Journalism on Twitter. The users' contribution to the flow of information[1]

Periodismo en Twitter. La contribución de los usuarios al flujo informativo

Jornalismo no Twitter. A contribuição dos usuários para o fluxo de informações

AMPARO LÓPEZ-MERI, Universitat Jaume I, Castellón, España (meri@uji.es)

ABSTRACT

Internet and social media contribute to the transformation of the process of selection and circulation of content. This paper investigates if Twitter users assume the role of gatekeepers when recommending content to their followers. Through the techniques of content analysis, we analyzed the links associated to #ArdeValencia and #25N, two viral hashtags in Spain about forest fires in Valencia and the Parliament election in Catalonia in 2012. The results question the potential of users as curators of content, because they tend to reproduce the media agenda and link news without following any strategy.

RESUMEN

Internet y los medios sociales contribuyen a la transformación del proceso de selección y circulación de contenidos. Este artículo investiga si los usuarios de Twitter asumen funciones similares a las del periodista gatekeeper cuando recomiendan contenidos. Mediante las técnicas del análisis de contenido, se analizan los links vinculados a #ArdeValencia y #25N, dos hashtags relevantes en España por su viralidad, referidos a los incendios forestales de Valencia y las elecciones de Cataluña de 2012. Los resultados cuestionan el potencial de los usuarios como curadores de contenidos, porque tienden a reproducir la agenda mediática y enlazar noticias sin seguir ninguna estrategia.

RESUMO

Internet e os meios sociais contribuem para a transformação do processo de seleção e circulação de conteúdos. Este artigo investiga se os usuários assumem funções similares a dos jornalistas como gatekeepers quando recomendam conteúdo para seus seguidores. A metodologia está baseada na análise de conteúdo dos links associados ao #ArdeValencia e #25N, duas hashtags virais na Espanha sobre os incêndios florestais em Valência e as eleições do Parlamento na Catalunha em 2012. Os resultados questionam o potencial dos usuários como curadores de conteúdo, porque eles tendem a reproduzir a agenda de mídia e a vincular notícias sem seguir qualquer estratégia.

Keywords: journalism, social media, Twitter, users, gatekeeping, links.

Palabras clave: periodismo, medios sociales, Twitter, usuarios, gatekeeping, enlaces.

Palavras-chave: jornalismo, mídia social, Twitter, usuários, gatekeeping, links.

INTRODUCTION

In the current network society, the mediation of new technologies has transformed the way in which we interact and communicate. Social networks are one of the main paradigms of this new context, marked by mass self-communication (Castells, 2009), the possibility of users to generate their own contents and distribute them bypassing the verticality of conventional media, which guard the interests –frequently incompatible with speeches that question the current institutionalism– of publishers and companies.

As a consequence of the above, power relations change. Social networks break the information monopoly of the media and empower citizens (Jenkins, 2006), who can create or recommend alternative content, which allows contrasting the news broadcast by traditional channels, oriented according to the convenience of the elites in power. This reality has implications both in journalism and in political systems and at the basis of democracy. Platforms like Twitter democratize communication, multiplying available information, participation and access to new sources, aspects that can strengthen freedom of information and transparency (Keane & Feenstra, 2014).

In Spain, the economic crisis, cutoffs in social rights and countless episodes of political corruption have eroded citizens' confidence in traditional actors in the public sphere, such as politicians, media and journalists, who are becoming increasingly aware that they must adapt to the logic of social networks to reconnect with the audience. Especially since the 15M citizen protests (thousands of people camped for days in the plazas of different Spanish capitals, from May 15, 2011, to show their indignation with the political system, as happened in Egypt and Tunisia with Spring Arab) and the birth of the so-called new social movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2014), citizens have discovered that they can operate outside the traditional actors. With the help of social networks, in addition to knowing issues missed by the mass media, they can influence the media and political agenda or establish their own (Micó-Sanz & Casero-Ripollés, 2014), for example, recommending and linking content. However, traditional actors also incorporate links to self-promotion and to reinforce their digital identity.

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the contribution of Twitter users to the information flow. The choice of Twitter responds to the important informational use conferred to it by users, media and journalists (Bastos, 2015; Herrero, 2014; Java, Song, Finin & Tseng, 2007; Túñez, 2012; Van Dijck, 2012). In order to do so, we address two relevant cases in Spain, #ArdeValencia (forest fires in Valencia) and #25N (elections to the Catalan Parliament), specifically to analyze the links incorporated with the two hashtags. It is a question of studying linked messages, establishing the behavioral patterns of each type of actor and evaluating whether citizens assume the functions of a gatekeeper journalist when they link contents, that is, if they select and hierarchize content according to their followers, and if they reinforce or counteract the media agenda (Bastos, Raimundo & Travitzki, 2013; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). We also checked the sources of the links, to verify if the conventional ones predominate and if new actors are introduced.

The selection of the case studies is based on two factors: the virality they achieved on Twitter, and their repercussion on the Spanish media and political agenda. The first case coincides with an unforeseen event, the forest fires of #ArdeValencia, which burned 50,000 hectares in Valencia during the summer of 2012. This event aroused much controversy, as much for its environmental consequences as for the criticisms of the opposition parties. These parties, mostly of left wing ideology, used the hashtag #ArdeValencia to denounce the management of the regional government of Valencia, then led by the Partido Popular (PP). They accused them of reacting late and ineffectively to the fires, of having made budget cuts and of the lack of troops to fight the fire. It took several days to control the flames and a helicopter pilot died while working on their extinction.

