henriques’ tomb is placed.

Another instance of defining the righteous Portuguese by comparing them with those who do not neatly fit into that characterization came when two alleged members of the Roma community spoke out against “the community’s lifestyle”:

Yesterday, in Bragança, we counted on the support of two members of the local gypsy community because they work, they pay their taxes, and they don’t approve of the community’s general behavior. This is what we need to show... and do! (January 17, 2021)

By praising these Roma community members for working and paying their taxes, Ventura implies that those are not usual traits in a community that supposedly feels entitled – unfairly – to welfare benefits. By speaking about “the community’s general behavior”, he is vague enough to let any listener fill in his utterance with their own interpretation.

Nationalism is mobilized by the simultaneous evocation of history and Catholicism, as Ventura did in his campaign visit to Batalha, a town near Aljubarrota, where the Portuguese army defeated its Castilian counterpart in 1385, in another battle for Portuguese independence. In the video uploaded to the campaign’s YouTube channel detailing Ventura’s visit to Leiria and Batalha, he can be seen saying: “We’re here to pay our respect not only to our soldiers, but also to honor D. Nuno Álvares Pereira, the Santo Condestável, to honor all Portuguese military, to honor Portugal’s independence, to honor, in a word, those righteous Portuguese that we want to represent.” Ventura draws a clear line between Álvares Pereira’s sainthood – a military leader and nobleman canonized by the Catholic Church in 2009 (Lusa, February 21, 2009) – the contemporary military, and the righteous Portuguese. Implicature, i.e., the act of meaning or implying something by saying something else (Davis, 2016), is used here to denote that the righteous Portuguese are Catholic and willing to fight for their beloved country’s independence from external influence, be it against, in an unlikely scenario, the Castilians, like the “Santo Condestável”, or from other, unnamed threats.

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Ventura also used provocation in connection with the idea of the righteous Portuguese, particularly in the television debate with the incumbent Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa. Ventura's strategy was to claim the "real" right-wing mantle, by painting the incumbent as too tolerant towards minorities, as in the following passage:

MRS: I know what heads of state from countries where [Bairro da Jamaica] inhabitants come from – like Cape Verde, Angola... I know what they told me, and I know what people there have been saying, what they've been thinking about Portugal. And I said, "no, we don't exclude, we are inclusive..."

AV: And you considered that more important than the Portuguese people!

MRS: Not more important. They're as important, because they're also Portuguese! And that says a lot about you, representative: for the longest time, Portugal has been made up of immigrants from Northern Europe, from Africa, from all over the world! There are no [ethnically] "pure" Portuguese people... and a President cannot make a distinction between those that are "pure" and those that are not!

AV: That's not truly being a President for the righteous Portuguese. It's the same old story of being a president for everyone. And I'll admit that: I'll never be the President for drug dealers, I'll never be the President for pedophiles, I'll never be the president for freeloaders, – those who get by on scams while the righteous Portuguese pay their taxes, get up early to go to work (...). A President must signal to the righteous Portuguese first, those who keep the economy moving! Many of these individuals came to Portugal exclusively to take advantage of our welfare state and what it can give them!

Ventura contrasts the righteous Portuguese with those he considers to be in the country in a cynical attempt at taking advantage of the taxpayers' generosity. He asserts that, if he were to win, he would not be a President for everyone, but only for the righteous. At the end of the debate, he took that logic further, stepping into clear provocation when the moderator asked him if the constitutional reforms proposed by Ventura – including lowering the number of parliamentary representatives and regearing the political regime towards presidentialism – will not lead to a dictatorship. Ventura answered: "The only dictatorship I want is one where the righteous Portuguese are, for the first time, recognized as such!" Despite its blatant nature, the provocation performed its ontologically decisive role (Ostiguy, 2017) by stoking the fires of indignation, both among Ventura's supporters and detractors, with many media and political pundits reporting on this statement as a threat to democracy (Afonso, January 11, 2021; Rosmaninho, January 22, 2021), ensuring that the candidate and his rhetoric remained highly visible.

The "Others" in Ventura's discourse, those not included in the righteous Portuguese, are addressed openly, particularly the Roma community. Perhaps the most illustrative example was Ventura's interview with the cable news channel CMTV, in which, after being asked if the Roma community members should have the same rights as other citizens, he responded:

AV: They do, and they should [have the same rights as other citizens]. And what I've been saying is that, in the case of the gypsies, there is a problem that the country doesn't want to see. It's a problem with the community. It's not a problem with the gypsies themselves. According to available studies, it's a problem with the community, a real issue of welfare dependence. But not only that, because that could be a mere economic issue. I mean... one could say "this community is vulnerable; it needs more state

support". The problem, as I see it, is that we're looking at a community whose standards... I mean, of course I don't mean everyone, but the overwhelming majority refuses to adhere to the rule of law [sic]... there's almost a cultural heritage of refusing to abide by the rule of law: in women's rights, in giving minors up for marriage, in the idea that the state owes them everything, and they don't have to follow any rules... I think we must recognize this problem, because it is a problem.

Ventura evokes the rule of law to place the Roma community outside the norms and therefore as an out-group. He employs ambivalence in his assurances that he does not mean to attack the whole community, but only those members who refuse to follow the rules. Explicitly, this is used as a justification for not supporting increased state support for the community, arguing that not only is it not necessary, but it would also be unfair to taxpayers, since Roma community members disregard norms; implicitly, it is consistent with its support for further privatization of public services including health and education (Chega, n.d.), proposals put into practice as soon as Chega achieved a position of influence in the Azores' regional government.

Attacks on the Roma community also take the form of scapegoating and conspiracy theorizing in Ventura's discourse, particularly following several demonstrations organized by the community in response to the candidate's statements. Roma community members were portrayed as being instrumentalized or paid for by unnamed adversaries, echoing widely circulated theories within the wider radical right-wing populist conspiracy milieu, in particular rhetoric regarding George Soros, accused of financing demonstrations against right-wing politicians and governments (Plenta, 2020). Ventura echoed this in his tweets:

Today, we again faced protests in Algarve, by the gypsy community. Is someone or some party organizing and instrumentalizing the gypsies in this presidential campaign? Is someone paying for it as well? (January 12, 2021)

Those who have been privileged in the past decades, instrumentalized by the decadent left, know their trough is about to dry up! They can protest, but nothing will stop this campaign!!! (January 10, 2021)

Even though the second tweet does not explicitly mention the Roma community, it contained a link to a news piece documenting a demonstration by the Roma community against Ventura in the city of Serpa. It is an effort to create the impression of a shadowy adversary, as well as impeaching the demonstrators' sincerity by implying they were paid for, therefore also perpetuating the stereotype that Roma community members are inclined to get by on scams and handouts.

"An Ordinary Man, Chosen by God"

André Ventura excelled in one of Portugal's most prestigious Law schools, obtained competitive public funding for pursuing a PhD on international law abroad, and upon his return, got a teaching role as Invited Assistant Professor, as well as a consultancy role at a law firm. This would scarcely make him a relatable figure among "losers of globalization" and populist voters skeptical of elites and academic expertise (Wodak, 2015), and would actually place him closer to the elite. He compensates for this by leveraging some of his other personal characteristics and life story, including his religiosity.

Ventura presents himself as a tireless, brave, and unapologetic politician constantly fighting for the righteous people and for the institutions that ensure order (e.g., the police), a doting husband and pet

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owner, as well as a fatherly party leader who sends “special, fraternal hugs to the enormous Chega family” on Christmas Eve. These elements were perhaps best exemplified in his interview with Manuel Luís Goucha, a longtime host of daytime TV shows. While the interview with Ventura was part of a series of interviews with presidential candidates eager to get through to Goucha’s target demographic, the host has been accused of whitewashing members of the far-right, including neo-Nazi leader Mário Machado (Diário de Notícias, January 3, 2019), by providing them with a platform and friendly interviews. The interview with Ventura (aired on January 7, 2021) sharply alternated between dramatized, personalized political questions, and a section solely focused on the candidate’s personal history, allowing him to dismantle the more accusatory questions while establishing relatability on his terms:

MLG: Let me ask you the first question: are you, or are you not a fascist?

AV: Well, let me start by wishing a good afternoon and a happy new year to everyone watching at home. No. I’m obviously not a fascist. I was actually born after fascism², so it is funny when people say I’m nostalgic, I’m a fascist... it’s a bit weird. But, unfortunately, Manuel, we’ve built a country where anyone who stands up for those who don’t have a voice, who stands up for normal, ordinary, Portuguese people, those who work and pay taxes, those who don’t live at the system’s expense... we’re immediately branded as fascists.

Ventura defends himself by employing what van Dijk (1992, p. 92) calls an act-denial, i.e., flatly denying breaking with democratic norms by defending the establishment of a fascist regime or being nostalgic for an authoritarian past. The implication is presented as impossible, since he could not be actually nostalgic for a time before his birth even though he frequently mentions Portugal’s perceived shortcomings as a result of the past 46 years, after the Carnation revolution (e.g., “It’s no surprise, the indicators are starting to show that the Portuguese people will mobilize for these elections and confront, for the first time in 46 years, the current political regime”, December 20, 2020), as well as his goal of founding a “4th Republic”.

Ventura also states that the problem lies with how “the country was built”, a vague description that pins the blame on a political class so out of touch that anyone who disrupts it by taking on the mantle of defending the interests of “the common people” is unjustifiably branded as fascist. This could be interpreted as an instance of calculated ambivalence by Ventura, whose sentence could be interpreted to mean that, unlike this democracy, the Estado Novo regime had the interests of the people in mind. This rhetorical move allows Ventura to speak to more than one audience at a time, ensuring his democratic bona fides while avoiding alienating any potential voter who really is nostalgic for the old regime.

Goucha’s interview included a segment on “André Ventura, the man”, taking up around half of the show’s runtime and giving Ventura free rein to burnish his role as an “everyday celebrity politician” (Wood et al., 2016), displaying his ordinariness by retelling his personal history, emphasizing his religiosity and family life. This was the most high-profile opportunity Ventura had to talk about his family life which, unlike his religiosity, did not repeatedly come up during the campaign. But it also allowed the candidate to portray his religious experience in a more relatable way than in other venues, as he had leeway to explore his spiritual path, while weaving religious and political beliefs together, instead of the more usual focus on his bombastic proclamation of being chosen by God to lead Portugal. An instance of this was when Ventura debated Revelation 3:16 with Goucha, seizing the opportunity to demonstrate devoutness and biblical knowledge by citing passages apparently offhandedly, while also using the op-

portunity to attack “lukewarm” politicians. The strategic use of religiosity reinforces Ventura’s identity as part of the overwhelmingly Catholic majority of the population and, thus, his relatability, while giving him an opportunity to indict opponents.

Finally, Ventura was also able to capitalize on Goucha’s question about his personal life and his willingness to have children in the future, by surreptitiously changing the topic to politics. He performed his ordinariness, as described by Moffit (2016), in a perfunctory manner by confirming that despite still not having children, he intends to have them in the future, blaming his own holding back on a “lack of institutional freedom in Portugal”, and further to explained that many voters come up to him in agreement, but refrain from saying so publicly, due to fear of repercussion from national and regional governments.

DISCUSSION

Ventura maintains proximity to his counterparts in Spain, France, and Italy, particularly Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini, participating in joint events and endorsing each other. Their ideological proximity is also noteworthy, but there are differences that result from a necessary tailoring of their messages to their countries’ specific contexts. The central role of digital media in their political communication strategies is another shared feature.

Like Abascal and Vox, Ventura and Chega are relatively new political actors, and both can be said to be taking advantage of what Ignazi (2021, p. 12) considers “the fire of mounting anti-party sentiment in recent decades” in Europe. Ventura seems to capitalize on the mistrust of mainstream parties and political elite, much like Marine Le Pen who also targets political elites more frequently than economic elites (Maurer & Diehl, 2020).

Another similarity between Ventura and Marine Le Pen is in the use of historical references, to advance arguments by using shared knowledge, appeals to emotions and expressing specific hopes and values (Firmonasari, 2020). A particularly important example of this dynamic is the evocation of Joan of Arc, “la sainte laïque”, used as a “symbolic synthesis of Catholicism, royalism and retaliation against foreigners and treacherous elites” (Almeida, 2017, p. 251), from which we could draw a parallel with Ventura’s homages to figures like Nuno Álvares Pereira in his initiatives. Although they differ in the importance of religion and in the framing of the “dangerous Other”, Marine Le Pen and André Ventura share the discursive elements of “dédiabolisation” noted by Stockemer and Barisione (2017): a) use of appeals to the people/people centrism; b) personalization; c) anti-elitist and anti-corruption features; d) use of simpler language; e) use of “common sense” arguments; f) presentation of MLP as an outsider/an alternative to “the establishment” and the left wing. This differentiation from the “establishment” and particularly from the left is key in Ventura’s political positioning.

While Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini and Santiago Abascal share anti-immigration stances, xenophobia and opposition to same-sex marriage (Morini, 2018; Cervi, 2020; Ferreira, 2019; Turnbull-Dugarte, Rama, & Santana, 2020; Maksic & Ahmic, 2020; Rama et al., 2021), Ventura’s stances, although resonating with these ideas, have been formulated more ambivalently to fit the Portuguese context. The ongoing immigration crisis has not hit Portugal as dramatically as France, Italy, or Spain and therefore Ventura has focused the discursive construction of the “dangerous Other” on the Roma community. Salvini focuses on immigrants and refugees, but also on the Roma community, which have been “framed through increasingly xenophobic and racist positions” (Bobba, 2019). Salvini’s staggering rhetoric against Roma citizens has included proposals of razing Roma camps using bulldozers and conducting a census of Roma

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people to find out illegal immigrants, calling them “zingaraccia (dirty gypsy)”, and presenting Roma culture as inherently unable to be civilized and inclined toward criminality (Cervi & Tejedor, 2020). But while Salvini’s discourse finds support in the mainstream media in which the Roma community is still targeted by ethnicized coverage, which tends to produce, reproduce, and foment anti-Roma sentiment (Catalano, 2018), Ventura’s discourse against this community is condemned and sometimes even censored by some journalists.

Another similarity between Salvini, Marine Le Pen and Ventura relates to their economic stances and more specifically to the ambiguity of their positions on economic issues. As Morini (2018) notes, in 2014, Salvini called for neoliberal economic policy (including flat tax rates), but more recently his platform has become more mixed, including an explicit defense of the pension system and opposition to excessive privatization. This partly mirrors the FN’s positioning, which also started out defending neoliberal economic positions and is now “anti-laissez faire and social, cultural and economic globalization” (Morini, 2018). For his part, Ventura is known for his incoherent economic stances, particularly in dilemmas such as the intervention of the state in the economy or the role of the state in providing ensuring public services in health or education, for example.

Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018) found that Salvini used Facebook mainly to attack elites (46%) and to construct the “dangerous Others” (53%) much like Ventura’s use of social media, which also features these traits that research considers among the central tenets of right-wing populist ideology and communication (Wirth et al., 2016), allowing actors to reinforce horizontal and vertical “us vs. them” dynamics, as well as their image as the people’s true representatives. However, Ventura reverses the relative relevance of these two kinds of attacks, targeting the elite more frequently. Ventura also attempts to build a specific image of himself, as we have seen, which is also common to the other populist leaders. Despite not being a central theme in Abascal’s communication, he commonly uses Instagram to share personal details together with his political activity, such as “his references to leisure and sports, [which] were used strategically to highlight aspects of his persona (like his physical strength) and the party’s vision (for example, its defense of bullfighting)” (Sampietro & Sánchez-Castillo, 2020). On Twitter, Abascal resorts frequently to populist messages highlighting “the central role of the people; anti-elitism; the consideration of the people as a homogenous entity along with the exclusion of people from the outside (immigrants) and inside (pro-ETA supporters, secessionists, coup proponents, communists, and leftists); and the use of simplistic, aggressive language” (Barrio, 2021, p. 137). Abascal also appeals to the people through general references, namely the use of “good people” in his discourse (Barrio, 2021), which is akin to Ventura’s “Portugueses de bem”. Religion also plays a role in Abascal, Salvini and Ventura’s political communication. They often frame their political action with the Catholic religion’s values and use religious symbols in their initiatives, while remaining ambivalent about its more progressive elements, such as Pope Francis’ positioning on migration (Ozzano, 2019). Ventura goes even further presenting himself as chosen by God to lead Portugal.

CONCLUSION

This analysis of André Ventura’s political communication shows how he adapts the main features of populist discourse to the Portuguese context, concentrating his attacks on the political elite, more precisely on the mainstream politicians that represent the parties that have been ruling Portugal since the Carnation revolution and left-wing parties in general. This is part of his strategy of differentiation of his

image and message from the other politicians, which also serves his anti-system stance. The “Others” framed as an outgroup are the Roma community, rather than the usual immigrants or Muslims, to take advantage of a preexistent distrust of parts of the population towards this community. The fact that most Portuguese people are favorable to immigration limits the potential of addressing such criticism towards immigrants in general or specific groups of immigrants. Nevertheless, while campaigning with Salvini and Le Pen, Ventura has stressed that Muslims are not welcome in Portugal too, as their traditions do not fit well in a Catholic country.

The online media are very important in Ventura’s political communication strategy, but they are used to both draw the journalists’ attention and further disseminate his mainstream media appearances. Ventura understands the media logic and has been using it in his favor. It is not accidental that his party Chega, although growing, is one of smallest parties represented in parliament, but Ventura’s media visibility is one of the largest, compared to other politicians and in proportion to their overall electoral weight (Salgado, forthcoming).

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Bairro da Jamaica is a poor, dilapidated neighborhood located in the Seixal municipality, where a racially-charged case of police brutality happened in 2019.
- ² By “after fascism”, Ventura means he was born after the 1974 Revolution and, thus, the end of the previous, authoritarian, Portuguese regime which is commonly referred to metonymically as “fascism” rather than “the Estado Novo”, the regime’s official designation.

Section 4

Chapter 14

Emotional and Rational Frames Contained in Institutional Speeches: Six European Leaders Managing the COVID–19 Crisis

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyses the institutional speeches of six European leaders (N=19) to identify the emotional and rational frames used when explaining the measures implemented to address the first wave of COVID-19. The results of the analysis show the importance of frames of different categories, and the trust and leadership shown by political leaders, who sought to give speeches that would provoke a feeling of security in citizens based on their capacity to lead. Emotionality, built on values such as protection, gratitude, social sacrifice, and citizen unity, is rounded off with a rational approach based on science and economics. With none of the leaders being populist, their personalities were heterogeneous, from Merkel's empathy to Conte's confidential tone, Johnson's instructive discourse, Macron's commitment to Europe, and Sánchez and Costa's pedagogical vocation.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the most profound crises that political institutions around the world have had to address in peacetime. There has been a combination of factors that have created and

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8057-8.ch014

affected this unique situation. First, the multidimensionality of its manifestations (De Blassio & Selva, 2020), that go beyond the issue of health and impact all areas of life. Second, a multifocal development of the pandemic, “a transboundary mega crisis” (Christensen & Laegreid, 2020, p. 716) that, unlike catastrophes and natural disasters, is neither limited to – nor contained in – a certain space (Forester & McKibbin, 2020). The sum of these conditions has served as a litmus test for policy makers around the world, who have had to address this unprecedented crisis and been forced to make decisions amid a context of urgency and uncertainty (van Esch & Swinkels, 2015). In such a context, the strategies of world leaders have not always run parallel to crisis communication recommendations (Costa-Sánchez & López-García, 2020).

With successive waves of contagions that have overwhelmed the health system and triggered periodic lockdowns, limitations on mobility, temporary workforce restructuring plans and business closures that have seriously affected the economy, the coronavirus crisis has also become “a crisis of leadership” (Tourish, 2020, p. 261). The purpose of this chapter is to analyse how the leaders of six Western European countries – each representing different political tendencies, political systems and cultural traditions (Denk et al., 2015; Mamadouh, 1999) – have addressed the pandemic in their institutional speeches to citizens, exploring the leadership style that has been developed in their discourse: Angela Merkel (Germany), Boris Johnson (UK), Emmanuel Macron (France), Giuseppe Conte (Italy), Pedro Sánchez (Spain) and António Costa (Portugal).

The complexity and interconnection of a globalised economy means that anticipating the impact of the crisis, or predicting the consequences of any action carried out, is difficult: “there will be multiple unintended consequences from any course of action, or inaction. Uncertainty is high, but decisions still have to be made” (Tourish, 2020, p. 264). Thus, the responses to a crisis classified by the UN as “a threat to humanity” – due to 2.8 million deaths at the end of March 2021 and 129 million people infected worldwide (Johns Hopkins University, 2021) – and which has caused the worst recession since World War II (World Bank, 2020), raise questions about the human, social and economic costs (Christensen & Laegreid, 2020, p. 713) that will be determined by different management and leadership models. The six countries analysed accounted for more than a sixth of the world’s deaths and close to 20 million coronavirus infections in March 2021, and is one of the areas that has been most affected by the economic impacts of the pandemic.

The present study carried out a discourse analysis of European leaders’ speeches to citizens on the incidence and measures taken to contain the advance of COVID-19. Specifically, we analysed whether they chose to appeal to scientific or public interest criteria – typical of a more institutional discourse – or to feelings – typical of a more populist discourse (Laclau, 2005; Mudde, 2004). We have limited the speeches studied to those given during the first wave of infections, taken from the videos available on each institutions’ YouTube channel.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Crisis and Leadership

The spread of the coronavirus and its devastating impact worldwide (Christensen & Laegreid, 2020) has generated a “mega crisis” (Boin et al., 2013) that will have long-term effects (Tourish, 2020) on all areas of life. This disruptive scenario, fuelled by the unpredictable and uncertain evolution of events (Ansell et

al., 2020; Wilson, 2020), is, in terms of leadership, an extraordinary challenge for global policy makers, who must manage it adequately to ensure as little impact as possible (Boin et al., 2013).

The concept of leadership “is as old as mankind” and is “universal and inescapable” (Blondel, 1987, p. 1). Among its different manifestations, political leadership is considered a “subtype of human social leadership” (Masciulli et al., 2016, p. 4), highlighted by both its visibility and scope: “Within each nation, political leadership can command and reach out widely and extensively” (Blondel, 1987, p. 2). However, defining its essence is far from simple, given that it depends on “institutional, cultural and historical context and situations” (Masciulli et al., 2016, p. 4). Blondel (1987) states that, although there is no universally accepted definition, political leadership is “manifestly and essentially a phenomenon of power” (p. 2).

The idea of power exists in different approaches, which all emphasise that leadership implies “a process of social influence, which maximizes the efforts of others, towards the achievement of a goal” (Kruse, 2013, p. 2) and its role in risk situations: “When an organization faces serious crises, leadership is required to guide the organization through this phase and ensure its survival” (Mumford et al., 2007). This leadership is associated with certain personality traits (van Esch & Swinkels, 2015) such as charisma (Weber, 1968) and its expression through verbal and non-verbal manifestations that allow a charismatic leader “to attract attention, reinforce social norms and a sense of collective identity” (Grabo et al., 2017, p. 483).

In crisis situations such as the one created by the pandemic, leadership skills have significant effects on their evolution and social repercussions (Boin et al., 2013; Wilson, 2020). Research on crisis management highlights that early recognition and sensemaking are crucial (Boin et al., 2013). Although the first implies “a shared recognition that a threat has emerged which requires immediate attention” (Boin, 2013, p. 82), the second implies a cognitive requirement – “leaders identify a crisis as such, and contemplate its nature and causes” (Van Esch and Swinkels, 2015, p. 1204) – before making critical decisions.

The present study focuses on three of the crisis management stages described by Boin et al., which are not properly associated with the management decisions taken by the six leaders, but rather with the way they have given meaning to those decisions – meaning making – how they have been communicated to society and the accountability processed that have been established (2013, pp. 84-86). Thus, the analysis will explore “how actors use certain arguments and symbols to support their crisis management measures” (Christensen & Laegreid, 2020, p. 714). To do this, they must not only explain what happened, but create a framework of interpretation on what actions need to be taken to manage it, “offering guidance to those affected, those involved in the response and society at large” (Christensen & Laegreid, 2020, p. 714). The ability to impose a dominant frame is key to legitimising the measures (Boin et al., 2013), and consequently, the leaders’ reputation – understood as a multidimensional concept that involves a series of collective convictions about the abilities, intentions, history and mission of a certain government (Carpenter, 2010; Christensen & Laegreid, 2020).

Institutional Speeches and Accountability

Institutional speeches are associated with certain events on a calendar – like the change of season – or exceptional situations – which include natural disasters, serious threats or conflicts – (Medina, 2016), in which the head of state or government assumes the *auctoritas* of the institution they personify to address the population. The institutional character is defined by the relevance of the speaker, who represents “a central figure in society” (Montero, 2009, p. 351), and also by the characteristics of a discourse that

goes beyond common communicative exchanges – “The discourse that results is something more than unnatural non-conversation” (Agar, 1985, p. 147) – and in which “important social and cultural meanings are negotiated through linguistic sources” (Prego, 1998, p. 267).

These institutional speeches are inseparable from the context in which they are given, which also serve to give them meaning and legitimacy (Medina, 2016; Montero, 2009). In fact, the verbalisation of a speech is “inseparable from the concept of power” (Chilton & Schäffner, 2002, p. 18). According to Medina (2016), ideological power “is exercised, to a great extent, through speeches” (p. 26), concurring with that highlighted by critical discourse analysis, represented by Fowler, Hodge, Kress and Trew (1979), Fairclough (1989) and van Dijk (1999). These speeches involve different political and representation strategies that contribute to their identity, particularly through interaction with the media (Mayr, 2008; Montero, 2009). They play an essential role in crisis communication (Coombs, 2007) when it comes to spreading “the authorities’ meaning-making” (Boin et al., 2013; Christensen & Laegreid, 2020). The media not only provide a record of the special situations in which they occur, but have also acted, for a century, as channellers of them – the first radio address was given by US President Calvin Coolidge in 1923, and Harry Truman gave the first televised one in 1947 (US House of Representatives, 2021).

Institutional speeches include those made by the political leaders of a country “in public space and due to exceptional situations in which the leader’s role requires their presence and discourse” (Montero, 2009, p. 352). These appearances demand attention because of the position of responsibility of those who deliver the speeches, and the staging that accompanies them. This refers to the ‘ritual’ they entail, not only because of the symbolic legitimization of the authority of the speaker but also because of the “evocation of transcendent values” (Domínguez, 2020, p. 242). The social dimension of institutional discourse is accompanied by representative symbols and a strict organisation that sets a certain rigidity on its development and dramatises the performance (Abèlés, 1988; Domínguez, 2020; Kertzer, 1988).

There are two main characteristics of institutional speeches. First, there is the vocation for transparency and the exercise of public responsibility by the political leaders. In this sense, the “horizontal or democratic accountability” (Schillemans, 2008) is an important democratic exercise (Christensen & Laegreid, 2020), through which leaders inform citizens – and offer a diagnosis – of the situation and explain the measures to be taken (Agar, 1985) – including those that have been taken before and during the crisis – and their effectiveness. “Rendering accountability does not only satisfy legal and moral requirements, it also allows for the restoration of trust in the functioning of public institutions” (Boin et al., 2013, p. 86). Second, these appearances also present characteristics of a political discourse that “seek to persuade and mobilise audiences and evoke emotions (both negative and positive)” (Montero, 2009, p. 351).

