EDICIONES
COMPLUTENSE

[en] Retweets by candidates as part of the political communication[1]

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Abstract. The current impact of social networks, especially Twitter, on the political communication strategies is transforming the way in which the electoral campaigns are organized. The purpose of this article within this context is to analyze the retweets issued by the leading presidential candidates during the electoral campaign for the 2016 Spanish general elections. By means of a mixed methodology where quantitative and qualitative methods of research are applied, it is possible to observe the relationship between politicians and the social environment, especially the mass media and citizens.
Keywords: Political communication; elections; retweet; image; Twitter.

Los retweets de los candidatos como parte de la comunicación política

Resumen. La relevancia que poseen las redes sociales dentro de las estrategias de la comunicación política, especialmente en el caso de Twitter, está transformando el modo en que se gestionan las propias campañas electorales. En este contexto, este artículo tiene como objeto el análisis de los retweets emitidos por los principales candidatos durante la campaña electoral a la presidencia de Gobierno que tuvo lugar en 2016. A través del empleo de un método mixto, donde se aplican técnicas de investigación cualitativa y cuantitativa, se visualiza el retweet como la relación que mantienen los políticos con el entorno social, especialmente con los medios de comunicación y los ciudadanos.
Palabras clave: Comunicación política; elecciones; retweet; imagen; Twitter.

Summary. 1. Introduction. 2. Method. 3. Results. 4. Conclusions. 5. References.

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1. Introduction

Twitter has gained great popularity within the political communication sphere, particularly during the electoral campaign, as a political tool that is increasingly noticeable in the campaign strategies pursued by the political parties and candidates. Some authors, such as Davis, Bacha, and Just (2016), indicate how at the moment in the electoral campaigns "no serious candidate ignores Twitter." Whereas, Casero-Ripollés (2017) mentions the use of Twitter as a cost-effective tool through which "the production of political information becomes easy, fast, and cheap." During the municipal and regional elections in the Basque Country and Galicia in 2009, and in Catalonia in 2010, there was a first contact between Twitter and the new forms of political communication, where we began to notice clearly how much possibilities the so-called microblogging network can offer to the world of the political propaganda (Rodríguez; Ureña, 2011).

However, it was not regularly used in this communication context on a massive scale as a clear campaign strategy until the elections held in 2011 (local, regional and general). All this was supported and magnified, in turn, by the victory of Barack Obama in the United States presidential elections of 2008 (Adams; McCorkindale, 2013; Benítez, 2012; Criado; Martínez; Silván, 2012; Tumasjan; Welpe, 2010; Castells, 2009).

Since then, all the component elements of this social network have been taken into consideration by both the parties and candidates and their communication teams, following the need for professional and academic studies on this phenomenon. Additionally, the changes that occurred within the Spanish political space after the successful entry of new political parties, as in the cases of Podemos and Ciudadanos, have enhanced the interest in the communication within this social network. The successful media outreach of these new political formations, from their creation to rising into power, is largely due to Twitter (Casero-Ripollés; Feenstra; Tormey, 2016) and they have contributed to making the social and political action develop through the use of this social network.

This work takes into account, as a novelty in comparison with other analyses of the political discourse in this network, the study of the *retweets* of political leaders as a significant and objective element in the analysis of the Twitter profiles of the leading presidential candidates for the Spanish general election, during the election campaign of June 2016. The research particularly focuses on the *retweet* issued by the candidates during the aforementioned period since the analysis of these retweets allow us not only to obtain an in-depth picture of the candidates' profile, but also to accurately know the social space and media through which they interact.

The retweet is one of the core functions of Twitter through which a citizen can forward a tweet published by another citizen (Orihuela, 2011), always maintaining the original authorship of the tweet. It enables any follower of the subscriber to retweet the original message, thereby causing the so-called "retweet cascades" (Kupavskii; Umnov; Gusev; Serdyukov, 2013).

Thanks to this feature, which has enabled Twitter to become a space where it is possible to deal with personal or political issues and opinions that formerly had a private character (Moya; Herrera, 2015), Twitter has become "an ideal platform for users to spread information" (Stieglitz; Dang-Xuan, 2012). On this particular

subject, Boyd, Golder, and Lotan (2010) note that the retweeting is an action that extends far beyond the mere acts of copying and retransmitting and that "contributes to a conversational ecology." Likewise, according to Macskassy and Michelson (2011), the communicative atmosphere generated by the retweets may be classified based on four main models: *General Model*, *Recent Communication Model*, *On-topic Model* and, finally, *Homophily Model*.