The second case addresses a planned event, the 2012 elections in Catalonia, celebrated on November 25, the date that gives the name of the hashtag analyzed, #25N, the most viral label regarding these elections. Two reasons define their importance. On the one hand, it is the first call to ballot boxes after Catalonia seriously considering the possibility of initiating its process of independence. On the other hand, the party that then

ruled Catalonia, a pro-independence nationalist forma-tion, faced a moment of great discredit, due to different judicial accusations of corruption.

The virality of both hashtags and the impact of both events on the journalistic coverage justify their rele-vance for this study. In addition, the selection of an ecological disaster and a political event serves the pur-pose of comparing two different journalistic contexts, which suppose different professional routines. In the first, since it is an unforeseen event, what prevails is a rupture of the informative flow. That is why the dyna-mics of work are characterized by immediacy, even by improvisation. On the other hand, as the second case is a planned election, communication strategies can specifically be designed by the actors involved in Twitter, both journalists and politicians, as well as citi-zens. From this perspective, the study of differences and similarities in the behavior of users, depending on whether it is an unforeseen event or a planned debate, can enrich the results. Also, although the conclusions are limited to these two cases, the quantitative con-tent analysis developed contributes to complement the contributions of previous research (Bernal, 2015; Paz García & Spinosa, 2014).

JOURNALISM IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

The Internet and the social media are transforming the way information circulates. Until now, it was the role of the journalist and the media to select and hie-rarchize content (McCombs, 2006). Journalism has tra-ditionally mediated between sources and the audience, interpreting reality and deciding what the citizens should know in order to form a reliable picture of the problems that surround them (Grossi, 2007). In this sense, the journalist's responsibility has been crucial, because the audience needs to understand its context to have its own opinion and to be able to fully deve-lop in democratic societies (Casero-Ripollés, 2008). However, these premises have changed. The produc-tion of newsworthy content is no longer exclusive to journalism. The new digital environment allows other actors, including citizens, to participate in the selec-tion and dissemination of information, comments and graphic resources related to the current situation (Castells, 2009). From this perspective, it is necessary to evaluate the impact of social media and citizenship on the evolution of the process of selection and circu-lation of content, as well as its possible consequences.

This transformation of the process of circulation of the messages opens the debate on fundamental issues of journalism, such as its social function or the journalist's role (Hermida, 2013). As a media-tor, in addition to telling stories, the journalist must develop his skills in selecting content (Bakker, 2014), for the enormous amount of information that circu-lates. Likewise, journalism faces the need to distin-guish itself from what users offer, demonstrating the reliability of its work. This context, if it is commit-ted to research, analysis and rigor, can be a shock to improve the quality of journalistic content, even to test new viable business models (Micó-Sanz, Masip & Ballano, 2012). Journalism also faces the challenge of integrating the audience in the construction of the informational story. Citizenship is rarely left out and their contribution can enrich the work of the journa-list (Orihuela, 2011). Journalism, in this sense, could be understood as a collaborative process, guided by the journalist, but open to dialogue and constant updating (Vis, 2013).

The literature indicates that social media are linked to these changes and questions about the foundations of journalism, in at least three senses. Firstly, because platforms like Twitter allow us to assess the environ-ment on current affairs and contribute to the interpre-tation of the news (Hermida, 2010). Secondly, because the citizenry, from these forums, participates in the evaluation of the interest of the affairs and influences the establishment of the agenda (Bruns & Burgess, 2012). Ultimately, because the users, thanks to these spaces, join the journalist in their work of monitoring the power (Feenstra & Casero Ripollés, 2014).

THE ROUTINES OF MEDIA AND JOURNALISTS ON TWITTER

Twitter has 316 million active users, generating 500 million tweets per day (Twitter, 2015). The media and journalists are aware that it is an interesting niche to attract audiences. That is why they have normalized the use of Twitter among their routines (Lasorsa, Lewis & Holton, 2012). In fact, it is estimated that the average user of this network is two to three times more likely to visit news websites than another average citizen (Farhi, 2009). In this context, the media are privile-ged actors, because their contents are the most linked (Kwak, Lee, Park & Moon, 2010), due to the dissemi-nation task that dozens of users play when echoing their headlines (Congosto, 2013).

However, although the media exploit Twitter's potential of distribution to reinforce their relationship with consumers (Ahmad, 2010, Greer & Ferguson, 2011) and to self-promote tweeting links to their webpages (López & Alonso, 2013; Túñez, 2012), they barely encourage interaction with the audience (Holcomb, Gross & Mitchell, 2011; Puebla-Martínez & Gomes-Franco, 2015). They do not usually respond to the messages of their followers (González-Molina & Ramos del Cano, 2013), nor create active communities (Requejo & Herrera, 2014), partly because of the persistence of traditional logics among professionals and entrepreneurs in the sector (Said, Serrano, García de Torres, Yerezers'ka & Calderín, 2013).