Management Styles that Fall between the Rational and the Emotional

Leadership in crisis situations cannot be limited to simply following best practices, since the crisis itself transforms not only the context but also resources, strategies and cognitive processes (Mumford et al., 2007; Osborn et al., 2002; Probert & Turnbull, 2011). In the case of this pandemic, the complexity has multiplied exponentially, both because of its ongoing character and the lack of experience, evidence and resources available to address an unpredictable evolution (Tourish, 2020). In such a context, analysing the different leadership styles (Boin et al., 2010; van Esch & Swinkels, 2015) expressed through institutional appearances and speeches on the pandemic, without the mediation of media narratives (Boin et al., 2013) is of interest. Specifically the frequency of rational and emotional elements in those speeches.

Emotional and Rational Frames Contained in Institutional Speeches

Although critical theory on crisis management suggests adopting a rational approach, adhering to scientific criteria, following the advice of experts and acting on the facts and evidence (Wilson, 2020), the emotional component is key to mobilising a collective effort and allowing it bear fruit; first, to strengthen the relationship between citizens and leaders (*affective governance*, Jupp et al., 2017) and second to appeal to the meaning of “good citizenship” (De Blassio & Selva, 2020) in a multifocal crisis such as that of COVID-19.

The trend on the populist style in political communication has been observed by research that underlines how political leaders take advantage of social media – mainly Twitter – to gain “continuous visibility” and to reinforce “the unmatched news-making position of the Presidency” (Waisbord & Amado, 2017, p. 1342). The populist style finds an ‘elective affinity’ in a context of post-truth communication (Waisbord, 2018). Particularly in the age of Twitter, that “privileges discourse that is simple, impulsive, and uncivil” (Ott, 2017, p. 59). Political communication largely associates the emotional element with populism (Clarke et al., 2006; Demertzis, 2006). Different studies have highlighted the negative effects of separating the emotional from the rational when managing crises, e.g. during Donald Trump’s presidency in the US or Jair Bolsonaro’s in Brazil, because in those situations, suspicion normally prevails over the science, there is a minimisation of threats and polarisation of the population (Gollust et al., 2020; Ortega & Orsini, 2020). On the basis of Moffitt’s (2015) findings on the possibilities available to populist leaders to obtain political gain from a crisis situation, Tourish (2020) notes that they “are particularly unsuited to dealing with radical uncertainty” (p. 265) such as the uncertainty represented by the pandemic. Concurring with Maurer and Diehl (2020), who observed different types of populist style beyond ideologies in their studies, Tourish (2020) notes that these traits could be categorised into five leadership modalities during the COVID-19 crisis: incompetent, denialist, panic, othering and authoritarian leadership (pp. 286–287).

METHODOLOGY

This study combined qualitative and quantitative methodologies to address its main objective: understanding the balance between the emotional and rational frames contained in institutional speeches given to citizens by the leaders of six European countries during the management of the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis. To this end, we first identified the open presidency or government YouTube channels in each of those six countries, in line with the institutionalisation implemented by the platform (Kim, 2012), which has two billion users (Newberry, 2021). We chose to do this to ensure a homogeneous, public and easily accessible structure, as government webpages outlining actions carried out have varying characteristics that make them difficult to compare.

Once the YouTube accounts to be analysed had been identified, the content related to the coronavirus published between March 2020 and March 2021 was collected from specific channels under this name or in other general ones dedicated to government action. The items included and initial sample (N=733) that were subjected to a first analysis, identifying the purpose of the material, the speaker’s profile and the type of target audience.

Given the main objective of this study, we decided to focus the qualitative analysis on all videos that corresponded to a president or prime minister’s institutional speeches to their citizens. Once all the material to be included in the sample were identified (N=36), and once the differences in the frequency of institutional speeches given throughout the period under study had been verified, we decided to focus

Emotional and Rational Frames Contained in Institutional Speeches

on the theory of *framing* during the first wave of the pandemic, to reduce the effects of the imbalance between each leader's number of speeches given. Thus, the analysis period was set at March to August 2020 (N=19), with speeches by Angela Merkel (n=6), Emmanuel Macron (n=4), Boris Johnson (n=3), Giuseppe Conte (n=3), Pedro Sánchez (n=2) and António Costa (n=1) (Table 1).

Table 1. Speeches analysed

Political leader	Date	Length
Angela Merkel	18 March	12:43
	23 March	5:30
	28 March	4:46
	30 May	7:34
	20 June	3:38
	4 July	5:13
Emmanuel Macron	12 March	27:10
	16 March	21:15
	13 April	27:45
	14 June	19:45
Boris Johnson	23 March	6:15
	12 April	5:13
	10 May	13:41
Giuseppe Conte	4 March	7:01
	11 March	9:08
	21 March	5:01
Pedro Sánchez	13 March	6:11
	15 March	24:07
António Costa	13 March	15:00

Source: Prepared by the authors

The speeches were transcribed by the authors and analysed. For this, we based ourselves on De Blasio & Selva's (2020) emotional frames coding method that has a total of nine variables. The methodology was complemented with a codebook of rational frames, based on the deductive and inductive approach made by the authors, with eight variables (Table 2).

The research study then carried out an image analysis to outline the staging and the characterisation and gestures of each political leader during their speeches. Various studies have shown the importance of analysing body language when researching political leaders' communication; they highlight the importance of the consistency between the verbal message and gestures and concurrence with the speaker's intonation (Bull, 1986) and facilitate a definition of the structure of the discourse and speech acts (Streeck, 2008). Likewise, the study of the use of hands during different international leaders' speeches, such as Obama (Guilbeault, 2017) and Trump (Hall et al., 2016), has shown the rhetorical contribution of their movements to political discourse, to delimit the perspective from which the speaker speaks, makes their message an attractive staging for the media and give it the capacity to attract a wider audience. Thus, exploring the way in which the analysed leaders use their hands and looks to develop their institutional speeches allowed us to contribute new elements to the analysis of the role that the audiovisual image plays in how politicians addressed the COVID-19 crisis (Drylie-Carey et al., 2020).

Emotional and Rational Frames Contained in Institutional Speeches

Table 2. Frames

Emotional		Rational	
<i>Anger</i>	War metaphors	<i>Science</i>	Research on the virus and decisions based on empirical evidence
<i>Care</i>	Expressions of compassion and solidarity	<i>Leadership</i>	People at the head of the institutions will manage the situation and make the necessary and appropriate decisions
<i>Confidence</i>	Stressing self-confidence and trust in the efficacy of policies undertaken	<i>Europe</i>	The European Union offers guarantees of improvement through coordinated effort and mutual support
<i>Fear</i>	Addressing the weaknesses of human nature	<i>Economy</i>	Protection of companies and employment through public financial aid
<i>Gratitude</i>	Emphasis on the role of the health system	<i>Public service</i>	Basic services and transport needs guaranteed by the government
<i>Grief</i>	Describing difficulties, risks, and defeats	<i>Foresight</i>	Announcement of progressive measures, assumption that the crisis will last over time
<i>Hope</i>	Eschatological perspectives (if...then)	<i>Pedagogy</i>	Hygiene measures and social distancing as keys to individual protection against the virus
<i>Pride</i>	Unification of the country across any difference and stimulating a sense of belonging	<i>Accountability</i>	Democratic justification and a desire for government leaders' transparency vis-à-vis their citizens
<i>Sacrifice</i>	Pointing at the ethical commitment to fulfilling a common mission		

Source: De Blasio & Selva (2020)

Source: Prepared by the authors

From the main objective and, based on the above methodologies, the following research questions will be answered:

RQ1: What are the frames and discursive strategies adopted during institutional speeches?

RQ2: What are the characteristics of the staging that are seen in the speeches?

RQ3: Which crisis communication styles are adopted by the different leaders analysed?

RESULTS

Frames and Discursive Strategies

The results of the analysis (Figure 1) show that the frame *confidence* is the most common in political leaders' speeches; it is present in all speeches to highlight the determination and security in the decisions taken. This feature is especially present in Macron's discourse – "we will leave this behind in slow motion. We will achieve it, my dear compatriots" – and Sánchez's: "We will do [...] whatever it takes, whenever and wherever it is necessary [...] we will stop the virus. There is no doubt". This emotional frame is closely linked to that of *leadership*, which takes second position; it emphasises the measures implemented from a rational perspective, despite their harshness: "The next few weeks and months will require revolutionary decisions. I will assume them" (Macron) and "Governing means having a

360-degree vision: this challenge, we now know, concerns the health of citizens (...) but also the stability of our economy, of our production system, made up of small and medium-sized companies” (Conte).

Emotional Frames in the Leaders’ Messages

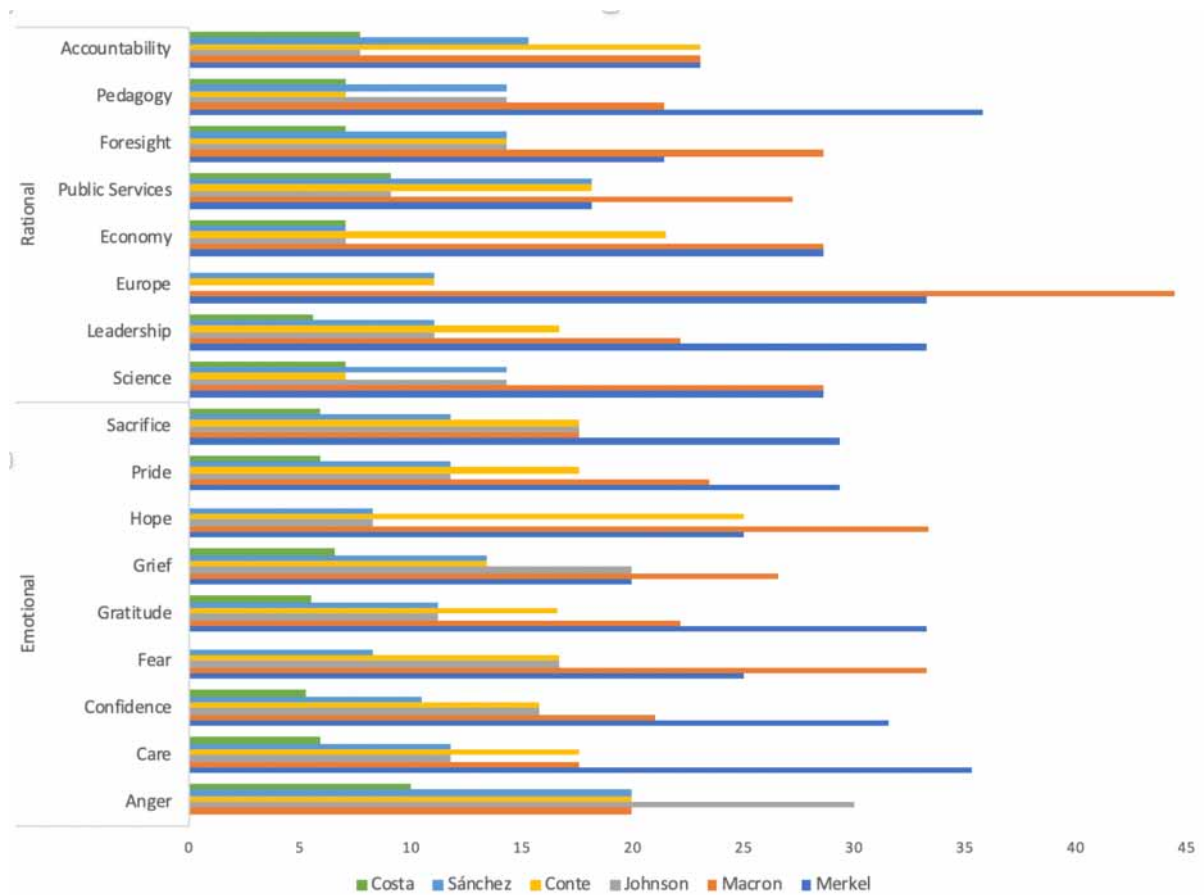
In the different leaders’ discourses, frames such as *care*, which appeal to being attentive to sick or vulnerable people were especially relevant – “We have particular concern for parents and grandparents” (Costa) or “Heroism also consists of washing hands, staying at home and protecting oneself, to protect all citizens” (Sánchez) – as was *gratitude*, aimed at those who continued to work: “I would like to start by thanking, once again, doctors, health professionals, researchers...” (Conte) and “Let me also express my gratitude to the people who are very seldom thanked. Those who are sitting at the checkout counter in a supermarket or filling the shelves” (Merkel). Along this line, the recognition of citizen values, which accepts the harsh restrictions, is also present in the frame *sacrifices* – “I want to thank everyone in the entire UK for the effort and the sacrifice you have made and are making. When the sun is out...; when the whole natural world seems at its loveliest and the outdoors is so inviting” (Johnson). Along with this, the frame *pride* is a call for unity and collaboration of compatriots, which has become almost a motto for the various leaders: “We will prevail over this situation, this emergency, together”, “We will do it as one” (Conte); “Because only together can we lead our country through this time of trial that no one could have imagined” (Merkel) and “Let there be no doubt: united, we will succeed. United, we will defeat the virus” (Sánchez).

Although they are not as frequent, the frames *grief* and *fear* appear in the speeches of some leaders. References to deaths are present in Macron’s discourse – “And tonight I want to commiserate our dead, their families, to whose grief we have to add the burden of limitation of mobility during this period” and “our thoughts go out to the families and loved ones of our victims” – Johnson’s – “the death toll has been tragic, and the suffering immense... we grieve for all those we have lost” – and Merkel’s – “a difficult fight against the disease and, unfortunately, also grieving the more than 8,500 deaths that have occurred up to now”. Leaders also echo feelings of uncertainty and unease: “And there are millions of people who are both fearful of this terrible disease, and at the same time also fearful of what this long period of enforced inactivity will do to their livelihoods and their mental and physical well-being” (Johnson), to warn that these feelings can lead to misinformation – “These days there are messages based on confusion, anger and anguish. And it is understandable... while we work towards stopping the contagion curve, let’s also break the chain of spreading panic. Let’s put an end to fake news and speculation” (Sánchez) – and make compassionate calls for calm: “Today no one can say that they know how long this complicated situation will last. I must ask you: be patient” (Merkel).

Future projections associated with the frame *hope* did not occur in all speeches, but they play a particular role in Macron and Conte’s discourse. Macron associates the experience with learning, to improve for the future – “tomorrow we will have to learn the lessons given by today’s experience; question the development model that our world has followed for decades and that has shown its failures; question the weaknesses of our democracies” – and points to a reconstruction on a new basis – “extract the first lessons from this crisis and use it to outline a new path in a general manner” and “We are experiencing a situation that will make us more daring, this is our moment to reset”. Conte alludes to a later moment in which current sacrifices will be valued – “I am convinced that when we look back we will be proud of how our whole country has addressed this emergency with courage and determination” and “Those sacrifices that seem like a step backwards today, will allow us to run tomorrow”. For Johnson, the “UK

Emotional and Rational Frames Contained in Institutional Speeches

Figure 1. Leaders and frames on institutional speeches



will be changed by this experience, I believe we can be stronger and better than ever before. More resilient, more innovative, more economically dynamic, but also more generous and more sharing”. Sánchez makes a call for hope for when there is a return to normality: “At least, until this virus passes. Because it will pass. And then we can leave the house again. We will go back to our daily routine and we will visit our friends and loved ones again”.

Out of all the emotional frames, *anger* is the least frequent, but specifically exists in the British prime minister and the French president’s discourse, who usually make extensive use of war metaphors: “A fight we never picked against an enemy we still don’t entirely understand. We’re making progress in this national battle” (Johnson) and “we cannot completely lower our guard”, “Our fight must go on” and “our caregivers fight to save us” (Macron). Macron used the expression “We are at war” six times during his second speech to the public. Although with less intensity, the leaders of Spain also made use of this expression – “This is a battle that we are going to win, there is no doubt about it; we are going to win” and “The first line is formed by health professionals. Our shield against the virus” – and Italy – “to combat the health emergency” – also uses this frame.

Rational Frames in Institutional Speeches

Beyond emotional frames, the leaders include numerous references to the *economic measures* and solutions to be implemented to minimise the effect of lockdown and other protection measures in their speeches: “Over the next week, we will decide on an economic stimulus plan to help the economy regain its balance and grow” (Merkel); “We have produced a huge and unprecedented programme of support both for workers and for business” (Johnson); “The Cabinet will decide on new financial resources and the Government will provide all the answers when necessary” (Macron); “The Government will intervene with extraordinary measures that will allow us to start over and move forward as soon as possible” (Conte).

The attention paid to economic plans is as significant in the speeches as the emphasis placed on protection measures – included in the frame *pedagogy* – and on future planning, according to the evolution of the crisis – reflected in the frame *forecast*. Regarding protection measures, the leaders emphasised the basic measures to stop the spread of the pandemic, especially in their initial appearances, either by reminding citizens of the basic rules – “keep your distance, be hygienic, wear a mask” – or by facilitating the vulnerable population’s access to social spaces: “Anyone in the supermarket who clears the aisle between the shelves so that an elderly person can pass at a distance, who uses their mask... correctly, will help the elderly feel safe to be there” (Merkel).

Similarly, the authorities tried to make the public aware that the measures may be modified at any time, but that those changes were part of the plan: “And I must stress again that all of this is conditional, it all depends on a series of big ifs” (Johnson); “It is likely that in the coming weeks [the lockdown] will last longer” (Costa); “My dear compatriots, France is going through a very difficult time. No one can accurately predict how long it will last. As the days go by..., following the recommendations made by scientists... we will have to adapt” (Macron).

Appeals to science play a key role, together with references to social responsibility when making decisions. The frame *science* occurs in the leaders’ speeches when they defend their actions: “We are going to be driven by the science, the data and public health” (Johnson), “We have always acted based on the recommendations by the technical-scientific committee” (Conte), “We will overcome this emergency based on the advice of science and supported by all the resources of the State” (Sánchez), “This comes from constant consultations between the Federal Government, the experts at the Robert Koch Institute and other scientists and virologists” (Merkel); and “Only one principle guides us when define our actions; it has guided us from the start, helping us anticipate the crisis and then manage it for several weeks, and it must continue to guide us: our trust in science” (Macron).

Together with the reiteration of science as a basis for the measures taken, the frame *accountability* appears as relevant for several reasons. On one hand, to evoke the consensus among experts, but also among other political leaders or authorities in the country: “I have consulted across the political spectrum, across all four nations of the UK... And today a general consensus on what we could do” (Johnson) and “I took the initiative to listen to all the political parties represented in the Assembly of the Republic... to explain the meaning of the measures and to listen to all the suggestions so they can be perfected” (Costa). On the other, to declare their commitment to transparency: “This is part of an open democracy: making political decisions transparent and explaining them. We have to justify and communicate our actions as best as possible so that they are understandable” (Merkel); “Always choosing the line of transparency and truth, determined not to feed suspicions and conspiracies. The truth is the strongest antidote, transparency is the best vaccine” (Conte) and “I will address you often. And every time I will

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tell you, as I have done until now, what the Government is doing, and the truth about how the situation is developing” (Macron).

The frame *public services*, regarding measures to guarantee transportation or food, occur fewer times than those referring to the economy, but do appear to some extent in the speeches of each leader: “We will ensure all essential public services, for example transport, continue” (Conte) and “Public transport will be maintained, restricting them would imply a blockade” (Macron). Finally, the frame *Europe* is absent in Johnson’s or Costa’s discourse, has little impact on Conte’s or Sánchez’s, but plays a significant role in Merkel’s – “Europe is facing the same task. ‘Together. We will make Europe strong again.’ This is the motto of our Presidency of the Council... In recent months we have learned even more how closely we are connected with our European partners” – and especially Macron’s: “This reconstruction plan will be made with Europe... an unprecedented stage in our European adventure and the consolidation of an independent Europe that provides the resources to affirm its identity, its culture, its uniqueness vis-à-vis China, the United States.”

Crisis and Leadership Communication Styles

Beyond the frequent occurrence of frames such as *confidence*, *gratitude* or *leadership* in most of the speeches, significant differences can be observed in the emphasis and style of the leaders analysed. We selected the defining frame for each one, considering the number of speeches included in the sample and their characteristics.

Emmanuel Macron had the second highest number of speeches in the first wave, but used the most time for his appearances (96 minutes). All of the speeches he delivered were given in the same institutional setting, at the Elysée office – the fourth speech included views of the gardens – with a solemn staging and the president’s look directed at the camera. Hand gestures usually happened out of camera shot, except during the last speech, when Macron opted for a varied repertoire that naturally accompanied his verbal expression. In his speeches, three rational frames stand out: the appeal to science, Europe and accountability. The latter is notable as regards the recognition of errors: “The moment, let’s be honest, has revealed failures, deficiencies” and “But like you, I saw failures; there are still unnecessary procedures that take too long, and weaknesses in our logistics. We will draw all these conclusions in due course, when it comes to reorganising ourselves”. However, he takes a positive perspective – “The last few weeks, let’s be fair to our country, have seen real success” – and, above all, efficient use of the frame *hope*, to

Figure 2.



Figure 3.



suggest the need for reconstruction and using the situation to learn lessons for the future. In Macron's speeches, both the multiple references to the idea of "a great nation" and the appeals to his audience stand out, with expressions such as "my dear compatriots" and "Long live the Republic, Long live France".

Macron's and Merkel's institutional speeches:

Chancellor Angela Merkel gave the most number of speeches and had the greatest variety of formats. From the most solemn address, from her institutional office with views outside, to a podcast during her quarantine and more informal recordings in a meeting room or with a neutral background. This variety brings her closer to her audience as does the familiar language she uses, such as when she included autobiographical references – "Let me assure you that for someone like me, for whom freedom of movement was a hard-earned right, such restrictions can only be justified if they are absolutely necessary" – and shows the limitations experienced by many citizens: "My podcast is being recorded as I am in lockdown, at home, by phone. That is a situation that I am currently sharing with many people". With a constant reference to scientific criteria, done in a pedagogical and empathetic style – "We appeal to you, your reason and your heart" – Merkel insists on protection, explaining the reasons for health measures, and advises young people to comply with the measures put in place and to maintain a distance from the elderly, and suggests that grandchildren send podcasts to their grandparents. However, she does not neglect her political responsibility and dedicates a good part of her speech to economic measures and the need for European stimulus.

The three speeches given by the British prime minister have a similar staging; his look is directed at the camera, although there are significant differences in his expressions, especially between the first and the last two. Boris Johnson opts for a discourse in which emotional frames such as *anger* or *grief* have a particular role, accompanied by messages that play more on fear – with expressions such as "devilish illness" or "devastating impact of this invisible killer" – than on empathy. Although the frame *pedagogic* is present in two of his speeches, the British prime minister's style is based on sobering terrain – "You should not be meeting friends. If your friends ask you to meet, you should say No" – and coercive, with direct warnings of punitive consequences in his first speech – "If you don't follow the rules, the police will have the powers to enforce them, including through fines and dispersing gatherings" – and reiterative in the last – "You must obey the rules on social distancing and to enforce those rules we will increase the fines for the small minority who break them". This is accompanied by a hostile gesture in the first

Emotional and Rational Frames Contained in Institutional Speeches

of his speeches, with his hands clasped tightly. In the other two, although he does not do that gesture, he uses expressions such as clenched fists and a gesture of tension that underline the harsh tone of his discourse. Despite the complexity of the moment, Johnson chooses to simplify the problem: “From this evening I must give the British people a very simple instruction – you must stay at home”.

Johnson’s and Conte’s institutional speeches:

Figure 4.



Figure 5.



Conte’s speeches take place in the presidential office, although each time with different settings and characteristics. In the first, he is standing in front of the office table, in an open plan, and his look is directed at the camera, contrasting with the other two, when he is sitting and sometimes reading his speech. This fact reveals a certain inconsistency between the confessional tone that his speech has – “I have a deep conviction, and I would like to share it with you” and “I have made a pact with my conscience” – and the expression given by his downcast eyes when reading. So, although the frames *care* and *hope* play an important role in his discourse, he loses strength and empathy because of this. In his speeches, the frame economic measures and guarantee of public services stand out, but *accountability* does too – “From the beginning I chose transparency, sharing; I chose not to minimise, not to hide the reality that is before our eyes every day”. The expression of the frame also addresses the problem of reading the speech.

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The Spanish president chose a functional setting for his two speeches, which corresponds to the lectern from which he gives his press conferences. In his discourse, the frame *care* is prioritised, with continuous allusions to the need to protect vulnerable people, which is accompanied by two other strong emotional elements, occurring mostly in his second, more extensive speech: the frame *anger* – where he uses various war metaphors that allude to the ‘war’ against the virus – and the frame *pride* – with frequent calls to the unity that is associated with the motto “This virus will be stopped together”. His speech combines an eminently pedagogical tone, in which he outlines all the measures that the state of alarm implies in detail, but also uses a paternalistic tone and is slightly condescending, which does not transcend institutional language.

Sánchez’s and Costa’s institutional speeches:

Figure 6.



Figure 7.



In his only speech to the public, the Portuguese prime minister does not use the solemnity of a presidential office, but instead opts for the staging of a press conference. In fact, he gives his speech accompanied by his cabinet, although the institutional image shows him alone during his speech, addressing a large audience. In António Costa’s discourse, the frame *care* stands out, delivering his speech in a calm tone in which the measures to be deployed are carefully separated, with frequent references to the decisions and recommendations made by technicians and experts (frame *science*) and the economic

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initiatives implemented to curb the impact. He also uses the frame *accountability*, with a clear commitment to consensual decisions, including an outline of the steps followed.

To sum up, the six leaders adopt different styles to address their institutional speeches and, even where not improvised, the results are influenced by their own personality and political style. The ability of Angela Merkel to adapt herself to different formats and to express empathy through her words and gesture contrasts with Giuseppe Conte's rigidity to effectively convey the message he reads out. Along with his extensive speeches, Emmanuel Macron makes an effort to combine the institutional style with strategic messages regarding the European context, without neglecting expressions of closeness to the audience. By contrast, Boris Johnson assumes the least empathic style, characterised by both gestures and words of severity to warn citizens who break the rules. With a more pedagogical tone, both António Costa and Pedro Sánchez are more committed to explaining the containment measures against COVID-19 and technical aspects than an emotional approach towards citizens.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research analyses the various ways six European leaders have used crisis communication to address a global pandemic that has resulted in an unprecedented situation for world officials due to its severity, duration, multifocal nature and the collateral impacts of the measures that had to be implemented. The comparative approach we took allowed us to observe not only the arguments provided by each leader, but also the influence their personality had when explaining the complexity of the situation.

By using official channels on YouTube for our analysis – rather than institutional websites – we were able to homogenise the conditions of publication and access; this gave us the first difference in leaders' communication management – the decision to create specific distribution lists with information on the pandemic, to post speeches related to the subject, the formats used, the settings and people who appeared in them, etc. While Portugal and the United Kingdom chose to include different government officials, France, Spain and Italy – and to a lesser extent Germany – focused only on the president and prime ministers when giving press conferences or speeches to the media. After this initial approach, an in-depth study of their public speeches allowed us to draw various conclusions on their discourse.

First, the act of giving an institutional speech is an exercise of authority and an opportunity to stage power (Chilton & Schäffner, 2002; Medina, 2016). The speeches analysed showed this through our findings that the two most frequent frames were *confidence* and *leadership* – even despite the fact that they have different aims. In these speeches, the political representatives not only displayed a proactive attitude, taking the lead and announcing the various measures that needed to be implemented, they also showed their determination and confidence in the initiatives. From the outset, by acknowledging the crisis (van Esch & Swinkels, 2015), and in the way they were addressed, the speeches themselves implied a proactive stance, one of the basic conditions of political management in these situations (Boin et al., 2016).

