User interaction on Spanish online news media during the coverage of the Francisco Camps trial[1]

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Abstract

In this paper, we analyze the interaction among users who write comments on news articles about former Valencian Community president Francisco Camps published at *Elpais.com* and *Elmundo.es*. We examine the interaction among users and establish differences based on the users' level of engagement in the forum, employing a quantitative methodology that incorporates a content analysis of the comments. The results indicate a moderate level of interaction among the platform's participants, with most comments having been published anonymously, unidirectionally, and massively. Commenters who interact with one another demonstrate greater loyalty to the online medium at hand, and their participation seems to be motivated by the need to create an online reputation.

Keywords: Interaction, comments, users, digital media, Francisco Camps.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 1.1. The Francisco Camps Trial. 2. Methodology. 3. Results. 4. Conclusions. Bibliography.

1. Introduction

Online media incorporate interactive tools that make it possible for the audience to participate in the communication process. Several researchers have maintained that the comment system on some news media websites encourages the public's participation and enables a conversation between journalists and the audience to arise (Bergström, 2008; Bowman y Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004; Thurman y Hermida, 2010). Nonetheless, others hold that such systems, rather than stimulate debate, favor the emergence of a space for spreading opinions unidirectionally, both on the news media's pages (Ruiz *et al.*, 2010; Taddicken and Bund, 2010) and on

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social networks, where they function as echo chambers (Quattrociocchi, Scala, and Sunstein, 2016). Along the same lines, Ruiz et al. (2011), in their study on comments on digital media, found two audience participation models: debate communities in which users argue distinct points of view, and homogeneous communities characterized by comments that express the users' feelings.

The analysis of the audience's comments shows that the users fail to make proper use of this tool and, quite often, the comments section becomes a forum for attacking whoever expresses a contrary opinion (Fenoll, 2011; Paskin, 2010; Santana, 2014), especially when ideology comes into play (Valera, 2012b). For these reasons, in this study we assume that the comments published on online news media represent the commenters' opinions, without necessarily representing general public opinion nor the majority opinion of a certain medium's readership. As the *El País* press ombudswoman stated in an article published on 20 December 1999, one cannot infer that:

> The comments appearing alongside the online edition's stories or articles are a representative sample of what EL PAÍS readers think. One must keep in mind that this kind of participation attracts a very belligerent type of ideological opponents whose only purpose is to provoke readers who share the paper's editorial opinion. This phenomenon can be seen throughout the media (Pérez Oliva, 2009).

As seen in interviews of the heads of Spanish online media, for many media channels the comments section has become a way to build user loyalty (Salaverría and Negredo, 2008). «Users who are involved in producing content in a site related to a certain online newspaper are expected to use and identify with that newspaper also in other contexts, thus strengthening the brand of the paper» (Jönsson y Örnebring, 2010: 141).

To participate in online media comment forums, readers must register beforehand, a requirement that works as a first line of defense to prevent spam and uncivil remarks. As revealed by interviewees in a study on in online media comment forum participants, commenters find it easy to maintain an aggressive style and disregard other participants' sensibilities because they feel bolstered by the virtual and anonymous nature of the conversation (Springer, 2011). According to John Suler's study, the «online disinhibition effect» (2004: 321) foments toxic disinhibition in some users, which leads to the use of uncivil vocabulary and the emergence of Internet trolls (Fenoll, 2015). Comparative studies on users of sites that allow anonymity and users of sites that do not (Hill, 2012; Santana, 2014; Sonderman, 2011) show that anonymous users use a more uncivil vocabulary than those who reveal their identity.

Nonetheless, registration is also a barrier to participation, as it can reduce the number of users who write comments (López García, 2011). Comments are, more often than not, subject to pre- or post-publication moderating: «pre-censorship can mean the creation of a black list of prohibited words whose appearance in a comment necessarily means that the comment shall not be published» (López García, 2011: 120). At *Elpais.com* and *Elmundo.es*, an outside company handles comments. For the prior, the Interactora firm handles 10,000 comments

a day (Pérez Oliva, 2009). Consequently, not all stories published on the sites can be commented upon and some stories that allow users to comment close this feature after a certain number of comments have been published.

Regarding users' interaction with the medium and the other participants, the level of interaction each is willing to take on depends on many factors. Some use the Internet to satisfy a need for recognition, through which they cement their personal identity, boost self-confidence, and establish a reputation in the user community (Leung, 2009). Others, nonetheless, only seek information, socialization, or entertainment (Chung and Yoo, 2008; Ruggiero, 2000).