Journalists, on the other hand, are dedicated to informing, seeking information and finding sources (Brown, 2012; Gulyas, 2013). They try to be close to the citizens, retweeting their testimonies and evaluations (Artwick, 2013). The journalistic product does not end after its diffusion, but is still alive on the network, thanks to the audiences' comments (Marta-Lazo & García-Idiakez, 2014). Journalists interact with audiences to a greater extent than the media (Lasorsa et al., 2012), to consolidate their personal brand on Twitter, even outside their companies (Rodríguez & García, 2013). In addition, they abandon their role as impartial mediators (Lara Padilla, 2010), commenting and sharing details of their private life to be close to the audience (Vis, 2013). They also recommend competing content to gain credibility. In this regard, Noguera-Vivo (2013) detects that Spanish journalists include links in 32% of their tweets and more than double leads to other media. He understands, therefore, that the social media environment unites the competition.

Other studies offer a less optimistic view. For example, they argue that journalists are prone to self-referencing because they link their creations and avoid recommending content from their media rivals (Cozma & Chen, 2013). Likewise, they tend to relate to their guild colleagues without mentioning other actors, and focus their public conversations on issues of their work (Paz García & Spinosa, 2014). This studies also demystifies their interest in interacting with the audience, which is still limited (Pérez-Soler & Micó-Sanz, 2015).

In the same way, the novelty of their contributions is questioned. In this regard, Carrera-Álvarez, Sainz de

Baranda, Hererro and Limón (2012) stress that journalists are dedicated to the re-diffusion of pre-existing contents. In a survey of Spanish journalists, they verified that the most recurring use of Twitter is to probe the environment and detect trends. On the other hand, it is less frequent to go to this platform to spread exclusive information, contact with citizen sources or investigate. In general terms, however, different authors conclude that journalists cannot ignore the virtues of social networks (Salaverría, 2010), despite their disadvantages and dangers (shortness of tweets, excess of speed, over-information, rumors, anonymity), especially as informative sources and as distribution channels (Orihuela, 2011; Said et al., 2013).

THE INCURSION OF OTHER ACTORS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF NEWS

Academic literature points out that Twitter is modifying the classic norms and values of journalism, because it allows citizens to participate in the construction of the news (Brown, 2012). In this sense, users also inform and report through Twitter, select and recommend news content to their followers (Groot & Costera, 2014). As sources, from their accounts, they are empowered as voices alternative to the officials and as counterpower (Castells, 2009).

Citizens use Twitter to cover four needs: daily chats, conversation, information sharing and news sharing (Java et al., 2007). For this reason, the mere conception of Twitter as a platform for personal relationships is overcome, because citizenship shows journalistic interests (Bruns & Burgess, 2012). In this sense, citizens provide first-hand information when they are witnesses (Murthy, 2011), discuss ongoing current events (Bruno, 2011) and evaluate their journalistic interest, as gatekeepers' editors of any media.

Singer (2014, p. 13) considers that users are "secondary gatekeepers", because with tools such as retweets they can give or subtract relevance, and influence the survival or disappearance of debates. In this line, Bruns (2005, p.16) introduces the term "gatewatching" to indicate that the audience is incorporated into the task of evaluating the interest of affairs and setting up the media agenda. Bruns and Burgess (2012) argue that what Twitter thinks transcends the virtual frontier to be included in the coverage of conventional media.

In this sense, some authors consider that users' contributions constitute a sort of soundtrack (Burns, 2010), because they contribute to the shared interpretation of current affairs (López-Meri, 2015), in line with the concept of "ambient journalism" coined by Hermida (2010). This author understands that the sum of messages circulating on Twitter provides a more complete knowledge, which can help journalists to better understand reality, claiming that microblogging networks like Twitter behave as awareness systems based on the power of collective intelligence.

This idea has been supported by other authors, such as Naaman, Becker and Gravano (2011), who define social networks as social awareness streams. From this perspective, Twitter users assume the role of social censors of the news (Sakaki, Okazaki & Matsuo, 2010) and the platform exercises as a channel to propagate alerts and exchange data in real time. In connection with the concept of crowdsourcing or collaborative construction of news, Broersma and Graham (2012, p. 404) argue that social networks are "huge pools of collective intelligence" and that journalists take advantage of "wisdom of the crowd" to complete their stories. In this regard, after studying the coverage of the riots in Tunisia and Egypt, the so-called Arab Spring, Hermida, Lewis and Zamith (2014) support the emergence of a new style of gatekeeping in real time, because journalists, through social media, have a potentially wider range of sources.

In Spain, the so-called *Indignados*, who encouraged the protests of the movement 15M, managed to impose their agenda on media and political parties (Casero Ripollés & Feenstra, 2012), for their ability to generate their own speeches in social networks (Sampedro, 2014). The 15M action could even have had an impact on the intention to vote and hurt the big parties (Anduiza, Cristancho & Sabucedo, 2014). This is why Feenstra and Casero Ripollés (2014) suggest that citizens have become watchdogs of the political and economic power, a function previously monopolized by the press. Studies on different social movements show that activists, experts and alternative sources are incorporated into the construction of news (Lotan et al., 2011; Papacharissi & De Fátima Oliveira, 2012). This suggests a redefinition of journalism (Hermida, 2013).

