How effective is online political communication really? Analysis of the interaction network of Basque political parties on Twitter[1]

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Summary

The regular communicative activity of political parties and what is known as the «permanent campaign» strategy (Canel and Zamora, 2004; Norris, 2005) have a special influence on democratic participation (Lilleker and Jackson, 2010; Mossberger and Tolbert, 2010; Campbell, 2013; Keane and Feenstra, 2014). How someone is perceived and credibility are essential attributes that involve steady and coherent actions related to traditional, offline mass media and, in the last two decades, to online media as well. This systemic external communication is important, considering the deterioration of confidence in political parties that has occurred in parallel with the development of a citizenry employing digital technologies and Internet (Velasco, 2011). In order to contribute to the studies on online political communication and its effectiveness in generating debate and influence at the social and mass media level (Sampedro, 2012; Chadwick, 2013; etc.), this article presents the results of a study focusing on the positioning and interactivity strategies on Twitter of the Basque political parties with parliamentary representation. The study sets out from the hypothesis that, due to the pseudo-endogamous character of

Twitter, many of the conversations that occur on this social platform are held between political leaders and the media. The results evidence a scant interest amongst Basque parties and their leaders in securing audience loyalty, which has consequences for the effectiveness and influence of their communications during and outside election periods.

Keywords: Twitter, politics, interaction, Basque parties

1. Introduction

As has occurred in other spheres, technological progress has taken politics onto the web, which has become the new «battlefield» of political parties. The umbrella terms «online politics» and «technopolitics» (Del Rey, 2011; Dader, 2009; Heindricks and Klaid, 2010) are precisely meant to represent a new form of practicing politics based on communicative actions linked to this innovative sphere (websites, social media, blogs, viral marketing, etc.), both during and outside campaign periods. For over a decade, a growing number of studies have become available that confirm the communicative practices of parties on Internet in different geographical contexts and during specific periods of campaigning, based on activities on websites (Dader, 2009; Dader *et al.*, 2014; Valera and López García, 2014) and on social media (Vergeer and Hermans, 2013; Graham *et al.*, 2013; Strandberg, 2013; López García, 2016). Some analyses also focus on the strategic use of different online platforms based on the interrelation of websites with other interactive tools like forums, blogs of leading candidates and a presence on Facebook and Twitter (Canavilhas, 2012: 30).

Parallel to the development of these practices and the consolidation of the web as a media field, there has been a reduction in public interest, a fall in affiliation and participation in parties and, in short, a «crisis of democracy» (Norris, 2005). As different authors have shown, a growing distance can be noted between parties and the citizenry, whose interest in politics is declining and who have a greater number of news and opinion media available to them (Velasco, 2011; Casero, 2015; etc.). Furthermore, the political parties and their leaders have come to be perceived as one of the main problems of society, as shown by sociological reports like the barometer of the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS-*Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas*) from February 2016.

Although political processes, and very particularly electoral processes, have in recent years adapted to a new scenario in which so-called «digital natives» are demanding a more interactive form of doing politics, a disinterest in online politics can be perceived, especially amongst young people. Uncertainties with respect to the effectiveness of social media in encouraging online and offline political participation are proving to be particularly important precisely in relation to this group. Young people require Web 2.0 political messages based on more effective feedback between parties and citizens (*Observatorio de Juventud en España*, 2012; Espinar and González, 2015).

In relation to the case that concerns us, the elections to the Basque Parliament in 2009 showed the preference of political parties for a top-down communication model, in which they provided detailed institutional information, but with a limited provision of channels for user participation (Peña, Lazkano and Larrondo, 2012). There was no specific strategy for the Net and the possibilities for interaction with citizens were deliberately restricted with the aim of: a) having maximum control of the candidates' public image; and b) altering the previously elaborated message as little as possible, in this way limiting the spread of negative currents of opinion (Peña and Pérez, 2011: 498).