Second, these speeches implied the staging of a political ritual (Abèlés, 1988; Kertzer, 1988): symbols such as flags were present (Domínguez, 2020) and, in most cases, the speeches were given in a context of power, such as the presidential offices. The leaders appealed to various transcendent values (Domínguez, 2020), through the use of emotional frames such as *pride* or *sacrifice*, reinforcing the feeling of belonging and collective identity (Koschut, 2017); and they made references to other historical moments where difficult challenges also had to be addressed. Both of those emotional frames occurred in most speeches, as well as those of *gratitude* and *care*, which acknowledged the excellence of citizens who contribute

to the general good (De Blassio & Selva, 2020) and they reiterated the values of offering assistance and social protection, associating them with the concept of the nation-state (De Neubourg, 2009).

Third, these speeches gave political leaders an opportunity to establish an interpretation of the crisis and to legitimise the measures to be taken to resolve it (Boin et al., 2013; Christensen & Laegreid, 2020). The magnitude of the pandemic, expressed in parliaments, was a strong argument that leaders used to justify decisions limiting constitutional rights. This was seen by the combination of emotional and rational frames that were interwoven in the speeches. The use of war metaphors (*anger*) and the frame *grief* heightened the needs for a forceful response, which leaders shaped through rational frames such as those that described the economic measures to be implemented, and how the public and protection services would be guaranteed (*pedagogy*). However, over-exploiting the frame *anger* is counterproductive and often results in dysfunctional social behaviour (Sabucedo et al., 2020; Wagener, 2000). The countries we chose to include in the sample skewed the positive result of the frame *science*, since we did not include leaders who denied – to any degree – the effects of the pandemic, associated with populism (Mede & Schäfer, 2020). In fact, after his infection and hospitalisation, Boris Johnson's discourse showed his support for scientific arguments.

The adoption of certain frames, delivered with greater emphasis, is linked to the concept of meaning-making (Boin et al., 2013), with the added advantages that the speeches given by leaders were unidirectional (Agar, 1985) – the options to leave a comment on YouTube were mainly deactivated – and the staging could be and was precisely measured. On this basis, two of the frames that distinguish Macron's discourse and that illustrate the ideological power that is established through speeches (Medina, 2016) are worth noting. In them there is an appeal to Europe (Chopin, 2018) and an emphasis placed on the frame *hope*, with which he raises the need to learn from the crisis and to reset society on new bases, in a speech that also includes the EU.

Fourth, the speeches imply a willingness to reinforce the existing relationship with citizens (Jupp et al., 2017), while demonstrating a democratic exercise of social responsibility (Christensen & Laegreid, 2020; Schillemans, 2008). This idea is fed back through the frame *accountability*. However, it must not be neglected that transparency and accountability can also be used for propaganda purposes, to enhance the presidential and personalist profiles (Manfredi-Sánchez, Amado-Suárez & Waisbord, 2021). In fact, the only leader who is explicitly self-critical is Macron; the other leaders allude to it with calls for transparency in decision-making. Beyond the initial moment, in a long-term crisis such as that presented by COVID-19, with fast-changing decisions, the continuity of speeches in front of the public plays an essential role, something that only Chancellor Merkel maintained and, to a lesser extent, the French president. This fact also reveals a desire for a leadership that operates beyond critical moments and establishes regular contact with the public. In the case of Merkel, it allowed us to look for new formats that go beyond the solemnity of the official office. To a large extent the frame *foresight*, which alludes to the possibility of new restrictions, also explicitly recognised the limited knowledge of the future evolution of the pandemic, a principle of crisis communication (WHO, 2004).

Fifth, through the comparative analysis of institutional speeches that we carried out, we also found results worth noting on the influence personality has on the how speeches are delivered. Finding themselves in the same crisis, interpreted from similar arguments, the leaders showed a heterogeneous style in crisis communication. The differences are exposed through their emphasis on certain emotional and rational frames and through their personalities, made manifest when leading. The leaders' personalities were different, from Angela Merkel's empathy to Giuseppe Conte's confidential tone, Boris Johnson's

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instructive discourse, Emmanuel Macron's commitment to Europe and Pedro Sánchez and António Costa's pedagogical vocation.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The scope of the results obtained in the present study are limited to the temporal (the first wave of the pandemic) and territorial nature of the study (six European countries). They are also limited by the selection of a specific type of political discourse (institutional messages delivered by political leaders). However, these limitations also offer new lines of research whose findings can be compared with those presented in this chapter. Thus, carrying out similar investigations that address the communication strategies of political actors during the crisis caused by COVID-19 would be of interest. These studies could explore another type of discourse (e.g. given by another official rather than the prime minister or president, or those that have a different target audience, such as the press or an institutional body) or other cultural contexts and political systems (with particular interest on populist styles of government, such as Bolsanaro in Brazil or Trump in the USA). Although the sample of countries in this study only includes one female leader, the conclusions are consistent with different international studies that have shown the strengthening of female leadership during the pandemic (Coscieme et al., 2020). New studies will be able to explore this aspect and compare how different political representatives manage communication when addressing COVID-19 from a gender perspective.

Similarly, carrying out comparative research analysing political leaders' institutional discourse during different crisis situations is appropriate, as similarities and differences between the way in which political communication manages this pandemic and the way in which it addresses other complex moments – such as terrorist attacks, deciding whether to intervene in a war or undertaking profound political and economic reforms – can be drawn. These studies could explore the significance of emotional and rational frames in institutional discourse according to different contexts, objectives and political leaderships.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

A previous version of this study was presented at the conference 'Fragile Democracies: Polarization, populism and disinformation in a hybrid media context', funded by the Conselleria d'Innovació, Universitat, Ciència i Societat digital from the Generalitat Valenciana (Ref. AORG2020/054). The translation of this chapter also benefited from this funding. It is also linked to the R&D project "Ecology of disinformation: the construction of fake news and its impact on public space", funded by the Conselleria d'Innovació, Universitat, Ciència i Societat digital from the Generalitat Valenciana (Ref. AICO2020/224).

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Chapter 15

Discourse and Disinformation on COVID-19 Vaccination in Spain and Brazil: A Case Study on the Twitter Debate

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the creation of political conflict on Twitter in a comparative study between Brazil and Spain. Based on an analysis of the political debate on dealing with two countries' health crises, it analyses the most retweeted messages published during the first week of vaccination in Europe and the Americas. Firstly, it analysed the general characteristics of the online debate on the immunisation of COVID-19. Secondly, it carried out an analysis of information disorder in each country. Although governmental positions in both countries are opposed, the results allow establishing common patterns of polarized profiles in both countries that question the management of the pandemic. It can be seen how political polarization is shaped as a characteristic of disinformation in both countries. That reveals that, after the health crisis, there is a crisis of democratic institutions that impact public health actions, but specifically to combat COVID-19.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8057-8.ch015

INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses political conflict on Twitter using a comparative study between Brazil and Spain and considers information disorder as a critical element of that conflict. The transformation that the digital public sphere has undergone since the 2016 U.S. election is crucial in interpreting its analysis. Since then, international literature has questioned the destructive role of social media platforms and the potentially damaging risk to democracies (Chadwick, 2019). This all resulted after large-scale automated activity on social networks designed to manipulate public attention during the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Kollanyi et al., 2016), the 2018 Brazilian election (Nascimento & Alves, 2018), the Brexit referendum (Bastos & Mercea, 2019), among others, became public.

Since then, currents and studies that address monopoly power based on surveillance capitalism have become visible (Couldry & Mejías, 2019), and deep uncertainty about the long-term impact of digital forms of communication has been spreading. For example, studies have shown that social media channels carried fake news, usually by bots, to generate confusion, mutual distrust, intolerance and even hatred on issues of great social importance, such as migration (Quandt, 2018). This created states of confusion among citizens in the face of politically relevant processes, with socially ambivalent motivations that lead people to share false and misleading information (Chadwick et al., 2018; Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019).

From here, the authors interpret the logic of algorithms and perceptions about disinformation, which, as Kreiss argues, can imply the fracturing of how people understand and agree on facts and political truths (O'Neil, 2016; Kreiss, 2017; Waisbord, 2018).

With the advancement of the COVID-19 pandemic, the spread of misinformation, fake news, conspiracy theories, “magic remedies”, and other false information on social media have caused enormous problems for countries in developing policies to fight the virus. Brazil and Spain are two such cases because, in addition to the large number of victims affected by COVID-19, they have also witnessed intense online conflicts over measures to prevent and combat the pandemic.

Studies show that political polarization and disinformation on social media are key factors that hinder the adoption of measures to combat COVID-19 (Van Bavel et al., 2020; Oxford Analytica, 2020). The absence of a political consensus to face the threat of COVID-19, especially among political leaders, makes it difficult for the population to mobilize in response to the crisis (Green et al., 2020). The polarization on social media creates a favorable environment to spread misinformation and conspiracy theories (Van Bavel et al., 2020).

The authors have opted not to use the term “fake news” as it is largely applied to describe the dissemination of fake content, while the disinformation on social media is mostly composed of genuine content as rumors, memes, manipulated videos or photos, but shaped or reframed to mislead readers. Wardle & Derakhshan (2018) proposed a framework to examine information disorder phenomena, identifying three different types: mis-, dis- and mal-information. Misinformation is when “false information is shared, but no harm is meant”, disinformation is when “false information is knowingly shared to cause harm” and mal-information is when “genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere”.

As a means of understanding the conflicting process of political polarization and the presence of information disorder in online public debate, this chapter aims to carry out a comparative study between Brazil and Spain, in which national governments followed opposing strategies in their policies to combat COVID-19 (described in the section “Contextualization of the COVID-19 crisis in Brazil and Spain”).

To study the Twitter debate at the beginning of the vaccination process in both countries (in January 2021), the chapter initially presents a brief theoretical discussion on political polarization and disinformation on social media, a description of the COVID-19 crisis in Brazil and Spain, the methodology used, the comparative analysis of the general debate and the information disorder narratives found, as well as a synthesis of the results obtained.

POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND DISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Public Debate and Polarization on Social Media

Since events such as the 2008 U.S. election, Arab Spring, Los Indignados (15M/Spain), Occupy Wall Street and other major events, social media has an essential role in the political dynamic in contemporary society. On social media, users can participate actively in online campaigns (Bimber, 2014), social and political mobilizations (Castells, 2015) and public debate (Tucker et al., 2018).

After the optimistic euphoria that the public debate on social media could follow the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere (Shirky, 2011), the studies carried out showed that public debate on social media platforms is characterized by political polarization and the spread of disinformation (Tucker et al., 2018). This polarization can be measured through conflicts that emerge on social media platforms (Kamienski et al., 2021).

In a context of crisis in the institutions of liberal democracy (Castells, 2018), the political debate on social media is characterized by political polarization between political groups that discursively dispute political hegemony (Penteado et al., 2021). Interactions on social media platforms tend to reinforce users' political positions and form echo chambers that reinforce their beliefs and ideologies (Kamienski et al., 2021). Studies on political polarization related to disinformation highlight that users' political positioning, sensational content, and appeal to emotions (such as fear, anger and indignation) are elements that help spread misinformation (Tucker et al., 2018).

In this study, the authors understand the importance of public space on social media as an *affective regime* (Arias Maldonado, 2016) that creates *affective feedback loops* (Boler & Davis, 2018). These loops appear in virtual communities, and antagonistic messages hinder agreement and public debate and generate polarizing dynamics. Democracy as a marketplace of emotions—rather than ideas—takes on an essential dimension in understanding the political and social context of conflict on the internet. Political ideologies offer attachment to an affective community, which provides emotional rewards.

In this context, disinformation itself has served to weaponize the creation of conflict scenarios that weaken the credibility of traditional institutions at the same time (Ricard & Medeiros, 2020). Disinformation studies warn of polarized groups susceptible to believing information according to their prior perceptions and the motivation to distribute it later (Albright, 2017). Disinformation materializes previous and internationally recognized theories about the internet, such as those related to the concept of fragmentation or the filter bubble (Pariser, 2011). Such attitudes reveal the weakness of citizens in democratic ecosystems in terms of their ability to debate their own beliefs (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2019).

Social media and algorithmic communication technologies allow disinformation strategies to be personalized according to socio-demographic and political profiles, with micro-targeting techniques (an example was the Cambridge Analytica scandal) and modern computational propaganda techniques to manipulate public opinion (Woolley & Howard, 2017). This context favors a political polarization,

which is articulated around affective mobilization by the public debate on social networks sites. The affective nature of these polarized communities explains two current phenomena in the Spanish and Brazilian public spheres.

In this chapter, the authors understand political polarization as the intensification of emotions of rejection toward those perceived to be members of other communities or ideological identities, as discussed by other researchers such as Levendusky (2017) and Westwood et al. (2018). Thus, emotions underpin political opinions, and the selective exposure and fragmentation of media consumption contribute to these reinforcing spirals (Slater, 2007) that have divided the population and hampered the adoption of measures and policies to control the pandemic (Green et al., 2020).

Public Debate and Polarization on Social Media

An *Infodemic* can be defined as *an overabundance of information—some accurate and some not—that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it* (WHO, 2020). For example, the global outbreak of the novel coronavirus caused a wealth of conspiracy theories, false rumors, and disinformation; a phenomenon called COVID-19 *Infodemic* by some researchers (Gallotti et al., 2020, Naeem & Bhatti, 2020; Pulido et al., 2020). The increase in potentially misleading, contradictory, or unreliable information issued by official or unofficial sources exposes people to not taking appropriate risk-reducing measures and creating a severe threat to public health.

Nevertheless, Bennett and Livingston (2020) address disinformation not as a phenomenon confined to the publication of fake news but of a more far-reaching nature for democratic systems and their institutions. The current public sphere suffers from an *information disorder* (Wardle, 2018) that calls for the fragmentation of the deliberative and democratic public sphere by deepening its citizens' emotional and ideological divides. These divides eventually lead to conflict—expressed in the online public debate—that influence the definition of policies to vaccinate the population and the fight against COVID-19.

Many studies have focused on misinformation surrounding vaccines on social media and COVID-19 information disorder (Ghinea et al., 2020; Cuesta-Cambra, 2019; Hansson et al., 2021). Uscinski et al. (2020) found that beliefs in the virus conspiracy theory could be related to the predisposition to reject information from experts and authority figures or embraced by partisan and ideological motivations. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism analyzed 225 pieces of false information about the novel coronavirus between January and March 2020 and identified nine types of false claim (Brennen et al., 2020). Roozenbeek et al. (2020) used samples from five countries to determine how COVID-19 misinformation can be used to predict appropriate health behaviors.

The authors identify two gaps in the literature. First, it is still unclear how the political conflict and significant polarization influences vaccination adoption, as Peretti et al. (2020) stated and, second, understanding the impact of the discourse on social media by polarized groups during the misinformation spreading is minimal. The authors therefore hope to address these gaps in this research.

CONTEXTUALISATION OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN BRAZIL AND SPAIN

Brazilian Context

Brazil is one of the countries most affected by COVID-19. According to data from the COVID-19 dashboard from Johns Hopkins University, Brazil is the country with the second highest death rate, at 407,639, only behind the USA at 577,172 (May 3rd, 2021). Since the confirmation of the first infection case by the new coronavirus in late February 2020, the country has faced several difficulties establishing policies to combat the pandemic.

Despite having killed thousands of people in Europe before arriving in Brazil, public authorities could not establish an effective and coordinated policy. Disputes between political agents and medical and health authorities made it difficult to create national plans to combat the novel coronavirus. An example of this mess was that from the beginning of the pandemic until May 2021 (14 months), the country had four health ministers. The first, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, was dismissed by President Bolsonaro for defending the adoption of stricter measures to face COVID-19, contradicting view of the president, who favored more flexible measures and minimizing the effects of the pandemic (“little flu”). The next, the doctor Nelson Teich, who did not recommend the use of hydroxychloroquine—advocated as the “cure for Covid” by Bolsonaro—was also dismissed after a month in office. He was superseded by General Eduardo Pazuello. Without experience in this area, Pazuello, who represents the military support base of the president, spent ten months in office and was responsible for recommending the so-called “Covid kit”, with drugs that had not been proven effective, delaying the purchase of vaccines and the increase in case numbers in 2021. Doctor Marcelo Queiroga took over the position in March 2021 to coordinate the national immunization plan, which was still very slow, in May 2021. The lack of coordination and effective measures by the federal government resulted in much criticism from public health specialists (Costa et al., 2020).

The negationist stance of President Bolsonaro and his supporters clashed head-on with the measures adopted by regional governments in Brazil (states and municipalities). Concerned about the lack of national coordination, each state and city took different measures to combat the pandemic. However, most regional governments followed the recommendations of public health authorities, adopting measures such as social distancing, mandatory use of masks in public spaces, closing schools, non-essential trade, and other actions to protect the population, which ran contrary to those advocated by the president.

Politicization around the pandemic also extended to the development of vaccines to immunize the population. The first vaccines approved for emergency use in the country reflected the polarization between Bolsonaro’s supporters and his critics. The Oxford University vaccine, AstraZeneca, was developed in partnership with the Fiocruz Foundation in Brazil and had support from public institutions of the Federal Government. The CoronaVac vaccine, developed by the Chinese biopharmaceutical company Sinovac Biotech and produced in Brazil by the Butantan Institute in São Paulo, was a political dispute between the state governor (João Doria) and the president. While the governor of São Paulo, bet on the vaccine and the discourse of defending science, this antagonized Bolsonaro and his supporters. In turn, they raised doubts about the efficiency of the “Chinese vaccine” and issued xenophobic statements against China in anticipation of the political debate of the 2022 Brazilian general election.

In addition to the political interests surrounding the policies to combat COVID-19, the public debate also involves different segments of society through social networking platforms expressing their views and positions. The discussion around the approval of vaccines (AstraZeneca and CoronaVac) and the

beginning of vaccinations sparked an intense online debate that represents a context marked by political disputes, the celebration of public health science in the face of denotational discourses and the spread of disinformation, as can be seen later in the research results.

Spanish Context

In Spain, the COVID-19 crisis also hit hard. The Johns Hopkins University dashboard places it among the top ten countries with the most deaths. It was also one of the top ten countries most affected by COVID-19, according to the same data (78,726 at the beginning of May 2021), the fourth highest country in the European Union with the most deaths, after Italy, France, and Germany.

On March 14, 2020, the government of Spain declared a state of emergency to manage the health crisis. This was almost two months after the first affected patient was detected on the Canary Island of La Gomera. On February 26, 2020, the political authorities confirmed the first case of coronavirus on the Iberian Peninsula in Barcelona. A few days later, on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization upgraded the public health emergency caused by COVID-19 to a global pandemic. The declaration of the state of emergency in Spain limited the freedom of movement of people throughout the country, with very restrictive conditions compared to other nearby countries, and appointed a delegated government commission to manage the crisis.

From that moment on, the government of Spain exercised a crisis-communication strategy centralized in the technical committee to manage the virus and with the prime minister. López-García (2020) points out that this communication was characterized by continuous communication through daily press conferences and campaigns to raise awareness of the seriousness of the health crisis through television speeches every Sunday by the prime minister in an attempt to justify the mistakes by the government's management to offer a sense of control of the situation.

The high number of people dying in care homes without being able to be transferred to hospitals, the saturation of Intensive Care Units as well as hospitals throughout the country, the shortage of Personal Protective Equipment and the difficulty in obtaining medical supplies generated a lot of political and social tension. In addition to this, the restrictive mobility measures imposed by the state of emergency, which prohibited minors, for example, from going out on the streets for at least six months, led to fierce criticism of the government's management of the pandemic.

The Spanish population largely complied with the restrictive measures. There was a succession of manifestations of support for health workers, including daily applause at 8 p.m. from windows of homes across the country. However, some anti-government or negationist groups also held some street demonstrations to protest against the government's measures; those with the most outstanding media coverage were those on May 12 and August 16, 2020, in Madrid's strategic areas.

Although the state of emergency was lifted in June 2020 to allow greater mobility of the population during the holiday months, the Spanish government approved a second state of emergency throughout the whole country on October 25, 2020, to contain the spread of infections caused by SARS-CoV-2. Although the competent authority remained the national government, the government delegated the authority to manage the crisis to each autonomous community or city. This new state of emergency limited the movement of people in public between 11 p.m. and 6 a.m. and restricted the entry and exit of people from each community's territory. This second state of emergency ended on May 9, 2021, when Spaniards could again move freely throughout the country.

Spain's vaccination plan was included in the European vaccination campaign channeled through the European Commission. As a result, the first doses began to be given with the Pfizer vaccine in December 2020 to older age groups and the population at risk. Although the vaccinations were initially scheduled to start in a coordinated manner throughout the European Union, at least three countries were one day early: Germany, Hungary, and Slovakia. After Pfizer, other vaccinations followed, such as Moderna, AstraZeneca and Janssen, which made it possible to generate a four-stage vaccination strategy in Spain to vaccinate most of the population by June 2021. Although the Spanish government's vaccination strategy was in line with the vaccination campaign in Europe, some groups called for greater leadership from the Spanish government vis-à-vis Europe and other world powers to acquire additional vaccine doses.

Finally, the polarization of management was also created by discussing the competence of the different state and regional administrations to manage care homes, the closure of shops and restaurants, the application of temporary layoff measures, and social aid. All these issues have been critical elements in the political discourse in social media.

METHODOLOGY

To understand and identify the discourse and the information disorder patterns associated with the COVID-19 vaccination in Brazil and Spain, the authors collected data from Twitter to generate evidence on how the phenomenon manifested in the countries. The analysis was divided into two main parts: the general debate and the information disorder content.

The categorization presented can be susceptible to human bias, which the authors recognize, and attempt to mitigate by making our decisions transparent, as documented here. Six researchers were been involved in brainstorming, iteration, and final annotation: three to the Brazilian dataset and three to the Spanish dataset. The categorization was refined based on discussions among the authors. Some of the annotations were changed and others were kept based on a majority vote in the final iteration.

General Debate about COVID-19 Vaccination on Twitter

The general aspects of the content of the tweets include some main types, sources and claims of the discourse about the COVID-19 vaccination. The analysis is divided into three approaches: classification of the content's nature, categorizing the Twitter profiles and investigating the principal narrative, all of which were drafted by the authors.

Classification of the Content's Nature

1. **Information:** Most Twitter messages are conversations and chats, but users can also use them to share relevant information and report news (Castillo et al., 2011). The text was classified as information when its content was based on a reliable source, such as traditional media or a trusted organization. It could also not reflect personal or subjective opinions or conversations and changes between users.
2. **Opinion:** An opinion message on Twitter can represent the individual's ideas, beliefs, assessments, judgments and evaluations about a topic or person (Khan et al., 2014). The text was classified as

an opinion when its contents reflected the user's perspective or source of the opinion, the subject about which the opinion is verbalized, and the observation, belief or point of view expressed.

3. **Humor:** Reyes et al. (2012) use the definition of verbal humor as a “phenomenon that suggests the presence of some knowledge resources, such as language, narrative strategies, target, situation, logical mechanisms or opposition, to produce a funny effect.” The text was classified as humorous when its contents contained a funny meaning, verbal irony, “jocularity, hyperbole, rhetorical questions, and understatement” (Gibbs, 2000).
4. **Information Disorder:** Wardle (2017) states that information disorder phenomena are composed of three notions: misinformation, disinformation and mal-information. The text was classified based on the intention of the source to cause harm by sharing false information and if the spreading was deliberate.

Categorization of the Twitter Profiles

1. **Regular user.** No prominence outside Twitter and fewer than 10,000 followers.
2. **Tweeter.** No prominence outside Twitter and between 10,000 and 100,000 followers having a high impact on this social network.
3. **Influencer.** Users who have built a reputation for their knowledge and experience on a specific topic and more than 100,000 followers. They post regularly on this topic and generate a large number of engaged followers. Influencers can be classified into the following types: celebrities, singers, actors, professional athletes, industry experts, bloggers and content creators, and micro-influencers (ordinary people who have become known for their fame or knowledge in some specialized niche).
4. **Political.** Represents a group of people with great ideological content but no formal relation to any political party.
5. **Political authority.** Holds positions of power or influence within the government or formal relation to a political party.
6. **Journalist.** Identifies as a journalist on the profile description.
7. **Traditional media.** Verified profile representing a traditional media vehicle.
8. **Alternative media.** Official profile representing an alternative media vehicle.
9. **Institutions and organizations.** This includes public and private organizations such as companies, NGOs, government ministries and agencies.
10. **Others.** Other user profiles not listed above, including scientists and experts.

Investigation of the Principal Narrative

1. **Defending the government:** Contents originating from pro-government communications apparatus, political authorities or known supporters to respond to the interest of political or economic authors.
2. **Criticizing the government:** Contents originating from opposition leaders or from profiles expressing complaints, anger and fears about the government's actions or policies.
3. **Pro-science and public health/regulations:** Contents with trusted and accurate information shared by researchers or health care professionals based on science and evidence, pro-science messages, and support for vaccination campaigns.
4. **Others.**

Elements Involved in Information Disorder

The authors proposed a descriptive approach to identify and categorize information disorder related to the COVID-19 vaccination on Twitter, adapting the model created by Wardle & Derakhshan (2017). To better understand the phenomena of information disorder, the authors defined and described the main differences between misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information (Table 1), their categories (Table 2), the elements involved in the production, consumption and spread of false information (Table 3), and a typology to classify the narratives of COVID-19 related misinformation.

A profile can spread, produce, or consume information disorder content with different intents and distinct strategies. Although the success in disseminating their content is partially due to their approach, users are affected by confirmation biases, causing a preference for choosing profiles with similar tendencies, a phenomenon known as homophily.

Table 1. Types of information disorders

Wardle (2018)	Authors' Approach
Misinformation. "Information that is false, but not created with the intention to cause harm."	Misinformation: although the word does not exist in Spanish or Portuguese, the authors opted out to use this term to refer to a tweet's contents with false, mistaken, or misleading information without the intention of harming third parties.
Disinformation. "Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country."	Disinformation: the word exists in Spanish ('desinformación') and Portuguese ('desinformação'), so the authors opted to use this term to refer to a tweet's contents with false, mistaken, inaccurate or misleading information that is deliberately deceptive (Karlova and Fisher 2013).
Mal-information. "Real information used to inflict harm on a person, organization, or country."	Mal-information: although the word does not exist in Spanish or Portuguese, the authors opted to use this term to refer to a tweet's contents with factual information or confidential matters that had the malicious intention of harming third parties.

Source: (Authors, 2021, adapted from Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018)

COVID-19 Information Disorder Narratives

To classify the COVID-19 vaccination narratives related to information disorder, the authors used a summarized version of the categories proposed by Brennen et al. (2020):

1. **Public authority action/policy:** Claims about policies, activities, or communication from public authorities and who make guidelines and recommendations.
2. **Community spread:** Claims about how the virus is spreading internationally and about people, groups or individuals involved or affected.
3. **General medical advice and virus characteristics:** Claims about health remedies, symptoms, treatments, self-diagnosis, effects, and signs of the disease.
4. **Prominent actors:** Claims about pharmaceutical companies and companies providing health supplies, claims about famous people as celebrities that have been infected or about what politicians have said or done.

