

‘Backstage Moments During the Campaign’: The Interactive Use of Instagram by Spanish Political Leaders

1. INTRODUCTION

The political use of social media is one of the most relevant research fields in the realm of communication and media studies. Used as campaigning tools since the mid-2000s (Gulati and Williams, 2007; Davis, Baumgartner, Francia and Morris, 2009), social networking sites —hereafter SNSs—have become integral tools in the arsenal of political communication worldwide. In this context, Spain is one of the countries where SNSs have become a pivotal point of political communication (Ruiz del Olmo and Bustos Díaz, 2016).

Interestingly, the application of SNSs to Spanish politics has been performed in a context of upheaval. Traditionally characterized by a two-party system—consisting of the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (hereafter, PSOE) and the conservative People’s Party (hereafter, PP)—alternating in power since 1982, the first cracks began to appear after the 2014 European election, when mainstream parties lost a large number of votes, while emerging ones like Podemos (‘We Can’)—a leftist party created four months before the election—burst onto the political stage. Podemos was soon followed by Ciudadanos, a right-leaning libertarian party originally confined to Catalonia. Following the 2015, 2016, and 2019 general elections, Ciudadanos and Podemos have become relevant political forces in Spain. Additionally, and as a consequence of the reaction against the Catalanian pro-independence movement, the ultra-right nationalist-populist party VOX won a number of seats in both the Andalusian and Spanish parliaments in 2018 and 2019, hence strongly influencing the political agenda.

In this unprecedented situation, the term ‘new politics’ has become commonplace in Spain. It is normally identified with a different way of understanding and doing politics—as opposed to the so-called ‘old politics’—which has allowed for a new form of communication, a new type of leadership, and the citizenry’s greater involvement (Domínguez Benavente, 2017)—thus resulting in a connection between this new approach and politician-citizen interaction. Applied to parties like Podemos and Ciudadanos, the ‘new politics’ label apparently encompasses those actions that intend to bring politics closer to citizens (Civieta, 2015). In short, the institutionalization of SNSs has coincided with a reshaping of the Spanish political system and, at the same time, more demanding citizens.

All considered, we focus on how the leaders of Spanish mainstream parties use SNSs in a context of change. In particular, we research the use of Instagram, an extraordinarily popular image-focused SNS which has experienced a remarkable growth in Spanish political communication in the late 2010s. This paper content-analyses the Instagram official profiles of the leaders of Spain’s four main national political parties in 2018. It tries to shed light on possible differences between ‘new’ and ‘old’ Spanish politics as far as Instagram use is concerned, as well as on whether the use of Instagram by leaders is predominantly non-interactive. The paper also focuses on the political topics addressed by Instagram posts, and the purposes with which leaders employ this SNS. On the other hand, since SNSs imply a continuous communication effort by parties which is not restricted to campaigning periods, we try to ascertain whether there are any differences in the political use of Instagram during election and non-election periods.

2. INTERACTIVITY, POLITICS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The institutionalization of social media or social networking sites has been associated with aspects such as personalization (Filimonov, Russmann, and Svensson, 2016) or the creation of politainment and celebrities (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013; Dimitrova and Bystrom, 2013). The theoretical foundations of this paper stem from two other aspects that have received attention on the literature regarding the political use of SNSs: on the one hand, the theory of internet interactivity; on the other hand, the debate on the dichotomous stances of the normalization hypothesis versus the innovation hypothesis. These theoretical issues have been formulated separately, but, as we will see, they can be connected.

As to the first theoretical foundation, it relates to the fact that SNSs have become important for politicians keen to engage their constituents. Hence, bearing in mind the citizenry's capacity for participation on these platforms, the potential for *interactivity* can be considered one key consequence regarding SNSs. This potential must be linked to theories of the political opportunities offered by the Internet, which have traditionally revolved around concepts such as proximity, dialogue, and horizontal relationships. The idea of a potential increase in contact with the voter (Powell and Cowart, 2003), and of the Internet as a development that facilitates participation and engagement (Bekafigo and McBride, 2013; Vergeer, Hermans, and Sams, 2011) relates to the notion of an open and egalitarian debate. Moreover, the evolution of online campaigning formats has taken place in the direction of interactivity, from static websites to social media apps where campaigners are able to respond to visitors' comments (Lilleker, 2016). Therefore, the possibility to interact has become a relevant factor in the historical development of e-campaigns (Greer and LaPointe, 2005; Serfaty, 2012).

We understand interactivity as 'user-to-user interaction' (Small, 2011: 887)—that is, the most engaging and democratizing type of interactivity (Lilleker, 2016)—thus

linking to the idea of dialogue with citizens beyond the mere broadcasting of information. Interactive communication is regarded as one of the functions of campaigning served by technology (Howard, 2006), as well as a major area of the literature on Internet campaigning (Gulati and Williams, 2007). In a context where Web 2.0 apps are regarded ‘as providing new opportunities to positively increase dialogue between people’ (Vergeer and Hermans, 2013: 400), interaction is considered as one of the characteristics of communication between social media users (Enli and Moe, 2013). Thus, it has been claimed that SNSs generate a conversation (Serfaty, 2012), or that the expansion of social media ‘has meant that there are major opportunities for grassroots communication, deliberation and discussion’ (Wheeler, 2014: 223). In this vein, Castells highlights the potential ‘offered for online political interaction by the explosion of social networking sites’, plus the fact that Obama’s historical 2008 campaign demonstrated the potential of the Internet when it was transformed ‘into an interactive medium geared toward stimulating political participation’ (Castells, 2009: 390, 393). To sum up, interactivity is generally regarded as having favorable effects on politics.

