

Commenting Natively

A doctoral thesis



Orge Castellano Parra
2020

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Commenting Natively: User-engagement Dynamics Below the Line within Spanish Digital Newspapers

A doctoral thesis by

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2020

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This dissertation was submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy in Social Communication**.

Further requirements included some signatures, several bureaucratic steps and a public defense in front of a doctorate committee of three or five scientists, including one or two from an recognized public university abroad, one or two from a public university in Spain, and one exclusively from the University of the Basque Country.



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The dedication of this dissertation is split in many different ways:

*To all the fighters; to the believers; to all those who do not standstill
to the ones that do not bear injustice and face it; to those who
are always ready to give their all to protect those who suffer;
to those who are discriminated against; to the minorities;
to those who strive every day and do not give up;
to those who are not afraid to go forward even when
the road is full of obstacles, misfortunes and miseries.
This is for you.*

A special dedication goes to the ever wonderful Ibai

Foreword

“Most of the important things in the world have been accomplished by people who have kept on trying when there seemed to be no hope at all.”
— *Dale Carnegie*

According to LaTeX, I spent 5118 hours drafting this dissertation. That’s the amount necessary to become a half-pianist, half-painter, half-CEO of something¹. Instead I decided to go for a research project. To become a Doctor. Who in their right mind would have done that? Well, I did. I embarked myself in what at the beginning was and seemed like an impossible task to achieve. My journey up to this moment in my life has been loaded with a pretty good dosage of failure and precariousness. This by far, has been one of the most difficult experiences I have been gone through in my life, and I have lived in Venezuela and Russia, which really says a lot. During the making of this work, I had to maintain a sense of reality, since trying to jump at every potential obstacle was not always a choice, at least not a realistic nor honest one, yet when encountered with massive data collection and analysis challenges, I sure did my best to absent myself from disappointment and despair, and went ahead in an enthusiastically journey to tried to excel at something I genuinely believe could bring a humble contribution to the current state of online discourse and its intimate interrelation with an innate human form: communication. The reader might notice that, at times this dissertation resorts to the use of natural language over academic rigorousness to the extent possible and appropriate. The underlying motivation behind this decision is to ultimately make this work more accessible and versatile to the general public, especially to those readers, young academics, and researchers whose first language might not be English. It is also an attempt to create a comprehensive study utilizing a minimal discourse approach. Exhaustive references to my previous publications and contributions from other authors and colleagues guide the reader towards in-depth explanations that can be found throughout the chapters.. This work has been conceived, despite the challenges, despite the uncertainty of the times we are living it, and despite the lack of resources found along the way, I survived and outlived, outsmarted the task and made it. Yet, it was not possible without the support, encouragement, tough love and trust

¹Based on the popular “10,000-Hour Rule” from Gladwell, M. (2008). *Outliers: The story of success*. Little, Brown.

of so many people whom I always will be grateful for (for a more-detailed humongous 'Thank you' note see). For the above stated reasons, and since no act of research ever happens in isolation, I will use the authorial "we" throughout the text, except in places where I want to emphasize my own viewpoint. Brace yourself with the hot beverage of your choice, get on a good comfortable couch or chair and enjoy the ride!

Preface

The growing boom and thirst for information on the Internet followed by the emergence of new platforms and participatory models in the news industry, in response to established mainstream media, have given birth to a new type of media: digital natives. This type of media, which is mostly established as independent editorial projects, was born with the aim of offering the news in mobile formats and meet the high demands of an audience that seeks alternative and quality content to that offered online. Today the reader is not only limited to information consumption, but to the production of content. The Internet has transformed the consumption of news (Boulianne, 2016). The digital sphere is a multi-platform environment in which audiences have more options than ever before to consume, distribute, and create a plethora of content and information in different digital ecosystems, whether they are within a network such as Social Media or inside the realms of the digital news outlets and their respective communities (Lee, 2013; Weber, 2020; Watson et al., 2019). This growing bidirectionality has turned emerging media into ideal spaces for debate and interaction (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). Nowadays, user-comments represent one of the most important contributions and a central element between the relationship of newspapers and their journalists with their audience, and are often regarded as being as the most widely used and widespread form of interaction within online news media (Ksiazek & Springer, 2020), and represent a vital element of deliberative democracy on the internet.

The hereinafter work is developed under a case study method. Applying both quantitative and qualitative methodologies we analyze the contents of a user-comment sample from three Spanish digital newspapers *ElDiario.es*, *ElEspañol.com* and *ElConfidencial.com*. The object of research of this thesis was chosen with the aim of making a tangible contribution to a reality that is palpable on the internet today: the participation of users and their discourse online. Therefore, the main objective is to understand in depth the current state of user-generated content within the digital native media and social networks from different empirical perspectives in order to illustrate the discourse dynamics that arises within this digital phenomenon.

This dissertation is focused within the framework of a line of research that is current and unprecedented, since its objectives focus on studying the case

of digital newspapers, their participation models and the contributions of their audiences inside their spaces for user-engagement and out of them on Social Media. Likewise, we explore the contributions of readers or subscribers through an analysis of the content of the comments and their discursive quality.

This dissertation is structured in 5 chapters. After this introductory section, we thoroughly discuss the following topics:

In Chapter 1, the purpose of the research, the objective, hypotheses, research questions and research methodologies applied to a sample of user-comments is introduced and explained.

In Chapter 2, we lay out a vast scope of broad definitions and explore the most relevant conceptual and operational terms around digital journalism and user commentary as a form of deliberative engagement online. Also, we unpack the theories and studies of a long list of scholars, experts, and journalists. A literature framework is intended to help navigate the reader through the deep waters of online journalism and its challenges, its perks, its virtues across a series of actors, landscapes, and perspectives across the globe and in a multitude of participatory and interactive scenarios. This chapter draws on theories concerning the digital public sphere, deliberative democracy and the role of social media in news distribution. In addition, integrates the theoretical framework of disruptive engagement, specifically, the conceptualization of incivility, anonymity, and moderation.

Chapter 3 focuses more specifically on the qualitative analysis from the perspective of the news outlets analyzed. Here we discuss with the key people responsible in each outlet of the moderation, the journalistic practices, the legal rules and ethics around user commentary in their respective news organization. A more detailed view of all the methodological techniques thoroughly examined in Chapter 1 are showcased.

Chapter 4 examines the discourse ethics through the lens of a quantitative and qualitative content and textual analysis of 98,426 user-comments. Here, we discuss in detail each and every aspect laid out in the methodology in Chapter 1. A series of comprehensive results and evidence are introduced and outlined. The results provide the reader a global understanding of the discourse dynamics of user-generated comments below the line inside and outside the news outlets'

spaces, as well as a full overview of the current commenting culture in Spain and their engagement characteristics, and a new light on new forms of visual discourse language.

In Chapter 5, we address the conclusions linked to the hypotheses and research questions raised in the main body of this paper. Finally, we conclude by discussing the limitations encountered throughout the research and propose future approaches in the field of online discourse studies within the context of user-generated content and digital media. Here we advocate for the development and exploration of AI based technologies and machine learning approaches to automatize the analysis of user-comments in academia and encourage news organizations to use automation for comment moderation and filtering of potential usable user-generated content in the newsroom.

I hope this introduction becomes the warm-up of a captivating adventure through the world of online news media and the deep waters of discourse ethics on the internet. I have learned a great deal while conducting this research; may the motifs, the findings, or the over-the-top terms found throughout this work inspire you in return.

Foreword

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trust of so many people whom I always will be grateful for (for a more-detailed humongous 'Thank you' note, see § Acknowledgments). For the above-stated reasons, and since no act of research ever happens in isolation, I will use the authorial "we" throughout the text, except in places where I want to emphasize my viewpoint. Brace yourself with the hot beverage of your choice, get on a good comfortable couch or chair, and enjoy the ride

Acknowledgments

Eizehu chacham? Ha-lomed mi-kol Adam

“Who is wise? The one who learns from every person.”

Eizehu m'chubad? Ham'chabeid et hab'riyot

“Who is honoured? The one who honours others.”

I am indebted to so many people who have contributed, implicitly and explicitly, to this point in my career, which ultimately led to the pursuit of this dissertation — an achievement that at times seemed like a stubborn, impossible one.

My life has been at times a roller-coaster going at its maximum speed filled with a mix of emotions: joy, sadness, anger, indignation, disappointment, kindness, fear, love, but most importantly, on this journey we all get to call "life," I have not been alone, in fact, I had the enormous luck and honor of encountering the most amazing-loving-talented-precious individuals I could have ever imagined, asked, dreamed or wished for. Having been surrounded by them has been a constant source of inspiration, which has guided me up for this moment, and I hope they will continue to do so in the future.

This work would not have been written without the support of the following people:

From the bottom of all me, I thank my mother. She has been the pillar of my life, but also my Achilles heel. She instilled in me a great work ethic and profound respect for myself, my creations, and ventures. Without her sacrifices and her hard work, I would not be where I am or be who I am, either. *Gracias Mamá por tu inconmesurable amor, apoyo y valores. Eres un sol y siempre lo serás.*

I have infinite gratitude towards my brother, whose extraordinary example of dedication, discipline, and good humor, has sparked and touched each of my experiences. *Te quiero mucho hermano. ¡Qué groso que sos!*

I am grateful to my family and friends scattered around the world. In Russia, I especially thank my wonderful and beautiful girls, Dasha O., Valya, Nastya Sund., Marina S., Alyona M., Anya R., Nastya O., Margarita P., and Natasha D., for their constant support, love, care, and strength. And also for providing me always with a good dosage of a Russian character, soul and conscience.

Дорогие мои, вы самые крутые, необыкновенные и обаятельные на свете, люблю вас. Спасибоочки.

I especially want to thank my gorgeous and kind friend Nastya S., for her words of encouragement, her funny bits, originality and genuine friendship. *Настя ты настоящий друг, таких, как ты, мало. Спасибо за такую невероятную дружбу.*

In Venezuela, Spain, Colombia, Perú and the US, I am forever thankful to all of my relatives for their tireless admiration and dedication for excellence, will-power, and hard work.

My heart holds a special place for Benny AKA Paul, AKA Blondie, whose incalculable and unconditional support and friendship are an intrinsic part of this work. Your work ethics, ideals, fantastic honesty, and life philosophy have taught me a great deal over the past years. *Danke, dass du der lustigste und treueste Freund bist.*

Grazie mille to Alberto for being a constant source of inspiration with every percentage of his remarkable qualities, his 33% of laughter, 43% of affection, 25% of enthusiasm, and 57% of love, which adds to all of his 158%. Sorry, I am a journalist, not a mathematician.

To my beloved and trusted buddy, homie, and room-mate Ibai, whose unmeasured, unequivocal and unlimited support, love, dearness, and care made this work possible in the first place. Thank you for giving me a chance, for believing in me and for your uninterested protection, affection, and patience, all of which I am and will be forever beholden.

To my Basque beloved friends, Ane, Sofia, and Irati. *Bihotz-bihotzez eskertzen ditut zuen babes eta maitasunezko hitz guztiak. Mila esker.*

To Paula, Ander, Ana, Victoria, Mariana, Araceli, Sara, Patricio, Nastya G., Gaby, Vadim P., Josvelis, Stefan, Cesarina, Omar, Nicole, Xabi, and Pablo, thank you for being part of my life and for having put up with all the intricacies, nuisance and shenanigans caused by this work. I cherished you and our moments together along with the making of this dissertation.

I super special bag of gratitude go to Sarah W., for being a wonderful moral partner, an incredible supporter and a truly genuine friend all these past years.

To the Research Group Gureiker: Ainara, Txus, Terese, Irati, and Simón. Thank you—*Mila esker*—for having opened the doors of your academic house and for giving me the opportunity to learn from each and every one of you.

To my friends at the University of Porto for their trust, fellowship and warmth. Special thanks go to Fernando Zamith for having hosted me at his lovely *alma mater*. *Muito obrigado pela sua generosidade e pelo apoio,*

And finally, I would like to thank and dedicate a few lines to Koldo Meso A.. Koldo always did his best to make sure this work was accomplished; despite the early setbacks and hardships, he never gave up on his support and confidence in me and my wild visions. I appreciate his endless willingness, temperance, and loyalty in each and every stage, complicated or not, of this work under his supervision. With all my heart and soul, I thank Koldo for being a supervisor I could trust from day one. It is because of his wisdom, recommendations, constructive criticism, edits, chats, countless cups of coffee. and meetings that this work has seen the light of day.

Thank you, Gracias totales, Спасибо огромное, Mila esker, Muito obrigado, Grazie mille, Toda raba!

List of selected Acronyms

Acronym	Description
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AKA	Also Known As
API	Application Programming Interface
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BTL	Below the Line
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
GIF	Graphics Interchange Format
LGBTQ	An acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning
NET	An abbreviation of the word Internet
NYT	New York Times
PP	Partido Popular
PSOE	Partido Socialista Obrero Español
SEO	Search Engine Optimization
SNS	Social Networking Site
UGC	User-generated Content
WWW	World Wide Web

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Chapter 1

In Which We Begin to Understand the Research Plot

“If you’re having a terrible day, take a deep breath, a nap, a long-walk,
do whatever it takes, but please don’t read the comments”
— *Anonymous*

1.1 Purpose of the Research

"All progress is born of inquiry. Doubt is often better than overconfidence,,
for it leads to inquiry, and inquiry leads to invention.'

— *Hudson Maxim*

We live in a completely digitalized world where communication has reached every corner of our society (Hague et al., 1999), no matter where we look or at what time, technology has monopolized every moment of our daily lives. Journalism has not escaped from this significant social and political phenomenon. We can affirm that this communication industry was one of the first to embrace and explore the vast benefits and horizons of the digital dimension (Hall, 2001). Technological disruption has created an infinity of communicative opportunities and spaces for citizens to disseminate ideas and involve themselves in different forms of civic engagement (Dahlgreen, 2005) while at the same time, the internet has also provided ordinary individuals with the tools to create and report their content without the need of having an industry behind to support them. We are witnesses of a revolution humanity has ever experienced before (Singer et al., 2011).

On a global scale, unimaginable before, places, communities, and networks, have emerged online (Bowen, 1996), allowing its members to discuss topics that matter, and share openly and freely individual common interests and ideas inside flourishing digital ecosystems (Papacharissi, 2002). Online discourse has increased political participation strengthening citizen rights (Cammaerts, 2008; Cammaerts & Audenhove, 2005) while at the same time, new information and communication technology (ICT) innovations, like the popularization of the smartphone, have helped revive the public sphere (Rasmussen, 2014). Nevertheless, engagement has also brought up negative nuances as well, as the amount of information available online increased, and as more and more people started to take part in public online forums such as social media like Twitter and Facebook (Kies, 2010; Lee, 2016), the number of discourse problems have, since the creation of the World Wide Web, skyrocketed (Aurigi, 2016). Hate speech (Waldron, 2012); the spreading of fake-news (McNair, 2018; Lazer et al., 2018); misinformation (Vergeer, 2018), conspiracy theories (Kaiser, 2017) and disinformation (Bennett & Livingston 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017); social bots (Woolley & Howard, 2017) and Troll culture (Benedictus, 2016) are just some of the today's

most common issues facing online spheres. These trouble times makes us question if we are witnessing the decline of digital journalism and the corruption of online discourse, as we know it or at least used to know it, which also brings in the question: Are we maybe, in fact, facing new dawn? Picard (2014) also questions further this issue and concludes that neither the one, nor the other, both, and adds that the changing historical, social and economic context indicates that journalism is facing a transition and that we are not witnessing its death.

Nevertheless, why is it essential to study the media? The media has to be studied because they are part of the core of our society and daily life. It is fundamental to study what the media has to offer us in terms of social and cultural dimensions, and of course, as part of the political discourse of the modern world. It is important to continue exploring media organizations in their ubiquity and complexity and in their contribution to our ability to understand the world and its meanings. As Roger Silverstone brilliantly stated in his book, *Why Study the Media?*

We cannot escape the media. They are involved in every aspect of our everyday lives. Central to the project as a whole was a desire to place the media at the core of experience, at the heart of our capacity or incapacity to make sense of the world in which we live. Central, too, was a desire to claim for the study of the media an intellectual agenda that would pass muster in a world too quick to dismiss the seriousness and relevance of our concerns (Silverstone, 1999:9).

We are living in difficult, darker times for democracy, plurality, and freedom of the press (Newman, 2019), yet, at the same time, we have never thrived more in history. Information and technology are more available, accessible, and reachable for billions of people (Küng, 2015). As Alan Rusbridger (2018:19), former editor of *The Guardian* and current Chair of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism wrote in his latest book

We are, for the first time in the morning history, facing the prospect of how societies would exist without reliable news - at least as it used to be understood. There has never been more information in the world. We know infinitely more than ever before through some new democracy of knowledge that has swept over us so suddenly and so overwhelmingly that is almost impossible to glimpse, let alone comprehend. Much of it is liberating, energizing, and

transformative. It is a revolution to rival the invention of movable type in the 15th century. And most of it is poisonous and dangerous.

This research aims to study the role of the user-comments in Spain; delve into the relationship between the audiences' comments within native digital newspapers and lastly, to explore the dynamics of users' conversation thought discourse analysis. By carrying out a multidisciplinary approach, applying both qualitative and quantitative methods, we aim to explain the effects and impact of user-generated content in the form of comments below news pieces on digital news outlets in Spain. At the same time, we will also analyze the discourse ethics of these comments both inside the official websites of the outlets as mentioned above and outside them on their social media official accounts, to determine the quality of the discussions, the language used, the acceptance of arguments, and the recognition and respect among its participants. An analysis worksheet has previously been designed based on the theoretical framework of the discursive ethics of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas¹, based on previous research (Habermas, 1983), who considers that dialogue is an ethical and rational procedure for social construction and the engine of social change.

¹Cfr. Habermas, J. (1990). *Moral consciousness and communicative action*. MIT press.

1.2 Objectives

"The main aim of the research is to find out the truth which is hidden and which has not been discovered as yet."
— *Cartik Kothari*

The general objective of this dissertation is to study the audience engagement and the discourse dynamics of user-comments generated in three major digital news outlets in Spain.

Among the specific objectives that this research aimed to meet were:

1.1 Study the contents of a sample of comments to identify the language used, the existence of dialogue, the recognition among the speakers, the respectful treatment between them, acceptance of the arguments of other speakers, and logical and coherent aspects of the discourse present at the discussions.

1. Study the different engagement and interactivity tools available in every news outlet.

2.2 Describe moderation policies and systems used in each of the participation spaces enabled.

1. Quantify the comments and the engagement generated from the news pieces published in the official profiles of the news outlets analyzed on social media, on Twitter, and Facebook, respectively.

3.1 Analyze the discourse ethics of the comments generated in the official social media accounts—Twitter and Facebook—of the news outlets selected.

1. Examine the contents of a sample of comments to identify the most commented news, the news sections with the most comments, and the favourite topics.

1.3 Hypotheses

Hypotheses are crucial due to their experimental nature. In order to discover new relationships, and to fully be able to apply the methods chosen for the research, hypotheses will have to be formulated. According to Kothari, the role of hypotheses is to:

... guide the researcher by delimiting the area of research and to keep him on the right track. It sharpens his thinking and focuses attention on the more important facets of the problem. It also indicates the type of data required and the type of methods of data analysis to be used (Kothari, 2004:4).

For Colobrans (2001:151), a hypothesis is an exercise of mental projection that involves accepting a risk. The results of the investigation will allow demonstrating the validity or invalidity of such a relationship, its return to the previous state of opinion, or its leap to the new thesis condition. The following hypotheses complement some of the answers that are intended to thoroughly understand the issues at stake in this research. Each hypothesis is accompanied—in the next section—by one or several research questions that help to find answers to the hypotheses. Once the research topic has been contextualized, and the objectives to be explored have been outlined as well, then we can proceed to formulate the following hypotheses:

H1: The conversations generated from the comments seek the dialectical confrontation, are not constructive and tend to be little enriching. There is a dialogue between participants, but there is not discourse continuity in the debates.

H2: User-engagement does not provide any kind of journalistic relevance to the native digital newspapers analyzed.

H3: Journalists rarely engage in the comments section with the readers.

H4: Politics and Society are the news sections/topics which generate the most engagement.

H5: The majority of debates takes place in the outlets' social media official accounts.

H6: Follow up engagement in the comments section within the outlets is scarce.

H7: Users use new forms of visual commentary such as memes, GIFs and emojis.

1.4 Research Questions

Once the hypotheses of research have been determined, it is necessary to formulate the research questions that should accompany them. Developing a research question is a crucial step to effectively resolve a research problem (Thabane et al., 2009). The success of a project depends upon how well these questions have been formulated (Booth et al., 2003). Based on the previous hypotheses, we proposed to answer the following research questions, which, in turn, correspond to each of the parts that make up this dissertation. Here they are:

RQ1: Do the user comments have a deliberative nature? Does incivility influence the dynamics of the discursive ethics of user comments?

RQ2: Do the comments have editorial relevance?

RQ3: Do journalists interact with users in the comments section?

RQ4: Which news sections/topics receive the most comments?

RQ5: Where do the vast majority of user-engagement take place?

RQ6: Do users continue to engage in the comments sections days after the first initial debate started?

RQ7: What kind of specific features do the comments have based on their distribution platform?

1.5 Methodology

For the development of this dissertation, we have chosen multiple methodological frameworks composed of several techniques. In social science, the extensive

use of research methods that are in favor of the use of numerous methods is quite common. This type of research approach is described as multimethod or multitrait (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). In our research, we decided to advocate for a mixed one, both quantitative and qualitative, to validate and cross-check the data collected from three different sources.

The qualitative and quantitative methods were applied to complement themselves and do not collide with each other. At the same time, a mixed methodology is a vehicle for reliable, convergent, and a more holistic portrayal of the units examined within the study. By observing the research question from two different perspectives, one can have a much-defined version of the social phenomenon at issue. Triangulation, as defined by Denzin (1978: 291), is the “combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon.” Therefore, by exerting two methods, our belief is enhanced because the credibility of the results is valid and not a by-product of a single methodological artifact. (Bouchard, 1976)

In order to study the objectives (see Section §1.2), several methodological techniques were combined. Among the techniques used we have: In-depth interviews, quantification of comments through computer software, and qualitative content analysis through specialized qualitative computer software *NVivo* and textual analysis.

1.5.1 Case study

We have also chosen the case study approach because we consider it appropriate to investigate complex questions from a qualitative perspective. Scholars such as Yin (1988; 2017) and Nord & Tuckers (1987) recommend the qualitative case study methodology when studying a contemporary phenomenon in a real context. In our case, the analysis of the discourse ethics of user-comments from digital-only newspapers in Spain and their impact, as well as, the study of its discourse, an issue that has not previously been widely documented. It seems appropriate then, to include a case study research within our methodological context. For Eisenhardt (1989: 535), the studies of cases can describe a phenomenon, test a theory, or generate it. In his highly acclaimed book *The Case Study Crisis: Some Answers* Robert Yin (1981) argues that a case study design should be implemented, using multiple sources of evidence, when:

... the preferred strategy when 'how' or 'why' questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context.

It is a methodology based on inductive reasoning capable of generating scientific knowledge. Finally, the case studies are established as a primary tool, and almost necessary, for junior researchers. As Dutch scholar Bent Flyvbjerg (2006) synthesizes it:

"cases are important for researchers' own learning processes in developing the skills needed to do good research. If researchers wish to develop their own skills to a high level, then concrete, context-dependent experience is just as central for them as to professionals learning any other specific skills."

The study has a qualitative perspective because the work is concerned with studying perceptions - that is, subjective human experience - through:

1. In-depth interviews with the directors and managers responsible for the comments section or the interaction platforms in each one of the digital newspapers analyzed. Indeed, a qualitative approach will allow us to reconstruct meanings, examine concepts, and know in depth the implications and effects of participation in news outlets generated by users through comments.
2. Performed qualitative textual analysis—using the normative approach of Habermas' discourse ethics—of the comments generated by the users within the comments section placed below each news story, as well as outside them in the official accounts of Facebook and Twitter of these. The analysis will be done through a datasheet that collects and classifies the contributions generated by the users at the bottom of the news pieces, with a relevant focus on the comments. .

Following these criteria, we used content analysis, which allowed us, in addition to obtaining a qualitative view of the comments, to obtain nuances of a quantitative nature as well. Kothari (1985) points out that quantitative research is measured in quantities; it applies to a phenomenon that can be expressed in terms of quantity. Qualitative research, on the other hand, is concerned with the quality of a phenomenon (Kothari, 1985).

Accordingly, in quantitative terms, we will initially establish an average number of comments generated during the sampling period, as well as the frequency of words, most commented news sections in general, number of users by their alias, and real-name. Data were controlled and measured, by combining a quantitative software such as Excel computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software *NVivo 12*². The use of different methodological techniques will allow us to make a cross-sectional analysis³, which will provide us with a deeper understanding of our research by data collected at the same point in time in a sample population or a representative subset. Cross-sectional studies are useful for measuring the prevalence, but not incidence, of factors of interest, since there is no attempt to follow the same events, people, conditions over time, which means that there is no prospective or retrospective follow-up (Mann, 2003).

1.5.2 Sample

The selected corpus is composed of three general-interest digital newspapers nationwide: *ElDiario.es*, *ElEspañol.com*, and *ElConfidencial.com*, the selection of these newspapers were made taking into account, on the one hand, their digital nature, i.e., newspapers that never existed on paper and that were born or that their foundation was made directly online and, on the other, their dissemination and relevance in Spain (See Table 1.1). The number of visits and their position in the world ranking and in Spain was also taken into consideration, of course, excluding in advance those newspapers with a paper version, or those newspapers that, even if they met the parameters described, had a web structure that did not fit with the methodological elements of the sample (Section §1.5).

For example, in the case of the digital newspaper *OKDiario.com*, a Spanish newspaper based in Madrid, founded in 2015, its landing page did not have the minimum requirements for carrying out the research, that is, a section or area, in its effect, of the most viewed news of the day on the front page of the

²*NVivo* is a qualitative data analysis (QDA) software program used for qualitative and mixed-methods research, developed by Tom Richards in 1999. Specifically, it is used for the analysis of unstructured text, audio, video, and image data, including (but not limited to) interviews, focus groups, surveys, social media, and journal articles. It is produced and developed by QSR International (Richards, L., 2003).

³According to Arnet and Class (2009) cross-sectional studies involve data collected at a defined time. This technique is often utilized for research that collects data on relevant variables one time only from a variety of people, subjects, or phenomena. The data are collected all at the same time (or within a short time frame (Arnett & Claas, 2009)).

website. It is also necessary to mention that, when the researcher of this work got in touch with the communication managers of this newspaper, they categorically refused to collaborate with data regarding their audience and overall, to the participation whatsoever in this research. Due to the two reasons named above, this newspaper has had to be excluded from the sample.

Another of the newspapers that had to be excluded was the Spanish version of The Huffington Post, *Thehuffpost.es*, a native digital newspaper that due to its characteristics could have been selected for the sample, but that could not be included since its “most-viewed section,” one that on their website it is called “TENDENCIA”, did not meet the requirements of the methodology, that is, a section of most viewed news on the website on a particular day. In the particular case of The Huffington Post, its section “TENDENCIA,” refers to the most important topics or news items in the agenda-setting of the newspaper and in general, topics with a defined media relevance in Spain, and not to the news most seen by readers in a day in particular. Other newspapers that could have been part of the sample given their characteristics, the researchers of this work could not take them into account were: *Libertaddigital.com* (“most viewed section” was not available); *Público.es* (previously edited on paper); and *Periodistadigital.com* (it is not among the most read digital news sites). The rest of newspapers or portals that are part of the ranking (see Table 1) and that have had to be left out is because they are specialized newspapers in specific areas, such as sports (*Sport.es* and *Mundodeportivo.com*) or because they are newspapers that even if they have a digital version, they are still being edited on paper and are part of the legacy media (*Elpais.com*, *Elmundo.com*, *ABC.es*, *LaVanguardia*, etc.).

In this respect, the reason why these digital newspapers have been chosen lies in the fact that our objective is to cover those digital, native newspapers with greater relevance in Spain that has certain similarities in terms of participatory tools, audience, and relevance, as described in previous paragraphs. According to the Similar web metric site (Table 1.1), the digital newspapers analyzed are among the most visited in Spain and among the most viewed in the world, and all of them have a prominent presence in social networks as well (Figure 1.1). Also, it is noteworthy to mention that among the reasons behind their selection for research were their defined ideological-editorial lines.

The economic and social scenario unfolding in Spain since 2011, in which the political and media activism of the 15-M, together with the creation of new

political forces and the increased interest and involvement of citizens favoured the birth of new progressive media, such as *ElDiario.es*. It has also been stated that digital-only newspapers such as *infoLibre* and *ElDiario.es* were created to defend social justice and serve the needs of the people, instead of the needs of mainstream media business (Jordán, 2014). For this reason, *ElDiario.es* is considered to be a centre-left publication.

In this same vein, we could include *ElEspañol.com*, which was born through collective sponsorship through a massive crowdfunding campaign with 5,595 investors contributing 3,606,600 euros (Fernández Sande & Gallego Pérez, 2015), but that regardless its collaborative birth, has a much more conservative and right-wing editorial line, mostly because of its founder Pedro J. Ramírez, who led the editorial staff of the newspaper *El Mundo* for many years, which had the same ideological line (García, 2011). *ElConfidencial.com* has been often been defined as a 'free market' newspaper with a right-wing ideological orientation (Bellido-Pérez et al., 2017).




























	Domain	Global Rank	Ranking	Monthly visits
	Marca.com	169	1	57.24
	Elmundo.com	268	2	28.85
	Elpais.com	269	3	44.71
	As.com	338	4	38.75
	ABC.es	436	5	16.81
	Lavanguardia.com	482	6	15.20
	ElEspanol.com	693	7	16.84
	ElConfidencial.com	814	8	11.15
	20 minutos.es	852	9	12.76
	Okdiario.com	1,392	10	7.90
	Mundodeportivo.com	1,038	11	10.13
	Sport.es	1,317	12	10.86
	ElDiario.es	1,751	13	8.206
	Elperiodico.com	1,850	14	5.858
	Rtve.es	1,894	15	9.414
	Huffingtonpost.es	2,882	16	2.547
	Expansion.com	2,861	17	6.015
	Libertaddigital.com	3,525	18	4.277
	Larazon.es	3,799	19	3.200
	Elnacional.cat	3,637	20	2.003
	Publico.es	3,545	21	3.757
	Lavozdegalicia.es	4,979	22	4.40
	Esdiario.com	5,063	23	493k
	Periodistadigital.com	4,803	24	1.362
	Eleconomista.es	4,216	25	4.835
	Elcorreo.com	5,463	26	1.745
	Lasprovincias.es	5,230	27	1.513

Table 1.1: Spanish digital newspapers' website rank. **In bold:** digital news outlets analyzed **In red:** digital outlets excluded from the sample

According to data from SimilarWeb in the 1st quarter of 2020, the three news outlets studied, combined, drew an audience of 377.8 million of overall users. ElEspañol.com comes on top with 145.7 million, followed by El Confidencial.com, 141.2 million users, and ElDiario.es with 90.77. The average monthly audience

of each outlet is considerably high (See Engagement on figure 1.1); mobile is the most prominent device for news reading, in second place comes the desktop (See Device Distribution on figure 1.1). Average monthly unique visitors varied from one outlet to another with ElEspañol.com in the first place (19.66 million) ElConfidencial.com in second (15.12 million) and ElDiario.es at last (7 million) (figure 1.1).

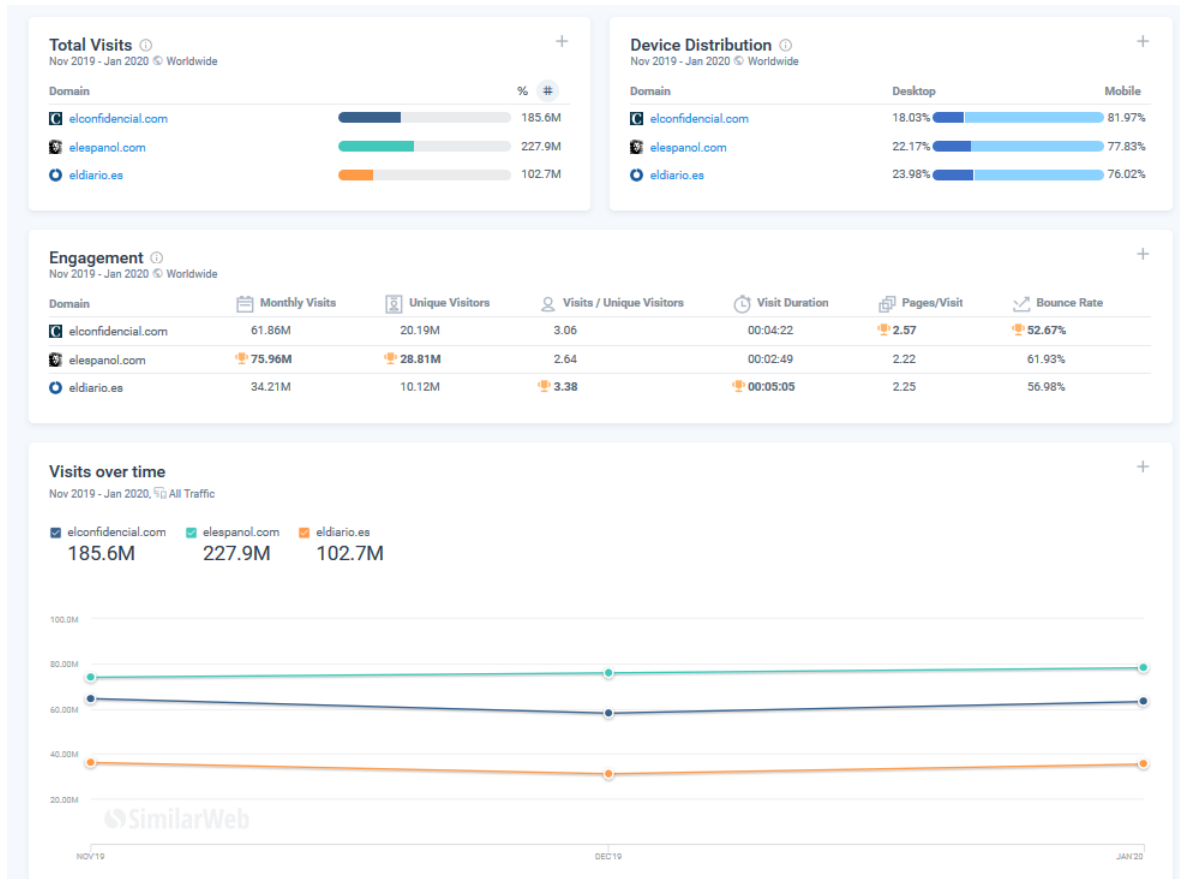


Figure 1.1: Analyzed Digital Newspapers Audience. Source: SimilarWeb.com

It should be noted that the function of posting comments below the news pieces was also a determining factor for the choice of the outlets. It coincided then that the chosen media had adapted platforms available for participation and also that, in order for readers to submit a comment, the outlets in question required a prior registration process, which has also been a factor taken into account. The identification of the user is crucial because this entails that only those readers who are registered can give their opinion once they have been recognized by the system, preventing the generation of anonymous comments.

The sample began on the first Monday of February 2019 until the end of March 2019 (Table 1.2), and it was comprised of a period of a compound month. We

took the first day of the week, in this case, the first Monday of the first month of the sample, and from there, we alternated one day until completing a month, during a period total of eight weeks. The intention behind this was to ensure that the same stories did not recur at the next sampling session. In the same way, these dates have been chosen so that the sample does not coincide with the European elections of May 2019; the general elections and local elections in Spain in April and May respectively, this, to prevent the sample from being filled with articles on the issues and controversies related to these electoral processes.

February							March						
S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S
					1	2						1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28			24	25	26	27	28	29	30

Table 1.2: Sample Schedule. In red: days in which the comments have been recorded and gathered.

For the selection of the sample, a cluster sampling method was chosen. In the first phase, we captured the comments below each article belonging to the "most-viewed" section from the day of the sample. Data was gathered from the landing page of each of the digital news outlets studied. For this process, we have used *Ncapture* (Nvivo, 2020), *Web scraper*, and *Print Friendly & PDF*, which are internet browser *Add-ons*⁴. Both extensions allowed us to capture and automatically collect all the content of a web page that was available at that time. Both two tools allowed us to save an offline copy on PDF format of each news article, as well as to classify the information in tags for later analysis and data dump in the *NVivo* 12 software. It is worth mentioning that when data was not correctly gathered by the previous methods, a Web Scraper plugin on Google Chrome was used. Comments collected by the tool were extracted and exported via CSV and then

⁴Often also called *browser extensions*, or *plugins*, they are small simple programs that extend the functionality of a browser. By using them users can power-up their browser, enabling it to handle a variety of tasks which without these tools wouldn't have been able to perform. In: <https://www.guidingtech.com/8005/beginners-guide-to-browser-extensions-add-ons/> Retrieved on June 24th, 2019.

converted to Microsoft Excel.

In the second phase, we dumped the data for later analysis, which was done semi-automatically through the coding of nodes. The sample has a pre-established schedule. Beginning at 10:00 in the morning and ending at 23:59 the same day. Two collections were made, one starting at 10:00 hrs., and the next at 22:00 hrs., 12 hours after, this was done in order to extract changes on the outlet's news distribution on a single day in two sessions. The schedule variable is based on data from different studies, such as the AIMC⁵, which explores in depth the use and traffic of the Internet in Spain (Moreno, 2018; Newman, 2019).

According to Eurostat, Spain enjoys one of the highest internet penetrations in the European Union, with 91% of its population having access to it on 2019 compared 70% five years before in 2013, this figure is close to the majority of the found throughout the European continent, and it is shared by most of the EU-28 households where the average penetration is 90% in 2019 (Figure 1.2). That is why we will use the time slot proposed in this study, which corresponds to the period of one day, where there is a higher level of internet use in Spain (figure 1.3).