Table 2. *Categorical contents of information disorders*

	Wardle (2019)	Authors' Approach
Intention to Deceive	Fabricated Content. "New content that is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm."	Fabricated Content. The author fully makes up the content.
	Manipulated Content. "When genuine information or imagery is manipulated or deceived."	Manipulated Content. A genuine message or media is manipulated to alter its original content.
	Imposter Content. "When genuine sources are impersonated."	Imposter Content. The writer usurps the identity of a famous person, institution or vehicle to use their credibility to deceive.
Low in Facticity: imply that both fully and partly untrue content can be classified as misinformation or disinformation	Satire or Parody. "No intention to cause harm but has potential to fool."	Satire or Parody. The content tends to have an ironic or humorous aspect composed of exaggeration, gossip, jokes, made-up information, and social criticism.
	False Context. "When genuine content is shared with false contextual information."	False Context. The writer reframes genuine content with malicious intentions.
	Misleading Content. "Misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual."	Misleading Content. The writer uses quoted fragments to support a broader point of view, cites statistics that align with the position they defend or reframes images or videos, slightly changing their real significance.
	False Connection. "When headlines, visuals or captions do not support the content."	False Connection. The writer uses clickbait techniques with videos, images or links that do not connect with the text content.

Source: (Authors, 2021, adapted from Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018)

Table 3. *Elements of information disorders*

Wardle (2018)	Authors' Approach
Agent. "Who were the 'agents' that created, produced and distributed the example, and what was their motivation?"	Source: the outlet through which dis/misinformation is being consumed (e.g., professional media profile, alternative media, journalists, influencers).
Message. "What type of message was it? What format did it take? What were the characteristics?"	Content: the content of dis/misinformation is being distributed (e.g., textual message on Twitter, news online from agencies and blogs, visual information, and videos).
Interpreter. "When the message was received by someone, how did they interpret the message? What action, if any, did they take?"	Consumers: individuals or groups exposed to or affected by dis/misinformation and that share or propagate the content (e.g., a retweet with a comment confirming the original tweet).

Source: (Authors, 2021, adapted from Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018)

5. **Conspiracies:** Claims that the virus was created as a bioweapon or who is behind the pandemic.
6. **Virus transmission:** Claims about how the virus is transmitted and how to stop transmission.
7. **Explanation of the virus' origins:** Claims about where and how the virus originated.
8. **Public preparedness:** Claims about hoarding, buying supplies and social distancing.
9. **Vaccine development and availability:** Claims about vaccines, their production and availability.

Data Collection and Processing

The authors collected 4,860,337 tweets in Brazilian Portuguese and 4,160,158 tweets in Spanish posted between January 17 and January 24, 2021, using the Twitter API v1.1 and the keywords listed in Table 4. The researchers focused on the 150 most retweeted texts in each dataset to analyze the public debate. The authors were also interested in identifying whether there was: a) online conflict expressed in political polarization, and b) information disorder content among these retweeted texts.

As the dataset was limited to the top 150 most retweeted texts in each country, the authors consider that these sampling conditions are acceptable given that the researchers are primarily investigating the public narrative around information disorder. Tweets that receive considerable scrutiny offer a reasonable standard. The authors opted to analyze available content, so deactivated, suspended, limited accounts or tweets deleted by the posters were excluded from the top 150 most retweeted texts.

Table 4. Description of the Tweets collected on COVID-19 vaccines in Brazil and Spain

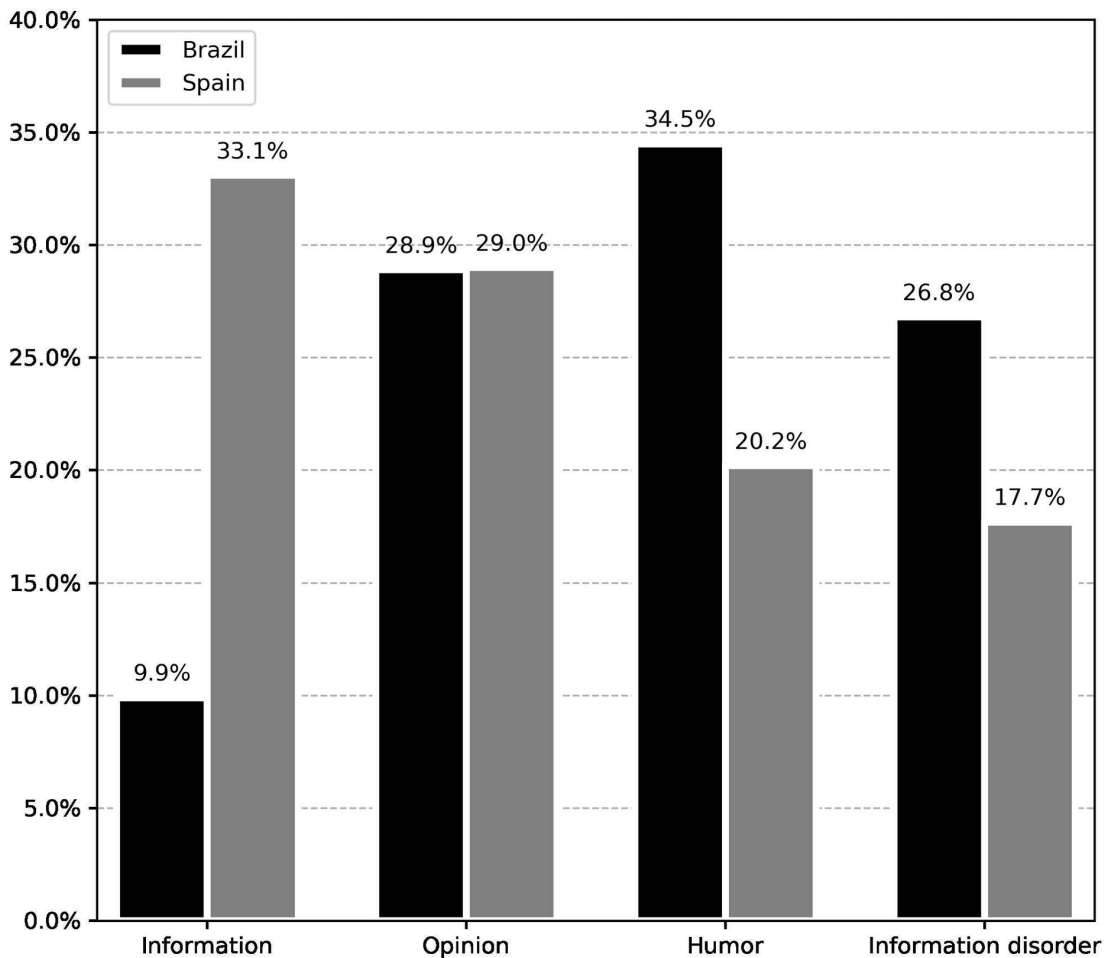
Feature	Brazil	Spain
Period of Time	2021-Jan-17/2021-Jan-24	2021-Jan-17/2021-Jan-24
Collected Tweets	4,860,337	4,160,158
Nº Retweets	3,417,463 (70.3% of the total)	3,157,447 (75.9% of the total)
Selected Tweets	142 (969,100 retweets / 28.4%)	124 (245,706 retweets / 7.8%)
Keywords used to collect data	vacina, vacinacao, vacinação, coronavac, sputnik, AstraZeneca, Pfizer, Anvisa, mRNA-1273, Moderna Therapeutics, INO-4800, Inovio, AD5-nCoV, CanSino, ChAdOx1, Ad26 SARS-CoV-2, Ad26.COV2.S, BNT162, AZD1222, NVX-CoV2373, Novavax, Covaxin, BioNTech, Sinovac, vachina, Butantan, Fiocruz	vacuna, vacunación, sputnik, AstraZeneca, Pfizer, mRNA-1273, Moderna Therapeutics, Moderna, INO-4800, Inovio, AD5-nCoV, CanSino, ChAdOx1, Ad26 SARS-CoV-2, Ad26.COV2.S, BNT162, AZD1222, NVX-CoV2373, Novavax, Covaxin, BioNTech, Sinovac, Araceli, OMS, pandemia, covid-19, plandemia, coronavirus, PCR, Sanidad

Six coders then manually applied content analysis to the final selected messages (142 and 124 tweets in Brazilian and Spanish respectively) to classify their general characteristics and describe the information disorder narratives. Finally, the data were processed using scripts written in Python for statistical calculations and sorting to generate descriptive data tables and by using Gephi software v.0.9.2 to calculate communities in graphs. The annotated data is accessible from the GitHub repository https://github.com/patyDSantos/Disinformation_Brazil_Spain in two different folders. The ‘Data’ folder contains the annotated messages separated by Twitter Id in CSV file format. The ‘Graph’ folder contains the images of the general retweet network and the information disorder retweet network.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section of the chapter will present the analysis of the data, divided into two parts. The first part presents a comparative analysis between Brazil and Spain, focused on studying the general characteristics of the online debate on the COVID-19 vaccination on Twitter, highlighting: content nature, tweeter profiles and the main narrative used in the most retweeted messages.

Figure 1. Distribution of the nature of the contents in selected most Retweeted messages by country



To understand the information disorder identified in this online conflict, in Brazil and Spain, the second part carried out a comparative analysis verifying: types of information disorders, categorical contents, elements of information disorder (adapted from Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018) and narratives with information disorder claims (adapted from Brennen et al., 2020).

Description of General Debate

Comparative data in Figure 1 show that while information tweets stand out in Spain (33.3%), there are more significant humor publications in Brazil (34.5%). As for tweets classified as opinion, the results were similar (approximately 29%). However, it is noteworthy that in the Brazilian sample, there was a higher incidence of information disorder (26.8%) than in the Spanish case. The data show a more chaotic public debate on Twitter in Brazil with high incidences of humor and information disorder.

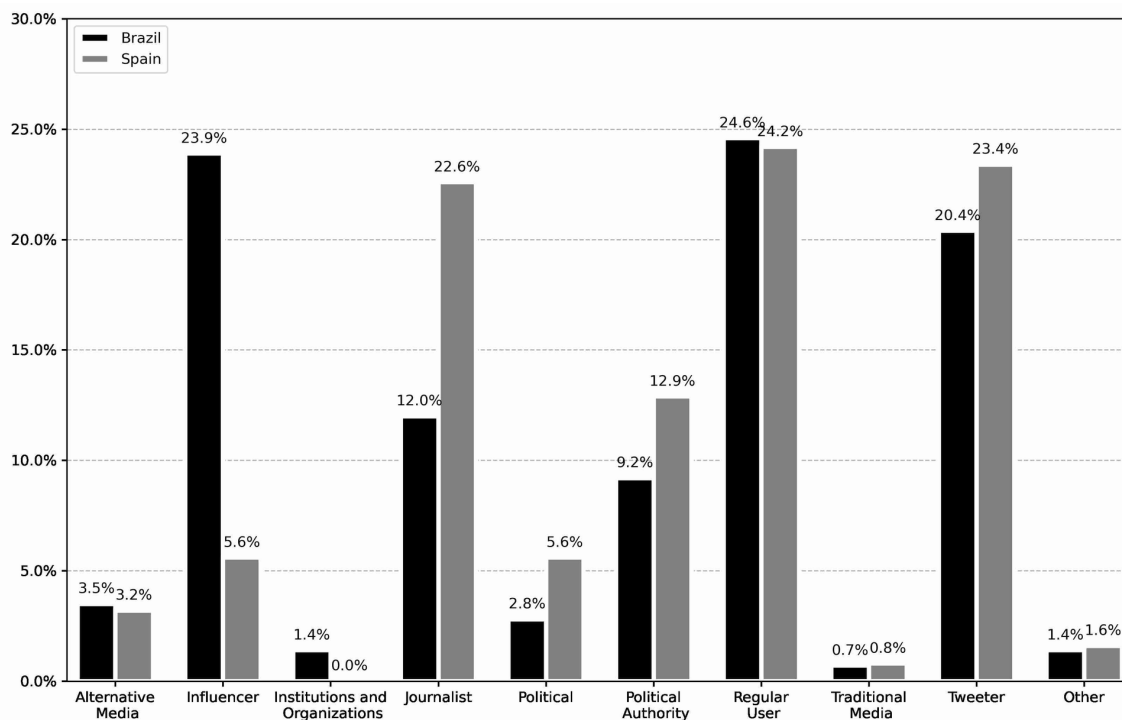
Regarding the most retweeted profiles, Figure 2 shows that the performance of regular users (25%) and tweeters (24.2%) stands out in Spain, with similar results in Brazil (24.6% and 21.1%, respectively).

Discourse and Disinformation on COVID-19 Vaccination in Spain and Brazil

Another Spanish highlight was 22.6% of journalists, quite different from Brazil, which had only 12%. In Brazil, the highlight is the high incidence of influencer profiles (23.9%). It was also identified that both countries had few scientists among the most retweeted profiles (categorized as 'Others' in the graph): two in Spain and just one in Brazil, which indicates that more qualified users (scientists) had little impact on the Twitter vaccination debate in both countries.

The more significant journalist profiles in Spain helps explain the more significant number of informative tweets. However, journalists are also involved in disseminating misinformation, in both Spain and Brazil (as shown below). However, influencers in Brazil stood out mainly for their humor publications.

Figure 2. Distribution of most Retweeted profiles by country

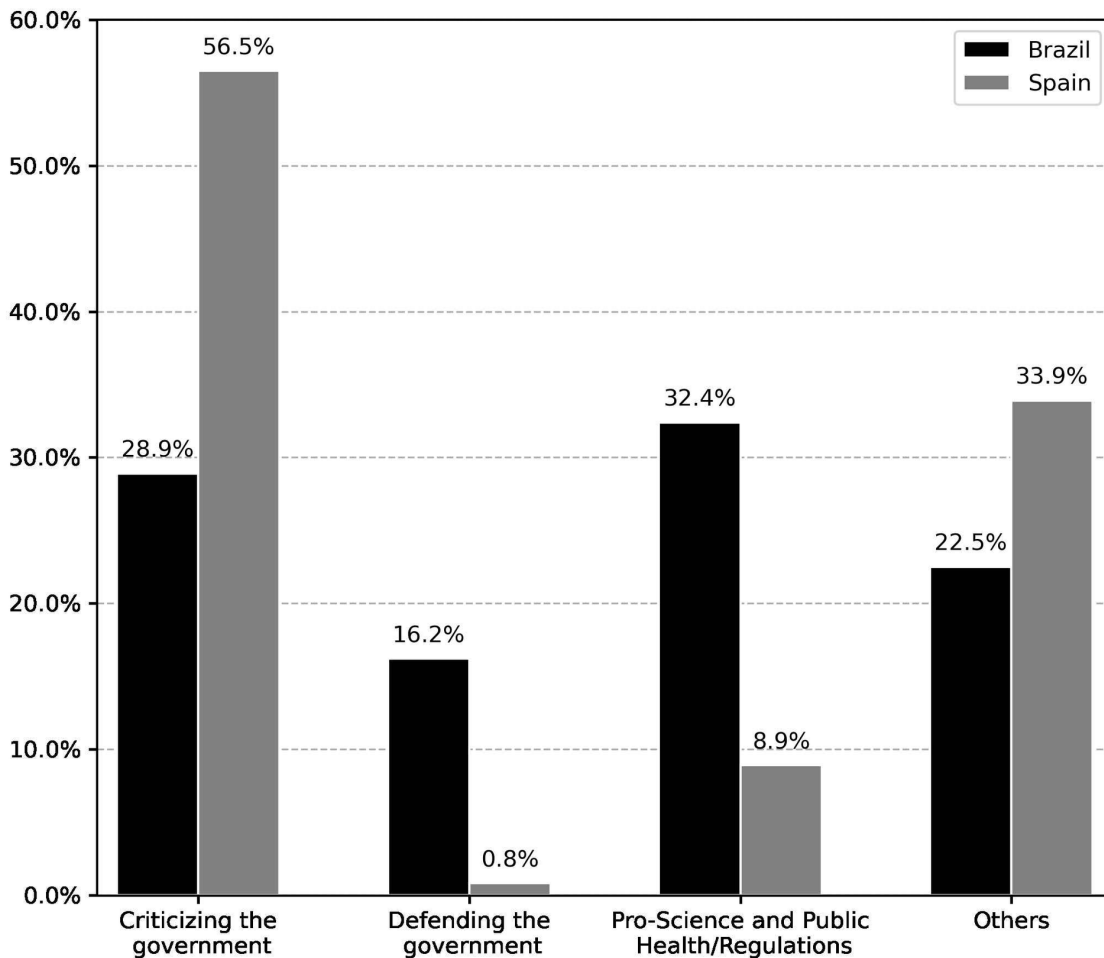


Another element that drew attention was the low occurrence of traditional media profiles in both cases, with only one event among the most retweeted messages, signaling a critical transformation in forming public opinion in contemporary society with new sources of information that can contribute to disruptive communication (Bennet & Livingston 2018).

Institutions had virtually no visibility in our analysis. However, the government in Spain assumed a leading role at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis in the ongoing communication as noted in the context of this chapter. Despite this, their prominence during the vaccination has been minor on social media.

As shown in Figure 3, there are no similarities between Brazil and Spain in the general narratives. While in Brazil, the pro-science and public health/regulations (32.4%) and criticism of the government (28.9%) narratives stand out, in Spain, there is a strong predominance of a narrative toward criticism of the government (56.5%) and in managing the pandemic and purchasing vaccines.

Figure 3. Distribution of the general narrative in the most Retweeted messages by country



In the Brazilian case, the pro-science narratives stand out for bringing information and many humorous messages where users (regular users, tweeters, and influencers) express their happiness with the beginning of vaccinations. On the other hand, regarding the criticism of the government narrative, there are opinionated, informative, and information disorder messages produced by traditional media, journalist, and opposition politician profiles.

A high occurrence of tweets with information disorder (as will be seen below in the ‘Description of Information Disorder Narratives’ section), followed by messages of opinion, published by different profiles (politicians, political authorities, tweeter, journalists, alternative media and influencers), revealing an anti-government mood on Spanish Twitter (which can also be identified, to a smaller extent in Brazil).

To study the relational dynamics of users’ behavior, the analysis of social networks was used (Wasserman & Faust, 1994) to identify the network of retweets and the profiles with the most significant centrality and authority in the online conflict during the pandemic.

In the general retweet network, it is possible to identify polarization in both countries, forming two main clusters (Table 5). The Brazilian case has a larger one with 92% of profiles (nodes) and 88.6% of

Discourse and Disinformation on COVID-19 Vaccination in Spain and Brazil

Table 5. Distribution of users and Retweets in clusters for general debate

General Retweet Network	Users (Brazil)		Users (Spain)		Retweets (Brazil)		Retweets (Spain)	
	Quantity	%	Quantity	%	Quantity	%	Quantity	%
Larger cluster	448576	92.0%	75472	68.5%	776509	88.6%	113171	62.4%
Smaller cluster	38910	8.0%	33049	30.0%	97370	11.1%	65066	35.5%
Intermediates	5	0.0%	1681	1.5%	2234	0.3%	4933	2.1%
Total	487491	100.0%	110202	100.0%	876113	100.0%	183170	100.0%

retweets (edges), sharpening profiles of criticizing the government, pro-science and others (Table 6). The second, smaller, with 8% of profiles and 11% of retweets, was formed by profiles with the narrative of defending the government and a significant information disorder (Table 7). It was also possible to observe that there was little interaction between the clusters, confirming the formation of echo chambers articulated by the political position of the narratives.

Table 6. General narrative of Retweets in clusters

General Narrative	Brazil		Spain	
	Larger	Smaller	Larger	Smaller
Criticizing the government	34.0%	0.0%	35.1%	81.2%
Defending the government	0.0%	95.0%	1.2%	0.0%
Pro-science and public health/regulations	34.0%	0.0%	13.5%	3.4%
Others	32.1%	5.0%	50.2%	15.4%

The Spanish retweet network also has two main clusters. The large one has 68.5% of profiles and 62.4% of retweets. However, unlike the Brazilian case in which the narrative of criticizing the government is concentrated in one cluster (larger cluster), in the Spanish case, criticizing the government is present in both clusters. In the larger cluster, there is also the pro-science discourse and other narratives. It is interesting to note that other narratives (which comprise humor tweets) interact little with tweets critical to the government and pro-science, which differs from the Brazilian case. The smaller cluster

Table 7. General classification of Retweets in clusters

General Classification	Brazil		Spain	
	Larger	Smaller	Larger	Smaller
Information	7.4%	5.5%	37.5%	21.6%
Opinion	26.9%	22.6%	16.1%	49.2%
Humor	45.2%	5.6%	30.7%	11.8%
Information disorder	20.5%	66.2%	15.7%	17.5%

with 30% of users and 35.5% of retweets predominates criticizing the government, posted mainly by Spanish tweeters.

Table 8. Top 10 users most Retweeted in Brazil

Top 10 Brazil	Received RT	Cluster	Profile	Involved with Information Disorder
opauloribeiro_	54417	Larger	Regular user	No
imleavinson	28009	Larger	Tweeter	No
AlineTosin	27460	Larger	Tweeter	Yes
pkfreestyleiro	22288	Larger	Influencer	No
garciasardi	20952	Larger	Regular user	No
mariliajuste	20076	Larger	Journalist	Yes
augustovieira	18442	Larger	Regular user	No
gaynoia	18039	Larger	Tweeter	Yes
ThomasVConti	17951	Larger	Tweeter	Yes
GFiuzza_Oficial	17896	Smaller	Journalist	Yes

Among the profiles with the highest degree of centrality in the retweets network in the Brazilian case, there is a predominance of profiles from the largest cluster (90%), emphasizing tweeters and regular users, totaling 70% (Table 8). It is noteworthy that half of these nodes were involved in the dissemination of disinformation.

Table 9. Top 10 users most Retweeted in Spain

Top 10 Spain	Received RT	Cluster	Profile	Involved with Information Disorder
PeqeniaCaja	13148	Larger	Journalist	No
Tonicanto1	10415	Smaller	Political authority	Yes
FonsiLoaiza	10282	Larger	Journalist	Yes
medicadoo	9020	Larger	Regular user	No
JorgeBustos1	5724	Smaller	Journalist	No
WillyTolerdoo	4806	Smaller	Influencer	Yes
OtroBoluditoMas	4688	Larger	Regular user	No
Aleesampedro	4361	Larger	Regular user	No
skeletoracb	4336	Larger	Regular user	No
ivanedlm	3903	Smaller	Political authority	No

In the network of retweets of the general Spanish debate, there is a greater distribution among nodes with a greater degree of centrality—60% of the largest cluster and 40% of the smallest cluster, as shown in Table 9. The profiles are also more diverse, with regular users (40%) and journalists (30%) standing out. Of these profiles, 30% were involved with the publication of disinformation.

Description of Information Disorder Narratives

Among the most retweeted and selected messages for analysis, 38 Brazilian tweets (26.8%) and 22 Spanish tweets (17.7%) showed information disorder. The following is a classification of these messages by type, level, and user profile that posted them and narrative.

Type

As shown in Figure 4, much of the information disorder narrative in both Brazil and Spain involves various forms of recontextualized or twisted accurate information rather than being completely fabricated. The authors' analysis recognized five different subtypes of misinformation and disinformation that reconfigured accurate information; Fabricated Content, False Connection, Manipulated Content, Misleading Content, and Satire or Parody. The most common form of information disorder in the countries is "Misleading Content" (44.7% in Brazil and 54.5% in Spain), in which the tweets contained some factual information. However, the original elements were reformulated or selected in a manner that made them false or misleading. The second most common form in Brazil is "Manipulated Content" (26.3%), which involves describing or quoting videos, messages, or images in a way far from their original meaning. Finally, the presence of the "Satire or Parody" narrative is very similar in both countries. While in Spain, there is a more significant number of disinformation tweets with "Fabricated Content".

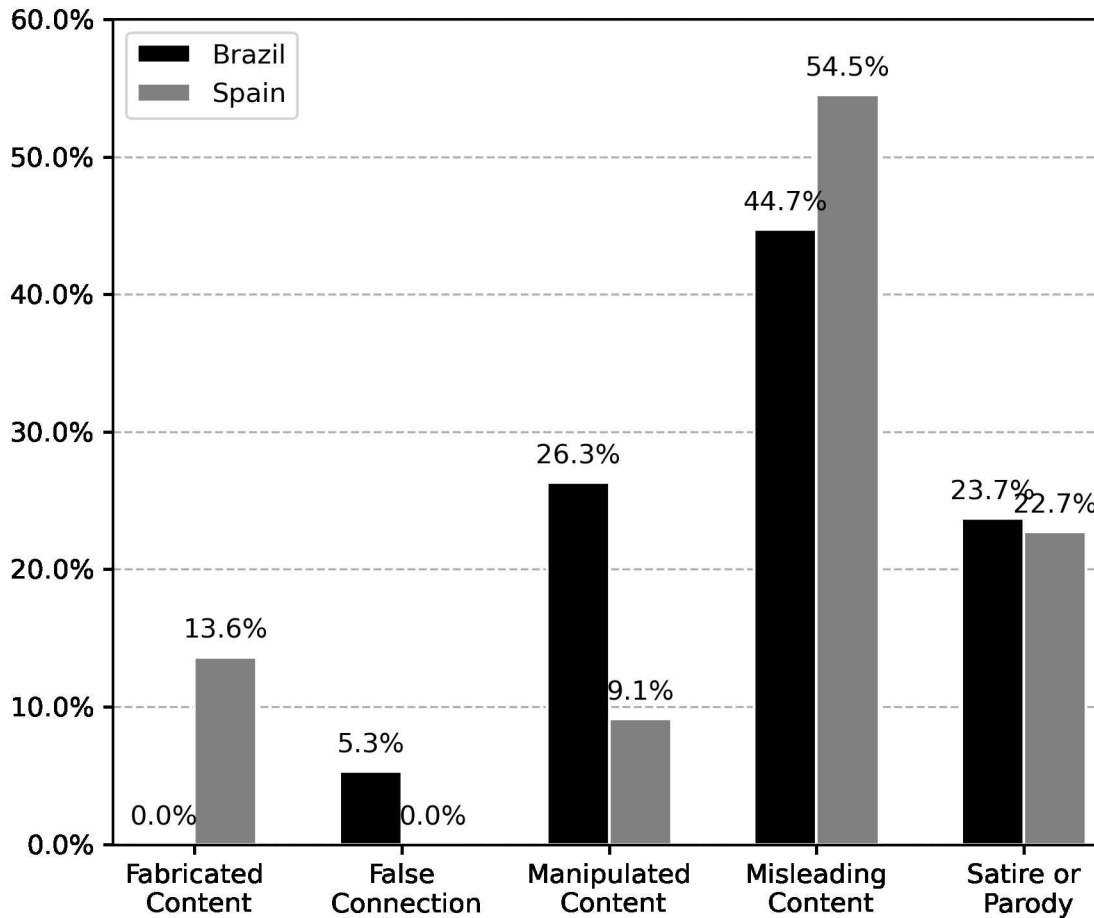
Level

Twitter's algorithm makes it easy to produce and spread messages with information disorder content; everyone can be a source or distributor of information. As shown in Figure 5, in Brazil, 76.3% of the mis/disinformation level were related to the 'Source', which can indicate that in some cases, the sources were people who generally had many followers or public figures that add trust to the message even though the content is not within their area of expertise. In Spain, 81.8% of the mis/disinformation level was related to the Content, with some complex messages using pictures, videos, and statistical data, which people tend to view as accurate and reliable information. Finally, the number of samples annotated as 'Consumer' is low, with 10.5% in Brazil and 4.5% in Brazil. The results indicate a tendency for the production and distribution of mis/disinformation to be personal or politically motivated. However, further research is needed to clarify the motivation.