However, research suggests that the interactive potential of SNSs has been exaggerated. In addition to data indicating that interactively communicating with citizens is contra-productive in increasing the politician’s network size (Vergeer, 2017), several studies have suggested that the new media represents a continuity with that of the traditional sort and, as a result, offline power structures are mirrored online—namely, the so-called *normalization hypothesis* (Lilleker, Koc-Michalska, Schweitzer et al, 2011; Klinger and Svensson, 2015; Ahmed, Cho and Jaidka, 2017), which holds that, since the Web is shaped by the traits and structures of offline, ‘real-world’ society, the political use of any technology merely reflects power relationships, and represents “politics as usual” (Margolis and Resnick, 2000). Consequently, electoral inequalities

are reinforced by the Internet, political parties use online resources to replicate offline patterns, and, more generally, ingrained procedures prevail in communication practices (Parmelee, Roman, Beasley et al., 2018). In opposition to the normalization thesis, the proponents of the *innovation hypothesis* claim that the media-specific attributes of information and communication technologies—hereafter, ICTs—have contributed to bring about a change in the way politics is presented to the public (Schweitzer, 2008; Vergeer, Hermans and Sams, 2011). When dealing with the normalization and innovation hypotheses, Klinger and Svensson propose studying online politics by integrating it in “today’s hybrid media system”, since “the division of media into production, distribution, and usage and logics into ideals, commercial imperatives, and technological affordances provides neat categories to structure analyses as well as data gathering around” (2020: 379).

Although it has been pointed out that the reinforcement of traditional parties—that is, a consequence of normalization—in online contexts may lead to more engaging communication resources (Lilleker et al., 2011), we hold that interactivity relates more to innovation than to normalization. On the one hand, interactivity is one of the features that have led the advocates of innovation to believe that the presentation of politics will be transformed (Schweitzer, 2008). On the other hand, the concept of ‘normalization’ goes beyond the notion that moneyed political actors perform better online: it also relates to the idea that the web takes on traditional possibilities and political patterns, and interactivity does not fit well among these. Hence, it is no coincidence that Margolis and Resnick (2000), who formulated the normalization thesis, pointed out the passive nature of the web, and were skeptical towards the celebration of interactivity. From a logical point of view, the normalization of traditional offline practices would also imply the migration of one-directional, broadcasting-led, and non-interactive

practices to the online world. Thus, the lack of interactivity can be analytically understood as an indicator of normalization, as it is suggested by other authors (Parmelee et al., 2018).

If we focus on SNS interactivity, in the case of Twitter—the SNS that has aroused the biggest scholarly interest (Filimonov et al., 2016)—accumulated knowledge indicates that politicians do not often put it to an interactive use (Golbeck, Grimes and Rogers, 2010; Grant, Moon and Busby Grant, 2010; Larsson and Moe, 2011; Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff et al., 2013; Mirer and Bode, 2015; Vergeer, 2020). Some of the findings on interactive communication on Facebook are also ambivalent (Karl, 2017), and there is evidence that political web 2.0 sites, like blogs, can be used as broadcasting tools (Giglioli and Baldini, 2019). Thus, it could be said that ‘Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are mainly used for one-way persuasive communication, from the campaign outwards’ (Lilleker, 2016: 236). Recent research, however, suggests that the trend may be changing, with data on Dutch and British candidates indicating remarkable percentages of interactive behavior on Twitter (Graham, Jackson and Broersma, 2017, 2018).

In this context, there is another SNS that is becoming a relevant platform for the study of political campaigning: Instagram (Filimonov et al., 2016). Although a number of studies have already focused on political strategies implemented on this site, research on Instagram is still scarce when compared with the abundant literature on Twitter. On the whole, the literature on Instagram points to the growing importance of the figure of the candidate who wants to convey the image of a professional politician. At the same time, a certain interest in associating the image of the ‘ideal candidate’ with familiar or personal attributes can be observed, as shown by an analysis of American primary elections (Muñoz and Towner, 2017). In Austria, Liebhart and Bernhardt (2017) have

placed the accent on content relating to the biography of Alexander Van der Bellen as a visual strategy for portraying him as a legitimate candidate. A study of the Canadian premier Justin Trudeau determined that his images formed part of an ongoing personalization campaign (Lalancette and Raynauld, 2017). Filimonov et al. (2016) noted that, although they had a strong visual presence, Swedish candidates preferred to be seen in professional rather than private settings. Along similar lines, Ekman and Widholm (2017), in a study of Swedish political profiles, revealed the lack of personal images. In Spain, Instagram has been considered as a campaign strategy tool to humanize political celebrities and candidates (Quevedo-Redondo and Portalés Oliva, 2017; Selva-Ruiz and Caro-Castaño, 2017), as well as a device for obtaining intense dynamics of personalization, and a positive emotional appeal (López-Rabadán and Doménech-Fabregat, 2018).

Strikingly, none of the aforementioned studies focused on the interactive role of Instagram. Indeed, very little research has addressed this topic. In a study of the 2014 Swedish elections, Russmann and Svensson (2017) observed that parties made little use of Instagram to interact with the citizenry, except for Feminist Initiative and, to a lesser extent, the Liberals. Broadly speaking, these authors (2017: 61) hold that ‘Swedish parties did not engage in two-way interaction on Instagram with their followers’. In a study performed on the leader of Spanish political party Ciudadanos (‘Citizens’) Albert Rivera a year before the 2016 election, Verón Lassa and Pallarés Navarro (2017) showed that Rivera did not exploit the dialogic character of Instagram.

To sum up, we stem from two theoretical foundations: on the one hand, the debate on the dichotomous stances of the normalization hypothesis (Lilleker, Koc-Michalska, Schweitzer et al, 2011; Klinger and Svensson, 2015; Ahmed, Cho and Jaidka, 2017) and the innovation hypothesis (Schweitzer, 2008; Vergeer, Hermans and

Sams, 2011) regarding the political use of SNSs; on the other hand, the theory of internet interactivity and dialogue, and the empirical studies that show an overall lack of interactivity in social media (Golbeck, Grimes and Rogers, 2010; Grant, Moon and Busby Grant, 2010; Larsson and Moe, 2011; Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff et al., 2013; Mirer and Bode, 2015; Russmann and Svensson, 2017; Verón Lassa and Pallarés Navarro, 2017; Vergeer, 2020). Attempting to put these theoretical frameworks in common, we hold that, since interactivity allows a more democratic addressing of communication in SNSs, it would relate to the innovation hypothesis from a theoretical viewpoint. Thus, in order to test the innovation thesis, we focus on if, and how, Instagram is used by politicians to dialogue with citizens. Such a focus tries to fill a research gap, since political interactivity on Instagram has attracted scant attention to date—and, when it has been broached, results have been fairly negative. In this context, our paper focuses on the interactive use of Instagram in Spanish national politics. Since the literature on the use of Instagram by Spanish politicians is particularly thin on the ground (Selva-Ruiz and Caro-Castaño, 2017), we are thus addressing an urgent topic that is still understudied.

3. OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS, AND HYPOTHESES

Thus, our main research objective (O1) is to determine whether Spanish leaders are using Instagram to develop interactive two-way communication, or simply for broadcasting messages in a traditional one-way fashion. The secondary objectives are (O2) to fill the gap in empirical studies on the interactive use of Instagram, (O3) to address the dearth of research on the use of Instagram in Spanish political communication, and (O4) to discern possible differences in the use of Instagram in election and non-election periods.

Instagram is an SNS belonging to Facebook, consisting in the posting of photographs and videos which allows users to comment on content, and to use hashtags. This network has been chosen as research object due to factors such as its extraordinary popularity: with 500 million active users per day (Instagram, 2018) it provides a highly enticing audience for politicians. Furthermore, Instagram is the network that has experienced the greatest growth in Spanish political communication, currently ranking as the second most consulted, with a share of 51.2 per cent (AIMC, 2019)—according to Fundación Telefónica (2019) data, Instagram was only second to Facebook as favorite SNS. In fact, it was the SNS that grew most in Spain in 2018 (Europa Press, 2019), as well as the site that gained more users in 2018 (IAB, 2019). In that same year, 84% of users with smartphones were using it for visiting social sites (Ontsi, 2019). According to The Social Media Family (2020), Instagram was the only SNS that gained users in Spain in 2019, with Twitter and Facebook figures dropping. It is also a SNS preferred by the young: 61% of its Spanish users are between 18 and 39 years old (The Social Media Family, 2020).

Since the youth factor is linked to parties embodying ‘new politics’, as well as to interaction, it is interesting to study a medium that attracts the younger generations—what is more, the youth vote may be a factor in shaping elections by virtue of the platforms: Instagram has been found the most trusted SNS among college students (Shane-Simpson, Manago, Gaggi, and Gillespie-Lynch, 2018), and it is regarded as appealing primarily to younger audiences by political practitioners (Kreiss, Lawrence, and McGregor, 2018). Since Spanish politicians have been courting young voters through SNSs for years—following a trend that started with Obama’s 2008 campaign (García Orta, 2011)—the use of Instagram is just one step forward in that respect.

Another factor regarding the rationale for choosing Instagram is that it is a strongly image-focused SNS, hence marking a difference with text-focused outlets like Twitter. Besides posts, Instagram provides new communication forms, like ‘Instagram Live’, which enables users to stream video to followers and engage with them in real time, and ‘Stories’, which allows users to upload contents—photos, short videos and live stream transmission—which remain on the network for only 24 hours. Stories are presented on the whole screen for 15 seconds, and each one of them is followed by another story, hence the user can go back and forth to the previous and next stories (Belanche, Cenjor and Pérez-Rueda, 2019). Stories have been linked to the uses and gratifications theory (Ko and Yu, 2019), and are used by both ‘old’ and ‘new politics’ representatives alike—actually, most of the main Spanish leaders use for campaigning the innovative ‘Instagram Story Highlight’ feature—that is, stories that remain in the profile.

In a context where differences among platforms become increasingly pronounced (Bossetta, 2018; Pelletier, Krallman, Adams, and Hancock, 2020), Instagram differs as a medium from other popular SNSs, such as Facebook and Twitter. Although these three SNSs are geared toward helping build and maintain social relationships (Seo and Ebrahim, 2016), Instagram places greater restrictions than Facebook on the manner in which communication may happen. At the same time, Instagram is more useful for establishing reciprocal relationships than Twitter, which is bent on information sharing. Thirdly, sharing of negative emotions is viewed as more appropriate on Facebook relative to a more public site like Instagram. Instagram also allow users to share posts across Facebook and Twitter, something that the latter two do not allow (Bossetta, 2018). From a sociological perspective, Instagram’s broadcasting of images to large audiences may draw people who seek attention from others online (Shane-Simpson et

al., 2018; Pelletier et al., 2020). Regarding age and gender, Instagram is overwhelmingly favored by college students, particularly women, in comparison with Facebook and Twitter (Shane-Simpson et al., 2018).

Regarding communication formats, whereas Twitter emphasizes text-based information sharing, and Facebooks provides a wide array of functions and mechanisms which include photo sharing, video, and text-based posts (Pelletier et al., 2020), Instagram emphasizes visual image sharing, and its images' captions lack clickable links—in this regard, it has been pointed out that the modality of content is a defining feature of Instagram, whereas Facebook allows for multi-modal content (Shane-Simpson et al., 2018; Towner and Lego Muñoz, 2018; Waterloo, Baumgartner, Peter and Valkenburg, 2018; Pelletier et al., 2020). Instagram also focuses on the sharing of pictures 'enhanced by filters' (Waterloo et al., 2018: 1817). Moreover, Instagram's visual focus has been linked to the fact that it is the platform most used for entertainment purposes (Pelletier et al., 2020).

Thus, as a result of its visual nature (Benedek, 2018; Pelletier et al., 2020), Instagram is consumed primarily as a visual medium, as supported by empirical evidence indicating that individuals who preferred Instagram identified the visual imagery as a primary reason for their preference (Shane-Simpson et al., 2018). Regarding use, Instagram's emphasis on visuals and aesthetics also leads users to focus on self-promotional content (Waterloo et al., 2018); in the field of online branding, it has been noted that Instagram obtains higher values in term of perceived image compared to Facebook or YouTube (Benedek, 2018).