⁵In English: The Association for the Research of Media

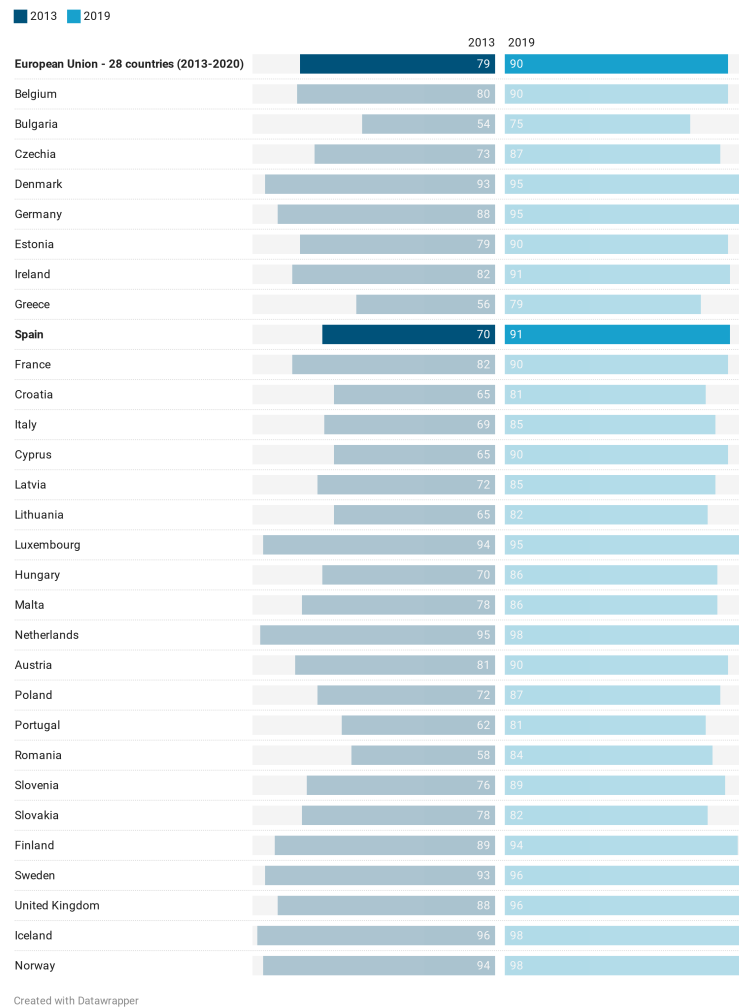


Figure 1.2: Internet access of European households, 2013 and 2019 (% of all households). Source: Eurostat, Households – level of internet Access. https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=isoc_ci_in_h&lang=en, retrieved on April 15, 2020.

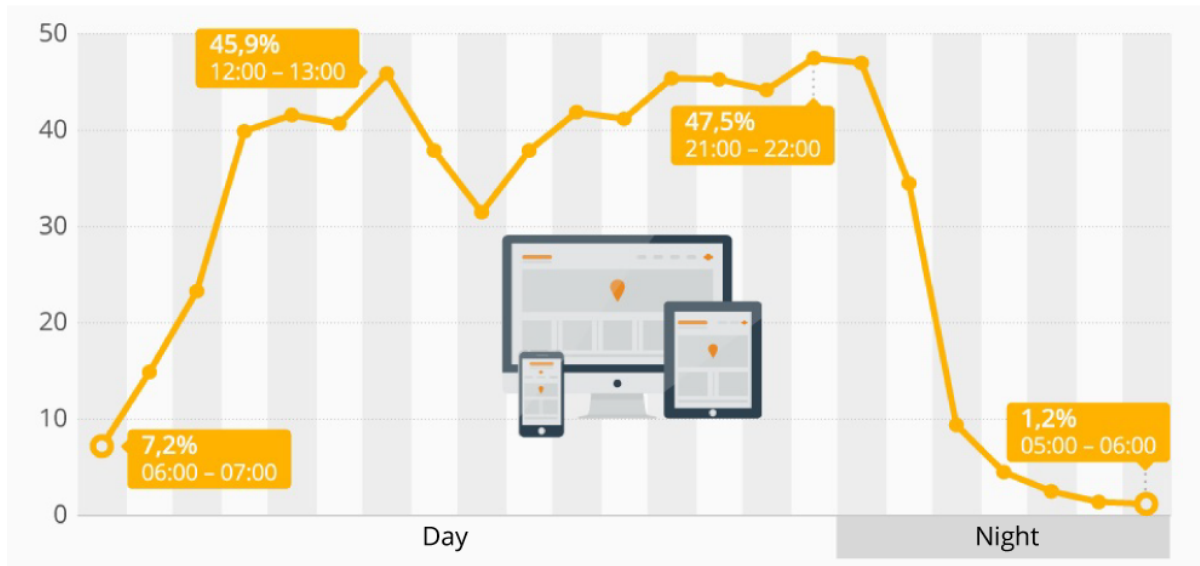


Figure 1.3: Internet time distribution use in Spain. Source Moreno, G. (2018, March 13). Infografía: ¿A qué hora hay más usuarios conectados a Internet? Retrieved February 18, 2020, from <https://es.statista.com/grafico/13222/a-que-hora-hay-mas-usuarios-conectados-a-internet/>.

1.5.3 Qualitative content analysis

As Krippendorff (1980:21) points out, “content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context.” As mentioned above, a qualitative analysis will help us to evaluate the elements and inherent characteristics of the sample to be studied, due to its ability to examine textual data for patterns and structures. This definition complements Kolbe & Burnett’s one, where content analysis is described as “an observational research method that is used to systematically evaluate the symbolic content of all forms of recorded communications” (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991), and also Berelson’s who summarized it as “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” Berelson (1952:18).

Likewise, content analysis will be used on a sample of comments, where we will start from the reasoning of the dialogue, as an ethical and rational procedure for social construction. We believe this research technique is appropriate because it will allow us to carefully examine and interpret the body of comments present in the sample. As Paisley (1969:133) puts it, “communications content is transformed, through the objective and systematic application of categorization rules,

into data that can be summarised and compared.”

The technique allows us the quantification of units, as well as the interpretation of the data (qualitative perception), considered by Christian Kolmer (2008: 117-130) as an essential method to analyze the product generated from journalistic practice. Arguing that without a qualitative vision, the influence of different factors on the production of news, including cultural, political, and economic structures could not be measured. This technique was used to identify indicators such as the number of comments per news; the number of comments per newspaper generated during the sample; an average of comments per news; number of participants per news item; distribution of comments *ex post facto*; distribution of comments per hour; number of impacts on social networks, Facebook and Twitter (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011). We also quantify the origin of the news and, whether these are from news agencies or the outlets.

The analysis of user-comments was carried out in three phases:

1. The comments we quantify the user-comments after their capture in a first stage to establish the average (average) number of comments generated by each news item generically and individually, and the number of comments deleted in the news in comparison with the first capture of the sample, in this way we will observe in the same way, if the news has generated more comments later, and how many of these comments have been eliminated by the moderators depending on their content.
2. In the next phase, we codify the comments extracted from social networks; we have measured the number of impacts generated by each news item (shares, likes, and retweets). The number of likes, comments, and shares on each post were recorded as continuous independent variables.
3. Once obtained the results of the two previous phases, we will proceed to analyze all the comments to extract the most frequent words from the sample, the most commented sections, the newspapers with the most comments, the number of comments with the presence of graphic responses such as emojis, GIFs and memes.

Datasheet Proposal

In our analysis datasheet, we have used the parameters previously exposed in the research work "Conversación 2.0. y democracia. Análisis de los comentarios de los lectores en la prensa digital" (Masip P. et al., 2012) based on the work of the philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1974; 1984; 1998), who believes that dialogue is a set of ethical, rational and moral standards that enable the construction of society, public opinion and therefore It has the potential to become the engine for social change (Habermas, 1974).

The data collection and coding combined both manual and automated, computer-assisted qualitative textual analysis. A hybrid approach takes advantage of the benefits of each method, like Lewis, Zamith, and Hermida (2013, 47) have argued, "hybrid combinations of computational and manual approaches can preserve the strengths of traditional content analysis, with its systematic rigor and contextual awareness, while maximizing the large-scale capacity of Big Data and the efficiencies of computational methods."

Methodologically, the datasheet considers, first, that the set of comments generated by a news item constitutes a conversation or which is the same, a dialogue between its participants, in this case, regarding users of each news outlet present in the sample.

To do this, we use a model of an adapted datasheet, which was based on the theoretical framework of the discursive ethics of the philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1989). This type of datasheets already been used in previous research. In Spain, the most relevant was the study proposed in Catalonia in a study carried out by the Ramón Llull University in Barcelona, entitled "Conversation 2.0. and democracy. An analysis of the reader's comments in Catalan online newspapers" (2010) by Ruiz, C., Masip, P., Lluís Mico, J., Díaz-Noci, J., & Domingo.

Our datasheet allowed us to analyze the speech of the conversations among the participants, Igartua defines that this analysis helps to discover the meaning of the language and its implicit ideological assumptions through an analysis of the clear language (Igartua, 2006: 191). In other words, if content analysis offers us a qualitative view of our object of study, discourse analysis allowed us to delve a little deeper and identify meanings in the communication process between users. Teun Van Dijk (1990) conducted several studies with this method in the

field of the written press and deepened the use of critical discourse analysis applied to texts explaining that text or discourse can have both general, abstract or context-free properties and that certain types of discourse patterns and properties that vary across different contexts (situations, speakers, etc.) in the same culture can be explained. While it is true that, both in the digital newspapers and in the forums of debate on the internet, exchanges of opinions take place through messages, there are discourses, these often have absolute compatibility with each other, if we analyze them using categories defined in the framework of critical discourse analysis, we will be able to obtain revealing information about the processes that have occurred in these spaces. In this sense, the theory of "Discourse Ethics" by Jürgen Habermas (1993) is positioned as an ideal literary reference for the analysis of our sample. Among these sections, the following three stand out: logic and coherence, cooperative search for truth, and an agreement based on the best argument. The Habermasian approach⁶ was influenced by Kant, like him, Habermas relies on the notion of rationality to generate moral norms.

Therefore, the datasheet is structured upon three coding segments (Habermas, 1992, 1984):

1. Logic and Coherence.
2. Cooperative Search for Truth.
3. An Agreement Based on the Best Argument.

Each segment was supported by a coding reference followed by a question based on a discursive ethical rule (Habermas, 1984, 1993). Each of the questions was subsequently applied to each of the comments in the sample, in order to perform a qualitative assessment (See Datasheet 1 on § Appendix).

As state above, the selected corpus of user-comments was examined and coded on a comment-by-comment basis, following a manual and semi-automated qualitative assessment. Data were controlled and measured by combining cross-sectional analysis (Arnett & Claas, 2009) with content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018), which provided us with a deeper understanding of the data collected at

⁶See Jürgen Habermas (1990), 'Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification,' p. 92

the same point in time in a representative subset. Therefore, a single comment can be classified into multiple sections depending on its versatility, as well as there will be comments that cannot be classified and are excluded from the sample (e.g., Comments deleted; Comments with lack of sufficient argumentation; Moderated comments⁷, etc.). Within each category, we have established a series of questions (see: Table 1.3) in order to frame each discursive ethical aspect. Consequently, each of these questions will be preceded by a measurement system based on two main criteria: one affirmative (YES) and one negative (NO).

In terms of quantitative analysis, we have also analyzed the following variables: the total number of participants in each dialogue as well as: the number of users who posted a comment under their proper name and those who did it under a pseudonym or a nickname; we also counted the number of mentions and replies; the presence of links or references in order to justify each argument or dialogue; the presence of advertising or self-promotion; the presence of additional sources in order to contrast the story with other media outlets or sites; the number of impacts on social networking sites (tweets, likes, shares, etc.), and if the replies included another type of digital discourse language elements other than text (GIFs, emojis, and memes).

⁷Usually refers to comments that have been entirely or partially removed from the outlet's comment section or from the social networks' site. Moderated comments usually contain improper language, personal attacks, obscenity, vulgarity, profanity (including expletives and letters followed by dashes) and incoherence. Some outlets might still show the comment but no without being flagged or highlighted with a disclaimer. On social networks comments might be hidden from other users depending on the infringement (See § Comments on Social Networks).

Coding Segment	Discourse rules
1. Logic and coherence	
Do users focus on the topic of the news story?	1.1 No speaker may contradict themselves.
Do users try to argue the point?	1.2 Every speaker who applies predicate F to object A must be prepared to apply F to all other objects resembling A in all relevant respects. 1.3 Different speakers may not use the same expression with different meanings.
2. Collective search for truth	
Do users respect and acknowledge each other as valid members of the conversation?	2.1. Each speaker may only assert what he/she himself/herself believes.
Does the comment contain incivility, profanity, or derogatory remarks?	2.2. Messages containing name-calling, aspersion, vulgarity, derogatory or/and abusive language, racist remarks, insults will be coded as uncivil.
Do users provide a different point of view than other comments?	
Do users question each other and ask for clarification on expressed views?	
3. An agreement based on the best argument	
Do users endorse an argument of another user?	3.1. Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.
Do users mention or refer to other sources?	3.2. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion, whatever.
Are the sources related to the point of view of most of the users?	3.3 Everyone is permitted to introduce any assertion into the discourse.

Table 1.3: Discourse Ethics Codebook

Discourse Ethics

Usually referred to as a type of argument, discourse ethics⁸ is a philosophical term coined within the neo-Kantian moral theory (ethics) by contemporary German philosophers Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel (Apel, 1980; Habermas, 1990). Although, the pursuit of the term must be credited to Apel⁹, who stated that “all human needs—as potential claims— i.e., which can be reconciled with the needs of all the others by argumentation, must be made the concern of the communication community” (Apel 1980: 277). This means that anyone who takes part in a conversation with an argument implicitly acknowledges all claims made by the members of the communication group if these can be justified by rational arguments (Kettner, 2006). Apel’s thoughts are validated and complemented by Habermas, who suggests that in order to an argument to be valid depends on the consensus among those who are affected by the norms “in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse” (Habermas 1990).

Nevertheless, both Apel and Habermas believed Kant’s theory was not sufficient, and that his approach did not account for the social, communicative dimensions of human reasoning, nor did he appreciate the force of cultural biases on individual moral reflection. Therefore, they proposed a dialogical approach to moral impartiality where in order to test rules for their impartial moral acceptability, one must enter into a real free and open dialogue where participants strive to reach a rational consensus on what is morally right or wrong, of course, after taking into consideration the views and opinions of each participant affected by the issue (Regh, 2015).

The discursive theory of Habermas (1998; 2003) strives to discover what makes an argument rational and demands moral behavior among participants. Habermas, for example, considers that dialogue is an ethical and rational procedure for social construction, although for it to be an ethical procedure, all the members who participate in a conversation must be considered valid conversational speakers, which means they are recognized among them as people. In order for the discourse to be valid, Habermas also demands truth, clarity, sincerity, and legitimacy, elements that have to take place, so any of the people who are talk-

⁸Originally coined in German as: *Diskursethik*

⁹Even though the term is usually associated with Jürgen Habermas (1990; 1993) has its *locus classicus* to an essay by Apel titled “The A Priori of the Communication Community and the Foundations of Ethics” (Apel, 1980).

ing can question them (Habermas, 1984). In this regard, discourse ethics forms part of the deliberative-democratic theory as well because of its potential site for collective learning. Discourse ethics asserts that morality is based on a pattern inherent in the mutual understanding of a language. (Habermas, 2009).

Within his discursive vision, Habermas (1990) resorts to his theory of communicative action. The philosopher calls communicative all those interactions in which the participants symbolically coordinate their action plans. The consensus in each case is measured by the intersubjective recognition of claims of validity. In the acts of speech, three types of claims are evident: truth, correctness, and authenticity, which refer, respectively, to the objective, social, and subjective world. On the other hand, Habermas mentions strategic action in which one actor empirically influences the other by threatening sanctions or promising rewards to achieve the desired continuation of an interaction. In this communicative action, each actor appears rationally motivated to act due to the binding effect of the offer of a speech act (Habermas, 1974; 1984; 1990).

The communicative action proposed by Habermas within his theory of discursive ethics is only possible from autonomous subjects, where their bond with the "other" is intelligent and reflexive, allowing them to act with their worldview and identity, without having to hide it to achieve full emancipation. On the other hand, the communicative action has as a central nucleus that the participants accept each other as equals - in the different scopes of the communicative action - and recognize the mutual responsibility in front of the achieved agreements, which are always revisable from new contributions (Habermas, 1990; 2018).

In-depth Interviews

Through in-depth interviews, we can collect the appropriate information relating to those responsible or managers of content and communication directly or indirectly responsible for the services and platforms of participation of each digital newspaper to be studied. These people are also those who know first-hand the process of moderation, control, and management of content generated by readers, audience metrics, and information related to the engagement of users inside and outside their websites.

The in-depth interview is one of the most used qualitative techniques in aca-

demographic research. The implementation in this study fits perfectly into our methodological design, to the extent that it will help us to understand and complement in a humanistic and holistic way those responsible for moderation, content and strategic participation that are practiced in each native digital newspaper. In the words of Taylor and Bogdan (1986), "the qualitative researcher studies people in the context of their past and the situations in which they find themselves." Consequently, we will apply to these experiences an exhaustive analysis that we will carry out later in our study around the discursive ethics in the comments of the users. The interview seems an appropriate technique due to its empirical nature, as described by José Ignacio Ruiz Olabuenaga (1996):

"In the interview, the researcher seeks to find what is important and meaningful in the minds of the informants, their meanings, perspectives and interpretations, the way they see, classify and experience their own world. The in-depth interview, in short, is a technique for getting an individual to orally convey to the interviewer his or her personal definition of the situation" (Ruiz, 1996:166).

In this sense, we identify deeply with Bisquerra Alzina's (2004) argument which states that in-depth interview requires responsiveness, human sensibility, and adaptation by the researcher to a natural and daily scenario to obtain an in-depth and complete description of events, situations, perceptions, experiences, beliefs, thoughts and individual and social meanings. groups (qualitative character information) to understand and interpret them (Bisquerra-Alzina, 2004).

The three in-depth interviews that have been conducted have an individual, personal, holistic, and semi-structured character (open questions and medium control over the answers). The selection of the interviewees has been intentional and limited. For the development of the interviews, we used *Xiaomi's Recorder* app version 1.7.0 for its later dump, transcription, and analysis. All interviews were conducted by telephone since all respondents so chose to do so. The only drawback has been that a close physical relationship could not be established. It is also important to note that during its execution, a strictly professional and confidentiality position was maintained for all the interviewees.

Interviewees

As we have indicated previously, the total number of interviews carried out has been three. The selection of the interviewees has not been random, but intentional, since we have interviewed those people officially commissioned and according to the template in their digital edition company or who had the responsibility of the digital or moderation department within their digital newspaper¹⁰.

The interviews, mostly, were conducted continuously, in March (EDdiario.es and ElEspañol.com) and May (ElConfidencial.com) each of the reasons why the interviews were planned in this way, fell on the availability by respondents. For example, in the case of ElConfidencial.com, the interview was delayed for six weeks due to the 2019 Easter holidays and the fact that the interviewee was not available. After the contract and confirmation phase, the interviews were prepared in advance of the date of execution. A question-topic script has been used. However, the interviews were open to the spontaneous incorporation of questions in accordance with the development of the conversations and the aspects dealt within them.

Interviewee	Company Role	Newspaper	Date	Duration
María Ramírez & Esther Alonso	Chief Strategy Officer / Membership Programme and Development Director	ElDiario.es	3/6/2019	1:00:23
Laura Sanz	Product Director	ElEspañol.com	3/15/2019	0:55:22
David Esteve	Head of Audience Development	ElConfidencial.com	5/6/2019	1:00:33

Table 1.4: List of interviews carried out during the research. Source: Elaborated by author

¹⁰It is essential to highlight the willingness and friendliness of each of the interviewees, who, from the moment of contact, showed excellent availability and interest in our work. All of them have been aware of the importance and current relevance of this research topic, not only in general terms but also because of the current political and social state of the media in the world.

Chapter 2

The Theory and Essential Elements Behind User-Engagement in Digital Journalism

“Our world is permeated by comment, and we are the source of its judgment and the object of its scrutiny. There is little novelty in the form of the comment itself, but its contemporary ubiquity makes it worthy of careful consideration, especially given online comment’s tarnished reputation as something best avoided.”

— *Joseph Reaglen*

2.1 Overview of Existing Research

“The hardest thing about the Internet is to imagine it.”

— *Peter Glaser*

It seems like it was yesterday when the digital revolution came into our homes, invaded our lives, and changed the way we interact and consume the news forever. It has been 25 years since those days, yet, in a volatile internet world, where technological advancement grows more every day, we still are not quite sure where digital journalism is heading. This process of social transformation has led to the parallel flourishing of a broad scientific community over the last two decades (Steensen & Ahva, 2015). Many voices in the field of journalism, social communication, marketing, new technologies, etc., have predicted that this technological paradigm, which is getting closer and closer to artificial intelligence (Newman, 2020), will reshape digital journalism in the next decade. However, many scholars, observers, and policy-makers are still in dispute over the term or the final form it will take (Vos, 2018). In this respect, there are already several futuristic labels being discussed and studied: environmental journalism (Hermida, 2010), computer journalism (Flew et al., 2012), experiential journalism (Pavlik, 2019), ubiquitous journalism (Salaverría, 2017; Colussi et al., 2018), or robotic journalism (Latar, 2018). Despite all these new exciting, razzle-dazzle terms, we still need “innovation-oriented journalism research that provides clear, foundational definitions of ‘innovation’ about journalism” (Anger, 2018: 12).

It is worth mentioning, though, the discoveries, the outcomes, and the results of so many scholars, whose vision and diligence have made possible this work. Regarding engagement in digital newspapers, we have observed how the number of scientific research that deals with the issue of the spread of spaces for participation in digital media has increased (Schultz, 1999; Chung, 2007; Hermida & Thurman, 2008). At the same time, papers dealing with how journalists and media industries tackling this unprecedented phenomenon have concurrently emerged as well (Bakker & Pantti, 2009; Williams & Clifford, 2010, Neuberger & Nuernbergk, 2010).

The first years of the '00s became a key date for the dissemination of the first works on participation in the web (Gillmor, 2004, Bowman & Willis, 2003, Martínez Rodríguez, 2005, Quadros, 2005, Varela, 2005), in part due to the growing prolif-

eration of content generated by users, which was significantly amplified with the strengthening of the empire of blogs. Many years later, between the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2014, we witnessed a new wave of research that marked the beginning of reflections on the participation of the public in the digital press and digital versions of traditional media edited on paper. This motivation relies mainly on the consolidation of engagement space that allows readers to comment on stories, as well as by the force of the repercussions of the earthquake produced by social networks on the Internet (Lee & Ma, 2012; Hermida, 2012; Bode, 2016;) the popularization of smart devices like the Smartphone and the iPad (Chy et al., 2012). Smartphones are currently the predominant device for accessing the Internet by a large percentage of the global population (Ofcom, 2018) that is extensively used to access information and engage online news media sites, their online profile and users alike (Bell, 2015; Newman et al., 2019). As a result of this digital transition, news outlets have gradually changed their newsroom practices to adjust their content to fit and adapt accessibility to mobile device viewing (Newman et al., 2019; Newman, 2018).

In the methodological field, it is necessary to reference the works developed in the area of communication and journalism by university researchers and professors in Spain, and across the globe such as Palacios, M., and Díaz Noci, J. (2009), Taylor and Bogdan (1987), and Colussi (2013). The realization of this study has been of valuable reference to the contributions of the authors mentioned in this state of the question. The studies carried out by the authors Ruiz, C., Massip, P., Micó-Sanz, JL, Díaz-Noci, J., & Domingo, D. (2010) (2009) (2012) deserve special mention since they analyzed the participation of users in different Catalan digital newspapers over the last ten years. Their contributions have served as a reference for our work, especially helping define the methodological aspect for the dataset.

Numerous experts, including names such as Bowman and Willis, authors of the famous report published in 2003, *We Media: How audiences are shaping the future of news and information*, and innovators of the term "User-generated content," established a figure that was previously non-existent to refer to the material produced exclusively by users, and distributed by the different participation channels available on the network.

A growing body of research focuses on user comments under the scope of participatory journalism, where content generated by users are treated as one of the

fundamental catalyzers for engagement inside digital news outlets (Ksiazek & Springer, 2020; Ksiazek & Lessard, 2016; Springer, Engelmann & Pfaffinger, 2015; Reich, 2011; Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011). User contributions in the form of comments, constitute, nowadays, a way of capturing the degree of commitment of the user with the news since when choosing to comment on a news item, the user shows an interest in its content (Ksiazek, Peer & Lessard 2016; Hermida, 2011, Meltzer 2015; Papacharissi 2002; Ruiz et al. 2011; Springer, Engelmann, & Pfaffinger 2015; Weber 2014;). Experts in the field have highlighted the opportunities and challenges brought by the comments and the dynamic between the media and the users (Paskin, 2010; Rowe, 2014; Springer; Engelmann; Pfaffinger, 2015; Ruiz-Caballero et al., 2012; Canter, 2013). Likewise, the democratic and plural aspect of the comments and their potential for the formation of public opinion are aspects that have also been highlighted in previous research (Weber, 2014; Papacharissi, 2004).

The mainstream media went from getting limited amounts of feedback to thousands of comments every day either from inside their own participatory spaces (Mishne & Glance, 2006) or from social media (Newman, 2009; Hille & Bakker, 2014; Zamith & Lewis, 2014). Providing the opportunity to comment on the news has been one of the most consistent and widely implemented strategies by the media (Stroud, Scacco & Curry 2014; Graham and Wright, 2015; Ziegele, 2016), mainly because they contribute to attracting users, promoting loyalty, and encouraging community (Goodman, 2013; Meyer & Carey, 2014). Comments allow users to participate in a discussion on the topics covered in the information. From a liberal perspective, the comments are a sign of the political times that are running and of the deep globalization of the sources of communication. In this sense, user-generated content belongs to a new period of deliberative digital democracy (Dahlberg, 2011; Goode, 2009; Masip, 2012), where there is a spectacular potential for the discourse of public opinion on the part of the public sphere.

The possibility of being able to comment on the news online, as a method of contemporary intervention, is undoubtedly one of the most explicit models of citizen participation on the Internet (Emmer et al., 2011). From here on, a multitude of scholars began using the term active audiences to describe the new nature of the audience (Bruns & Highfield, 2015). As Bruns and Highfield (2015) state, the emergence of the internet has mixed and merged the individual public spheres that may exist within an increasingly global network with incessant

flows of information. This vibrant dynamic makes readers more active and immersed in the content is being produced. Nevertheless, it is not readily apparent that the positive effects, economic and democratic benefits of publications offering participatory spaces outweigh the consequences of uncivilized comments. Both journalists and audiences (Meltzer, 2015; Barnes, 2015) find the presence of comments in the media valuable, both groups had expressed concerns about the quality of the conversations taking place in these areas (Anderson 2011; Nielsen 2012; Lee, 2012; Springer, Engelmann and Pfaffinger 2015).

Journalists and media at a global level knew the impact that users' comments would have on traffic to their websites, participation within their spaces and the increase towards brand loyalty (Vujnovic, 2011) However, public comments often do not meet the standards of constructive engagement, as they often present arguments that are rude, discourteous, uncivil and irrational (Groshek & Cutino 2016; Rowe, 2015) more and more frequently these comments are mixed with abusive language, derogatory remarks or racist sentiments and xenophobic slurs (Oz et al., 2018; Groshek & Cutino, 2016; Rowe, 2015; Santana, 2014). Incivility, in the form of online comments, has been defined by Ksiazek, Peer, & Zivic (2015:854) as:

“intentionally designed to attack someone or something and, in doing so, incite anger or exasperation through the use of name-calling, character assassination, offensive language, profanity, and insulting language.”

In an exhaustive textual analysis discourse on user comments, Meltzer (2015) noted growing concern between reporters regarding incivility in reader comments. Moreover, the lack of courtesy in the comments in the media has been one of the characteristics that have generally been worst perceived by readers (Hwang et al., 2014), and an issue that stands out among them all (Coe, Kensky & Rains, 2014). As Larsson points out, "Internet is perceived-from a free-for-all utopia of public discussion, to more problem-laden rhetoric surrounding the hate speech and bitter rhetoric that one is likely to happen to happen upon in forums such as newspaper comment fields" (2018).

Nonetheless, the presence of a higher degree of controversy and uncivil behavior among readers cannot be considered generalized in the comment sections, since the moderation and user registration policies developed by the media contribute to ensuring that the general tone of the debates does not exceed the discourse

limits (Ksiazek, 2015; Cho & Kwon, 2015). Nevertheless, when moderation fails, incivility it is often focused on quite specific themes and targets (Coe, Ken-sky and Rains, 2014), such as immigration (Gagliardone et al., 2015), women, refugees, and other ethnic minorities (Chen et al., 2018; Edström 2016; Gardiner et al., 2016). Ziegele, Breiner, & Quiring (2014) found that user comments that include uncertainty controversy, hostility, and customization are also much more likely to cause reactions from other readers. One of the latest research approaches has been to assess the impact that comments from others would have on the probability that a person will post an offensive or uncivil comment. Rösner and Krämer (2016) found evidence that commenters used much more hostile sentences and reacted aggressively towards comments that included aggressive rhetoric. While, in much recent work, Ziegele et al. (2018) found that negative feelings would usually lead to greater eagerness and willingness to reply to harmful or uncivilized comments.

In contrast, Diakopoulos & Naaman (2011a) have found that articles where the news pieces had a positive aspect, obtained a lower average of comments for articles. It is worth mentioning also that some scholars have employed content analysis aimed at delving deeper into the quantity and forms of incivility in political debate across a diverse range of online media has shown that, in certain respects, conversations do not accurately represent the deliberative ideal. For example, Papacharissi (2004) evaluated comment threads in online political chatrooms and discovered that roughly 14 percent of the content sampled attacked democratic values. In contrast, an additional 22 percent was either offensive or disrespectful. Another study of patterns of incivility on national-and local newspaper websites observed that more than 40% of comments contained incivility (Santana, 2013). Furthermore, a related study of comments by Coe et al. (2014) showed that about one in five articles used an extremely rude or abusive language. A more recent study revealed that reading negative, hateful comments about refugees online might negatively change the attitude towards them (Weber et al., 2020).

Stroud, Scacco, Muddiman, & Curry (2015) demonstrated that journalists' participation in the comments section could potentially strengthen the deliberative quality of comments. This finding was revalidated by Ksiazek (2018) in his study, *Commenting on the News*. In terms of civility, their research suggests that when journalists engaged actively with their readers in the comments section, discussions tend to have a more civilized tone. However, Loke (2012) found

that Journalists are usually divided about whether they should be involved in comment sections; many believe that these platforms are for readers only. In contrast, others recognize the value and the opportunity to interact with their audiences through comments.

User-comments as a generalized contribution and product of the participants have not been exempt from studies and research; other contributions of an individual nature have qualitatively examined the comments of the readers and the behavior derived from their publications. (Díaz-Noci, et al., 2010; Manosevitch & Walker, 2009; Nagar, 2009). Nevertheless, comments published in the media have not always lived up to the expectations of the theorists who defended their deliberative character (Stroud, Jomini, Scacco & Curry, 2014). According to Robinson (2010), people posting space comments value the ability to exercise freedom of speech. They expect openness, mutual respect, and a self-moderate framework that assesses the comments within the community. Comments can be seen as an asset in any story. Commenting spaces are being used to dispute news stories, to argue, to communicate with other readers, and to learn. (Robinson, 2010) Tenenboim and Cohen (2015) imply that user comments have a role to play in building social and community identity, as political issues and controversies are on news articles. Comments from other users have shown that they influence the perception of the news article by the reader (Kim, 2015; Prochazka, Weber, & Schweiger, 2018).

It is also necessary to consider the recent work on the influence of social networks on the internet, and the new communicative paradigm due to the growing popularity of Facebook and Twitter. Their advent has opened up new arenas for leaving comments on news content (Ben-David & Soffer, 2019).

Authors like Rowe (2015) found significant differences in the structure and processes of the discussions between readers in the comment sections of the media and those made on the official pages of those same media on social networks, very often user engagement with news articles on social media is characterized by short, emotional, and consensual comments. Similarly, he found that 'web site commenters are more likely to engage in higher-quality discussion than Facebook commenters' (Rowe, 2015:552). Indeed, the media tend to divert the participation of their readers towards social networks, especially Facebook (Larson, 2018), which reduces the presence of anonymous comments and improves their overall quality (Hille & Baker, 2014).

Social networks can offer newspapers with vast amounts of data and analytics (Hermida, 2011). The abundance of information, mixed with a news media landscape driven by the convergence and a plethora of opportunities for user news engagement and consumption, has resulted in the fragmentation of news production, dissemination, and discussion (Nielsen & Schröder, 2014; Trilling & Schoenbach, 2013). Therefore, it is worth mentioning the scholarship on cross-platform engagement (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2017; Swart, 2016; Vaccari et al., 2015). Besides, multiple studies have enforced cross-platform analysis of the impacts and limitations of user comments forums outside news outlets' sites (Kavada, 2012; Rowe, 2015; Zelenkauskaitė, 2014). Such platforms, like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Twitter provide news organizations with lists of trending topics calculated by algorithms that monitor what people are posting and sharing, along with real-time data on how many likes, comments, and shares are being posted (Tandoc & Vos, 2016).

Lasorsa et al., (2012); Bruno, (2011); Coddington, Molyneux, & Lawrence, (2014) and Molyneux, Holton, & Lewis, (2018) have also concluded that the activity of reporters in social networks conforms to their professional guidelines, but at the same time, journalists are trying to normalize the use of social tools such as Twitter within their practices; they are also absorbing the behaviors typical of social networks such as mixing facts and opinions and sharing their thoughts and beliefs, departing from traditional journalistic positions that assume as devising a distance from the sources of information especially answered by American journalism (Laorsa et al., 2012; Bruno, 2011; Lawrence, Molyneux, Coddington and Holton, 2013) the intersection between traditional media and social networks then more prominent practices, logics, and routines (Belair-Gagnon, 2015).

We also observed the proliferation of studies where the management by the companies of the content generated by the user is analyzed, and the adoption and implementation of strategies for their control (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011b, Nielsen, 2012). In the field of comments, Reich (2011) is one author who focuses primarily on this type of contribution. On the debate, the perceptions, judgments, and interactive potential of the readers' comments we have: Diakopoulos & Naaman, (2011); McCluskey & Hmielowski, (2012); Ksiazek (2018); Weber (2014); Quandt (2018) and Springer, Engelmann, & Pfaffinger (2015).

Also, empirical findings by a number of scientists suggest that the influence on the quality of comments under strategies of moderation policies (Weber, 2013),

the quality of the news with comments (Ksiazek, 2015), the effect that sections of the comments have on journalists' practices in the newsrooms (Neuberger, Langenohl, and Nuernbergk, 2014). Other contributions made in the field of content generated by users, active audiences on the Internet, moderation and the attitudes of journalists towards the comments of readers and their influence on the creation of online communities and the simultaneous production of user-generated content is also observed: Wise, K., Hamman, B., and Thorson, K. (2006); Paulussen, S., & Ugille, P. (2008); Williams A. and Wahl-Jorgensen, K (2011), Meyer, H. K., and Carey, M. C. (2014) and Meso, et al. (2015).

The impact of the comments in the news stories and the role of the journalist managing the conversation, as well as the effect on the news production process have been widely explored (Nielsen, 2014; 2012; Thurman, Cornia & Kunert, 2016; and Ziegele & Jost, 2016). While it is true that in Spain, the research around the comments in the news and its moderation are scarce, highlight substantial contributions made by Perales-García, C. (2014), Ruiz et al. (2011), Lopez G. (2014).

In parallel, in recent years, a new emergence of empirical studies can be seen. These scholarships reinforce the fact that the comments in the news are directly intertwined with motivations that subsequently are also observed in the democratic process and within the notions of freedom of expression (Chung, 2008; Bergström, 2008).

This can be contrasted with the study carried out by Boczkowski and Mitchellstein (2012) who dealt with the role and influence of the most commented topics and concluded that those printed media with higher participation were those that were focused on public and society issues, especially of Politics, and that the debate was ignited in periods where there was an intense political agenda, for example, during presidential elections.

It is also vital to highlight Weber (2012) who determined that that news with a high social impact, and with a standard media structure, would determine the level of controversy of said informative pieces, claiming that if they received a negative reception from the reader, they attracted more negative comments, in his research he analyzes articles focused on topics such as patriotism, the nation or regionalisms, also suggesting that the way in which articles were presented was decisive. Thus, if it had a very formal headline or appearance, then the

number of comments would decrease significantly (Weber, 2012). It is also important to note that it has also been concluded that news with a high number of banal comments liked readers less (Ash et al., 2010).

One of the major concerns for many editors today is the negative effect that the uncivil comments may have on the quality of the content published on their websites, ultimately undermining users' perceptions on the media (Anderson et al., 2018) and, above all, on the perception that the public has of their brand since the comments are within their spaces, many users may think that the outlet endorses such opinions (Meltzer, 2015). In fact, it has been argued that abusive comments have a substantial impact on the readers' credibility of the media organization hosting such remarks (Searles et al., 2018).

The critical works of scholars, such as Sikorski & Haenelt, 2016; Wallsten & Tarsi, 2015, specifically addresses the impact of low-quality comments that reaffirm the industry's concerns. Prochazka, Weber, and Schweiger (2018) confirmed this affirmation, suggesting that both the incivility and the lack of reasoning in the comments of the users can have adverse effects on the perceived quality of the newspaper article. It has also been shown that users reading uncivilized political debates are much more inclined to see the debaters as influential and less trustworthy relative to those who read civil discussions (Ng & Detenber, 2005).

In times where social networks such as Facebook and Twitter predominate the communicative ecosystem on the Internet, it is imperative to mention the influence and impact these platforms have on public opinion (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2014) and as an essential source of interaction (Hermida, 2002; Larsson, 2018), recent studies show that compelling interactivity among users is limited. Instead, reactivity is more frequent, i.e., the isolated response from one user to another, without dialogical character (Carey, 2014).