Profile

In this research, new actors such as twitterers are the predominant senders of the messages in the sample, both in Brazil (23.7%) and in Spain (36.45%). Other key profiles were journalists, with 21.1% in Brazil and 22.7% in Spain, which indicates an ethical issue about the activity of journalists. Political profiles were also important in spreading information disorder in the Spanish sample (22.7%), which suggests disinformation as a political opposition strategy. It is interesting to note the high percentage of profiles of political authorities involved with information disorder. In Brazil, the index was higher than Spain at 15.8%, compared to 9.1%.

Figure 4. Distribution of information disorder types for COVID-19 vaccination narratives



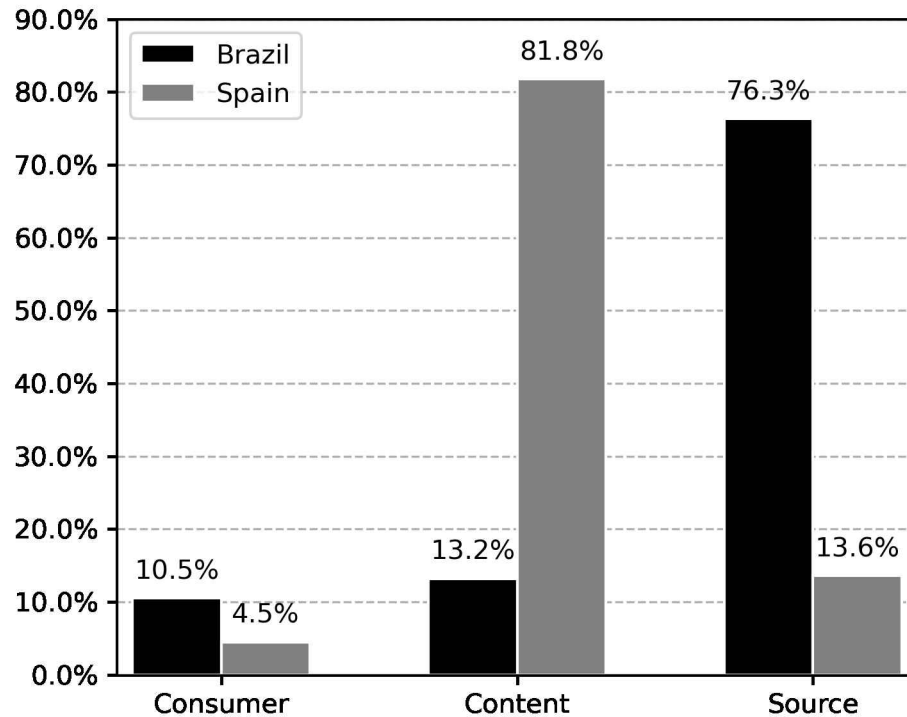
Information Disorder Narrative

Figure 7 shows that the most common claims within information disorder narratives concerning the actions or policies that public or health authorities are taking to address COVID-19 (52.6% in Brazil and 40.9% in Spain). Public authorities can include national/regional/local governments, agencies or ministries and international institutions like the WHO.

The second most common allegation concerns the development and availability of vaccines (18.4% in Brazil and 36.4% in Spain). Some messages showed distrust toward the COVID-19 vaccine resulting from influencers or authority figures not taking the vaccine, public figures receiving the vaccine before frontline workers and older adults, and a preference for alternative therapies such as chloroquine over biomedical treatments.

Conspiracy theories are the third most claimed (15.8% in Brazil and 18.2% in Spain). The claims included skepticism toward the political motivations behind vaccine development, people who felt that

Figure 5. Distribution of level of information disorder types for COVID-19 vaccination narratives



the vaccine was not tested enough due to political pressures to reopen the economy, and a lack of knowledge about vaccines among Twitter users.

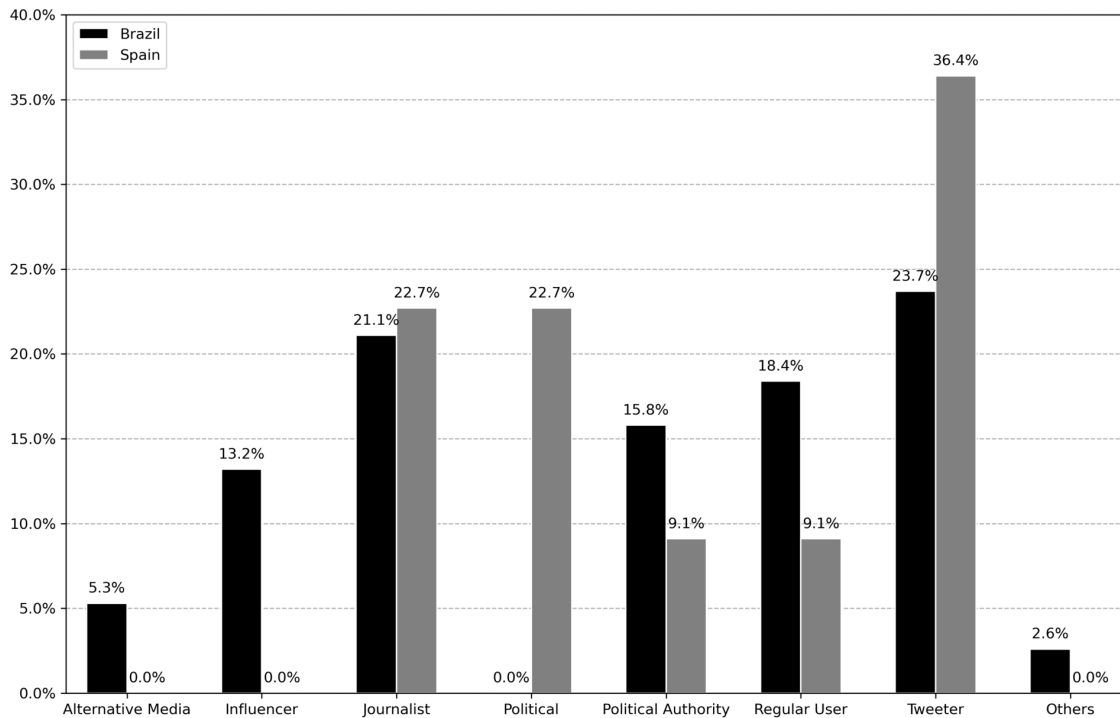
In Brazil, narratives using mis/disinformation against prominent actors, namely the pharmaceuticals industries and the federal government, appear in the sample (5.3%). General medical advice occurred in 7.9% of Brazilian messages, and community spread appeared in 4.5% of Spanish messages, indicating issues for health authorities in communicating direction and policies to the public.

General Information Disorder Narrative

The most common narrative revolves around the government's actions or public authorities such as agencies or ministries, as shown in Figure 8. The authors observed a range of variations of these narratives: some messages used mis/disinformation content to show distrust in the public authorities' ability to handle the pandemic (81.8% in Spain and 31.6% in Brazil); others used misleading content to support the government's approach to controlling the pandemic (39.5% in Brazil and none in Spain). This is an essential contrast between the countries because it shows that there is a balanced claim in Brazil about what the government is accomplishing or not, with a positive or negative emphasis on the purported actions of public authorities, while in Spain, it seems that the majority of the messages criticize the government's management of the coronavirus pandemic.

Almost a third of the misinformation narrative samples, 15.8% in Brazil and 13.6% in Spain, was coded as 'Others', with a predominance of humorous or satirical content. It was annotated by the authors

Figure 6. Distribution of user profile generating information disorder



as an information disorder because, despite its satirical intent, some people can still misinterpret it as serious content.

Finally, 13.2% of Brazilian and 4.5% of Spanish tweets contained a narrative the authors call ‘Pro-Science and Public Health/Regulations’. Some examples of these narratives suggested that preventive remedies and early treatment exist for the virus or criticizing known measures to slow the spread of the virus, such as facemasks and other prevention measures such as social distancing or avoiding crowds.

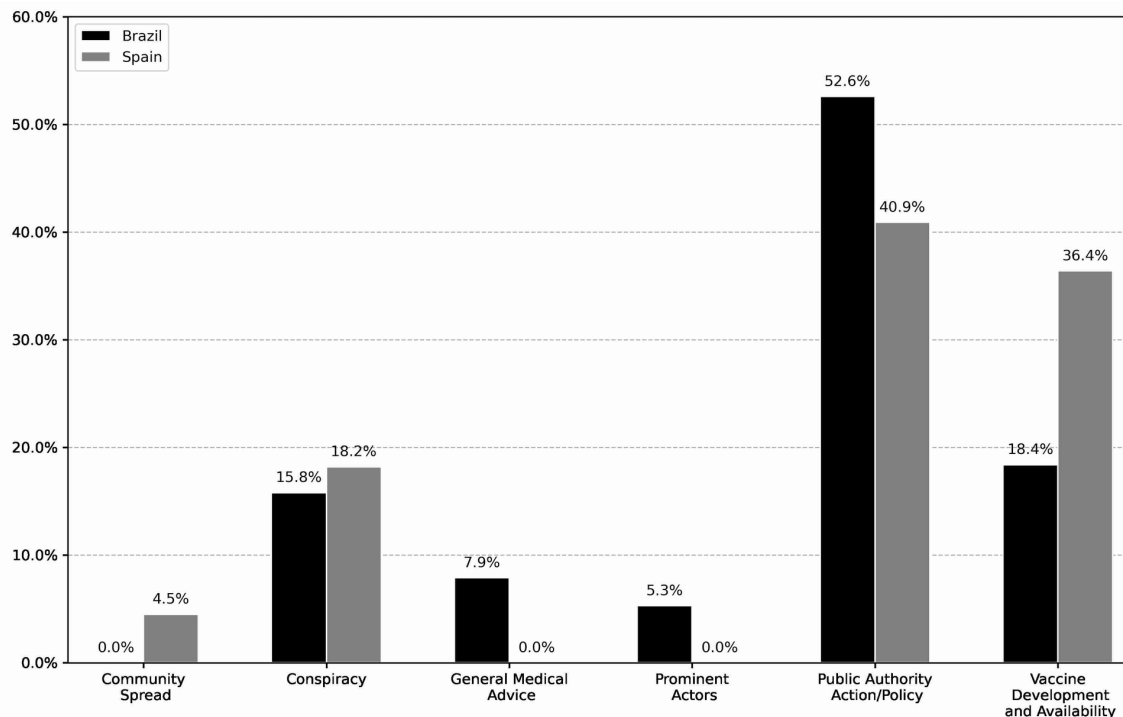
These narratives help to spread distrust in public institutions that, in the case of this study, hinders the process to vaccinate the population and accentuates the crisis of the institutions of liberal democracy (Bennet & Livingston, 2018; Castells, 2018).

To analyze the network of retweets with information disorder, only users who retweeted at least two selected messages classified as having information disorder were considered. In Brazil, as shown in Table 10, 39,850 users (8.2% of the total dataset) distributed 112,353 retweets (12.8%) whose content nature was related to information disorder. In Spain, 5,480 users (5.0%) disseminated 13,522 retweets (7.4%) of this type.

The smaller Brazilian cluster includes 35.7% of the total users and 41.1% of the total retweets. Proportionally, the small cluster in Brazil has grown (as shown in Tables 5 and 10, from 8.0% to 35.7% in the number of users and from 11.1% to 41.1% in retweets) when looking only at retweets with disinformation. In Spain, the proportion of clusters does not change significantly when comparing general and information disorder retweet networks. The small cluster in Spain has 34.7% of users and 31.2% of retweets.

As shown in Table 11, misleading content predominates in the larger cluster in Brazil (62.5%). In comparison, manipulated content is dominant in the smaller (58.4%), followed by misleading content

Figure 7. Distribution of information disorder narrative



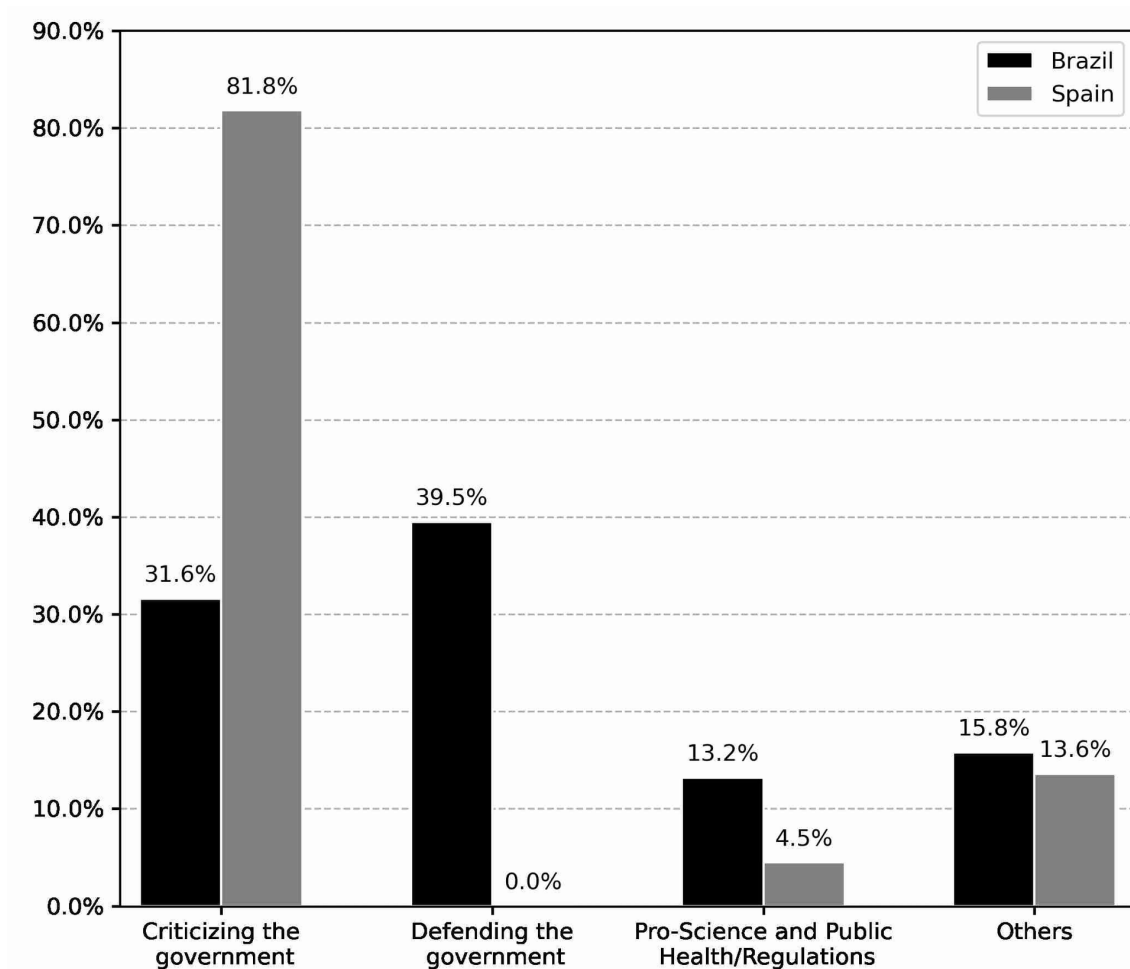
(28.3%) and false connection (13.4%). In Spain, misleading content is also predominant in the larger cluster (67.7%), but in this cluster, there are occurrences of manipulated content (11.5%) and fabricated content (6.7%). Satire or parody occurs in both clusters in Spain, while this type of message only appears in the larger cluster in Brazil. Another point is that both clusters in Spain display manufactured content, whereas there is no such content in Brazil, but there are messages with false context in circulation in both clusters.

The distribution of narratives varies in both clusters in Brazil and Spain, as shown in Table 12. In Brazil, in the larger cluster, there is mainly information disorder about public authority action/policy (58.7%) and conspiracies (22.9%); different narratives are significant in the smaller cluster: public authority action/policy and vaccine development and availability (both about 30%), conspiracy (16.5%), and prominent actors and general medical advice (both about 11%). In Spain, messages about vaccine development and availability (71.3%), conspiracies (15.4%), and public authority action or policy (13.4%) are prevalent in the larger cluster, while the smaller cluster contains retweets about public authority action/policy (81.2%) and community spread (18.2%).

CONCLUSION

From the data presented above, it is possible to identify similarities and differences between Brazil and Spain. In the general debate, it was possible to verify a predominance of criticism of the government in both countries. It is necessary to highlight that the Brazilian government of Jair Bolsonaro is a far-right

Figure 8. Distribution of general information disorder narratives



administration that adopted a negationist and critical stance toward the scientific protocols to combat COVID-19. Many pro-science narratives also have a meaning that contrasts with Bolsonaro’s controversial statements, mainly about defending drugs without scientific efficacy and against the Chinese vaccine. In Spain meanwhile, the administration of Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, from a center-left party (PSOE)

Table 10. Distribution of users and Retweets in clusters for information disorder retweet networks

Information Disorder Retweet Network	Users (Brazil)		Users (Spain)		Retweets (Brazil)		Retweets (Spain)	
	Quantity	%	Quantity	%	Quantity	%	Quantity	%
Larger cluster	25630	64.3%	3552	64.8%	65726	58.5%	9276	68.6%
Smaller cluster	14216	35.7%	1901	34.7%	46136	41.1%	4220	31.2%
Intermediates	4	0.0%	27	0.5%	491	0.4%	26	0.2%
Total	39850	100.0%	5480	100.0%	112353	100.0%	13522	100.0%

Table 11. Distribution of type of information disorder in clusters

Type of Information Disorder	Brazil		Spain	
	Larger	Smaller	Larger	Smaller
Fabricated Content	0.0%	0.0%	6.7%	11.7%
False Connection	4.8%	13.4%	0.0%	0.0%
Manipulated Content	0.0%	58.4%	11.5%	28.4%
Misleading Content	62.5%	28.3%	67.7%	29.3%
Satire or Parody	32.8%	0.0%	14.2%	30.7%

in coalition with the left-wing Unidas Podemos (UP), the criticism of the government narratives are directed at restriction measures (lockdown) and problems in the vaccination program.

A difference that draws attention is related to the volume of tweets in the research sample (the 150 most retweeted). In Brazil, the selected most retweeted messages accounted for 28.4% of the total retweets collected, while in Spain, the volume was only 7.8%. These data indicate that the debate in the Spanish twittersphere was less concentrated than in Brazil; however, there is a need for studies in other online conflicts to verify this public online behavior.

Another relevant difference identified in the general debate is related to the nature of the content. For example, there are numerous occurrences of humor tweets published by Brazilian influencers compared to Spain, where there is greater participation of journalists, highlighting a more significant number of informative posts.

It is noteworthy that there is a minor occurrence of traditional media profiles in both countries among the most retweeted. These data indicate a change in the role of conventional media in the public debate that takes place on social networking sites and shows an essential theme to the research agenda in the field.

The results also show that mis/disinformation can come from various sources and bring many claims. In Spain, the information disorder content relates to attacking public authority action, namely government policy regarding the distribution and availability of the COVID-19 vaccination. Although several messages related to vaccine availability in Brazil, most of the claims showed the government’s defense trends. The arguments used to defend the government range from safety concerns to suspicions about political or economic forces. It is interesting to note that there is a high incidence of mis/disinformation associated with political disputes in both cases, pointing to an issue to be examined in future research.

Table 12. Distribution of information disorder narrative in clusters

Information Disorder Narrative	Brazil		Spain	
	Larger	Smaller	Larger	Smaller
Community Spread	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	18.2%
Conspiracy	22.9%	16.5%	15.4%	0.6%
General Medical Advice	3.9%	11.5%	0.0%	0.0%
Prominent Actors	0.5%	11.9%	0.0%	0.0%
Public Authority Action/Policy	58.7%	30.4%	13.4%	81.2%
Vaccine Development and Availability	14.0%	29.8%	71.3%	0.0%

The data also confirm that discursive conflicts marked the public debate on the vaccination of COVID-19 in both countries on Twitter. These conflicts are characterized by the affective political polarization around the measures and policies adopted by governments to manage the pandemic. In the case of Brazil, one of the main criticisms is the absence of practical actions and negative statements by the Bolsonaro government. The joy and hope for the beginning of the country's vaccination also stand out. In Spain, the data also indicate a political polarization around vaccination, with much criticism of Sánchez's management, described by the authors in the contextualization of this chapter.

The political polarization in both countries creates a favorable environment to spread disinformation, especially in Brazil where Bolsonaro's government and his supporters are a source of information disorder in a chaotic Twittersphere featuring many critics against public authorities. While in Spain, despite having a lower informational disorder index, there is a critical mood against the public authorities too. It is also possible to observe that an ideological view influences the way the leadership reacts to the pandemic. Bolsonaro's government aligned with the alt-right is more concerned with economic issues, defending inefficient medicines and against social isolation. Sánchez's government aligned with a moderate left wing shows more concern on the adoption of more restrictive measures to contain the virus, which bring much criticism to its management, showing similar results to the research of Green et al. (2020) about the leadership in the USA.

The phenomena of political polarization and information disorder are research problems that have attracted the attention of researchers. This comparative study between Brazil and Spain contributes to observing some similarities exist between countries despite their contextual specificities, indicating some trends related to the studied phenomena. An element that drew attention in this research was an association of extreme right profiles with the spread of information disorder, pointing to the need for future research agenda to explore the ideological features of information disorder.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research was supported by t a 2020 Leonardo Grant for Researchers and Cultural Creators, BBVA Foundation; and the Cooperation Agreements FAPESP/MCTI/MC/CGI (FAPESP: 2018/23022-3) - Brazil.

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Chapter 16

Citizens, Polarization, and the Pandemic in the Italian Hybrid News Media System

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ABSTRACT

Italy was the first Western democracy to experience mass lockdown in response to COVID-19. In the early stages of the pandemic, citizens' trust in the government increased and journalists "indexed" to institutional sources; however, elite polarization was not long in coming, in tandem with an infodemic. Rooted in this context, this longitudinal study investigates Italian citizens' positions on an issue which lies at the very heart of democracy: the balance between public health and individual freedoms. Findings indicate that citizens' opinions did not polarize between extreme communitarian and libertarian stances. On the contrary, a significant majority of citizens expressed strong beliefs in the primacy of public health over their freedoms. Extreme libertarians were only a minority, and their positions were driven by a completely different vision of the news reliability of "older" and "newer" media arenas, different attitudes toward the "official truth," and different levels of trust in the government to those of extreme communitarians. Implications are discussed in the conclusion.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8057-8.ch016

INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 was declared a public health emergency of international concern by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 30 January 2020, and a pandemic on 11 March. Although the initial shock seemed to dampen political conflict, disputes and disagreement among political elites about pandemic-related issues soon arose (Bobba & Hubé, 2021a). From an early stage, Covid-19 became a polarized arena of conflict among political elites in Europe (Bobba & Hubé, 2021b) and the United States (Green et al., 2020), where government and opposition leaders/parties took divergent stances in relation to the virus' origins, danger, diffusion, therapy. Moreover, from the earliest phases of pandemic management, political elites struggled to either intensify or relax containment measures by supporting “pro-lockdown” and “anti-lockdown” policies, “no-mask” and “pro-mask” campaigns, and “shaking hands” and “social distancing” rules.

In the US, scholars have shown how polarization in the elite debate around Covid-19 fostered discord in citizens' response to this public health issue, with Democrats more likely than Republicans to take the disease and its consequences seriously and respect the social limits imposed on personal freedoms to protect public health (Allcott et al., 2020; Kushner Gadarian et al., 2020; Van Green & Tyson, 2020). In contrast, in Canada, where there was a cross-party consensus about how to handle the response to the pandemic, partisanship had no effect on public acceptance of social distancing rules (Merkley et al., 2020).

The study presented in this chapter focuses on the country – Italy – which, on 9 March 2020, announced the first mass lockdown in the modern history of Western democracies (“Phase 1” of pandemic management). After two months of mass lockdown, in May, Italy entered “Phase 2”: many restrictions on citizens' freedoms were gradually lifted in light of decreasing pressure on the national health system. However, during this second phase – as early as August – Italy showed the first, weak signs of a new rise in detected cases. Therefore, in October, when there was a conspicuous rise in the rate of increase of detected cases and deaths, the government launched “Phase 3” of its pandemic management by alternating periods of “lighter” and “harder” lockdowns. The government which managed the bulk of the emergency in Italy, until January 2021, was a newborn alliance between the Five Star Movement and left-wing parties, driven by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. Right-wing opposition parties polarized the debate about the emergency measures just after the initial weeks of the Phase-1 lockdown (Bertero & Seddone, 2021; Lovari, 2020).

In this context of heated disputes on pandemic management between government and opposition, this study aims at exploring whether Italian public opinion also demonstrated dynamics of polarization. Specifically, the study explores the state of divergence of Italian public opinion during the first two phases of Covid-19 emergency. Divergence is one of multiple dynamics of polarization which can occur at the societal level, when preferences move apart to opposite extremes (Fiorina et al., 2005; Lelkes, 2016; Wojcieszak, 2016).

The analysis focuses on divergence in public opinion in regard to prioritizing public health over individual freedoms. This tension between national security and personal freedom is an issue that lies at the heart of democracy and, as such, a recurring topic in classical and contemporary political science (Dahl, 1991; Lasswell, 1950; Neal, 2010; Schmitt, 1922). With the Covid-19 emergency, this topic assumed top ranking also on the citizens' agenda: When the Italian government announced the mass lockdown in spring, during a state of emergency, millions of citizens experienced a radical suspension of personal freedoms and democratic rights. Shortly thereafter, citizens around the world experienced

very similar severe limitations on their freedoms, aimed at addressing the crisis in health systems caused by the new coronavirus.

The literature suggests that elite polarization can foster social polarization when combined with a hyper-partisan news media system (Druckman et al., 2013; Prior, 2013), thus providing evidence in support of the hypothesis that Italian public opinion also diverged on this issue. Nevertheless, the literature also provides good reasons to expect that Italian citizens converged on positions that gave priority to the public health protection. A study conducted during the mass lockdown (Bordignon et al., 2020) has pointed out how the majority of Italian citizens accepted limitations on personal freedoms from the state in the name of public security. This tendency has supported critical reflections (Agamben, 2020; Bordignon et al., 2020) on the risks, for liberal democracies, of a protracted use of the state of exception in the name of the pandemic emergency. The public acceptance of derogations from democratic freedoms, in the first phases of pandemic management, may have been encouraged by phenomena that are typical of critical situations caused by external threats to the whole society (for example, a war or a natural disaster), such as “media indexing” (Bennett, 1990) and “rally-around-the-flag” (Baum & Groeling, 2008).

The present study provides useful insights to explore these two hypotheses concerning whether or not Italians’ opinion diverged between both extreme “communitarian” and “libertarian” positions (which claim, respectively, the clear-cut primacy of either public health or citizens’ freedoms).

A second aim of the study is to provide evidence concerning the media predictors of polarization dynamics which unfold at the individual level (Wojcieszak, 2016). In particular, it investigates the effects of disinformation processes on the construction of extreme communitarian and libertarian positions.

