INVESTIGACIÓN

UNDERSTANDING DIGITAL POLITICS—PRINCIPLES AND ACTIONS

Para comprender la política digital – principios y acciones

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of the Internet has forced a reformulation of communication in all areas and at all levels. Politicians and candidates have been forced to adapt to a constantly changing environment, where the rules of one-way communication are lost, but the technical possibilities and scope of the messages are multiplied. This article makes an approach to the tools and practices of technopolitics as well as the tactical and strategic use of digital tools for organization, communication and action. To this end, it highlights the main platforms linked to the Internet such as websites, social networks, instant messaging platforms, and more recently, smartphone applications for political use alone. It also analyses the current trends linked to the celebrification of the candidate, the use of memes, hashtags as a vertebral and transversal element in digital communication, the analysis of big data as the last frontier and the participation through (semi-)automated users or bots. From the point of view of communicative noise, two of the main problems of political communication are addressed, namely astroturfing - in all its variants - and fake news, linked to the increasing hate speech on digital platforms. Finally, after the analysis was carried out, the keys to understanding the politics to come, in the opinion of the authors, are proposed.

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RESUMEN

La irrupción de internet ha obligado a una reformulación de la comunicación en todos los ámbitos y a todos los niveles. Políticos y candidatos se han visto obligados a adaptarse a un medio en constante cambio, donde las reglas de la comunicación unidireccional se pierden, pero las posibilidades técnicas y el alcance de los mensajes se multiplican. Este artículo realiza efectuar una aproximación a las herramientas y prácticas de la tecnopolítica así como el uso táctico y estratégico de las herramientas digitales para la organización, la comunicación y la acción. Para ello, señala las principales plataformas ligadas a internet como web, redes sociales, las plataformas de mensajería instantánea y, más recientemente, las aplicaciones para *smartphone* de uso exclusivamente político. Asimismo, se analizan las tendencias actuales ligadas a la celebrificación del candidato, el uso de memes, las etiquetas como elemento vertebrador y transversal en la comunicación digital, el análisis de *big data* como la última frontera y la participación a través de usuarios (semi)automatizados o *bots*. Desde el punto de vista del ruido comunicativo, se abordan dos de las principales problemáticas de la comunicación política como son el astroturfing - en todas sus variantes - y las *fake news*, ligadas al creciente discurso de odio en plataformas digitales. Finalmente, y tras el análisis realizado, se propone lo que, a juicio de los autores, son las claves para entender la política que está por venir.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Comunicación política – internet – redes sociales – marketing político – ciberpolítica – política digital - tecnopolítica.

PARA ENTENDER A POLÍTICA DIGITAL – PRINCIPIOS E AÇOES

RESUMO

A irrupção da internet forçou uma reformulação da comunicação em todos os âmbitos e em todos os níveis. Políticos e candidatos foram forçados a se adaptar a constantes mudanças, onde as regras da comunicação unidireccional se perdem, mas as possibilidades técnicas e a abrangência da mensagem se multiplica. Este artigo procura efetuar uma aproximação as ferramentas e práticas da tecnopolítica assim como também o uso tático e estratégico das ferramentas digitais para a organização, a comunicação e a ação. Para isto, indica as principais plataformas ligadas a internet como web, redes sociais, as plataformas de mensagens instantâneas e, mais recentemente, os aplicativos para *smartphone* de uso exclusivamente político. Da mesma forma, se analisam as tendências atuais ligadas a celebrificação do candidato, o uso de memes, as etiquetas como elemento vertebrador e transversal na comunicação digital, a análise de big data como a última fronteira e a participação através de usuarios (semi)automatizados ou bots. Do ponto de vista do ruído comunicativo, se abordam dois das principais problemáticas da comunicação política como são o astroturfing - em todas suas variantes - e as *fake news*, ligadas ao crescente discurso de ódio nas plataformas digitais. Finalmente, e após a análise realizada,

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propõe-se quais são, na opinião dos autores, as chaves para entender a política que está por vir.

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Como citar el artículo:

1. INTRODUCTION

The digital environment has promoted a deep transformation in both the way of understanding politics and its manifestations. Throughout the 21st century, political actions and communication have been decoupled from institutions to form a complex convergence environment comprised of old and new media, of institutional and social actions, in which traditional political agents and citizens converge in multiple ways (Boulianne, 2009; Rueda Ortiz, 2009; Jenkins, 2006). On the Internet, political communication has been re-dimensioned, which has led to the advent of new non-institutional political forms and the emergence of an interconnected network of users -more or less distributed- (Martínez-Rolán and Piñeiro-Otero, 2017; Smith *et al.*, 2014).