These tendencies were corroborated three years later in the elections to the Basque Parliament in 2012. The mass media continued to be the main source of information for citizens, only a small minority of whom had recourse to social media (7.7% of Internet users and 4.5% of the total population) or the websites of the political parties or their candidates (2.6% and 1.5% respectively) to obtain information during the electoral campaign (CIS, 2013). Nonetheless, it seems that it is merely a question of time until the social media manage to reverse the traditional mass media's colonization tendency (Aguirre, 2012: 10).

The results of the study *La actividad comunicativa de los partidos políticos del País Vasco en el escenario digital (Communicative Activity of the Political Parties of the Basque Country in the Digital Scenario)* (Larrondo *et al.*, 2016) show that the communication departments of the Basque political organizations function following the current parameters that are based on the production and distribution of multiplatform content; that is, they act as providers of final content for the mass media, but also for the political parties' own websites, blogs and other social media. It is precisely in this Web 2.0 context that the parties of the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) and their press offices need to make a greater effort and achieve a better definition. This is because they are required to publicly transmit their activity in a more proximate way, not only working as emitters with new tools available to them, but especially as receivers of what is expressed by their target publics. This increases their level of professionalization and specialization.

According to the same study, the current difficulties are caused by the way the party itself functions; it tends to maintain its traditional attitude or role as an emitter rather than a receiver of what the public is saying, or as one side involved in a dialogue. After all, an online communicative strategy requires growing specificity, because merely setting up an organizational website, blogs and profiles on social media does not result in Web 2.0 communication (Del Rey, 2011). In some cases these difficulties are due to the use that the public makes of social media, tending to avoid deep or committed debates. The scant use that the media and journalists in the BAC make of the political parties' social media also contributes to this.

The parties are thus characterized by orchestrating actions that tend to converge in the search for the same result, but these actions present a wide divergence. After all, in addition to the need to exploit communicative options that coexist and complement each other (mass communication, interpersonal communication, etc.), it is necessary to expand in the online field where there is an

overabundance of competing messages. One of the main handicaps for developing multimedia and Web 2.0 communication is precisely the overload of work and time involved, as well as the need to have increasingly specialized profiles available. In any case, one should not lose sight of the fact that society still trusts the traditional media of press, radio and television as relevant sources of information on politics, parties and elections.

In light of all this, with the aim of clarifying the effectiveness of online political communication in the context of the BAC in terms of listening, dialogue and participation, we present a case study on political activity on Twitter in a non-electoral period —although situated close in time to elections to the autonomous parliament— based on a study of the Twitter profiles of the main Basque political leaders. The results of this study are intended to contribute to increasing understanding of a sphere in which there is a proliferation of specific analyses on this and other social media, at different electoral times and in different geographical and socio-political areas.

Concretely, this study focuses on Twitter due to the particular advantages of this network in relation to current online political practices, as well as the early interest shown towards it by the main political leaders in the Basque Country. One basic premise of the study is that Twitter is a useful network for all actors involved in the communication process of political parties (communication departments or teams, media journalists, and the citizenry). Another premise is Twitter's special utility for traditional agents, that is, for the parties and the media, as well as the consideration that Twitter's «loudspeaker» effect (Congosto, Fernández and Moro, 2011) tends to encourage the relation between parties and traditional media, rather than between parties, leaders and citizens. This conditions the effectiveness of online political communication in the social media and its potentialities for engaging the Basque citizenry.

2. New forms of political participation

The Anglophone term «political engagement» has been defined as an essential concept of modern democracies; its reliable and effective measurement has been the object of different studies (Boulianne, 2009; Doolittle and Faul, 2013; Anduiza, Jensen and Orba, 2012; Oser *et al.*, 2013; Keane and Feenstra, 2014; Espinar and González, 2015; Pontes, *et al.*, 2016), especially in relation to the use of social media (Gil, Jung and Valenzuela, 2012; Casero, 2017; Múñiz *et al.*, 2016; Laurison, 2016).

The growing influence of Internet, and specifically social media like Facebook, Twitter and Youtube, has encouraged novel, previously unknown forms of commitment and political participation. There are still doubts about these new forms, at least with respect to their usefulness for promoting political participation, especially in terms of votes (Mossberger and Tolbert, 2010; Oser *et al.*, 2013; Park, 2013).