In her study on electronic discussion groups, Ha (1995) found that some users never participate and behave as silent observers or lurkers, whereas other users participate often. A lurker is an individual within the community who uses but does not contribute information, asks questions but does not respond to those of other members, and reads community discussions without participating in them (Kollock and Smith, 1996). Springer, Engelmann, and Pfaffinger (2015) discovered differences among users who do not participate in the comment forums. In addition to the lurkers, who, despite not writing comments do read them, they found non-users; i.e., users who disregard the comment forum and only access the online medium to read the news.

Digital media users can be grouped into two basic categories based on their individual use of digital media and their level of interaction with the tools of engagement: «First, there is the passive user, or reader, who uses [the media] only to stay informed. Second, there is the active or participatory user, who collaborates using interactive tools made available to the audience,» (Fenoll, 2011: 19). We can follow the trail left by these two types of users in the various interaction options the medium offers. First, stats on the most-read stories provide information on the preferences of passive users, or readers (Fenoll, 2011). These users access online media seeking information and have no interest in participating in the comment forum, which they consider a waste of time (Springer, Engelmann, and Pfaffinger, 2015). Thus, the user assumes the traditional role of the audience and behaves as a mere consumer of information when using online media. Second, the preferences of active users are reflected in the rankings of the most commented stories.

As Tenenboim and Cohen (2015) point out, there are major differences revolving around subject matter among the most read stories, which range from sensationalist and bizarre topics to the most commented upon stories about social issues. The authors maintain that stories related to social conflict or politics can be a fitting platform for users who seek to express their opinions on issues of public interest and influence others. Consequently, such stories lead to a greater number of comments, especially when there are two opposing parties in a social or political conflict (Tenenboim and Cohen, 2015).

In terms of user interaction levels, Yoo (2011) detected two levels of participation in online media: interactivity with the medium and interactivity with people. On one end, interactivity with the medium implies a low level of participation, as in reading news stories or comments, in which the interaction takes place between user and medium. Interactivity with the medium is limited to the selection of information and to control of the communication process. On the other, interactivity with

other people represents a greater level of participation, including two-way communication, interpersonal interaction, and reciprocal communication between two or more people. Also within this second category are those users who write comments without interacting with the other forum participants (two-way communication), those who write a single response (reactive communication), and those who participate in a conversation (interactive communication). These two categories allow us to merge various past definitions (Chung y Yoo, 2008; Fenoll, 2014; Ha y James, 1998; López García, 2005; Massey y Levy, 1999; Schultz, 1999).

In light of this division regarding the actors engaged in interaction, Graham and Wright (2014) proposed a classification system based on the user's level of participation. Several studies have confirmed that some users of online media never write comments (Bergström, 2008; Springer, Engelmann, and Pfaffinger, 2015), or do so sporadically (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, 2012). Nonetheless, some users write a well above-average number of comments. Graham and Wright (2014:7) defined a *super-poster* as those users who write more than 2% of the comments in forums with 20,000 to 100,000 comments or who write more than 2,000 comments in forums with more 100,000 comments. These *super-participants* or *heavy users* (Ziegele *et al.*, 2013: 96), despite being a numerical minority, write a significant percentage of the comments published in a given forum (Graham and Wright, 2014: 96). Despite quantitatively dominating the debate, an analysis of their comments shows that super-participants typically refrain from dominating and attacking other users. Indeed, Ziegele et al. (2013) hold that *super-participants* play a positive role in the forum and help create a sense of community among the forum's participants.

1.1. *The Francisco Camps Trial*

The Gürtel case is an investigative operation in Spain presided over by judge Baltasar Garzón, the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office, and the Economic and Fiscal Crimes Unit, which on 6 February 2009 culminated with the dismantling of a corruption ring headed by Francisco Correa. On 19 February 2009, the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office decided to include then-president of the Valencian Community, Francisco Camps, in the Valencian branch of the case, after having analyzed several conversations that allude to invoices for Camps's suits being paid by companies within the corruption ring.

In April 2009, judge José Flors claimed jurisdiction so that the Superior Court of Justice of the Valencian Community (TSJCV) could take on the investigation of the crime and begin the so-called «tailor-made suits case» within the Gürtel case, in which he would indict Francisco Camps and other elected officials and ranking members of the Valencian Community autonomic government. They were accused of committing improper passive bribery in the acceptance of suits and garments paid for by the firm Orange Market, the Valencia Community branch of the corruption ring led by Francisco Correa in Madrid. Nonetheless, the defendants filed a motion with the Civil and Criminal Part of the TSJCV and, in August 2009, the court, presided over by judge Juan Luis de la Rúa, dismissed the case and acquitted the defendants with two votes for and one against.

