Technology, social networks, politics and journalism: Plurality or boomerang effect?

Tecnología, redes sociales, política y periodismo. ¿Pluralidad informativa o efecto bumerán?

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a qualitative analysis, based on interviews, about the experiences of users in their access to online political information. Along with the Internet, social networks have set a new space not only of political protests and callings, but also of access to information, thus creating a new personal agenda setting, enhanced by interactivity. As a result, social networks represent a new educational channel for part of the population that uses this option for information, and represent a new role in media literacy. The results of this exploratory study show lines of research and materialize seventeen information and communications technologies (ICTs) practices in politics and journalism, as well as a weakening of the media malaise, facing the promotion of citizen participation.

RESUMEN

Este artículo realiza un análisis cualitativo, basado en entrevistas en profundidad, de las experiencias que los usuarios tienen en el acceso a la información política en la red. Junto con Internet, las redes sociales han configurado un nuevo espacio no solo de protestas y convocatorias políticas, sino también de acceso a las noticias, creando así una nueva agenda setting, potenciada por la interactividad. Las redes sociales constituyen un nuevo canal educativo para parte de la población que usa esta vía como medio de información y representan una nueva función en la alfabetización mediática, pero su dinámica y funcionamiento pueden potenciar o limitar los contenidos informativos. Los resultados de este estudio exploratorio muestran líneas de investigación y concretan diecisiete prácticas de las tecnologías de la información y comunicación (TIC) en la política y el periodismo, un debilitamiento del malestar mediático frente al impulso de la participación ciudadana y un cuestionamiento de la pluralidad informativa en la red.

INTRODUCTION

In Spain, in an environment of political and economic crisis since 2007, media, as an institution, must enhance its dynamic role of social debate to be channels that create public opinion, guarantors of social criticism. Journalism is based as "a basic pillar of democratic societies" (McCombs, Shaw & Weaver, 1977, p. 7), to the extent that Lippmann (1995) sustained that "the crisis of Western democracy was due to a journalism crisis" (p. 8).

Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) warned about the diminishing critical ability of the media. Since then the creation of "passive consumers" was denounced (Curran, 1991, p. 82) and a commodification of journalism that keeps the media from their "social purpose" (Chomsky & Ramonet, 1995, p. 341), where news are determined by directions of the elites in power (Bennett, 1990). Consequently, deterioration in the formation of opinion incurs, inasmuch as the untrue or conditioned news become "corrupted" and violate the very principle of information (Desantes, 1976). This situation also leads to an absence of major social issues (Bernal, 2013b). Mattelart (2002) noted that the media cause the creation of a unique pattern of information and, consequently, any form of social protest that are not within rules of action remains muted.

It is in this framework that the need for higher media literacy is presented, as a guarantee of the fundamental rights and for the development of a "critical conscience" (Wilson et al., 2013, p. 20). Only in this way the effects of the media malaise theory (Lang & Lang, 1966) can be prevented. With the arrival of the Internet and the emergence of social networks, in addition to media literacy a "digital literacy" is needed, as it is essential in the development of this new informative dynamic (González, 2012, p. 18), where the receiver also happens to be selector and emitter of messages. This phenomenon generates implications in political systems, initiating a phase of CyberDemocracy, according to Rey Morato (2007), where civil society must exert its participatory capacity in the space of debate, which has among its novelties initiatives of civic protest and democratic transparency (Keane & Freenstra, 2014), in line with the theories of political mobilization (Holtz-Bacha, 1990; Newton, 1999).

TECHNOLOGY, MEDIA AND POLITICAL PERCEPTION

However, although new technologies cheapen the emission of the message and its access (Cantijoch, Jorba & San Martín, 2008), some authors have reservations regarding its reach and effectiveness to transform society (Dahlberg & Siapera, 2007; Sampedro, 2005). Even more so because some studies (Wilhelm, 2000; Mozorov, 2012, p. 203) warn that Internet audience is geared to consume entertainment rather than politics, and technology does not facilitate the most disadvantaged in accessing power, but instead strengthens the dominant elites (Mozorov, 2012).

At any rate, the investigations of García Luengo (2002; 2005) or Rodríguez Virgili, López-Escobar and Tolsa (2011, p. 7) concluded that highest level of media use is associated to less negative and more moderate perceptions of politicians, parties and politics, in relation to the virtuous circle theory by Norris (2000). Some investigations point out that consulting political information, on any type of media, causes a greater interest on the subject, boosting political appreciation (García Luengo, 2008; Gallego & Jorba, 2008).