However, there are many authors skeptical of the democratizing role of social networks, because strong links are not generated between users (Dahlgren, 2007), and the citizens' positions previously assumed outside the digital sphere are reinforced (Christensen & Bengtsson, 2011), with the risk of isolation among equals without knowing contrary opinions. This tendency favors dominant elites (Mozorov, 2012), that tend to become the focus of attention, to the detriment of alternative actors such as bloggers or leaders of minority parties. Therefore, there is a warning against the danger of reproducing the current media and political polarization in social networks (D'heer & Verdegem, 2014). Noguera-Vivo (2013) assures that only a small group of journalists considers the users and the atmosphere that is breathed on Twitter for the co-creation of news.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used is based on the techniques of content analysis, which allow describing in an objective and systematic way the manifest content of the messages, to formulate generalizable inferences that help their interpretation (Krippendorf, 2004). This methodology also makes it possible for the results to complement the findings of other exploratory studies. Specifically, this work focuses on the content linked to Twitter by different types of actors, understood as users who publish the tweets, with special regard to the activity of citizens. The objective is to answer the following research questions:

- **RQ1.** What kind of content and topics do the users that debate on current affairs link on Twitter?

- **RQ2.** Which sources do the actors who recommend links on Twitter use?

- **RQ3.** What type of actor provides alternative content to those broadcast through conventional channels, as the media of communication?

In order to answer these questions, the content analysis addresses the issues and sources of the links linked to two cases. In addition to detecting general trends, the data obtained are broken down according to the

type of actor, to analyze whether the contributions of citizens differ from those made by other actors, such as journalists or politicians. It is a question of assessing whether those who debate on Twitter, specifically citizens, have the ability to influence the process of selection and circulation of content, and whether they act as content prescribers for their followers.

We analyzed two samples of tweets linked to two hashtags of current news in Spain, an unforeseen event and an expected event. For the selection of cases, the more or less planned character of the news event has been considered, since they generate very different professional routines among journalists. Unforeseen events break the information continuity and speed up the pace of work. Instead, the planned events allow the strategic planning of messages that are more important to prioritize and disseminate. This circumstance leads one to think that on Twitter, different tendencies can be generated with regard to the selection and circulation of the contents proposed by the users. Hence the interest in having two events that allow for comparison.

As an unforeseen event, we analyzed the links recommended next to the hashtag #ArdeValencia, referring to the serious forest fires that devastated 50,000 hectares in Valencia in 2012. As an expected event, the links connected to #25N, which alludes to the elections of Catalonia held on November 25 of the same year. The criterion followed for the choice of the cases responds to the virality and media repercussion that they reached. It should be noted that the use of #ArdeValencia was popularized especially among opposition political parties and disgruntled users, who used the hashtag to criticize and attack against the policies of the Valencian Government, then led by the Partido Popular (PP). From this perspective, the label #25N is more neutral, used by all parties concurring in the elections of Catalonia to optimize the visibility of their tweets.

Regarding the fires, the sample covers all tweets published with the label #ArdeValencia between July 7 and 11, a total of 491 units. For #25N, we evaluated a selection of 500 messages published between November 23 and 26. In total, we analyzed the presence and content of the links in 991 tweets. For the election of the dates, we considered three criteria. On the one hand, both hashtags were required to be trending topic in their geographical area in some time slot of the selected days. On the other hand, we valued the

correspondence with the media and political agenda (days in which both media and official sources paid special attention to the news related to both hashtags). Third, we considered necessary to look for a similar number of units in each case, to facilitate the comparative analysis. Due to the high volume of publications related to the Catalan elections, in order to match both samples, we decided to circumscribe the analysis of #25N to the days closest to the vote, in line with the media interest of these days (since the closure of the campaign until the day after the elections, dedicated to the interpretation of the results).

The sample of tweets was collected through the Tweet-Tag application, which monitors hashtags with a margin of error of 0.77% (López-Meri, 2015). Each unique tweet forms a unit of analysis. The sample was coded according to the content analysis model defined in this section. In this research, the term link refers to the hyperlink that redirects the reader to content hosted on another website. Videos and photos that are displayed and viewed from the Twitter application itself are excluded. Scott's Pi formula was used to calculate the intercoder reliability. The level reached is .93 for the variable content type, .95 for the link source variable and .90 for the variable type of actor who publishes the link.

Regarding the analysis model, in relation to the first research question, we established nine categories for the identification of the type of content of the texts or materials linked through the tweets. For the design of these categories, we conducted a preliminary study of 100 units (50 of each case), which allowed us to detect the main tendencies and to choose the most representative items. They are not exclusive categories, because the same link can combine different types of content (information and opinion, for example) and be classified into several categories at once. To understand each category, we proceed to its description and add links as an example:

- **Information:** news that contain contrasted data and/or statements from sources, without opinions made by the journalists or authors of the linked content. Example: news from the newspaper The Guardian on the economic repercussions of the independence of Catalonia [https://goo.gl/brupao- https://goo.gl/Nl0xwZ].

- **Interpretation:** contents that includes arguments to explain or interpret data. Example: analysis with information and interpretation on the treatment of the fires of Valencia in Twitter, conducted by the Observatory of Investigation in Digital Media (Oimed) [https://goo.gl/BZR60K- https://goo.gl/nECyAv].

- **Opinion:** the linked content includes reviews, personal ratings, thoughts or emotions. Example: opinion article on the fires of Valencia, written by an opposition deputy and published by the newspaper Levante-EMV [https://goo.gl/jO7gjS- https://goo.gl/JoFBgR].

- **Promotion:** content that self-promotes the author of the tweet or promote third parties. Example: multimedia guide to follow the elections in Catalonia, prepared by a digital media that promotes it on Twitter [https://goo.gl/1zlxBy- https://goo.gl/L7Po7g].