As to the relevance of Instagram in the context of political parties' efforts, the scarce available data indicate that Podemos' spending on Instagram is overwhelmingly bigger than that of the other parties: according to 2019 data, Podemos spent almost one

million euros on Facebook and Instagram—including leader Pablo Iglesias’ personal profile—followed by Ciudadanos (359.511 euros), PP (263.790 euros), and PSOE (above 30.000 euros) (J. R. S., 2019). However, we must note that political spending on Instagram is much scarcer than on Facebook (Andrino, Grasso, Peinado, and Pérez Colomé, 2019). Moreover, and since mainstream parties’ 2019 campaign budgets amounted to figures such as 23 million euros (PSOE), 11 million euros (Podemos), or 9 million euros (Ciudadanos) (Calderón, 2019), it can be reasonably estimated that—with the exception of Podemos—Instagram can be considered a secondary medium regarding spending¹.

Based on the assumption that new parties tend to focus more on SNSs—which provide the wherewithal to launch low-cost campaigns (Gueorguieva, 2008)—and, more specifically, on research conducted by Selva-Ruiz and Caro-Castaño (2017)—who point to a greater activity on Instagram by ‘new politics’ representatives—the following hypothesis (H1) is formulated:

H1. The leaders representing Spanish ‘new politics’ put Instagram to a more relevant use than those of the traditional parties.

As to the interactive capacity of SNSs, Graham et al. (2013) note that one of the most common findings is that politicians use SNSs like Twitter primarily for broadcasting, instead of interacting with the public. Moreover, in the case of Spain the prevailing conclusion is that interactivity is a secondary factor when using SNSs—the

¹ As to the leaders’ popularity, Instagram is also secondary to Facebook: according to late-2018 data, the number of followers of the politicians was always higher on Facebook. For instance, Sánchez had 90,700 fans on Instagram, while his Facebook numbers amounted to 241,000, whereas Iglesias’ Facebook figures are almost ten-fold compared to his Instagram following. A similar pattern emerges regarding Twitter: for instance, Rivera’s 125,000 Instagram followers were far outstripped by his million of Twitter supporters, while Casado’s 62,300 Instagram fans were outnumbered by his 160,000 Twitter followers (Izquierdo, 2018a; 2018b).

normalization hypothesis thus receiving considerable support. Previous research indicates a lack of politician-user interactivity on Twitter (Criado, Martínez-Fuentes and Silván, 2013; Zugasti Azagra and Pérez González, 2015; Ramos-Serrano, Fernández Gómez and Pineda, 2018), to which must be added that the dialogic potential of this SNS is hardly leveraged at all by politicians (Russmann and Svensson, 2017; Verón Lassa and Pallarés Navarro, 2017). This leads to a second hypothesis:

H2: The use of Instagram by Spanish political leaders is predominantly non-interactive.

The following research questions (RQ) help to describe additional dimensions of Instagram use. Firstly, it is important to determine what leaders talk about on this network, and for what purpose. Whereby the following RQ:

RQ1. Which political topics do Instagram posts address, and for what purpose?

On the other hand, the study of election periods has the advantage that the enquiry focuses on ‘times when political communication is at its most strategic, pre-planned, and intense’ (Enli and Moe, 2013: 638), thus providing data for analyzing party intention and behavior. However, SNSs imply a continuous communication effort by parties during non-election periods as well. From this contrast emerges another RQ:

RQ2. Are there any differences in the political use of Instagram during election and non-election periods?

4. METHOD

We perform a content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) of Instagram posts on the official profiles of the leaders of Spain's four national political parties that won parliamentary seats in the 2016 election: Pedro Sánchez (@sanchezcastejon, PSOE), Pablo Casado (@pablocasadoblanco, PP), Albert Rivera (@albertriveradiaz, Ciudadanos) and Pablo Iglesias (@iglesiasturrionpablo, Unidos Podemos). It must be noted that we focus on the analysis of the *personal* Instagram profiles of the leaders, and not on party profiles. The aim of this multiparty selection was to avoid the traditional two-party system by including the country's 'new' and 'old' party leaders in the same proportion. It is also important to note the sample's ideological variety, including parties originally occupying the anti-capitalist portion of the political spectrum (Podemos), conservatives (PP), social democrats (PSOE), and center-right libertarians (Ciudadanos). Although far-right party VOX has become a major player in current Spanish politics, it was excluded from the sample because it did not enter the national Parliament until April 2019.

The sample time-frame runs from 2 September to 2 December 2018—that is, a three-month period running up to the Andalusian regional elections held on 2 December. Thus, the sample provides evidence of Instagram activity in both non-election (2 September-15 November) and election (16 November-2 December) periods. The Andalusian campaign was chosen as research context for several reasons: first, it was the prelude to a prolonged electoral cycle in Spain between 2018 and 2019, which has included general, European, regional, and local elections; secondly, leaders such as Pablo Casado and Albert Rivera were highly involved in the regional election, to the point that the results ended up being interpreted in national terms; thirdly, the 2018 Andalusian election was the highlight of a period of political tension characterized by

the decline of the Spanish two-party system and the advent of left- and right-wing populism.

The units of analysis were 504 Instagram posts: 135 during the election period, and 369 during the non-election period. No additional sampling was performed on the initial 504 units because they constituted the total universe of posts during the study's time frame. Instagram 'Stories' was discarded because sampling was performed after the election, and "Stories" only last for 24 hours—something which is stated by Instagram itself (on about.instagram.com). Posts, on the contrary, remain on the site, hence they are a more reliable form regarding sampling. As to the 'Instagram Story Highlight', at the time of our sampling Casado's profile did not use this feature, thus making comparison between leaders impossible.