Christensen (2011) adds that Internet activities reinforces the position the citizen have outside the digital realm, although Cantijoch et al. (2008) clarifies that it also generates more critical attitudes, with a tendency to support minority groups, as well as an increase in participation in political actions outside the system. Along these lines, Anduiza, Cristancho and Cantijoch (2012) maintained that Internet has served as a platform for movements such as 15M (the "Indignants" Movement), which significantly reduces the likelihood of voting for a big political party instead of a small one. Also, among young Spaniards interest for politics and news during the economic crisis has increased, with Internet and social networks facilitating the emergence of new spaces for political participation (Bernal & Lobera, 2014).

In this relationship of citizens-politics-media one must bear in mind the educational constraints, employment status (Robles, Molina & De Marcos, 2012) and age (Sampedro, Sánchez Duarte & Poletti, 2013). Borge and Cardenal (2012) and Peña-López (2013, p. 8) added another variable, such as greater participation of those people involved in ICT, regardless of whether they have a political motivation or not.

ONLINE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND OPINION

Social media encourage questioning the individualistic ideology of traditional journalism (Hermida, 2010). Although social movements are associated with cyber-activism, Zizek (2013) considers that what exists is only a widespread dissatisfaction with the current social, political and economic development of each country, where networks have been one more tool of propagation of the process, but not the essential or defining component. This new situation produces changes in the system, with a self-communication of masses, according to Castells (2009), a horizontal movement that creates solidarity and confidence between the users.

Mainstream media have almost always marked the movements and protests with the idea of violence; a trend sustained with "questionable" coverage of the social movements, based more on legal and order problems than in their proposals. On the other hand, if the movement manages to expand on Internet and social networks, it registers a greater sensitivity of public opinion toward their objectives (Della Porta & Mosca, 2004).

It is necessary to underline the functional limitations of "conversation 2.0" (Levy, 2007, p. 220). Participation can be contaminated by *bullshit* (Frankfurt, 2006) and false information is more accessible online, without fact check, encouraged by the anonymity of many of their sources (Buckingham, 2005). Add to this that conversations are often guided by a group of regular users (Bergström, 2008) that lead the opinions. This factor already happened in the news comments during the electoral campaign in 2011, with a radicalization of the dialogue marked by political confrontation (Bernal, 2013a).

It should also be noted the possibility of the participation limiting to a "clicktivism" of insufficient commitment, although authors such as Peña-López (2013, p. 11) highlight that this degree of cooperation is an indispensable factor for the maintenance of the community and collective identity.

Movements are born online, in the web or blogs, and disperse their messages in an "information cascade" continue Kwak, Lee, Park and Moon (2010, p. 9). Between the various platforms, *Twitter* is an "instrument of activation and maintenance of the movement and viral distribution of images" (Castells, 2011, p. 13).

However, it should be considered that in this new field an eclosion of infoxication (Cornella, 2002) is produced, "inevitable side effect of emergent cyber-informative reality" (García de Diego & Parra, 2007, p. 29), while Casas-Mas studies (20149) point out that this informative excess "does not cause a high citizen malaise" (p. 9).

CHANGES CAUSED BY SOCIAL NETWORKS

Social networks act as small informational impulses that become the main entrance of information. In this case the effect of the medium cover disappears, to give way to the "tweet" or "post" effect, which becomes the conduit of access to news (Bernal, 2013b). On the other hand, the inherent structure of the digital platforms as well as access devices, determine different practices. According to Groot and Costera (2014), in order of frequency, the user can exercise all of these functions: read (*reading*), look (*watching*), see (*viewing*), *listening* (listening), check or browse (*checking*), peck (*snacking*), scan (*scanning*), monitor (*monitoring*), search (*searching*), click (*clicking*), bind (*linking*), share (*sharing*), mark "like" (*liking*), recommend (*recommending*), comment (*commenting*), vote or make a scrutiny (*voting*).