Disinformation and polarization have, indeed, proved to be deeply intertwined processes (Humprecht et al., 2020; Benkler et al., 2018; Faris et al., 2017; Recuero et al., 2020): When elite ideological and affective polarization intensify, partisan misinformation and conspiracy theories increase as well (Nyhan, 2018; Tucker et al., 2018). Nevertheless, key gaps and challenges remain in our understanding of the relationships between disinformation and polarization (Tucker et al., 2018).

Defining “disinformation” is the first challenge for researchers in the field. Scholars have provided diverse definitions of “fake news” (Jack, 2017; Tandoc, 2018), mainly emphasizing a lack of veracity in the content or an intention to deceive in sources. Thus, they have neglected one of the main drivers of citizens’ information experience, namely sources’ consistency with their political attitudes (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Weeks & Garrett, 2014). So far, the “fake news genre” (i.e., the deliberate creation of news lacking factual correctness) has mostly gained scholarly attention (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). Nevertheless, highly partisan media systems (such as that in Italy, Cfr. Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Giglietto et al., 2019b) require further research to study the implications of the “fake news label” (i.e., the politicians’ instrumentalization of this label to delegitimize news media which does not align with their views) (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019).

Further research is also needed (Tucker et al., 2018) to understand the role of fake news spread through “newer” and “older” media sources in the processes of opinion polarization. In fact, the core of disinformation studies has mainly focused on the role of social media platforms in infodemic processes, including during the Covid-19 pandemic (Brennen et al., 2020; Ferrara, Cresci, & Luceri, 2020) and in Italy (AGCOM 2020a; Giglietto et al., 2020; Lovari & Righetti, 2020). However, social media platforms are just one of the news media through which people can access information within contemporary “hybrid media systems” (Chadwick, 2017), while traditional news media still dominate political newsmaking and actively take part in disinformation processes (Giglietto et al., 2019a). For this reason, and given the centrality of the traditional news media system during the first phases of the pandemic in Italy (AGCOM,

2020c; Vaccari & Ceccobelli, 2021) and its contribution to the infodemic processes on Covid-19 (WHO, 2020a), the study also took into account legacy sources of (fake) news.

The final challenge addressing researchers studying disinformation in a hybrid media system concerns the consolidation of “post-truth”, a concept that “signals the collapse of the modern project of disciplining knowledge by promoting the scientific model as the only legitimate knowledge” (Waisbord, 2018, p. 1869). When the new coronavirus started to spread around the world, the paucity of scientific knowledge encouraged the development of multiple epistemic cultures engaged in the production of alternative truths on the pandemic, in some cases completely detached from the official scientific paradigm. The relationships between citizens’ disinformation and polarization about Covid-19-related issues cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration the great conflict over how the truth is defined which characterizes contemporary social systems, particularly during a new pandemic. Citizens’ knowledge of (official or alternative) “regimes of truths” about the new coronavirus can lead to opposing perceptions of the seriousness of the disease and, therefore, the need for safety measures, including limitations on personal freedoms.

Taking into account all these considerations about contemporary research on disinformation, this study is conducted at an individual level and with a twofold aim. First, it aims to explore whether (and how) Italian citizens’ opposing judgments on traditional media (television, radio, newspapers), social media, and messaging apps as “fake-news realms” are associated with extreme communitarian and libertarian positions. Second, it investigates whether (and how) the level of knowledge of “official truths” proposed by institutions at the beginning of the emergency was associated with these extreme positions. For this second aim, the study takes into consideration citizens’ knowledge of both Covid-related fake news debunked by institutional sources and news derived from institutional sources. In this way, the association between the level of knowledge and extreme opinions is not interpreted in strictly normative terms but, rather, as connected to trustful vs. doubtful attitudes towards the official regime of truth about Covid-19 proposed by institutions at the beginning of the emergency (as opposed to the alternative regimes of truth proposed by other actors).

Lastly, the study focuses on political predictors of extreme communitarian and libertarian positions. Leveraging recent findings pointing out the association between high levels of citizens’ trust in the government promulgating the “stay-at-home” order, on the one hand, and positive attitudes towards restrictions in Italy, on the other (Bordignon et al., 2020), support for the Italian government is investigated in the present study as a driver of extreme beliefs in the primacy of public health and extreme intolerance of limitations on individual freedoms.

In the next two sections the chapter briefly reviews existing literature on public opinion polarization and “fake news”, addressing some of the multiple conceptualizations and measures of these two multifaceted phenomena which have been proposed by scholars. Leveraging this literature review, research questions are formulated. Following this, the chapter presents the methodological strategy adopted and, finally, discusses the results and main takeaways.

DEFINING AND MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION POLARIZATION

Public opinion polarization is a complex phenomenon that can unfold in relation to policy issues, ideologies, and political actors. According to many studies (e.g., Prior, 2013), mass political polarization hinders social integration, political stability, and economic cohesion. Indeed, political polarization is a

process wherein opposing and conflicting positions occur and the ensuing conflicts become unsustainable for democratic societies. As long discussed in democratic theory (Carpentier, 2011), in democratic societies conflict is not absent but, rather, revealed through fragmented interests and identities among which consensus can be reached. Conversely, when opinion polarization arises, societies, groups, and individuals disagree to an extent at which democratic conflicts become unsustainable, breaching interconnections between fragmented groups and increasing political tensions and hostility.

Research on political polarization has provided multiple conceptualizations and measures that help to grasp the diverse dynamics of this phenomenon at the societal, group, and individual levels (Wojcieszak, 2016). The “divergence” of political positions is one of most investigated manifestations of polarization (Lelkes, 2016), alongside the “consistency” of opinions (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008), “perceived polarization” (Yang et al., 2016), and “affective polarization” (Iyengar et al., 2012).

Conceptualizing polarization as divergence means measuring the extent to which public opinion moves towards the extreme poles of a theoretically informed continuum (Fiorina et al., 2005). According to this view, public opinion is polarized when citizens’ positions split into two very distant, alternative, and irreconcilable “poles”.

To study the divergence of public opinion, the literature on polarization has suggested diverse measures and indexes that point out the presence of bimodal and dispersed distributions of positions (DiMaggio et al., 1996; Pfister et al., 2013). Freeman and Dale (2013) and Lelkes (2016), among others, have shed light on the utility of a measure of bimodality known as the “bimodality coefficient” (BC). The BC of a given empirical distribution is compared to a benchmark value of 0.555, which is expected for a uniform distribution; higher numbers point toward bimodality whereas lower numbers point toward unimodality (Pfister et al., 2013). BC may find a spurious second mode in long-tailed, skewed distributions (Freeman & Dale, 2013). Lee (2016) has developed a “polarization score” (PS) (range: 0–100), showing how many respondents occupy the two extreme positions of a scale and the evenness of the distribution of these extreme positions between the two poles. Given that neither index is perfectly sensitive and specific at the same time, it is recommended that descriptive statistics are also taken into consideration and distributions are graphically inspected (Pfister et al., 2013).

Leveraging this seminal polarization research, the present study aims at understanding whether and to what extent, in Italy, during the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, public opinion diverged in relation to a disputed issue raised by the mass lockdown and other restrictive measures, which is the primacy of public health over individual freedoms. Specifically, the study asks:

RQ1: Whether and to what extent Italian public opinion diverged between both extreme communitarian and libertarian positions during the first two phases of the Covid-19 pandemic.

There are good reasons to expect that Italian public opinion diverged on this issue. As mentioned in the previous section, in fact, elite polarization can foster social polarization (Druckman et al., 2013; Prior, 2013), particularly when it is combined with a hyper-partisan news media system and widespread use of social media (Tucker et al., 2018). In Italy, the high partisanship of traditional news media (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and social media (Giglietto et al., 2019b) may have amplified elite polarization on the pandemic (Bertero & Seddone, 2021), thus fostering mass polarization.

However, as stated above, there are also good reasons to expect Italian citizens to converge on communitarian positions during the first stages of pandemic management, accepting derogations from democratic rights and freedoms in the name of public health protection. Two phenomena, in particular, can have driven a diffused acceptance of unprecedented limitations on personal freedoms.

During the first phases of the pandemic, Italian journalists relied mainly on institutional actors, giving space to data on contagion rates, deaths, and pressure on the public health system and marginalizing the polarizing messages of the opposition parties (AGCOM, 2020a, 2020b; Bertero & Seddone, 2021). This process of “media indexing” (Bennett, 1990) – typical in U.S. foreign crises – may have encouraged public opinion’s acceptance of the restrictions imposed by government. Moreover, as happens in other external shocks, a sort of “rally-around-the-flag” phenomenon (Baum & Groeling, 2008) also occurred in Italy: The pandemic increased citizens’ trust in government (Bol et al., 2021; Bordignon et al., 2020). Rather than divergence patterns, this ceasefire on the part of journalists and the increasing trust in government would suggest that Italian citizens are more likely to believe in the primacy of public health over individual freedoms.

Leveraging the measures suggested by polarization studies (Lee 2016; Lelkes, 2016; Pfister et al., 2013), this study explores these two hypotheses concerning the presence or absence of a state of divergence in Italian public opinion toward extreme communitarian and libertarian positions in Phase 1 and 2 of the pandemic management.

POLARIZATION AND “FAKE NEWS” IN THE HYBRID MEDIA SYSTEM

As intertwined phenomena (Benkler et al., 2018; Faris et al., 2017; Humprecht et al., 2020; Recuero et al., 2020), polarization and disinformation can fuel each other and, together, challenge democratic debate. Political polarization can make people more vulnerable to disinformation, whereas disinformation can lead to greater political polarization (Tucker et al., 2018). In the US, for example, where elite ideological polarization and affective polarization intensified under the Trump administration, partisan misinformation and conspiracy theories have also increased (Nyhan, 2018). Disinformation is inherently related to mass political polarization (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020), because, as seen, high levels of partisanship can lead citizens to uncritically accept (dis)information that is congruent with their political views rather than consider the content’s factual correctness (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Weeks & Garrett, 2014). However, key gaps in our understanding of the relationships between disinformation and polarization persist and require further research (Tucker et al., 2018).

In the previous section, we introduced some of the main challenges for researchers in the field of disinformation. The most significant may be that related to the concept of disinformation itself.

Many scholars have discussed conceptual ambiguities concerning disinformation processes. After Trump’s election in 2016, when “fake news” was becoming a fuzzy buzzword in public debate and the scientific literature, many scholars took on the challenging task of defining what fake news is (e.g., Jack, 2017; Tandoc, 2018). Most such definitions identify fake news by looking at the lack of veracity on content and whether sources intend to deceive. However, this emphasis neglects one of the main drivers of citizens’ information experience, that is, whether sources are consistent with their political attitudes (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Weeks & Garrett, 2014). In a context of a hyper-partisan media, political beliefs and ideology outweigh the need for factual correctness and foster citizens’ (mis)perceptions of news (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020).

Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019) distinguished between the “fake news genre”, that is, the deliberate creation of pseudo-journalistic disinformation, and the “fake news label”, in other words the political exploitation of the label “fake news” to delegitimize news media with opposing views. As suggested by these authors, the “fake news label” can influence partisan citizens’ judgment regarding the reliability

of news media more than the content's factual correctness or the source's intention to deceive, a judgment which also affects the rejection or acceptance of (dis)information. In the US, for example, when President Trump delegitimized liberal media as "crooked media" and "fake news," Republicans and heavy Facebook news consumers were more likely to distrust legacy news media and believe that social media news was accurate than Democrats and those who relied more on other news sources (Guess et al., 2017; Silverman & Singer-Vine, 2016). Additionally, during the pandemic (March 2020), U.S. citizens' perceptions of Covid-19 media coverage were starkly polarized: A vast majority of Republicans aligned with Trump's claims about the unreliability of legacy media, stating that these news media exaggerated the risks connected to the virus (Mitchell & Oliphant, 2020). In Western Europe, populist views (and their anti-elite-media messages) seem to divide citizens in their evaluation of legacy news media (Mitchell et al., 2018). However, outside the US, there is still limited research on the effects of this "weaponization of the fake news label" (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). Research on the implications of the "fake news label" is particularly necessary to grasp disinformation processes in contexts – like Italy – of high partisanship in the traditional news media (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and social media (Giglietto et al., 2019b).

A second challenge for research on disinformation is related to the diverse news sources available in the high-choice contemporary media environment.

Studies on disinformation and polarization have mainly focused on digital platforms (Tucker et al., 2018). During the Covid-19 emergency, likewise, studies on disinformation have mainly researched social media platforms (Brennen et al., 2020; Ferrara et al., 2020), including in Italy (AGCOM 2020a; Giglietto et al., 2020; Lovari & Righetti, 2020), revealing a significant increase in online disinformation on coronavirus. Despite the significant role played by widespread usage of social media in disinformation and polarization processes (Tucker et al., 2018), these platforms are only some of the many used by individuals use to keep themselves informed in contemporary hybrid media systems (Chadwick, 2017). Contemporary hybrid political news making is more inclusive: Here, older and newer media compete and overlap in the construction of political news cycles. Older media are still dominant in this process (Chadwick, 2017) and can take part in contemporary hybrid fake news cycles (Giglietto et al., 2019a), particularly during emergencies, when authorities and experts also have limited knowledge.

This centrality of the legacy media in the (dis)information processes was also confirmed during the first phases of the pandemic. In Italy, the supply and demand of information increased in both traditional and online media (AGCOM, 2020c). The Italian Prime Minister, for example, made intense use of social media, but he was also on tv and radio, and in newspapers of every political color (Vaccari & Ceccobelli, 2021). Moreover, traditional media – in Italy as well as worldwide – played a central role in the infodemic processes around Covid-19, as observed by the WHO. In mid-February 2020, the WHO warned about the spread of an "infodemic" (WHO, 2020a), by which it meant "an overabundance of information, both online and offline," including accurate as well as misleading or fake information (WHO, 2020b). This scenario of an information crisis exacerbated by the pandemic reminds us of the need to pay attention to both newer and older news media, in Italy and abroad.

Finally, disinformation studies concerning the first phases of the Covid-19 pandemic have faced the initial scarcity of scientific knowledge of the new coronavirus. The context of the emergency has contributed to the consolidation of "post-truth" (Waisbord, 2018), that is, the crisis of the modern project of disciplining knowledge through the promotion of the scientific model. Contemporary societies have seen the emergence of official and alternative regimes of truth on the pandemic (on the virus' origins, danger, diffusion, therapy, measures of containment), nurtured by multiple epistemic cultures. The adherence to

these opposing regimes of truth about Covid-19 could lead people to adopt extreme opposing positions on the limitations on personal freedoms.

Against this background, the present study investigates the relations between disinformation and extreme communitarian and libertarian opinions by focusing on two processes. First, the study analyzes the effects of citizens' perceptions of the news reliability of older and newer media (tv, radio, newspapers, social media, messaging apps) by asking:

RQ2: Whether and how opposite perceptions of older and newer media arenas as characterized by the circulation of false or falsified information were connected to extreme libertarian or communitarian positions.

Second, the study investigates the effects of citizens' level of knowledge of the "official truths" proposed by institutions, during the first phase of the emergency, by using a measure that explains their knowledge of both fake news related to Covid-19, chosen from among news items debunked by institutional sources, and news coming from institutional sources. Specifically, the study asks:

RQ3: Whether and how levels of knowledge of Covid-related official truths were associated with extreme libertarian or communitarian positions.

Lastly, the study considers the relationship between these extreme positions and support/hostility for the government. Following a recent study which highlighted that trust in the Italian government fostered positive positions on restrictions, regardless of ideological positions or voting intentions (Bordignon et al., 2020), the study asks:

RQ4: Whether and how trust in the government which issued the "stay-at-home" order was associated with extreme libertarian or communitarian positions.

DATA AND METHODS

The present analysis is based on the first two waves of a three-wave CAWI survey administered to a sample representative of the Italian adult population (aged 18 -74) with internet access based on quotas related to gender, age, education, employment status, and region of residence¹. The first wave was carried out in May 2020, immediately after the conclusion of Phase 1 of the pandemic management in Italy, during which the country endured a two-month mass lockdown. The second wave was administered in September 2020, at the end of Phase 2, when citizens experienced less strict limitations on their individual freedoms.

In order to analyze (RQ1) whether, and to what extent, during these two different moments of the Covid-19 pandemic, respondents' opinions moved apart to opposite extremes in the tension between the value of public health and the importance of individual freedoms, we considered a question in our survey which asked interviewees to indicate their position on an 11-point scale with respect to two opposite statements. The first was that "citizens' freedoms always come before public health," and the second was that "public health always comes before citizens' freedoms." Leveraging this original scale, we built a measure of positions on this issue ranging from 0 (extreme communitarian position) to 10 (extreme libertarian position). We measured the divergence of this distribution through the BC (Lelkes, 2016) and the PS (Lee, 2016). Moreover, we compared the two indexes by taking into consideration descriptive statistics and graphically inspecting distributions (Pfister et al., 2013). Furthermore, to have a "benchmark" of divergence in Italian public opinion, we compared divergence on public health with divergence recorded for other divisive issues in Italian public debate before the Covid-19 pandemic (Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri, 2019), namely immigration and European integration. For this purpose, a further two questions

asked interviewees to indicate their position with respect to the following opposing statements: “Being part of the European Union is good for Italy” versus “Being part of the European Union is not good for Italy;” and “Immigration is a threat to the security of our country” versus “Immigration is not a threat to the security of our country” (all descriptive statistics for these measures are provided in Table 1).

Then, to explore the relationships between extreme positions on public health and different perceptions of the hybrid media system as an infodemic environment (RQ2), knowledge of official truths about different aspects of the Covid pandemic (RQ3), and trust in the national government (RQ4), we employed two different logistic regressions predicting the likelihood of assuming, respectively, extremely libertarian and extremely communitarian stances. We were specifically interested in understanding the effects of citizens’ disinformation experiences during the total lockdown which started on 9 March 2020 (and ended immediately before the fielding of our Wave 1 survey), as infodemic processes particularly intensified during the first stages of the emergency (WHO, 2020a, 2020b). Therefore, we present both cross-sectional (all variables measured in Wave 1) and auto-regressive models (where dependent variables are measured in Wave 2 while all covariates, including the lagged value of the dependent variable, are measured in Wave 1). Cross-sectional analyses will be employed to explore associations between our independent variables and the probability of assuming extreme positions, while auto-regressive models will offer the opportunity to understand whether some degree of causality can be envisaged in such relations.

Each of our dependent variables clusters together respondents who positioned themselves close to one of the most extreme positions on the public health-related issue outlined above versus all other respondents, including those who positioned themselves at the opposite extreme. We thus employed the same question presented above and, to identify “the libertarians”, we coded as 1 those who chose one of the three scale points closest to the statement “citizens’ freedoms always come before public health” (8.4% of our respondents in Wave 1 and 7.6% in Wave 2) and all others as 0. Conversely, to identify “the communitarians”, we coded as 1 those who chose one of the three scale points closest to the statement “public health always comes before citizens’ freedoms ” (61.8% in Wave 1 and 58.1% in Wave 2) and all others as 0.

Our first set of independent variables measures respondents’ perceptions of older and newer media arenas as characterized by the presence of false or falsified information (RQ2). In this sense we considered answers to the three following questions: “Thinking of the last two months, how often have you encountered news related to political or public interest issues that, in your opinion, included fabrications, fake news, or more broadly false information...” “...on television, radio, print and digital newspapers,” “... on social media (such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, etc.),” “...on messaging apps (such as WhatsApp, Telegram, etc.).” Respondents could choose between “Never” (coded as 0), “Only rarely” (coded as 1), “Sometimes” (coded as 2), “Often” (coded as 3), “Always” (coded as 4), and “I don’t know” (treated as a missing value). The resulting variables averaged 2.03 (SD 0.95) for older media (tv, newspapers, and radio), 2.6 (SD 0.96) for social media, and 2.14 (SD 1.17) for messaging apps.

Secondly, we included in our models an index measuring levels of respondents’ knowledge of official truths concerning different aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic (RQ3). Respondents were asked to assess seven statements as “true” or “false” and were also offered a “don’t know” option. Five statements were related to the medical aspects of the pandemic and were created from notes published on the official website of the Italian Health Ministry² in a section aimed at debunking fake news circulating during the first months of the Covid emergency. The remaining two statements were related to news coming from institutional sources³ and concerning other issues at the center of the infodemic processes (EEAS, 2021), that is, the initiatives taken by the EU or other European countries to offer support to Italy during the first

phases of the Covid-19 emergency. Correct evaluations were coded as 1, while both wrong and “don’t know” answers were coded as 0. The resulting values were combined into a 0–7 index (mean 4.94, SD 1.71)⁴. Here, we report the full list of the statements included:

- The spread of the Covid-19 pandemic was facilitated by the installation of 5G antennas (False; correctly evaluated by 81.3% of respondents).
- Immigrants from non-EU countries are immune to coronavirus thanks to the vaccine against tuberculosis (False; correctly evaluated by 78.3% of respondents).
- Antibiotics do not prevent coronavirus infection (True; correctly evaluated by 78.4% of respondents).
- The use of disinfectants containing 70% alcohol or bleach is effective to kill coronavirus on surfaces (True; correctly evaluated by 69.2% of respondents).
- The coronavirus that generated the Covid-19 pandemic was created in a Chinese laboratory (False; correctly evaluated by 47.9% of respondents).
- During the lockdown, Germany helped Italy by treating Italian patients in German hospitals (True; correctly evaluated by 59.4% of respondents).
- The European Stability Mechanism (MES) is an Italian government program created to face the coronavirus emergency (False; correctly evaluated by 79.4% of respondents).

Thirdly, we focused on trust in the Italian government (RQ4), which we measured by employing a specific item in a battery on institutional trust introduced by the question: “How confident are you in the following institutions and public actors?”. Response modes were “Not at all” (coded as 0), “a little” (1), “sufficiently” (2), “a lot” (3), “totally” (4), and “don’t know” (treated as a missing value). The mean value of the resulting variable is 1.43 (SD 1.0).

Finally, we included in our models a set of control variables measuring the frequency with which respondents reported using radio, tv, print and digital newspapers, social media, and messaging apps to remain informed about politics and public interest issues, as well as the usual sociodemographic variables⁵.

FINDINGS

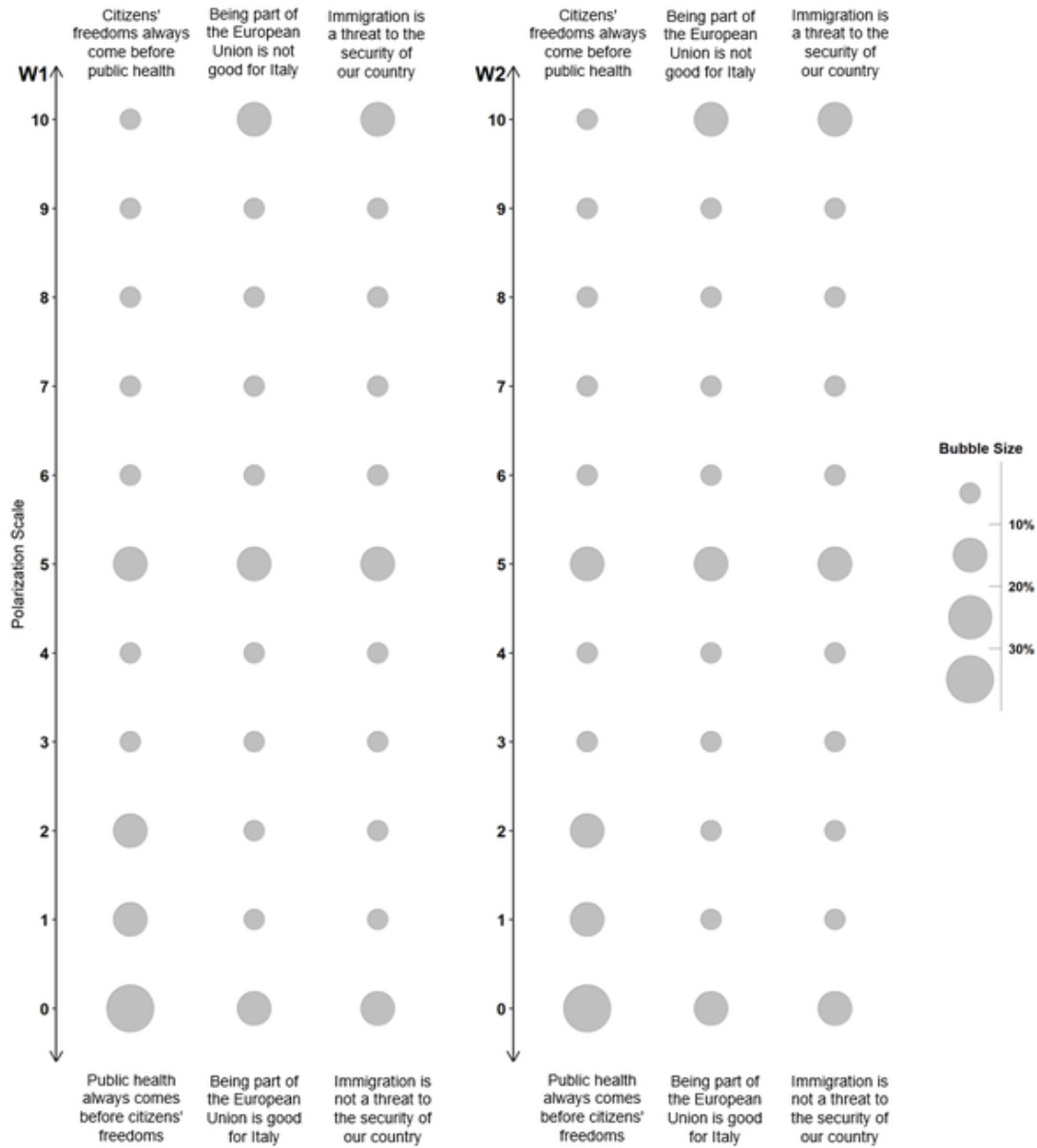
Our first research question asked whether, at two crucial moments of the management of the Covid-19 pandemic, respondents’ opinions diverged, moving apart to opposite extreme positions in the tension between the value of public health and the importance of individual freedoms.

Figure 1 shows that, for Wave 1 and Wave 2, the distribution of respondents’ positions on the 11-point scales presenting, at their extremes, two opposing statements concerning public health, immigration, and European integration. Table 1 summarizes descriptive statistics and indexes (Bimodality Coefficient – BC, and Polarization Score – PS) concerning these distributions.

In Wave 1, after two months of total lockdown, the distribution of respondents’ opinions on giving priority to public health over citizens’ freedoms pointed toward bimodality (BC: 0.66), but the peaks did not concern the two most extreme positions (PS: 18,0). On the contrary, the distribution of responses was deeply asymmetric, unbalanced towards extreme communitarian positions. The peaks of consensus referred to the most extreme communitarian (30%) and nearby positions (31.8%). At the opposite end of the scale, the most extreme libertarian position gained low consensus (4.7%), as did the positions

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Figure 1. Answers' distribution (%) to the question: "Here are some pairs of statements that indicate opposing positions on matters of public interest. With respect to such statements, where would you place your opinion?" (N= 1353). The graph displays results of both wave 1 (W1) and wave 2 (W2) of the survey



next to it (3.8%). The distribution of the sample's responses in relation to Europe and immigration was clearly different. Here, the significant BC value indicates the peaks of consensus occurring for positions that were distant from each other, including the two most extreme and the central one. The balancing between the two most extreme positions and a higher percentage of extreme positions brought about a

Table 1. Positions on issues concerning public health, Europe, and immigration: descriptive statistics, bimodality coefficient, and polarization score. Table summarizes results of both wave 1 and wave 2 of the survey

	Public health always comes before citizens' freedoms (0) Citizens' freedoms always come before public health (10)		Being part of the European Union is good for Italy (0) Being part of the European Union is not good for Italy (10)		Immigration is not a threat to the security of our country (0) Immigration is a threat to the security of our country (10)	
	W1	W2	W1	W2	W1	W2
Mean	2.57	2.66	4.67	4.22	4.81	5.12
Median	2	2	5	4	5	5
Standard Deviation	2.78	2.77	3.57	3.54	3.56	3.6
Variance	7.71	7.67	12.78	12.53	12.65	12.99
Skewness	1.18	1.05	0.13	0.31	0.11	0.01
Kurtosis	0.63	0.36	-1.35	-1.25	-1.38	-1.41
Polarization Score (Lee, 2016)	17.98	16.65	33.44	31.64	32.84	37.93
Bimodality Coefficient (Lelkes, 2016)	0.66	0.62	0.61	0.62	0.62	0.63
N	1353	1353	1353	1353	1353	1353

higher polarization score for these issues than that concerning the tension between public health and individuals' freedom.