As a result, retweeting is transforming the "key mechanism for information diffusion in Twitter" (Suh; Hong; Pirolli; Chi, 2010); therefore, the study should also be extended to the area of political communication and included as a relevant element in the analysis of the enunciation of the Twitter profiles of the politicians and of the networks that make up these profiles. Some authors, such as Spiro, DuBois and Butts (2012), define the elements of how a tweet becomes a *retweet*, including, for example, "the number of hashtags, URLs, and mentions" of other citizens.

Therefore, the examination of the retweets issued by the politicians on Twitter can provide a clear idea not only of their ideological connection, which is a more obvious and superficial issue, but also of the cultural, social and media networks where they are registered. Furthermore, by knowing the profiles of other members retweeted by the candidates that we have examined, we can get to know which news or what types of media, or what other persons or socially relevant institutions are collected by them. In essence, in accordance with the study of the retweets carried out by Molyneux (2014) on the journalists, politicians, by means of the retweet, they also work "to build a personal brand and relationships with their audience".

2. Method

As mentioned above, this publication forms part of the analysis of the retweets issued by the leading presidential candidates during the electoral campaign for the Spanish general elections (Mariano Rajoy, Pedro Sánchez, Albert Rivera, and Pablo Iglesias), which took place from June 10th to June 24th in 2016. The scope of the study consists of 1,371 retweets that were issued during this period, and a mixed analysis of all both thematically and numerically.

Similar to the previous research by other authors, such as Anguera (1986), this study follows the transformation from the qualitative method to quantitative method due to technological developments. Although this study starts from a qualitative idea, we have carried out quantitative techniques in order to triangulate and verify conclusions, which also acts as complementary methodology, guaranteeing more reliable and universal conclusions. In other words, "to know the social and economic reality we need a set of data, already existing or created by us, over time or at a certain point in time" (Lafuente Ibáñez, C.; Marín Egoscozábal, A., 2008, p. 10).

Therefore, in this case we have undertaken a content analysis, which is a method consisting of discovering, "classifying and coding the different elements of a message in interpretable categories and thus make the meaning and sense emerge" (Gómez Mendoza, 2000). The retweets have been classified according to

the retweeted profiles, which provides a first overview of the tendencies and the social and cultural contexts of each of the analyzed politicians, as well as their contact networks.

For this purpose, we have defined four main categories that reflect the nature of the retweets' basic content: The *Media*, the *Party*, *Party Members* and *Other Outstanding Members of the Twitter Network.* Since the media landscape to which the candidate belongs is an essential part of this study, the first category is fragmented according to the media retweeted by the candidates throughout the election period. The second one consists of the sum of all the retweets issued from the profile of the candidate to the profile of his party. The third one represents all the citizens who are identified or affiliated with the party, including but not limited to sympathizers, members, or other posts of the party. Finally, the category of *Other Members of Twitter* makes reference to the profiles that are notably positioned or not with any party, or who are out of the category of *Media*.

3. Results

First, a general analysis of the results notes the evidence, the clear tendency of the main Spanish political leaders to retweet as a prominent form of political communication. In fact, it is observed that from the total amount of tweets issued by the President of Partido Popular (Popular Party) during the study period, 57.3 percent were retweets. Similarly, the total amount of retweets by the Socialist leader Pedro Sánchez reaches to 51.6 percent. Representatives of the new parties are at the two ends in this campaign: on the one hand, the Secretary-General of Podemos, who retweeted less (only 24.5 percent of his Twitter content were retweets) but generated more content than the leader of Ciudadanos who reached a total of 85.5 percent retweets.

These initial data shows the different forms through which the main Spanish political leaders communicate in the microblogging social network, at least during the elections that is the subject of this study. The importance of the retweet as an independent communication act is also supported by the lack of cause-effect relationship between the retweets and the number of followers, as displayed in the following table:

Table 1. The number of retweets in proportion to the evolution of the number of followers during the campaign.

	Total no. of Retweets	No. of followers 10/06/2016	No. of followers 24/06/2016	Balance of followers obtained
M. Rajoy	429	1,209,096	1,221,714	12,618
P. Sánchez	342	343,426	354,052	10,626
A. Rivera	573	3,079	178,901	3,079
P. Iglesias	27	1,759,411	1,788,251	28,840

Among the national political leaders in Spain, Pablo Iglesias has been the one who has increased the most number of followers during the election period. In contrast, Albert Rivera is the leader who got the least number of followers. As

previously stated, a higher number of content does not imply greater impact on the increase of followers and, therefore, the influence or follow-up that might be exponentially acquired on Twitter.