Political discussions on the internet take shape from the implementation and democratization of the information highway. (Pfaffenberger, 1996, Hill & Hughes, 1997). This type of debate has been analyzed from an academic perspective since the mid-1990s, up to the present time, with research carried out in different digital scenarios, and which investigates various aspects: from the Usenet groups (Pfaffenberger (1996), to the chat rooms (Weger & Aakhus, 2003), the discussion forums, (Zhang, 2006), the blogs (Trammell et al., 2006) and the latter social net-

works with the exploration of the political, linguistic debate used in these (Boyd, 2008).

However, all these investigative achievements must be added to those that mention the toxic and harmful nature that the comments may have. Researchers, journalists, and experts talk about a dark reality, where most of the user-generated comments lack quality and are unnecessarily disrespectful, uncivil (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014), and are often lacking reasoned argumentation (Ruiz et al., 2011).

While today the existence of new research areas is evident and their development vibrant, something that has led to enormous contributions made in the last thirty years in the field of communication, journalism, digital sociology, public opinion, etc., the ideas of the great 20th-century social science thinkers are still being applied and continue to be a reference for the analysis and study of modern phenomena. Authors such as Jürgen Habermas, Walter Lippmann, Paul Lazarsfeld, Harold Lasswell, or Marshall McLuhan, continue to be, to this day, literary references for the understanding of new developments, including the digital one. As Mitchelstein and Boczkowski referred to this praxis: "most studies continue to use existing lenses to look at new phenomena" (Mitchelstein; Boczkowski, 2009:575). These classical studies—from both the humanities and the social sciences—are complemented by established authors of our contemporary era. Modern thinkers who have defined various concepts without which we could not subsist in the academic world at present, among them, we can mention Maxwell E. McCombs & Donald L Shaw (1972), for their empirical studies that demonstrated the theory of the agenda-setting, Manuel Castells (1996) for his influential theory of the network society, Zygmunt Bauman (2013), prominent philosopher and sociologist with his theory of liquid modernity, or the hugely influential Henry Jenkins (2006), whom we will repeatedly mention throughout this doctoral dissertation, for his theory of convergence and transmedia¹ culture where the new tries to coexist with the old.

¹Transmedia (also known as transmedia narrative or multiplatform storytelling) is the technique of telling a single story or story experience across multiple platforms and formats using current digital technologies. The study of transmedia storytelling—a concept introduced by Henry Jenkins, author of the seminal book *Convergence Culture*—is an emerging subject. Because of the nature of new media and different platforms, varying authors have different understandings of it. Jenkins states the term "transmedia" means "across media" and may be applied to superficially similar, but different phenomena. In particular, the concept of "transmedia storytelling" should not be confused with traditional cross-platform, "transmedia" media franchises, or "media mixes" (Jenkins, 2011).

2.2 Theoretical framework

To deny that we currently thrive in a technological society, a communicative one (Elsweiler et al., 2011), would be an understatement. This modern society of ours is entirely determined by a wide range of online tools that foster and strengthen, not only participation by itself, but also interaction and citizen involvement, especially in news reporting, something ordinary individuals were not part of before the gatekeeping² process (Lewis et al., 2010). Technology has undermined the role of the gatekeeper, a role that “rested largely on professionals’ privileged access to the means of producing and disseminating information” (Singer et al., 2011).

The advent of Web 2.0 and its steady evolution has meant an unprecedented breakthrough in the way in which people consume and interact with information in the past three decades (Bimber, 1999). A transformative change, the industry adopted reasonably fast, yet, unbeknownst to them, the Internet was not going to be an accessible new technology to deal with. As a cultural historian, W. Joseph Campbell, author of *1995: The Year the Future Began*, was to reflect “no industry in 1995 was as ill-prepared for the digital age, or more inclined to pooh-pooh the disruptive potential of the Internet and World Wide Web, than the news business. [...] the industry suffered from innovation blindness – an inability, or a disinclination to anticipate and understand the consequences of news media technology” (Campbell, 2015).

Content production, as user-generated-content, has seen a new light within the parameters of this new digital spectrum, regular citizens are thriving in online communities (Boczkowski, 2010), forums and participatory spaces (Hermida, 2011), and as a result, selecting, creating, and sharing information based on their own perceptions or opinions (Daugherty, Eastin & Bright, 2008; Singer, 2010; Kim et al., 2012). This means that ordinary individuals nowadays hold a variety of decision-power given the technological circumstances; these changes had, undoubtedly, led to a new model of journalism, the participatory one (Domingo et al., 2008). Nowadays, the natural approach is not a necessity, because if one wants to interact with another human being, it is enough to have a device with sufficient Internet connection that would allow one to connect with the informa-

²According to Shoemaker et al. (2001), gatekeeping is the “overall process through which the social reality transmitted by the news media is constructed” (Shoemaker et al., 2001:233).

tion highway, opening oneself onto the world in a manner of seconds (Rheingold, 1993).

Historically, journalism has continuously been in the process of rethinking and reinventing itself (Deuze et al., 2007). Precisely, this tendency to change or adaptation is what Roger Fidler refers to as mediamorphosis³. That is to say, the change produced in the media due to technological advancements and new social demands. He points out the existence of evolution in the media very similar to Darwin's work *On the Origin of Species*, arguing that the new media appear gradually by the metamorphosis of the old media. When new forms of communication media emerge, the old forms usually do not die, but continue to evolve and adapt (Fidler, 1998:57). Fidler highlights this complementarity of new media and media with those previously existing through a reconfiguration of uses, languages, and their adjustments to target audiences. Quickly, the news industry and their staff—journalists, news editors, reporters, etc.—had to adapt itself to the new norms, challenges, and conditions available in a digital environment (Hall, 2001). Media moguls like Rupert Murdoch⁴ were not entirely ready for the uprising of the internet. In a speech given back in 2005 in front of an auditorium filled with news editors he expressed the following:

“I was not weaned on the web, nor coddled on a computer. Instead, I grew up in a highly centralized world where news and information were tightly controlled by a few editors, who deemed to tell us what we could and should know [...] The peculiar challenge then, is for us digital immigrants – many of whom are in positions to determine how news is assembled and disseminated – to apply a digital mindset to a set of challenges that we, unfortunately, have limited to no first-hand experience dealing with” (Allan, 2016:2).

This process has continued until recent times, especially with the advent of social

³Mediamorphosis is a theory by professor of the School of Mass Communication and Journalism, Roger Fidler at the University of Colorado; considered in the field of mass and communications as a pioneer and the prophet of the digital age of newspaper publishing. The term was first coined in his book *“Mediamorphosis: Understanding new media,”* is described as “the transformation of communication media, usually brought about by the complex interplay of perceived needs, competitive and political pressures and social and technological innovations” (Fidler, 1997)

⁴Australian-born billionaire, chairman and CEO of News Corp., he controls a media empire that includes cable channel *Fox News*, *The Times of London*, *The New York Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. He is also famously known for running media businesses known for their conservative tilt. Encyclopedia Britannica. Retrieved 1 June 2019.

media (Hermida et al., 2012). Journalism has had to redefine itself to face new communication codes, possibilities of journalistic genres, the new characteristics of stories and understand that this new communication model handles different parameters: hypertextuality (Kawamoto, 2003), multimedia (Deuze, 2005), participation (Masip et al., 2015) and interactivity (Scolari, 2001). In the very beginning of the adoption of the WWW, mainstream journalism struggled to incorporate its well-established narrative into the digital arena (Kim, 2000). The Internet has radically changed the way we communicate (Haythornthwaite, 2005), work, and socialize with each other (Tapscott, 2008) online and offline (Lindgren, 2017). Technology undoubtedly has become a ubiquitous part of our lives. Nicholas Negroponte's statement encapsulates this societal process magnificently when he mentions that the atom is replaced by the bit and that the physical world gives ground to the digital; to the electronic (Negroponte, 1995:27). The information age⁵ had made technology systems and developments available to the masses in a way that before was unimaginable (Shapiro & Richard, 1999).

“The Internet, which can be thought of as one huge distributed media database, also crystallized the basic condition of the new information society: over-abundance of information of all kind” (Manovich, 2001:55).

The democratization of technology allows citizens to thrive within the walls of a new media ecosystem, one that has enabled them to fully become more globalized and involved citizens furnishing them with information about public issues (Carpini, 2000). According to Livingstone:

“(…) today's media environment is reshaping the opportunity structures by which people (as audiences and as mediated publics) can participate in an increasingly mediatized society” (Livingstone, 2013:24).

In the current media ecosystem, it seems that not only the traditional elements of the communication model have evolved, but, as University of Navarra's, Professor José Luis Orihuela (2015) points out, these and other stages of communication have also revolutionized:

⁵The Information Age, sometimes also known as the Computer Age, Digital Age, or New Media Age, is a period in human history characterized by the shift from industrial production to one based on information, digitization and computerization.

“Journalism wants to be a citizen; advertising wants to be content, propaganda wants to be participation, entertainment wants to be interactive; users want to be media, the media wants to talk. The old paradigms that defined the identities and functions of the agents of public communication have been blown up, and it is time to rethink them with some urgency”.⁶

Nevertheless, journalism nowadays is going through times of declining public trust (McNair, 2017), loss of ad revenue (Picard, 2014) and the increasing emergence of modern consumption patterns of media (Thurman & Schifferes, 2012), along with new forms participatory culture, journalism has had to adapt to any period that has come towards its gates.

“Whether real or perceived, a structural sense of constant change and permanent revolution is the strongest guide or predictor of the human condition in the digital age” (Deuze, 2007:235).

The leading dimension of the crisis that the journalism industry is going through is precisely due to the social position that journalism has in our society and the position in society that it has imposed itself. Journalism no longer has the same position it had during the current regime of public communication, characterized by reasonably defined limits and a coherent structure for the production and use of information (Papacharissi, 2015).

For decades, the relationship between journalists and audiences has been based on a pact of mutual trust, of shared expectations, on a kind of unspoken social contract. This trust has been shattered in the last few years (Karlsson; Clerwall; Nord, 2015). The trust that readers place in journalists, in the hope that content published by them will have an impact and be of value to them, has declined. At the same time, the confidence journalists have placed in the feedback from users in the form of comments has also been a bittersweet experience, because, on the one hand, they get a real-time response for their professional performance, but on the other, they are also subject to the contrary and toxic discourse that prevails on the online world (Ward, 2005; Masip, 2014).

⁶Translated from Spanish. Original text: “El periodismo quiere ser ciudadano, la publicidad quiere ser contenido, la propaganda quiere ser participación, el entretenimiento quiere ser interactivo, los usuarios quieren ser medios, los medios quieren conversar. Los viejos paradigmas que definían las identidades y funciones de los agentes de la comunicación pública han saltado por los aires y toca repensarlos con cierta urgencia.”

The existential crisis of journalism refers, above all, to the breakdown of the position it had when it was a central institution in the flow of news, information and public opinion. It was the world of the western public sphere when it was the mediating institution par excellence of public information especially during the last century; it has been argued that that will no longer be the case, journalism as many generations knew it, has most probably died (Conboy & Eldridge, 2014). This regime has collapsed and will not be replaced by something similar since the possibility of a "system" of news that contradicts or goes against the fluid dynamics of information and communication in contemporary societies, unleashed by the incipient progress of digitalization in all aspects of modern everyday life (Waisbord, 2017).

In this regard, any border/barrier between countries is eliminated and begins to appear more global terms such as interactivity, convergence, and digital media. The mutability of digitized information, given the characteristics of the medium, as well as the possibility of being distributed to global and massive levels, significantly enabling the uses of information and knowledge, and as a consequence of this, the probabilities of socialization and cultural learning have increased (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2010). Authors like Papacharissi (2013) have studied the evolution of the public sphere online, suggesting that public and private online spaces are indistinguishable and that the lines between the two have become blurred. In the era of social networks, internet surveillance, and the advance of technologies, the internet has become, according to Dearnley & Feather (2001), the most abundant public space in human history. Other authors like Danah Boyd who have also studied this phenomenon, in her instance, has coined the term "always-on," to refer to today's Internet culture, where virtual surfaces and constant access to the Web, ensures that one is never offline, she defines it in this manner: "It is no longer about on or off really, it is about living in a world where being networked to people and information wherever and whenever you need it is just assumed. I may not be always-on the Internet as we think of it colloquially, but I am always connected to the network. Furthermore, that is what it means to be always-on." (Boyd, 2012). In this regard, digital media, an integral part of everyday life, have become more closely connected and collaborative with its audiences, such a conventional distinction between public and audience appears fragmented, and so does the division between public and private spaces (Masip, 2019).

The Internet is established as a new information and communication environ-

ment that allows the creation and consolidation of multidirectional and interactive connections between all and the Internet must be considered as another means of communication and take advantage of its interactive features when communicating (Calvo & Reinares, 2001). Of course, the concept of the Internet is, at times, intertwined with the one of digital society, as explained by Juan Cebrian (1999), in his book *Sociedad y globalización* the digital society as a fast-paced environment; that is to say, the one that develops in an almost autonomous way very quickly, and has overflowed all the forecasts about its growth. There is no invention throughout the 20th century that can be compared to the internet in terms of its speed of implementation (Cebrian, 1999: 24).

According to several sources, the world’s digital population has increased exponentially in recent years⁷. While in the year 2000 the Internet was populated by around 360 million Internet users, the latest data show, as of this writing, that the number of Internet users⁸ worldwide is set at 4.3 billion people, which means a penetration of 57% of the world’s population, where 3.9 billion of them are active mobile users, representing the 52% of the global mobile share.

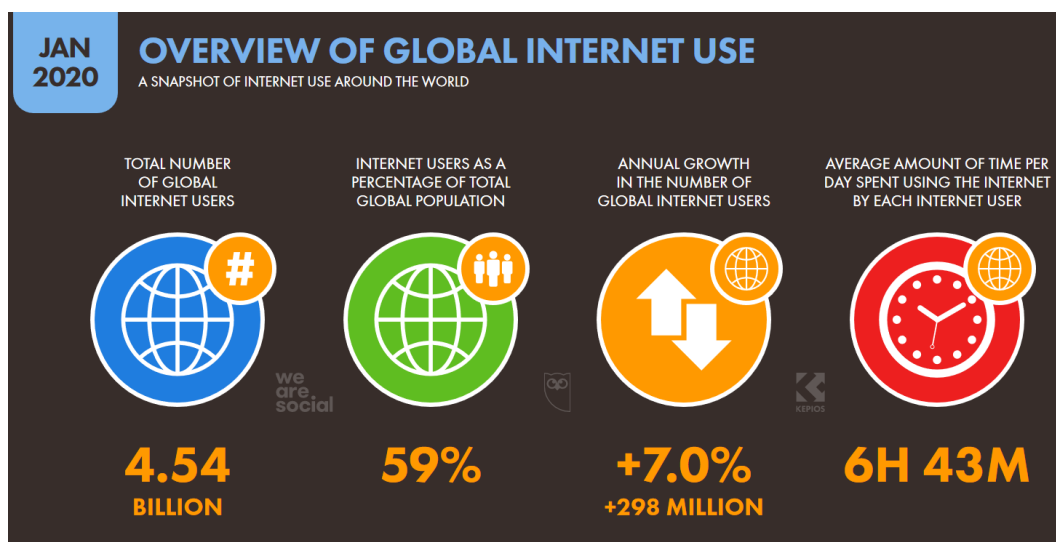


Figure 2.1: Global Digital Population (as of June 2020) Source: Hootsuite. The Digital 2020, published by “We Are Social” a report from Hootsuite Retrieved June 18, 2020 from <https://hootsuite.com/pages/digital-2020>

⁷Khosrow-Pour, M. Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology, Third Edition. IGI Global, 2014.

⁸The penetration rate or the percent of population with Internet access usually vary from country to country. Statistics often may include users who access the Internet at least several times a week to those who access it only once within a period of several months, therefore, several sources, like the World Bank, ITU World Telecommunications, the CIA World Factbook, etc., report different but close estimates.

In this regard, The Digital News Report, produced by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, also shows that around the planet, a large part of its population accesses information through search engines, social networks, or aggregators. Nevertheless, the use of social networks to access news has fallen significantly, primarily due to changes in Facebook’s algorithm in 2016, which prioritizes user-generated content over that produced by the mass media or news agencies (Newman, 2017:102). This consumption fell from 42% in 2016 to 36% in 2019 (Newman, 2019). Spain is the absolute exception, being one of the few countries among the 36 in the study, where the use of social networks to consume news is increasing, going from 28% in 2013 to 52% in 2019, indeed, users of digital news in Spain are characterized by being participatory, in 2019, 52% of them shared the news, while 52% commented at least one news item weekly. The mode of sharing news is the most widespread, 34% of users on social networks for this task, almost equally on Facebook or Twitter, among 2% prefer instant messaging such as WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger. In comparison, the remaining 16% still use email (Negredo et al., 2019).

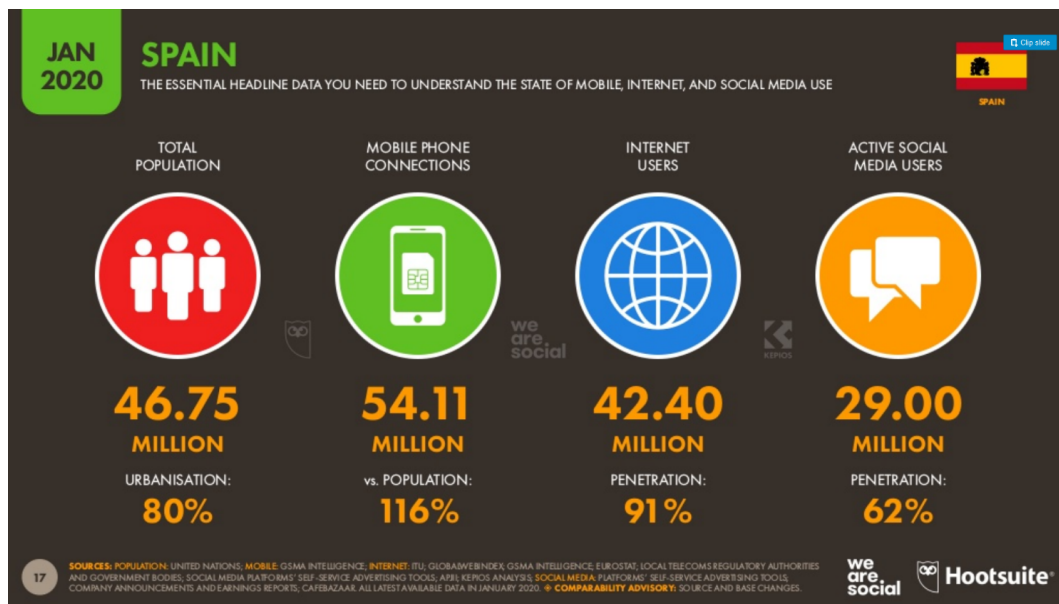


Figure 2.2: Internet Use in Spain 2020 (as of June 2020) Source: Hootsuite. The Digital 2020, published by “We Are Social” a report from Hootsuite Retrieved June 18, 2020 from <https://hootsuite.com/pages/digital-2020>

The evolution of the Internet cannot be understood only from a quantitative point of view. If we consider qualitative aspects, the most relevant digital transformation has been the evolution of the Web when it went from version 1.0 to 2.0. The initial World Wide Web, born at the beginning of the 90s, was based exclusively on unidirectional communications in which users could access texts

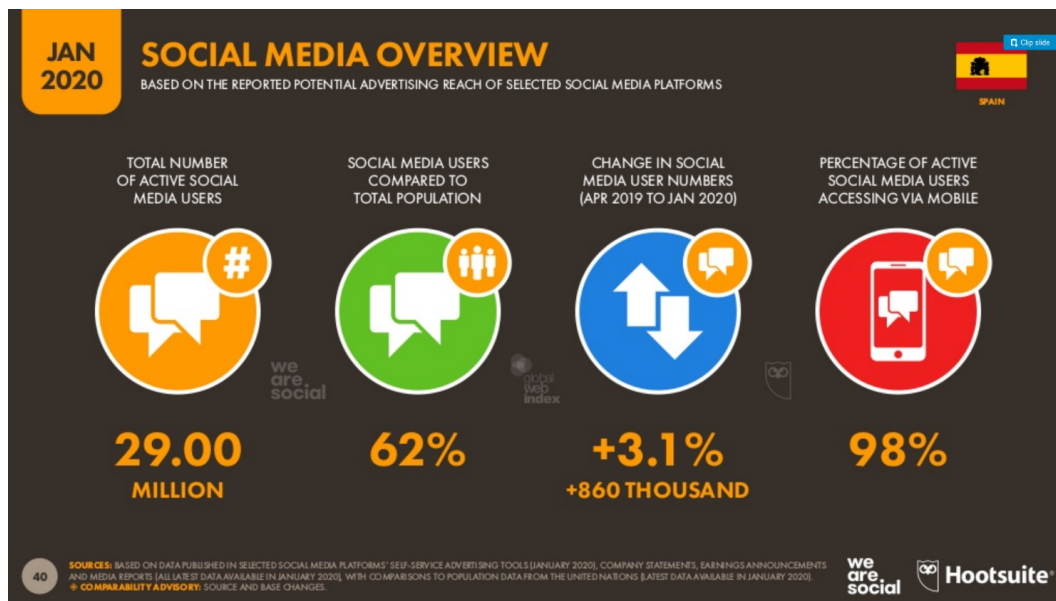


Figure 2.3: Social Media Overview in Spain 2020 (as of June 2020) Source: Hootsuite. The Digital 2020, published by “We Are Social” a report from Hootsuite Retrieved June 18, 2020 from <https://hootsuite.com/pages/digital-2020>

and images. Nevertheless, participation by the user was minimal. In Web 1.0, users made a passive use of the Internet, limited to consulting and extracting information from web pages. In 2005, Tim O’Reilly introduced a substantial change in the evolution of the Internet by defining the term Web 2.0 in a conference. O’Reilly proposed a completely new scenario, in which Internet users would become proactive users thanks to the new features and tools of participation offered by the new Web (Treviño, Barranquero & Zusberro, 2013:168).

2.2.1 History of the Digital Newspaper

The newspaper, as a printed publication, is one of the oldest elements of contemporary media (Boczkowski, 2004). For a long time, it has been considered as a primary model in the creation and distribution of information (Denis, 1994). Over the years, the print media has been criticized for imposing a unilateral and analogical discursive model, thus preventing the participation from the audience (Schultz, 1999). In order to fully understand the evolution of this medium, it is essential to mention the work of Spanish academics, among others, professors Javier Díaz-Noci; Emy Armañanzas; and Koldo Meso (1996) who considered that the digital newspaper constituted a new medium of communication by it-

self. If we think about it, the history of digital media on the Internet is relatively short. The first newspapers to open their editions on the Internet did so at the beginning of 1994, among the first we have: *Telegraph*, with its digital edition *Electronic Telegraph*, in England or the *San Jose Mercury News* in the United States. There, it is also considered the Californian newspaper, *Palo Alto Weekly*, whose first issue appeared on the network on January 19, 1994, as the first newspaper regularly published on the Web (Carlson, 2003).

In Spain, back in 1994, the *El Boletín Oficial del Estado* was published on the Internet. The first newspaper to have an online version was the Catalan newspaper *Avui*, whose digital version was launched on April 1, 1995. A few months later, *El Periódico de Catalunya* launched its Internet edition in HTML and PDF format (Estévez, 2002). The following year, 1996, the digital versions of *El Mundo* and *La Vanguardia* were created, and in 1996 *El País* and *Abc* did the same. The first Spanish newspaper published exclusively on the Web was *La Estrella Digital* in 1998 (Mancera, 2011).

The Internet as a new communication environment (Castells, 2001), has nourished a new media structure that, in the shadow of significant social transformations, has led to a new landscape that incorporates media technologies, resources and systems and new models of media consumption (Canavilhas, 2011) and, in general, all the processes mediated by technology in the online era. Indeed, the Internet has transformed the consumption of news (Boulianne, 2016). In a multi-platform environment where audiences have more alternatives than ever before to access and share information (Lee, 2013), the analysis of access pathways, modes of participation, and the intermediation of social networks in this process is a vital issue. According to the theoretical framework of "media repertoires" (Edgerly, Vraga, Bode, Thorson & Thorson, 2018; Kim, 2016; Lindell, 2018; Swart, Peters and Broersma, 2017), the results of the Digital News Report 2018 survey define some of the informational uses and preferences that alter the traditional way of interacting with the news.

In this context, it seems relevant to shed some light on the data of digital news audiences in Spain. The following analysis draws on the survey conducted by YouGov for the Digital News Report project led by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism of the University of Oxford, which covers the Spanish market with the academic sponsorship and support of the Center for Internet Studies and Digital Life of the Faculty of Communication of the University of

Navarra. Below are contains a selection of the data as mentioned above on digital media. The Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2019) project underlines the relative stability of online audience consumption in Spain. The survey data reveals that the audience in Spain's native digital media remains almost invariant since 2014 (28%) (Negredo et al., 2018 in Toural-Bran & López-Garcia, 2019).

Notwithstanding the above, the preferred media choice of Spanish users for the total amount of media on the Internet - consisting of traditional online media, digital-only media, and social networks and blogs - is experiencing a progressive growth in popularity (from 35% to 41% of users).

Meanwhile, Internet users' preference for native digital media is growing, rising slightly to 5% (Negredo, 2018). Digital newspapers stand out as the preferred option in all age groups, the second most popular among 25-34-year-olds (23%). Two out of every three users in Spain (64%) consult at least one native digital media weekly, and a third use two or more of this type of media; 16% of Internet users consult three or more exclusively digital media during the week, and 7% have four of these brands in their information diet. ElConfidencial.com and ElDiario.es are among the five brands that most users declare to consult weekly, although the digital one founded in 2012 by Ignacio Escolar, the newest newspaper among all those included in the sample. Other online brands also compete with leading televisions and newspapers, and are above the radio on the Internet; this is the example of Público, OKdiario, the HuffPost and ElEspañol.com. These findings are line with Salaverría et al. (2019), who found that by May 2019, there were a total of 3,565 digital media outlets in Spain (See Figure 2.4). Among these, 3,202 of them were active, while the remaining 363 did not show any activity at least on one occasion during the three previous months before their classification.

2.2.2 Digital news outlets

After a long process in which different technologies influenced, the digital newspaper was born with hopeful expectations. Some of these new efforts to bring written news to the net were made mainly by *the Mercury Center* and *The Chicago Tribune* back in the early nineties (Garrison, 2004; Pavilk et al., 1997). It was a new field of communication that could surpass its predecessor, the one pub-

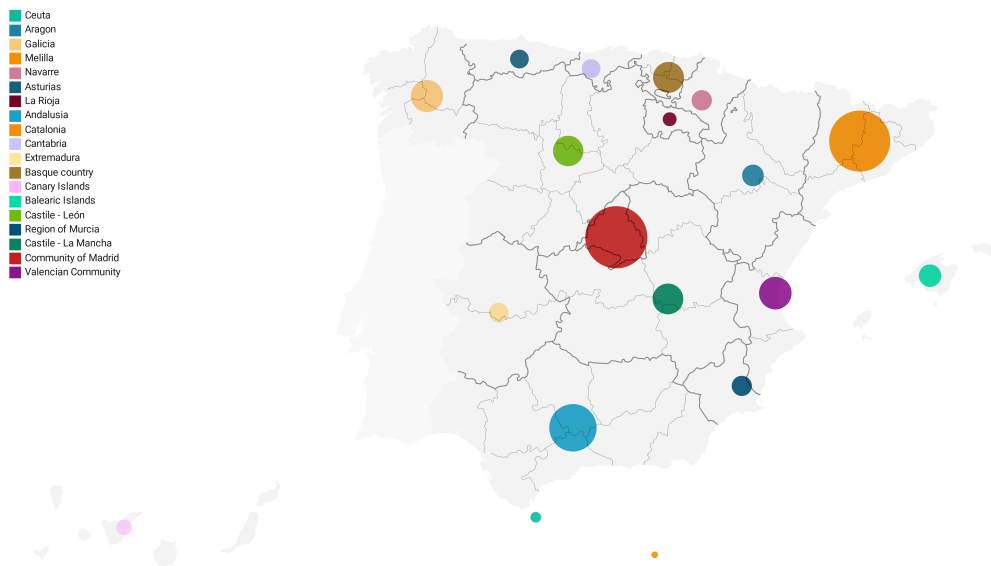


Figure 2.4: Territorial distribution of digital media outlets in Spain as of 2019 ($N=3,565$). The current figure shows the Iberian Peninsula and the the Canary Islands, the Balearic Islands, and the autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla located on the northwest coast of Africa, sharing a border with Morocco. Source: Salaverría et al., 2019.

lished in the paper (Meso, 2006) and whose characteristics supposed modifications of root for the journalistic profession, from the production of contents until the interaction of the reader with the outlet (Fortanell, 2013). For the scholars, Díaz-Noci and Salaverría (2003), digital journalism or cyberjournalism⁹ is a type "journalism speciality that uses the cyberspace for research, development and, most especially, for the dissemination of journalistic content."

The term to refer to the press written on the Internet arose simultaneously with the WWW in different countries at the same time. This caused a series of denominations that were generated at the moment of trying to coin the mere presence of news online. Therefore, a diverse number of terms emerged, for example, at the beginning of the 1990s, they were the nominal syntagmas that predominated: "electronic journalism" and "digital journalism" (Mancera, 2011). In Spain, the terms 'Ciberperiodismo' or 'cibermedio' predominated (Salaverría, 2004), which would fit the generalization of the English term "Cyber journalism," in Portuguese the preferred term was 'webjornalismo' (web journalism), which is

⁹From the Spanish "ciberperiodismo", it has been the coined term often use in academics and in the industry to define online journalism in Spain and Latin America (Díaz-Noci & Salaverría, 2003)

also commonly used in Germany 'web-journalismus,' recently though the term *ciberjournalismo* has been more widely used in Portugal and Brazil. A similar term is commonly used in French. In our work, we will use the terms of digital journalism and online journalism (Tejedor, 2007).

Authors such as Díaz-Noci pointed out that the use of a single word was necessary since we would not have to resort to a noun accompanied by one or more adjectives. Thus, *cyberjournalism* is the word that best adapts in terms of correction and representation to the activity carried out by the digital media over the internet (López et al., 2005:40). We have seen how there is a myriad of ways to define the virtual communicative phenomenon of digital media. It is essential to highlight that to start talking about digital journalism or journalism, and it is necessary to understand it as the result of the pressure exerted by the internet and the electronic format on the old information format, making the characteristics of this information drastically changed in order to be able to adapt to the latter. (Díaz-Noci, 2006). The support is the element that determines conditions and modulates, within the communicative process, how the recipient or recipient receives the information. Besides, the type of content transmitted, that is, textual information, photographs, GIFs, sounds, videos, etc. In addition, the possibilities of structuring and presenting the content and, ultimately, the effectiveness of the communicative activity, are aspects that are closely linked to the possibilities offered by the support used by the reporter or digital journalist.

The cyberspace came with its own rules, as we have described in previous paragraphs. Hence, this has made digital media adapt to their characteristics (Díaz, 2008). Therefore, it is crucial to know the general characteristics of the digital press strictly in order to understand its present and future. Following the guidelines of the outstanding expert in new media, computing, and semantics Lev Manovich (2001):

1. **Numerical Representation:** whether new media is created from scratch on computers or converted from an analog format, they all have been programmed and composed from digital code.
2. **Modularity, or "fractal structure of new media":** That is, a new media object has the same modular structure throughout. Media elements, be it images, sounds, shapes, or behaviors, are represented as collections of discrete samples with a strong emphasis on the structure.

3. **Automation:** Numerical coding of media (principle 1) and the modular structure of a media object (principle 2) allow automating many operations involved in media creation, manipulation, and access. Thus humans intentionally can be removed from the creative process, at least in part, research in artificial intelligence, machine learning, and algorithms are the result of these processes.
4. **Variability:** the possibility that the message is not fixed finally, but can be presented and retrieved in different versions. It is a characteristic that derives from modularity. The variability also allows the personalization and updating of the contents. It also makes it possible to create layers, or present different versions of the same media object with different levels of detail.
5. **Transcoding:** which implies a change to, together with the structures and conventions traditionally established by humans, other structures proper to the order of data by the computer, “in new media lingo, to “transcode” something is to translate it into another format. The computerization of culture gradually accomplishes similar transcoding concerning all cultural categories and concepts” (Lev Manovich, 2001:64).

2.2.3 Digital Native Newspapers

In the last three decades, the media industry has undergone a series of transformations or reorganizations (Cervi, Paredes & Pérez Tornero, 2010) that have changed the way news media companies are structured, operated and defined. Within the ecosystem of digital media, different opportunities have emerged from current disruptive changes made by technology (Manovich, 2013; Paulussen, 2016; Barnes, 2016), especially marked both by the new models of production and consumption of information and by the renewed forms of relationship with the public, thanks to the expansion of social networks, mobile devices (Westlund & Lewis, 2014; Westlund, 2015) and new business models (Arrese & Kaufmann, 2016; Herbert & Thurman, 2007). In this vein are born the digital natives newspapers (Prensky, 2001)¹⁰ outlets that operate exclusively on the internet and do

¹⁰A term coined by education consultant Marc Prensky back in 2001. In his acclaimed article, “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants,” the author expresses how “the arrival and rapid dissemination of digital technology in the last decades of the 20th century,” adding “today’s students think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors. These dif-

not depend, neither editorially nor financially from any mainstream source of funding, or do not have a physical version, printed or audiovisual of any kind. Digital native media has been defined as the new kid in the block trying to coexist with legacy media around a new technological era, configuring a “hybrid media system” (Chadwick, 2013; Mendez, Palomo & Rivera, 2020). This new model of media combines according to Ariana Huffington “the best practices of traditional journalism—fairness, accuracy, storytelling, deep investigations—with the best tools available to the digital world—speed, transparency, and, above all, engagement” (Huffington, 2013).

One of the first native outlets that appeared in Spain was the general interest daily *Estrella Digital* (1998). In Catalonia, *El Temps* magazine appeared in 1994. It became the first published medium to have an Internet version, and in 1996, *Vilaweb* was the first regional digital-only newspaper without a printed version¹¹. In other autochthonous communities within Spain, such as the Basque Country, Valencia o Galicia, these new forms of digital journalism were mainly scarce (Noci, 2010). Salaverría (2016a) draws up an enthusiastic balance for the first two decades of digital journalism in Spain, primarily digital natives that he described as “broad, diverse and expanding,” even though the remaining issue according to the author is to “find a profitable and sustainable business model.” In this scenario, digital natives have shown the higher capacity for adaptability, the emergence of some innovative laboratories promises times of and loyal hyper-connected audiences change (Sádaba & Salaverría, 2016; González Alba, 2017).

Recent data shows that in Spain, the number of digital news outlets, founded indirectly on the internet itself, natively, already accounts for a third of all digital publications in 2018, representing 35,1% of all digital media. In that year, around 3,065 of the digital media were identified, from which 1,077 belonged to the digital-natives group (Salaverría; Martínez-Costa; Breiner, 2018). In this regard, despite the crisis and economic weakness of traditional media, where after the recession, the number of staff within traditional newsrooms was cut drastically by 25% between 2008 and 2018 in the United States only. In the same period, the

ferences go far further and deeper than most educators suspect or realize [...] What should we call these “new” students of today? Some refer to them as the N- [for Net]-gen or D- [for digital]-gen. But the most useful designation I have found for them is *Digital Natives*. Our students today are all “native speakers” of the digital language of computers, video games and theInternet.” (Pensky, 2001).

¹¹Salaverría, R. (2008). “Ciberperiodismo: diez años de prensa digital en España”. En: Fernández Sanz, Juan J. (ed.) *Prensa especializada actual*. Doce calas. Madrid: McGraw-Hill, p. 375.

number of vacancies in digital native newspapers almost doubled, from 7,400 to 13,500 (Geiger, 2019).

Breakthrough in the News Industry

The model of native news media has been quite disruptive in the journalistic world, despite their smaller size compared to legacy media. They have been regarded as being more open to new ways of producing digital content and to the implementation of editorial experimentation, including the use of alternative sources and the creation of specialized content (Mendez, Palomo & Rivera, 2020). In Spain, accurately, more significant innovation has been detected among small digital newspapers and, especially, among native digital media of an emerging nature (García-Avilés et al., 2018). Harlow and Salaverría (2016) affirmed that another particular characteristic, besides innovation, is its values. Digital news outlets are more committed to the advocacy of a more informed society to promoting pluralism and for the production of diversified news. Their journalists have been regarded as being 'pragmatic conformists' and 'enthusiastic activists' (Hedman & Djerf-Pierre, 2013).

Their self-determining vision and their inner digital structure make them a significant player in the news industry. Native news media have replenished journalism with an independent, comprehensive, and accountable tone. Publishing unique, compelling, and high-quality investigations, all of which have been linked to audiences, disappointed by mainstream media. Besides, their journalistic routines are dedicated to the exercise of responsible journalism, which has received multiple accolades, including the five Pulitzer Prizes awarded to ProPublica. In Spain, exclusive investigations by ElConfidencial.com and ElDiario.es culminated in the dismissals of two ministers from the newly elected government in 2019 (Negredo, Vara, Amoedo & Moreno, 2019). The political instability of Spain in the past years has favored the consolidation and expansion of online media.

Funding

The internet revolution, along with the four digital giants, Google, Facebook, Twitter, and Amazon, has been the primary beneficiaries of the sustained in-

crease in online advertising, which has had a profound effect in the editorial business online and offline (Picard, 2014). As an advertising platform, the written press became one more option for brands and businesses ready to invest among many. The media is no longer the mandatory or preferred way of access consumers for advertisers (Larsson, 2018). In this sense, the native digital newspapers at the beginning were still in a period of business strategy definition that allowed them to survive in such a competitive digital market (Deuze, 2003). However, while, in the prominent newspapers, the income comes from subscriptions and advertising contracts. In digital native newspapers, the panoply of solutions is broader and more innovative: crowdfunding campaigns, support shareholders, subscribers, donations from followers, payment walls, audiovisual content on paper, and among others, are the most go-to business models (Salaverría, 2019; Kaye & Quinn, 2010).