In this context, the multiplication of communication channels and formulas has given rise to a new media ecology (Islas, 2015), in which traditional actors (parties, political leaders, and the media) have lost the exclusivity of political communication. Social networks have proven to be more influential for social mobilization than other conventional media, thanks to their interactivity and immediacy, allowing dialogue to be democratized and multiplied (Hernando and Paramio, 2019). On the Internet, each node of these networks can become an addresser, which has led to the emergence of mass self-communication (Castells, 2009 and 2011).

Beyond utopian perspectives, which grant the same opportunities and power to all users to become addressers, the reality is that the relevance of users on the Internet will depend on the nodes of their network, the interactions they establish and its structure (Martínez-Rolán and Piñeiro-Otero, 2017). Despite the fact that on the online arena relations are massive and tend to remain invisible (Del-Fresno-García, 2014), each node has a different value. This new social asset is, according to Zúñiga *et al.* (2017), specific to the online sphere, although occasionally, it is inherited from the "real" arena. That way, the analysis of the political conversation 2.0 reveals the emergence of new addressers and power relations, but also the important weight

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that traditional political agents still hold to the point of being a central aspect around which different types of users orbit.

The accessibility of the Internet, from both the perspective of sending and receiving messages, has made the idea of self-mediation a reality: entities, personalities, and communities have made the Internet and social platforms spaces for dissemination of their actions and contents, which has allowed them a direct channel to their different audiences and stakeholders, avoiding the interference of the media (Piñeiro-Otero and Martínez-Rolán, 2019). This self-mediation went from constituting an extension of traditional channels to being a central place in the public communication of political agents (López-Meri *et al.*, 2017).

At a time when politics is oriented towards its mediatization (Enguix Oliver, 2015), parties, leaders, and institutions seize the communicative advantages of social media and other online platforms to reach out to their publics directly, even when they have to communicate key actions and decisions (Gallardo-Paúls and Enguix, 2016). In addition to the re-edition of informative filtering processes with which politicians try to set the media agenda (Enguix Oliver, 2015) or evade their underrepresentation (Piñeiro-Otero and Martínez-Rolán, 2019), leaders such as Barack Obama (with the announcement of him running for re-election in 2012), Peña Nieto (when, as head of the Mexican Government, announced the capture of the drug trafficker "El Chapo Guzmán") and, above all, Donald Trump and his daily communicative practices, have turned Twitter into a sort of news agency.

In any case, the growing online entity in the daily life of citizens has led parties and political personalities to develop an active communicative strategy on the Internet. The switching to an interactive environment has required reformulating communication, taking into account the singularities and specificities of 2.0 channels for greater efficiency and user participation. Today, it does not make sense that political agents continue to use social web platforms and services with a 1.0 logic, as mere loudspeakers of a vertical discourse without taking into consideration the response of users (Caldevilla, 2009).

The leap to social media facilitates proximity with citizens, in addition to equalizing great political forces with those minorities, or not consolidated ones, due to a lower requirement of resources and the absence of filters imposed by the conventional media (Padró-Solanet and Carenal, 2008). An example of this can be found in the communication of *Podemos* (Peris Vidal, 2008).

Immersed in the "third age" of political communication (Blumler and Kavanagh, 2010), political marketing –understood as an assemblage of theories and instrumental methods aimed at an efficient mediation between the political agent and the citizenry (Rey Lenon, 1995)– focuses more and more on online platforms, due to their direct, open, massive, and interactive nature, their capacity to make content go viral, and their possibilities for measuring results, which provides political agents with greater knowledge of their potential voters as well as it generates a feeling of proximity in

citizens that leads them to interact with political accounts even without expecting a response.

At a time when political marketing has focused on the construction of political personalities as brands, the Internet offers multiple tools and opportunities to achieve their positioning in a more and more diffuse ideological space, as well as in the minds of their publics and potential voters (Winther, 2017). Characteristic phenomena of current politics, such as the fragmentation of discourse (Hallin, 1992), the personalization of politics (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999) or its progressive approach to formulas, themes and entertainment genres (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999; Berrocal Gonzalo, 2015) have achieved their utmost expression on the Internet. It is only necessary to access the accounts of the political parties and personalities on social networks to observe how their idées-forces are balkanized in multiple messages, of a multimodal nature (text, images, video, audio…), carefully designed-produced that, in addition to the actions and reflections of political personalities in their role as candidates or members of institutions, show pieces of their daily life as citizens, family members or friends.

Paradoxically, at the same time as social networks have incorporated the more human and daily life aspects of these personalities, a professionalization of communication has occurred on these platforms, so that what citizens consider "personal" or "casual" is the result of a strategy carefully designed and managed by the leader's team, even with "interferences" from the leader.

The Internet, as well as its different platforms and services, have their own logic grounded in specific communicative norms and practices (Van Dijck and Poell, 2013), such as the power of algorithms as gatekeepers of digital information, the importance of contents to achieve the engagement of users for the sake of their further expansion and the development of processes of social influence, or a culture of adherence that prioritizes ratification over deliberation (de Aguilera and Casero-Ripollés, 2018).