In Wave 2, at the end of Phase 2, the BC value for responses concerning libertarian and communitarian positions decreased (BC: 0.62); again, however, we can observe an asymmetric distribution. Extreme communitarian positions maintained their stable peak of consensus (30%), while nearby positions slightly decreased in favor of central positions. The light emptying of the most extreme libertarian positions in Wave 2 (4,0%) led to a lower PS (16.6%). Compared with responses to the public-health-related issue, those referring to Europe and immigration recorded a consistently higher PS, including in Wave 2, as extreme positions were more balanced between the two opposite poles. A sharp increase of BC in Wave 2 was also seen: the peaks of consensus again referred to positions that were distant from each other.

To sum up, taking into consideration the issue related to public health and individual freedom, the distribution showed that the sample's opinions did not diverge, but, rather, converged on the extreme communitarian position after both Phase 1 and 2 of the pandemic. What we observe is a persistent concentration of extreme communitarian stances, which lost a small degree of consensus after the summer but without any subsequent greater favoring of extreme libertarian positions. Conversely, Europe and immigration issues indicated a greater division among interviewees, even if there was no move towards the two extreme positions since respondents also selected central values.

These data provide us with an answer to our first research question: in both May and September 2020 – that is, at the end of the first two phases of the crisis management – citizens with access to legacy and digital media did not diverge between two extreme positions but tended to align their opinion with the Italian government's communitarian rhetoric. Despite the increasing divergence, from April onwards, between government and opposition regarding restrictions on personal freedoms, citizens' opinion did not polarize but, rather, concentrated on extreme communitarian positions. Extreme libertarians were,

until September, only a minority, albeit a minority which took up a position which was very far from the average and radically opposed to the mainstream debate.

Our second, third, and fourth research questions focused on the associations of libertarian and communitarian positions with different perceptions of the hybrid media system as populated by fake news, levels of pandemic (official) knowledge, and trust in the government. Table 2 presents the results of cross-sectional (Models 1 and 3) and autoregressive (Models 2 and 4) logistic regressions predicting the likelihood of assuming libertarian (Models 1 and 2) or communitarian (Models 3 and 4) positions.

Let us start by focusing on the libertarians, who, as stated above, were a minority in our sample. If we consider the cross-sectional analysis (Model 1), we see that the coefficient measuring the frequency of perceived encounters with fake news on older media (newspapers, radio, and tv) is positive and significant. On the contrary, the coefficient measuring the same perception on social media is negative and significant. The effect of the perception of legacy media as highly populated by fake news also holds in the autoregressive framework (Model 2), providing some statistical support for the idea of a causal relation. In this setting, however, the negative effect of a “social media-as-fake-news realm” perception disappears, but it is replaced by likewise negative and significant effect of similar perception of messaging Apps, suggesting a negative pattern connected to digital platforms.

Regressions predicting the likelihood of assuming a communitarian position yield the opposite results, at least in the cross-sectional setting (Model 3). Indeed, the coefficient measuring the perception of older media as populated by false information is negative and significant while the same coefficient is positive and significant for social media. In this case, the significant association between the perception related to social media experience is confirmed in the auto-regressive setting, indicating a causal relation, while the same cannot be said for legacy media.

Taken together, these findings provide us with an answer to our second research question by unveiling what we believe is a clear pattern: The perception of legacy news media as a toxic environment populated by false, inaccurate, or made-up information during the lockdown was positively associated with – and boosted over time by – the likelihood of assuming a libertarian position, while it was negatively associated with the likelihood of having a communitarian position. Conversely, people who believed that fake news was profusely circulating on social media during the lockdown were also more likely to have communitarian positions, and this perception increased such probability over time. An opposite negative relation (if we consider either social media or messaging apps) was found between libertarian positions and concern about the quality of information encountered on digital platforms.

Findings connected to our third research question confirm this pattern, indicating how diverse attitudes toward official truths lead to opposite positions in the tension between public health and individual freedoms. In this case, the association between higher levels of knowledge connected to the Covid-19 pandemic and libertarian positions is negative and significant in the cross-sectional analysis (Model 1) and maintains its significance in the auto-regressive design (Model 2) if we relax the threshold to $p \leq 0.1$. In contrast, the coefficients’ direction is positive in the models (3 and 4) predicting a communitarian stand, and statistical significance is coherent with the levels just described for models predicting a libertarian position. In other words, a higher level of (official) knowledge connected to different aspects of the pandemic boosted the probability of having a communitarian position and depressed the likelihood of assuming a libertarian one.

Findings related to our last question also point in this direction, since the coefficients related to levels of trust in the national government are negative and significant for the two models (1 and 2) predicting the likelihood of assuming a libertarian position, while they are positive and significant for those (2 and

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Table 2. Cross-sectional and autoregressive logistic models predicting the likelihood of assuming extreme positions on the liberty vs health issue

	Dependent variable:			
	Cross-sectional libertarian position	Autoregressive libertarian position	Cross-sectional communitarian position	Autoregressive communitarian position
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Frequency of perceived exposition to fake news on...				
...social media	-0.46** (0.15)	-0.23 (0.18)	0.34*** (0.08)	0.21* (0.10)
...Apps of instant messaging	0.12 (0.13)	-0.34* (0.15)	-0.004 (0.06)	-0.05 (0.08)
...legacy media	0.29* (0.14)	0.40* (0.17)	-0.21** (0.08)	-0.14 (0.09)
Knowledge about the Covid pandemic	-0.20** (0.07)	-0.16+ (0.09)	0.08* (0.04)	0.09+ (0.05)
Trust in national government	-0.69*** (0.13)	-0.55*** (0.16)	0.37*** (0.07)	0.46*** (0.08)
Frequency of information through...				
...radio	0.03 (0.09)	0.21+ (0.11)	-0.12* (0.05)	-0.08 (0.06)
...TV	-0.20+ (0.11)	-0.20 (0.13)	0.13* (0.06)	0.10 (0.08)
...newspapers and newspapers websites	0.10 (0.10)	0.05 (0.11)	0.03 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.06)
... Social media	0.19 (0.12)	0.10 (0.14)	-0.01 (0.06)	0.04 (0.07)
...Apps of instant messaging	0.11 (0.10)	0.17 (0.12)	-0.07 (0.05)	-0.12* (0.06)
Gender (Female)	-0.33 (0.23)	0.13 (0.30)	0.32* (0.13)	0.21 (0.15)
Age	0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.02*** (0.005)	0.004 (0.01)
Educational level	0.02 (0.17)	0.08 (0.22)	-0.03 (0.10)	-0.08 (0.11)
Income	-0.05 (0.06)	0.07 (0.08)	0.005 (0.03)	0.06 (0.04)
Lagged Libertarian Position		2.60*** (0.31)		
Lagged Communitarian Position				1.88*** (0.15)
Constant	-1.06 (0.72)	-2.17* (0.91)	-2.09*** (0.42)	-2.38*** (0.50)
N	1,256	1,090	1,256	1,090
Log Likelihood	-294.66	-194.41	-770.96	-582.61
Akaike Inf. Crit.	621.32	422.81	1,573.92	1,199.22
<i>Note:</i> Coefficients are log-odds, standard errors are in parentheses. The dummy variable identifying missing observations on income is not reported in table (see note 3). + p < 0.1; * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001				

3) predicting having a communitarian stand. Extreme positions assumed by citizens on public health were thus strongly associated with, and caused by, their support of or hostility toward the government. We could infer that those who were more trusting of the government were also more likely to believe that the way public institutions were managing the pandemic was appropriate and that the restrictions enforced were necessary; while those who did not trust the government developed the opposite opinions.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Since the early stages of the pandemic, Italy – like other Western democracies – has witnessed an increasing politicization and polarization of the elite debate on Covid-19 (Bertero & Seddone, 2021; Bobba & Hubé, 2021b; Lovari, 2020). Government and opposition leaders/parties have sent divergent messages on issues concerning the pandemic, including measures of containment, taking “pro-lockdown” and “anti-lockdown” stances.

In this context, we conducted a longitudinal study on a representative sample of adult Italians with Internet access, interviewed immediately after the first total lockdown (Phase 1 of pandemic management) and at the end of Phase 2, when many restrictions on citizens’ freedoms were being gradually lifted.

The first aim of the study was to understand whether, in this scenario of heated disputes among political elites and during the early stages of the pandemic, Italian public opinion also diverged between a libertarian stance (which gave priority to citizens’ freedoms over public health) and a communitarian one (which gave priority to public health over citizens’ freedoms). Second, the study aimed at investigating the effects of both disinformation processes and trust in the government on extreme opinions.

Data analysis showed that respondents’ opinions did not diverge between extreme libertarian and communitarian positions. On the contrary, unlike the issues of European integration and immigration, which show a greater degree of division among interviewees, what we observed in relation to this public-health-related issue was the dominance of the extreme communitarian position, which was also evident at the end of Phase 2.

This first result indicates that in Italy – unlike the US (Allcott et al., 2020; Kushner Gadarian, Goodman, & Pepinsky, 2020; Van Green & Tyson, 2020) – polarization of Covid-19 elite debate did not foster, at least in the early stages of the pandemic, mass polarization. On the contrary, a significant majority of Italian citizens clustered around extreme beliefs in the primacy of public health over their personal freedoms. This can be an effect of both the journalists’ initial cease-fire (AGCOM, 2020b; Bertero & Seddone, 2021) – as in the “media indexing” hypothesis (Bennett, 1990) – and the increasing trust felt by citizens in the government which issued the “stay-at-home” order (Bol et al., 2021) – as in the “rally-around-the-flag” phenomenon (Baum & Groeling, 2008).

The significant manifestation of extreme communitarian positions revealed in this study is a “stress test” for democratic values. According to this finding, in the case of Covid-19, the tension between public security and individual freedoms – an issue which lies at the very heart of democracy (Dahl, 1991; Lasswell, 1950) – is indeed largely resolved by citizens choosing to give absolute priority to public health security. The public acceptance of unprecedented limitations on personal freedoms, in the name of public health protection, during the first two phases of the pandemic, may represent a fertile ground for a normalized suspension of democratic rights within the emergency frame (Agamben, 2020; Bordignon et al., 2020). More than a year after the total lockdown, as this chapter is being finalized, Italy has a new

government, but the fact that the formal state of emergency remains in place in this country raises the question of whether a contemporary democracy can face a pandemic without ceasing to be a democracy.

The manifestation of extreme libertarian positions during the emergency, even if they are decidedly in the minority, challenges the democratic management of a pandemic in another way. These radical positions – very distant from the average – can indeed activate diverse types of practices of dissent against behaviors that are proving to be effective in the containment of the pandemic, such as vaccination. In Phase 3, Italy has experienced violent anti-vax demonstrations, and some doctors and nurses have refused to have the vaccination.

Moreover, findings from logistic regression models clearly indicate that extreme libertarians and extreme communitarians are separated in relation not only to a specific issue but to a whole system of attitudes towards the news media system, official truths, and the government.

Indeed, the analysis showed, on the one hand, a strong relation between trust in the government, a trustful attitude toward the legacy news media and institutional sources as reliable sources, a vision of digital platforms as infodemic environments, and extreme communitarian positions. On the other hand, extreme libertarians were driven by distrust in the government, skepticism of the legacy news media and official truths about Covid-19, and less concern about the risk of being exposed to fake news on digital platforms.

Those who were skeptical of the government might have considered the general support for the government's lockdown to be exaggerated among journalists and, as a result, could have developed a stronger intolerance of limitations on their individual freedoms. In contrast, those who were more confident about the government and the information provided by legacy media could have seen their belief in the primacy of public health enforced. Conversely, for digital platforms, which were more populated by voices criticizing the lockdown, an opposite dynamic could be inferred. These two opposite patterns of attitudes toward older news media and the government also emerged when we considered the level of knowledge of the official truths about different aspects of the pandemic. Indeed, a higher level of knowledge boosted the probability of having an extreme communitarian position and depressed the likelihood of assuming an extreme libertarian one.

This study contributes to contemporary research on polarization and disinformation in at least two ways. First, leveraging seminal opinion polarization literature, it adopts a specific definition of polarization and polarized opinions, exploring divergence in public opinion and extreme positions (Fiorina et al., 2005; Lelkes, 2016; Wojcieszak, 2016). This helps to move away from the umbrella term “polarization” and focus on specific manifestations of opinion formation – at the societal and individual levels – which indicate unsustainable conflicts for democratic societies. This effort is particularly necessary both to face certain conceptual ambiguities in the polarization literature (Wojcieszak, 2016) and to overcome a general definition of polarization as a scenario wherein opposing and conflicting positions occur.

Second, addressing “fake news” as a multidimensional phenomenon (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019), involving the contemporary hybrid media system (Giglietto et al., 2019a) and diverse regimes of truth (Waisbord, 2018), this study has investigated citizens' visions of the reliability of different (older and newer, official and alternative) news media sources. Opposing visions of news media arenas (when it comes to where we should be more skeptical of the information we encounter) are associated with, and influence over time, the assumption of extreme libertarian and communitarian positions. This finding confirms the value of considering multiple dimensions of the disinformation processes that can unfold in contemporary hybrid media systems, instead of limiting the analysis to a single (social) medium,

without renouncing an exploration of the multiple factors affecting the process of acceptance of false and true news.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This work was supported by the Italian Ministry of Research and University under the National Projects of Relevant Interest (PRIN) research program 2017 (grant number: 20175HFEB3).

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The survey was administered by SWG (<https://www.swg.it/home-en>) to a panel of respondents directly managed by the company. Respondents were offered non-monetary incentives to take part. Wave 1 was carried out between 18 and 28 May 2020, Wave 2 between 31 August and 13 September 2020, and Wave 3 between 2 and 20 December 2020. In Wave 1, 7563 invitations were delivered,

and 1923 interviews were collected matching the requested quotas. The original completion rate (including over quota) for Wave 1 was 38.7%. As regards the longitudinal study, 1763 panelists participated in Wave 2 and 1714 in Wave 3, while 1646 participated in all three waves (retention rate 91.7% between waves 1 and 2; 85.6% across the three waves). After the conclusion of the longitudinal study, we implemented a process of data cleaning to improve the dataset quality by excluding inattentive panelists (based on inconsistencies in answers to socio-demographic time-invariant questions across the waves) and sloppy interviews (based on short completion time). As a result, we reduced our longitudinal sample as follows: 1563 valid interviews in Wave 1, 1353 in Wave 2, and 1299 in Wave 3, with 1204 panelists included in all the three waves. After the data cleaning procedure, the sample in Wave 1 still matched the original requested quotas on all variables mentioned above with a maximum difference of +/- 4.5% for each quota (albeit for almost all quotas such difference was smaller than +/- 3%), and we believe the quality of the data had been substantially improved. For the final reduced dataset, therefore, the completion rate in Wave 1 is 34%, and the retention rate between Waves 1 and 2 is 86.6% and 77% across the three waves.

² See https://www.salute.gov.it/portale/news/p3_2_1_1_1.jsp?lingua=italiano&menu=notizie&p=dalministero&id=4327 (accessed 14 September, 2021).

³ The news about Germany's support to Italy at the beginning of the health emergency was given by the president of the committee for German-Italian cooperation to national and international journalists (see, among others, this article from the Italian newspaper "La Repubblica" https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2020/03/23/news/coronavirus_germania_pazienti_italiani-252076289/). The European Stability Mechanism (known in Italy as "MES") – a form of financial assistance to EU countries in existence since before Covid-19 – was widely discussed during the first phases of the pandemic by government and opposition, who were divided on the opportunity to use it (among the many institutional sources concerning MES, see the EU Consilium's page at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/it/policies/financial-assistance-eurozone-members/>

⁴ KR-20 for the index is 0.63 which, albeit not high, is acceptable.

⁵ These variables are gender, age, education level (low, medium, high), and household income. Since our dataset in Wave 1 (which we consider here for our independent and control variables) featured 266 missing values on income, we replaced them and added a dummy variable to our model identifying such cases instead of introducing listwise deletion bias. The dummy variable identifying missing observations on income is not reported in the table since it is meaningless being simply a function of the value used to replace missing observations.

Chapter 17

Citizens' Political Discourses on Climate Change and Vaccines: A Comparative Study Between Spain and Poland

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this chapter is to compare the political discourses of Polish and Spanish citizens on science issues such as vaccines and climate change expressed by the citizens participating in the public consultations held in València (Spain) and Łódź (Poland) during the autumn of 2019. As the general elections were held very close to the public consultations in both countries, it was expected that there would be references to election campaigns, political parties, or public policymaking during the debates. Then, those statements explicitly expressing political views on climate change and vaccines were selected from the debate transcripts before applying five specific frames and variables for analysis and interpretation. The results show that more political opinions were expressed in the debates on climate change than on vaccines. Moreover, the citizens' views on the science-politics dichotomy mainly were negative, with the men mixing science with politics more than the women.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8057-8.ch017

INTRODUCTION

Political discourse is omnipresent in all areas of the public sphere in democratic societies. It is fuelled both by positive and negative information circulating through numerous sources and channels. This is why it is difficult to remain aloof from the political statements and messages with which our societies are bombarded on a daily basis by the media, billboards, advertisements, social networking sites (hereinafter SNSs) and other dissemination platforms (Anderson, 2009; Luzón, 2013). In the early 1980s, Habermas (1981) was fairly critical of the involvement of the media in the public sphere, because he believed that they played a negative role, given that the communication industries always defended their own particular interests. Basically, he was of the mind that the media's power of propagation allowed its discourses to impact political and social life, alike. Therefore, he considered the media and its structures as fundamental powers that strongly influenced both. Since then, it seems that the influence of the media has declined to the point that they do not now play such an essential role in people's decision-making. On the contrary, international research suggests that, broadly speaking, personal information and SNSs exert the strongest influence in this respect (Entwistle et al., 2011; Álvarez et al., 2017; Campos & Kim, 2017; Martire & Helgeson 2017; Whitehead et al., 2018; Moreno-Castro et al., 2019; Urena, 2019).

In addition to the multiplicity of information channels, with the COVID-19 pandemic it has been confirmed that other aspects, such as the circulation of fake news, have since burst onto the scene (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2020). These information sources and channels are shaping an ecosystem characterised by an unstable post-public sphere, due to the multifaceted consolidation of the Internet era. According to Schlesinger (2020), this instability should come as no surprise since, over time, the conceptualisation of the foundations and scope of the public sphere has not ceased to change. Indeed, states are constantly developing rules to regulate the boundaries of their political systems. For his part, Davis (2020) calls it the anti-public sphere, defined as that space of online socio-political interaction in which the conversation routinely and radically mocks the ethical and rational norms of democratic discourse. This formerly offline space, which has recently gained visibility thanks to networked digital media, includes a large variety of discursive spaces and platforms, such as supremacist websites, anti-vaccination portals, climate change denial forums, anti-immigration Facebook pages, extremist websites and so forth. On these right-wing and 'truth' (conspiracy) websites, the conversation rides roughshod over the rules of public debate and argumentation (Žuk & Žuk, 2020).

Plenty of international studies have been performed to date on the political polarisation of the discourse on vaccines and climate change (Boykoff, 2008; Broniatowski et al., 2020; Walter et al., 2020; Weingart et al., 2000; Žuk & Žuk, 2020; Cafiero et al., 2021). This chapter, whose aim is to provide a qualitative approach to this line of research, presents the results obtained from two of the public consultations held in five European cities – Vicenza (Italy), Łódź (Poland), Trnava (Slovakia), València (Spain) and Lisbon (Portugal) – during the autumn of 2019, in the framework of the CONCISE project (Moreno-Castro et al., 2020). The intention was to gain further insights into how Europeans built their scientific beliefs, perceptions and attitudes based on the information that they received through various information sources and channels on a daily basis. In order to gather the citizenry's opinions, the five public consultations, on four topics relating to science controversies, namely, vaccines, complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), climate change and genetically modified organisms (GMOs), were held during the autumn of 2019, with the participation of a total of 497 citizens. Divided into group discussion tables, according to sociodemographic criteria including age and educational level, the attendees debated among themselves for a day (Saturday).

The debates were recorded and transcribed. Subsequently, quantitative and qualitative analyses were performed using the T-Lab linguistic corpus software and the N-Vivo software, respectively. In the five countries, all the debates were staged following the same protocol, which had been previously agreed upon by the CONCISE consortium members (Llorente et al., 2021). Since the 1950s, public consultations have been held in democratic countries so as to allow the citizenry to discuss different issues on the political agenda, to the point that nowadays they are a matter of course for local and international policy-making. Furthermore, different administrations are also now staging online public consultations to gather the citizenry's opinions for designing and implementing specific actions (Boucher, 2009).

The citizens participating in the public consultations, staged in the framework of the CONCISE project, were asked standardised questions aimed at identifying the sources to which they usually resorted for keeping abreast of news on the topics of debate. Likewise, they were asked about the extent to which they trusted those information sources and believed that they were reliable. Then, before concluding the debates, they were asked how they would like to be informed about each discussion topic, namely, how they wanted to receive information and through which channels. This set of questions yielded very interesting, original and useful results for the field of science communication. One of the objectives of the CONCISE project was to re-examine the role that science communication plays in contemporary societies. Science communication is an emerging discipline that encompasses a large number of research objectives, from professional practice to science communication research, through citizen perception of science-related issues (Burns et al., 2003; Bubela et al., 2009; Trench & Bucchi, 2010; Bucchi, 1996). Additionally, very complex scientific issues are inherent to modern societies and continually debated in the public sphere (Brossard & Lewenstein, 2009). That is why the focus was placed on determining how the discussions among the participants would develop, how they would express themselves, what kind of anecdotes they would tell and who they would or would not trust when receiving information. The analysis of their discourses has allowed for ascertaining the extent to which the public is involved, either consciously or unconsciously, in the practice of science, given that the media and SNSs make scientific knowledge available and negotiable (Van Dijck, 2003).

Furthermore, the moderators attempted to make the debates as straightforward as possible in order to allow all the participants to express their views. In all the public consultations, the debates were, by and large, enjoyable and the attendees, who were pleased to be in the limelight, actively participated in them. Additionally, the results generated by the public consultations will be very beneficial for the science communication community, especially scientific experts working for government agencies or non-governmental organisations (NGOs), all of whom seek to develop communication materials and documents to inform citizens on topics relating to science and technology, which Bruine de Bruin and Bostrom (2013) described in a study of citizen contributions to science communication activities.

Science Communication Research

This is particularly the case right now, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, when all national and international public health institutions are striving to disseminate information so as to combat disinformation (Da Silva & Toledo, 2020; Zarocostas, 2020). People need information that does not only fill gaps in their knowledge and corrects their misconceptions, but which also builds on their existing beliefs (Bruine de Bruin & Bostrom, 2013). For this reason, the discussion groups provided information on the citizens' beliefs which will help to design communication materials for addressing common problems that affect people's decision-making. Likewise, it would be interesting to confirm, through other stud-

ies, whether or not those materials lead to a much needed improvement in comprehension and informed decision-making. To a certain extent, the CONCISE project diverged somewhat from the priority lines of research in the field science communication, generally focusing more on the analysis of messages and professional practices than on reception studies. In addition to yielding qualitative results, it was a highly participatory process in which the citizens had the chance to express their own views on the topics debated during the five public consultations, thus providing essential inputs for EU policy-making.

As noted by Brossard and Lewenstein (2009), in democratic societies the citizenry's understanding of science has an important bearing on policy-making on controversial science issues (stem cells, global warming, biotechnology, etc.). Indeed, scientific controversies on which there are a wide range of views are continually debated in the public sphere. Accordingly, science dissemination and outreach activities have been promoted in Western countries during the past three decades, with a view to informing the citizenry before addressing or making decisions on these problems. At the same time, new theoretical concepts of the public understanding of science (hereinafter PUS) have emerged, like, for instance, the linear dissemination of popularisation models emphasising secular knowledge, public commitment, public participation and science policy-making (Lewenstein, 2003).

Empirical research has shown that the public communication of science is more complicated than the knowledge deficit model suggests, as noted by Simis et al. (2016). According to these authors, the deficit model persists in the public communication of science:

1. Because scientists believe that audiences process information rationally, when this is far from being the case.
2. Because this model may be a product of current institutional structures, since many higher education programmes in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) generally lack formal training in public communication; and
3. Scientists conceptualise 'the public' and relate it to attitudes towards the deficit model, contending that it persists because it can easily influence public science policy-making.

In light of this, Simis et al. (2016) proposed ways of eradicating the deficit model and to move towards more effective science communication practices, including training scientists in communication methods based on social science research and following approaches that involve community members in science-related issues. Emerging at the beginning of the twenty-first century, this last approach to science communication research focused more on its holistic study, than on the PUS because the latter assumes an implicit hierarchy between experts and laypeople (Van Dijck, 2003). The shift from the deficit model to the dialogical model is more present in the theoretical realm than in social reality (Trench, 2008; Horst & Michael, 2011).

Science Communication Movement

According to Bucchi (2013), citizen participation in outreach activities has become a matter of course. Be that as it may, there is no consensus among scholars or people involved in science communication regarding the long-term impact of the science communication movement. The citizenry actively participate in activities aimed at improving science culture, in general, and science communication, in particular. The aim of social science research is chiefly to study how citizens participate in decision-making on science and technology, specifically highlighting the role that the media, SNSs and institutional communication

play in the process (Nisbet & Scheufele, 2009). According to Nisbet and Scheufele (2009), there is still a belief that science literacy is both the problem and the solution to social conflicts. In a review of the evolution of climate change, food biotechnology and nanotechnology, these authors offered a series of detailed recommendations for enhancing the public engagement efforts of scientists and their organisations. First and foremost, they emphasised the need to improve science communication through initiatives encompassing media platforms, SNSs and institutional communication, thus enabling conversations with the public and recognising, respecting and incorporating different values, perspectives and goals.

In light of the foregoing, and taking into account the existing science communication models, the general results of the CONCISE project show that the citizens participating in the public consultations agreed on the four topics of debate more than they disagreed (Brondi et al., 2021; Dziminska et al., 2021; Kupper et al. 2021). In the main, the results allow for arriving at the conclusion that the differences of opinion had to do with age and gender, in addition to the topics of debate. The CONCISE consortium members are currently designing new analyses based on citizen discourses.