The sampled Instagram messages depart from those in other media: besides a few posts based on stills from television interviews and similar formats, most of the pictures are Instagram-exclusive, and seem to be taken by photographers accompanying the politicians. In this respect, it could be said that images and videos are tailored for this platform: Instagram photographs showing the daily life of leaders differ from the more informative Facebook posts, and Twitter messages, on the other hand, reflect leaders' day-to-day campaigning in a more institutional, formal way, lacking Instagram's emotional connotations. Moreover, Instagram videos imply a careful selection of the audio-visuals. Thus, both Instagram's technology and the relevance of personal content impose a certain tailoring of messages.

A frequency analysis was performed on posts. We relied on the operationalization proposed by Graham et al. in the article 'Between broadcasting political messages and interacting with voters' (2013), where they develop a coding scheme for studying the behaviour of British candidates on Twitter during the 2010

local elections—a scheme which was adapted to Instagram for our purposes. According to the authors, the scheme ‘was developed as a means of identifying and describing politicians’ posting behaviour’ (2013: 697). They proposed different categories of analysis: type of tweets, the person interacted with, functions, and topics. As to the kind of tweets, three types are distinguished: normal post, @-reply, retweet (the symbols used are, e.g., ‘RT’ or ‘via’)—a similar typology to that used by Larsson and Moe (2011). However we differ from Graham et al. in that we do not take into account RT with comments, understanding that this function is similar to that of the normal retweet. Graham et al.’s operationalization includes the consideration of the @-reply as a basic indicator of social media interaction—in this context, the @-reply has already been used as an indicator of dialogue and interactivity (Ahmed and Skoric, 2014; Zugasti Azagra and Pérez González, 2015; Graham et al., 2018). The average number of hashtags used in each post was understood as a secondary indicator of interactivity (Verón Lassa and Pallarés Navarro, 2017), for the academic literature has noted that, when used correctly, hashtags are a valid resource that aims to increase interactions (Cartes Barroso, 2018).

All the posts coded as replies were done so with whom they were interacting—another variable of Graham et al.’s coding scheme, which includes public citizen, journalist/media, lobbyist, expert, industry, authority, celebrity, politician, and party activist. To code the categories employed in this variable, coders had to consult the profiles of these users. The functions of the posts were also based on Graham et al., as well as the posts’ topics. As to functions, Graham et al differentiate (1) (update from the) campaign trail, (2) campaign promotion, (3) campaign action, (4) call to vote, (5) political news/report, (6) other news/report, (7) position taking/own stance, (8) party stance, (9) critiquing/arguing, (10) requesting public input, (11) advice giving/helping, (12) acknowledgement, (13) personal, and (14) other. We have combined the ‘(update

from the) campaign trail’ and ‘campaign action’ categories, which are very similar from a conceptual viewpoint—into a function we call ‘Information/news about the campaign,’ to codify messages that narrate what is happening with the campaign. We have also added a function called ‘Non-electoral promotion of the leader and/or party’, to include the tweets published in the non-election period. Regarding topics, Graham et al’s study distinguishes between (1) animal rights, (2) civil and human rights, (3) crime and judicial proceedings, (4) business and economy, (5) education, (6) environment, (7) EU, (8) government, (9) health and social welfare, (10) immigration, (11) military and defence, (12) religion, (13) science and technology, (14) war and conflicts, (15) world events, (16) national events and heritage, (17) infrastructure, (18) campaign and party affairs, and (19) norms and values. To adapt the coding sheet to the Spanish context, we have added topics like the media, non-Spanish nationalisms, corruption, gender issues/feminism, and Spain (see Tables 4-7 for a complete list of categories regarding functions and topics).

The inter-coder reliability index was calculated in two stages. First, a reliability pre-test using Holsti’s formula indicated average percentage agreements that ranged from 60% to 78.26%. This served to fine tune some variables and categories—principally, the variables related to the topics and functions of the posts. After that, new two-coder tests—on the basis of more precise instructions resulting from the pre-test—employing Krippendorff’s alpha yielded an average reliability index of 0.97 calculated on seven variables, which can be regarded as acceptable—all variables reached a reliability index of 1, with the exception of the topics variable (0.83). Coding was performed by two of the authors of the paper, one of them an assistant professor and the other a post-graduate student. Both of them manually collected the coded posts as well,

in a process which was supervised by the third author of the paper. The data was collected and coded between December 15 and December 30, 2018.

5. RESULTS

To begin with, an examination of the frequency of the posts (Table 1) is revealing.

TABLE 1 HERE

The leaders of the traditional parties (Pedro Sánchez, of the PSOE and, chiefly, Pablo Casado, of the PP) were far more active than those representing the ‘new politics’, i.e. Albert Rivera (Ciudadanos) and Pablo Iglesias (Podemos), the latter with practically no activity whatsoever, above all in the period corresponding to the Andalusian elections. By the same token, it is also worth noting that Casado was the most active leader on Instagram during the election and non-election periods alike.

The information shown in Table 2 is essential for gauging the level of interactivity of Spanish leaders, which was not statistically significant at all. Rivera was the only leader who somehow managed to establish a conversation with his followers, although with a reply rate of under 10 per cent. Iglesias was the politician who paid least attention to interactivity, inasmuch as he did not offer a single reply during the study time frame. If to this is added that the reply rates of the leaders of the two main parties (Sánchez and Casado) did not even reach 1 per cent, it is easy to explain why interactivity was present in only 2.38 per cent of the posts in general. However, the most striking finding is that during the election period, the level of interaction was even lower than in the non-election period. As to who interacted with the leaders, seven of the 12 replies in the sample as a whole were aimed at citizens, their conversation with

celebrities coming in second place—in this context, it is remarkable that there were not replies to politicians or party activists, whose presence is to be expected in a political dialogue.

TABLE 2 HERE

A secondary indicator of interactivity were the hashtags employed. As Table 3 depicts, there was not any positive correlation between the use of hashtags and replies: despite being the leader who replied most, Rivera used the least average number of hashtags. Furthermore, the behavior of the leaders was not uniform. In the non-election period, Sánchez used the highest average number of hashtags per day—Image 1, for instance, evidences the use of 16 hashtags—closely followed by Iglesias, while Casado and Rivera resorted to them a lot less, and to a similar degree. During the election period, however, Casado used the highest number of hashtags on a daily basis, nearly doubling Sánchez, whereas Iglesias used them on fewer occasions. Judging by the averages for each period, the election led to a more pronounced use of hashtags.