In its different forms, citizen political participation is indispensable, as it stimulates democracy and an active citizenry; it also provides legitimacy to political

decisions and renews the confidence of the citizenry, which is made responsible for the decisions. In this respect, it diversifies the knowledge on the basis of which decisions are taken, thanks to the intervention of experts, the general public, the political class and representatives of power groups (Carpentier, 2011; Campbell, 2013).

Following the success of Barack Obama's online campaign during the U.S. presidential elections of 2008, which are considered paradigmatic (Aaker and Chang, 2010), this question has become one of the main objects of study in Political Communication (Canel and Zamora, 2004: 540).

There is thus a growing number of studies on the increasing power of social media as a tool for political communication, especially during electoral campaigns. These studies draw attention to the opportunities provided by social media profiles when it comes to renewing democratic engagement, thanks to the possibility of establishing more direct and simpler channels for dialogue with the citizenry. Specifically, social media are shown to be an instrument of great interest and utility as they make possible greater closeness between parties and public, as well as between parties and mass media and other stakeholders, making up for traditional deficiencies of activity in this field (Kelty *et al.*, 2015; Laurison, 2016).

For all that, while no candidate wants to be left out of the new communicative possibilities provided by the Net, it seems that in general political parties are continuing to transfer communicative patterns to this field that are more characteristic of traditional media (Van Aelst *et al.*, 2014). Parties tend to bureaucratize their digital activities, restricting the options of participation of their affiliates and sympathisers (Noguera, 2009; Rodríguez and Ureña, 2012). The reasons for these limited uses seem to lie in the fear amongst parties and their leaders of an opening up of processes and debates that might limit their traditional control of the message (Lilleker and Jackson, 2010; Van Aelst *et al.*, 2014). Without any doubt, this is detrimental to their credibility on and off the social media.

3. Twitter, an ideal channel

Political parties and their leaders have increased their investment in digital communication and for many years no campaign has been designed without the planned and systematic use of social media, those that are most useful for establishing a bidirectional communication process in which political messages are not only launched by the political class, but also by the citizens (Dader, 2009). Especially notable in this respect is the use and impact achieved by Twitter, which for many years has been the best-known and most widespread microblogging network. There have recently been different studies on Twitter in diverse geographical and political contexts that serve as theoretical and methodological antecedents for this research (Larsson and Moe, 2012; Vergeer and Hermans, 2013; Aragón *et al.*, 2013; Graham *et al.*, 2013; López García, 2016; Marín and Díaz, 2016, etc.).

As shown by one of the latest reports on political activity on Twitter, the *Twiplomacy Study* (2015), this Web 2.0 platform has become an ideal channel for

parties. According to this report, until March 2015 86% of the 193 member countries of the United Nations had a presence on Twitter, and 172 heads of state and government had personal accounts on Twitter. Similarly, several politicians are included amongst the five most followed world leaders. Recent studies conclude that the political class prefers Twitter to other social media, especially at specific moments during campaigns (Rodríguez and Ureña, 2012; Park, 2013; Enli and Skogerbø, 2013; Keane and Feenstra, 2014). Beyond the image of modernity and closeness provided by Twitter, the inherent characteristics of this service make it an ideal medium for use in the political arena, as will now be explained (Rodríguez and Ureña, 2012; López García, 2016).

Twitter users are «opinion leaders» in their melieux, active people who share information, organize, generate debate and, in short, try to influence their circles. Due to its value as a barometer of public opinion on current affairs, Twitter proves highly useful for taking the pulse of the citizenry.

However, it is the political parties, the governments and the mass media that lead opinion on Twitter. Thus, the traditional actors of communication are the most listened to and the ones who set agendas on this online and eminently social medium as well (Deltell *et al.*, 2013; Casero, 2015). It is understandable that Twitter users, overwhelmed by the informative confusion that exists on and off this network, opt to listen to and follow only leaders who stand out. But do these leaders of opinion also tend to follow each other? The people in charge of political communication strategies know that a presence on Twitter serves, amongst other things, to gain a presence in the traditional mass media, above all on television. These media pay a lot of attention to what is said on Twitter, giving rise to a «loudspeaker» effect (Congosto, Fernández and Moro, 2011; Casero, 2017).