Engagement

Another essential feature of online media is their proximity to their audiences, which is one of the reasons why they have embraced social media right from the start. In this sense, the involvement of native media in social networking sites has aroused new opportunities for growth, mostly because of the traffic they receive, but also because, when properly treated, users are turned into subscribers (Southern, 2019), a process that has been defined as ‘growth-first-revenues-later’ kind of mentality (Nicholls et al., 2016). The importance of content coming from digital news media has also been the focus of some research that has shown how the widespread use of social networks by digital native media has not only affected the nature of the agenda-setting (Bane, 2019) but mostly the development of a different kind of coverage, using a youthful tone and covering the subject of taboo (Nicholls et al., 2016).

The native digital newspapers have adopted—almost duplicated—the same participation models of many Spanish general info newspapers as *El País* or *El Mundo*. Although it highlights the new forms and features for audience participation that have incorporated many alternative or independent media, the same predominate dynamics in the spaces of participation in both digital newspapers and those that do not continue being the same as a decade ago, this includes, of course, the incorporation of social networks to this new informative scenario.

2.3 Imperative Elements of Digital News Media

2.3.1 Interactivity

The concept of interactivity has been extensively studied and discussed by many experts in the field of communication (McMillan, 2002). After carefully studied every definition and controversial conundrum available regarding the concept “interactivity,” American author Spiro Kiousis (2002) concluded the following:

“interactivity can be defined as the degree to which a communication technology can create a mediated environment in which participants can communicate (one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many), both synchronously and asynchronously, and participate in reciprocal message exchanges (third-order dependency). With regard to human users, it additionally refers to their ability to perceive the experience as a simulation of interpersonal communication and increase their awareness of telepresence.” (Kiousis, 2002)

Interactivity is, according to Rafaeli & Sudweeks (1997), a ‘bi-directional communication process’ (Figure 2.5).

Interactivity is the condition of communication in which simultaneous and continuous exchanges occur, and these exchanges carry a social, binding force. [...] Fully interactive communication requires that later messages in any sequence take into account not just messages that preceded them, but also the manner in which previous messages were reactive. In this manner, interactivity forms a social reality (Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997:1).

Other scholars like McMillan (2006) emphasized three dimensions or phases the term interactivity needs to have in order to be considered one: 1) user-to-user; 2) user-to-content; 3) user-to-system. Thus, for example, the publication of comments uses two of the phases: users interact by publishing comments with reciprocity, therefore, reading those of other users (user-to-user interactivity) but at the same time facilitating the creation of content (user-to-content interactivity). As Ana Zalberg (2001) states, the importance of the NET brings with it the need for newspapers to be present in this medium. The time in which responses are generated is less (there is constant interactivity with readers), and, also, the information can be published, edited, or eliminated in a matter of seconds.

“Se puede evaluar rápidamente desde las páginas visitadas y los tiempos de exposición de los navegantes a la noticia hasta el impacto que la misma produce. No hay límites precisos más que los dados por la creatividad, y estos límites son de tecnología y están en expansión permanente”. (Zalberg, 2001:8).¹²

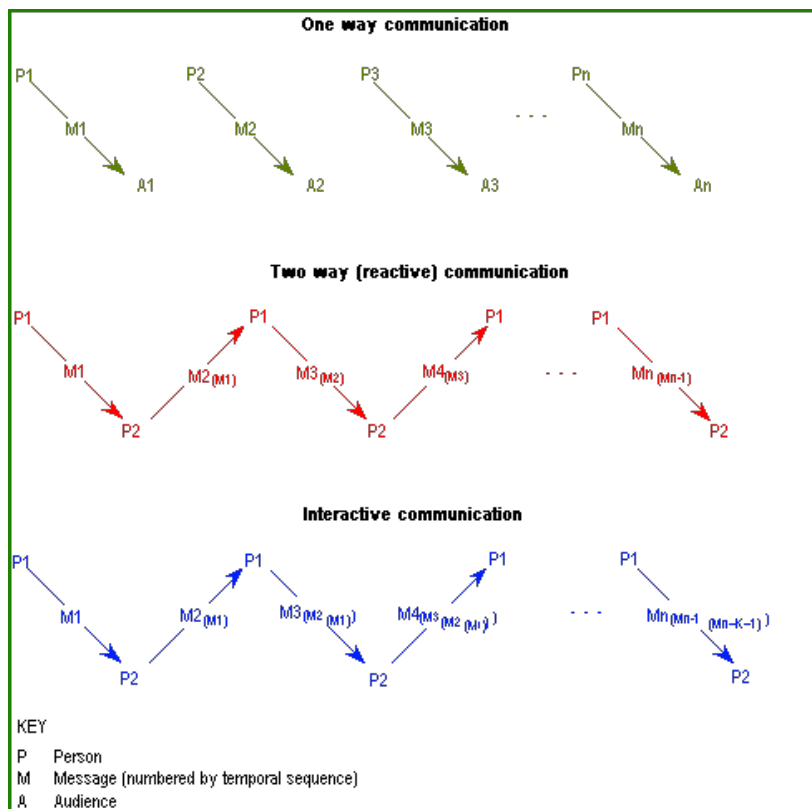


Figure 2.5: One-way, two-way, and interactive communication. Source: Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997.

Other scholarly work suggests that interactivity is the ‘the extent to which the communicator and the audience respond to, or are willing to facilitate each other’s communication needs’ consisting of the following variables: playfulness, choice, connectedness, information collection, and reciprocal communication. (Ha & James, 1998:462). It is fair to state that when a new form of communication arises, that is characterized by being digital and collaborative, allowing in real-time to be in contact with many users at the same time. On the Internet, the news acquires a series of "added values" such as interactivity (Mancera, 2011). In this way, multimedia and information become convergent. This new way of

¹²In Spanish: “You can quickly evaluate from the pages visited and the times of exposure of the web surfers to the news to the impact that it produces. There are no precise limits other than those given by creativity, and these limits are those of technology and are constantly expanding.”

communicating is what Castells (2009) calls "mass self-communication," a term that is understood according to its global nature, that is, it reaches an infinity of individuals; and calls it self-communication because it is the user who creates the content (Castells, 2009). Interactivity is also spoken of as "the ability of a user to ask the system, and thus lay the foundations to recover the information in the desired way" (Meso, 2006:42).

The growing need for diversification by the media has led to the emergence of a new communicative paradigm, that of technological convergence. In the words of Castells (2009), this process is understood as "the growing convergence of specific technologies in a highly integrated system." In other words, the internet has the autonomy and capacity to integrate new media that may emerge. In a way, the products that are created fall within a digital cohesion. Technology companies know about this and their economic potential. Thus the elements created by one entity are complemented by another.

Interactive opportunities have amplified with the introduction of online news outlets, and the previous incorporation of mainstream media back in the '90s. Research suggests that both have fostered mainly a new sense of engagement among its users (Sundar, 2000). Interaction can also be seen as a way of 'knitting the audience' back to the outlet's brand (Hermida & Truman, 2007). This process goes from a unidirectional model to one of interactivity, or bidirectional, allowing the enrichment of communication processes and redefining the notion of *feedback*¹³ (Orihuela, 2003).

Initially, interactivity inside digital media was scarce. Authors such as Fidler (1997) and Cabrera (2000:71-74) described at the beginning of the last decade how the development of a digital journalistic genre had taken place in an analogue manner, that is to say; the media emulated its paper version and uploaded it directly onto their webpage. There was not a distinction between channels. It should be noted that R. Salaverría and R. Cores in a previous study had already identified this process, which they described as *repetition*:

¹³In the context of communication, feedback is understood as the response transmitted by a receiver to the sender, based on the received message that efficiently fuels the conversation. Within the communication process, the communicative feedback is the quality that allows to keep the communication active, and that favors the issuer to change or modify its message based on the answers received. In: *Feedback y escucha activa: Tema 3 de la antigua Unidad 2. Habilidades directivas y de gestión para ingenieros*. Universidad Europea de Madrid (UEM).

“Este estadio corresponde al nivel más básico, el de la mera reproducción literal en los cibermedios de géneros y formatos textuales tomados de medios precedentes, habitualmente de los impresos. En la actualidad, gran parte de los contenidos de los cibermedios siguen este modelo de repetición, puesto que son una simple transposición del papel a la pantalla. Esto ocurre de ordinario con los cibermedios más modestos, aquellos que apenas disponen de un equipo redaccional propio y se limitan al volcado de contenidos del papel a la Web. Pero entiéndase que para que se dé este estadio de repetición no es preciso que el cibermedio reproduzca contenidos de otro medio impreso o audiovisual; basta con que reproduzca sus géneros. Por lo tanto, puede haber cibermedios —de hecho, abundan— que sin disponer de una edición impresa matriz recurren a este tipo de géneros repetidos (ocurre, por ejemplo, con muchos de los llamados confidentiales y con otros cibermedios que se contentan con ser simples “periódicos impresos en internet” (Salaverría & Cores, 2005:148).¹⁴

Therefore, as already explained, the communication in the newspaper was of an analogical and one-way nature. Until not long ago, only letters to the director fulfilled such function. (McCluskey & Hmielowski 2011). However, the internet has allowed development in this field, Ruiz J. Alonso (2006) identifies it as interactive modes of order subject/object, the former being characterized by the fact that the user can dialogue with the system to retrieve the desired information (Ruiz, 2006). Boczowski (2004) argues the same and clarifies that with the adoption of the Internet, the media had an opportunity to explore a more interactive relationship with their audiences and also to provide new features, such as audio or video, which distinguishes the presence of online publishing from traditional printing and distribution practices. While initially, interactivity was the dominant form of content on online news sites; gradually, the idea of sharing and socializing information was gaining traction (Chung & Yoo, 2008). While the information and entertainment seeking habits generated in audiences

¹⁴In Spanish: ““This stage corresponds to the most basic level, that of the mere literal reproduction in the cybermedia of genres and text formats taken from previous publications, usually from the printed media. Today, a large part of the contents of cybermedia follow this model of repetition, since they are a simple transfer from paper to screen. This usually occurs with the more modest cybermedia, those that barely have their own editorial equipment and limit themselves to transferring content from paper to the Web. But it must be understood that for this stage of repetition to take place, it is not necessary for the cybermedia to reproduce content from another printed or audiovisual medium; it is sufficient for it to reproduce its genres. Therefore, there may be cybermedia -in fact, there are many of them- which, without having a matrix print edition, resort to this type of repeated genres (this happens, for example, with many of the so-called confidential and other cybermedia that are content to be simple "newspapers printed on the Internet.”

have been the most influential factors in introducing the adoption of the use of online news sites, in recent years the sociability that the media affords has been a significant factor in forecasting the uptake of interactive applications (Chung & Yoo, 2006).

Alejandro Rost (2006) identifies four stages of evolution in communicative interactivity in his doctoral thesis. In the third stage, which begins with the phenomenon of asynchronous participation (forums, letters from readers, e-mails to the newsroom), the development of the comment boards, or sections of comments under each news item is an event that the author I call it extraordinary. This change, although today may seem insignificant, is, and was valuable for digital journalism, since the typical reader begins to mingle with journalists in the construction of today, and also stands as a critical figure for support of deliberative participatory culture on the internet (Rost, 2006). Users become more visible, although their interventions continue to accumulate similarly, and sometimes often lost in the wealth of information available (Nguyen & Western, 2006).

Communicative interactivity is a term that also has been studied by several authors like Hall (2001), Deuze (1999), Dahlgren (1996), and Kawamoto (2003). In this, the user plays two roles. Not only does he/she have the possibility of engaging in a debate with other users, but he/she also accesses the digital platform where he/she lives, figuratively speaking, and becomes a content generator. Then we are facing a new actor, able to send and receive content (Rost, 2006). In digital media, this model of communication is becoming more frequent.

A large part of the contents we find in digital-only newspapers are not only hypertexts in themselves, but at times they adopt this characteristic by the system in which they are framed: they are called hypertexts insofar as they are part of a "hyper document" (Codina, 2003:143-146). The term web 2.0 is used for the first time in 2004, during a brainstorming session between O'Reilly and *MediaLive International*, a conference in which the critical situation of the web, its resurgence and evolution were being analyzed:

...far from having 'crashed,' the web was more important than ever, with exciting new applications and sites popping up with surprising regularity. (...) the companies that had survived the collapse seemed to have some things in common (O'Reilly & Battelle, 2009).

The importance of figures in digital terms (1.0, 2.0, etc.) is significant. These seem to be the common denominator when one wants to talk about digital aspects, but much more about the evolution set out within the process itself. It is necessary to indicate that currently we are not only facing the presence of a new digital revolution, but also the fact that, with it, a new lexicon is coming. In recent years, there has been the emergence and subsequent consolidation of the so-called "conversation 2.0". Some authors have come to talk about a revival of social dialogue. In 2010, Ruiz, C., Massip, P., Micó-Sanz, J.L., Díaz-Noci, J., & Domingo, D. (2010:9) defined it as follows:

Conversation 2.0.: is the social dialogue that makes possible the technology and tools of Web 2.0., through various participatory channels that digital media and other websites have made available to the audience, and turns the public into readers and (co)authors of an active or participatory audience.

2.3.2 Engagement

The rhetoric of participation includes the contributions made by people who are part of the public, within a medium in which they inform about something or think about a specific event or a subject in particular along with other users. One of the essential elements of journalism itself is that it must provide the reader with space or forum where he/she can publicly criticize and give their opinion (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2004; 2007). As Loke (2012:234) reflected, "After all, journalism is ... (ideally) fueled by public participation." In this sense, digital journalism embraces the concept of "participatory culture" that has been reviewed by Jenkins (2006), where users, who act as sender and receiver, exchange knowledge, ideas, and arguments. As the author, himself writes:

"contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship. Rather than talking about media producers and consumers occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands" (Jenkins 2006:3).

Previously, we mentioned how the journalistic field motivated by the birth of the internet and by the implementation of communication tools, had propitiated the change of the rules of the game as far as mass communication is concerned. In

addition to this bi-directionality, the main characteristic of the new journalistic genres on the internet is their ability to break with the traditional one-way narrative (Barrio, 2013), which no longer belongs to media monopoly (Benkler et al., 2015). The volume of information offered by the Internet affects both journalists and consumers, where technological determinism affected - and affects - the journalistic profession (Pavlik, 2001) and where the supply of quality products as well as the credibility of these it is proposed as a solution to the profound crisis of the sector (Kawamoto, 2003). Today's audiences are participatory, and it is one of the most profound effects of the eruption of a new technological scenario that has transformed the conditions of content production, distribution, and engagement.

Jenkins & Deuze (2008) state that, in the society of convergence, customers become increasingly powerful as they learn to engage and connect with new environments. The media paradigm is crossed by three key concepts: media convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence. However, in its broader scope, it does not fathom convergence just as a technological process; its sense is broader because it runs within the societal, cultural sphere.

With convergence, I refer to the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries and the migratory behavior of media audiences, willing to go almost anywhere in search of the desired type of entertainment experiences. (Jenkins & Deuze, 2008:6)

Readers are no longer forced to construct a closed text, linear and in a limited space, but can resort to hypertext and support their argument with other texts of their own or others at any point of his speech (and allow, for example, that these linked texts conform the most expository part of his argument). Newspapers born directly on the Internet are those who take advantage of these possibilities better (Rebillard & Touboul, 2010). Therefore, the media have gradually, cohesively, and progressively integrated different types of participation tools within their websites (Loosen & Schmidt, 2012).

This rupture within the argumentative linearity, together with the demand for interactivity demanded by the users and that generates a bidirectional communication, leads to a crisis in the figure of the journalist or author of the news: a genre traditionally of individual authorship becomes the Native digital newspapers in a participatory genre (Cánovas, 2003:534).

Audience engagement is also related to media literacy, as individuals who show greater engagement tend to access not one but different media, providing them with new perspectives and comparisons (Couldry et al., 2016). These users feel that journalistic information is sufficiently related to their lives. In summary, engagement with news integrates a real interest of the audience in the media agenda and critical capacity to judge sources, which determines the trust that the audience places in the media (Couldry et al., 2016). The analysis of available literature conceptualizes engagement mostly within three distinct dimensions, more often between cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement (Hollebeck Glynn, & Brodie, 2014; Brodie et al., 2013). Engagement is best understood at the level of involvement or intensity of a particular user (Ksiasek, Peer & Lessard, 2016; Vivek et al., 2012). Ksiasek & Springer (2020) have defined a conceptual model of engagement that combines both the psychological (cognitive/emotional) and behavioral elements of it, along a continuum (See Figure 2.6).

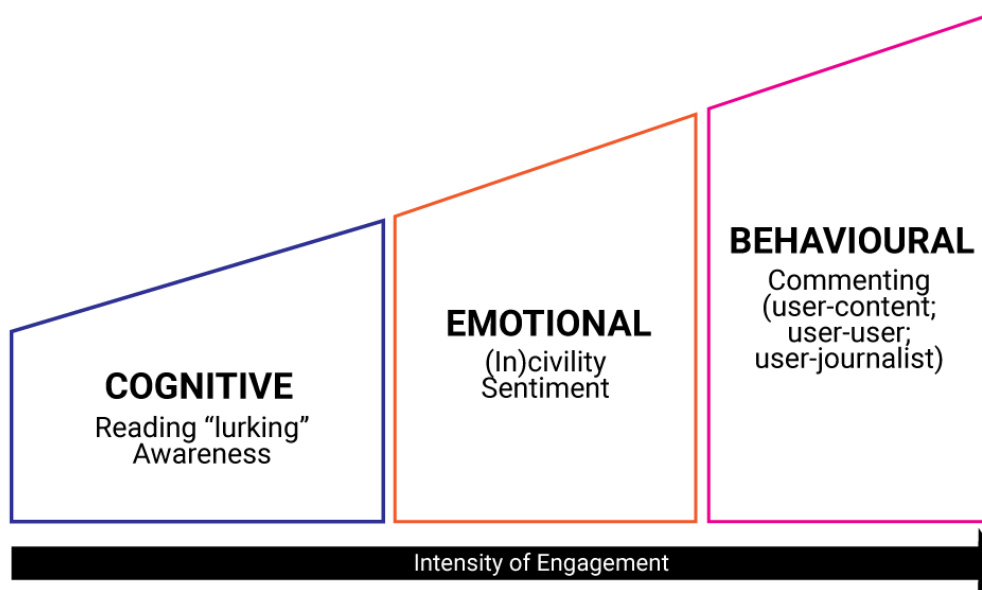


Figure 2.6: Conceptual Model of User Engagement (Adapted from Ksiasek & Springer, 2020)

In the case of user-comments, commenting on a news item can be considered both an indication of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement. As explained by Ksiasek & Springer (2020:35):

The act of commenting, itself, constitutes behavioral interaction with a news outlet and its other users. But commentary also inherently signals aware-

ness—cognitive engagement—of the content on which a user is commenting and/or other comments to which a user is replying. Additionally, emotional engagement is often captured by user sentiment/tone toward content and other comments. Text mining, sentiment analysis, and other automated content analytic tools offer opportunities to capture emotional qualities of user commentary (e.g., positive/negative sentiment; (in)civility).

The actions of a user within participatory spaces have a different level of emotional and cognitive as regarded by the engagement continuum in Figure 2.6 (Ksiasek & Springer, 2020). For instance, in the case comments reading, which has been defined as ‘lurking,’ it can be considered a lower-intensity behavior. Whereas lurking may require different levels of inner cognitive and emotional responses to the comment threads of others, the failure to act on those replies demotes lurkers to the low end of the scale of the engagement continuum. In the act of reading the comments, the intensity of engagement only rises when emotional responses are stimulated or involved. Leaving a comment just below line to react to another user implies a greater depth of engagement (Picone et al., 2019). According to Ksiazek & Springer (2020:35), this action requires “cognitive/emotional reflection on the content/comments and then behavioral engagement via posting an actual comment for public consumption.”

At the very last level of the engagement model proposed by Ksiazek & Springer (2020), behavioral engagement is established. User comments at this stage may vary widely from user reactions, which entail users interacting with content, such as replying to comments in response to an article. Additionally, user-user interaction consists of exchanges between two or more participants, in which case the user responds to another post already added to a thread by another user (Ksiazek et al., 2014). Ultimately, the last scenario includes interaction between readers and journalists, both in the comments section, where users discuss issues with journalists in their feedback and vice versa.

Engagement on Digital News Outlets

We live in thriving times when digital media possess a wide arrange of tools that enable user participation. While it is true that mediums which previously predominated on the Internet, such as chats, weblogs, etc., have been displaced, new environments have sprung online. Digital news outlets have adapted their

sites based on the newest communicative and technological trends. Therefore, news organizations provide spaces for comments below the line, promoting a sense of “community” (Watson et al., 2019). Digital newspapers have in their hand’s cutting-edge technological instruments that promulgate a conversation of *tête-à-tête* (Table 2.1).

Between editors and readers, this new ‘community’ relationship should not, in principle, alter the order of how journalism has been doing in recent years, as quoting Loke (2012:234): "After all, journalism is (ideally) fueled by public participation." And it is that, although the reception of participation in media, (promoted above all else by the rise and technological evolution of hypertext and web source code such as HTML 5.0, which has allowed the media to acquire sophisticated platforms for communication), there are still media outlets that are reluctant to adapt to new participative environments, or that are positioned in a closed position against participation (Rosenstiel, 2009).

Even though the antecedents of online communities around the world are different by their nature, many of them share certain similarities and attributes: regular interaction, appreciation for the virtual norms that govern them, the ability to express their opinions, and reaction to opinions (Meyer & Carey, 2014). Jim Brady, who was until 2009, the executive editor of The Washington Post exposes it in the following way, when he speaks of a new type of relationship between the reader and the journalist, noting that it is "a shared experience" and that it is necessary "to implement other voices."

Generally, the participants enjoy not only the content but also the diversity of the people and the opinions that are found throughout the network. (Stromer-Galley, 2003). Kollock (1999), for example, pointed out that contributions to online communities have an excellent public character; that is, any user can benefit from them (and in our case journalists), regardless of whether they have helped or not in the production of such contributions.

As published in the book *Online journalism: principles and practices of the news for the Web*, theorists such as Michael Skoler of the Minnesota Public Radio cite how, sometimes the editor gets advice and even data about stories and coverage of some comments from readers, becoming these in the source of information, Skoler emphasizes it to us of the following way: "in some news, often the reader knows more than what we handle." Dan Gillmor, one of the greatest advocates of participatory journalism, says that "My readers know much more than I know.

Collectively they know more"(Gillmor 2004). This is contrasted with what Weber (2014:10) pointed out:

For news events that perpetuate an issue that is already on the average agenda, it is much more likely that readers have some knowledge about the topic from prior news and have probably developed an opinion.

Format	Description
Citizen blogs	Blogs created by users hosted on the news organization's website.
Citizen media	Photographs, video and other media submitted by users, usually vetted by journalists.
Citizen stories	Written submissions from readers on topical issues, including suggestions for news stories, selected and edited by journalists for publication on the website.
Collective interviews	Chats or interviews with journalists or invited guests, with questions submitted by readers and typically moderated by a piece of news professionals. These usually are webcast in audio or video formats, or transcribed live, offering a sense of interactivity and immediacy.
Comments	Views on a story or other online item, which users typically submit by filling in a form on the bottom of the item.
Content hierarchy	News stories ranked according to audience ratings, often based on the most read or emailed content.
Forums	1. Discussions led by journalists, with topical questions posed by the newsroom and submissions, either entirely or reactively moderated. These often are open for a limited number of days. 2. Places where readers can engage in threaded online conversations or debates, with discussions staying open for weeks or months. The readers usually initiate these forum topics.
Journalist blogs	Authored by one or more journalists, with short articles in reverse chronological order. Journalist blogs (also called "j-blogs") often are associated with a specific topic or perspective, with the facility for readers to comment on entries.
Polls	Topical questions posed by journalists, with users asked to take a multiple-choice or binary response. These polls provide instant and quantifiable feedback to users
Social networking	Distribution of links to stories through social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook.

Table 2.1: Examples of formats for user participation. Source: Hermida & Thurman, 2008.

User-comments

Besides interpersonal communication, user-comments have the potential to impact the experience of the reader, the article, or the related media information being consumed (Waddell & Sundar, 2017). User engagement also has the power to influence online communication and information-seeking actions of the reader (Kim et al., 2016).

Comments are a type of content that can be categorized as 'raw,' or 'rough and ready' contributions usually written in an informal language, unedited, and sometimes in an uncivil manner (Santana, 2014). Comments can inform and rate (via reviews) can provide answers and improvement (via feedback) but also can alienate (via hate, incivility, and profanity). User-comments are governed by broader social standards such as considerations of decency, civility, taste, and legality (Thurman, 2008). It certainly took online news outlets time to implement comments threads, which in the long-term proved to be a more organic solution to the nature of the new medium adopted by the latter (Reich, 2011). User-comments are considered to be the most widely used and widespread form of interaction among digital news outlets, user-comments have become a fundamental device for knowing the opinions of readers within the news article's context (Ksiazek & Springer, 2020). Belonging to the new web 2.0 revolution, they can often be considered as interferences, positive or negative, and are established as a vital figure in the social dialogue that accompanies the news items in the online media, sometimes even complementing them. However, also, it can influence or condition users' opinions and perceptions about a particular topic or theme (Perales, 2014).

At the very beginning, media gatekeepers tried their best to stick with the traditional channels for participation, such as the online version of the letter to the editor, opinion columns or lastly blogs (Örnebring, 2008; Thurman, 2008) but later they progressively realized how imperative was to have users' opinions within the framework of their publication (Santana, 2011). Commenting features, as one of the most striking characteristics of the online engagement (Hermida, 2011), has led to thousands of user-generated contributions every day for the majority of digital news outlets around the globe (Haim et al., 2019; Loosen et al., 2018).

This reflection is added to the one argued by Mildemberger, who assures that

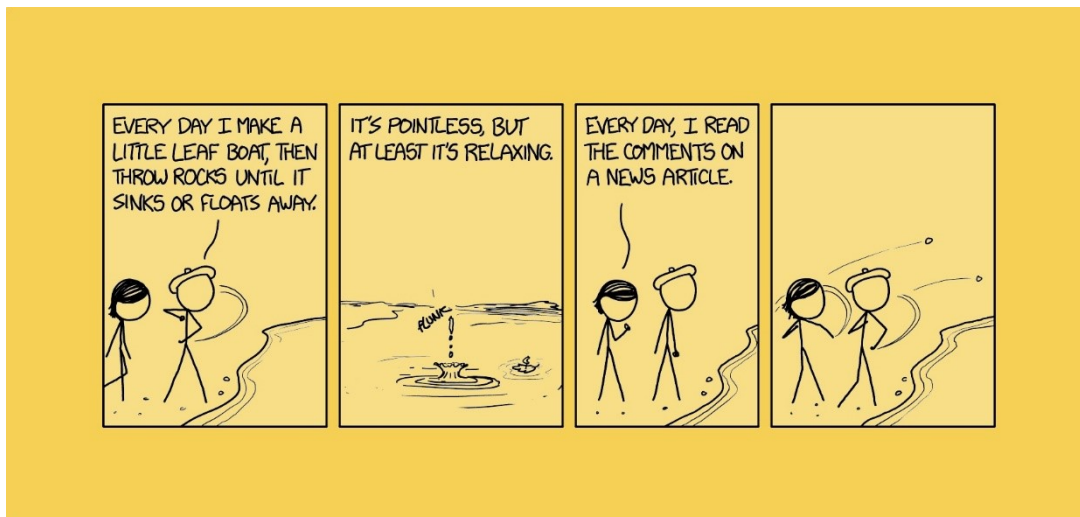


Figure 2.7: Comic Strip “Throwing Rocks”: The Frustration of Online Comments.

Source: XKCD. Erikson, L. (n.d.). Throwing Rocks. Retrieved October 12, 2019, from <https://xkcd.com/1385/>

the reader is not only the protagonist as such but also has the opportunity to participate by commenting on all types of news in online publications (Mildemberger, 2014). Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011:137) clarify the motivation for people to write comments, which are fragmented into four motivations. The first is information that comprises educating others, answering or asking questions, adding information, sharing experience, clarifying, noting missing information, balancing discussion, and fixing inaccuracies and factual errors or misinformation. The second is personal identity, which includes the expression of intense emotion or opinion. The third is entertainment, which includes giving humor to discourse and debate, and the fourth is social interaction, which includes seeing the reactions of the community, attempting to persuade others, sympathizing, expressing sympathy, praising kindness, or arguing.

Comments as content generated by users; (differing from other types of contributions) start from an individual basis that distinguishes them; the text is its essential value, although they can also be accompanied by images, links to videos, or multimedia content. They have a focus primarily directed at other commentators. Magdaleno & Gutiérrez-Rivas (2013) described it in the following way:

... la diferencia fundamental radica en que el comentario realizado a la noticia publicada en un diario virtual no está dirigido específicamente al editor

o empresa encargada del portal periodístico, sino a los lectores de la noticia o, incluso, a los protagonistas de la noticia.” (Magdaleno & Gutiérrez-Rivas, 2013:21).¹⁵

In Spain, one of the first news outlets who provided a space for online commenters was *20minutos*, which is also positioned as the first digital newspaper pioneer in establishing continuous updates of its contents¹⁶. As a discursive product, the comments provide a relationship between the user and the newspaper. They are an integral part and essential feature of virtual communication; it is the oral quality of the written texts that Internet users exchange with each other. (Yus, 2010). The content in the form of comments allows people to express themselves collaboratively in a way never before seen and with much more physical accessibility (Reich, 2011). The contents are consumed in another way, and the reader’s routine has been altered with the introduction of comments, this type of participation has an advantage and is that it turns the reader into an active devourer of information, this means that the old passive attitude it is decreasing, the user now knows that by accessing the news he/she will have the opportunity to express his/her opinions and points of view (Cánovas, 2003).

From a liberal perspective, the comments are a sign of the political times that are running and of the deep globalization of the sources of communication. They belong to a new period of deliberative digital democracy (Dahlberg, 2011), where there is a spectacular potential for the discourse of public opinion on the part of public opinion. The possibility of being able to comment on the news online, as a method of contemporary intervention, is undoubtedly one of the brightest models of citizen participation on the Internet (Emmer et al., 2011).

The comments at the bottom of the news pieces represent a continuity of the message initially proposed by the author/editor of the news. The articles published in question become relevant and dynamic. The number of user-comments on a news article may be an indication of its importance, interest or impact (Tsagkias et al., 2010).

Unlike print media, the internet allows the journalist to know almost imme-

¹⁵In Spanish “The essential difference lies in the fact that the commentary made on the news published in a virtual newspaper is not aimed specifically at the editor or the company in charge of the newspaper website, but at the readers of the news or even the main figures of the news.”

¹⁶Especial 15 Aniversario de 20minutos, Retrieved on June 15, 2019 from <http://microsite.20minutos.es/15-aniversario/>

diately the user's reaction to their work (Meyer & Carey 2014). The contributions are new communication channels that provide new perspectives, not only to its participants but to journalists as such. Even though some research has shown that only a small percentage of the readers are willing to leave a comment (Bergström, 2009; Tausig, 2009) Different scholars advocate that they join the current communicative bandwagon and begin to be part of the discussions of their articles or their colleagues since their interventions would further enrich the debate. (Meyer & Daniels, 2011).

Despite the significant concerns about quality and the cultural barriers that may arise from its implementation, there is substantial evidence of the journalistic and economic value of the comments, as well as putting into perspective, through ideas and personal experiences. These enrich and nuance the information, even more making possible the tracking of the interests of the readers, who even become potential sources for future news pieces (Díaz, Domingo, Masip et al., 2010). Scholars like Horvath and Paolini (2013) have argued that comments can be an outlet for disengaged segments of the population, including young people, many of whom are less inclined to follow conventional forms of political engagement and who turn to new forms of influencing decision-makers. Young generations may find new ways to hear and exchange ideas in online discussion spaces (Ziegele, 2019; Madden, Lenhart & Fontaine 2017).

However, the potential of discourse quality emerges only when there is a substantial number of users participating [commenting] on an article or item, or when there is a certain level of interactivity between them. For example, the level of participation will be proportional to the number of comments/messages previously shared or published (Kioussis, 2002). In this sense, the commentators can be summarized in two phases. At the first level, they express their own opinions, interact with others. At a second level: they create consensus or dissent in the interpretations towards journalists, mediate with other actors, and on the comments of other users (Springer et al., 2015). In this regard, comments sections provide a democratic space for users outside the traditional channels. According to Robinson (2010), people posting space comments value the ability to exercise freedom of speech. They expect openness, mutual respect, and a self-moderate framework that assesses the comments within the community. Comments can be seen as an asset in any story. Commenting spaces are being used to dispute news stories, to argue, to communicate with other readers, and to learn. (Robinson, 2010:137) Tenenboim and Cohen (2015) imply that user com-

ments have a role to play in building social and community identity, as political issues and controversies are on news articles.

Although comments have established themselves as one of the main axes for participation in most digital media (Williams, Wardle & Wahl-Jorgensen 2010; Singer et al. 2011), primarily digital natives, for a long time, there was a reluctance among many users to comment on the news (Hewitt, 2005). These doubts over the desire to contribute within our community are not new. As Withey (2006) argued, “most people like to consume media as opposed to take part in it, and therefore the role of the publisher is still an important one (Cited in Hermida & Truman, 2007).

When observing the comments on social networks, it is considered that they make up a network of opinions and knowledge that people share on a voluntary basis, in which ties or affinities are created from the action of responding and exchanging content (Wasko & Faraj, 2005), especially when there are shared interests with specific issues, such as politics and, more specifically, elections. As reflected by Dahlgren (2005), interaction through digital platforms occurs on two levels: between users and media/content and also between users themselves, creating a dialogue.

Comments as an Element of Deliberative Democracy

For this dissertation, deliberation will be conceived as an idealized category within the broader definition of what Gastil et al., (2002); Chambers (2003), as well as other scholars, call it ‘discursive participation’ (Carpini, Cook & Jacobs, 2004). This refers to a particular kind of discussion among at least two people in which (1) the means of communication emphasizes the use of logic and reasoning rather than power or coercion, and (2) that articulated engagement tends to focus on a social or political issue through which participants are able to identify solutions to a common problem.

In the context of deliberative digital democracy, reader comments are part of the discourse of online mass media are particularly relevant spaces in the public sphere because of its ability to discuss widely essential issues to a broader audience facilitating the formation of public opinion (Dahlberg, 2011). As Weber (2014:3) puts it:

...by providing commentary and debate spaces, online newspapers create the opportunity for active communication that is easy and accessible for ordinary users in these important forums of the public sphere. This opportunity opens up prospects for the visible and public discursive processing of news issues by readers.

Furthermore, of course, when it comes to users' participation through comments, online newspapers open up opportunities for public deliberation to emerge right there, inside their platforms (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009; Hughey & Daniels 2013). Thus by offering readers access to news content, and providing them with a public space in which they can contribute their own opinions, perspectives, and expertise, as well as interact with others, they are promoting public discourse in new digital open spheres (Ruiz et al., 2011; Zhou, Chan & Peng, 2008).

Despite its deliberative value, user-comments have caused friction between readers and journalists. Conversations below the line (BTL) have been a constant nuisance for many media outlets, arguably the most significant challenge relies upon the incivility factor and often aggressive tone (Coe, Kenski, & Rains; Gervais 2014) and the number of contributions which makes them sometimes impossible to moderate and result in an intermittent conflicting issue in the newsrooms' daily work (Reich, 2011; Singer & Ashman, 2009; Bergström & Wadbring 2015).

We have been trawling in this "darker side of communication" (Barnes, 2018:114) for the past number of years, trying to understand when and how the language we use online has shifted from a civil, friendly debate to what the researcher Emma Jane (2014) has called 'e-bile.' Today's Web is very different from the early days when cyber-utopians hailed a new golden age of human communication and collaboration. The internet was a forum for news outlets where people could come together to create constructive communities and where "citizen journalists" could fight from the ground up against political agendas.

At the very beginning, at the cusp of the internet's start back in the '90s, sharing ideas in a globalized world seemed like a noble cause, a utopic precept, and even as a constitutional right for some (Bohman, 2004), yet the promise of meaningful engagement in the comments sections, has since then vanished (O'Brien, 2011; Ksiazek, Peer & Zivic, 2015). Soon, comments became a problem for some major

news outlets who thought they were going to be a revolution in the information world in the first place. Gone were the fruitful debates, and noise followed by incivility, improper behavior, hateful language (Muddiman, 2013), fake news, and trolls, which replaced valid arguments (Chen, 2017; Barnes, 2018), a myriad of strong, diverse opinions and respectful objective contributions. Chaos imposed itself as the norm and the new normal in almost all comment sections across numerous news outlets (Rowe, 2015). As Jamilah Lemieux (2016) wrote for The New York Times, “It is in comment sections that trolls get a static space with a built-in audience, at which they can hurl shocking vitriol, and bigotry most would not dare express offline.”

Publishers realized that in the majority of cases, they could achieve the same level of quality and engagement of their own sites (Ellis, 2015). This emphasis comes from a cultural and social point of view. As social media platforms became more popular (Hermida et al., 2012), readers started to progressively migrate to new communities of discussions there, outside the outlet’s realms (Gil de Zuñiga et al., 2012; Holton et al., 2015).

From 2015 on, many notable publications, mostly American, have followed a distinctive pattern: closing their comments sections and redirecting the conversations to social networks. Sites like Reuters¹⁷, Popular Science¹⁸, NPR¹⁹, The Chicago Sun-Times²⁰, Re/code²¹, Bloomberg²², Motherboard²³, and The Daily Beast²⁴, are just some of the publishers who have decided to close the doors of their comment sections in favor of letting their users move the discussion of their stories on third party sites instead, in this case, social media, mostly Facebook and Twitter, Reddit also has emerged as an alternative place where users can contribute to the conversation and find a new community of commenters (Ellis, 2015).