2. OBJECTIVES

In recent years, studies on political marketing have been articulated, according to Negro (2016), around three axes: political leaders and parties as brands, the role of the media, and the strategies implemented in their construction (Cf. Guzman *et al.*, 2014; Zavattaro. 2010; Parker, 2012; o Saftoiu and Popescu, 2014.). These three perspectives are going to interact at different levels in the field of digital platforms.

During the electoral and presidential communication of Barack Obama, the strategic use of the hyper-segmentation of publics, the use of memes (to Rodríguez, 2013, Obama was the memecrat par excellence), APPs, the creative use of social networks such as Facebook and MySpace, the creation of a specific website to curb defamations, and the capacity -and success- to adapt the messages of his campaign to platforms as varied as instant messaging, blogs, YouTube or online television were

taken to their utmost expression, with very diverse objectives such as communication, citizen mobilization or fundraising that a decade later are being emulated by political personalities all over the world (Cf. Bimber, 2014; Miller, 2013; Castro Martínez, 2012; Hedges, 2010 ó Zavattaro, 2010, etc.).

The orientation of political strategies towards online platforms and services has aroused new reflections about this type of communication and about the management of the image of parties and personalities in the digital environment (Paré and Berger, 2008, Marland, 2012).

To Avalos González (2019), these strategic uses of communicative technologies go beyond the idea of technology as a tool to give them a meaning as devices for action that are intertwined with subjectivity processes differentiated according to the contextual conditions of the political agents.

In this sense, the purpose of this study is to make an approach to the tools and practices of technopolitics, understood as the political updating movement through social technology (Gutiérrez-Rubí, 2014) as well as the tactical and strategic use of digital tools for organization, communication and action (Toret, 2015). Although this term is usually used to refer to the online practices of opposition groups and social movements (Avalos González, 2019; Treré and Barranquero, 2018), in this work, we are going to use it to focus only on the transformation of the processes and spaces for the communication of traditional political agents, as a synonym of politics 2.0 or cyberpolitics that, even with its nuances, allude to another way of understanding the relations between governors and the ones being governed (Kruikemeier, 2014; Matud-Juristo, 2009) on online spaces that began as an extension of the public sphere (Westling, 2007) but that are progressively positioning in a relevant place in it.

The strategies developed on these platforms can be linked to concepts such as segmentation, personalization and engagement (Fernández Quijada and Ramos Serrano, 2014) as well as to the idea of a permanent campaign (Loomis, 2004; Needham, 2005). If political marketing has its utmost expression in electoral marketing (Lindon, 1976), in the Internet field, the frontiers between the two of them and even with institutional communication get blurry, so it is difficult to determine where party communication and government communication begin and end.

3. PLATFORMS

The technology that underpins the transmission of data between computers has changed a lot over the years and enables different channels and platforms. Despite the numerous existing protocols, some of them survive by performing the same functions as in the past, such as the SMTP for mail or FTP for transferring files; none of them has been as prolific as the http/s, upon which the web and social networks operate. Here are some of the main platforms for cyber politics.

3.1. Web.

The invention and popularization of the Web in the 1990s has also affected political organizations and the way of doing politics. Since its inception, politicians have sought their own space on the Web. Already in 1992, Bill Clinton used the web to seek the support of voters (Kiyohara *et al.*, 2017, p.173) and political participation in the form of web space evolved from small online spaces with information equivalent to a virtual business card into the complex press rooms, private spaces for members and a repository of current textual and audiovisual content.

The web portal emerges, precisely, as a portal for digital politics. It is a digital meeting point and where the traffic deriving from social networks will go to, although as a partisan source it will not have such good reputation as the media, among other things because, as stated by Serra and Gonçalves (2016), the level of participation that the websites of political parties provide to citizens are more focused on propaganda or persuasive matters than on true participation.

This cyber-pessimistic stance (Coleman, 2001) collides with other more optimistic authors who highlight the tools and their possibilities for reframing public politics on websites, such as the case of Norris, when he points out that a website is not a mere one-way communication formula.

> these websites are not simply 'top-down' channels of information, or party propaganda, instead, contrary to the American studies, in Europe they also facilitate 'bottom-up' communication from citizens to parties and elected officials. The content analysis showed that party websites contained many features that could potentially strengthen the relationship between supporters and leaders, providing opportunities for feedback and input into the policy process as well as the mobilization of support (Norris, 2003, p.43).

One of the advantages of websites in comparison to social networks is their popularity among different age groups. While the later are the central axis of information for the younger generations, the recognition factor and the use of the web remain stable for all age groups.

3.2. Social Media.

The development of a more agile and dynamic web that is underpinned by the postulates of O'Reilly (2004), is the prelude of the most widespread spaces for digital conversation today: social networks management platforms or, simply, social media.