TABLE 3 HERE

IMAGE 1 HERE

Post topics focused on a number of matters that were important for all leaders (Table 4): the situation of Spain as a nation, campaign and/or party affairs, the government, and business and economy. The relevance of these issues point to a certain degree of endogamy, since the importance of campaign and/or party affairs—the most important

topic brought up by Rivera—and government—the most pressing issue for Iglesias—indicates that political ideology influences Instagram activity, with patriotism being the most burning issue for Rivera, Casado, and even the leftist Iglesias. Regarding Casado, his patriotic concern for Spain—as he remarked in a post, ‘It is not the first time that the PSOE has presented a budget manipulating spending and revenues, increasing taxes and deficit: in short, ruining Spain’ (17 October)—was reinforced by the attention he paid to non-Spanish nationalisms (18 per cent). At the same time, social and political issues like immigration or the environment were only mentioned in passing by the Socialist Sánchez. Other indications that ideology might have played a role in the selection of topics can be observed in the fact that the left-wing leaders (Sánchez and Iglesias) referred to the media and civil and human rights more often than their right-wing opponents (Casado and Rivera), while these referred more frequently to non-Spanish nationalisms.

TABLE 4 HERE

The endogamous use of Instagram became even more pronounced during the Andalusian election, when this site was used as a secondary supplement to the campaign. As Table 5 shows, campaign and/or party affairs was the subject broached most often by Casado and, in particular, Rivera and Iglesias: in both cases, nearly or over half of their posts addressed this topic. Sánchez dedicated 9 per cent of his posts to campaign and/or party, i.e. less than those addressing topics such as business and economy and the environment/climate change. As before, the Socialist was the only leader who addressed immigration or environmental issues, while in the case of Iglesias more than 25 per cent of his pictures revolved around civil and human rights. This is

exemplified by a message posted three days before the elections (Image 2), with the leader of Podemos referring to Andalusia as ‘a land that welcomes, embraces and cares for’ immigrants.

IMAGE 2 HERE

On the other hand, topics that were of some importance in the non-election context, such as non-Spanish nationalisms and government affairs, became very secondary—when not completely ignored—during the election, while a little more attention was paid to gender issues and feminism by right-wing leaders. Patriotism, in contrast, still had a certain amount of importance for the most left-wing leader (Iglesias) and, above all, for his most right-wing adversary (Casado).

TABLE 5 HERE

The functions of the posts are also useful for determining the importance given to interactivity (Table 6). In the non-election period, the functions potentially implying a dialogue with the citizenry, like ‘advice giving/helping’ and ‘acknowledgement’, were more or less irrelevant for all leaders, except for Iglesias, 22 per cent of whose posts served these purposes, and Rivera, who used Instagram to acknowledge citizens. However, it is noteworthy that the function that would foster interactivity most, that is, ‘requesting public input’, appeared in only 1.39 per cent of Rivera’s posts, and was conspicuous by its absence in those of the other leaders—at the same time, posts employing the broadcasting approach, with categories such as the promotion of the leader and/or party, always accounted for over 25 per cent.

TABLE 6 HERE

The scant importance given to functions such as ‘requesting public input’ became much more pronounced during the Andalusian campaign (Table 7), to the point that its frequency was null for all leaders. In sum, listening to the opinions of citizens during the campaign appeared to be irrelevant, as with ‘advice giving/helping’, which did not appear at all.

TABLE 7 HERE

There were more posts aimed at acknowledging citizens, but otherwise the accent was placed again on a broadcasting approach to communication, with categories like ‘information/news about the campaign’ skyrocketing to 45 per cent (Rivera) and 50 per cent (Iglesias). Categories relating to the stances taken by the leaders were also important: Casado refers to leader stances in over 28 per cent of the posts, and Sánchez focuses on party stances in over 40 per cent of his pictures. A post that left no room for doubt as to patriotic stances was published by Casado (Image 3), in which he listed five proposals pertaining to the role of Gibraltar in the Brexit agreement—including shared sovereignty. On the other hand, it is interesting that the ‘new politics’ leaders used posts for personal purposes during the election period, whereas the leaders of the traditional parties did not.

IMAGE 3 HERE

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In a context where social media have become a must for political communication, this paper has tried to shed light on the way an extremely popular SNS, Instagram, is being used by emerging and traditional political forces. Our interpretation of the results is guided by theoretical assumptions regarding interactivity, and the prevalence of the normalization hypothesis.

Our first empirical finding has to do with the considerable activity of the leaders of traditional parties PP and PSOE. This contradicts the results obtained by Turnbull-Dugarte, who indicates that the number ‘of posts made by both Ciudadanos and Podemos, competing in national elections for the first time, is far greater than that made by either the PSOE or the PP’ (2019: 7). This may be justified by the fact that big parties have better electoral machines than new parties. In any case, the finding implies that traditional parties have regained the ground lost to new parties in the digital environment. Anyway, H1—contending that emerging parties make a more extensive use of Instagram—is not supported. This is so in spite of the fact that, according to early-2019 data (Gálvez Garcés, 2019), Rivera and Iglesias were among the most-followed leaders on Instagram, with 167,000 and 128,000 supporters respectively, followed by Sánchez (116,000) and Casado (107,000), thus indicating that high popularity and high activity do not correlate on Instagram. Moreover, if we take into account that in December 2018 the number of followers was substantially lower all across the board—Rivera: 125,000 followers; Iglesias: 106,000; Sánchez: 90,700; Casado: 62,300 (Izquierdo, 2018a)—it may be hypothesized that the 2018 Andalusian campaign had some favorable impact on the national leaders’ Instagram popularity.