As Kara Swisher, Re/code editor in chief was to reflect, “we believe that social media is the new arena for commenting, replacing the old onsite approach that

¹⁷<https://reut.rs/33cUxwx>

¹⁸<https://bit.ly/3k5gZys>

¹⁹<https://n.pr/3k30dhv>

²⁰<https://bit.ly/32imwvz>

²¹<https://bit.ly/2RbPAhP>

²²<https://bit.ly/2FibRIj>

²³<https://bit.ly/33cK0By>

²⁴<https://bit.ly/2Zq9r1k>

dates back many years²⁵.” On the same note, Dan Colarusso, executive editor of Reuters.com, in a blog post entitled “Editor’s note: Reader comments in the age of social media,” weighed in on the discussion about how conversations on news sites slowly gravitated toward social media:

Much of the well-informed and articulate discussion around news, as well as criticism or praise for stories, has moved to social media and online forums. Those communities offer vibrant conversation and, importantly, are self-policed by participants to keep on the fringes those who would abuse the privilege of commenting [...] We value conversation about the news. However, the idea of comments on a website must give way to new realities of behavior in the marketplace. The best place for this conversation is where it is open to the largest number of participants possible.²⁶

Several publishers shared some of the values expressed by the previous editors. It makes sense though, that conversations are being moved to social media, mostly because that is where engagement is at the moment. As Kara Swisher told Nieman Lab:

We want to have a broad audience, but we also have a very heavy-influencer audience. We want them to see we are on these social media platforms. That’s where they engage, so that’s where we engage with them. [Social media] is just a better place to engage a smart audience that’s not trolling. We got a lot of trouble in our comments on different stories — attacks on our writers, just stupid things; it wasn’t smart.²⁷

For some media, the migration of their communities of participation to social networks meant a reduction in the number of moderations they had to make in their comment sections, yet, at the same time, this also led to a decrease in toxicity and profanity. However, this also means that these problems do not stop persisting, and simply change territory. As Devlin et al. (2019) explained it:

With the closure of many comments sections, toxic online behaviour needed to find other platforms and the most accessible was Facebook. News outlets could post articles on the social media platform without the responsibility of moderating comments. This is when we noted a dramatic shift.

²⁵<https://bit.ly/2RbPAhP>

²⁶<https://reut.rs/33cUxwx>

²⁷<https://bit.ly/2G0qaoD>

Individual keyboard warriors swinging their sabre in an attempt to land a killer barb have been replaced by organised, ideological armies ("dumb xenophobe Nazis" and "happy-clappy libtard traitors") who are engaged in highly strategic linguistic wars to further their agendas.

Quality vs Quantity

Millions and millions of comments have been posted around the web since its very creation. Nevertheless, this does not mean millions of people are behind the keyboard, typing away their online thoughts or that these opinions have something useful to contribute or say. One of the reasons comments have become a hassle for publishers is because of the amount of work it takes to moderate them (Shepherd et al., 2015; Riedl et al., 2019).

For example, National Public Radio's website, NPR.org, in the United States recorded in July 2016, 33 million unique users, and 491,000 comments, which were left only by 19,400 commenters²⁸, this amount represented only a 0.06 percent of their users who regularly commented. This, along with the fact that a significant number of its audience was predominantly debating more on social media, led to the closing of its commenting section that same year. The conclusion here was straightforward: their commenting system was serving a small portion of their total audience. "The most startling statistic was that more than half of the comments left on NPR's site over three months came from just 2,600 people, who at least posted one comment" stated an article published the year after they decided to remove comments at the end of their stories (Jensen, 2017).

Disruptive Engagement: Incivility

"Terrorism and harassment by trolls will be presented as excuses,
but the effect will be dangerous for democracy."

— *Richard Stallman*

As we stated along the last couple of paragraphs, modern life revolves around a global digitalized ecosystem where social interaction (Benson, 1996; Dahlberg,

²⁸<https://n.pr/3k30dhv>

2001; Papacharissi, 2002)—generating significant amounts of data—can be considered the status quo; the norm; and the most crucial component of the internet. Without social interaction there will not be comments, social media could not have a place online (Berry & Sobieraj, 2011), the use and the accessibility of networked communications by humans is what makes the internet possible (Bond et al., 2012). Nevertheless, this same humanity is what makes the internet a difficult, complicated place. In this milieu, several authors have provided with operational definitions of what incivility looks like: some include vulgarity, stereotypes, and insults (Kwon & Cho, 2017; Chen, 2017; Theocharis et al., 2016; Gervais, 2015); other definitions include irony to mock people or situations, name-calling, hyperbole or rudeness (Gervais, 2013). As Chen (2017) stated, “incivility can be a slippery notion. What constitutes incivility varies from person to person, so it is difficult to come up with a rule of what incivility means or even describe discourse that is consistently viewed as uncivil.”

The uncivil discourse in the comments section and online participation spaces is varied, multifaceted, taking different discursive frames (Ng & Detenber, 2005; Berry & Sobieraj, 2011). One of the most common ways in which incivility has been studied is by contrasting it with politeness (Uslaner, 1993; Papacharissi, 2004). The distinction between incivility and discourtesy is thus relevant since, under this approach, many comments can be categorized as discourteous but not uncivil. Being rude, in general, means having bad gestures, something much more related to communicative, social, or cultural aspects. In contrast, incivility has a purpose, which is to break into personal or collective freedoms, that is, into democracy and its civil norms (Banfield, 1992). As fantastically summed by Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist Leonard Pitts (2010), “havens for a level of crudity, bigotry, meanness and plain nastiness that shocks the tattered remnants of our propriety.”

While civility is more focused on norms that promote the collective good, politeness or cordiality, incivility conveys messages that use an unnecessarily disrespectful tone (Coe, Kenski & Rains, 2014) *ad hominem* fallacies fall into this definition, when a user refers negatively toward the social construct of another (Gervais, 2015). Hence, the uncivil discourse has also been defined as that in which “communication violates the norms of courtesy of a given culture” (Mutz, 2015). For instance, Hsueh, Yogeewaran and Malinen (2015) observed that comments expressing clear bias toward Asian-Americans lead to more discrimination between respondents subjected to these posts. For Hwang et al. (2014),

the concept is operationalized as simple “disrespectful statements or attacks” toward someone else. However, for the scholar Papacharissi (2004), incivility has a purpose, and that is to disrupt the collective roots of democracy. According to her study, the messages that should concern us the most are those who, while being courteous, threaten democratic traits or use antagonistic stereotypes (Theocharis et al., 2016).



Figure 2.8: Comic Strip: Online Debate Strategies. Source: Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal

Incivility has also been described as flaming (O’Sullivan & Flanagan, 2003). In this case, the use of vulgar or provocative language towards another individual with the explicit purpose of provoking an adverse reaction in the latter is recognized (Aiken & Waller, 2000). Hmielowski, Hutchens & Cicchirillo (2014) found that those who commented on the Internet were much more likely to fall into “flaming” behavior when other users attacked their arguments or opinions.

A central component of all incivility—and one that has been extensively studied by scholars—is how the anonymity that is permitted in these online spaces has affected the level of discussion and allowed for higher levels of incivility (Graf, Erba & Harn, 2017; Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). However, while anonymity has allowed an increase in flaming and incivility, it also has the advantage of reflecting more honest, more emotional opinions, which may, therefore, be more representative of the users who express them (Papacharissi, 2004). Incivility has also been discussed concerning the story categories in online newspapers, to

identify in which news-topics or story categories, incivility is more prevalent in politics (national affairs), economy and sports, which usually generate high levels of incivility (Coe, Kenski & Rains, 2014; Muddiman & Stroud, 2017).

The incivility present in politics and public affairs is particularly relevant in that it causes cracks in spaces of deliberation and citizen participation that are at the heart of digital democracy (Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011; Herbst, 2010). Recently, Weber et al., (2020) found that reading uncivil and hateful user comments against refugees negatively impacted participants' attitudes towards them, even exerting indirect effects on prosocial behavior. Moreover, new research has shown that between 22 and 33% of the comments posted on the sites and Facebook pages of multiple regional and national media include derogatory words, profanity, or unfounded accusations of misinformation (Coe et al., 2014, Su et al., 2018). In severe cases, this incivility usually ends in hate speech, which encompasses verbal abuse towards an entire ethnic group merely based on gender, ethnicity, faith, sexual orientation, or other affiliations of the social construct (Gagliardone, Gal, Alves, & Martinez, 2015). Additionally, on the Facebook pages of major media outlets, all these severe forms of incivility are far less common than many other forms of hatefulness (Su et al., 2018), though, on the Facebook pages of local news outlets, extreme incivility appears to be even more prevalent (Su et al., 2018).

Because of the above, defining incivility has been a challenging task, because many messages contain different traits and levels of aggression, hatred, and sarcasm (See Table 2.2), all attributes of incivility already identified in the literature (Massaro & Stryker, 2012). An excellent example of meta-analysis is found in Jane (2015). Generally, the only aspect of incivility that is easily identified is vulgarity: profane words or vitriol (Kwon & Cho, 2017; Hutchens et al., 2015).

2.3. IMPERATIVE ELEMENTS OF DIGITAL NEWS MEDIA

Form of Incivility	Operational Definition	Example
Name-calling	Mean-spirited or disparaging words directed at a person or group of people.	“At least the morons in the state capital no longer have control of this process!”
Aspersions	Mean-spirited or disparaging words directed at an idea, plan, policy, or behavior.	“Texting while driving is stupid.”
Lying	Stating or implying that an idea, plan, or policy was disingenuous.	Americans have been screaming at the top of their lungs that this government is wrong, is corrupt, is lying, is deceiving the people, and is violating our constitution....
Vulgarity	Using profanity or language that would not be considered proper (e.g., pissed, screw) in professional discourse.	“Shut up asshole, what the fuck do you know about this topic, huh? So retarded”
Pejorative for speech	A disparaging remark about how a person communicates.	“I am sick and tired of [them] throwing their tantrums....”

Table 2.2: Operational definitions of incivility. Source: Coe et al., 2014.

Most of the studies done on this topic so far have been developed in the United States, and have used quantitative methodologies to account for the volume of incivility in different dimensions (Coe et al., 2014), as well as its effects on readers (Chen & Ng, 2017). For this reason, we found noteworthy to include incivility inside the coding book of our study, in the hopes to contribute, with a qualitative and inductive approach to how incivility is presented in native digital media. In our approach, we have observed whether the identified categories of incivility in our sample resemble those previously addressed in the literature review.

Based on research that has already been conducted on this particular issue, incivility promotes participation—the volume of comments—much more than civil comments (Kenski, Coe & Rains, 2017; Muddiman & Stroud, 2017). This raises an important question and challenge for the media and those responsible for it: how to encourage a more civilized engagement with the news by users?

Anonymity Behind the Comments Section

There is no doubt the Internet offers an opportunity for self-presentation and social interaction, with the increased potential for anonymity, many people feel more confident sharing facets of their identity than they are unable to communicate offline (Bargh et al., 2002). Nevertheless, anonymity also can suppress social inhibitions which has been linked to toxic behavior and vitriol online (Reader 2012; Hardaker 2010; Alonzo & Aiken 2004), which is one of the reasons behind several news outlets have restricted or obliterated the ability to comment anonymously on their sites (Reader, 2012). Wright & Street (2007) claimed that anonymous online discussions not only promote debate on topics but also allow discursive techniques to obstruct deliberation preventing others from participating. Simply put, anonymity—for some academics—encourages incivility (Borah, 2013; Scott, Rains, & Haseki, 2011). Journalists usually do not like anonymity in the comments sections, although some editors do acknowledge the fact that users' feedback had become helpful for producing story ideas (Reader, 2012; Santana, 2011).

Readers also acknowledge the vehement complexity of online comments, but tend to encourage anonymous participation because they see them as encouraging and egalitarian (Reader, 2012; Rosenberry, 2011). Users often endorse anonymity as a protection against the loss of privacy and the "degradation of dissension" (Reader, 2012, p. 505). Anonymity sometimes promotes "toxic disinhibition," which can sometimes turn to " which may lead to "rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats" (Suler, 2004, p. 321). This so-called online "disinhibition effect" (Suler, 2005). Conceptualized as the lack of inhibition caused by anonymity may be a positive or negative thing, based on the inhibition in hand.

Online anonymity also may foster social discord or the propensity among like-minded individuals to become more violent after online communication (sum-

marized in Christopherson, 2007). Similarly, anonymity free people from inhibitions related to their social and socioeconomic background (see Bowker and Tuffin 2003; Kim 2006). Anonymity may also make it possible for individuals to check claims and improve their political or social positions (Black 2011). Some academics, however, have stressed the adverse effects of this release on restrictions. Sia et al. (2002) suggest, on the grounds of experimental analysis, that privacy decreases 'external appearance,' which in turn increases the fragmentation of debate.

Moreover, the prevailing view is that anonymous ecosystems are strongly linked with non-civil or abusive dialogue (Polat and Pratchett, 2009; Lea et al., 2001). Some time ago, the technology-focused magazine *Wired* featured a reflection on the subject by Daniel Ha²⁹, CEO, and co-founder of website-based commenting platform *Disqus*.

He argued that comments coming from pseudonyms or anonymous users allowed people to "express themselves more freely, with greater authenticity and with greater impact" (Ha, 2015). That same year, the company's data revealed that 65% of those who comment do so under a pseudonym and that these users contribute seven times more than people commenting anonymously and five times more than those who identify themselves through a personal Facebook account.

Many anti-social attitudes are typically associated with anonymity enabled by online interactions (Ksiazek, 2015; Meyer & Carey, 2014). Anonymity has the ability to curb social inhibitions, has also been linked to incivility and online hostility (Reader 2012; Hardaker 2010; Alonzo & Aiken, 2004). In fact, as attention is paid to alleviating offensive behavior, a variety of newspaper websites have worked to restrict or remove the ability to make anonymous comments (see Reader, 2012).

However, over time, theorists have moved away from conceptualizing anonymity in terms of harming behavior to be feared in online communities. Meyer & Carey (2014) found that, when allowed, anonymous users increase engagement, and Jessup et al. (1990) suggested that anonymity enhances critical thinking. For example, Meyer & Carey (2014) also noted that the willingness of the users to

²⁹Ha, D. (2015, August 7). Anonymity Isn't the Problem with Web Comments. Retrieved August 3, 2019, from <https://bit.ly/3ikP1yi>



Figure 2.9: Anonymity Online: "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."
Source: Peter Steiner for The New Yorker

comment anonymously, coupled with the involvement of an influential moderator, would often facilitate repeated engagement. Anonymity has been seen to increase participation in health-related discussions (Tanis, 2008) and political activism (Dang-Xuan et al., 2013; Tanner, 2001) as well as to help people in online support groups uncover personal issues and concerns that they may not feel at ease sharing with their relatives and friends (Scott et al. 2011).

It is worth remembering that there are real people with plenty to say under anonymous nicknames. However, in the same argument, some users prefer to stay anonymous in order to protect their privacy, and not because they have a personal agenda or are trying to mislead other users (Finley, 2017). Anonymity, also known as pseudonymity, is part of the ecology of the internet (Loke, 2012), studies have shown that a loss of accountability it could lead to an increase in the degree of online toxic disinhibition, and therefore encourage impulsive, violent and abusive behavior (Christopherson, 2007; Bargh & McKenna, 2004;

Dumont & Candler, 2005; Kabay, 1998). When employed to address incivility, moderation, and policies on anonymity on comment threads are associated with increased rates of civility (Coe et al., 2014; Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011; Ruiz et al. 2011).

In this sense, the social dynamics on social network channels are relatively quite different from the outlets' comments sections. On social media, there is not much place for anonymity since a high number of commenters end up using their profiles or handles, just as Jensen (2016) pointed out referring to the NPR commenting transition to social media: "discussions [on Facebook] in particular, tend to be more civil, most likely because users are required to use their names (not that fake accounts do not get through, but there seem to be far fewer than the predominantly fake names that NPR commenters currently rely on)." However, despite the shift, some publishers still face enormous challenges in terms of civility and brand image on social media (Coe et al., 2014; Larsson, 2018) as some news outlets realized that comments were a threat to their image and reputation (Canter, 2012; Loke, 2012; Bruns & Highfield, 2015). "Even a fractious minority wields enough power to skew a reader's perception of a story," wrote the online-content director of Popular Science Magazine Suzanne LaBarre. With the closure of the comments section, users with troll oriented remarks and toxic behavior started to look for alternative spaces to spew out their undesired discourse (LaBarre, 2013).

Moderation

"In an environment that is not heavily curated, it becomes
about silencing voices and not about opening up voices."
— *Nicholas White, editor, The Daily Dot*

One of the significant concerns of today's media is being able to keep their spaces for participation free of incivility, disruptive behavior, liabilities, and conflict. Due to the high volumes of engagement, managing communities below the news through moderation has become one of the biggest challenges and a much-needed tool for quality media on the web in recent times (Diplaris et al., 2012). Abuse, trolling, racism, misogyny—all these issues have raised concerns both in the academic and the news industry over fears of the growing personal

harassment, vitriol, bile, and reels of trolls online (Shepherd et al., 2015).

Published scientific literature in participatory journalism studies (Singer, 2011; Wolfgang, 2018) show that moderators are frequently regarded as the new gatekeepers, because they have the power to determine whether individual comments should be published or not, and therefore filter users' contributions and whether or their viewpoints are appropriate, valid or acceptable.

Most media are aware that within their comment sections and participation communities, many people are attempting to engage in discussions (Hermida, 2010; Masip et al., 2011). However, many times these readers on digital newspapers end up leaving the conversation because of other users insulting or disrespecting them (Stein, 2016). This is where the figure of the moderator comes in, in charge of keeping the discussion healthy and free of discursive conflict. Nevertheless, at times, the process of moderation is not one that can be mastered swiftly, as technology evolves, so does the users' discourse, as Domingo (2015:164) stated:

There's no magic recipe for moderating news comments, and news websites have explored different moderation strategies over time, mostly by trial and error.

Manual (human) moderation systems cannot cope with the massive number of messages that the majority of media outlets and social networks site receive. Empirical studies suggest moderators also cannot keep up with the emotional stress (Newton, 2019) and exhaustion from managing uncivil comments (Riedl et al., 2019). The solution to these urgent issues has been to combine automatic and manual moderation. In this sense, automatic moderation systems serve to activate early warnings, detect uncivil behavior. However, then there is human intervention, which enables a thorough examination of the linguistic and semantic details that automatic filtering fails to identify and thus undermines the quality of the conversations. Readers are more willing to participate in online forums and at ease when there are moderation rules involved (Wise et al., 2006); nonetheless, some associate it with censorship (Sherrick & Hoewe, 2018). Moderation is often associated with higher levels of civility (Coe et al. 2014; Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011; Ruiz et al., 2011).

In literature, three primary approaches for community management have also been outlined: First, the termination of comment sections on specific controver-

sial issues or the complete closure of the gates (Nielsen 2012; Thurman, Cornia & Kunert 2016). Second, the pre-moderation of comments (Hermida and Thurmann, 2008). Third, the moderation of comments after publishing or policing behind the gates (Ksiazek, 2015). Such primary approaches also lead to many management activities, such as removing other comments or banning individual accounts altogether as unique words for closing gates. As suggested by Frischlich, Boberg & Quandt (2019), all these specific tendencies can be regarded in two primary dimensions: “interactive versus uni-directional” and “authoritative versus participatory moderation.”

Third-party Moderators

The development of new participatory tools and the foster of engagement online had come hand in hand with the growth and popularization of social networks such as *Facebook* or *Twitter* (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011). Additionally, the new wave of plugins or APIs³⁰ (in their mostly based on open source) for user-generated content management has made it possible to moderate comment threads. On *Facebook*, for example, through its collective development project for programmers called *Developers*³¹, a comment-hosting tool³² was created titled *Facebook Comments* (Figure 2.10). The widget allowed Facebook the collection of data from those interactions, whether they were from users or outlets (Müller and Thiesing, 2011).

Back in 2012, around 400,000 sites used the platform (Constine, 2012), including many digital newspapers such as *San Jose Mercury News* and *LATIMES.com*³³. This type of third-party applications offered a tremendous advantage for digital news outlets, but also in social behavior terms, was a solution to discourage vitriol since users were much more prudent and discreet when leaving a comment out of tune, because he/she was aware that his/her profile in the social network was at stake, at risk of getting blocked or banned from Facebook. Jimmy Orr,

³⁰Benslimane, Djamal; Schahram Dustdar; Amit Sheth (2008). "Services Mashups: The New Generation of Web Applications". *IEEE Internet Computing*, vol. 12, no. 5. Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers. pp. 13–15.

³¹Facebook Developers. Retrieved on April 12th, 2019 <https://developers.facebook.com/>

³²Facebook Comments Moderation Tool: Facebook for Developers. (n.d.). Retrieved January 15, 2020, from <https://developers.facebook.com/products/social-plugins/comments/>

³³Josh Constine, "Facebook Updates Comments Box Plugin with Comment Exporting and Larger News Feed Stories," *Inside Facebook* (blog), Retrieved on April 12th, 2019 <http://www.insidefacebook.com/2011/04/12/comments-box-exporting-hotmail/>

the managing editor in charge of *LATimes.com* at the time, summed it up in the following way:

by requiring a Facebook registration, it will cut down on the mean-spirited, profane, and sometimes useless responses because one's friends will also see the comments in their newsfeeds.

Comentarios

The screenshot shows a news site's comment section. At the top, there are two buttons: 'COMENTARIOS CON FACEBOOK (33)' and 'COMENTARIOS CON RT (4)'. Below these, it says '25 comentarios' and 'Ordenar por Destacados'. A comment input field with the placeholder 'Agregar un comentario...' is visible. Below the input field, there are several user comments:

- Retlolito** (with a thumbs-up emoji): Ya valimos pero eso de reality show ¿quien ve esas cosas? en su sano juicio claro
Me gusta · Responder · 12 · 23 h
- Fray Kabul** · Harvard University: Nadie, absolutamente nadie. Tienes razón.
Me gusta · Responder · 1 · 21 h
- Marcos Talavera** · Valencia, Venezuela: Fray Kabul lamento decirles que los que miran MTV es practicamente lo unico que ven, mira que su audiencia es enorme. En VH1 tambien pasan muchos.
Me gusta · Responder · 1 · 16 h
- Nicolas Jesus Morales Liaz** · Programmer en DIGI mobil: la mayoría de hecho, si, son asi de pateticos!
Me gusta · Responder · 5 h
- James Wheeler** · Df: donde queda la religion, la educacion manipulada, la partidocracia y todas las demas cosas implementadas por el poder para mantener a la borregada alejada de las cosas importantes como la economia y el poder

Figure 2.10: Example of Facebook Comments incorporated into a news-site. Source: RT in Spanish

Unfortunately, the above mention case is not longer the rule. Outlets no longer recur to Facebook to manage their comments sections. Since 2016, when the Cambridge Analytica scandal broke out (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018),

a bunch of online publications has stripped Facebook's comment functionality from their sites. As of this writing, Facebook advertises on its *Developers*³⁴ website that their commenting systems are still available on ESPN, , Techcrunch, MSN, among other renowned outlets. The authors of these works investigated and found out that all these outlets no longer have the tool incorporated even though Facebook still states they do. The HuffingtonPost and Techcrunch are using OpenWeb (former Spot.IM) (Figure 2.12), while MSN and ESPN, both removed their comments sections from their sites until further notice.

The mission to maintain civility online has not been an easy one, mostly due to the lack of sufficient technology able to before AI tools, these goals were not economically feasible, and unreachable for the majority of news outlets. Nowadays, there are currently many website-based commenting platforms that offer their services to a full scope of companies, Disqus (founded 2007) (Figure 2.11), LiveFyre (2009), SolidOpinion (2013), Discourse (2013), and OpenWeb (2012) and Coral³⁵ (2017) are among the best known for outsourcing comment management and moderation available, and their applications are made more convenient by the incorporation of different social or gamification login options.

³⁴Facebook Comments Moderation Tool: Facebook for Developers. (n.d.). Retrieved January 15, 2020, from <https://developers.facebook.com/products/social-plugins/comments/>

³⁵The Coral Project is Moving to Vox Media. (2019, January 22). Retrieved January 16, 2020, from <https://blog.mozilla.org/blog/2019/01/22/the-coral-project-is-moving-to-vox-media/>

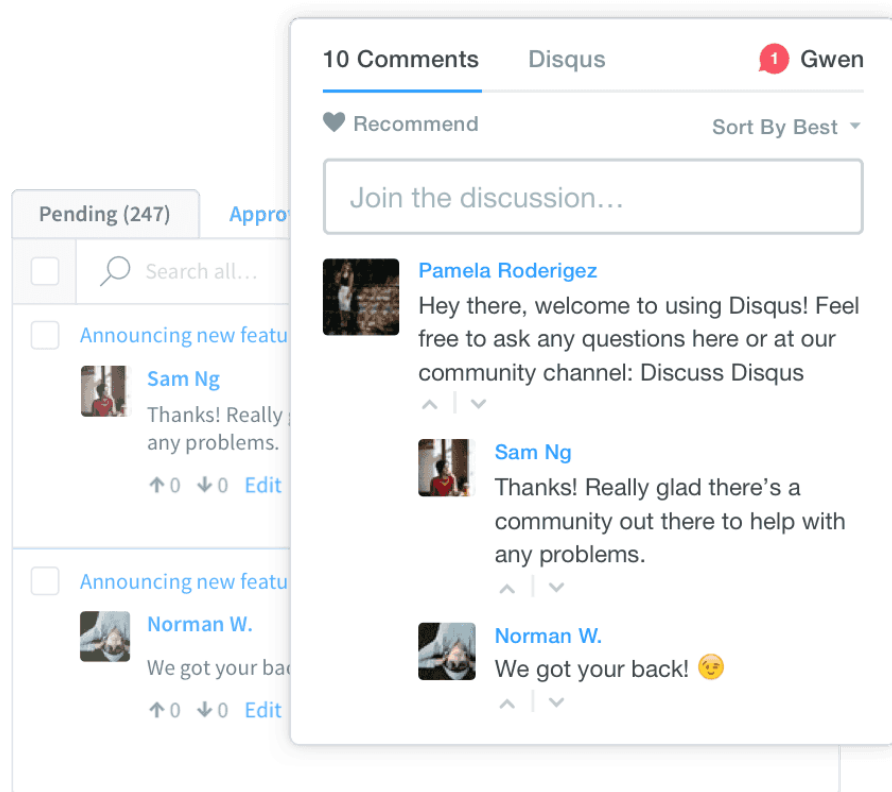


Figure 2.11: Disqus' online public comment sharing box. Source: Disqus.com, Retrieved June 15, 2020 from <https://disqus.com/features/engage>

Some outlets like El País,³⁶ The New York Times, or The Washington Post, have gone a step further in their mission to host quality conversations (Lichterman, 2017). In the summer of 2016, the prestigious publication struck a deal with Jigsaw³⁷, part of Alphabet, Google's parent company (Etim, 2017). The Times gave the technology incubator anonymized comments data, and in exchange, Jigsaw (Wakabayashi, 2017) built a machine learning algorithm, able to predict abuse and harassment online (Figure 2.14). According to the web's project, The API called Perspective is aimed at helping outlets to "build new tools that give people control, allowing them to explore the conversation in new ways [...] Perspective scores comments based on the perceived impact a comment might have on a conversation, which publishers can use to give real-time feedback to commenters, help moderators sort comments more effectively, or allow readers to more easily find relevant information. We will be releasing more machine learning models later in the year, but our first model identifies whether a comment

³⁶El País (2018, December 18). Inteligencia artificial para elevar la calidad del debate digital. Retrieved January 16, 2020, from https://elpais.com/sociedad/2018/12/17/actualidad/1545081231_439667.html 9

³⁷<https://jigsaw.google.com/>

could be perceived as "toxic" to a discussion³⁸."

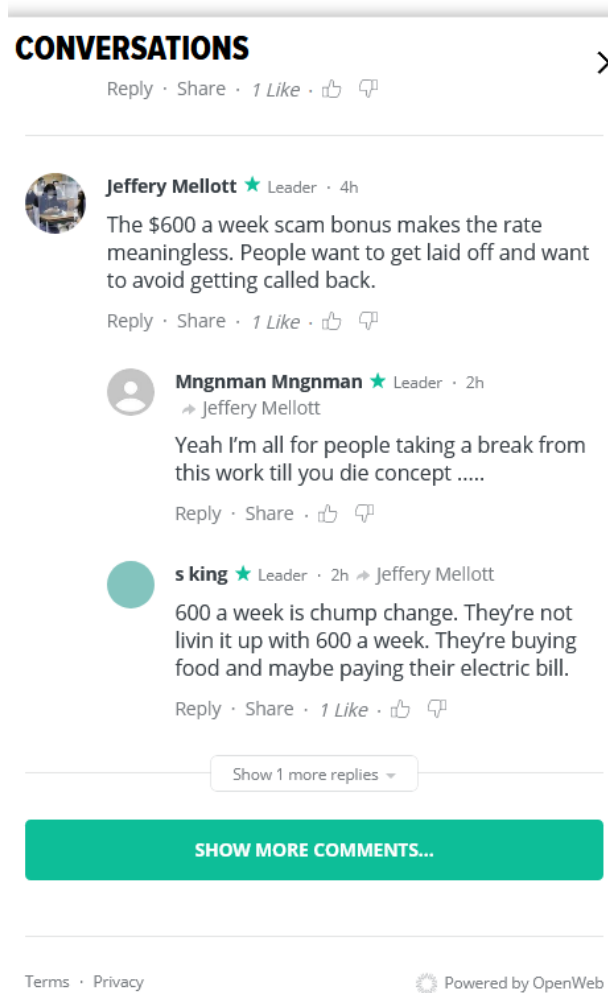


Figure 2.12: Example of OpenWeb’s (Spot.IM) commenting system platform embedded in the HuffingtonPost’s website.

Source: Rugaber, C. (2020, June 26). Applications For Unemployment Aid Fall To Still-High 1.48 Million. Retrieved June 26, 2020, from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/unemployment-claims-june-coronavirus_n_5ef49779c5b615e5cd39d1f8

In the same vein, Teddy Amenabar, Audience Editor, and Greg Barber, Director of newsroom product from the Washington Post reflected on the rolling out of *Talk*, a new commenting system (See Figure 2.13), in partnership with the Coral Project, that promotes civil conversations and enables the newsroom to engage to their users at scale:

³⁸<https://www.perspectiveapi.com/>

We're implementing new comment software to give users, editors, and moderators an updated set of tools to ensure that Washington Post readers can discuss the news in ways that are thoughtful, effective and enjoyable for years to come. We have heard your concerns about bots and incivility; this new software will help us address them. We're showing our work — what's done and what still needs to be completed — so you can have the maximum opportunity to influence what we build. Please continue to share your thoughts in the comments below. Our partner in building this software is a group called the Coral Project, which began as a collaboration between The Post, the New York Times, and the Mozilla Foundation, funded by a grant from the Knight Foundation.

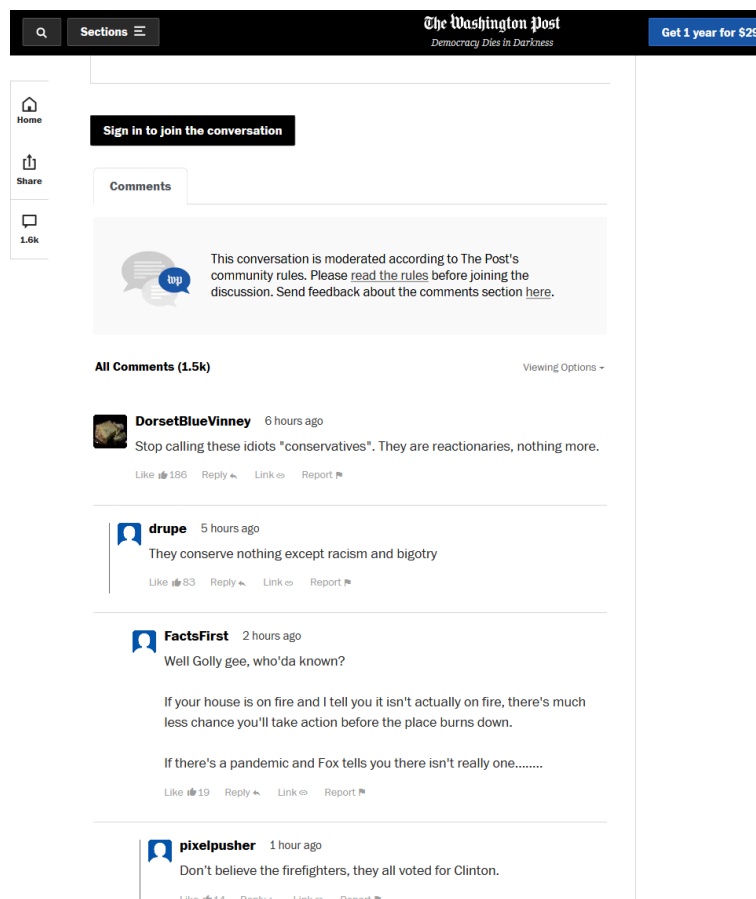


Figure 2.13: Example of the commenting system at the Washington Post powered by the Coral Project.

Source: The Washington Post. Ingraham, C. (2020, June 25). Analysis | New research explores how conservative media misinformation may have intensified the severity of the pandemic. Retrieved June 25, 2020, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/06/25/fox-news-hannity-coronavirus-misinformation/>

In a similar field, comes Discourse³⁹ a system created by Jeff Atwood, the developer, co-founder of the question and answer network Stack Exchange. Discourse, which among other things, is open-source—runs like traditional discussion forums—but has become a compelling alternative to manage them due to its extensive features. “Discourse is a from-scratch reboot, an attempt to reimagine what a modern Internet discussion forum should be today, in a world of ubiquitous smartphones, tablets, Facebook, and Twitter.⁴⁰” The feature makes use of gamification to encourage civilized debate and to provide tools that the community uses to expel trolls and “bad actors. The platform is known worldwide as the most reliable and convenient moderation and comment management system, due to the integration of different social or gamification login options.

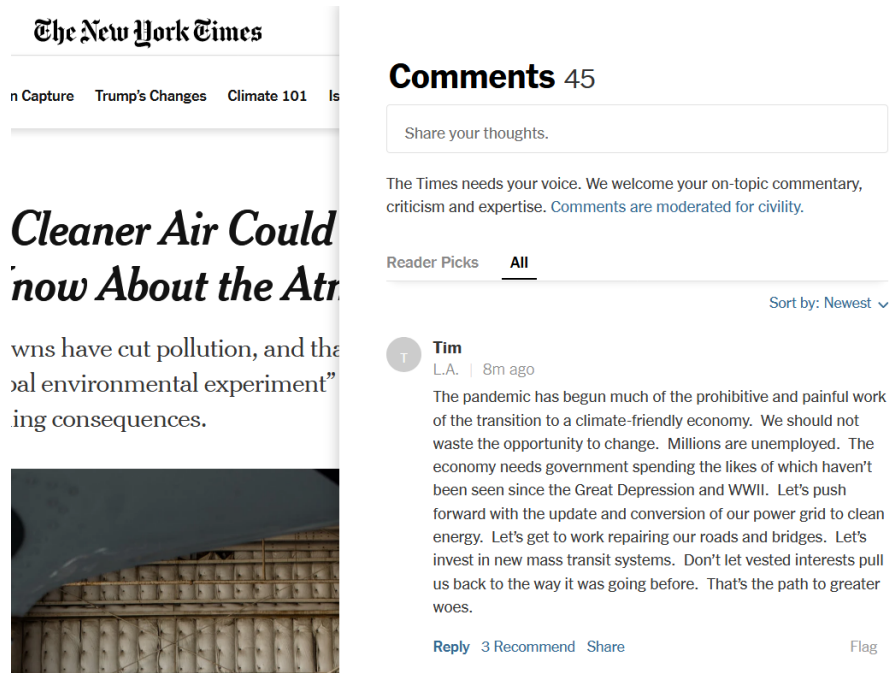


Figure 2.14: The New York Times’ comment system powered by a conjoined of AI tools part of Google’s Perspective API project.

Source: Davenport, C. (2020, June 25). Pandemic’s Cleaner Air Could Reshape What We Know About the Atmosphere.

Retrieved June 25, 2020, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/25/climate/coronavirus-clean-air.html?action=click>

³⁹<https://www.discourse.org/>

⁴⁰What is Discourse? (n.d.). Retrieved January 17, 2020, from <https://www.discourse.org/about>

2.3.3 A Digital Sphere

The concept of "public" has always been associated with the media. Authors such as Jürgen Habermas (1989) and Gabriel Tarde (1969) have written in detail about how the media was—and has always been—the primary source of citizens' nourishment on public affairs. For centuries the public has been formed around spaces of participation and ordinary meeting places such as cafes, social clubs, or public squares. In these settings, citizens would gather in order to debate, deliberate, and exchange different points of view, as long as the members of these spaces adhere to a series of pre-established principles, previously implemented by default⁴¹. According to Habermas (1974)⁴² in his article "*The public sphere: An encyclopedia article (1964)*," the public sphere concept is first described as:

... all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body [...] Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion. That is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions-about matters of general interest.

Participation within the realm of public sphere forums meant that these mere interactions allow the conception of what we know as public opinion (Dewey, 1946).⁴³ German author, sociologist and philosopher Ferdinand Tönnies used a physics metaphor in order to explain the solid-state of public opinion by stating "Public opinion is a universal, irrefragable conviction of the public, which as the bearer of such convictions represents a whole nation or a still more full circle of 'civilized mankind.'" (Cited in Palmer, 1938). On the one hand, Habermas (1964) stresses a rational public opinion that subject to critical argumentation serves as a counterweight.

⁴¹These principles coined by Habermas as "model of norms and modes of behaviour by means of which the very functioning of public opinion can be guaranteed for the first time" are: a) general accessibility, b) elimination of all privileges and c) discovery of general norms and rational legitimations.

⁴²Version translated by Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox. Original published in the German encyclopedia Fischer Lexicon, Staat und Politik, new edition (Frankfurt am Main, 1964), pp. 220-226.

⁴³See also: Habermas, J, *Historia y crítica de la opinión pública. La transformación estructural de la vida pública*. Barcelona: G. Gili. Original edition: *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*. Neuwied: Luchterhand V., 1962;

On the other hand, we have E. Noelle-Neumann (1974), who refers to that of an irrational force, expressed in majority values that tend towards consensus and social control. For Walter Lippmann (1946), public opinion was a product manufactured and manipulated by the elites, which would generate "images in our minds" (discursive frames) (Petersen, 2003). For Lippmann, the media would deploy the most exceptional capacity for cognitive framing in contemporary societies.