At the same time, social networks favor an openness of information that helps wane misinformation created by political, economic and social forces (Otte, 2010). Citizenship, with their participation, can create through their action a new parallel public media agenda (Casero-Ripollès & Feenstra, 2012), which shows a new empowerment of citizens (Castells, 2009). In addition to this a new vision of reality is even determined by the *gatewatching*, the network of friends that selects information for us and distributes it through social networks (Bruns, 2003).

Compared to *Facebook*, which has a more familiar use, *Twitter* is the quintessential information network. According to Zhao, and Rosson (2009), the reasons for *Twitter* consumption are pinpointed in two blocks: first, the content characteristics (update of activity and information in real time) and secondly, the technological qualities (brevity, mobility, personal perception and integration). Studies such as the one by Java, Song, Finin and Tseng (2007) conclude that the use of *Twitter* is justified for four reasons: talk, conversation, daily information sharing and

the transmission of news. It provides, first of all, a change in the forms of distribution, journalists and citizens sharing the same space (Lasorsa, Lewis & Holton, 2012). However, although the media register a greater distribution of their content (Kwak et al., 2010), Congosto (2013) maintains that the news are not mainly distributed by the profile of the issuing medium, but do so indirectly by people who select the information. Although users tend to go to profiles of people recognized as a guarantee of credibility, more opinion leaders emerge determined with this tool (Osteso, Claes & Deltell, 2013), where many began as new actors in broadcasting and production of news or data during 15M (Casero-Ripollès & Feenstra, 2012).

Despite the informative opening that this network implies, D'heer and Verdegem (2014) warn of the prevalence of relations between media and audiences, and politicians and electorate, on *Twitter*. Consequently, the latent danger is that media and political polarization might move into social networks, with users who will focus on commenting the performance of the media and politicians, instead of participating directly in the political discussion (Bruns & Burgess, 2012). This was a trend detected in Spain during the election campaign for the European elections, where the media polarization of the referent media transferred to the debate, even thought new topics of a more social agenda (Bernal & Congosto, 2014) were included (with minor impact). Even though on certain occasions a more progressive trend is defined in *Twitter* comments, the Internet does not prevent the spiral of silence defended by Noelle-Neumann, but instead, it perpetuates it (Hampton, et al., 2014).

The distribution of the news depends on moments of "greater collective trauma ", where *Twitter* acts as an effective mechanism of "public awareness and mobilization (Perez, Berná & Arroyas, 2013, p. 26). In this way, *Twitter* users become "social news sensors" (Sakaki, Okazaki & Matsuo, 2010). Naaman, Becker and Gravano (2011) denominate this form of communication and its platforms as currents of social consciousness (*social awareness streams,* SAS). It is in those moments of greater intensity that characters that satirize the facts (*fakes*) have less impact, which for Congosto (2013) refutes the fame of "frivolity" in *Twitter* users.

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

The objective of this research is exploratory: examine the attitudes and reasons that explain changes in habits in access to digital media news, with special interest in the role of social networks, and how these change the access to political information. In particular, it is foreseen as specific objectives to study the attitudes of network users, determine their uses or practices, interest in politics and information, reflect on the quality and plurality of information, political participation, the contribution to social networks, the access to other media of communication, freedom of expression in the networks and if some disaffection towards political information is detected.

While the qualitative methodology has as default the inability to generalize data, it allows to understand and inquire into the reasons of the phenomenon (Flick, 2004, p. 14), in line with the need to complete further quantitative studies developed accordingly to the inherent nature of social science, as Orti (1995, p. 88) explains.

A regular social network user was defined as unit of analysis, considering as such those who access and use social network at least *four days a week* and with more than an hour of dedication. Therefore, it is defined by the frequency and intensity of use. Limits of participation were established.

A random non-probabilistic sample was selected, through a convocation spread on the Internet and dispersed through social networks. An online summon via social networks was realized to these followers and they were filtered by a series of requirements, such as if they actively participate in two social networks as a minimum. Out of the one hundred people contacted through the call for participation a *random* selection was done, which composed the final sample. The final group of 52 people was equivalent in terms of gender, age, and professional status; people younger than 20 years of age were discarded, as the youth, for their informative interest and technological adaptation, could result in an alteration of the results (Bernal & Lobera, 2014). People older than 20 years of age would contribute to contrast the current technological evolution and its consequences, with habits and previous routines where technologies were not involved. The choice of the sample excludes the under-20, as in the Youth Report (Youth