One of the main assets of these types of platforms is their great power to shape public opinion. In this sense, Twitter has become a fundamental channel for political communication 2.0 (Ruiz-del-Olmo and Bustos-Díaz, 2016). This is due to several factors, such as the public nature and asymmetry of relationships (it is not necessary to be registered to access the contents, or to be followed to follow others), the brevity

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of its messages (up to 280 characters) and an expansive factor among the media that increases its vitality considerably.

The high politicization of this platform allows using it as a thermometer of public opinion (Barberá and Rivero, 2012; Kruikemeier, 2014; Peña-López, Congosto and Aragón, 2014; Martínez-Rolán and Piñeiro-Otero, 2016), although it may distort reality due to its biases and the arrangement of groups of users (Martínez-Rolán and Piñeiro-Otero, 2017).

That is why Twitter, from its origins, has aroused the interest of the Academy, with numerous approaches, mostly of a quantitative nature due to the ease of accessing the data through the public API.

This approach has guided both the pioneering studies of this platform (Java *et al.*, 2007; Krishnamurthy *et al.*, 2008; Huberman *et al.*, 2009), as well the cybermetric analyses (Azorín-Richarte, 2012) or the communities classifications in the twittersphere of Smith *et al.* (2014), which constitute the basis of this work. Even if it is true that the political debate is not the main purpose of Twitter, authors such as Calatrava (2015) point out the suitability of this platform to mobilize the allured public of each party and try to fish in the fishing ground of the undecided ones. In fact, this microblogging network labels itself as the greatest online platform for political influence in Spain (Calatrava, 2016).

However, politics 2.0 is not just Twitter. Facebook, despite being a fenced garden (Dans, 2012), is the place that brings together the largest number of users in almost every country in the world. In fact, the micro-segmentation this social network allows is such (see the big data section) that it has taken advertising on social platforms to a new level, with huge-scale scandals linked to politics such as the data harvesting from 50 million accounts on this social network, making the privacy of this platform and the role of the use of data by third parties questionable (Isaak and Hanna, 2018).

The switching to a more visual web has highlighted the role of new successful platforms, such as Instagram or TikTok.

In the case of Instagram, which in the second half of the 2010s has become the favorite network of young people, the appropriation by politicians started timidly and without a clear content strategy, but right now it is key since the images and the texts of the posts reach new publics who, a priori, might not be interested in politics (Selva-Ruiz and Caro-Castaño, 2017; Lalancette and Raynauld, 2019). With all that said, and from the academy, it is necessary to deepen in the comprehension of the political storytelling through this type of visual platforms.

Secondly, the social network TikTok allows uploading videos of up to one minute long, bearing highly complex creative pieces or simple video clips with short texts on top of a colored background. Unlike other social networks, the musical aspect

acquires more relevance, becoming in many cases the crux of the message or the memetic factor that makes the post go viral. Although it is too early for the Academy to analyze its effects thoroughly, Serrano *et al*. (2020) point out that the political content seems to be a relevant aspect in the TikTok ecosystem, which is why it will be convenient to analyze this platform's recommendation system to verify if it is an impartial environment for political communication 2.0 or not.

The configuration of these online spaces has enabled the evolution of the figure of specialists or recommenders, now known as influencers. In this context, the protagonists who connect in a special way with users are magnified by an enormous applause rate and influence that can transcend the frontiers of social networks and that connects with the celebrification of the candidate (see the section in this text).

In addition to these platforms per se, whose value lies in the contents their users upload and share, their internal search engines and their optimization are also important. In fact, the social video network Youtube is the second most widely used search engine in the world, only outstripped by its owner, Google, which highlights the importance of these types of platforms.

3.2. Instant messaging.

The public exposure to which users are subjected through social networks is a determining factor to implement more private, darker, although equally effective communication solutions. That way, instant messaging becomes one of the most widely used services on smartphones. A service led by WhatsApp (Facebook) in almost all the countries in the world, together with other applications such as Messenger (Facebook) or Telegram. In fact, all the platforms for managing social networks have their own private instant messaging functionality.

Just as it occurred with social media, if users began to use these tools to communicate, which are darker and more hidden from the traceable network traffic (this is why, in web analytics, instant messaging traffic is known as "dark social"), then parties will also be encouraged to use them.

According to Valeriani and Vaccari (2018), instant messaging services are becoming a relevant arena for digital political conversation, although, as they also point out, when discussing politics in private and selective environments, the users of these platforms could get trapped in small political bubbles of strong like-minded ties –a matter that Pariser (2011) defined as a "filter bubble"- and perhaps with more polarized political opinions than on social media.

This matter provides a context to understand how WhatsApp, the leader of this segment, had to restrict the forwarding of messages within its platform to try to curb misinformation and other bad practices in political communication.