The Internet is a personal and dialogic medium; that, in its beginnings, challenges the root of the journalistic, demoscopic, and electoral representation of the public opinion. When each and every one of society's citizens can act as a potential channel of communication, they can express their own opinion on a daily basis, individually or collectively, with hardly any middleman or censorship (Cammaerts & Audenhove, 2005). They can reformulate and challenge the depictions that the media, surveys, and ballot boxes portray on them. In other words, the notion of a discursive public opinion becomes valid, which, due to the nature of the digital environment that drives it, will blur the political lines and social places where such an opinion was previously expressed (Blanco et al., 2010)

As previously stated, the meaning of the public sphere and public opinion is deeply intertwined with the role of the media heavily influencing the latter. The press establishes itself as an institution for the public, despite its commercial basis. Habermas (1964:53), puts it by quoting Karl Bücher, one of the founding fathers of journalism as an academic discipline in Europe, illustrated this societal development as it follows:

"Newspapers changed from mere institutions for the publication of news into bearers and leaders of public opinion—weapons of party politics. This transformed the newspaper business [...] for the newspaper publisher. It meant that he changed from a vendor of recent news to a dealer in public opinion."

Though it is relevant to mention that in the case of broader public newspapers, magazines, radio, and television represent the media of the public sphere (Habermas, 1974; 1990), public space is presented as the place where public opinion arises, which can be manipulated and distorted, but at the same time, it constitutes the axis of social cohesion, construction, and legitimation—or even the discredit—of politics. Individual and political freedoms depend on the dy-

namics that arise inside this public space (Parkinson, 2012; Goode, 2005). Along these lines, there is a new structural breakthrough in the concept of the public sphere as we know it (Calhoun, 2010). The impact of the internet has brought up a different concept and meaning of sharing, discussing, and debating current topics and viral (Barton, 2005; Benkler, 2006; Benkler et al., 2015).

Dahlberg (2005) further lays out the criteria for the public sphere. In the first place, he points out that when Habermas speaks about the public sphere, he is not arguing about a particular group, but rather about the entire continuum of complex networks of diverse, overlapping communities built up through the vital discourses of individuals, communities, civic societies, social movements, and media organizations. What Dahlberg points out to synthesize is the need for an idealized form of public reasoning.

1. The first prerequisite is the subject and the constructive critique of the validity of the problematic statements, which requires the adoption of constructive opinions.
2. The second characteristic is reflexivity, which means that speakers must objectively evaluate their beliefs, perceptions, and desires in the light of the motives and statements of someone else. It also includes being able to change their viewpoint.
3. Thirdly, Dahlberg talks of the ideal role to be played. In other words, the participants put themselves in the role of those directly impacted, taking into account the situation from other viewpoints, which requires impartiality and careful listening.
4. The fourth premise is sincerity.

Without a doubt, we are experiencing just another systemic transformation of the public sphere (Bruns & Highfield, 2015) powered by the rapid growth of the internet (Bruns, 2018). For certain scholars, it follows the concept by Habermas of a single public sphere in which the media play a predominant role, has large audiences, and serves as an environment in which the entire public discourse takes place (Hartley, 2006). Other studies argued that this systemic reform is so drastic that we might consider rejecting the definition (Webster, 2013). The third approach attempts to keep the idea alive, but no longer requires a single

solution and recognizes that at present, the public sphere is made up of several different spaces (Dalhgren, 2005).

Over time, the public sphere on the Internet has embraced a number of new keywords, such as 'digital,' 'virtual,' 'online.' All these terms reflect the idea of a contact space enabled by social networks. Participation in such spaces is always open and free of charge to all participants, where they address topics of mutual interest in a platform that is accessible to anyone and everyone (Schäfer, 2015). One of the characteristics that define this modern public domain is its unavoidable fragmentation (Galston, 2003). This fragmentation affects all the platforms where interactions between people and the public will ultimately take place.

Bruns and Highfield (2015) provide a comprehensive and insightful categorization of the public sphere fragmentation. First, there is a wide-ranging variation between all the audiences. For example, Dalhgren (2009;2013) and Webster (2013) both refer to the political sphere, while Hartley and Green (2006) identify the public sphere of culture. A whole other division is a technology, where the public is defined by its primary form of communication. For example, the Twitterverse or the comments sections on a subreddit have become part of the regular language among digital users within online environments. Lastly, Benkler (2006) has developed the idea of a "networked public sphere." These scholars hold the view that the reduction in the size of the sphere and the mutual interest in the topic will improve the quality of the discussion. Another division concerns public issues, spaces for debate on particular topics for all the parties involved in the conversation. Topics tend to be about specific events, closely related to immediacy, in a limited time-frame, and a fast-moving manner, which gradually goes away. The latter two types are especially noteworthy, as they can describe the form of spheres that welcome comments from readers on news articles. In the case of social media, a networked public sphere will be the appropriate term for the free sub spheres enabled by social networks (Masip et al., 2019).

In the new digital sphere, users do not tend to be within the same spaces; in fact, they move back and forth from public spaces to private ones. Often these spaces are referred to as personal public spheres. For instance, Schmidt (2014) designates groups of friends on social media as self-centered networks, whether they are in the form of friends on Facebook or as followers on Twitter. They are referred to as personal publics. Papacharissi (2010) moves on to discuss the

private sphere, within which individuals interact in "privately public conversations" because conversations are not being held behind closed doors or in full view of the general public. Altogether, this is a new form of a sphere, a modern environment, which replaces the existing public sphere. Much like the old world, where private people have shared views on public policies or ideologies, the new public spheres are filled with messages that can be read in public yet are only about personal issues or opinions.

As technology has evolved, online forums provide opportunities for individuals to connect with news affairs with the public at large. Carpini et al., (2004) refer to this kind of engagement as *discursive participation* or the formation of judgments, the promotion and expression of opinions, and the recognition of unique viewpoints from others. Deliberative spaces can increase awareness of current political, social, and economic events and enhance comprehension of different viewpoints among readers (Cappella et al., 2002; Fishkin & Luskin, 2005; Karpowitz & Raphael, 2014). As Bruns and Highfield (2015) point out, the advent of the Internet has combined and integrated the different public spaces that could exist inside an increasingly worldwide network of incessant knowledge transfer.

Comment sections are one of many venues for online engagement. At times considered a valuable deliberative forum (Stroud et al., 2015; Ruiz et al., 2011). Research on deliberation values the involvement of a large number of opinions on current events (Mutz, 2006). Deliberative spaces can improve understanding of public affairs and strengthen awareness of diverse perspectives between participants (Cappella et al., 2002; Fishkin & Luskin, 2005; Karpowitz & Raphael, 2014).

In the case of the comments sections below news items, it has been shown that the tone of a conversation has the potential to influence readers' opinions and viewpoints on a specific subject, especially those users that are less interested in the subject under discussion (Winter; Krämer, 2016) ultimately affecting their public opinion. Scholars have found evidence that some readers may change their view of a particular subject by shifting it toward what is regarded as the majority of public opinion (Lee & Jang, 2010; Anderson et al., 2014; Hsueh, Yogeewaran & Malinen, 2015). In addition, users are more inclined to share their views when they agree with the vast majority (Soffer & Gordoni, 2017; Masullo Chen & Lu, 2017), thus contributing to a significant lack of debate and the monopolization of plurality in conversation (Ruiz-Caballero et al., 2011).

2.3.4 Deliberative Democracy

Access to information has never been as democratized as in present times; much of this is due to globalization, which has made technology not only more accessible but affordable (Ferdinand, 2013). The web becomes an ideal medium for intercommunication and the exchange of information in real-time. Without any doubt, communication and information determine the debate and decision making of citizens, and their participation, which in turn is the *sine qua non* of democracy (Goode, 2009).

Back in 2007, Deuze (2007) predicted a new way of doing journalism, a formula that would enfold cross-media functionality and an interactive relationship with the audience. Ultimately, journalism can no longer be seen or defined as a praxis that is exclusively for trained, salaried professionals anymore (Deuze et al., 2007).

As former Reuters' editor-in-chief, Geert Linnebank stated at a conference in March 2007: "Now everyone can be a reporter, commentator or a film director, the days of owning and controlling these processes are over" (Hermida & Thurman, 2008).

As is well known for several centuries, democracy depends fundamentally on the ability of citizens to take part in the political debate. What naturally means being able to express oneself in political ecosystems (having spaces for public debate) and being able to discuss freely; that is, having information about public affairs in a broad sense and (ideally) having an exchange of opinions with the public authorities (Garot, 2002:57). Sartori (1994) pointed out that one of the many characteristics of democracy in its definition of the democratic theory was "A government of discussion and debate." By this, he meant that democracy develops, as more and more people get involved and participate in it.

Ideally, the role of the media is precisely to be contributors in the creation of antagonistic public spaces in which there is the possibility of dissent; spaces where there is room to express alternative and avant-garde opinions (Mouffe cited in Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006:974) Much of deliberative democracy theorists agree that the main reason for its essence lies in the deliberation. Gutmann and Thompson (1996:3) specify that one of the principal and most essential characteristics of this political process is the "reason to give or provide." Therefore,

those participations and deliberations need to possess that substantial ingredient without which there would be no reasonable exchange of political arguments.

It should be noted that several studies have shown the existence of greater efficiency and openness of users to talk about political issues online through an electronic device and within an online community or platform than in face-to-face dialogues (Rains, 2007; Stromer-Galley, 2003). This is because online costs of involvement in political debates decrease, creating new mechanisms for organizing discussions, and opening new channels for interactive communication (Benkler, 2006; Rheingold, 1995). As a result, the Internet has a powerful influence and ability to group and encourage rational debates between people from different cultural and social backgrounds with broad and diverse points of view.

For the purpose of conversation, also in cyberspace, to be compatible with the general aspects of democracy. In this regard, Lévy (2007) establishes some conditions. One of them is the existence of deliberation and argumentation. The important thing is not just the comment itself, but it is content and form. Noise, understood as communicative difficulty, in its way, is irrelevant to democracy. In the democratic process established within the new communicative spaces - emerged in the new digital revolution - what is said is not the most important thing, but rather how one is saying or arguing the point of view in comparison to other authors, Masip et al., (2012: 5) they synthesize it like this:

Democracy implies respect for others and their arguments, for pluralism, for tolerance. It is the difference between speaking and dialogue; between arguing for the sake of arguing and severe dialogue in which there is an interest in the subject of debate because those who are speaking are trying to understand each other.

Habermas (1987) suggests the Habermasian "validity claims" refer to the type of reasons provided for deliberative democracy. In order to qualify, any agent (person) acting linguistically, with a view to an understanding with others, must comply with the following claims of validity⁴⁴: truth (what are the facts? are

⁴⁴When describing Habermas' validity claims this terminology tends to vary. In the book *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, the four validity claims are translated as truth, rightness, truthfulness, and comprehensibility (Habermas 1979), a translation used by Ulrich (2001) in his paper *A Philosophical Staircase for Information Systems Definition, Design, and Development*. Forester (1989) used the term "comprehensibility" instead of clarity, but at the same time, he follows the terminology used by Cukier et. al., 2004, cited above.

the arguments supported with evidence?), clarity (is what is said intelligible and comprehensible?), sincerity (is what is said what is meant?), and legitimacy (what is privileged? what is missing?) (Habermas cited in 1979; 1987).

2.3.5 Citizen Journalism

We start from the premise that the Internet is hegemonic (Berners-Lee & Fischetti, 2001) as the new communicative ecosystem (Papacharissi, 2002). On various fronts, the beneficiaries are journalism and the fields of communication sciences in particular (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2009). In the more traditional form of mass media, the decline in the number of readers of the paper versions is compensated by the accelerated growth of cyber-readers and the advent of new means of communication in a local setting. The relatively affordable financial sustainability of digital newspaper business models (Herbert & Thurman, 2007; Anderson, 2013) is fuelling the emergence of new forms of media, like citizen journalism (Singer, 2006; Deuze, 2009; Goode, 2009; Allan & Thorsen, 2009; Bruns & Highfield, 2012).

Journalism is, therefore, being revived in the wake of technological Darwinism (Schwartz, 2002). The new knowledge manager within this digital economy is the content creator, as it becomes the central figure in the intense and direct relationship between the company and the consumer, first converted into a prosumer, consumer and producer of content, (Toffler, 1980; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010) and then into a crossuser, an autonomous, informed, demanding and very critical consumer when it comes to choosing a product or service acquired by browsing the web (Ros-Diego & Castelló-Martínez, 2012).

The availability of a plurality of sources and the participation of the reader with data or opinions are an added value for the media (Dahlberg, 2001), which sometimes uses these materials to confirm or modify the focus of a specific piece of content. Videos recorded during demonstrations of the Arab Spring (Al-Ghazzi, 2014) or the social mobilization of the Spanish *Indignados* (Ferré-Pavia & Perales, 2015) reflect the crucial role of citizen journalism (Chung, Nah & Yamamoto, 2018). However, the accurate filtering and use of these data fall to professional journalism. Thus, it should be considered that professional newspapers have the most credibility and audience, since the reliability of so much unfiltered infor-

mation was already being questioned since the end of the 20th century (Naisbitt & Aburdene, 1990), participatory or citizen journalism (Gillmor, 2004), which is not always exempt from ideological conditioning (Deuze, 2005), is therefore based on interaction. It is more conversational than a textual approach. In fact, in the production of contents (Díaz-Noci, 2004), the participatory or authorial formulas are raised. Thus, in the former, the reader would intervene in the creation of newsworthy content, and in the latter, he or she could provide consultations and data. However, professional journalists would not introduce them to the content. This media-citizen journalism gear turns the communication scenario into a less authoritarian and more participatory grassroots journalism (by the people, for the people), which popularizes the sources. If Journalism 1.0 transfers the traditional contents of analogical media to the Internet, Journalism 2.0 creates the contents in a network context, and Journalism 3.0 is collaborative and builds a community. The reader is a proactive consumer and producer (Rosnay, 2006), as opposed to the info-capitalist norm in the context of mass media (Steimberg, 1993). The reader produces, disseminates, and even curates content on the Internet.

Known for its participatory and democratic nature (Baase, 2008), citizen journalism has been described as "public journalism," "collaborative journalism," "civic journalism," "open source journalism," "crowd-sourced journalism," "grassroots journalism"⁴⁵, "community journalism," among other terms (Noor, 2017). Some academics have generally described citizen journalism with an emphasis mainly on empowering citizens to partake in democratic discussions and exchange of ideas (Chung, Nah, & Yamamoto, 2018; Nah & Chung, 2016). One of the most popular and used conceptualizations of the term is provided by Bowman and Willis (2003:9) who described citizen journalism as:

the act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing, and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, and wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires.

⁴⁵"Grassroots journalism is part of the wider phenomenon of citizen-generated media—of a global conversation that is growing in strength, complexity, and power. When people can express themselves, they will. When they can do so with powerful yet inexpensive tools, they take to the new-media realm quickly. When they can reach potentially global audience, they literally can change the world" on GILMOR, D. (2006), *We the media: Grassroots Journalism by the people, for the people*, Sebastopol, O' Reilly Media, 15.

Technology has played a significant role in “transforming citizens from passive consumers of news produced by professionals into active participants who can assemble their own journalism” (Kovach & Rosentiel, 2007). Bowman and Willish (2003) have suggested that ordinary citizens have enabled other citizens to raise their voices and report about hard issues. Citizens, as a collective subject of individuals, participate in journalism in multiple roles, such as reporters, witnesses, experts, curators, proofreaders, photographers, camera operators, editors, and commentators (Reese, 2016; Loke, 2012; Allan & Thorsen, 2009). These developments generate enormous expectations in those who see participatory journalism as an additive that helps the operation of traditional journalism and helps solve several of their old problems: the elitism of the news, the absence of diversity of voices (El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2016), ignorance of social problems that require extreme attention (Borger, Van Hoof, et al., 2013). As former The Guardian’s editor-in-chief, Alan Rusbridger puts it in his book *The Remaking of Journalism and Why It Matters Now*:

I’m afraid we felt a bit superior to those without the same access to information that we enjoyed. It was easy to confuse our privileged access to information with ‘authority’ or ‘expertise’. And when the floodgates opened — in billions of people also gain access to information you could publish them self —journalism struggled to adjust.

Indeed, it can be argued that such positions illustrated by numerous daily commentary practices on news sites, countless blogs on an endless thematic diversity such as the participation of amateur journalists in the coverage of events such as disaster emergencies and police violence, and the constant content curation by citizens (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2017). Mobile devices have contributed to this phenomenon by opening new spaces for citizen journalism, available at the fingertips of every news consumer aimed for it (Westlund, 2013).

According to Kovach et al. (2007), the primary purpose of journalism should be giving citizens the information they need to be free and self-governing, at the same time they also add that the “twenty-first century must recognize this and help arm the public with the tools it needs to perform this more active form of citizenship” (Kovach et al., 2007). This alternative approach, in many ways, perhaps even seems to be more closely aligned with the concept of objectivity than it is in the filtering process, which news ordinarily undergoes through utilizing the traditional, mostly commercial, journalism model.

The establishment of citizen journalism across the globe provides an outlet to individuals who desire to report on the news independently of business or government influences (Ward, 2009), separating themselves from the responsibility of having to deal with the formalities and the pressure that often result from news corporation or mainstream media.

2.3.6 News Reading and Sharing on Social Media

“News organizations do not own the news anymore.”

— *Richard Sambrook*

Back in 2011, according to the *State of the News* report by Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, online news’ audience surpassed for the first time in history the ones from print newspapers. It was clear that since that moment on, the news ecosystem was becoming more digital-centralized (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). With more and more people consuming social networking sites, it is essential that we grasp who is using the sites and why. Earlier studies have begun to explore how individual differences affect online behavior (Suler, 2004; Belk, 2013; Kuss & Griffiths, 2011).

Undoubtedly, social media have become a crucial and elementary part of online news consumption and distribution (Kramp & Loosen, 2018). New patterns of news consumption have emerged with social media being the most relevant player, which relegates journalists to a different dimension in terms of sole gatekeepers (Trilling et al., 2016; Bruns, 2018). Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram have become large media outlets for providing information, discovering sources and new stories, promoting content, and the traffic to their websites (Lee, 2016; Sacco & Bossio, 2017; Barberá et al., 2016; Thurman, 2018). They emerged as “places to turn to when news break and where users can search for further contextualization of events” (Heinrich, 2012:767). In this regards, mobile devices—smartphones, tablets, and hybrid computers—have now made it possible for individuals to interact with a plethora of media content regularly in various ways, including reading news apps to social media news channels such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram (Wei, Lo, Xu, Chen & Zhang, 2014).

Even before the popularisation of social media from the beginning of the '00s, a new wave of research among academics rose, focused mainly on the effects, the democratic consequences, the benefits, and the disadvantages of the collaborative online news site⁴⁶ and overall in social networks in society in general (Singer, 2014). Digital technology has enhanced social networking processes and news distribution, with news organizations trying to promote the sharing of news to specific audiences by adding Facebook share and Twitter retweet buttons to their web pages (Singer et al. 2011).

Social media has become a key component of contemporary media schemes. Experts from a variety of disciplines have focused on the different creative potential of social media (Nielsen & Schrøder, 2014; Newman, 2011; Bode, 2016; Bruns, 2018), like whether the emergence of new technologies and communication systems leads to a more participatory media landscape, in which regular people play a significant and more proactive role in the development, spreading and debating of news (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2012). As BBC's Richard Sambrook stated: "social media sites are the new towns, cities, or neighborhood bars where the public gather and discuss things" (in Newman 2009:10).

Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites offer an innovative way to deliver engaging content and the ability to express and distribute one's thoughts quickly through comments. Since social media is powered mainly by user-generated content—thus, media-generated content is delivered to consumers by *Likes* and comments—commenting on news posts is a significant part of the user experience (Carr & Hayes, 2015; Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2012). As Krumsvik (2015) has shown, while comparatively new media approaches for user engagement have been positive and based on deliberation and discussion, difficult financial situations and problems with online moderation have changed editorial tactics in this regard to the distribution of varied audience participation. The dissemination of news content on social media drives valuable traffic for media companies.

Social media also made more straightforward news sharing—both for media organizations and individuals (Hermida, 2012; Ju, Jeong & Hsiang 2014; Kalsnes & Larsson 2017). Twitter and Facebook have played a crucial role in the reporting of anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions of social

⁴⁶We use the terms social media and social networks since both are often used interchangeably to describe the same phenomenon.

and political magnitude (Batorski et al., 2018) such as the Arab Spring in Iran, Turkey and Egypt (Khondker; Khamis & Vaughn, 2011) the Occupy movement (Tremayne, 2014) and the Spanish movement of the *indignados* (Theocharis et al., 2015). Over time, every news-site has progressively incorporated over the last decades within their websites share buttons provided by companies behind the social media sites (Hermida et al., 2012). Whether is “sharing” and “reposting” on Facebook or “retweeting” on Twitter, news outlets have intensively benefited and rely on referrals from social media sites to improve access, article views, content moderation and get more ad revenues by visits to their websites or engagement generated from their published content (Larsson, 2018). *Pew Research Center* summarized this new gatekeeping model as “if searching for news was the most important development of the last decade, sharing news may be among the most important of the next” (Olmstead, Mitchell & Rosenstiel, 2011:4).

Besides, as Boczkowski et al. (2017:1785) point out, “most young users get the news on their mobile devices as part of their constant connection to media platforms.” Even when users are not actively looking for the news (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017), the centrality of social networks makes possible its dissemination and engagement. According to Fletcher and Nielsen (2019), citizens are unwittingly exposed to information because they are regularly exposed to them; they see how other users share news stories, with posts featuring first-hand mainstream-related information appearing on their social walls, or when mainstream media are posting links to editorial content.

In their acclaimed article, “*Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship*,” Boyd & Ellison (2007) state that every social network has three technical particularities:

1. Allowing individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system.
2. They are letting users draw up a list of other users with whom they share a connection.
3. Facilitating systems to view and search through their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

Social Engagement

Social engagement is an outstanding element of news sharing, and users share information to engage with other individuals—a lot of the times with those who are minded of the same ideological ideas (Lovett et al., 2013), to feel like they belong to a community in particular while expressing their uniqueness through information sharing (Ho & Dempsey, 2010). News dissemination or news sharing online will often depend on the user's personality and mentality (Trilling et al., 2017). SNS users who distribute, comment, and engage with news posts Facebook, Twitter, or WhatsApp are viewed as social curators or content curators (Villi, 2012). Recent studies suggest that content shared has a distinct social cognition function (Purcell et al., 2010), who aims to increase the power to influence the group, sustain group integration, and improve social prestige. The choice to share is, therefore, neither spontaneous nor arbitrary (Goh et al., 2019). When reviewing literature about the importance of news sharing, Weeks & Holbert (2013:215) stated:

In theory, if people encounter a piece of news that is personally meaningful, they will look to share or talk about it with others, through either conversation or the use of communication technologies. Information sharing is especially likely in situations where people have secure social networks and when the content is interesting, helpful, or emotionally arousing.

In this regard, some scholars have suggested the influence of news factors in news sharing. *Proximity* (Weber, 2014), *controversy* or *conflict* (Eilders, 2006)—are some of the most common influential elements in news sharing. In this vein, for example, a study by Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2012), demonstrated that controversial news articles are more likely to be shared during election times—and *entertainment* (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001) are the main actors driving *shareworthiness*⁴⁷ on social media. The theory of news value is that stories that contain such elements thrive more among users. Positivity and human interest matter as well, as proved by Trilling et al., 2017, articles with a more substantial influence on these factors might be shared more on Facebook than others that lack a

⁴⁷A term often coined to determine if something is worthy or able to be shared or shareable. In the news industry this concept is used to understand the theoretical relevance of news flows in the 21st century, where the audience are in charge of redistributing journalistic content online. According to Trilling, et al., (2017), the term takes a bigger meaning in the current news landscape, having implications "... for the study of mass communication, journalism, and political communication, as people increasingly get their news via social media."

positive side. In the case of comments, it has been argued that a certain level of newsworthiness can predict whether an article will get comments or not (Weber, 2014), Ziegele, Breiner and Quiring (2014) used the concept it to explain how much interaction does a news article receive within the comments section.

Motivations and Inhibitors of Social News Sharing

Studies on what factors motivate users to share or discuss media coverage on social networking sites have also attracted extensive interest. First of all, it is worth mentioning the massive variety of research results introduced within the area of news sharing. According to Kalogeropoulos et al., (2017), both national political context and the level of involvement that readers show with public issues are crucial when analyzing the motivations behind news sharing. For instance, there seems to be a substantial percentage of observational studies that show that the majority of news sharing or interactions on social networks are influenced by entertainment or a close bond to the news story, as opposed to motives of a political nature (Baden & Springer, 2014; Heise et al., 2013; Larsson, 2012; Paskin, 2010). However, Kalogeropoulos et al., (2017) found that there is a positive spiral of reassurance in sharing and exchanging opinions on social media. Readers who are politically engaged tend to be more inclined to share news on social media sites and engage in meaningful public discussions, while those with less interest in politics are less inclined to partake.

Within the conversations, the role of a leader often comes as a relevant characteristic of news sharing on social media. Several studies have identified the question of leadership. It is suggested that a substantial number of individuals that share stories or debate somewhat frequently on Twitter and Facebook tend to define themselves as having leadership traits (Hu et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2011; Ma; Lee; Goh, 2013).

The social media user's understanding of their own role with regards to public affairs is also associated with the question of leadership. As Kalogeropoulos et al., (2017) pointed out, readers who often share the most are also more intimately connected (Couldry et al., 2007) to current political issues and affairs; they also generally follow more diversified and independent media and see news sharing as a positive activity (Rosengard et al., 2014; Yang, Chang & Chen, 2014).

In this sense, it is vital to mention the psychology behind news sharing. Kümpel et al., (2015) define the motivation behind news sharing in three principal categories: altruistic, social, and personal or egoistic. Concerning the incentive of a personal or egoistic form, findings point again to entertainment as the key factor for participating in social media engagement activities (Ma et al., 2012; Masip et al., 2019). Some studies have found that the incentive of specific individuals to engage in social media is a way to draw attention or build a reputation among their peers or followers (Boyd; Golder; Lotan, 2010; Berger, 2014). One of the most critical altruistic motivations is to interact and engage to maximize the spread of news that is considered relevant to society (Holton et al., 2014).

The cognitive benefits of news sharing, comparable with those of entertainment, have been examined by other scholars: where some people feel eager to share news articles which have gone viral mostly in an involuntary fashion (Heimbach et al., 2015), whereas others emphasize the urge to share news for which people have a deep emotional connection (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013; Bright, 2016). Furthermore, lastly, users who choose to share information for social purposes believe that they are doing it out of an urge to form relationships and the need to gain peer acceptance (Hanson; Haridakis, 2008; Lee; Ma, 2012). Motivations for not taking part in news sharing or comment postings include not the desire to give views and opinions that could contradict what is believed to be the consensus view between the majority of friends and followers (Kormelink; Costera-Meijer, 2018). As seen by Kalsnes & Larsson (2018), the latter negative motivation could be proportionally substantial enough just to understand why a vast majority of the people do not post or comment on the news on social media.

The Negative Side of Social Media

In previous paragraphs, we stated many studies focused on how existing news outlets, progressively over the years, have integrated social media into their production and dissemination phases of their content. Scholars such as Ju, Jeong and Chyi (2013); Thurman and Schifferes (2012); Hermida (2012) have studied how editors and journalists have adapted into their daily routines the use of Facebook, similarly Hermida et al., (2010); Stassen, (2010); Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton (2012); Gil de Zúñiga et al., (2012); have examined the use of Twitter in the newsroom and how editors have embraced the microblogging platform.

The inherent nature of social media platforms, its low cost combined with quick accessibility, and the rapid dissemination of information make it a double-edged sword for news consumption. Social platforms have taken on functions that go far beyond interpersonal connection and individual expression, and several of these functions collide directly with the traditional role that our societies, according to the press and the public sphere (Elvestad, Blekesaune & Aalberg 2014). At a similar vein, they have also served as a platform for the ideological exhibitionism and empowerment of the populist rhetoric of the past few years (Brown, 2018). In this post-truth world, social media has proved to be the perfect tool for the authoritative, the demagogues, and the populists (Kemmers, 2017; Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018). To say that there is not an ongoing political division across the world, would be an understatement (Guess et al., 2018; Azzimonti & Fernandes, 2018; Spohr, 2017).

The widespread of fake news (Vargo et al., 2017; Silverman, 2017) the scale of misinformation (Lewandowsky et al., 2012) and the revival of conspiracy theories (Castellano, 2019) has led to a general growing consent that social media is potentially damaging to society and the bedrocks of democracy (Alcott et al., 2019). Misinformation and widespread misperception is nothing new in history (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007; Allport & Postman, 1947), yet the scale technological advancement has brought to this problem is quite concerning and has caused widespread alarm (Flynn et al., 2017; Lazer et al., 2018; Alcott et al., 2019). All these issues make social media an outstanding player and an impactful social factor within the news engagement experience.

Bearing the above in mind, social media in particular, but mainly Facebook and Twitter, have come to realize that the non-reliability of the content that they spread is a threat to their own future existence. If social media becomes just a mouthpiece for unproven rumors and hype, it loses some of its essence and significance, as well as its commercial value. The following is a description of some of the proposals and initiatives they are considering. In October 2018, Facebook began an experiment to fork off content from professional mass media and user-created content. Thus, in Sri Lanka, Bolivia, Guatemala, Cambodia, Serbia, and Slovakia (1% of the world's population), only user-created content and ads appeared in the contacts' news feed, excluding official media content (Wang, 2017). In March 2018, they decided not to continue with the experiment because the experience was not the same, and there was much criticism from users, as well as from journalists and media from those countries that saw very

reduced traffic to their websites (Wong, 2018).

Moreover, Twitter, as a relevant public opinion-making tool, is making efforts to help filter the truth needle into a haystack of fake news. There have been studies of the use of bots in various election campaigns, where it is estimated that up to 20% of the traffic could come from malicious bots (Bessi; Ferrara, 2016). Some of the changes proposed by Twitter to avoid the misuse of bots are - not allowing the posting of identical or substantially similar content to multiple accounts - not allowing actions such as likes, retweets, or follows from multiple accounts (Roth, 2018).

The Case Facebook

People use Facebook not only to connect with family, friends, and colleagues but also to seek information and get an understanding of the world that surrounds them (Wohn & Bowe, 2016). According to the 2019 Digital News Report released by the Institute for the Study of Journalism in Reuters, Facebook is still considered to be the most significant social media platform for getting the news, especially in Spain (Newman et al., 2019). Because Facebook does not produce original content, users receiving news through Mark Zuckerberg's creation, are still being referred to the media organizations that initially published the content. One drawback is that news stories distributed exclusively through the *Instant Articles* program did not show any traffic back to the media outlets' websites (Goel & Ravi, 2015). Given the impactful nature of Facebook, news outlets have resorted to creating pages within the social network. Pages and their user-related comments are an indistinguishable part of the online media-consumption experience (Su et al., 2018).

Engagement On Facebook, there are several metrics to measure user engagement in any published post. Public posts contain four types of metrics. Users may opt to connect with a particular post in any or all of the preceding ways (Page Post Metrics, 2015):

1. Click: click whenever a Facebook user clicks on a media element in a post, which leads to that media on Facebook or to an external website.

2. Like: the like occurs when a Facebook user clicks the 'like' link under a post.
3. Share: sharing occurs when a Facebook user selects the 'share' button beneath a post and shares content on their own Facebook timeline or through-out a social networking timeline.
4. Comments: a comment is made when a Facebook user clicks on the 'comment' link below the post and makes a comment.

Recent changes in Facebook's algorithm have affected how users see and engage with comments. Since July 2019, comments on a particular post are displayed in four different categories (See Figure 2.15). According to their *Help Centre*⁴⁸ section, they are categorized into the following parameters:

1. New to show all comments, with the newest comments first.
2. Oldest to show all comments, with the oldest comments first.
3. All Comments to show all comments, including potential spam. The most relevant comments will appear first.
4. Most Relevant to show friends' comments and the most engaging comments first.

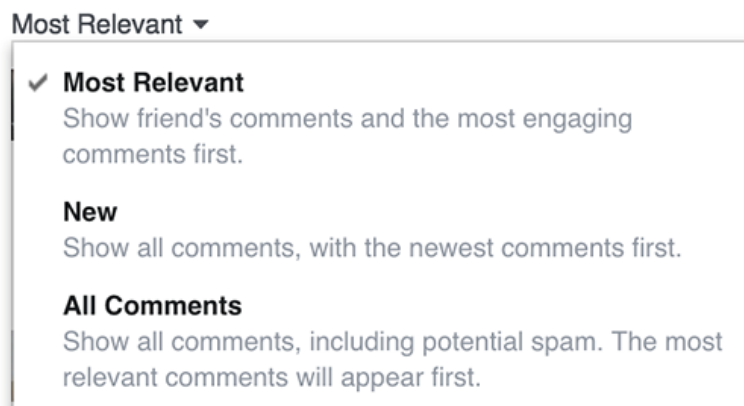


Figure 2.15: Facebook's comment ranking on public posts

⁴⁸What does Most Relevant mean on a Facebook Page post? Facebook Help Center. (n.d.). Retrieved September 10, 2019, from <https://www.facebook.com/help/539680519386145/>.

Following the above-state parameters, the algorithm chooses which comments are displayed to a particular user depending on previously liked posts or comments. On content, the user engages with the most. If, for example, friends or pages who liked a post or inserted a comment on a particular post, then these user-comments will automatically be placed on top of the ranking according to its relationship with the user. Another of the aspects taken into consideration are posting time, content overall quality, popularity, and users' reactions. According to the U.S. Patent US10216803B2 filed by the company on 2015-11-16 and approved for its use on 2019-02-26, a series of scores for each comment are assigned in line with one or more signals associated with the content of the comments.

In particular embodiments, social-networking system also includes user-generated content objects, which may enhance a user's interactions with social-networking system 160. User-generated content may include anything a user can add, upload, send, or "post" to social-networking system. As an example and not by way of limitation, a user communicates posts to social-networking system from a client system. Posts may include data such as status updates or other textual data, location information, photos, videos, links, music or other similar data or media. Content may also be added to social-networking system by a third-party through a "communication channel," such as a news-feed or stream.⁴⁹

The company's algorithm was changed back in July 2019⁵⁰, since then comments available on public pages are not shown or ranked as they previously did before, where users saw all comments all the time regarding engagement, popularity, etc. This new roll out affects the reach of comments on public posts from *Pages* and people's *News Feed* equally. The new feature, called "comment ranking" (Owens, 2017), which is patented in the US under the name of *Systems and methods for ranking comments* (See Figure 2.16)⁵¹, ranks comments under a quality signals basis. This ranking is also determined by another Patent titled *Ranking and filtering comments based on author and content*, meaning users will only see

⁴⁹Patent N° US10216803B2, inventor Erich James Owens for Facebook Inc. Retrieved on June 2, 2020

from <https://patents.google.com/patent/US10216803B2/en?inventor=Erich+James+Owens>

⁵⁰Making Public Comments More Meaningful. Retrieved August 23, 2019 from <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/06/making-public-comments-more-meaningful/>.

⁵¹Patent N° US20170140036A1, inventor Erich James Owens for Facebook Inc. Retrieved on September 2, 2019 from <https://patents.google.com/patent/US20170140036A1/en>

comments that are timely and relevant to them, and interactions between users are based on the content posted and previously engaged posts and type of authors (See Figure 2.17)⁵². The ranking's core mechanism, according to one of the patent's claims, is described as follows:

A system comprising: at least one processor; and a memory storing instructions that, when executed by the at least one processor, cause the system to perform: training a model to define relatedness ratings for a plurality of terms, each relatedness rating indicative of a relatedness between two terms; receiving a posted content item; receiving a comment to the posted content item; determining a relevance rating for the comment and the posted content item based on the model; and ranking the comment among a plurality of comments based on the relevance rating (Owens, 2017).

⁵²Patent N° US10216803B2, inventors Allison Elaine Ball, Kaushik Mohan Iyer, Ashoat Tevosyan, Mikhail I. Okunev, Erich James Owens for Facebook Inc. Retrieved on June 2, 2020 from <https://patents.google.com/patent/US10216803B2/en>

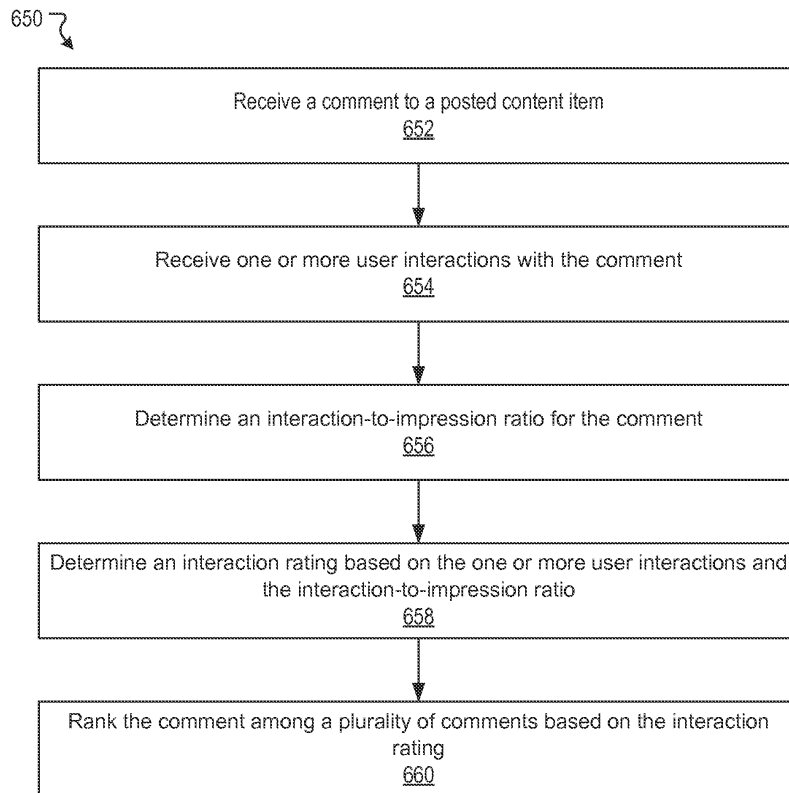


FIGURE 6B

Figure 2.16: Figure 6B of Patent US20170140036A1 “Systems and methods for ranking comments” by Facebook.