- **Humor:** ironic and satirical contents, comic strips, vignettes, memes and jokes. Example: vignette that ironizes about the political party in charge of managing the extinction of the fire in Valencia [https://goo.gl/7acyzj- https://goo.gl/RTaaOG].

- **Forum:** citizen comments on chats. Example: links to chats promoted by political parties and other collectives with comments from users [https://goo.gl/jA7KgX- https://goo.gl/ULTllA].

- **Noise:** links to topics that are not related to the analyzed news. Example: column on gender violence associated with #25N, but not related to the Catalan elections [https://goo.gl/yssQgy- https://goo.gl/9nV5Vo].

- **Error:** expired or erroneous links that do not lead to any content. Example: link leading to an expired Facebook page [https://goo.gl/GzeJIa].

- **Other:** contents not included in any previous category. Example: Links to streaming retransmissions of television channels.

With these not mutually exclusive categories, the objective is to assess the total weight of each content type to define the preferences of actors including links related to hashtags. It also seeks to assess the concrete case of citizens and draw conclusions about their potential as gatekeepers. In this sense, in the case of media links, because they are the most abundant, in addition to studying the type of content, which marks the function of the link (informative, value, promotional, humorous), we analyzed the most recurrent subjects. To delve into these aspects will allow to connect the results of this work with the findings of the literature, and assess whether Twitter, in these case studies, provides redundancy or scoops, whether it serves as a speaker to official sources or introduces new voices, as the most optimistic studies suggest.

Regarding the issues related to the fires of #ArdeValencia, as detected in the preliminary coding phase, they can be grouped into eight items, as shown in the results section (figure 1): (a) evolution of fires and economic and environmental issues; (b) budget cuts for fire prevention; (c) creation of a neighborhood platform for those affected by fires; (d) reactions, statements and criticisms from opposition parties; (e) reactions and statements of the Valencian Government; (f) data on other fires; (g) noise or issues not directly related to fire; and (h) expired or erroneous links.

In the case of the elections of #25N in Catalonia, the most frequent themes (figure 2) can be grouped into eleven items: (a) information on voting results, casting of seats and composition of the Catalan Parliament; (b) independence process; (c) acts of campaign closure and balance of the electoral campaign; (d) political corruption linked to the parties aspiring to govern; (e) controversy over bureaucratic obstacles to mail voting from abroad; (f) alleged irregularities committed by activists and proxies of the Partido Popular in some polling stations; (g) media coverage of elections; (h) opinion articles on different topics; (i) interviews that address different topics; (j) noise or issues not directly related to elections; and (k) expired or erroneous links.

Second, to study the sources of the links, related to the second research question, there are six categories: media, blogs/websites (political party websites, associations, citizen groups, companies or professionals of any kind), social networks, anonymous websites (websites of authors that are not identified), expired websites (no longer have content or do not exist) and other forums (websites not included in any previous category). The study of the origin of the links will allow to know if the users use conventional media or

alternative sources, like blogs elaborated by experts in different professional areas.

Finally, with the aim of investigating the routines and preferences of the different types of actors, we distinguish between individual or collective users and between identified or anonymous profiles. In turn, the identified users are classified into subcategories: media, journalists, political parties, politicians, companies, entrepreneurs, professionals/experts, citizen groups and associations. The study of the typology of actors will allow knowing which actors tend to recommend or mention contents from conventional media, and which actors bet on expert or alternative sources, aspect related to the third research question. In this regard, in this study, the links proposed by anonymous users have been considered citizen contributions. In the same way, suggestions from professionals/experts or social movements are considered citizen contributions, since they contribute to building the atmosphere that is breathed on Twitter, and can also help to control power (Feenstra & Casero-Ripollés, 2014; Hermida et al. al., 2014).

RESULTS

PREFERENCES REGARDING LINKED CONTENTS AND TOPICS

#ArdeValencia's debate on forest fires generates links in 33% of tweets, a small percentage that drops to 24% in the case of the #25N elections in Catalonia. Consequently, the inclusion of links does not seem a priority for the virtual communities originated around these two hashtags. In relation to the first research question, which seeks to evaluate the type of linked content, in both cases of study the information predominates, especially in #ArdeValencia, present in 83% of the links. The remaining contents are well below this percentage (table 1).

The opinions occupy between 18% and 20% of the links, while the interpretation is around 10%. The promotional messages are superior in the case of the Catalan elections, because of the interest of politicians and parties in praising their heads of list, ask for the vote and try to win the elections. The high percentage of noise related to #25N is due to the fact that the same day the Day Against Gender Violence was celebrated, labeled with the same hashtag.

On the other hand, the analysis shows that thematic diversity is scarce, since there is a significant percentage of repeated links, or that, being different, explain the same data with a similar approach. This percentage of reiteration is 45% in the case of #ArdeValencia. In part, this is due to the preference of the actors, also of the citizens specifically, to redirect traffic to the media (figure 1), especially to articles, reports and interviews that deal with the evolution and consequences of fires (62%).

Specifically, there is information on the tasks of extinction, the area burned, which reaches 50,000 hectares, economic losses estimated at 1 billion euros and the risks of future fires due to erosion of the land. The remaining messages address the budget cuts of the Valencian Government in fire prevention (10%) and the creation of a platform of affected neighbors (5%). There are also reactions of the opposition parties (4%), which demand the resignation of the Minister of Interior and the creation of a commission on forest policy in the Valencian Parliament. Opinion articles are barely registered (9%) and are linked to damage the image of the Spanish government's president, Mariano Rajoy, for not visiting the burned area, even though the contents do not explicitly mention the fires, as shown in the example of image 1.