Twitter is also an ideal medium for directly informing the public, without the mediation of the mass media. Furthermore, it helps politicians to think and speak in «headlines» and therefore to be able to transfer their messages in the most effective way possible: short, concise and direct phrases that serve for a short item on television or radio or a press headline. It is thus a source of news for journalists and a channel for improving the relationship with them. On the other hand, Twitter humanizes politicians and increases empathy with them, by enabling them to provide a glimpse of their opinions and aspects of their personal life that are of interest to the citizenry.

4. Methodology

The study presented in this article is based on the premise that politicians are highly influential and have a great power of prescription, due to the enormous repercussion that their messages can obtain in society. It was understood that such messages on Twitter have a high capacity of going viral and of thus being shared by a high number of followers, who consider them interesting enough to spread amongst their own community of followers. In this sense, another premise of the analysis is the greater potentialities of Twitter for amplifying a

message, increasing its visibility and facilitating interaction with political parties, in comparison to other social media like Facebook (Congosto, Fernández and Moro, 2011; Enli and Skogerbø, 2013). In particular, and taking into account Twitter's abovementioned «loudspeaker» effect (Congosto, Fernández and Moro, 2011; Casero, 2015), the basic hypothesis of the study is that the conversations fomented on Twitter mainly take place between politicians and media, due to the pseudo-endogamous character of this network (Rodríguez and Ureña, 2012).

This research has accordingly sought to determine the extent to which Basque political leaders contribute to creating debate, whether they are influential or not, and in short, whether what they write on this microblogging network is finally taken up by the media. In this sense, the analysis places special emphasis on the interactions between Basque politicians and media journalists to discover the place the latter occupy amongst the people, institutions and organizations that are most followed, mentioned, replied to and retweeted by Basque politicians. These data make it possible to gain a deeper understanding of aspects related to the effectiveness of the online political message, such as the degree or level of activity, the reach or level of amplification of messages, their potential to influence followers and the reactions generated amongst users.

Secondarily, the study tried to determine whether amongst the most retweeted and «favourite» tweets of Basque politicians there is content related to their personal life, far removed from their institutional or professional life, bearing in mind that these questions favour the humanization and closeness of leaders. This is especially important for encouraging engagement in an age when public opinion is distanced from traditional political affairs, as noted in the introduction. As was also mentioned in the introductory section, this analysis forms part of the research activities of a broader study focusing on the external communication strategies of the political parties with representation in the parliament of the Basque Autonomous Community.

In accordance with the stated aims, the fieldwork involved analysing the Twitter profiles of the main Basque political leaders. For this purpose the study adapted the recent methodological proposal of Pérez, Santos and Meso (2015), focusing on parameters like the rates of activity, amplification, gratification and conversation of the five Basque political leaders with the most followers on Twitter. To that end the study applied an analytical file designed on the basis of 24 indicators grouped in four sections: a) potential to influence, b) activity, c) interaction and d) reactions generated in users. These parameters were evaluated using the *Twitonomy* tool, which defines the last 3,200 tweets published on each profile. In order to carry out the study a total of over 15,000 messages were analysed that had been disseminated during the month of June 2016 in the five selected Twitter accounts belonging to the Basque political leaders with most followers (Graph 1). The month of June was chosen to carry out the study because it was suitable for analysing political activity outside electoral periods, although this was a moment of great communicative activity, since autonomous elections were to be held in the Basque Autonomous Community following the summer period, concretely on 25 September.