Table 1. (Qualitative) Research questionnaire

Questions	Categories
Personal data: age, gender, professional status	Personal data: age, gender, professional status
To what extent do you think that new technologies have made political information approachable to you? How?	Information access
Do you think that social networks are an adequate space to inform oneself about politics?	Information quality Information diversity
How would you define your political activity in networks? In recent years has your interest and activity changed?	Political participation
Do you think that politics improve with the use of social networks?	Political contribution
Are there other traditional media you still prefer to inform yourself about politics rather than new technologies? Which ones? Why?	Media comparison (press, radio, television)
If you want to find out what happened during the day, for political news what do you approach first?	Newspapers, radio, television, Internet
Do you think that social networks give greater freedom to express opinions? Why?	Opinion
If social networks are your main access to information, we can conclude that there is reluctance to the usual media setting the news issues. What consideration do you have of the agendas that so far the media have created? (We refer to online media, newsprint, radio and television).	Disaffection and agenda
Besides the agenda established by the traditional media, there is a perspective in which they treat information. Do you think these perspectives harm or benefit the image of politics? Are social networks the best solution to alleviate the deficit of issues and informative approach that traditional media does not reach?	Disaffection and *framing*

Source: Own elaboration.

Institute, 2013) the young people between 15 and 20 years of age are registered as having less informative interest, regardless of the medium (newspapers, radio, television and Internet), which is higher in the rest of the ages analyzed by the study.

The final group had 10 people, 20 to 30 years of age; 38 people between 31 and 59; and 4 people of 60 years or older. In total, 29 men and 23 women. Of these, 29 are workers, 14 unemployed, 4 students and 4-retired.

Each of them did the qualitative in-depth interview, where ten issues related to the subject of analysis were asked (Table 1).

The Tapor program was used for data collection and its treatment in different thematic concepts and categories, one per each question. Reflections were recorded with the initials in ENº. The results, such as exploratory and qualitative study, serve as a guide for further investigations and are not generalizable to the entire population.

RESULTS

All of the interviewees responded that technology had changed their access to political information. Above all, they noted, it adds a greater proximity, with a "better understanding" (E21) and where you can "find the politician of the day immersed in a social network, from which it we can address him or her and debate" (E33), even though not all respond (E15, E01, E5).

The main axes that ICTs have changed are access to the opinion (not of journalists, but of citizens), information on social movements and the political parties themselves. This, fundamentally, due to the influence of social networks.

> I approach more specific topics that interest me and I distance myself from the general. (E25)

> I now read daily pieces in various digital newspapers, but always get to them by the recommendation of my contacts on *Facebook* and *Twitter*. Meaning there a pre-selection made

by friends that for the most part are not journalists, at least not in their role as tweeters or *Facebook*ers, but that they understand this dissemination of links more as a militant attitude. (E30)

Technologies have changed in the quickness of the information and the exponential diffusion of citizen problems that go unnoticed in the political arena or normal media. (E43)

Regarding social networks, they highlight strengths such as simplicity of use, convenience, accessibility, emotionality, the abundance of sources, updates, gratuity, being involved and socializing information. The only disadvantages mentioned about new technologies refer to the superficiality of such information, when it is unfiltered. But in response to this, they underline that its easy accessibility generates media power and an absence of censorship. For example, for respondents, social movements did not represent a theme that is found easily in the usual media agenda.

Some users admit that this technological advance is "also a growth opportunity in terms of the media who are beginning or do not have much follow-up on common channels" (E41), "and not just those from the mainstream media or power groups" (E42). In fact, when asked what media they turn to first, 29 people pointed out social networks as a first option (they consider it just another medium), followed by the direct access to an online medium.

Networks bring freshness to a scenario that was stagnant and affected by media disaffection and a loss of credibility, by "putting before their own interests instead of their role as a means of communication" (E12, E49, E8). "

> I don't know if social networks are the best solution to alleviate the multiple shortcomings of traditional media; what I am clear of is that they are the fastest and easiest medium so the average citizen can contrast the information and approaches that different media publish. (E49)

> The fact that the press that in theory should be serious becomes "sensational" or "tabloid" press to call the attention of the people, it seems to me a stupidity, an error and one of the causes for which the image of politics is at a such low. Some politicians with their actions and statements help worsen the image of politics, but that the media puts

the focus of attention in those politicians and their dire statements, only serves to worsen the image of a profession already reviled by much of the population. (E27)

I have some reluctance to 'traditional' media. It is more media pamphleteers who defend their own interests. In Spain it coincides that the owners are banks, which finance the media with their own advertising. The agenda has nothing to do with the citizen's need for information, but with the justification of its financing. (E52)

In addition, they are a platform that streamlines the search for news and favors, at least, access to major sources, as recognized by E26: "If you follow journalists of different brands, you avoid wandering from one medium to another, looking for concrete information".