Category	#ArdeValencia	#25N
Information	83	51
Interpretation	10	9
Opinion	20	18
Promotion	8	17
Humor	1	–
Forum	5	2
Noise	4	30
Error	4	2
Other	1	1

Table 1. Presence of each content in the links of #ArdeValencia and #25N. In percentages
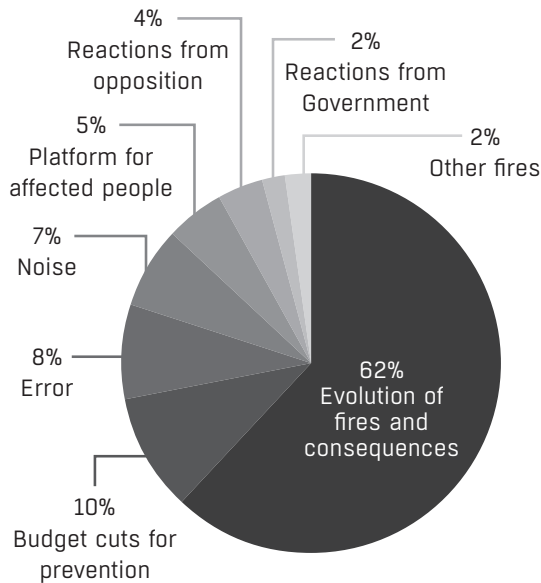
Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 1. Themes of media links in #ArdeValencia

Source: Own elaboration.

Also, there is little thematic diversity next to the hashtag #25N (figure 2), although there are less repeated links (13%) than in #ArdeValencia. In this sense, the linked content usually focuses on two issues: the interpretation of electoral results (28%) and the process of independence of Catalonia (20%). To a lesser extent, there is content on the closure of the campaign (9%), political corruption (4%), voting from abroad (2%) and other incidents, such as the episode related to PP proxies accused by Twitter users to introduce its party's ballots into envelopes (2%).

Media links are usually informative, such as in #ArdeValencia. Only on 11% of the occasions there is opinion. In sum, the bulk of the recommended content focuses on the electoral results and provides a similar vision, to point out that the parties favoring the independence of Catalonia obtain better results, especially Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) and Candidatura de Unitat Popular (CUP), as opposed to the downturn of the rest of the parties.

Image 1. Criticism of President Rajoy linked in #ArdeValencia

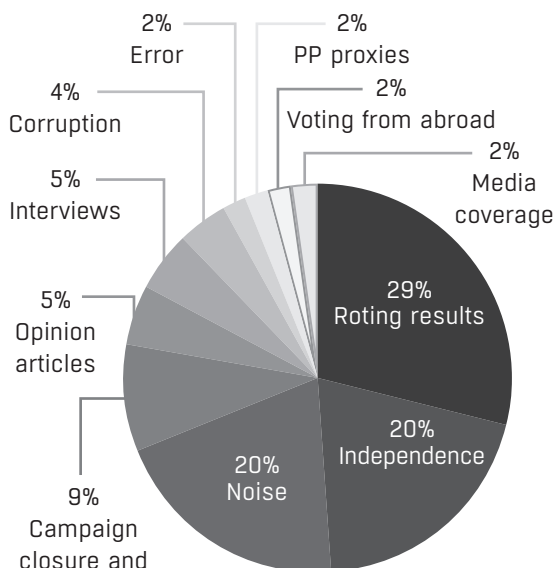*Source: news linked from the newspaper Público.es.*

Figure 2. Themes of media links in #25N

Source: Own elaboration.

In general, opinions, absent in media links, are more frequent in links from websites and blogs of experts, political parties, organizations and other collectives. In #ArdeValencia, 15% of blogs contents questions the policies for fire prevention of the Valencian Government. However, it should be noted that a quarter of these blogs belong to politicians or opposition parties, which explains their interest in monitoring the work of the Valencian Government. Regarding the elections of #25N, opinions are seen in 40% of blog posts, but only 6% question the Catalan government, then presided over by the nationalists of Convergència i Unió (CiU). In general, in the two cases studied, the criticisms are more abundant and forceful when they come from anonymous sources. In fact, 30% of the content from anonymous blogs contains criticism of politicians and rulers.

PREFERENCES REGARDING THE SOURCE OF THE LINKS

Regarding the second research question, the quantitative analysis offers similar data in both case studies. Most links direct traffic to the media, more than half in the case of #ArdeValencia (table 2). This data is in consistent with the fact that information predominates, as it is often recommended to consume news and

reports. Behind the media websites, in second position are websites and blogs of political parties, professionals/experts or companies, which account for a quarter of the links, while the presence of other social networks and forums is symbolic. The volume of links to anonymous sites is also similar.

In the case of the fires of Valencia, there is more presence of national media than of local media. The Valencian newspaper *Levante* is an exception, since it has the highest number of links (28%), followed by *El País* (19%) and *El Mundo* (13%), both nationals. No media gets so much advantage in the #25N debate. In this second case, users opt to recommend Catalan media content, such as *El Periódico* (9%), *Nació Digital* (5%), *Ara* (5%) and *VilaWeb* (5%), although the Catalan elections were internationally covered. In addition, almost all links refer to written media. There are no links to radio stations and the presence of television channels is symbolic.