Once the total amount of tweets and retweets had been determined, and analyzing the content and nature of the retweets generated during the elections under the categories previously established, we have obtained relevant references to precisely understand who are retweeted by our politicians, what they retweet, and show the range of people with whom the leaders have contact. They express all this on the network following the particular communicative strategy of each candidate in campaign.

Graphic 1. Representation of the profiles retweeted by the main political leaders during the election campaign for the Spanish Parliament in 2016.
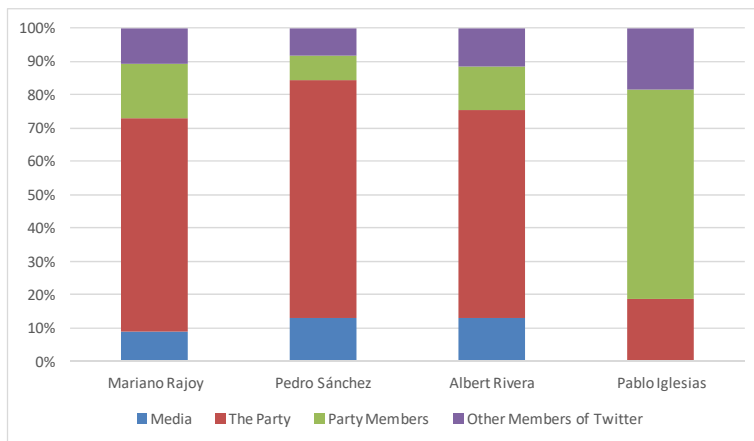

In the Graphic 1, it can be observed how the different strategies carried out by the politicians Mariano Rajoy, Pedro Sánchez, and Albert Rivera are very similar, giving the highest priority to the ideological connection by retweeting the publications of their parties, which exceeds 50 percent of the retweets (64 percent, 72 percent and 62 percent respectively). A different strategy is observed with the statistics of Pablo Iglesias's Twitter profile. He gives priority to the retweets of members of Podemos or like-minded people, which amounts to 63 percent of the total retweets. Another relevant observation emerging from the above categories is the absence of retweets of any media in the profile of Pablo Iglesias, while the other political leaders give relative importance to the media sphere with 9 percent in the case of Rajoy, and 13 percent of Pedro Sánchez and Albert Rivera.

An interesting matter, though it is certainly predictable, is the inbreeding found when analyzing the retweets, or what Macskassy and Michelson (2011) describe and denominate as *homophily*; that is, the total amount of retweets from followers of the party together with the retweets from the party itself, which demonstrates the great distance in the percentage of retweets from people who do not express any kind of political ideology on their profiles. In the case of the Spanish candidates, this issue may be quantified in the following way: Pablo Iglesias is the politician who most retweets other members of Twitter with any ideological stance declared

on their profiles, only reaching to 19 percent in this section, where Albert Rivera ranks second with 12 percent, followed by Mariano Rajoy with 11 percent and finally Pedro Sánchez with 8 percent of retweets from profiles in principle outside the field of action of his political party.

These initial research results give shape to the profiles of the main parties. The analytical framework *Media* and its subsequent categorization not only evidences how substantial the media is during an election campaign, but also its breakdown into subcategories contributes to the knowledge of apparent media preferences of our politicians and their construction during the election campaign of a communicative network. Outlined in the graphic below, this inclination through the retweets from some media or other and the number of retweets used to nourish their profiles is shown.