Speed, agility and ability of segmentation that networks provide are great strengths as a platform for management and access to latest news, where you can access general and specialized media, topics by list, and specific journalists (E25). All cited *Twitter* as an informative reference network, although *Facebook* also plays a closer and intimate role that, for its technological qualities, promotes a better argument:

> *Twitter*, for its immediacy and the variety of information that allows you to access. *Facebook*, because it allows more calmed and reasoned debates, and many friends. (E25)

> *Twitter* is an immediate and reliable source of information. *Facebook* has no limitation in terms of characters when it comes to discussing or comparing something with other people, and that is appreciated. (E33)

Among them, *Twitter* is the main access as a "perfect thermometer of political current affairs" (E13), detectable in a simple way through *trending topics*. In fact, they admit that the networks make them participants and connoisseurs of data and convocations before they are published in traditional media (E45, E12). It is a sought-after option on days that there is little time to go in depth in the news, but on the other hand, you want to keep up-to-date with what is happening (E23). In addition, social networks derive in other types of access to the news and a new informative tour, where the network acts as a core:

> First I open *Twitter*, since in the *trending topics* always stands out the most controversial occurred during the day. Then I

look at profiles of newspapers or journalists and I *click* and read news that I consider of interest to me. Put another way, today social networks are the new portals from which I end up by going to the news media. (E33)

Two participants warn that in the social networks they even access more contrasted and broad news on the topic of Catalonia, little discussed in the national press (E43, E44). It also seem positive to them to follow profiles of journalists, rather than media (E43, E29, E16) because "they take off the masks and are portrayed" (E12), in addition to having direct political sources: "I think that in a social network there are both media and important political figures. It is an ideal mixture for contrasting "(E43).

The subject matter of interest is more varied. In all cases they admit that the news more often read are those of political information; among them, the related with cuts and corruption; but, in general, are interested in all those affecting citizens (E1, E3, E17, E20, E21, E32), such as social movements, policies of minority parties, demonstrations, ecology, agriculture, inequality, job insecurity, social justice or social rights.

Regarding if the social networks improve the image of politics, almost all point out the increase of participation, as a channel of "awareness" (E11), but regret that many parties consider it an electoral and affiliation instrument (E17, E20, E35, E49), to the extent that "politicians and institutions do not give answers or are willing to listen to social networks, they only want to generate opinion" (E25). They also mentioned that some of the communication teams that manage the profiles of parties and politicians "make communication with citizens futile " (E14, E2).

Networks can be useful to democratize political knowledge beyond the representative media, because "you can get to know parties other than those who often go in the main media and that makes me get more involved in politics, because I see things that I like" (E2). Several respondents mentioned the work of the website Change.org, that collects signature for different initiatives, which leads to consider the networks as a space of solidarity and altruism, to release feeling to try to solve problems that traditional political parties do not solve:

> I believe that social networks are like the Cáritas of politics; meaning, [they give space to] our freedom to express, to decide, to call a referendum, etc., the political actor that we

as citizens carry, [that] has basic needs not covered by the State. A company or external entity has to come to do this work. With this I am not saying that social networks are souls of charity, not by a long chalk, but that is the effect. (E7)

Only one person of the surveys poses the debate that social networks are one more "opportunity" (E2) to express opinions or actions, but that through them you cannot articulate social change, because "complaining on the Internet does not amount to anything if then you do not take to the streets to fight for the rights and freedoms that are being taken away" (E26). Due to the affinity of tastes and preferences with their followers and friends, they (E4, E18, E22) recognize that they receive the same news that share the same approach, especially with the columns of opinion (E23), which prevents the arrival of information from other political hues. However, in these cases, the trend after spreading a message (Tweet or *post*) is to receive comments for or against this view that they may bring other informative perspectives.