Bearing in mind that political ideology is a distinguishing feature regarding social media use, the results of our analysis are dissimilar to those of previous studies on SNSs like Twitter, in which some authors claim that the activity of the PSOE and the PP is more or less similar (Criado et al., 2013), while others note that the PP's activity is more low-key (Cebrián Guinovart et al., 2013). Although there is not much difference in the frequency of posts between the PP and the PSOE in non-election periods, the leaders' Instagram activity does seem to rely on ideology, with a clear predominance of the right. For one, this contradicts the general trend on social media like Twitter, where left-wing parties are the most active (Vergeer et al., 2011; Ramos-Serrano, Fernández Gómez and Pineda, 2018).

The key of our findings was established by H2. Empirical analysis indicates that interactivity is an irrelevant factor for Spanish leaders; thus H2, besides being borne out, also points to the theoretical conclusion that Instagram can be added to the array of SNSs whose interactive political potential is incorrectly used—or not used at all. In Spain, this finding was anticipated by Verón Lassa and Pallarés Navarro's study (2017), and unveils the predominance of a broadcasting model, in line with the skeptical view of the use to which Spanish politicians put SNSs (Abejón, Sastre and Linares, 2012). As with the dearth of mentions/replies reflected in the data collected by Ramos-Serrano, Fernández Gómez and Pineda on Twitter (2018), our analysis indicates that the interaction of Sánchez and Casado on Instagram is irrelevant as well—which is significant, given that they lead the two main Spanish parties. In this regard, the results indicate that a Web 2.0 app can be used in a Web 1.0 context, in which 'sites are predominantly hierarchical and disseminating, from the politician and party directly to the citizens' (Vergeer and Hermans, 2013: 400).

The results also indicate that an electoral context does not necessarily imply a higher level of interaction with the citizen/constituent—a context where, paradoxically, SNSs should have fostered participation and dialogue, above all on the part of leftist leaders who have traditionally found it harder to mobilize Spanish voters (Barreiro, 2002). This leads us to the second research question, dealing with differences in election and non-election periods, and whose answer would state that the potential of Instagram for engagement remains untapped in any context. Interactivity even decreased in the election period, while posts relating to campaign and party affairs increased, thus resulting in self-promotion and one-directional broadcasting.

As to the relevance of the type of party, the ‘new/old politics’ variable was unrelated to interactivity in our sample. In this vein, our findings contrast markedly with studies performed on SNSs in countries like Pakistan—and even Spain—where emerging or minority parties are those that interact most with the citizenry (Ahmed and Skoric, 2014; Ramos-Serrano, Fernández Gómez and Pineda, 2018). In the case of Iglesias and Podemos, the predominance of one-way communication is coherent with the media strategy that boosted the party, which deemed particularly relevant Iglesias’ appearances on television (Gallardo-Camacho and Lavín, 2016)—that is, a broadcasting medium. Although the lack of interactivity may relate to the fundamentally visual character of Instagram, whereby text responses may play a secondary role among the showcasing of pictures, the fact that a new technology is used as an old medium is striking.

Interactivity seems to be related to ideology, because in both election and non-election periods the conservative Casado and, chiefly, the libertarian Rivera, interacted as much as, or more than, left-wing leaders. Consequently, the Spanish right seems to be slightly more open to dialogue on Instagram than the left, which, as before,

contradicts previous research. However, the use of hashtags does not sustain this conclusion, for the leader who used the highest average number was Sánchez. Notwithstanding ideology, as a rule the ‘new/old politics’ variable may explain why traditional parties used, on average, a greater number of hashtags, compared with the two emerging ones. Either way, it should be recalled that hashtags are not direct, but secondary indicators of interactivity (Cartes Barroso, 2018).

The scant interactivity via replies was consistent with the relevance of functions such as self-promotion, the dissemination of electoral news, and the broadcasting of political stances. Waterloo et al.’s study (2018) on Dutch youngsters indicated that the expression of negative emotions was rated as more appropriate for Facebook and Twitter compared to Instagram, a finding that ties in with previous research pointing to a focus on self-promotion. Thus, it could be argued that self-promotional political communication would fit the uses of Instagram by young people—and young voters. However, political leaders are *not* normal users, but individuals that are expected to answer to their constituencies—all the more so when the success of Instagram pages has been related to interactions generated by the posts (Benedek, 2018). Hence, such a lack of interaction is detrimental to functions that really foster dialogue, and demonstrates a broadcasting-centric use of SNSs. In this connection, nor were there any statistically significant differences between the two periods analyzed, insofar as Instagram was used for self-aggrandizement in both periods. In short, images and texts were employed by the main Spanish leaders to talk basically about themselves, while interactive categories like ‘requesting public input’ were all but absent—another characteristic that may be linked anyway to the visual nature of Instagram, since such requesting would imply linguistic messages designed for that aim. Moreover, and as opposed to Podemos’ use of Instagram for mobilizing the electorate in 2015 and 2016 (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019),

the 2018 campaign data indicate that ‘new politics’ leaders did not resort to mobilizing categories, such as ‘call to vote’. Although these leaders did indeed express their thanks, our results support the theoretical notion that the use of ICTs by political elites is mostly asymmetrical (Greer and Lapointe, 2005).