In May 2010, the Criminal Part of the Supreme Court accepted the motions filed by the Valencian socialists and the Prosecutor's Office which opposed the dismissal of the case and decided to re-open it. The court's five judges deemed that, despite the lack of a causal relationship, there was evidence of the commission of a crime. Moreover, the Supreme Court decided to remand the case directly to the presiding judge Flors and not to the Civil and Criminal Part of the TSJCV, presided over by judge De la Rúa, who had closed the case.

On 15 July 2011, in line with the Supreme Court's ruling, judge José Flors once again indicted Francisco Camps for the recurring crime of bribery. Finally, on 25 January 2015, the Jury Court found him not guilty by a vote of five to four.

From the first news articles alluding to Francisco Camp's relation to the Gürtel ring, the court of public opinion has held a heated and prolonged argument on the consequences that should arise due to this relation. The media's ongoing revelation of new details about the case, the alleged animosity judge Garzón felt towards the conservative People's Party (Partido Popular), and the supposed friendship between Camps and judge De la Rúa sparked a public debate that manifested in user comments published on the websites of online media. The trial proceedings presented the opportunity to analyze how the audience engages with digital media and examine the differences among the comment section's users based on their level of engagement. Given the literature review and the context of the case study, we pose the following research questions:

RQ$_1$: What are the characteristics of the interaction among participants in the comments section?

RQ$_2$: What impact does an increase in participation have on the interaction among users?

2. Methodology

To answer the research questions, we performed a content analysis of the users' comments appearing on articles about the so-called «tailor-made suits case» published on *Elpaís.com* and *Elmundo.es*, Spain's most-read online, national periodicals. As pointed out by Tenenboim and Cohen (2015), stories about social or political controversies elicit a large number of comments. Thus, the topic chosen assures us sufficiently high levels of participation so as to analyze the characteristics of the interaction among users, especially when the ruling was issued.

Likewise, to answer RQ2 and determine what influence an increase in participation exerts on interaction among users, we built the corpus to include every user comment appearing below articles published on two key dates of the process with distinct levels of participation: the stories on the indictment of Francisco Camps, with an average of 1.35 comments per minute, and those pertaining to his trial's verdict, with an average of 7.77 comments per minute.

The study's quantitative methodology is based on an analysis of the occurrence rate of the following variables within the comments: username, user participation rate, user loyalty, type of identification, the comment's addressee, and the publication phase. Therefore, the unit of analysis is the comment and the contextual unit is the user.

To explore the way users participate in the comments system, we recorded the *username* under which comments are published. Using the username, we can define other variables that provide complementary information about users' participation in online media. First, we can determine the number of unique users who participate in the comments system to determine the users' *participation rate*, based on whether they publish *one comment* or *several comments.* Second, knowing the username, we can codify the variable *user loyalty*, which yields information about users who publish on one or more than one medium. Lastly, using the variable *type of identification*, we can classify how users register and sign their comments on the medium. Each comment is classified based on whether the user identifies himself with a *name* or a *handle*. At the time of research, users were required to register in the comments system, though they could use either their real name or a pseudonym. As such, the digital media have no reliable mechanism to confirm that the names used in registration match the user's true identity.

Regarding how users interact in the forum, the variable *addressee* allows us to classify comments based on who the comment is directed at. To define the categories that make up this variable, we rely on Yoo's model (2011: 70-71). First, the category *medium* represents those comments which express the user's opinion without revealing any sort of interaction with other participants, such as this comment: «Excellent news!!! It was about time this came to an end!! Congratulations!» (*El Mundo* user, 25 January 2012). Second, in the, *user* category we include comments that show interaction with other forum participants, those which are responded to directly or through the comments system's tools: «If you respect the judicial decisions, suit yourself, but respect people who don't share your opinion» (*El País* user, 25 January 2012).

Lastly, the variable *phase* classifies comments based on the day they were published: indictment (15 July 2011) and verdict (25 January 2012). This allows us to analyze the differences in the comments published by users on each day and to establish what impact the increase in participation has on the interaction among participants.

3. Results

We counted 2,905 comments written by 1,066 unique users published on the online periodicals' comment system during the study's time frame. Most participants (63.70%) write just one comment, while the remaining 36.30% average 5.75 comments.

To answer RQ1, we analyzed the level of interaction among participants and determined the influence it has on the remaining variables. Table 1 (next page) shows the number of comments written by users based on the addressee and the user's level of participation in the comments system. Fifty-five percent of comments show no interaction whatsoever among participants and represent the unidirectional opinions of users who are uninterested in an interactive dialog. Consequently, the data suggest a moderate level of reciprocity among participants: only 44.5% of comments are directed at other users and can be considered an online conversation.