Graphic 2. Representation of the national press during the election campaign.
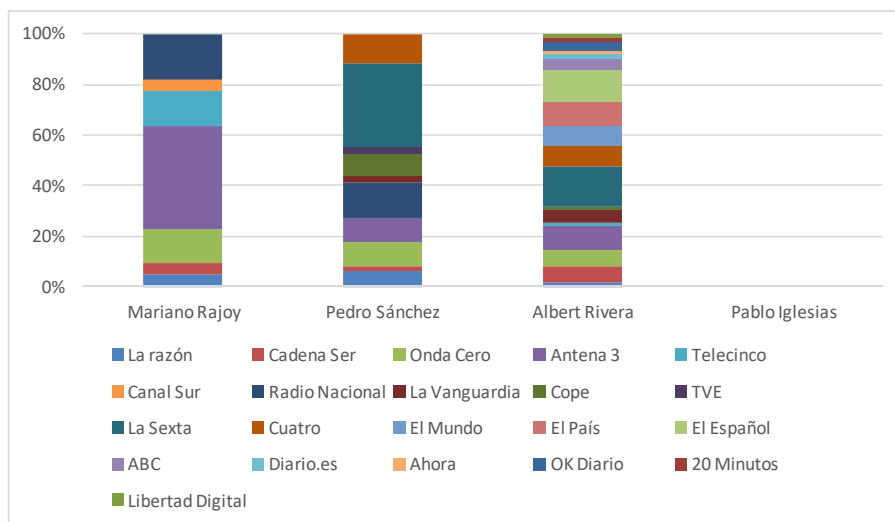
Graphic 2 gives a clear picture of the different mass media that has been retweeted by the main Spanish political leaders during the electoral campaign on June 2016. First, it highlights the virtual absence of retweets by the Secretary-General of Podemos, who has only retweeted the satirical magazine *El Jueves* (which is not included in this study since it is not within the daily media category). This does not imply that he did not include links to different media in the numerous tweets issued during the analysis period; nevertheless, tweets are excluded here since this study focuses on the retweets of the candidates.

The rest of the leaders opt for retweeting different media. Albert Rivera retweeted more national media and in a more varied way within the media spectrum, followed by Pedro Sánchez, and finally Mariano Rajoy, although both politicians had a significant number of retweets from a particular media outlet (the television network *La Sexta* and the newspaper *ABC* respectively). Interestingly, no political leader retweeted anything from the Spanish left-wing media, *Diario*

Público, a particularly striking fact in the cases of those candidates who are ideologically similar to this media; it is a relevant indication of the selection of media to retweet according to the influence of the channel in the targeted social sphere, and its power or lack of power to build influential stories.

There is another remarkable fact relating to the leaders of the traditional parties: both have avoided retweeting some important Spanish printed media, such as *El Mundo* and *El País*. In contrast, these two newspapers have been retweeted by Albert Rivera by 8 percent and 10 percent respectively, as reflected in a diverse representation in this form of communication by the President of Ciudadanos.

Only the newspapers *La Vanguardia* and *La Razón* appear in more than one profile and are retweeted by more than one candidate. The first one is 5 percent in the retweets from the profile of Albert Rivera, and 2 percent in the case of Pedro Sánchez. Meanwhile, *La Razón* occupies 5 percent in the profile of Mariano Rajoy and 2 percent in the case of Albert Rivera. With regards to the radio stations, *Cadena Ser* and *Onda Cero* are the only radio broadcasters appearing in all three profiles with a rate of 6 percent for both stations in the profile of the leader of Ciudadanos, 5 percent and 16 percent respectively by the President of Partido Popular, and finally the Secretary-General of Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) fill this section with 2 percent and 10 percent, as established in the order above.

In relation to the audiovisual media, *Antena 3* appears in all three profiles, although as in the case of the press, other media appear in more than one profile, such as *Cuatro*, *Telecinco* and *La Sexta*. In the case of Mariano Rajoy, the percentage of retweets from audiovisual media is as follows: 47 percent for *Antena 3*, and 16 percent for *Telecinco*. For its part, the distribution in the case of Pedro Sánchez reaches these figures: *La Sexta* (35 percent), *Cuatro* (13 percent), and *Antena 3* (10 percent). Finally, the retweets by Albert Rivera in this field are distributed in the following way: *La Sexta* (16 percent), *Antena 3* (10 percent), *Cuatro* (8 percent), and *Telecinco* (2 percent).

4. Conclusions

Among the different functions of Twitter, retweeting is a unique communicative activity whose potential is more complex than the simple practice of copying or retransmitting information, thus contributing to a conversational ecology or the construction of a coherent communicative sphere for the sender's profile. Since the retweet is an essential process to disseminate information through Twitter, its study is also relevant in the case of political communication as a special tool of analysis within the enunciation of the politicians' profiles on the network.

The analysis of the Twitter profiles of the four main presidential candidates during the elections held in June 2016, and, in particular, of the nature and number of retweets issued by those political leaders during the designated period allows us not only to obtain a clear picture of the candidates' profile, but also to know the social and media space where they interact.