Regarding topics, the relevance of campaign and/or party affairs indicate that the use of Instagram in the 2018 Andalusian campaign was a case of ‘Metacampaigning, that is, communications about the state of the campaign’ (Jensen and Anstead, 2014: 61). Not by coincidence, metacampaigning relates to a vertical, monologic communication approach (Jensen and Anstead, 2014). Hence, the interaction of leaders with the citizenry is not only scarce, but they also normally talk endogamously about party affairs and activities. Such self-referentiality is communicated through both images and texts, since all visuals were accompanied by a linguistic message, hence reinforcing an overall multi-modal message, with pictures lacking an independent semantic role. Moreover, the endogamous use of Instagram is consistent with data indicating that hashtags are normally used to repeat campaign slogans (Verón Lassa and Pallarés Navarro, 2017), involving meta-campaigning along the lines of that of the 2011 general election campaign, in which Spanish leaders Rajoy and Pérez Rubalcaba ‘tended to use Twitter to talk mainly about the election campaign per se’ (García Ortega and Zugasti Azagra, 2014: 305), plus the 2014 European elections, in which the campaign figured among the most frequently broached subjects (Congosto, 2015). One of Albert Rivera’s posts described the accompanying photograph in the following terms: ‘Momentos de backstage en la campaña andaluza [Backstage moments during the Andalusian campaign]’ (19 November); a statement that works as a metaphor for the secondary, sidekick role played by Instagram as a medium. In this regard, the emotional, personal-driven nature of Instagram was not fully realized by the campaigns:

if we take a closer look at the context of the pictures, we find that personal contexts were very rare, with leaders shown in public spaces and, above all, in professional settings ranging from office work to public events to campaign rallies. Thus, a basically personal-driven medium like Instagram was used with a focus on professional contexts.

The sidekick role also relates to the implications of Instagram content for campaigning. Modes of shared content are influenced by changes in the communication system, and, as Kreiss et al. argue, ‘campaigns must produce their own creative content for very different platforms’ (2018: 9), with visual content in particular being attempted to optimize by organizations (Seo and Ebrahim, 2016). Instagram’s political visuals fit the notion that content must differ in different platforms, since the images posted to Instagram by Spanish leaders tend to appear exclusively in this site. However, the problem does not rely on the originality of content, but on its thematic limitations. The photographs and videos were Instagram-only, but they parasitically relied on second-hand campaign-trail topics, as evidenced by a plethora of images of events and media interviews. Thus, the creation of Instagram-exclusive content as a mere echo chamber of the official daily activities of politicians, offers food for thought regarding what must be considered ‘original’ in social media.

Together with the use of Instagram for self-promotion, the four main Spanish leaders did not leverage its conversational potential. On the contrary, they prove themselves to be excessively indebted to a traditional vision of conventional media, focusing on one-way broadcasting. Even if we consider the image-centric nature of Instagram, this is particularly striking when taking into account the Spanish political context over the past few years, with phenomena such as the advent of the 15-M movement—one of the seeds of Podemos—with massive public protests against the two-party system on 15 May 2011 (García-Jiménez, Zamora-Medina and Martínez-

Fernández, 2014). A forerunner of initiatives like Occupy London and Occupy Wall Street, the 15-M called for a more participatory democracy and exemplified Castells' concept of 'mass autocommunication', a new form of interactive and many-to-many communication (Fernández-Planells, Figueras-Maz and Feixa Pàmpols, 2014). Nonetheless, this proposal does not seem to have been taken up in party communication. In this regard, the 'new politics' of Ciudadanos and Podemos does not differ much from the old kind.

The lack of interaction is consistent with the normalization hypothesis: campaign innovations such as interactivity are not determined by technology, but by campaign logic (Lilleker, 2016), and Spanish campaign logic seems to follow the path of normalization. Instagram use by Spanish leaders thus provides additional support to the normalization thesis, which is 'the dominant paradigm in the study of e-campaigning' (Southern and Lee, 2019: 180). In this sense, our results build upon existing theoretical work, since they support both the assertion that this hypothesis tends to prevail in research (Vergeer and Hermans, 2013), as well as the theory that technology does not necessarily change the purposes and mechanics of election campaigns (Towner and Dulio, 2012). Although the Internet provides a horizontal communication channel (Castells, 2001), ICT capabilities are not necessarily reflected in online political behaviour, exemplifying the coexistence of one-to-many mass communication, and one-to-one interactive communication (Dahlgren, 2005). In this context, the use of Instagram in Spain would be closer to a mass media logic than to an interaction-oriented network media logic (Klinger and Svensson, 2015).

In short, after analyzing Instagram as a propaganda tool used by new and old Spanish leaders, our main findings can be summed up as follows. Firstly, interactivity is an irrelevant factor for the main Spanish political leaders; secondly, an electoral context

does not necessarily imply a higher level of interaction with the citizen; thirdly, the levels of political engagement and interaction do not seem to rely on the old/new politics divide. Nevertheless, political ideology stands out as a variable related to the four leaders' Instagram behavior, since our data indicate a clear predominance of the right-wing regarding posting activity. These findings are not only relevant for supporting the normalization thesis, as well as a critical assessment of interactivity theories; they have wider implications regarding media models as well. The communication of top Spanish leaders is clearly indebted to a traditional media logic, focusing on one-way broadcasting, and mirroring mass media practices, instead of exploring the new possibilities offered by a young, flourishing site like Instagram.

Thus, Instagram-mediated politics looks very similar to mediated politics as usual. In this regard, and from the viewpoint of communication practitioners, Instagram works as a purely self-promotional medium for politicians—a promotional tool with the advantage of attracting young voters. Political strategists should evaluate whether young voters may regard positively a communication effort whereby images are used by leaders to talk about themselves; or, on the contrary, whether youngsters may find broadcasting-led metacampaigning tiresome. The fact that the emotional nature of Instagram was not fully realized by Spanish leaders should also be considered in this regard, as well as the entertainment side of this SNS.

Our study is a further step towards gaining a more precise understanding of the political use of Instagram, but nonetheless has limitations. One is the electoral context in which a part of the data was collected. Another has to do with the results, which reflect the behavior of Spanish leaders and, therefore, may not be representative of that of their peers in other countries. In this connection, Enli and Moe rightly assert that 'the impact of social media on election campaigns is fairly diverse across different regions

and countries, depending on media environments, cultural practices, and political systems' (2013: 641). These limitations open up further research lines: on the one hand, to analyze Instagram communication in different electoral contexts; on the other hand, to perform a cross-national study, hence providing further evidence of whether the one-way use of Instagram is especially pronounced in Spain compared with other countries. Additionally, the analysis of new Instagram forms, such as “stories”, could be an enticing research direction.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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