Table 1. Comment addressee based on user participation frequency.

Several comments/Single comment			Participation rate		Total
Addressee	Average	Absolute frequency	1026	585	1611
		%	46.1%	86.2%	55.5%
		Adjusted residuals	-18.4	18.4	
	User	Absolute frequency	1200	94	1294
		%	53.9%	13.8%	44.5%
		Adjusted residuals	18.4	-18.4	
Total %		Absolute frequency	2226	679	2905
		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

* No cell (0%) has an expected frequency less than 5. The minimum expected frequency is 302.45

The Yates corrected Chi-square test confirms that the differences among the groups of the dependent variable are statistically significant [c^2 (1, N = 2905) = 336.47, p < .001]. Upon analyzing the adjusted standardized residuals, we can determine the differences among the various levels of interaction. Users who write just one comment mostly participate in the comments system without showing any type of interaction with the other users. Nevertheless, most comments written by users who write more than one comment are directed at other users. Thus, the Phi coefficient shows a moderate but statistically signification correlation among the variables (ϕ = -.34, p < .001). Consequently, we gather that users with higher levels of participation in the comments system interact more with other users.

Table 2 shows the number of comments based on the comment's addressee and the user's loyalty to the medium. The Chi-squared test results indicate that the differences among the categories are statistically significant [c^2 (1, N = 2905) = 3.96, p < .05].

The frequency distribution analysis reveals two differentiated tendencies. First, most users who publish simultaneously on different media tend to write unidirectional comments that ignore the forum's other participants. Second, users who publish comments in just one medium write a significantly higher than expected number of comments directed at other users. Thus, we find an association between medium loyalty and interaction among participants.

Table 3 (next page) shows the distribution frequencies and the adjusted standardized residuals for the variable addressee based on the type of identification used to participate in the comments section. The Chi-squared test results indicate that the differences among categories are statistically significant [c^2 (1, N = 2905) = 11.60, p < .001].

Table 2. Comment addressee based on user loyalty.

No /Yes			Publishes on more than one medium		Total
Addressee	Average	Absolute frequency	1584	27	1611
		%	55.2%	73.0%	55.5%
		Adjusted residuals	-2.2	2.2	
	User	Absolute frequency	1284	10	1294
		%	44.8%	27.0%	44.5%
		Adjusted residuals	2.2	-2.2	
Total %		Absolute frequency	2868	37	2905
		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

* No cell (0%) has an expected frequency less than 5. The minimum expected frequency is 16.48

Table 3. Comment addressee based on type of identification*

| Handle /Name			Type of identification		Total
Addressee	Average	Absolute frequency	1549	62	1611
		%	56.2%	41.6%	55.5%
		Adjusted residuals	3.5	-3.5	
	User	Absolute frequency	1207	87	1294
		%	43.8%	58.4%	44.5%
		Adjusted residuals	-3.5	3.5	
Total %		Absolute frequency	2756	149	2905
		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

* No cell (0%) has an expected frequency less than 5. The minimum expected frequency is 66.37

Just as with user loyalty, a user's form of identification in the forum is also associated with the level of interaction among participants. As seen in Table 3, users who identify themselves with pseudonyms write mostly unidirectional comments directed at the medium, whereas most users who identity themselves with their given name and surname interact with other users in the comments section.

To answer RQ2 and determine what impact an increase in forum participation has on the interaction among users, we analyzed the differences in the comments published during the two phases of the trial, which have different average levels of participation. Figure 1 shows that users published a particularly high number of comments after the Jury Court's verdict was announced, twice as many as on the day of the indictment and six times greater than the average number of comments per minute.

Nevertheless, despite the marked increase in overall participation, the level of interaction remains constant throughout the two phases. The c^2 is not signifi-