At the time of the analysis, the Basque political leaders under considera-
tion had experience in the use of Twitter. The first to open an account on this
microblogging network was Patxi López (Socialist Party of Euskadi, PSOE-
EE; @patxilopez) (September 2008), followed by Oskar Matute (Basque
Country Unite, EH Bildu; @oscarmatute) (March 2009). The latter was fol-
lowed two months later by the current president of the Basque Autonomous
Community, Iñigo Urkullu (Basque Nationalist Party, EAJ-PNV; @iurkullu).
The accounts of Gorka Maneiro (Union, Progress and Democracy, UPyD; @
Gorka_Maneiro) and Iñaki Oyarzabal (People's Party Basque Country, PP; @
inakiOyarzabal) were opened in 2011. In more up-to-date terms, Patxi López,
who had been president of the Basque government between 2009 and 2012,
heads the classification of political leaders with the most followers on Twitter.
Behind him are the current president, Iñigo Urkullu, the current spokesperson
of UPyD in the Basque Country, Gorka Maneiro, the secretary of Rights and
Freedoms of the PP, Iñaki Oyarzabal, and Oscar Matute, a parliamentarian of
EH Bildu (Graph 1).

Graph 1. Basque leaders most followed on Twitter.
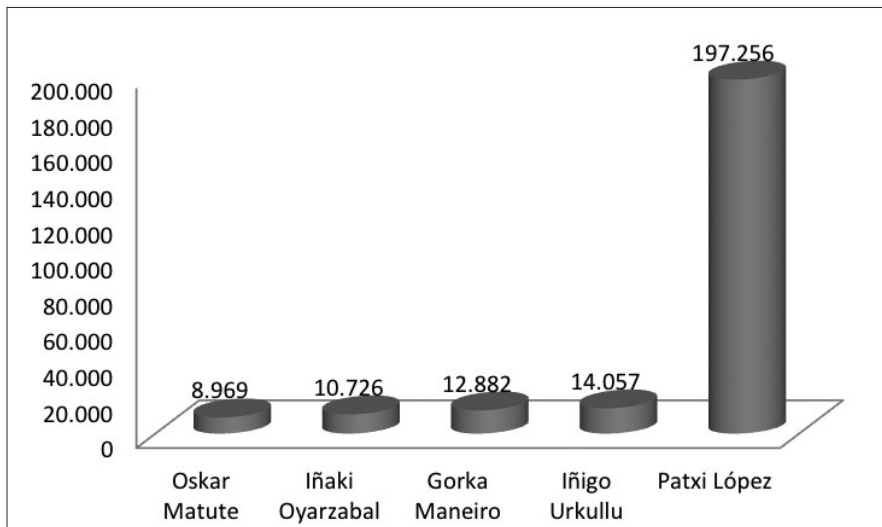
Source: Elaborated by the authors based on Twitter (Data for May-June 2016).

Table 1. The most influential Basque politicians on Twitter.

Politician	Followers	Following	Messages	Followers/ Following	Listed/1,000 followers	Tweets/day
Patxi López	197.256	444	2.255	444	12	0,79
Iñigo Urkullu	14.057	25	3.721	562	23	2
Oskar Matute	8.969	2.821	29.446	3,18	21	48,44
Gorka Maneiro	12.882	1.500	89.587	8,59	27	58,05
Iñaki Oyarzabal	10.726	879	3.864	12	22	2,39
Politician	Retweets	%	Mentions	%	Replies	%
Patxi López	272	12%	638	0,28	305	14
Iñigo Urkullu	668	21%	553	0,17	506	16
Oskar Matute	3.107	97	119	0,04	67	2
Gorka Maneiro	2.449	77	709	0,22	153	5
Iñaki Oyarzabal	2.182	69	730	0,23	342	11
Politician	Links	%	Hashtags	%	**T**weets retweeted	%
Patxi López	517	0,23	239	0,11	1.385	61,5
Iñigo Urkullu	832	0,26	535	0,17	2.347	73,39
Oskar Matute	12	0	5	0	53	1,66
Gorka Maneiro	374	0,12	302	0,09	734	22,99
Iñaki Oyarzabal	276	0,09	452	0,14	843	26,50
Politician	Number of times retwee-ted	%	Favourite Tweets	%	Number of times marked	%
Patxi López	43.722	31,57	1076	47,749	19.562	18,18
Iñigo Urkullu	15.303	6,52	1492	46,65	6.844	4,59
Oskar Matute	644	12,15	62	1,94	422	6,81
Gorka Maneiro	31.501	42,92	738	23,1	22.152	30,2
Iñaki Oyarzabal	17.161	20,36	843	26,50	10.080	11,96

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on Twitonomy (June 2016).