DIFFERENCES AND TRENDS ACCORDING TO THE TYPE OF USER

In response to the third research question, individual profiles incorporate more links (70%) than collective users (30%). Also identified actors include more links than anonymous users, especially in the case of the Catalan elections, where identified users link more informative (60%), evaluative (60%) and interpretative (80%) contents. Regarding the forest fires in Valencia, opinion (67%) and interpretation (59%) are more frequent from anonymous users. In this regard, it is essential to clarify that the debate on #ArdeValencia was politicized and led

CATEGORY	#ArdeValencia	#25N
Media	55	43
Blogs/Webs	24	27
Social networks	3	6
Anonymous websites	10	8
Error	2	13
Other forums	6	3

Table 2. Presence of the different sources of the links. In percentages

Source: Own elaboration.

to strong criticism of the Valencian government. This circumstance could explain the interest of anonymous citizens to share opinion articles critical with their rulers.

On the other hand, in the two analyzed cases we can see that the media, journalists, parties and politicians tend to self-promotion and corporatism, by including links to their webpages. Therefore, it could be said that they use Twitter to create or promote their brand and spread their own content. In the case of journalists, 93% of their recommendations come from media, with 60% of their own media. The media present in the samples also direct the traffic to their respective media groups, in 80% of the occasions. Likewise, half the links proposed by parties and politicians lead to their corporate websites, and the other half refers to articles published by media. Both media and journalists

basically link information (90%), while parties and politicians add opinion pieces.

Companies refer to their websites, but also to expert blogs. Users classified as professionalsexperts, including teachers, engineers or advertisers, recommend specialists and alternative voices 80% of the time. This can be seen in image 2, which contains images about the dimensions of the fires of Valencia, linked from the website of a company specializing in photogrammetry. This suggestion is from a user in the professional/expert category. On the other hand, citizen groups propose media content in 25% of cases. They also direct traffic to blogs and other social networks. In the case of fires, which have the presence of groups linked to political activism, these groups promote their websites and the pages of political parties.
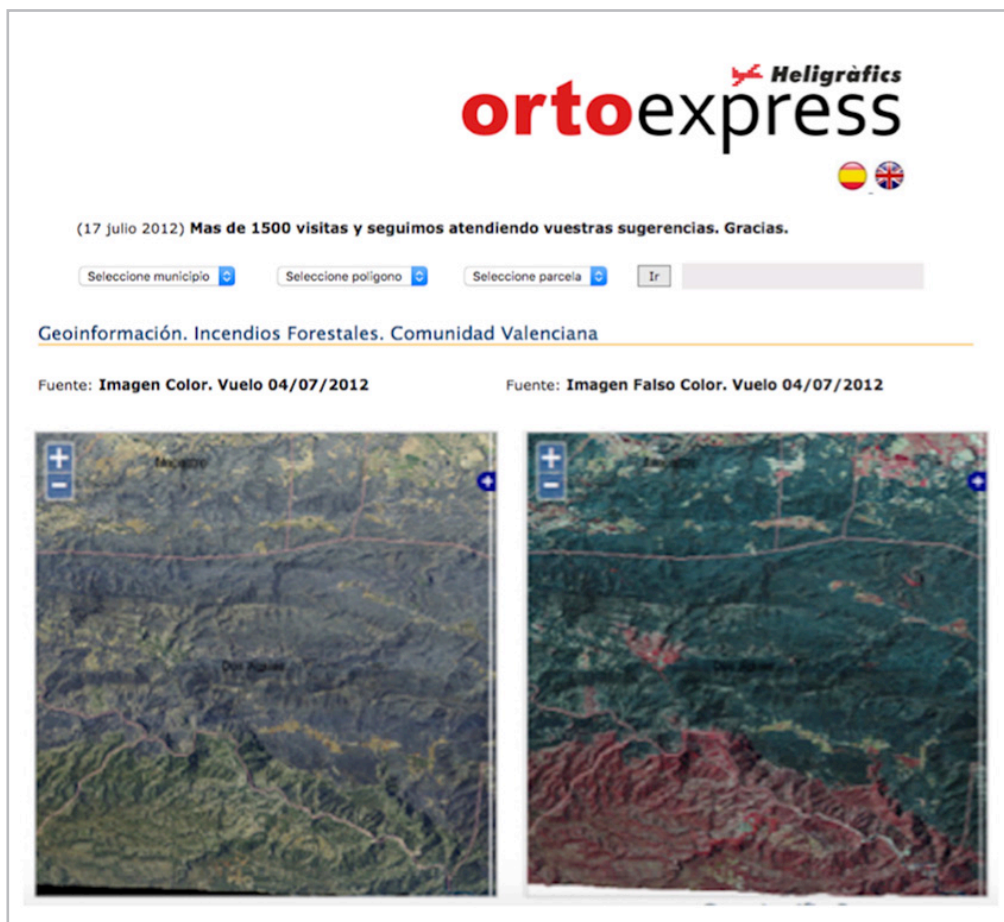

Image 2. Example of a link proposed by an expert user

Source: Web of Heligrafics Fotogrametría S.L.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This research is presented with the aim of evaluating the contribution of Twitter users to the information flow. Its relevance is framed in the need to delve into the changes that the process of selection and circulation of content in the digital environment undergoes. Specifically, this study focuses on the recommendations that users make through the practice of linking content. We analyze the links linked to two cases of journalistic interest, #ArdeValencia and #25N, hashtags related, respectively, to an unforeseen event (forest fires in Valencia) and a planned event (2012 elections in Catalonia), to facilitate comparison in contexts that generate different professional routines. In addition, we reviewed the preferences of different types of actors, with special attention to citizenship.