According to the patent, the figure illustrates “an example method 650 associated with ranking a comment based on an interaction-to-impression ratio, according to an embodiment of the present disclosure. It should be appreciated that there can be additional, fewer, or alternative steps performed in similar or alternative orders, or in parallel, based on the various features and embodiments discussed herein unless otherwise stated. At block 652, the example method 650 can receive a comment to a posted content item. At block 654, the example method 650 can receive one or more user interactions with the comment. At block 656, the example method 650 can determine an interaction-to-impression ratio for the comment. At block 658, the example method 650 can determine an interaction rating based on the one or more user interactions and the interaction-to-impression ratio. At block 660, the example method 650 can rank the comment among a plurality of comments based on the interaction rating.”

Source: Patent N° US20170140036A1, inventor Erich James Owens for Facebook Inc. Retrieved on June 2, 2020 from <https://patents.google.com/patent/US20170140036A1/en>

The statements mentioned above are verified by a press release issued by the company back in July, in which they noted four features that their updated

comment algorithm include, which are:

1. Integrity signals: a measure of authenticity. Comments that violate community standards or fall within engagement-bait are negative signals.
2. User indicated preferences: This is a reference to user surveys that Facebook performs in order to understand what users say they want to see in their comments.
3. User interaction signals: These are signals related to whether users interact with a post or not.
4. Moderation signals: It applies to how people or Page admins hide or remove comments made in their posts. Described by Facebook as:

People can moderate the comments on their posts by hiding, deleting, or engaging with comments. Ranking is on by default for Pages and people with a lot of followers, but Pages and people with a lot of followers can choose to turn off comment ranking. People who don't have as many followers will not have comment ranking turned on automatically since there are fewer comments overall, but any person can decide to enable comment ranking by going to their settings⁵³.

According to Patent US10216803B2 (Figure 2.17), the method used by Facebook ranks and filters comments based on interactions of the user viewing the comments with one or more social networking feeds. The documents states the process as following:

The method may begin at step 810, where the social-networking system may retrieve a set of comments associated with a content object such as a post. At step 820, the social-networking system may prepare to repeat the subsequent steps (e.g., steps 830 through 860) for each comment in the set. At step 830, the social-networking system may prepare to repeat the subsequent step (e.g., step 840) for each signal that is associated with the comment and related to a history of user interactions by a target user with the comment. Step 830 may identify each signal as described below [...] At step 840, the social-networking system may evaluate the signal associated with the current comment by determining a numeric value of the signal

⁵³*Ibid*

based on the history of user interactions by the target user with the comment, as described below with reference to FIG. 11. Step 840 may also store the determined numeric value in memory for use at step 860. At step 850, the social-networking system may determine whether there is another one of the signals identified at step 830 to evaluate, e.g., another signal that is associated with the current comment and satisfies the conditions specified in step 830. If so, step 840 is executed again for the next signal associated with the current comment. If there is not another signal to evaluate, step 860 is executed. Step 860 determines a score for the comment based on the numeric value(s) of the signal(s) evaluated at step 840. At step 870, the social-networking system may determine whether there is another comment to evaluate, e.g., another comment in the set. If so, step 830 is executed for the next comment. If not, step 880 is executed. At step 880, the social-networking system may determine an ordering of the comments based on the respective scores. For example, step 880 may sort the comments by their scores, as described above. At step 890, the social-networking system may present each comment that has a score satisfying a threshold value to the user. The comments may be presented in order according to the determined ordering.”

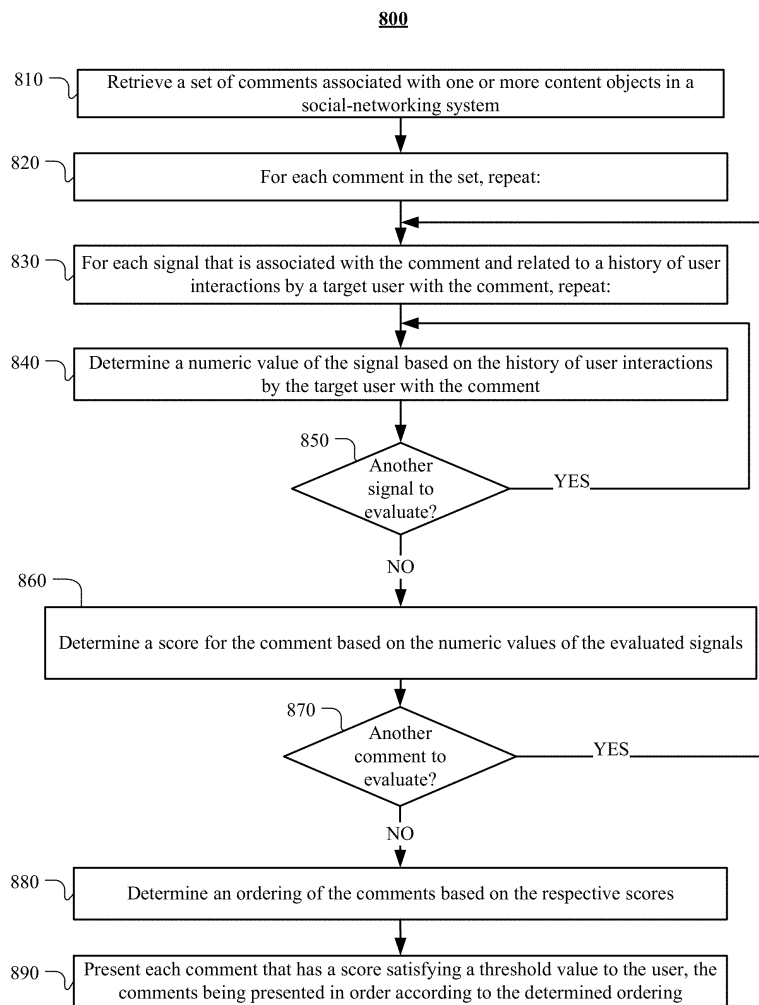
**FIG. 8**

Figure 2.17: Figure 8 of Patent US10216803B2 “Ranking and filtering comments based on author and content” by Facebook

Source: Patent N° US10216803B2, inventors Allison Elaine Ball, Kaushik Mohan Iyer, Ashoat Tevosyan, Mikhail I. Okunev, Erich James Owens for Facebook Inc. Retrieved on June 2, 2020 from <https://patents.google.com/patent/US10216803B2/en>

2.2.16.5 The Case of Twitter Since its launch in March 2006, Twitter has become a successful platform for dialogue and information exchange within the confines of a few characters (Stone, 2006). Its influence and prestige have proliferated due to the interaction between the media, politicians, experts, citizens, and journalists (Heravi & Harrower, 2016; Santana & Hopp 2016), who have transformed this social network into a discursive space where different political and public issues are given interpretation and discussion (Ausserhofer & Maireider, 2013).

Twitter's path has echoed that of preceding social networking sites such as blogs became tools for news reporting and lengthy follow-up, commentary as well as debate of news articles (Bruns, 2006; Hermida, 2010).

One aspect that differentiates it from other social networks is that users can follow each other without reciprocity involved. Furthermore, the vast majority of tweets are public and available to everyone; therefore, Twitter's information role takes precedence over its interaction functions (Kwak et al., 2010; Van Dijck, 2011). The public nature of tweets and engagement opportunities, however, make it a convenient and useful place for journalists to look for information, communicate with potential sources, and check trending topics and popular conversations on their timeline (Marwick & Boyd, 2011) which is a highly deliberative element scholar like Hermida (2010) have focused on. The academic defined Twitter as an "awareness system" that lets people genuinely understand each other's interactions and uncover "news radar patterns or issues" (Hermida: 2010:309).

Originally described as a 'highly communicative social network' structured as an asymmetric network, based on a microblogging logic (Broersma & Graham, 2013), its minimalist format has managed to connect everyday people with the famous, powerful wealthy and influential (Marwick & Boyd 2011). As Sunstein (2006) stated, microblogging technology allows regular citizens to "obtain immediate access to information held by all or at least most, and in which each person can instantly add to that knowledge.'" Even though at times Twitter's timeline can be seen showing new facts, ideas, and information, research shows news items that are fresh, such as story breaks, amusing, scandalous or shocking media articles are much more highly regarded, retweeted and shared throughout the web by their users (Houston et al., 2020). Many attention-grabbing posts are more commonly spread, making them 'viral.' Even though when twitter posts or comments are not shocking, the social aspect of the microblogging network helps to create a somewhat more online personal environment, more than any other social media platform (Chen, 2011; Marwick & Boyd, 2011) this can also be told about Twitter's tone, which is regarded as content—including people's comments—that is somewhat more engaging than anything observed in mainstream news sites (Schmidt, 2013).

In recent years, the social network has proven to be an effective system that allows users to contribute to the rapid flow of news (Thurman, 2018). The mi-

croblogging concept enables users to socially construct information out of the media range and immerse themselves in a 24/7 information environment (Hermida, 2013). In terms of news interaction, Twitter is said to be more frequently used in the event of breaking news and in the dissemination of news to followers with whom, in the most part, there is little personal connection with (Anderson & Caumont, 2014; Masip et al., 2019).

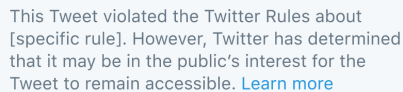
User profiles are often related to an older population with beneficial expertise or experience in various policy domains, and that is a common explanation for journalists and politicians involved on the social network (Newman & Levy, 2018; Engesser & Humprecht, 2015). In this sense, journalists have widely embraced Twitter as part of their professional practice (Gulyas, 2013), which has had an enormous effect on their standards and practices, especially when it comes to sourcing, posting breaking news stories (Broersma & Graham, 2013; Lysak et al., 2012; Revers, 2014). Twitter is used by reporters to produce news ideas, identify sources and gather evidence for investigative reports, engage readers or gather input from viewers, disseminate news and information, give one's viewpoints about a particular event or issue, curate material, and endorse one's individual or another journalists' work. (Hayes et al., 2007; Hermida, 2012; Bruns & Burgess, 2012; Molyneux, 2015; Swasy, 2016; Yongwhan et al., 2016). Coddington et al., (2014) have described the adoption of the social platform by news professionals as 'the central circulatory system of information among reporters.

The immediacy and strength of the audience enable reporters to rely on a continuous flow of evidence, knowledge, and information that might otherwise prove to be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to obtain in other circumstances. During situations of catastrophes or natural disasters, in particular, journalists frequently go on the social network to get nuances and quick information from users reporting on the ground way before the official authorities begin to mobilize, and of course, before the news machinery with their first reporters land on the scene. (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2012; Burch et al., 2015; Malik & Pfeffer, 2016; Hermida, 2016).

The algorithm used to rank Facebook's comments section behaves differently than, for example, the one observed at Twitter. In contrast, the latter tends to show all comments resulting from a Tweet or Thread to any user public or logged in by default.

On Twitter, the limitation behind the inability to capture some comments relied on several factors, such as the users' privacy setting, the suspension of an account by the social platform (2.21), the removal of content directly from the user or Twitter itself, among other reasons (Statt, 2018). According to Twitter, they add notices on tweets to give context on actions their system or moderation teams take on specific content, which can be categorized in the following (Twitter, 2020):

1. **Placing a Tweet behind an interstitial:** place on some forms of sensitive media like adult content or graphic violence behind interstitial advising viewers to be aware that they will see sensitive media if they click through.



This Tweet violated the Twitter Rules about [specific rule]. However, Twitter has determined that it may be in the public's interest for the Tweet to remain accessible. [Learn more](#)

Figure 2.18: Notice for a removed Tweet that violated the rules. Source: Twitter.com, "Notices on Twitter and what they mean". Retrieved June 22, 2020, from <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/notices-on-twitter>

2. **Notice for a removed Tweet that violated the rules:** If a Tweet was found to violate the site's rules, and has yet to be deleted by the person who Tweeted it, the SNS will hide it behind a notice. The account will remain locked until the Tweet is removed.
3. **Labeling a Tweet that may contain disputed or misleading information:** If Twitter determines that a message contains misleading or disputed information that could lead to harm, they add a label to the content to provide context. For Tweets containing media determined to have been significantly and deceptively altered or fabricated, the social network adds a "Manipulated media" label.

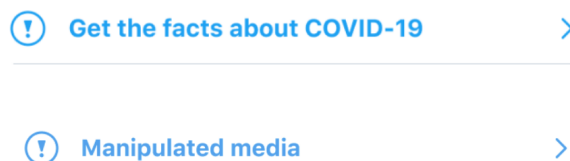


Figure 2.19: Notice for Tweet on synthetic and misleading information. Source: Twitter.com, “Notices on Twitter and what they mean”. Retrieved June 22, 2020, from <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/notices-on-twitter>

4. **Tweets with limited visibility:** used when a Tweet is unavailable for viewing, in particular, if a user is trying to see or interact with a Tweet from an account they do not follow that has protected Tweets. The notice also shows up if the account has blocked a user from viewing their messages, if the Tweet was deleted, or if the Tweet is from a deactivated account.

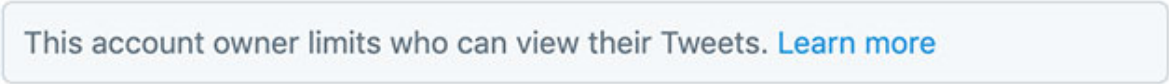


Figure 2.20: Notice for a Tweet with limited visibility. Source: Twitter.com, “Notices on Twitter and what they mean”. Retrieved June 22, 2020, from <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/notices-on-twitter>

5. **Notice for a Tweet from a suspended account:** If an account were found to be in violation of Twitter’s rules, any Tweets from that account would be hidden behind this notice.



Figure 2.21: Notice for a Tweet from a suspended account. Source: Twitter.com, “Notices on Twitter and what they mean”. Retrieved June 22, 2020, from <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/notices-on-twitter>

6. **Withholding a Tweet or account in a country:** if Twitter receives a valid and properly scoped request from an authorized entity in a specific country, they may withhold access to certain content.
7. **Hiding a violating Tweet while awaiting its removal:** Once Twitter takes an enforcement action and the user deletes their Tweet, a notice with the title “This Tweet violated Twitter Rules. Learn More” will appear on a thread and on timeline up to 14 days after to acknowledge its removal.



This Tweet from @username has been withheld in <country> based on local law(s). [Learn more](#)

Figure 2.22: Notice for a withheld tweet on a particular country. Source: Twitter.com, “Notices on Twitter and what they mean”. Retrieved June 22, 2020, from <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/notices-on-twitter>

Chapter 3

Empirical Perspectives and Practices from the News Outlets

“A good newspaper, I suppose, is a nation talking to itself.”
— *Arthur Miller*

Within this chapter, we reflect not only on the news outlets' moderation practices and methods used but also mention in detail each of the rules of participation and legal notices available on their websites. First, this section is accompanied by passages and fragments of the semi-structured in-depth interviews carried out by the author of this work with each of the communication managers or critical individuals, responsible for the content and dynamics of participation in each newspaper. All interviews were conducted on an online basis between March and May 2019. The interviews had an average length of one hour and were digitally audio-recorded. Interviews were transcribed following the simple extended rules of Dresing and Pehl (2015) immediately after collection. The transcripts of the interviews were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, following Mayring (2004). The study centered on all points relating to interviewee's experiences with user comments engagement and UGC management newsroom's procedures, the quality of readers' participation, the culture and ethics behind the comments section, the role of journalists in discussions, and their prospective future approaches to online participation and user-engagement in their respective news organizations.

Second, their feedback and statements support and underpin the many previous findings drawn from the coding and analysis of the sample units in the comments. Besides, it helped us verified and confirmed previously found scientific evidence. Their contributions support numerous studies and observations made by different academics and experts in the study of moderation policies, active Internet audiences, digital journalism, and newsroom dynamics. Lastly, the semi-structured in-depth interviews¹ have provided us with a clear vision and a much closer and more extensive qualitative understanding to the policies of moderation in every news outlet; the control and quality of user-comments; the discussion guidelines; the perceptions and perspectives that each media organization has regarding the content generated by its readers; the content production, distribution, and user engagement dynamics within their social networks official pages and profiles; their relationship and challenges posed by users' engagement.

¹All the interviewees statements were translated from Spanish to English by the author.

3.1 Comments Policy & Terms of Participation

In previous paragraphs, we reflected on the importance and role of moderation in the comments sections. The authors of this work mentioned that the perceived quality of a news article might depend on the type of comments it has at its bottom (Rowe, 2015; Stroud, Scacco, Muddiman & Curry, 2015; Ksiazek, 2018). Research has highlighted the impact that moderation policies can have on the readers (Meyer & Carey, 2014) as well as how they can shape their attitudes and decision making before commenting on a news item (Coe et al. 2014; Diakopoulos & Naaman 2011; Ruiz et al., 2011; Wise et al., 2006). The relevance and power of moderation policies not only lies in getting the best out of each commentary section, exalting the quality of the contributions but also the discursive and deliberative plurality that the opinions and thoughts of their users bring with them, not to mention the legal, ethical, moral and objective challenges that user- for digital media since it could be said that user-generated comments and opinions are a fundamental value intrinsic to freedom of expression and fundamental and crucial element in democratic engagement on the Internet and the formation of public opinion.

Online public discussions within the news are not just about news media and their reporting being more participatory or engaging as online newspapers integrate user comments into their own spaces, an ethical and legal approach needed to be considered. Here is where the rules come in, in an attempt to strike a balance between freedom of speech and respect for one another, the core of democratic ethics. Implicitly, the rules on engagement should remind readers that freedom of speech is not absolute freedom and also that news outlets establish their boundaries by trying to foster respect, which is the only way that a discussion can become a constructive democratic debate (Ruiz et al., 2011).

The terms of participation or user participation guidelines aim to inform users of their current obligations as responsible creators of content—comments in this case. The fact of the matter is that consumers must understand that they must be accountable for the information they leave in the comments section. The news outlet should guarantee that consumers are held to account and ban anyone who does not adhere to the guidelines. Moderation teams shall execute the process duty.

In this regards, the figure of the moderator is established in order to: manage the volume of participation and as a necessary and binding force; to restore and maintain order in the debates, and also to exercise control over the deontological policies of the media towards the users; for the respect of the ethical and usage norms within the conversations. In these terms, the rules, in general, of almost all the media analyzed in our sample expressly prohibit the dissemination of the content of a racist, pornographic, sexist, xenophobic, terrorist advocacy, exaltation of violence, anti-democratic messages, false information, and other aspects. Each of the websites analyzed has within its privacy policy and legal notices, sections where these terms of conditions are stated. Each one considers more relevant aspects than others, almost all of them are similar, and sometimes the differences we find have more to do with the ideological angle of each outlet, but in essence, they all start and go towards the same place, which is to ensure that the debate is free of conflicts, that the quality of the opinions prevails and that all the readers have the opportunity to express their opinions without any impediment, all this is carried out within a legal and juridical context and that under all aspects the established rules are respected.

3.2 Analyzed Digital News Outlets

As we mentioned in Chapter 1, the outlets chosen for the analysis of this work relies on the fact, that every one of them belongs to the most-read online-only newspapers in Spain as of January of 2020. Their relevance, audience reach, and social traffic are also factors that had been taken into consideration for this research since its importance for the study of the user-comments studied is imperative. We found the following specifications, which provide us with a comprehensive picture of the norms of use of each media subject to analysis:

3.2.1 ElDiario.es

Founded in September 2012, this digital newspaper can be considered one of the "heirs" of the newspaper *Público*, which appeared after the printed version of the newspaper was closed. In fact, the current director of ElDiario.es, Ignacio Escolar, was the first director of *Público*, his last director, Jesús Maraña, also

created a native digital newspaper after the closing of the newspaper: *Infolibre*. (López & Ordaz, 2013)

ElDiario.es has on its staff several journalists from the *Público* newsroom, as well as a large number of contributors from the same background. From the outset it has enjoyed considerable success with the public, thanks above all to the focus of its reporting, which is critical of the *Partido Popular* and oriented towards the left, generally aimed at a young and educated readership. ElDiario.es is published by a limited company called *Diario de Prensa Digital S.L.* More than 70% of this company is in the hands of editors and collaborators of the newspaper that contributed capital and work now of putting it into operation. Many of these journalists, who are also shareholders, in turn, are those who signed the following statement of intentions: “At ElDiario.es we believe that society needs independent and professional information with social values. We want to give voice to many citizens who are drowning before a cookie-cutter asphyxiating informative offer² [...] We are driven by the ambition of buying our freedom, claim our trade, own the newsroom in which we work in and thus ensure that the editorial line is independent and does not correspond to any hidden interests. Behind ElDiario.es, there is no one else: no large business group, no political favor, no subsidies, or any debts with the bank”.³

With a center-left orientation, this digital native newspaper is still until this day (as of the printing of this work) run by the journalist Ignacio Escolar under the banner of “periodismo a pesar de todo” (journalism despite everything). The newspaper has an active role as a “watchdog” that focuses on monitoring power, manifests itself against corruption and fraud, is interested in the new politics and democratic regeneration, combating inequalities and poverty through the recovery of rights and freedoms and, among other things, prioritizes the struggle against gender violence in all its different expressions (García-Carretero et al., 2019). Its success is based on a mixed financing model, running ads, and through members’ subscriptions. As of 2020, the number of subscribers was 34,000 that

²Original version in Spanish: “En ElDiario.es creemos que la sociedad necesita información independiente y profesional con valores sociales. Queremos dar voz a tantos ciudadanos que se ahogan ante una oferta informativa monocorde y asfixiante”. Retrieved from https://www.ElDiario.es/que_es/

³Original version in Spanish: “Nos mueve la ambición de comprar nuestra libertad, reivindicar nuestro oficio, ser dueños de la redacción en la que trabajamos y garantizar así que la línea editorial sea independiente y no responda a intereses ocultos. Detrás de ElDiario.es no hay nadie más: ningún gran grupo empresarial, ningún favor político, ninguna subvención ni ninguna deuda con el banco.” Retrieved from https://www.ElDiario.es/zonacritica/detras-eldiarioes_6_45905412.html

contributed to 33% of its revenues.



Figure 3.1: Current landing page of ELDiario.es. Screenshot retrieved on September 9, 2020. Source: www.ELDiario.es.

Engagement Features

The reader has different ways of commenting. Besides the comments section available in all of the news pieces, the newspaper has official accounts on Twitter and Facebook⁴⁵. Although their presence on social media is significant, it only uses them for the posting of news articles or multimedia pieces, such as videos or podcasts, but not as a communication channel for its audience.

⁴<https://www.facebook.com/eldiarioes/>

⁵According to Facebook, on their transparency tab, ELDiario.es created their page on 27 March 2012

The newspaper gives priority to subscribers, which, according to them, are a fundamental pillar of their independence. All published articles allow comments from readers. For users to be able to comment, it is necessary to register and thus obtain a reader profile in which other users can see the number of comments posted, the ratings received, and if one has been reported for the use of abusive or non-civic language (See Figure 3.2).⁶

Moderation

For ElDiario.es, one of the tools they value the most is the active moderation from their users. In the reform of the comments section carried out in June 2014, an improvement was implemented for the first time in a flagging system since its creation. In December of that same year⁷, the newspaper shared with readers the possibilities for them to participate as well. In an article, they explained how all readers could comment and vote, but only subscribers together could moderate inappropriate comments. Both votes and complaints would be public.

Today we are launching the changes in the voting and comments system of ElDiario.es' readers. As defenders of freedom of expression and plurality of voices, we believe that comments are a space that continuously enriches us all. We were quite concerned that the votes would stifle the exchange of opinions, as many of the readers gave negative votes to comments with which they disagreed ideologically, when in fact, the aim of hiding the comments should be to avoid spam and insults, not to silence the dissenters.

The Chief Strategy Officer of the newspaper, María Ramírez, confirmed the application of this voting system in the interview for this study:

Registered users themselves, as well as the members, can vote positive and negative comments, then we have a small algorithm that counts how many positive and negative votes a comment has; if the negative votes exceed the

⁶On the comments box: "Leave your comment here. We want this to be an open and respectful space. Help us to achieve it by taking into account the rules of participation. A civilized debate relies on people like you."

⁷ElDiario.es, & Gonzalo, M. (2014, December 3). Puesta en marcha de los cambios en sistema de votos y comentarios. Retrieved 10, 2019, from https://www.ElDiario.es/redaccion/Puesta-marcha-cambios-sistema-comentarios_6_331126903.html.

positive ones, in a certain amount, the comment is hidden (María Ramírez, pers. comm., ELDiario.es, March 2019).



Figure 3.2: El Diario.es' comment box. Source: ELDiario.es

Within the comment participation system, there are two categories: that of registered regular readers and those who are subscribers, the latter is highlighted in preview-mode at the top of the comments' section with the heading *Comments from our members*⁸ (Figure 3.6); comments from members also have a signature triangle badge on the top right of their comment that reads *socio*⁹ or *socia* (Figure 3.4) —if the user registered is a woman or uses or identifies herself with the Spanish female pronoun. Comments made by members are also highlighted in a light grey background (Figure 3.3). While their responses to other members' opinions show a black badge on the top corner of the comment's box (figure 3.5) Besides, members can access all news items published at night, and privileged non-members will not have access until 7 am of the next day. Digital subscribers are also invited to participate in offline and online events and meetings and special promotions organized or sponsored by the outlet. Subscribers can comment on the news unlimitedly, while regular or unsubscribed users can only comment on one story per day. As of 2020, the comments section has gone through three significant structural changes, one in 2014¹⁰, the second in 2019¹¹ and the last one in 2020 due to concerns over the raise of COVID-19 misinformation and false claims from unregistered users and registered ones without a membership¹². All the changes have come to solve relevant issues concerning moderation; troll handling, comments visualization and classification, section's design, functionality, and layout, among others. In this context, the design has a substantial weight

⁸In Spanish: "Los comentarios de nuestros socios"

⁹In English: Subscriber or Member

¹⁰https://www.ELDiario.es/escolar/cambios-comentarios-eldiarioes_6_274082608.html

¹¹https://www.ELDiario.es/redaccion/Nuevas-funcionalidades-comentarios_6_943215680.html

¹²https://www.eldiario.es/socios/votacion-cambios-comentarios-eldiarioes_132_5946674.html

for the media, since it allows users to find news content effectively and quickly as Schönbach and Lauf (2002) design and layout can promote the success of newspapers.

In an op-ed piece by journalist Ana Requena Aguilar, part the editorial staff of the newspaper confirmed the paragraph as mentioned earlier, the following it stated:

At ElDiario.es, we have reinforced our commenting policy and will make further changes soon. For example, to comment, you need to register, and there is only one comment per day. Members do have unlimited comments and can moderate them. When we detect that a comment violates our participation rules, we initiate a process to disable that user. Among the new features, authors and users will be able to silence others on their screens.¹³

In 2020 and as a result of the coronavirus crisis and due to the increase in hoaxes, use of bots by anonymous users and interventions by trolls, ElDiario.es decided to consult their members in order to change its rules of participation within the comment section, a change that will allow only their members to comment below the news. In an article published on April 29, 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain, Ignacio Escolar wrote the following regarding that decision:

For eldiario.es, it is important to maintain a space for respectful conversation. As explained in our participation rules, we seek polite comments for an argumentative and constructive exchange of opinions: among the community of eldiario.es members and also with the authors of each article. These days, we have discovered trolls who used several names to insult our members and to break up the debate in eldiario.es: one person pretending to be ten or even more different users for this purpose. After blocking several similar cases, last week we launched an emergency measure -and for now provisional- about which we want to consult you: that only members can participate in the comments. What do you think about this decision? Do you agree with this decision? The reason that only the members of eldiario.es can comment is, fundamentally, that this way we avoid the proliferation of these networks of bots and trolls, which try to simulate several voices when they are only one. We know that, behind each member, there is a real

¹³https://www.ElDiario.es/redaccion/equilibrar_6_941815833.html

person. But this is not the case with registered users. The second related question, which we also want to ask you about, is whether comments in eldiario.es should be anonymous, as they have been until now, or should they all be signed with the name and surname of the author? My impression is that the quality of the debate would improve if all those who participate in our forum did so with their real name: without hiding behind a nickname, as was the case before with the old letters to the editor. I think that if we all took charge of what we say, as in any other area, the level of insults would be lower. One of the reasons why bad education probably prevails in Internet debates is anonymity. Not everyone uses it badly, far from it. But it is the shield behind which trolls often hide; those who behave on the networks in a way they would not use in real life. This change is more complex than simply limiting comments to only members. It requires some time and technical development, which we will only implement if most of our partners agree to this option. It is our community that has to make this decision. If approved, this change in the rules of participation will not have retroactive effect. It would only affect the future: not for those comments that have been previously published in eldiario.es, which will continue to be signed by your nickname, as they are today. And your name and surname will only appear as members of eldiario.es if you participate in the comments in the future. Nothing else. I don't like to limit access to the comments in eldiario.es. Nor do I like to remove nicknames, which are not always misused and in some circumstances can be justified. I wish we didn't have to discuss this or make any changes. But I also want to guarantee in our forum some minimum conditions that, in these circumstances, I think are not given. Out of respect for our community of members, I believe that we must act. Trolls and bots are sabotaging the public debate on social networks. As in other conversations, those who squeal the most are heard the most. In the absence of arguments, some resort to insults and organize themselves to break up the debate, knowing that this is the only way their hate speech can win. It is a global phenomenon, which is affecting democracy itself, and which, on a small scale, is also reproduced in media forums.¹⁴

It can be asserted that the after a global anonymous vote sent to every member at the end of April 2020, a decision was made on May 5th to limit, temporarily, the possibility to comment on the news only to those paying a membership. According to an article with the result's layout, a total of 16,623 members voted,

¹⁴Escobar, I. (2020, April 29). VOTACIÓN: Cambios en los comentarios de eldiario.es. Retrieved September 09, 2020, from https://www.eldiario.es/socios/votacion-cambios-comentarios-eldiarioes_132_5946674.html

around 1/3 of all users with a membership.¹⁵ As of September 2020, the changes have still not been reverted.

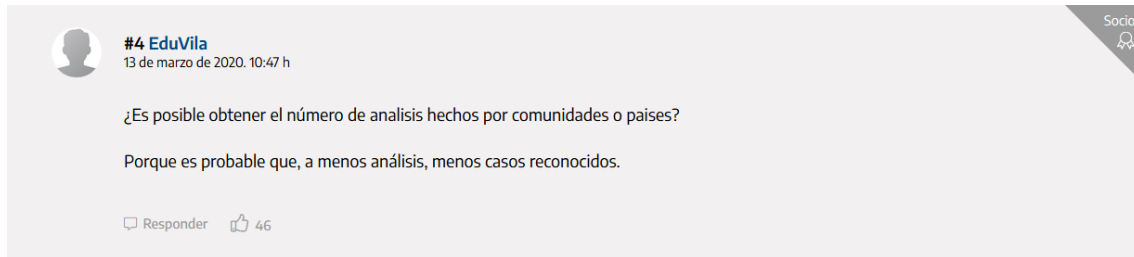


Figure 3.3: Subscriber's comment from ELDiario.es. Source: ELDiario.es

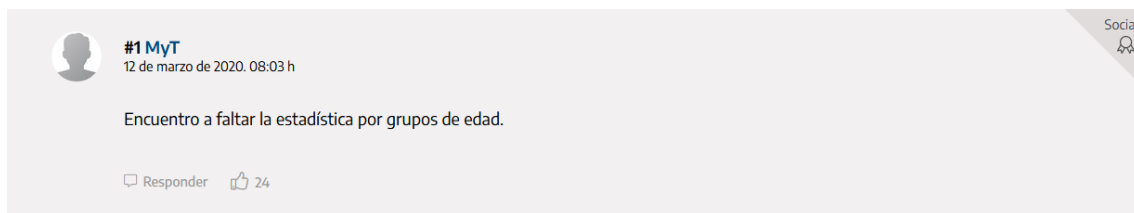


Figure 3.4: Subscriber's comment from ELDiario.es. Source: ELDiario.es

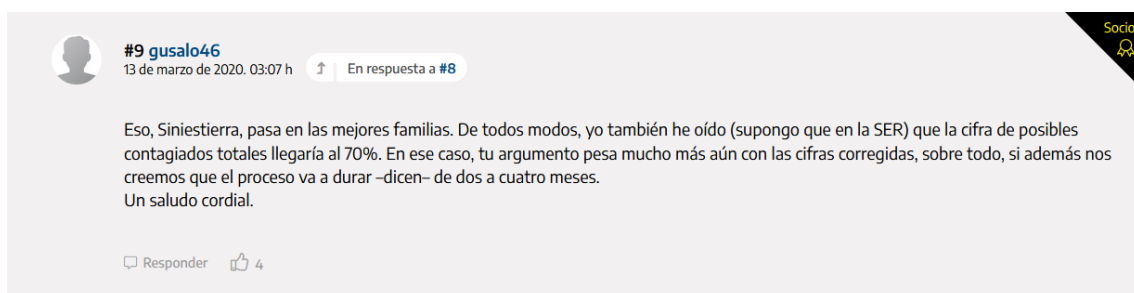


Figure 3.5: Subscriber's response from ELDiario.es. Source: ELDiario.es

¹⁵Escolar, I. (2020, May 05). RESULTADOS: Votación sobre los cambios en los comentarios. Retrieved September 09, 2020, from https://www.eldiario.es/socios/resultados-votacion-cambios-comentarios_132_5956530.html

Estos son los comentarios de nuestros socios y socias

<p>#186 Arouet https://www.theworldcounts.com/challenges/people-and-poverty/hunger-and-obesity/how-many-people-die-from-hunger-each-year Pues me parecen pocos comparados los que se mueren de hambre sin que nadie se...</p>	<p>#185 Belkados Hasta los 50 millones de víctimas que hubo en la mal llamada gripe española... hay tiempo.</p>	<p>#184 ascasona ¡¡VER-GON-ZO-SO!! Soy maestro y padre. No podemos de ninguna de las maneras volver a lo vivido durante el confinamiento. En mi centro, nadie se ha preocupado por nuestra conciliación familiar. NA-DIE... ¡¡Legislación y...</p>
<p>HAZTE SOCIO/A TÚ TAMBIÉN Y ÚNETE A LA CONVERSACIÓN</p>		<p>O inicia sesión si ya lo eres</p>

Figure 3.6: EIDiario.es' subscriber preference at the top of the comments section.
 Source: EIDiario.es

Discussion Guidelines

EIDiario.es provides its users with different spaces and tools for participation to encourage conversation and the exchange of ideas and opinions among users. Its objective is to “remain open and accessible to anyone as long as basic rules of coexistence and respect are respected¹⁶.” As María Ramírez recounted in our interview:

We obviously have the competence to participate proactively in moderation. We can decide, if a comment is not pleasing, and violates the rules of participation, or remove it from the site. There are several ways to do this: there are some journalists, especially those with a higher level of responsibility, who has the power to do this themselves. We try to centralize this moderation in the member service team because normally the moderations on our site are accompanied by the activation of a protocol of "Communication and Compliance with the Rules," we try to make it a centralized process, more than anything to have global and orderly management, so that we also have a well-measured pulse of what is happening on the web at all times (María Ramírez, pers. comm., EIDiario.es, March 2019).¹⁷

Some of the norms of participation include

1. Under no circumstances shall it be permitted to publish content that

¹⁶Aviso legal, condiciones de uso y normas de participación. (n.d.). Retrieved October 15, 2019, from https://www.EIDiario.es/aviso_legal/

¹⁷

clearly promotes hatred, contempt, or discrimination on the grounds of birth, race, sex, religion, nationality, opinion, or any other personal or social circumstance. Nor shall attempts to impersonate third parties or to publish private contact details be tolerated for any purpose whatsoever.

2. Messages containing 'spam' or those with links to sites that have no connection with the subject of the conversation will not be approved either.
3. We are looking for polite messages for an exchange of opinions, so no personal attacks or messages unrelated to the conversation will be allowed.
4. To avoid repeated comments, we recommend reading a conversation first before participating in it.
5. The User is responsible for all messages on the Internet as he or she would be anywhere else.
6. User Messages do not necessarily correspond to our editorial line.
7. The Website reserves the right to delete, for any reason and without prior notice, any information or content generated in the participation spaces.
8. The Website provides a tool for reporting inappropriate messages or content, which can be accessed via a button provided for this purpose.
9. The Website expressly declines any responsibility arising from the content hosted by users, without prejudice to which it will adopt the appropriate measures to detect and deal with complaints about possible illegal activities by users, expressly reserving the possibility of interrupting at any time and without prior notice, temporarily or permanently, the participation service offered to any user whose content may be considered illegal, prohibited or merely inappropriate.
10. Registered users may only send one comment every 24 hours.
11. The voting functionality in the comments is available only to members¹⁸.

When asked if they were happy with the results of participation and what the advantages and disadvantages were of the spaces for debate in their newspaper, María Ramirez responded:

More than an advantage, we believe that [the comments] are a door that should be left open, for our readers, to participate and interact among themselves, and with the journalists. It is not easy, because many people monopolize the conversation. There are some readers and partners who have

¹⁸Translated from Spanish to English from Aviso legal, condiciones de uso y normas de participación. (n.d.). Retrieved October 15, 2019, from https://www.ElDiario.es/aviso_legal/

already told us that they write comments to us because they feel attacked every time they write and are not comfortable. In fact, I think we have the same disadvantages, so to speak, or points of difficulty that other newspapers may have with comments. Furthermore, what we are doing is, offering those people who want to participate and interact and give their opinion, uh, but not necessarily do not like the atmosphere that is produced sometimes with these comments, to offer them other alternative forms of participation. Last year, we applied for an innovation project from Google, from the Digital News Innovation Fund¹⁹, which has, precisely, a project aimed at expanding the ecosystem of communication and participation channels. It is a call, and we won a grant, our project is called: Leave your Mark²⁰. (María Ramírez, pers. comm., ElDiario.es, March 2019).