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3.4. PoliticAPPS

At a time when smartphones are permanently multiplying their presence in the hands and pockets of millions of people around the world (with a worldwide penetration of 67% and 116% in Spain, We are social, 2020), political communication has set the goal to conquer mobile devices for its strategic communication. Today, political APPs are the most visible manifestation of the so-called mobile politics, understood as the shifting of party structures and political action to mobile digital environments (Gutiérrez-Rubí, 2011) and in which manifestations such as QR codes, geolocation, augmented reality or instant messaging systems from SMS to WhatsApp are included (Vázquez-Sande, 2016).

The connected and multimedia nature of these high-performance portable devices, as well as the heterogeneity of users, increases the diversity of applications, which go from simple shortcuts leading to the website of the party/candidate to more complex manifestations that combine geolocation and augmented reality for informative and entertainment experiences.

According to Gutiérrez-Rubí (2015), the ease of downloading these APPs on mobile devices, as well as the familiarity with their access, make them the paradigm of a new generation. In fact, Zamora-Medina *et al.* (2020) underline the diversity and use of these APPs taking into account their promoting agent, purpose of the APP, level of interaction, autonomy or the predominant tone.

The accessing of their personal devices by users allows a closer and more individual communication, in addition to being continuous through possible notifications. It also provides the parties with relevant data of their possible voters, both actively -data provided by users with their subscription, as well as through the access permissions to their contacts- and passively, through their use habits; data that will be very useful for big data strategies.

4. TRENDS

4.1. Celebrification of the candidate

Traditionally, the political product was the result of the trinomial: image of the party, of the leader, plus political commitments (Wring, 1997). This mixture has been leaning more and more towards the image of the political leader and/or the candidate.

The personalization of current politics, attributed to the Americanization and presidentialization of political institutions (Norris, 2004; Cervi and Roca, 2017), has led to the construction of charismatic leaders capable of being mediatized at the expense of the renewal of ideas (Rey Lenon, 1995; Criado and Martínez Fuentes, 2010).

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If at the beginning of the 1990s, Justel (1992) warned of the prominent place that political candidates were achieving for drawing advocates and electoral support, the brandification of political personalities is a common practice of political marketing that acquires particular relevance in the online field.

The personalization and popularization of politics has promoted the celebrification of its communication, understood as the strategic use of elements of the culture of fame for the construction of the image of a political personality (Oliva et al., 2015, van Zoonen, 2006). This trend establishes a link between the notion of a celebrity and the attributes of power, as well as a reflection around the need that people have of recognizing in public figures a projection of their own concerns and desires (Séguéla, 1991, Marshall, 1997).

To Oliva *et al*. (2015, p.4) the celebrification of the candidate bases on two aspects:
A primary strategic value as the incorporation of elements of the culture of fame in the construction of the "ideal candidate" that allows reinforcing and redefining traits that will contribute to his/her media "hook" and "a secondary strategic value since it broadens the spaces for the construction of the candidate's image, diversifying the ways or resources for the characterization of the politician as the ideal candidate or to reinforce his/her symbolic positioning."

Political personalities transcend the conventional media, platforms and formats of political communication to go further and even dominate new channels and contents, which allow them to present a more informal and personal image, showing their strengths and weaknesses strategically. Political personalities "manage" their channels on the Internet, by which they complement their political activity with apparently casual content of their private lives, or what happens behind the scenes, which depicts them as ordinary people. Giving a kiss to a baby during political events has permitted snapshots of parenting, of domestic intimacy or personal/social activities such as walks or sports practices.

The celebrification strategies on social networks seek to draw the empathy of citizens by depicting leaders as close celebrities, as humans, but above all, with aptitudes for governing (Quevedo-Redondo and Portalés-Oliva, 2017).

4.2. Memes

Probably one of the most noteworthy phenomena of the Internet as collective intelligence (Levy, 2004) is memes. This term usually refers to images of a humorous or satirical nature, typically without a known sender, which are shared all over the Internet, disseminated and/or adapted by the community of users. However, the term meme refers to any minimal unit of cultural information transferred between individuals through processes of replication or transmission (Dawkins, 2006). This definition, which includes images, videos, musical themes or even hashtags, contributes to explaining the irruption, expansion and disappearance of ideas on the Internet (Santibañez, 2011). The capacity of memes to synthesize a complex idea,

situation or expression in a brief and powerful content, so they do not go unnoticed by the community of users, provides them with great potential for political communication (Martínez-Rolán and Piñeiro-Otero, 2017; Re, 2014). To Gutiérrez-Rubí (2014, p.34) the power of memes, of memecracy, lies in "the creative force of digital ARTivism for social ACTivism."

In addition to their appropriation for social mobilization, the communicative value of memes has led to their integration into the communicative strategies of traditional political agents, thus political leaders and parties have embarked on the creation of contents, mostly of a visual nature, for their sharing and appropriation by the community of users. Images portraying political pacts, leaders wearing masks or the meetings of the heads of presidencies and states in front of a screen due to COVID-19 have been strategically "displayed" by communication teams for their dissemination through the Internet.