> I have a series of contacts that I follow frequently. Journalists such as Antonio Maestre, Ana I. Bernal, Rosa Maria Artal, Antón Losada; newspapers such as eldiario.es, publico.es, Infolibre... or politicians like Pablo Iglesias, Alberto Garzón, Gaspar Llamazares, Monedero. As my *timeline* is critical with the people, politicians or media that do not appear in the above list, on many occasions I end up invaded by news of La Razón, Tweets from Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría, Toni Cantó or Herman Tersch... and it becomes a living hell. (E19)

Some news that appear in social networks can also produce confusion, and the consequences of the bad image politicians have are evaluated. Therefore they recognize that many comments do not leave the loop of "all politicians are the same" (E1, E5, E6, E14, E19, E22, E35, E36, E41, E50), an attitude that can lead to damages of the political structure, according to E30: "We will end by looking down on everyone. This means that no serious and honest politician will have the slightest option of doing a job".

Although some clarify that in terms of politics they prefer to read and not discuss, to avoid "other implications" (E12), social networks have been a channel of motivation for receiving political information, to which they normally "did not pay attention" (E7, E12, E27), to "share, generate, distribute or promote discussions..." (E13), where social integration makes it possible to get more involved:

My interest in politics has changed a lot; every day I get more involved and I am more aware of the situation. Most of the time on social networks I commented political situations of the day. (E7)

This attitude is more rooted in those who are linked with specific movements (E-19, E21), either because they belong to them or considered themselves associated to them, as an option to confront the power and get more involved in other actions that were once foreign to them:

> In social networks I am belligerent and combative, increasingly since the 15 M. I opine, publish things, and follow demonstrations and protests... (E19)

> I am pretty active, I create content, think, debate, I have made convocations in *Change* and *Avaaz*, have promoted boycotts and actions against homophobia in Russia or Iran, and participated in other campaigns. (E-25)

> I share news, I comment them, give my point of view etc. I have also followed demonstrations if I have not been able to go to them; and social networks, especially, started me in feminism, something that until recently I had not questioned. (E22)

Networks contribute to modify habits: "from not being in the networks, to be in them about 10-12 hours" (E34). This point generates a debate where it is recognized that there is some dependence on this type of access to information, for being so present and automatic, in an interest that has been increasing "when seeing the explosion of this kind of information" (E38). Several of the respondents show that their integration with the social networks has been gradual, with timid beginnings, and that since the beginning of the crisis (E8, E52) and social cuts, their involvement has been growing.

> Now I'm pretty active. At the beginning, when I opened the *Twitter* account, I did not use it for these purposes; but since the crisis began until now, I do. (E26)

> My interest in politics has been increasing over time. It may be because by social networks or due to the fact tat I have been maturing at the same time that Internet has been consolidating itself. Also I have been able to get involved in demonstrations and discussions with known people and users of the social network, which would be much harder to do without *Twitter* or *Facebook*. (E28)

> Now I share news; share headlines; I connect with politicians of all "political colors"; I follow manifestations and share links in which they report live both news and streaming broadcasts; I share announcements; and summary or emphasize moments of parliamentary debates. The networks expanded my activity in that sense. (E33)

In no case is mentioned the political disaffection as a variable that affects access to this type of news, but rather the opposite, inasmuch as they have been favored with a the creation greater awareness. Several interviewees feel identified with the opinion of E41 when stating that the involvement "has increased considerably. Not only do I share information, but I also commented current affairs with my own ideas. Which by the way have strengthened enough in recent years. Before, that did not happen to me, I was less involved".

In general, respondents considered that social networks are an appropriate way to receive political news, while others suggest that it has brought other qualities to the news. They are now "more immediate, with more sources, better accessibility, more diverse and broader" (E5) and with a less partisan focus (E23); Although they highlight the need for a content filtering, most of the time via journalists or people who follow in their profiles.