The results show a clear tendency for the main Spanish political leaders towards the use of the retweet as an autonomous means of political propaganda and

interaction. Of the total number of tweets issued by the President of Partido Popular during this period, 57.3 percent are retweets, an amount very close to the Socialist candidate's, whose percentage is 51.6 percent. Meanwhile, the representatives of the new parties occupy the two ends in this campaign: at one end, the Secretary-General of Podemos, whose total number of Twitter activities consists of 24.5% retweets, has generated more content compared to the leader of Ciudadanos who made a total of 85.5% of retweets. This fact shows the different forms to communicate in this social network where the new parties practice mainly a direct authorship communication, with the purpose of creating a unique and electoral brand.

This reflects the hegemony of the inbred model among the Spanish politicians. The retweets by the profiles of Mariano Rajoy, Pedro Sánchez, Albert Rivera and Pablo Iglesias are defined within the *homophily model* (although with varying degrees), since their retweets mostly focus on their party scope and on the members of Twitter who are defined as voters of their parties, or, in many cases, are party members.

There is no evidence of a direct relationship between the number of retweets and the number of followers; hence, out of the four politicians analyzed here, Albert Rivera, who generated the most retweets, obtained a lower growth of followers. However, in the opposite case, that is when there is a greater amount of original tweets as compared with retweets, a larger number of followers is obtained. An example of this is the increase of followers in the profile of Pablo Iglesias who, despite being the political leader who issued the least number of retweets, is the one who added more fans during the period of this study.

The communication and propaganda strategies carried out on the network by the politicians Mariano Rajoy, Pedro Sánchez and Albert Rivera are very similar, giving the priority to the empathy and inbreeding of content by retweeting their parties published messages, a fact which in all three cases exceeds 50 percent of the retweets (64 percent, 72 percent and 62 percent, respectively). A different strategy is observed with the statistics of Pablo Iglesias's Twitter profile. He gives priority to the retweets of members of Podemos or like-minded people, which amounts to 63 percent of the total retweets. Another conclusion derived from the analysis of the communicative typologies is the absence of retweet from the media by Pablo Iglesias. Conversely, the rest of the political leaders give the media relative importance with 9 percent in the case of Rajoy, and 13 percent of Pedro Sánchez and Albert Rivera.

The following figures show the statistics of the aforementioned inbred retweets by the Spanish candidates: Pablo Iglesias is the politician who made most retweets from other members of Twitter with no ideological stance declared on their profiles, with only 19 percent in this section, where Albert Rivera ranks second with 12 percent, followed by Mariano Rajoy with 11 percent and finally Pedro Sánchez, with 8 percent of retweets from profiles that apparently do not belong to the field of action of his political party.

With respect to the analysis of the relationship between political leaders' retweets and Spanish media, there is a clear division between traditional and new parties. On the one hand, it is noticeable the virtual absence of retweet issued by the Secretary-General of Podemos, who has only retweeted the satirical magazine

El Jueves, which cannot be in line with the definition of daily media, consequently it has not been included in this study. This does not mean that his profile does not issue links from different media.

The rest of the leaders choose to retweet different media. Albert Rivera is the politician who has most retweeted various heterogeneous national media, followed by Pedro Sánchez, and finally Mariano Rajoy, although both candidates had a significant number of retweets from a specific media outlet (the television network *La Sexta*, in the case of Sánchez, and the newspaper *ABC*, in the case of Rajoy). No political leader has retweeted the newspaper *Diario Público*, even those who are ideologically aligned with this media, which suggest the selection of media according to the influence of the channel and its presence in the public debate.

With regard to the audiovisual media, only the contents of the TV channel *Antena 3* are retweeted in all three profiles; and there are other media appearing in two profiles on Twitter, such as *Cuatro*, *Telecinco* and *La Sexta*. In the case of Mariano Rajoy, the percentage of retweets on audiovisual media meets these figures: 47 percent for *Antena 3*, and 16 percent for *Telecinco*. The distribution in the case of Pedro Sánchez prioritizes the TV channel *La Sexta*, with a 35 percent majority, followed by *Cuatro* (13 percent) and *Antena 3* (10 percent). Finally, the percentage of the retweets issued by Albert Rivera in this field is: *La Sexta* (16 percent), *Antena 3* (10 percent), *Cuatro* (8 percent), and *Telecinco* (2 percent).

The radio is comparatively the least retweeted media. In this field, *Cadena Ser* and *Onda Cero* are the only radio stations appearing on all three profiles (Rajoy, Sánchez and Rivera, in descending order of retweets). In conclusion, in both the press and the radio or television whose contents are retweeted, the data shows that they are an essential part in the construction of a coherent and homogeneous political communicative narrative through the profiles of the candidates and the spectrum of citizens to which their electoral messages are addressed.

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