Similarly, being aware of the role of the community in the dissemination and construction of the sense of these memes, political agents create and disseminate easy-to-modify content or -even- resort to these through massive and global use platforms such as 4chan or meme generator.

Among memes, animated gifs acquire particular relevance, mainly micro-videos that -due to the manipulation of the image or the insertion of subtitles- will be appropriated by the user community through dissemination and replication processes.

These iconic and audiovisual practices are going to give prominence to a new relation between political actors and image, moving from an exclusive use to a conception open to interaction and the creativity of the public, as a formula to provide greater visibility and projection on the Internet. The fact that users react positively to a political meme or contribute to its dissemination does not make them activists, even if they promote the creation of connection and interaction structures with their actions (Martínez-Rolán and Piñeiro-Otero, 2017; Harlow and Guo, 2014).

4.3. Hashtags

Despite the fact that hashtags can be memes by themselves, according to McKelvey and Menczer (2013), their relevance in the field of political communication has given them their own entity, which has led Jeffares (2014) to talk about "hashtags politics". In fact, hashtags and the opening of Twitter, today present on other platforms such as Instagram (Cartes Barroso, 2015), have made it the political social network par excellence (Campos-Domínguez, 2017; Cihon and Yasseri, 2016).

Social hashtags, which agglutinate the 2.0 conversation around a certain topic, have been used for the online strategy of political actors, as a way to appeal for the participation of users around current affairs, party issues or even idées-forces with the use of descriptive or self-referential hashtags (Small, 2011). The creation of an

ephemeral community (Martínez-Rolán and Piñeiro-Otero, 2017) around a hashtag on the Internet broadens its projection on the Web even through confrontation, as in the case of the radical forces that have achieved their permanence in the social conversation that way. An example of this is the #SpainSupportsTrump as a negative reaction to the mobilizations against racism in the United States.

In the field of electoral communication, these hashtags -usually with the core-idea of campaign- tend to be integrated to the posters and other types of offline contents and mediums, as a gateway (or "rabbit hole") to the transmedia universe of the campaign (D'Adamo and García Beadoux, 2014).

Making hashtags trending topics, by agglutinating a significant volume of traffic on social networks, allows drawing new users to the social conversation, even to participate in the media agenda (de Aguilera and Casero-Ripollés, 2018; Kim and Lee, 2007). In this sense, leaders and political forces can also take advantage of the trending topics to know the stances around certain current issues –as it has happened recently with #MeToo or #BlackLivesMatter-, to interact around these topics for greater visibility of their ideas and statements, and even appropriating them by polarizing the conversation.

4.4. Big Data

In addition to the potentialities of online platforms and mediums to measure the actions being carried out in real time -monitoring, interactions, community engagement, etc.- their possibility as sources of data must be included.

One of the trends of global communication that can be successfully used by political institutions and agents is the exploitation of huge amounts of textual data available on the Web through the massive use of social platforms and textual sources of information, such as online media, official websites or reports, etc., (Arcila-Calderón et al., 2016; Boyd and Crawford, 2012). This phenomenon, known as "Big data" refers to both the complex and massive volume of information, which requires computational methods to extract knowledge, and its intentionality and usefulness (Murphy and Barton, 2014).

The Cambridge Analytica scandal, a consulting firm specialized in data mining and analytics for electoral communication, has promoted the association of Big Data with political manipulation. Although the very configuration of our online social network as an "echo chamber" (Mendieta and Jiménez, 2012), with like-minded ideas and thoughts, makes us more permeable to the content disseminated on it, the truth is that there are numerous possibilities of the strategic use of Big Data for political communication.

The international NGO Tactical Tech (2018) points out three strategic uses of data interpretation for politics:
  1. As a political asset, since they provide valuable information about citizens.

2. As political intelligence, since they allow knowing the political preferences of voters for the sake of defining strategies and establishing campaign priorities.
3. As political influence, data collection-analysis can be used to reach out to voters and citizens in order to influence their opinion.

These uses have reached their utmost expression in the field of electoral campaigns. Even if the use of big data in electoral campaigns in the United States predates the Internet (Bejarano, 2017), it currently has greater presence given the volume and quality of the information available, and its possible uses. That way, one of the best known practices in the use of 'Big Data' is the strategic segmentation of publics by dividing the electorate into small groups basing on common characteristics, which can be useful for the planning of messages-platforms (Hidalgo, 2014). If Bill Clinton's 1996 presidential campaign developed specific media planning meant for "soccer mums" (Carroll, 1999), in 2008, the candidate Barack Obama carried out a door-to-door strategy with "Moms for Obama" (González, 2010).

The possibilities provided by digital platforms, namely Facebook, to reach out to very specific publics that are still geographically scattered, have permitted the micro-segmentation of the electorate, which allows the creation of ad hoc messages, and that has been implemented successfully in campaigns such as the Brexit Referendum one (2016), the one for Trump's 2016 presidential elections (Grasseger, and Krogerus, 2017) and even in the strategy of Spanish parties such as the one of *Ciudadanos* for the general elections of 2015.