This study describes the public consultations held in Poland and Spain, because they were staged very close to the general elections in both countries. Hence the interest in verifying whether or not the citizens had been influenced by the election campaigns and the stances taken by the different political parties on current affairs, such as those discussed in the public consultations. In Poland, the general elections were held on 13 October 2019, while the public consultation was staged nearly three weeks before, on 21 September. As to Spain, the public consultation was staged on 26 October 2019, while the country went to the ballot box a little over two weeks afterwards, on 10 November 2019. By the way, it was the second time that the provisional government in Spain had called elections that year, because it had been impossible to form a government after those held on 28 April 2019, for the lack of a parliamentary majority.

On the other hand, geographically speaking Spain is a Southern European country, whereas Poland is an Eastern European one, for which reason there might have been some significant differences in the political attitudes of the citizens of both countries towards health-related or environmental issues. Besides the fact that it was general election year in both countries, owing to the historical similarities between Spain and Poland and their close bilateral relations in the framework of the European Union it can be claimed that they have been, and still are, on excellent terms. Likewise, the two countries, both with a long Catholic tradition, have implemented democratisation and secularisation processes from a very similar social perspective (Anderson, 2003; Raimundo, 2013; Requena & Stanek, 2013; Meardi et al., 2015; Wojcik, 2017; Moroska-Bonkiewicz & Bourne, 2020).

METHODOLOGY OF THIS STUDY: TOPICS, FRAMES, GENDER AND DATA FLOW

The Relevance of the Topics

This study focuses on climate change and vaccines, two of the four topics of debate in the public consultations staged in Spain and Poland, because they were the ones that were receiving most media coverage at the time. Furthermore, both issues have given—and will certainly continue to give—rise to controversies fanned by climate change deniers or sceptics and anti-vaccine groups or vaccine hesitancy among citizens. The public consultations in Poland and Spain resulted in 900 and 1,120 pages of debate transcriptions, respectively, in which a search was performed on the terms 'politician', 'policies', 'elections', 'election campaigns' and 'political parties' in Spanish and Polish. A summary grid for the variables of analysis,

including table number, discursive frame—which allowed for identifying the sociodemographic characteristics of the people participating in each debate—gender, discursive tone, quote and country, was designed in order to explore the citizens' political discourses on climate change and vaccines.

The Specific Frames for the Study

Specific frames were designed for clustering the worldviews of the Spanish and Polish citizens. Media frames have been comprehensively analysed in the fields of media, communication and political communication studies (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999, 2007; Benford & Snow 2000; Dirikx & Gelders, 2010). In the 1980s, Gamson and Modigliani (1989) understood frames as 'interpretative packages in the context of social movements', explaining that the packages consisted of rhetorical devices, such as metaphors, visual images and symbols. So, during the past 30 years, the study of media framing has played an essential role in the public understanding of science and technology. Research enquiring into media debates on current affairs has shown that laypeople use news in different ways and for different purposes than scientists (Nisbet & Mooney, 2007). Scheufele & Turney (2006) observed that 'media frames provide audiences with cognitive shortcuts or heuristics for efficiently processing new information, especially for issues that audience members are not very familiar with'. Accordingly, five specific frames relating to the different views expressed by the citizens in the debates were designed. To this end, 30 quotes with political connotations were selected from the debates on climate change (15) and vaccines (15). Following this, the main points of the arguments, such as trust and mistrust, media bias, marketing and advertising, hopes and wishes, were identified, before determining the extent to which the five frames agreed with the preselected quotes. Cronbach's alpha values of 0.80 and 1 were obtained for the preselected quotes and discursive tone, respectively, thus indicating the acceptable internal consistency of the five frames. There were no statistically significant differences in the rest of the variables, since the information was accurate. The quotes represented the following frames:

- **Lack of responsibility of politicians and distrust towards them.** When citizens disagree with or question political approaches to relevant issues such as climate change and vaccines, including scepticism towards political decisions.
- **Partisan biases in the media.** When the information that citizens retrieve from the media, SNSs or the Internet is politically or ideologically biased or manipulated.
- **Campaign slogans inherent to political marketing.** When political parties or politicians resort to slogans and/or propaganda to broach the subject of climate change and/or vaccines in election debates or rallies. If and when they eventually come to power, they usually do nothing to improve the situation.
- **Greater awareness of public policies.** When citizens harbour the hope that public policies will raise awareness about environmental protection and vaccines in the Third World.
- **Confidence in political decision-making.** When politicians or political parties decide to implement new policies in which citizens have confidence because they are effective.

Gender Dimension of the Study

The gender dimension was also analysed to determine whether or not there were any statistically significant differences. Finally, the 'discursive tone' variable was analysed to identify whether the citizen's

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Table 1. Units and variables of analysis

Discursive frames in relation to politics	Gender	Tone	Country
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of responsibility of politicians and distrust towards them• Partisan biases in the media• Campaign slogans inherent to political marketing• Greater awareness of public policies• Confidence in political decision-making	Female Male	Positive Negative	Poland Spain

Source: own elaboration

views on the political discourse relating to science topics were positive or negative. Once a pre-test had been run on the 30 quotes and the five frames of analysis had been identified, an analysis was performed on the rest of the quotes.

For the statistical data analysis, the statistical software R (version 4.0.2) was used. First, a descriptive analysis of the demographic characteristics of the citizens and their views on climate change and vaccines was conducted. The variables were summarised using absolute and relative frequencies. Then, after calculating the absolute and relative frequencies of the different views expressed by the citizens, a bivariate analysis was performed on them, according to their country of origin. Finally, a Fisher test was run to determine whether or not the views were equally distributed in both groups with an eye to comparing them.

Finally, word clouds were created to summarise the views expressed by the Spanish and Polish citizens in the selected quotes. The data flow diagram below shows the two phases of the research process.

Data Flow of the Comparative Study

The diagram shows the two phases of the research process. In the first stage, the figure explains how the data collection was gathered in the public consultations; and in the second stage, what kind the methodological approach was applied to the citizen's dialogue analysis.

MAIN FINDINGS OF THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND VACCINES

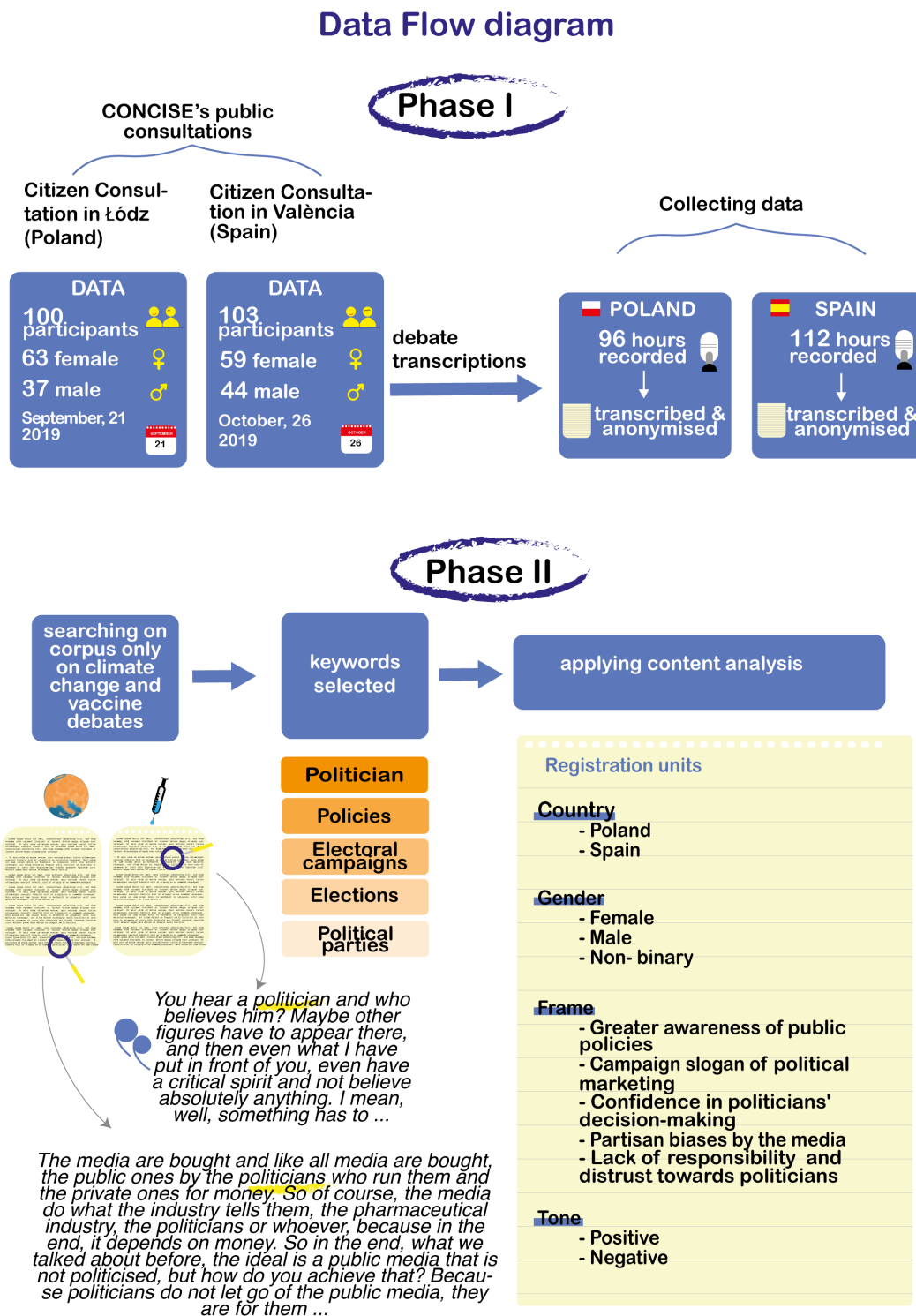
Univariate Descriptive Analysis

Broadly speaking, climate change was the topic with the strongest political connotations, especially in Spain. The Spanish and Polish participants in the public consultations referred 131 times to environmental issues in relation to politics. Even though there were more women in the two public consultations (Spanish men 54.55%; Polish men 60.47%), the men dominated the political debate on climate change (see Table 2). Moreover, the discursive tone was predominantly negative (82.4%).

As to this topic, 'Lack of responsibility of politicians and distrust towards them' was the predominant frame. In Poland, at the time, climate change tended not to dominate the political agenda and no debates were organised on this topic in which politicians participated. However, the climate issue did appear in some political statements during the election campaign, being used as a way of highlighting the differences between the candidates of the competing parties, rather than as an important issue that

Figure 1. The two phases of the research process: data collection and analysis

Source: Own design and elaboration



Citizens' Political Discourses on Climate Change and Vaccines

Table 2. Descriptive data pertaining to the citizens' views on climate change

Variable	n = 131
	Mean (SD) / n (%)
	Median (1r, 3r Q.)
Country	
Poland	43 (32.8%)
Spain	88 (67.2%)
Gender	
Male	74 (56.5%)
Female	57 (43.5%)
Tone	
Negative	108 (82.4%)
Positive	23 (17.6%)
Frame	
Lack of responsibility of politicians and distrust towards them	61 (46.6%)
Partisan biases in the media	27 (20.6%)
Campaign slogans inherent to political marketing	12 (9.2%)
Greater awareness of public policies	23 (17.6%)
Confidence in political decision-making	8 (6.1%)

Source: own elaboration

should be addressed. The following statements reflect the general distrust towards politicians as regards climate issues:

'Climate change's very political, and this is a problem because as it's political, it's often biased in one way or another' (Polish woman).

'I once watched a programme in which a well-known right-wing politician with a double-barrelled name [laughter from the others] said that generally there is no climate change, but even if there was, a temperature increase of one or two degrees would be wonderful because the harvest would be better' (Polish man).

In the case of Spain, distrust was expressed, for example, in the following statement:

'You hear a politician talking about climate change and who believes him? Perhaps other people should get a look in. And I've said this before with respect to those who appear talking about climate change. We should have a critical spirit and refuse to believe anyone. That is, well, something that should be believed' (Spanish man).

The higher proportion of Spanish quotes on the subject of climate change with political connotations might be justified by the fact that the UN Climate Change Conference (COP25) was scheduled to be held in Spain (2-13 December 2019). Despite the fact that the presidency was held by the Chilean government, the Spanish government finally hosted the conference in Madrid, owing to the anti-government protests, which left dozens dead and hundreds injured and caused significant damage in the capital Santiago de Chile. In addition, there were plenty of environmental news stories in the media and on SNSs in Spain

at the time, which might explain why there were twice as many political references to climate change during the Spanish public consultation (n = 88) than during its Polish counterpart (n = 43).

The political references to vaccines were much thinner on the ground in the debates held in Spain and Poland during the public consultations, with only 35 being identified, most of which were negative in

Table 3. Descriptive data pertaining to the citizens' views on vaccines

Variable	n = 35
	Mean (SD) / n (%)
	Median (1r, 3r Q.)
Country	
Poland	16 (45.7%)
Spain	19 (54.3%)
Gender	
Male	20 (57.1%)
Female	15 (42.9%)
Tone	
Negative	29 (82.9%)
Positive	6 (17.1%)
Frame	
Lack of responsibility of politicians and distrust towards them	14 (40%)
Partisan biases in the media	9 (25.7%)
Campaign slogans inherent to political marketing	1 (2.9%)
Greater awareness of public policies	3 (8.6%)
Confidence in political decision-making	8 (22.9%)

Source: own elaboration

tone (82.9%). As to the gender dimension, though, the references were more or less equally distributed (see Table 3).

With respect to this topic, the ‘Lack of responsibility of politicians and distrust towards them’ frame also predominated. In Poland, the citizens remarked that the growing popularity of the anti-vaccine movement and distrust were caused not only by a lack of knowledge but also by the insufficient involvement of experts:

‘It’s a sign of the times that nowadays everyone thinks they’re the smartest. Especially when they’re chosen or appointed to a position, the very fact of being appointed predisposes them to believe they’re the smartest and know everything. On the other hand, those in power don’t necessarily employ wise advisors, but rather loyal ones who aren’t necessarily wise [...]. However, I believe it’s worth listening to the authorities on some subjects’ (Polish man).

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It warrants noting, however, that in the vaccine debates 22.9 per cent of the references had to do with the 'Confidence in political decision-making' frame. In Spain, some of the citizens mentioned the Spanish Association of Paediatrics as an excellent information source on children's vaccines. For example:

'I also trust, for instance, the Spanish Association of Paediatrics, which is the institution that issues the technical report on which national policy-making on this issue is based' (Spanish man).

Descriptive Bivariate Analysis

The comparative analysis shows that even though there were differences between the Spanish and Polish citizens as regards most of the variables, these were not statistically significant.

Comparison by Country

Be that as it may, the men expressed political views more frequently than the women in both the public

Table 4. Comparison of citizens' views on climate change by country

Country	Poland	Spain	p-value
n (%)	43 (32.82%)	88 (67.18%)	
Gender			0.58
Male	26 (60.47%)	48 (54.55%)	
Female	17 (39.53%)	40 (45.45%)	
Tone			0.47
Negative	34 (79.07%)	74 (84.09%)	
Positive	9 (20.93%)	14 (15.91%)	
Frame			0.32
Lack of responsibility of politicians and distrust towards them	15 (34.88%)	46 (52.27%)	
Partisan biases in the media	11 (25.58%)	16 (18.18%)	
Campaign slogans inherent to political marketing	5 (11.63%)	7 (7.95%)	
Greater awareness of public policies	10 (23.26%)	13 (14.77%)	
Confidence in political decision-making	2 (4.65%)	6 (6.82%)	

Source: own elaboration

consultations, notwithstanding the fact that more women than men participated in them, as we explained in the previous paragraphs. This result is fascinating concerning the empowerment that women don't play in the public sphere, as Haraway stated since the 80's decade.

Table 4 was not found statistically significant differences concerning the tone of the speeches or gender of the political discourses on climate change. However, there were some differences between the analysis frames. Distrust of politicians' actions on climate change was greater among Spanish citizens. According to the frame analysis, 'Lack of responsibility of politicians and distrust towards them' was the main context of the dialogues from the Spanish participants (52.27%), compared to 34.88% of the Polish participants.

Table 5. Comparison of citizens' views on vaccines by country

Country	Poland	Spain	p-value
n (%)	16 (45.71%)	19 (54.29%)	
Gender			0.73
Male	7 (50%)	11 (57.89%)	
Female	7 (50%)	8 (42.11%)	
Tone			1.0
Negative	13 (81.25%)	16 (84.21%)	
Positive	3 (18.75%)	3 (15.79%)	
Frame			0.012*
Lack of responsibility of politicians and distrust towards them	3 (18.75%)	11 (57.89%)	
Partisan biases in the media	7 (43.75%)	2 (10.53%)	
Campaign slogans inherent to political marketing	1 (6.25%)	0 (0%)	
Greater awareness of public policies	0 (0%)	3 (15.79%)	
Confidence in political decision-making	5 (31.25%)	3 (15.79%)	

Source: own elaboration

As can be seen in Table 5, there were practically no statistically significant differences in the variables between the two countries in the debate on vaccines, except in the frames of analysis.

Although most of the references to vaccines were negative in tone, there were three positive ones in each public consultation (p-value = 1), which were related to trust in public vaccination policies. One of the quotes highlighted that confidence in politicians is built through consistent communication and by setting an example: ‘Well, I imagine the president, the prime minister makes an appearance and says, “Ladies and gentlemen, let’s vaccinate”’ (Polish woman).

Gender Dimension

As to the gender dimension, there were no statistically significant differences in the debates on climate change regarding the tone of the views expressed by the participants (see Table 6).

With respect to the frames of analysis, ‘Lack of responsibility of politicians and distrust towards them’ (40.54%), and ‘Partisan biases in the media’ (29.73%) were the most frequent among the men, while ‘Lack of responsibility of politicians and distrust towards them’ (54.39%) and ‘Greater awareness of public policies’ (22.81%) were the most frequent among the women. From this it can be inferred that the women from both countries were more familiar with political decisions on climate change.

In the vaccine debates, the male and female participants expressed roughly the same number of political views, whose distribution in the five frames of analysis was just as even. The only noteworthy difference was that the female participants expressed double the number of positive views than their male counterparts (women 26,67%; men 11,11%). However, as there were very few political references to vaccines, it cannot be claimed that there were any statistically significant differences. Furthermore, the lack of differences in the views held by the male and female citizens on vaccines seems to defy common sense assumptions. Based on common perceptions of gender roles in the West, it would seem

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Table 6. Comparison of citizens' views on climate change by gender

Gender	Male	Female	p-value
n (%)	74 (56.49%)	57 (43.51%)	
Country			0.58
Poland	26 (35.14%)	17 (29.82%)	
Spain	48 (64.86%)	40 (70.18%)	
Tone			1.0
Negative	61 (82.43%)	47 (82.46%)	
Positive	13 (17.57%)	10 (17.54%)	
Frame			0.027*
Lack of responsibility of politicians and distrust towards them	30 (40.54%)	31 (54.39%)	
Partisan biases in the media	22 (29.73%)	5 (8.77%)	
Campaign slogans inherent to political marketing	8 (10.81%)	4 (7.02%)	
Greater awareness of public policies	10 (13.51%)	13 (22.81%)	
Confidence in political decision-making	4 (5.41%)	4 (7.02%)	

Source: own elaboration

that women are more likely to be responsible for the health and safety of their children and, therefore, to express their views on this issue, although this was far from being the case. It is worth noting that at

Table 7. Comparison of citizens' views on vaccines by gender

Gender	Male	Female	p-value
n (%)	18 (54.55%)	15 (45.45%)	
Country			0.73
Poland	7 (38.89%)	7 (46.67%)	
Spain	11 (61.11%)	8 (53.33%)	
Tone			0.37
Negative	16 (88.89%)	11 (73.33%)	
Positive	2 (11.11%)	4 (26.67%)	
Frame			0.74
Lack of responsibility of politicians and distrust towards them	9 (50%)	5 (33.33%)	
Partisan biases in the media	4 (22.22%)	4 (26.67%)	
Campaign slogans inherent to political marketing	0 (0%)	1 (6.67%)	
Greater awareness of public policies	1 (5.56%)	2 (13.33%)	
Confidence in political decision-making	4 (22.22%)	3 (20%)	

Source: own elaboration

to cover those cases in which unvaccinated children had died with a large dose of sensationalism (social media, the Internet and the traditional media). They considered that the media were not setting a good example and that if the authorities wanted to ensure that all children were vaccinated, this should be achieved with the launching of specific campaigns, rather than with sensational news stories. The debate on vaccines focused more on the lack of clarity and information transparency on their side effects and the need to make other vaccines currently not included in the official calendar available. Finally, one of the most noteworthy findings is the remarkably poor debate on public policy-making and institutional campaigns relating to vaccines.

DISCUSSION ABOUT THE COMPARATIVE STUDY

As stated by Jakučionytė-Skodiėnė and Liobikienė (2021), to achieve the long-term goals of climate change policies an effort should be made not only to raise awareness about climate change, but also to promote climate-friendly behaviour. They analysed how economic development and Hofstede's cultural dimensions contributed to raise such an awareness and to promote personal responsibility and actions relating to climate change mitigation. Furthermore, the authors' aim was to determine whether climate change concerns and personal responsibility had the same degree of influence on all actions associated with climate change mitigation and whether those actions pursued the same goals. They also discovered that the performance of actions relating to climate change mitigation varied across European countries.

The results of our comparative study of Poland and Spain show that the citizens of both countries have little trust in political decision-making regarding climate change, while having a high awareness of such policies. In Poland, in the period around the consultation the actions initiated by Greta Thunberg received a fair amount of media coverage. Citizens, especially young ones, expressed their support, organising the nationwide Youth Climate Strike (Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny, 20 September 2019) and the General Strike for the Earth (Generalny Strajk dla Ziemi, 17 September 2019). The citizens involved made no reference to politicians. Environmental protection, climate change and drought were among the most important issues that, for the Poles, should be addressed during the election campaign launched a few weeks before the public consultation was held. It is worth noting that for 34 per cent of the respondents of a telephone survey—on a representative nationwide sample of adult Poles ($n = 1003$), conducted by the company Kantar for TVN and TVN24 on 12 and 13 August 2019—climate change was the third most important issue (along with education), after healthcare and social programmes (Zalewska, 2019). Climate change was even more relevant in a survey conducted by IBRiS for the newspaper *Rzeczpospolita* on 9 and 10 August 2019 (Kolanko, 2019), in which 64 per cent of the respondents considered that, after healthcare, it was the second most important issue that should be addressed during the election campaign. In the broad sense of the word, issues touching on environmental protection, including those directly related to combating climate change, were present in the election programmes of all the political parties. However, they were not given the same importance, with the candidates preferring to propose other solutions (renewable energy sources, development of nuclear energy) (Bellon, 2019).

Our findings show that the citizens participating in the public consultation held in Poland expected climate change topics to be broached in the political debate. However, at the same time, they were often aware that the statements and promises made during election campaigns did not take the shape of specific actions after the elections (e.g. Poland was the only EU country that did not sign the 2050 climate

neutrality agreement) (Bodalska, 2019). One of the Polish citizens participating in the public consultation referred to this in the following way:

'Politicians have already noticed that talking about environmental issues can win them votes, so on-line electoral programmes now even include sections like 'How eco are you', or, in general, whenever politicians make an appearance they talk about these environmental and climate issues, among others. So, it's now 'if I don't talk about climate change, I lose a few votes'. [...] So, yeah, it's become very politicised' (Polish woman).

In Spain, during the months running up to the public consultation, digital newspapers published 96,756 news pieces on climate change in Spanish, according to the Mynews digital media database. As noted above, climate change was very much on the media agenda. Almost daily, the media published an update on Greta Thunberg's activities and the Madrid Climate Conference (COP25).

Improving communication between public institutions and healthcare professionals, on the one hand, and the citizenry, on the other, with the aim of making public health or environmental policy interventions more efficient poses an enormous challenge to contemporary societies, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a study on vaccines performed by Eguia et al. (2021), the respondents voiced their concern about their lack of effectiveness, safety issues during the vaccination process and their potentially dangerous side effects. In conclusion, the authors recommend that communication be improved so as to convey more straightforward messages.

As already observed, our comparative study of Poland and Spain refers mainly to the vaccination of children. The results of the debates on vaccines in the two public consultations point to the fact that it is a topic rarely broached by politicians. In Poland, it does not receive regular media coverage. Be that as it may, every now and again it becomes a burning issue, especially when the anti-vaccine movement causes a splash. At the time of public consultation in Poland, the movement did not take any newsworthy action. Still, its influence can be observed in the gradual increase in the number of people who refuse to receive mandatory vaccinations, among other aspects. While in 2010 the number of people refusing to receive mandatory vaccinations totalled 3,437, almost 10 years later in 2019, 48,609 cases were registered, namely, 14 times more (Czarkowski et al. 2020). Thus, the anti-vaccine movement has already taken its toll and its ongoing activities will in all likelihood politicise the issue even more. In Spain, prior to the public consultation, vaccines were a burning issue due to the differences in the children's calendar, which depended, and still depends, on the different regional administrations. For example, the Spanish citizenry want more vaccines to be included in the official calendar. One such case is the meningococcal vaccine, with parents calling for one covering more strains, particularly after the outbreaks registered in several countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom, as of 2015. In Spain, the child vaccination rate was around 98 per cent between 2017 and 2019 (Ministerio de Salud 2020). It is therefore impossible to talk about an anti-vaccine movement in Spain.

CONCLUSION

The Spanish and Polish citizens participating in the public consultations held before or after the general elections in each country did not generally refer to science issues in relation to politics, which implies a more 'neutral' perception of science. However, recent studies, such as that performed by Ward (2018), have shown that the movements emerging in the 1950s and the 1960s were the first to condemn certain political regimes for having put science to military uses, thus denying the neutrality of science. Since

then, a comprehensive line of research has been developed on the social implications of science and technology. In short, this has highlighted the non-neutral role of science and the Manichean use to which it can be put for the purpose of harming people or the environment. However, contemporary Western societies are currently going to great lengths to promote science as a value per se and as a tool for social progress, evolution and innovation that might have been the benchmark for the citizens participating in the two public consultations held in 2019.

In this context of the probable objective and neutral nature of science, the most exciting finding of our comparative study is that the citizens of both countries separated the two science topics on which they debated from the political sphere, despite their cultural and social differences. Additionally, notwithstanding the proximity of the general elections in both countries, the debate on climate change was more politicised than that on vaccines. Lastly, the Spanish and Polish women were less involved in the political dimension of both debates, while displaying a more positive attitude towards public policies regarding vaccines.

Both of the topics of debate, climate change and vaccines, are becoming progressively more popular and important. New scientific findings, political discourses, actions and challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic have all contributed to this state of affairs. We assume that the number of political references in the debate on vaccines might have been much more numerous if the public consultations had been held during the pandemic. Nonetheless, our findings offer a snapshot of the citizenry's political perceptions of climate change and vaccines in 2019 and a departure point for future studies, especially of the post-pandemic reality.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research was supported by the H2020 program from the European Commission [Grant Agreement N. 824537]. Particular thanks to the consortium of the CONCISE project, without whose support the production of this chapter would not have been possible. Also, our thanks to all citizens and stakeholders who participated and involved to the project lifetime in the five European countries where citizen's public consultations were held. Furthermore, the authors are delighted with the referee suggestions that contributed to improving the manuscript. Finally, thanks to Amaia Crespo for her help with the proper use of gender terminology and Thomas MacFarlane for the English proofreading.

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