5. Results

5.1. Potential to influence

Besides the number of followers, the capacity to influence a community depends on variables that are quantifiable in terms of retweets, mentions, replies or information concerning «who has retweeted you». These data make it possible to concretize the levels of engagement and amplification of the message.

Although a wide number of followers only gives an approximate idea of the influence that a Twitter profile might have, it is in any case a figure with a complementary value and is thus of interest. In this respect, the politicians under consideration in general enjoy a great power of prescription, as they are followed by many people. In this sense, Patxi López (Socialist Party of Euskadi), who was president of the Basque government between 2009 and 2012, stands out, as he has 197,256 followers at the time of the analysis. After him comes the current president of the autonomous community, Iñigo Urkullu (Basque Nationalist Party), with 14,057 followers, and further behind Gorka Maneiro (Union, Progress and Democracy) with 12,882 followers. Iñaki Oyarzabal (People's Party) comes in fourth place with 10,726 people who have subscribed to read his messages. Finally, there is Oskar Matute (Basque Country Unite) with 8,969 followers. The mere figure of the number of followers is not in itself very relevant, although there is a surprising distance between the Basque politician in first place on Twitter and the rest. This difference served for Patxi López to be considered the most popular Spanish politician on the microblogging network in 2015.

In relation to the potential reach that a profile can achieve, the 1,000-user list proves to be an interesting variable. This measurement is an indicator of the quality of an account and refers to the average of people who added the politician's profile to a public list. «Its value lies in that it indicates the average number of Internet users who have taken the time and trouble to classify the profile on a public list (for each 1,000 followers), which is a recognition of its importance on a concrete issue. A high number combined with a broad base of followers means that the user's tweets are considered especially relevant by third parties» (Pérez and Santos, 2014: 218).

Notable in this respect are Gorka Maneiro with 27 lists for every 1,000 followers, Iñigo Urkullu with 23, and Iñaki Oyarzabal with 22. The last position corresponds to Patxi López with 12. In general and in spite of the differences between them, all have good results as none falls below ten points. In any case, as mentioned above, this figure must be combined with a high volume of followers. Thus Patxi López continues to have the greatest potential to influence, as he is the one who can gather the largest part of the public.

Concerning the users followed by these accounts, it should be noted that the majority are related to politics; however, with respect to this research, it is also worth underscoring the presence of mass media and journalists amongst the lists of users who are most retweeted, most replied to and most mentioned (Table 2). As can be observed, the number of media, programs and journalists followed by Basque politicians is uneven. While some follow two or three, others barely interact with any.

Table 2. The most followed mass media and professionals.

Politician	Most retweeted users	Most replied to users	Most mentioned users
Patxi López	*Boulevard de EiTB El País*	Aitor Alonso Borja Bergareche César Calderón	*El País* Ana Pastor (*TVE*) César Calderón
Iñigo Urkullu	*EITB Noticias Euskal Telebista Boulevard de EiTB*	-	*El Boulevard (Radio Euskadi) Euskal Telebista Herri Irratia Onda Vasca Radio Euskadi Azpimarra (ETB1) Buruaga (COPE) Telebilbao Euskadi Irratia*
Oskar Matute	-	-	-
Gorka Maneiro	-	-	*Julia Otero(Onda Cero) Julia en la onda (Onda Cero) Dani Alvarez(EiTB)*
Iñaki Oyarzabal	*Nort Expres*	Federico Quevedo	-

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on Twitonomy (June 2016).