Beyond the use of big data for a more efficient impact on users-voters, the amount of information that companies like Google have regarding who we are and what we are as social subjects is so enormous that –according to Lys (2019)- it can even reshape the very structure of societies and politics as the structure of social governance.

In the field of politics and "Big Data", mainstream institutions and political parties can use data mining techniques to get to know citizens for the sake of adapting their discourse and actions to what the majority (or specific stakeholders) thinks, but it can also work in favor of citizen, activists' platforms and even political groups to supervise the political actions of Governments and parties, as a sort of data mining (de Aguilera and Casero-Ripollés, 2018). Despite its multiple uses in politics, Lys (2019) points out that we must avoid that illusion of big data allowing reliable predictions, given the volatile nature of reality and the impossibility of integrating every possible conditioning aspect into the calculations.

4.5. Bots

The development of social networks, instant messaging, and apps has led to an exponential increase in interactions, and their use linked to customer services or similar ones has entailed focusing their efforts on optimizing resources. Many of

these services spend a lot of time and resources answering very similar questions, a sort of FAQs that can be automated with the help of virtual assistants or bots.

Bots are automated or semi-automated software pieces to respond to stimuli or to disseminate messages mechanically.

From the good practices perspective, the use of bots is not very widespread in politics, although Gutiérrez-Rubí (2016) highlights an interesting type of bots that can work in favor of parties and candidates, and not in an immoral way. These are follower bots (those that help increase the number of followers), disseminating bots (they automate targeted tweets and retweets), traffic bots (programmed to increase interactions in contents), temporary bots (it consists in ceding an account temporarily or thematically for a cause, through automated content), automated chatbots (useful for semi-automated conversations) and politician's assistant bots.

The use of automated chatbots or conversational assistants, particularly, has soared in recent months, especially on friendlier platforms such as Telegram. In relation to the pandemic caused by the Covid-19, organizations such as the WHO or the Ministry of Health (Spain) have created each chatbots for WhatsApp to inform users in real time and on demand, to answer questions about the coronavirus, an example that can be seen in many other countries in the world.

5. MALPRACTICES

The options of the digital environment in political communication bear, as aforementioned throughout this work, great impact and a long trajectory. However, according to Kranzberg (1986), since technology is neither good, nor bad, nor neutral, dysfunctions of political communication are also subject of study due to their singularity.

When Google established its rules so that pages would try to position themselves in the search engine (that is, to appear at a higher position in the search results for a specific search), malpractices that sought effective positioning with artifice that circumvented the regulations of this search engine began to proliferate. This set of malpractices is known as Black Hat Seo. In the same way, in cyberpolitics, we can also talk about Black Hat Politics, among which astroturfing and fake news would stand out.

5.1. Astroturfing

Astroturfing refers to all those kinds of movements orchestrated and being operated from the shadows. It is a wordplay deriving from "AstroTurf" (a very popular brand of artificial carpeting resembling grass in the United States generally used as a metonymy for artificial turf) and grassroots, which is how the natural and spontaneous movements of people outside of the power structures are known (Martínez Rolán et al., 2015, Rodríguez-Salcedo, Gómez-Baceiredo, Tigner).

This term, coined in 1985, initially referred to the non-spontaneous actions and activities incorporated into the persuasion strategy of political parties, public relations agencies or companies.

Said concept, which essentially consists in disguising false opinions or arguments by giving them the appearance of being real, acquires a new dimension with the emergence of the Internet, especially, social networks. The (false) sense of anonymity, the ease of creating accounts and posting content on social platforms, and the credibility granted to this type of content is the perfect breeding ground for these types of practices.

Showalter and Fleischer (2005) emphasize the context of the phenomenon, and blame the weakness or fissures of the democratic system as the cause of these types of practices (*astroturfing* and *fake news*). Any institution, party or public personality can start a mobilization campaign hidden from the very dynamics of the network, and the difficulty to verify the origin and the veracity of the information provided can only be part of a gap in the system.

Astroturfing takes places, mainly, in the sphere of the consumer goods sector, between different rival brands, and in the field of politics, either to support a party or candidate or to denigrate political adversaries.

The techniques linked to this practice are used either for extolling or denigrating politicians or political groups. Through a favorable assessments network, they can try to get back up or mitigate a reputational crisis, in the same way as unfavorable comments about politicians or parties -typically adversaries or rivals in the political sphere- can be used to undermine the image of candidates.