They also confirm, as a positive value, that there is an improvement in the amount of political news that before would have stayed hidden, because social networks do not respond to "a publisher nor economic interests" (E7). With lower incidence they reflect that networks impose immediate, quick access based on headlines, and that to delve into it they refer to digital media (E9). Some agree with what E28 exposed against the criticisms that are made of the amount of false information circulating in the social networks. This participant considers that it is easier to detect false or manipulated information in social networks than it is in traditional media, and that is something that is not "questioned and is offered as an informative guarantee". Putting aside the inherent work of the media, another user admits to preferring to follow the political news through their representatives:

> Very appropriate, if used in the right way. It brings us closer to all the possible political parties and politicians who are part of those political parties. We can interact with them and ask questions about proposals, laws, programs, etc., that may cause any doubt during their development or parliamentary process. (E33)

They admit that it is very rewarding to verify how a fact changes the interpretation based on the political affinity of a user as soon as an event happens, something that previously was limited or conditioned (E38). In addition, the opinion of others contributes to enriching the information process:

> You can share any news and comment it, and other people can also comment and start a discussion in an asynchronous way on the topic, where you can share links or other files on the subject to support your comments. This experience enriches us, and helps us to understand the society in which we live, and this includes news about politics. (E44)

For most of the participants, social networks are a channel of greater freedom to express opinions, compared to traditional media, where information is vetoed in accord to the ideology of the media (E30, E43).

Actions such as expressing one's view without providing the actual identity (E28) or making

Table 2. Influence of ICT in politics, debate, and journalism

Politics
Create content

Opine

Parliamentary debates

Convocations

Campaings

Acces to representatives

Opinion-Debate
Promote

Share

Moderate

Distribute

Integrate

Journalism
Upload news/headlines

Write to a representative (politicians and journalists)

Share information

Spread convocations

Summariza parliamentary debates

Live information

Source: Own elaboration.

"convocations was an impossible thing five years ago" (E21, E19). One of the users indicates that, precisely, the fact of hiding the identity is what allows greater freedom in social networks, without condition the opinion to "get a job; for example" (E40), although a certain "fear" of being identified is perceived (E49). They also point out, in counterpart, that said freedom of expression allows attacks and insults to other users in social network without any detriment, although it is considered as an effect which is acceptable in favor of having said greater freedom (E25, E27, E37, E44).

However, since the murder of the politician Isabel Carrasco and its impact on social networks, users mentioned repeatedly the attempts of the Spanish Government to stifle freedom of expression in social networks with specific laws:

> We have seen how they have detained many people doing a witch-hunt for a so-called "glorification of terrorism", while Nazi and fascist accounts with thousands of followers are tolerated. (E22).

For them, the social networks also brings more freedom by the broad access to sources, which provides greater liberty of thought in order to discuss and debate, because "you reach a large number of people with whom you inter-relate, something impossible in everyday life" (E51), and that "extends the approaches and perspectives, the way in which you see the problems" (E52).

CONCLUSIONS

Technology, with its new modalities of access and greater accessibility, has set up a new form of relationship with politics and the media, as a source of power. Up to seventeen practices that ICT incorporate to the axis politics-media are determined (Table 2), where a third pillar arises focused on the generation of opinion-debate: create content, opine, follow parliamentary debates, disseminate convocations, create and publicize campaigns, access representatives; promote, share, moderate, distribute and integrate discussions; upload news/headlines, write to political representatives and journalists, share information, distributing notices and announcements, summarize parliamentary debates and receive live information.

Drawn from the economic crisis and how it affects the citizens, there is a transfer of citizen interest to politics, their dynamics and their impact, with a

consolidation of the virtuous circle. Social networks have become a channel of access to politicians and political information that previously went unnoticed. Inasmuch as technology improves access and increases the sources of knowledge, it allows an assessment of political activity and, in addition, processes of awareness-raising on specific topics (social movements, evictions, feminism…).

Although political disaffection does not affect access to the news of that theme, criticism appears to political parties that use social networks as a mere showcase of opinion and militancy instead of as a space of debate and citizen response. A greater tendency to support the role of social networks and their function as an approach to politics is detected among unemployed people and students. However, since it is a qualitative research, that data cannot be generalized, and is registered as an analysis variable for further investigation.

According to the opinions analyzed, with the advent of *Twitter*, the *establishment* media can lose its ideological influence and agenda setting power. The mercantilist view of such media is criticized, and the information they provide is blamed for resulting in a citizen malaise towards politicians. Against that media malaise, social networks are associated to political mobilization and their theories. Now a constructive and collaborative agenda is created between the followers of social network. Issues that previously were hardly considered by the media (or, occasionally, focused from a negative perspective) become of information of interest in social networks, such as social movements, corruption, manifestations, inequality, agriculture and ecology (Bernal Triviño, 2013a)… In short, issues that affect citizens, beyond the journalism of declarations or political battles. Although its influence is not high, the construction of an alternative agenda to the official media agenda is considered, moving part of that power of dissemination to citizens. The extent of sources is not only reduced to media, but also to journalists or activists.