It is also worth considering the influence of political ideology when consider-ing the media and professionals that are followed. The current Basque president shows an attachment to the media of the Basque Country, which is reflected in the fact that the Basque Public Radiotelevision Corporation or some of its pro-grams can be found amongst the users most retweeted and most mentioned in Urkullu's tweets. The rest of the politicians, with certain exceptions, tend to relate to the state-level media. None of the mass media but some professional journal-ists can be found amongst the most replied to users. In fact, anonymous citizens appear in the first places, without any link to the media or politics, which is a clear indication of the communicative relation found between Basque politicians and their fellow-citizens.

5.2. Activity

It seems that one of the problems with Twitter is to get users to become active participants and not abandon the network. This idea of activity is essential because active users are the only ones who can draw attention to, and amplify, the message of Basque politicians, thus maintaining an effective level of engagement. That is, publishing up-to-date content is the best way of ensuring user loyalty and making

the profile influential. In this section the Basque politicians analysed show a high degree of commitment since, with certain variations, they are active and try to contribute something every day. Gorka Maneiro is the one who contributes by far the most in this respect, with a daily average of 58 messages. Oskar Matute with 48 messages comes second. They are followed by Iñigo Urkullu and Iñaki Oyarzabal with an average of two messages per day. Patxi López comes last with one tweet per day.

5.3. Interaction

The degree of interaction examined a) the number of retweets by users followed by the profile, b) average mentions per tweet and c) answers obtained. The values obtained by these indicators serve for measuring an account's interest in interacting with third parties. In other words, it makes it possible to know whether Basque politicians comment on other people's messages and respond to their mentions. In this case differences are found with respect to the form of interacting with users. Oskar Matute is notable as he uses the retweet as a form of interacting (97% of the total number of messages on his accounts), followed by Gorka Maneiro (77%) and Iñaki Oyarzabal (69%); this is moreover a good way of increasing the profile's influence.

The second way of creating conversation-interaction on Twitter is by mentioning others (this is the number of mentions a profile receives every time a tweet is posted). In relation to this question the best results are obtained by Iñaki Oyarzabal (730) and Gorka Maneiro (709), followed by Patxi López with 638. President Iñigo Urkullu resorts to mentions in 17% of his messages and Oskar Matute in 4%. Iñigo Urkullu is first in number of replies (506). He is the politician who replies to his audience the most, with 16% of his total messages. He is followed by Patxi López, with 14% and Iñaki Oyarzabal, with 11%.

With respect to the probability of the users becoming a source of information for third parties, which also contributes to generating interaction, links (the politician's own and with others) and hashtags were observed. For example, the higher the number of links, «the greater the probability that the user is a source of information for third parties» (Pérez and Santos, 2014: 221). Concretely, the likelihood of tweets containing links being shared is 86% higher (Cooper, 2013). In relation to this question, there are two politicians who closely follow this maxim. One is Iñigo Urkullu, with 26% of his messages containing links; the other is Patxi López, with 23%. They are followed by Gorka Maneiro, with 12%. These figures can be considered symptomatic of their interest in becoming a source of information for the public that follows current political affairs. On the other side of the scales there is Oskar Matute, who barely includes links in his messages.

Another resource for increasing the visibility of an account's messages and obtaining more followers is to use a hashtag. This resource serves for relating a tweet to a concrete issue or for starting a discussion, since by selecting it one can read all the messages that talk about this issue. Its importance is such that adding one or two hashtags in a message increases audience participation by 21%. In this

case, the tweets that are most likely to be found in a search and generate interaction are those of Iñigo Urkullu, since 17% of his messages contain a hashtag. He is followed by Iñaki Oyarzabal with 14%. In this variable nearly all the politicians analysed obtain a relatively low score, since in general all of them are situated in a range of between 9 and 17%.