Regarding the first research question, the results show that all actors prefer to link information content, although journalists, media, politicians and parties combine information with self-reference, linking their own content. On the other hand, the volume of critical messages is not significant. Complaints against the government only gain prominence when linking anonymous blogs. Likewise, there is little thematic diversity, including repetition of identical links, usually from the media. This data reinforces the idea that there is no exclusivity on Twitter, as other studies suggest (Carrera Álvarez et al., 2012).

In this area, no significant differences were detected between the two case studies. The results of the analysis lead us to think that users do not plan the selection of the contents they recommend, nor when tweets are submitted during an unforeseen event, nor when discussing scheduled events. It seems that in both contexts they link by imitation, in the sense of copying the same headlines proposed by the media, without following any strategy. This reality departs from the research that maintains that users adopt functions similar to those of the gatekeeper journalist (Bastos et al., 2013, Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), and that contribute to evaluate the issues of interest (Bruns, 2005; & Burgess, 2012).

In addition, the proposed links tend to stick to the media agenda on forest fires and Catalan elections, without introducing alternative voices to official sources, as opposed to other studies that indicate the potential of users to influence the agenda (Casero Ripollés

& Feenstra, 2012; Hermida et al., 2014). In both cases, as the media agenda is reproduced, as Bernal (2015) warns, it is likely that users will feedback the same approaches circulated by conventional media, without providing sufficient information plurality.

On the other hand, regarding the second research question, in both case studies it is confirmed that the usual source of the links corresponds to media, a habit already pointed out by other authors (Kwak et al., 2010). Less often, on a quarter of the occasions, users link posts from websites or blogs of parties, politicians, organizations, groups and professionals from different areas. With regard to fires, for example, the percentage of links of articles previously published in the media doubles the links to blogs of experts or alternative sources. This fact emphasizes the idea that the media agenda is reproduced without taking full advantage of the power of Twitter as a tool for gatekeeping.

However, the results also show the important role of citizens in the promotion of journalistic content, in line with literature (Ahmad, 2010; Congosto, 2013; Túñez, 2012). This trend can be useful for designing strategies that improve the positioning of the media on Twitter. In this sense, the promotion of opinion articles would be a field to explore, since they have less incidence than the news and reporting links, at least in the two case studies. If the media encouraged the interaction and the exchange of links with their followers, they could generate more traffic to their webpages, although the literature indicates that the dialogue with the audience has not just taken off (Requejo & Herrera, 2014; Said et al., 2013).

Finally, in relation to the third research question, it is confirmed that citizens suggest more alternative contents than the other actors, although they do so timidly. In this regard, there are no significant differences, either from an expected or an unforeseen event. In the two case studies, the media, journalists, politicians and parties tend to corporatism, as suggested by various studies (Noguera-Vivo, 2013; Paz García & Spinosa, 2014). They are engaged in linking their news and redirecting traffic to their media. This information could imply that they are more interested in promoting themselves, making their work visible and reinforcing their personal brand than in hierarchizing contents for their audience.

In contrast, citizens refer to alternative sources of information, but less frequently than in other research (Hermida et al., 2014). These alternative sources range from experts who contextualize the damage caused by the fire or the election results, to anonymous voices normally critical of the power, that remember the episodes of corruption that affect the rulers. In this sense, it could be understood that citizens contribute to a greater extent than the other actors to the gatekeeping process, not so much for making original contributions as for reinforcing arguments that already circulate in mainstream media or conventional media. This conclusion is related to the role of secondary gatekeeper assigned to users (Singer, 2014), since they contribute to promote certain issues on Twitter.

Regarding the comparison of the case studies, the fact of not having found significant differences suggests that the behavior of the users in relation to the resource of the links does not depend on the nature of the journalistic coverage. The results indicate that even in situations that allow for greater planning, users tend to replicate links previously tweeted by the media. In rare cases a real attempt is made to pluralize the debate and share the contributions from sources alternative to the official ones.

In short, two are the main contributions of this research. On the one hand, it questions the potential of users as curators of content, because they tend to link media content without following any apparent strategy. On the other hand, it questions the role of citizens as watchdogs, because although they introduce alternative sources of information to conventional media, they do so on a residual basis. However, the reiteration of identical links detected in the analysis could be understood as a way of evaluating the transcendence of affairs, as does the gatekeeper journalist.

However, these results have limitations. First, they are limited to the two case studies and the Spanish context. Second, the period analyzed is short. Third, the research lacks the users' point of view. In this regard, further research should be conducted, with the monitoring of relevant hashtags in other countries and with larger samples. Thus, it could be evaluated if in other cases there is more plurality and if it improves the timid attempt detected in this work of linking contents that counteract the media agenda. Likewise, it would be convenient to complement the quantitative content analysis with qualitative methodologies that allow knowing the direct valuation of the users.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Amparo López-Meri, is Research Associate in Journalism in the Department of Communication Sciences of the Universitat Jaume I of Castellón (Spain). Teacher in the Master's Degree in New Trends and Processes of Innovation in Communication. Her lines of research focus on the reformulation of journalism and political communication in the digital environment. For twelve years, she has worked as a journalist on different Spanish television channels.