Some of the most common astroturfing techniques (Martínez Rolán, 2014) are:
1. Tendentious editing of the information on Wikipedia, which consists in massaging or inflating some aspects or facets of certain entries in the most widely used collaborative encyclopedia on the Internet, with notable cases of scandal (Bejerano, 2013).
2. Buying and selling false testimonies: to professionalize or to provide commercial support to the task of publishing false comments, with a market in which companies that want to buy public opinion and companies and "opiners" who receive remuneration for it participate.
3. The creation of fake accounts on social networks. Due to its important role, this technique is addressed in "bots".
4. Sockpuppeting: this technique, linked to the previous one, consists in a single person managing multiple user accounts, so that each of his/her "puppets" can come to the rescue of the main account or "puppeteer". They are very difficult to identify and they often come to light because the manager uses the wrong account when posting content.

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5. The creation of fake blogs: blogs funded by a political institution are also included -generally for minor or medium opinion leaders-, although with the rise of social networks they have lost popularity.
6. Front Organizations / Front Groups: organizations set up by or controlled by another entity to disseminate the information arranged and provided by the parent account. In politics, this role is usually linked to youth organizations of the consolidated parties.

There are other astroturfing techniques, although less important in the political field, such as fake web traffic and search engine optimization.

5.2. Fake news

Fake news has become the main problem when it comes to connecting truthful information with citizens and institutions. Ever since the Oxford dictionary highlighted the term in 2017 as word of the year -complementing the 2016 "post-truth" concept- the use of fake news has increased exponentially, to the point that we can currently find the term infodemic to talk about the spread of fake news regarding the crisis caused by the Covid-19 epidemic.

During these past recent years, electoral processes of great importance such as the presidential elections in the United States or the Grain Britain referendum, both held in 2016, have been marred by accusations of external interference and attempts to manipulate public opinion through botnets.

In the English case, Bastos and Mercea (2019) identified a network of more than 13.000 Twitter users at the service of the pro-Brexit argument that might have influenced the decision-making of many voters. For their part, Howard and Kollanyi (2016) speak directly of political bots and demonstrated that a significant portion of the political conversation about Brexit was not only polarized, but also automated in up to 30% of the analyzed sample (for both supporters and detractors of Brexit).

Gorodnichenko *et al*. (2018) analyze both electoral processes, Brexit and the American Presidential Elections, in the search for bots and fake news on Twitter during the campaigns of the two events, and verified the relation between users' own bias and the probability of them being affected by a bot: the capacity for how bots can affect the activity of genuine users on Twitter depends on whether the information from these bots is consistent with the preferences of humans, which is again directly related to the aforementioned concepts of the filter bubble and the echo chamber of each user.

Grinberg et al. (2019), for their part, analyzed the activity on Twitter during the campaign of the American presidential elections and estimated that up to 7% of the URLs that were shared came from websites that disseminate fake news, bearing great impact and exposure on the Twitter community.

A problem that derives from these malpractices, the echo chambers and the filter bubble, is the considerable increase in hate speech. The increase in racism, sexism, discrimination and intolerance is visibly reflected -although it is just the tip of the iceberg- in a discourse full of insults and threats that are not always veiled, which represents a difficult challenge for social networks management platforms.

6. CONCLUSIONS

As a medium for mass self-communication, online platforms have often been considered exceptions to overcome the filters of conventional media, thus equating large and small parties (Padró-Solanet and Carenal, 2008). However, although online communication requires fewer resources to reach out to citizens, it is difficult to compete against big parties due to the budget and professionals destined for their strategies on the Internet (Piñeiro-Otero and Martínez-Rolán, 2013).

Far from the democratization of communication promised by the ICTs, parties and candidates have known how to adapt to cyberpolitics and establish new communication channels where they can disseminate their message, which can provide new communicative formulas and trends (gifs, APPs, bots, political video games…). Therefore, the future means creating transmedia content and environments. The development of political actions that strategically mix online and offline platforms and mediums, allows greater presence and permanence of the political messages and their addressers in the public sphere. The adaptation to the possibilities and to the language-form of each platform enables a greater projection of the messages, as well as the growing interest of users in interacting with them in multiple ways, expanding their reach on the Web and the switching between online-offline platforms. This transmedia conception of politics not only allows the switching of users from some platforms to others through "rabbit holes", but also enables the hyper-segmentation of publics basing on platforms or spaces within them, according to Dena's (2008) tiering thesis.

Nevertheless, given the current increase in messages and communicative stimuli, the liquid adaptation game -as Martínez Rolán (2018) calls it- of political parties and personalities to the online arena does not prevent a lesser impact of the content on the citizens that, on the one hand, in a more or less consciously way, get disconnected from the thousands of communicative impacts to which they are subjected, and on the other, shelter in their comfort zone, surrounded by comments, ideas, and arguments, with which they feel comfortable, and which are going to reinforce their stances alienating them from other ideologies and sensibilities.

All of these are aspects that must be monitored closely to chart the future of digital politics in the short-medium term, still being constantly updating to adapt to the different possibilities ICTs offer and their appropriation by users, by the digital citizenry.

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