New technologies are considered an informational opportunity, an escape valve of citizen expression and convocation, which provides transparency, and a basis of institutional and social participation.

The media agenda becomes a collaborative agenda created between followers and passed through the filter of each personal social network.

Before the arrival of social networks, media agenda was only built in function to what journalists considered newsworthy. Therefore, the reader could only access that single agenda (the medium does not offer but that version, a version of reality according to its editorial line), passive, closed (it does not allow participation in the choice of issues), limited (offers a particular vision, it is a source as a medium), and through social networks it has gone to a multiple agenda (as many options as users who have a profile on the social networks that they choose to follow), active (the user chooses and participates), open (even people who are not followed can participate) and collaborative (as a result of the participation and content sharing).

On social networks, the information input is different. On the Internet, the traditional web page of a newspaper is no longer exclusively branding the informative agenda of its readers, and the user that accesses the news through *Twitter* acts as an alternative-broadcasting center, at their own expense. The trend of the user and reader acting as a sensor of social news persists, contributing to its sustainability. Although they have the feeling that social news do not have the impact that they should, at least now they receive information and convocations that before went unnoticed.

With the media in the sphere of power are added, as information channels, alternative media, journalists as independent sources and citizens themselves. The information goes from being a channel of "cold" data to a channel of "hot" data in a continuous process of proposals, changes, dialogue and solidarity (Change.org). Technologies impose, in addition, new forms of information access, where the agenda is also shaped by the *trending topics* (despite some sponsorships).

The increase of news and sources strengthens the freedom of information, the participants point out in the study, even being aware of the weaknesses of the system (viral information, falsehood…). Consequently, they point out, the political awareness and empathy with other citizens' cases where inequality is generated by the crisis and its effects also increases. In these cases, informative and political participation in social networks is greater. This participation is considered as a process added to the construction of a more participative democracy, even though attitudes of distrust or fear to express personal opinions persist, and this despite having anonymous profiles as a resource, which

promotes the development of further investigations that delve into the impact of the spiral of silence in certain countries. Although, in some ways, media are responsible for transferring media polarization to the social networks, users tend to find different sources of contrast, though several recognized they exercise a function of militancy. In this way, the users themselves contribute to strengthening ideological polarization. Furthermore, the action of sharing can lead to an "informative spiral" agenda, which basically are feeds of the same approaches creating, especially with the *retweet*, an informative boomerang effect, where the same widespread news content comes back. This effect calls into question the plurality of information received between users, who limit themselves to see contents of their social circles, with whom they have affinities.

In short, technology provides a more open and intimate vision of political information, even if they are brief informational impulses that can arouse the attention of the receiver. Therefore, there is a tendency to a "micro-information" or a "micro-politics" where a very reduced text should be able to attract and encourage the reader to follow with the demand for news. Social networks weaken media malaise by broadening the sources of access and strengthening political participation.

Social networks like *Twitter* improve access to the news, although there are doubts about its final quality, due to the infoxication that occurs, the easy proliferation of viral messages and the participation of any user. In this situation, it is necessary to promote a specific digital literacy in social networks that brings about a critical consumption from these platforms.

In comparison with other media, social networks are considered a useful support, most suited to a person's information routine. However, although the purpose of social networks is the dissemination of issues and citizen debate, this last ideal is not always achieved and sometimes is limited not by technological issues, but by choice of the user who censors itself in this process. Social networks have complemented the vision of certain media for which there is disaffection, due to lack of credibility in them at a time of crisis like the present in Spain. Moreover, respondents are aware that political interests are moved online in knots of users.

Even though this qualitative research data may not be generalizable, it allows outlining attitude changes in accessing information. The study confirms more positive attitude changes in matters of access and political reading; more moderate ones in opinion and interest to come out of the disaffection with media and politics, based on the possibilities of choice that bring social networks and debate. These data outline that social networks encourage the interest in political information where, as a result, society can exercise a counterweight in the media structure, if it is aware of its capacity and the tools available, as well as if these new platforms are viewed as spaces with more credible information.

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