Figure 1. Number of comments per trial phase
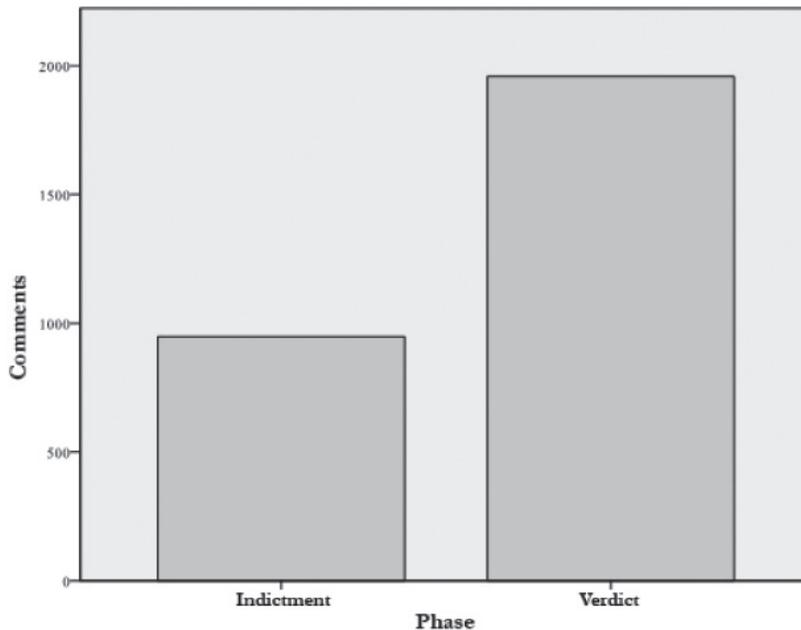
Source: Created by author

cant (*p* = .16) and confirms that the increase in participation does not seem to affect the way users interact. The Chi-squared results reveal that the participation increase in the comments section also fails to influence both the number of comments written by each user and his or her loyalty to the digital medium at hand. Still, the results are statistically significant when we cross the variables phase and type of identification [c^2 (1, *N* = 2905) = 28.84, *p* < .001].

   As seen in Table 4, only 5% of comments are identified by name and surname. The vast majority of comments are signed by users with a wide range of pseudonyms. Some handles have mythological origins (Ariadna_w/o_Theseus), whereas others allude to violence (KickingYourArse), hometowns (Alicanti From Alacant), or political ideology (formersocialist).

   The standardized residuals analysis indicates that the increase in average participation is associated with an increase in the number of users who identify themselves using pseudonyms. Quite the opposite, in the phase with less participation, we find a greater than expected percentage of users who identity themselves using their given name and surname.

Table 4. Type of identification based on phase in which comment was published*

Indictment /Verdict			Phase		Total
Type of identification	Handle	Absolute frequency	868	1888	2756
		% within the Phase	91.7%	96.4%	94.9%
		Adjusted residuals	-5.5	5.5	
	Name	Absolute frequency	79	70	149
		% within the Phase	8.3%	3.6%	5.1%
		Adjusted residuals	5.5	-5.5	
Total % within the Phase		Absolute frequency	947	1958	2905
		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

* No cell (0%) has an expected frequency less than 5. The minimum expected frequency is **48.57**.

4. Conclusions

Online media's incorporation of engagement tools such as blogs or comments sections alongside news articles facilitates interaction among users and the emergence of an online discussion (Thurman and Hermida, 2010). Nevertheless, this study's results point to only a moderate level of interaction among participants in the comments section. These data are in line with conclusions from similar studies on comments in online media (Ruiz et al., 2010; Taddicken and Bund, 2010; Valera, 2012b), comments published on blogs (López, Campos, and Valera, 2013; Valera, Campos, and López, 2013), or on Facebook (Camaj and Santana, 2015; Valera, 2012a).

If we focus on the characteristics of users who participate in online media comments systems, this study's results indicate that the most prolific commenters are those with the highest levels of interaction with other participants. Users who write just one comment tend to unidirectionally express their points of view, whereas most users who write more than one comment use the comments forum to respond to or interact with other commenters, thereby fostering a sense of community among users (Ziegele et al., 2013).

The results show that user loyalty to the medium where they participate and how they identity themselves in the comments forum affect the level of interaction among users. The commenters who interact least in the forum tend to identify themselves using pseudonyms or to comment on various media at once. Such users write comments anonymously, unidirectionally, and massively to satisfy their need for self-affirmation (Taddicken and Bund, 2010). On the contrary, users who engage in active debate with other participants tend to write comments on a single medium and identify themselves using their given name and surname. Thus, interaction among users seems to have its roots in the need to build one's reputation in the comments forum, a motive linked with the need for recognition (Leung, 2009).

Moreover, the study's results reveal that an increase in forum participation does not imply an increase in the number of comments written by each user nor in their level of interaction. Rather, in an avalanche of comments, we find a greater number of users who sign using a handle. These data confirm that more users participate when they write comments without revealing their personal identity (López García, 2011; McCluskey and Hmielowski, 2012).

In this paper, we have analyzed the coverage of a political controversy, because of which our conclusion on user participation cannot be extrapolated to online media users as a whole. Similarly, selecting just two online periodicals limits the results related to user loyalty. Future studies should examine a greater number of online media channels and incorporate comments from different sections to determine if there are differences in participation based on an article's subject matter and level of controversy.

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