5.4. Reactions generated in users

An account with many of its messages retweeted to third parties is an unmistakable sign that it is considered a source of information to be taken into account by users. If we apply this to the Basque politicians, the result makes clear the expectation generated in the audience by their content. Gorka Maneiro and Iñaki Oyarzabal have a percentage around 25%, which is quite a good score. At the head are Iñigo Urkullu and Patxi López, with high percentages oscillating between 60 and 70%. Oskar Matute's messages are the ones that generate the least expectation, as only 1.6% of his tweets are retweeted to third parties. In the case of the current Basque president, users retweet an average of seven out of ten messages. In any case, Patxi López has the greatest repercussion, since although he is 12 percentiles less than Urkullu (61.5% of retweets as against 73.4%), each of his messages is shared an average of 31 times, in comparison to the 6 times that the Basque president's messages are shared.

To discover whether what Basque politicians tweet is liked by their account followers, we considered the so-called «favourite rate», obtained on the basis of the number of times each message is marked as a favourite. This measurement, together with the previous one, is one of the most interesting for measuring an account's influence or real repercussion on the microblogging network. Once again, nearly all the accounts have high scores that oscillate between 23 and 48% (the exception is Oskar Matute's, with 2%), which is a sign of the attention and interest aroused in the audience by content written by Basque politicians. The first position is for Patxi López, with 48% of his messages marked as favourites by third parties. Besides, each of this politician's tweets is marked as a favourite by an average of 18% of users. In general, all the politicians considered have very good results in this section, which reflects a strong degree of engagement with users and is indicative of the visibility and influence of their activity. In Urkullu's tweets it is also possible to find questions that are more personal, or that depart from strictly political content. This more human view doubtless contributes to awakening greater empathy with the public, in addition to being an indicator that managing and writing the messages depends directly on the political leader.

6. Conclusions

The communications of the Basque political leaders via Twitter are aimed specifically at the citizenry and Internet users, since, with exceptions, they do not think that journalists follow the party's activity on social media in a systematic

way. In relation to the starting hypothesis, it is worth underscoring that it is barely possible to detect a presence of mass media and media professionals amongst the users that politicians most interact with. This has a direct influence on the way in which their messages reach society. After all, parties nowadays use social media mainly to retransmit content already spread through other media (press, radio, television and the organizational website) and thus already well-known to journalists, to whom the party personally sends all the information in written, visual and audiovisual form. According to the parties themselves, journalists feel no need to turn to Twitter in order to find in the leaders or parties' tweets a reliable source of information with which to feed their current affairs content (Larrondo *et al.*, 2006).

This study of the Twitter accounts of the most influential Basque politicians also makes it possible to confirm the repercussion of their messages on social media. The rate of amplification (or virality) oscillates between 25 and 70%. Equally, the «favourite rate», which measures whether their tweeting is liked by followers, is also very high, with values oscillating between 25 and 50%. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that, with the exception of one of the politicians analysed, as a general rule the leaders under consideration make no effort to encourage the engagement and loyalty of followers, which would increase the influence of their account, since they do not publish up-to-date content with the necessary continuity, and thus do not contribute any additional interest to the follower. This idea is important insofar as active audiences can draw attention to, and amplify, the message of the Basque politicians.

The rate of interaction is also positive in general. What stands out is the use these politicians make of mentions of others in their tweets —virtually no account is below 15%— followed by the example of the retweet as a form of commenting on the messages of third parties and generating conversation. Similarly, the study demonstrates the variable interest shown by these politicians in positioning themselves as a reference source of information for third-parties. This interest derives, on the one hand, from the number of links that they include in their messages —only two are situated around 25%— and, on the other hand, accompanying tweets with a hashtag, which occurs in 10% of the tweets studied.

This evidence is complemented by other data of interest, such as the fact that the political representatives considered in this study hardly use their profiles to transmit information that does not deal with politics. Without doubt, this can be understood as a reflection of their limited interest in approaching the citizenry and, for that matter, of the still timid tendency amongst the Basque citizenry to follow the political communications of the parties and political leaders of their milieu through social media and, especially, Twitter.

Equally, this could be understood in terms of an inefficient management of communication on Internet. At the present time of expansion of the social web, the Basque political parties and their leaders need to improve their strategies and redesign them according to the possibilities of this field, since merely having a presence on Internet is no longer the most relevant consideration when the aim is to promote fundamental values for the parties, such as transparency, attention and citizen participation.

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