When asked if there was any deliberation on their comment platform and if the noise outweighed the quality of the contributions, especially from the subscribers, we were told:

There is a lot of noise, but there is much valuable conversation. For example, no one joins in to comment or to moderate comments. The vast majority of comments are concentrated on unsubscribed users, and the ratio of comments per user is extremely polarized. Very few people generate a high percentage of the comments that are posted. Moreover, the latter is more prominent than paid subscribers. In fact, we have observed that there are people who have up to ten profiles to almost talk to each other and boycott other comments. The debate is concentrated in very few hands. (Esther Alonso, pers. comm., ElDiario.es, March 2019).

¹⁹According to the Digital News Innovation Fund's website, the project can be described as "a European program that's part of the Google News Initiative, an effort to help journalism thrive in the digital age. The DNI Fund is a €150 million commitment to support and kick-start innovation within the European news ecosystem." The initiative is currently operating in 29 European countries with 461 Projects and €94m of funding awarded.

²⁰With this project, ElDiario.es aims to develop "...an inclusive, rewarding and integrated participation ecosystem that will enhance better interactions between the audience and the newsroom bringing to light the most valuable part of our community. We will implement a unique navigation experience where participation is naturally integrated within the site and interaction with the newsroom is real. An innovative solution intended to rethink the role of readers and journalists within digital media outlets that will offer more formats and tools for participation than just a box at the end of every article. [...] We will try to overcome the 'era of trolling and noise' with a variety of innovative interconnected formats that promote the best of digital interaction and diminish traditional effects from the dark side that are damaging digital media and clouding the ideal of the Internet as a democratic enhancer." From Leave Your Mark (Round 3). Digital News Initiative. (n.d.). Retrieved December 4, 2019, from <https://newsinitiative.withgoogle.com/dnifund/dni-projects/leave-your-mark-lym/>.

3.2.2 ElConfidencial.com

This digital newspaper was founded in 2001, initially as a specialized media outlet for economic news aimed at a tiny niche of readers related to banking and the business world. Its founders were José Antonio Sánchez García, who—as of this writing—holds 40% of the shares, Jesús Cacho and Antonio Casado Alonso, when it comes to digital news media in Spain, El Confidencial, in the leading outlet in the sector (Galdospin et al., 2018). Their current slogan: is "The preferred daily of influential readers." The digital newspaper has a staff of 155 people, and an advertising turnover that reached €18 million back in 2018 (Mendez, Palomo & Rivera, 2020).

It has several specialized sections, such as Cotizalia—economy and the stock market—and Teknautas—technology and science. Another section is society, and its YouTube channel, known as "El Confidencial televisión," apart from including content from television broadcasts and TV shows, also carries out monitoring of shows and serials. Run by Nacho Cardero, its primary source of funding is events and advertising. It is oriented towards investigative journalism content. It is part of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, and among other relevant content, it participated in the publication of the Panama papers and the Falciani List.

According to researcher Alfonso Vara-Miguel, professor at the University of Navarra, ElConfidencial.com is a newspaper that offers to the public exclusive quality news content, especially content that other newspapers cover up or do not publish because of their overlapping of political and business interests (Vara-Miguel, 2016).²¹ James Breiner, a digital media consultant and guest lecturer of communication at the University of Navarra in Pamplona, defined the newspaper as "Spain's most successful digital journalism startup."²² Throughout this time, the outlet has gone from being a mere digital newspaper focused exclusively on political and economic news aimed at the target audience of influential viewers, to become from 2007 onwards a generalist newspaper with a more extensive audience target.

For a long time, the newspaper has been one of the few native Spanish digital

²¹In: *Innovación y desarrollo de los cibermedios en España*, 2016, Eunsa, Pamplona, pp. 166-77.

²²In: <https://bit.ly/2FnE0m5>. Retrieved on May 23rd, 2019.

newspapers that have managed to be profitable by setting their revenues on the advertising model. According to Antonio José Antonio Sánchez, president and founding partner of the company, the newspaper was born with 360,000 euros of capital in 2001, that year it had a loss of about 30000 euros, but from the second year, the newspaper has always been profitable.

The newspaper has implemented a series of innovative features, and this explains the success of its audience and income. One of its essential features is to offer exclusive information that other media used to hide and did not dare to publish due to political or business interests. According to the newspaper's directors, this innovation was possible for three reasons. Firstly, because of the editorial economic deterioration of the leading Spanish media groups whose particular interests conditioned the economic and political information. Secondly, because El Confidencial was not part of any political or economic project and therefore did not have any debts with the banks and was unconnected with the large Spanish media groups. Thirdly and finally, because the Internet also offered the possibility of creating a new newspaper with a low initial investment cost (Vara-Miguel, 2016).

In 2013, the newspaper launched the improved presentation of its platform for reader comments, providing a formula that allows it to visually highlight the most voted comments for the rest of the users. This incremental innovation was intended to reduce the clutter and lack of a hierarchy of many commenting systems and provide a system that increased the quality of content and increased traffic by laser recommending the most voted news (Cobo, 2015). Alejandro Laso, director of the laboratory at that time, stated to Alfonso vara Miguel of the University of Navarra in his article entitled "El confidencial innovar en contenido como clave del éxito," that "...with almost one million unique users a day we have almost 2000 comments a day, and we don't want more. We fight for people's time, normal people don't have time to read 50 comments, we try to keep a high level of the community until now, people ask to be part of the community with a paragraph in which they have to explain why they want to be part of the community, so we want people to be comfortable and that people contribute with value, sometimes they have more information than us."

Engagement Features After having analyzed the participation tools available within its website and its participation policies, a pattern of three liabilities

emerges for ElConfidencial.com. The first would be ethics (no insults or threats in the comments), the second is legal (there cannot be comments that constitute crimes such as threats or disclosure of confidential data), and the third represents discursive (that the comments add value to the conversation). In our conversation with David Esteve, Head of Audience Development, he reflected us on the significance and value of comments to their user community:

For us, feedback is vital. More than anything else because, in the end, people who participate in the comments are still registered users, and this means a lot to us and helps to improve the metrics a lot, e.g., at the level of retention and time spent on our website. Besides, the forum system is a thing from the past, and it is something that fell into disuse, but it worked very well, and this prompted users to get involved in other forums, in order to follow the news. I do believe that it has a lot of value for us, it is vital, it is something that we cannot coexist without, and we work a lot on the comments' moderation and the community fluidity (David Esteve, pers. comm., ElConfidencial.com, May 2019).

This is reflected in the main paragraph available in its Community Standards section:

In *Titania Compañía Editorial, S.L.*, we believe in the freedom of expression and in the contribution of the readers to create and enrich the debate on the current issues we deal with.²³

The newspaper allows any user, before registration, to comment on their site. Since their business model is based on advertising, it does not currently have a subscription model available. All comments are sorted into two categories, by date and the best rated. The latter is a classification based on the users' voting system (Figure 3.8). The user's profile picture, registration data, and a number of comments made are displayed in the comments section (Figure 3.9).

²³Translated from Spanish to English



Figure 3.8: ElConfidencial.com's comment example. Source: ElConfidencial.com.

Moderation

In order to promote and maintain that environment of useful and free exchange of opinions, ElConfidencial.com has established a set of rules that aim to guarantee the adequate development of the readers' debates within its website. On the newspaper's website, we can see that those users who do not comply with these rules run the risk of having their comments removed or even being expelled from the community if their uncivil behavior is repeated and they do not comply with previous warnings by the team of moderators. David Esteve described it to us as follows:

In our case, it has an electronic component, which is utilizing a word filter. These words must be rude or insulting or disrespectful, as they are not allowed, and on the other hand, it has a manual side as some people bypass the automatic system. Humans are always going to go beyond a machine if he or she chooses to do so. This is a matter of time or willingness to accomplish it. Ultimately, the objective is to keep the community in a healthy state, so that everyone can express their opinions freely, above all respecting other people's opinions, because freedom does not take priority over disrespect, if someone is disrespecting others since obviously there is no room for it in the community and moderation is generally done post-publication, except for the automatic part which I have already mentioned and which is an all-day job; it is a continuous job. Now I would not know because it depends on the day, but it is a non-stop work. It is a task that belongs to

one person in particular. (David Esteve, pers. comm., ElConfidencial.com, May 2019).

Discussion Guidelines Among some of the primary participation, rules of the digital newspaper within the comments section are the following:

1. We do not admit insults, threats, contempt, or, in general, behavior that tends to undermine the dignity of people, whether they are other users, journalists from the different media and communication channels of the publishing entity or the protagonists of the contents. Nor do we allow postings that may contravene the law or seriously infringe the truth as proven (or not) in court, such as slander, or promote violent or racist attitudes or incite hatred against any community.
2. We do not accept repeated postings of links to specific sites on a self-serving basis. We consider that they do not contribute anything to the rest of the readers, and they are practices that we consider spam since the space for comments cannot serve as a promotion of personal blogs or other projects. We do accept any kind of link that amplifies, clarifies, or enriches the information being discussed, and is therefore useful for all readers.
3. We do not allow the publication of sensitive personal data (telephone numbers, postal addresses, mail addresses, or other related.) We understand that this is information that may cause problems to the person who publishes it or to third parties (we are unable to determine).
4. We do not allow the same person to have multiple active accounts in this community. In the case of detection, we will proceed to disable all of them.
5. We reserve the right to suspend the activity of any account if we consider that its activity tends to be annoying for the rest of the users and does not allow the healthy development of the conversation. This includes the abuse of capital letters or comments not related to the subject matter of the content²⁴.

At the end of the list, the editorial staff includes a final note acknowledging and taking into account the contributions made by users, and the text quotes the following:

²⁴Translated from Spanish to English

Also, we ask our users to behave towards others with the same respect they want to be treated equally. In this way, The Community will continue to be an inviting space in which to debate and learn. We thank all our readers in advance for their efforts and contributions²⁵.



Figure 3.9: ElConfidencial.com's Comment Box.

2.2.3.3 ElEspañol.com It is a digital newspaper that was born under the guidance of Pedro J. Ramirez, co-founder and former director of ElMundo and Diario16. In the fall of 2015, the newspaper broke historical records, when through an equity crowdfunding campaign managed to raise 3,600,000 euros from 5,624 people in two months, the most considerable amount of money ever raised by this method worldwide by news media project. El Español.com was born as an ambitious bet amid a crisis in journalism and the media (Cabrera, 2014). With an investment of 18 million euros and a staff of almost 100 people, the newspaper opted for a mixed business model, based on one hand on traditional advertising and the other in content subscription (Del Arco Bravo et al., 2016).

Engagement Features

As previously stated, the daily, an outstanding example in crowdfunding worldwide, has a comment section at the end of each news item. The comments are open to all stories and are classified by date and relevance, and the latter

²⁵*Ibidem*

is based on the number of affirmative votes a particular comment has gotten (Figure 3.11).



Figure 3.11: ElEspañol.com's ranking comment system example. Source ElEspañol.com. Zurro, J. (2020, July 07). La confesión de Álvaro de Orleans: "La pasión entre el Rey y Corinna era tóxica, daba escalofríos". Retrieved July 08, 2020, from https://www.elespanol.com/espana/20200707/confesion-alvaro-orleans-pasion-rey-corinna-escalofrios/503200657_0.html

Because it currently has a subscription model, a regular user can only read up to 25 news items per month. Members can comment on news items without limit; their comments are highlighted in comparison to those of regular users and are identified by a crown icon followed by their username or alias and the designation "Suscriptor²⁶²⁷" (See Figure 3.12). The newspaper pointed out that the importance of highlighting subscribers' comments (Figure 3.13) lies primarily in the fact that they are the ones who are supporting independent journalism:

We highlight their comments because, in the end, they are the voices that interest us the most, the ones that support this type of journalism. These comments are moderated separately; we usually do it in a manual fashion.

²⁶In English: Subscriber

²⁷Unlike ElDiario.es, at ElEspañol.com, we have observed that it does not have an inclusive language policy in its writing and neither in their comments section, no gender distinction is made when it comes to the identification or assignment of the preferential pronoun of their users, therefore only the male pronoun is used.

El Confidencial
EL DIARIO DE LOS LECTORES INFLUYENTES

ESPAÑA OPINIÓN CULTURA MUNDO TEKNAUTAS DEPORTES TELEVISIÓN VÍDEOS Premium

IBEX 35 0.55% EURO STOXX 50 1.27% S&P 500 -2.78% NIKKEI -1.04% EUR/DOL 1.1808 PIES500 8030 EUR/GBP 0.4220

ESPAÑA El Constitucional admite a trámite los recursos contra los juramentos atípicos de varios diputados

Rebotes covid-19
Rebotes por provincias | Análisis económico | Evolución a nivel mundial

Evolución de casos acumulados en 14 días por cada 100.000 habitantes

Evolución de **casos diagnosticados** y **fallecidos** (media 7 días)

ÚLTIMOS 7 DÍAS | Contagios: 52.139 (4,87%+) | Hospitalizaciones: 1.953 (6,8%+) | Fallecimientos: 261 (10,1%+)

CS ASUME QUE ERC VUELVE A LA ECUACIÓN Y AVISA A SÁNCHEZ: "TIENE QUE ELEGIR"
PALOMA ESTEBAN 13:00

La negociación de los Presupuestos sigue completamente abierta. La predisposición de distintos grupos políticos, desde Ciudadanos a ERC, a iniciar conversaciones e influir en las futuras cuentas no hace más que dar aire a Pedro Sánchez, consciente de las distintas vías que ya se le han abierto

El Congreso de los Diputados investigará al PP por el caso Kitchen
FERNANDO GARETA 10:47 53

Rajoy en manos de Fernández Díaz y Cospedal en el espionaje a Bárcenas
BEATRIZ FARRERA

Casado, obligado a romper con Rajoy para salvar su liderazgo
F. GARETA 09:45 25

Sánchez corteja a ERC y asegura que Cs 'sigue en la foto de Colón'
F. G. 09:45 23

Por qué Pedro Sánchez humilla a Pablo Iglesias
IGNACIO VARELA

Defensa prepara una ley de secretos oficiales para desclasificaciones
I. GIL / R. MENDOZA 11:22

Más de 800.000 trabajadores en ERTE corren el riesgo de no volver a sus empleos
JAVIER G. JORDAN

Por qué la renta mínima de inserción debería ser de 5.000 euros
ALBERTO OLIVERA

Los dos gráficos que dejan en evidencia la economía española
CARLOS SÁNCHEZ 09:43

Problemas con la vacuna de Oxford: ¿qué implicaciones tiene su paralización?
JOSE PICHEL 11:43

¿Y los conservatorios? 'Me tengo que meter en un aula sin mascarillas y cinco flautistas'
HECTOR G. BARNES

Última hora | Baleares confina cuatro barrios de Palma de Mallorca por covid
EL CONFIDENCIAL 14:53

Figure 3.7: Current landing page of ElConfidencial.com. Screenshot retrieved on September 9, 2020. Source: <https://www.elconfidencial.com/>

EL ESPAÑOL

ESPAÑA OPINIÓN REPORTAJES MUNDO INVERSIÓN CIENCIA CULTURA DEPORTES JUNOLA JALEOS MAGASIN LO ÚLTIMO

EXPANDIR

ESTAMOS PREPARADOS

Junta de Andalucía

Covid-19 DATOS DIRECTO PODCAST NEWSLETTER

PSOE y Podemos impulsan una comisión de investigación al PP por la operación Kitchen

CARLOS FRÍAS 31

La amenaza a Fernández Díaz de su nº2 tras negar el ministro el espionaje a Bárcenas: 'Se arrepentirá'

Casado se planteó suspender la militancia a Fernández Díaz, pero lo descartó

CRISTIAN CAMPOS 4

'La Pequeñita', 'El Polla' o 'El Barbas': los motes con los que Villarejo ridiculizaba

NICOLÁS ALBA 4

Los hospitales del sur de Madrid más afectados por la Covid

Hospital 12 de Octubre

Hospital Severo Ochoa de Leganés

Hospital Universitario de Fuenlabrada

El coronavirus se ceba sobre el sur obrero de Madrid: la ruta por cuatro hospitales alarmados

DIEGO RODRÍGUEZ VERA / NICOLÁS ALBA 4

Sánchez, a Casado: "Podemos sí cumple con la Constitución, ustedes no"

DANIEL RAMÍREZ 104

Sánchez tiende la mano a Cs para los PGE pero dice que "no ha salido de la foto de Colón"

REDACCIÓN | AGENCIAS 1

La UE alcanza un preacuerdo con Pfizer para otra posible vacuna contra la Covid

JUAN SANHERMELANDO | BRUSELAS

Por qué es una buena noticia que AstraZeneca frene el desarrollo de su vacuna contra la Covid

PAOLO FAVA 1

Abascal asegura que el Gobierno de Sánchez e Iglesias "es peor" que la dictadura de Franco

DANIEL RAMÍREZ 104

Los puentes de EL ESPAÑOL

- Conversaciones pandémicas
- Opiniones para salir de la crisis
- Hablando sobre España
- Nuestras obsesiones
- Memorial del coronavirus
- Pedro J. Ramírez, 40 años como director

I SIMPOSIO OBSERVATORIO DE LA SANIDAD
Las fronteras de la lucha contra el coronavirus

Inversión pública en tecnología sanitaria para acabar con la obsolescencia hospitalaria

ARTURO CRUADO

La tercera jornada del simposio de EL ESPAÑOL en imágenes

La Innovación hospitalaria aboga por más colaboración público-privada contra la Covid

Iglesias se mofa del acento murciano de García Egea: "Vocalice un poco más"

P. S. 107

Un exconcejal del PP en Málaga pide "un tiro en la nuca" para Pedro Sánchez

EDUARDO GARCÍA / IMÁGENES PAREMOTRÓN 174

pepephone

FIBRA 300Mb

+ 5GB ACUMULABLES

38'90 €/MES

SABER MÁS

Figure 3.10: Current landing page of ElEspañol.com. Screenshot retrieved on September 9, 2020. Source: www.elespanol.com

EL ESPAÑOL

64 Comentarios

Escribe tu comentario

[NORMAS DE USO](#)

[ENVIAR](#)

[Por fecha](#) [Por relevancia](#)

Figure 3.12: ElEspañol.com’s Comment Box Source: ElEspañol.com.

Engagement Features

The participatory spaces in this newspaper are similar to the last two digital media described above. Although we noticed specific differences and divergences, in ElEspañol.com, comments are not generated on an organic basis, which means not all users get in the comments section to leave their opinions. This peculiarity was noticeable while we were collecting comments for the sample. In several replies, we found that some people had mentioned one another, but that the username inside the comment never corresponded to any member or user within the comment thread. Almost every time we encountered this anomaly, we could not find the user who had mentioned another one. That is why, faced with this concern, we asked Laura Sanz, the newspaper’s Product Manager, the reason behind this peculiar occurrence in the interview we conducted:

We bring the comments from the social networks and post them on our page. In other words, all comments are managed on Facebook, on networks, and we are the ones who bring that conversation, that debate about the news and then publish it on our website. There are indeed some very loyal users, subscribers above all, who comment directly on the page, but it is not the standard. The usual thing is that the conversation or debate is generated mainly on Facebook (Laura Sanz, pers. comm., ElEspañol.com, March 2019).

None of the previous media reports this type of practice, it is questionable if this kind of strategy for engagement within the digital media is ethical since

in no clause informs the users about their comments posted on Facebook being transferred over to the newspaper's comments section.

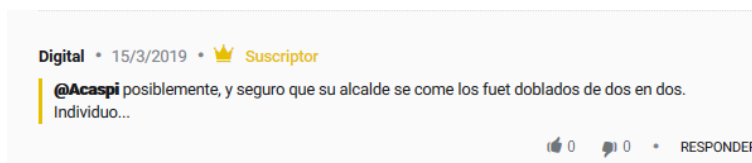


Figure 3.13: ElEspañol.com's subscriber comment. Source: ElEspañol.com.

Moderation

The voting system available in the comments zone is not aimed at the moderation of comments, but only indicates the level of popularity or relevance of a particular opinion. In this sense, this newspaper differs from the other two analyzed, which do provide their readers with tools for reporting inappropriate behavior or incivility within their communities in addition to moderating comments or banning particular messages through flagging mechanisms. The moderation at ElEspañol.com is mostly done automatically, through a subcontracted company, in the words of Laura Sanz:

On the website, comments are automatically moderated. Basically, we have a tool that measures, that takes away hostility, noise, spam, personal data, illegal content, or repeated information. All those things are removed. Last month [February 2019], this tool rejected about 10,000 messages, 10,200 to be exact. Of these filtered comments, 7000 contained hostile words, 1800 were noise but not news-related, 1800 included spam and 1200 profanity (Laura Sanz, pers. comm., ElEspañol.com, March 2019).

3.2.3.2 Discussion Guidelines

Among all the policies and rules of participation examined, the ones in this media are the briefest. By comparison to ElDiario.es and ElConfidencial.com, this newspaper does not emphasize and does not go into any depth in each of the sections within its participation policy.

In terms of participation, users of El Español who wish to make use of its dis-

cussion space below the news will have to comply with all the points set out below:

The use of this tool is conditioned by the fact that the user is of legal age and that he or she has previously registered his or her e-mail address and the alias under which his or her comments will be posted. Any comment will be filtered prior to publication to ensure that this criterion is met:

1. Comments containing insults, threats, or profane language will be rejected. We reserve the right to reject also those comments aimed at undermining the dignity of other users, journalists both from our own and other media, as well as protagonists of the stories published.
2. Publications that contain slander or those that promote discrimination or violent attitudes against any collective will not be allowed.
3. EL ESPAÑOL reserves the right to suspend those users if we consider that their comments and activity tend to be upsetting to the rest of the users and do not allow the proper functioning of the conversations.
4. In addition to these rules, in the section "Use of the Website," the following clauses are indicated that may also apply to the participation section:
5. The USER undertakes to make appropriate use of content and services (i.e., chat services, discussion boards or newsgroups) that THE HOLDER offers through its website and, including but not limited to, not to use them for:
6. Engage in illegal activities, illegal or contrary to good faith and public order.
7. Disseminate xenophobic, pornographic, illegal, content or racist propaganda, or support terrorism or the violation of human rights.
8. Attempt to access and, where appropriate, to use the e-mail accounts of other users and to modify or manipulate their messages.
9. Use the website or the information contained therein for commercial, political, advertising purposes and for any commercial use, especially in sending unsolicited e-mails.

Unlike the guidelines for the participation of other digital newspapers, ElEspañol.com does not openly condemn or penalize the dissemination of repetitive messages

or SPAM, nor does it mention within its clauses about the commentary voting system, which it does have implemented; much less does it mention any user support system or system for denouncing inappropriate behavior, while the other newspapers do have it implemented within their websites. Nor does it limit its users to the use of more than one account to comment, which for instance, is expressly sanctioned by ElConfidencial.com. Also, the newspaper does not have a flagging system the users can go to, if they aim to report incivility, trolling, and other incivility nuances. In our interview, Laura Sanz expressed they outsourced the daily moderation tasks and that comments which do not follow the rules are removed immediately, "A computer takes care of removing the comments. A company brings this to us; it is called *Raiz.es*. Users are not reported or banned. We remove their comments, and that is it. Users can discuss and reply to each other, but they cannot moderate posts from others."

3.3 Journalists' Involvement in The Conversation

Engagement in the comments section, coming from the journalists, would be ideal for deliberative purposes. Studies have repeatedly shown that their presence helps establish a much closer bond with the reader and could potentially strengthen the deliberative quality of comments (Stroud, Scacco, Muddiman & Curry, 2015). For instance, Broersma and Graham (2013) demonstrated how journalists use Twitter to disseminate information, search for stories, find sources and quotes from officials - all of these routine activities that are fundamental to the work of information professionals. Reich (2013), through a series of in-depth interviews, found that print journalists interpret and use technology in accordance with their more traditional forms of reporting. The intersection between traditional media and social networks is hence creating new practices, logistics, and routines (Belair-Gagnon, 2015).

In this context, for example, Robinson (2010) found that younger journalists were more prone to interact with their readers than older ones, who hold traditional authoritative views. Based on ethnographic interviews, she divided these contrasting philosophies into two sections: "Traditionalists" who wanted to keep a traditional more of a "gatekeeper" relationship with the public while "Convergers" called for more engagement with their customers, aka readers. Similarly, a study by Ksiazek (2018) has suggested that the quality of the discussions in

the commentary threads improved due to the editor's involvement. This engagement also plays positively in terms of civility. Journalists can often see an opportunity in the comment threads to add additional context to their stories (Goodman, 2013).

Nevertheless, although some reporters see the intrinsic benefits of comments, some have pointed out that the presence of negative comments in the form of "irrational arguments, misinterpretations of facts presented, and direct accusations" made them "hesitant about the merits of online commentary" which discourage them for participating (Secko et al. 2011). Some journalists have expressed their concerns that vitriol and trolls may diminish their outlet's brand (Canter, 2012; Loke, 2012; Bruns & Highfield, 2015). However, research suggests that when reporters engage with their audience in the comments sections, the discussions tend to be more civil (Stroud et al., 2015). Another reason why the journalist does not participate is due to time constraints. In addition, numerous journalists have expressed their concerns about the lack of time and the users' intrusion on their daily routines when it comes to their participation (Anderson, 2011; Ihlebaek & Krumsvik, 2015; Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011). These motives have also been raised in the Spanish news ecosystem wherein 2017, ElDiario.es claimed that the rapid transformation of the participatory spaces made some of its journalists exhausted due to the constant aggressive and insistent messages from the users (Mendez, Palomo & Rivera, 2020).

What is certain is that, in our study, the participation of editors and journalists in the debates and the comment sections is minimal, if not non-existent, taking into account that it is only done sometimes where it is necessary to correct some misprint or to clarify some mistaken nuance. All the interviewed subjects agree that they would like their journalists to participate and join in the debate and that the nuances and points of view of the journalists could enliven conversations. However, one of the factors why this dialectical exchange does not happen is to avoid falling into empty and banal discussions with some individual commentators, especially if they have to deal with difficult, complex topics, which by their nature, could have a more controversial or sensitive angle, such as news about terrorism, sexual assault, or immigration, are topics that journalists do not usually comment on.

We do not have a policy here of not responding to comments. However, it is not a requirement for reporters, but there is a free disposition for an

editor or a journalist to reply to users. It is not a scenario that happens with all editors, but it is also an unusual situation because it is the people who read you and they are your future customers, so to speak, so you are also interested in their interaction, but journalists do not have any kind of requirement that they have to answer mandatorily. (David Esteve, pers. comm., ElConfidencial.com, May 2019)

Another motive is the limitation of time and the lack of resources that make the media avoid this kind of dynamics.

Journalists do respond. Not to the level of frequency that I think they themselves would like, for a matter of time. It is pretty random their involvement in the discussions. Maybe there is a topic that generates or has generated a fascinating conversation in which the journalist participates, but there are news pieces where the journalist does not participate. (Esther Alonso, pers. comm., ElDiario.es, March 2019).

ElEspañol.com is the only newspaper in the sample, where journalists do not engage in the comment section at any time. The interviewee from the outlet observed:

Well, the reality is that we do not usually respond to comments, but we do try to be dynamic. We do surveys, we ask controversial questions, we try to listen to what users have to say, but we do not participate in the debate. (Laura Sanz, pers. comm., ElEspañol.com, March 2019).

The participation and involvement of journalists in participatory spaces is an aspect that is very important for ElDiario.es. One of the peculiarities observed while we were collecting the data was to see that on several occasions, Ignacio Escolar, ElDiario.es' Editor in chief, was directly responding to users' claims, suggestions, and remarks on the comments. Besides from commenting on the news, the newspaper opened a monthly column titled ElDiario.es Response²⁸ where staff—most prominently its editor in chief (Figure 3.14)—responds to users' questions, recommendations, reports, and complaints about the comments section, a comment, in particular, a suspicious or inappropriate behavior,

²⁸Escolar, I., Sánchez, J. L., Tomàs, N., Ramírez, M., Castillo, C. del, Ejerique, R., Galaup, L. (n.d.). ElDiario.es responde. Retrieved January 16, 2020, from <https://www.ElDiario.es/responde/>

etc. We also observed that in our sample, Ignacio Escolar commented on several of the pieces gathered. Our records show the editor in chief, left comments on two pieces, one published on February 12, 2019, titled *El juicio a la rebelión que nunca existió*²⁹ and another on March 20, 2019, with the headline *Podemos despide con 20 días de indemnización a los trabajadores del equipo de Íñigo Errejón*.³⁰

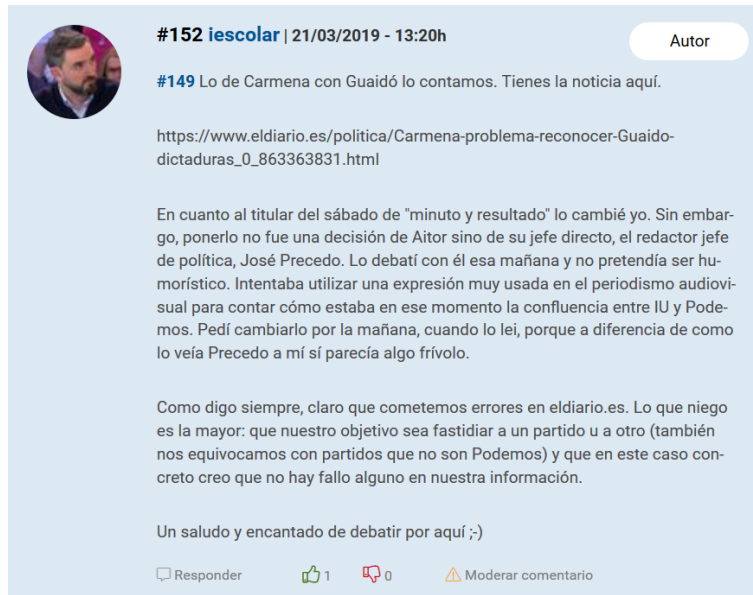


Figure 3.14: ELDiario.es' Editor in Chief Comments. Source: ELDiario.es.
 Caption In Spanish: "We told you about Carmena and Guaidó. You have the story here. https://www.ELDiario.es/politica/Carmena-problema-reconocer-Guaido-dictaduras_0_863363831.html. As for Saturday's "minuto y resultado" headline, I changed it. However, putting it in was not Aitor's decision but that of his direct boss, the chief political editor, José Precedo. I discussed it with him that morning and I didn't mean to be humorous. I was trying to use an expression widely used in audiovisual journalism to tell how the confluence between IU and Podemos was at that moment. I asked to change it in the morning, when I read it, because unlike how Precedo saw it, it did seem somewhat frivolous to me. As I always say, of course we make mistakes in the newspaper. What I deny is the biggest one: that our aim is to annoy one party or another (we also make mistakes with parties that are not Podemos) and in this specific case I think there is no mistake in our information. Greetings and happy to debate here ;-)"

From our observations, all the interviewees agree that user-comments benefits

²⁹Escolar, I. (2019, February 12). *El juicio a la rebelión que nunca existió*. Retrieved February 3, 2020, from https://www.ELDiario.es/escolar/juicio-rebellion-existio_6_867273292.html

³⁰Riveiro, A. (2019, March 20). *Podemos despide con 20 días de indemnización a los trabajadores del equipo de Íñigo Errejón*. Retrieved February 3, 2020, from https://www.ELDiario.es/politica/Podemos-empleados-trabajan-Inigo-Errejon_0_879812795.html

are countless; that this kind of participation strengthens the freedom of speech and therefore reinforces and fosters democracy.

While media companies progressively rely on direct reader profits, due to the digital subscriptions' boom, news outlets could take this advantage to refer their readers over their own participatory spaces. Commenting mechanisms have the incredible potential to foster users' civility and efficiently and effectively help build a community around reporting with both readers and journalists, and this is imperative for a bidirectional relationship between the two. As Andrew Losowsky, Head of the Coral Project told Nieman Lab³¹:

Almost everybody online knows how to post something on Facebook or Twitter. The barriers to being able to publish your thoughts online are [low]. As a result of that, news organizations need to think about what is the kind of dialogue they want to host versus the kind of dialogue that will appear elsewhere. I think it's perfectly fine to say that there are rules here that are different from rules in other spaces what news organizations can do is create a space which gives direct access to the journalists, that has the ability to bring the community into the process and be part of the process, manage interaction on the news organizations' terms rather than Facebook's terms about what is visible, what moderation tools you have, about the ability to focus and highlight on different conversations and so on. And news organizations can be transparent about how they're using people's data and really safeguard the privacy and transparency around the data of every interaction that they're having with the community [...] what news organizations can do is create a space which gives direct access to the journalists, that can bring the community into the process and be part of the process, manage interaction on the news organizations' terms rather than Facebook's terms about what is visible, what moderation tools you have, about the ability to focus and highlight on different conversations and so on. Furthermore, news organizations can be transparent about how they're using people's data and really safeguard the privacy and transparency around the data of every interaction that they're having with the community.

The deliberative aspect and the resulting pluralism of the users' diverse voices are part of the natural philosophy of the native media or at least should be. That two-way communication is the right way to establish a modern public sphere,

³¹Lichterman, J. (2017, May 24). How The Washington Post plans to use Talk, The Coral Project's new commenting platform. Retrieved February 6, 2020, from <https://bit.ly/3bIP18F>

but that the current challenges in the world of media and the constant technological advance make it impossible to build up readers' loyalty. The advantages for each media vary and depend on their vision and business model. At the same time, the lack of time and human capital makes it impossible to look after every reader, and read their contributions within the comments sections. A disadvantage, users use against other participants in the conversation. In ElDiario.es, both interviews observed how some readers create multiple accounts in order to sabotage the debate:

We have observed that there are people who have up to ten profiles, to almost talk to themselves and to boycott any other comments. The debate is very concentrated in just a handful of people. (Esther Alonso, pers. comm., ElDiario.es, March 2019).

Despite, the interviewees' desires and efforts. In our sample, the number of interactions and contributions from the journalists were scarce and represented an irrelevant portion to be considered as two-way engagement. For this reason, H3 (See §1.3) receives support.

3.3.1 The Impact of User-Generated Content Inside the Newsroom

The reasons behind the digital newspapers' motivation to implement participatory spaces inside their own realms vary between them. Among the people in charge of the media analyzed, there were very varied attitudes, from discretion to enthusiasm. These attitudes translate into specific work routines that guide the nature of user-comments benefits and drawbacks. Management strategies and participation, therefore, are not neutral but have actual intentions and tangible consequences. To understand what motives have led digital newspapers to develop one or other criteria, one must know what media expectations are about the benefits that the audience's involvement brings to them, defining these strategies, especially the ones concerning the users' engagement within their participatory realms is imperative and a key to the continuation of meaningful deliberation and interaction among readers and the stakeholders involved within the production and consumption of news.

Some of the interviewees acknowledge that the comments of the audience influence their journalistic decision-making—although certainly not regularly—and that occasionally users supply them with information which later is used to produce news content. David Esteve, Head of Audience Development at ElConfidencial.com, describes it clearly:

Mostly I would say that some comments transcend. Many comments are read; the community is not abandoned. They are read by the editor because, in the end, when someone mentions you, you read it. Most of all, I would say that debate is generated later after the comment is made. There are times when we have published information that has angered some users, and we take it into account because we are a newspaper that is for a community and if I tell you that our user is faithful, that he/she reads us, he/she follows us, well, it would be foolish to ignore people's opinions. So I think that if a company, for example, a bank, does not change our point of view, but if it is a user, who is the one who reads us, then it has much more influence on us than precisely a corporation. It is imperative to listen to the reader's opinion. Many people have an opinion, who writes very well and who contributes a lot to the debate, and if there is a user who has an opinion, then it makes perfect sense for us to read it, and we always do so. (David Esteve, pers. comm., ElConfidencial.com, May 2019).

All the interviewees state that their users' opinions are critical. They are in favor of the fact that one of the reasons for the implementation of channels for user engagement on social media, has been the result of the SNS's boom and the need to incorporate cross-platform spaces for debate, in order to advocate for freedom of expression and establish a much closer relationship with the reader, who progressively have migrated to social networks for consumption, sharing, and engagement of newsworthy content.

When asked about the challenges and the future and what would they like to improve within their comment sections, based on their answers, the media could be divided into two categories, those who want to improve their participatory platforms and those who want to improve their presence on the Internet and social networks.

In the first case, we find David Esteve's statements that he advocates eliminating dark content generated by users of his media:

Well, we would like to improve the pre-moderation of comments so that people do not abuse the system. This must be done in conditions at a technological level, and we would like to reduce the number of toxic people of haters so that they do not influence or contribute anything to the community. We want to turn the comment section into a safe playground so that people do not have to be dodging these kinds of negative people, these trolls; people who comment on negative things and who get an enjoyable debate, and that is the final goal. I would like a community that does not have to moderate itself because there are no disrespectful people, but there are people who are going to find contributions from the ethical, from the moral point of view. (David Esteve, pers. comm., ElConfidencial.com, May 2019).

In contrast to the other two outlets, ElEspañol.com ascribed to a different approach to their future practices:

Sure, we would like a thousand things, but we are limited, we have few resources, I would love to have all kinds of additional means, from personal, with a staff of data analysis, to strengthen in the area of SEO writing and to position on the web. There is so much missing because we also need someone who can dedicate a little bit to the comments that right now do not have allocated resources, as well as tools that we would also like to invest, that is to say, we are making a significant human effort to compete to be where we are with the means that we actually possess. (Laura Sanz, pers. comm., ElEspañol.com, March 2019).

For ElDiario.es, due to its participatory philosophy, based on a two-way relationship with its readers. The newsroom is ready to deal with the high volume of comments and the challenges between users and journalists in the comments section. Although its objectives in the participatory sphere may indeed be too ambitious, one solution they are working on is to be able to detect and record through AI technology, meaningful user contributions that could potentially be of use for the journalists or the newsroom itself. The representative of the ElDiario.es who participated in this study explained:

I think it is, and it's enriching. Obviously, having an opinion from your readers, even at the cost of trolling. What we would like, with the project

Esther told you about [Leave your Mark]. What we would also like is that, in those comments, we would find more value; That is, if all of a sudden, well, we detect that someone is commenting a lot, on something they are an expert on, so that we can keep that comment, or point it out in some way, that at a given moment it could serve as a source for the journalist, or of course, also, that for us it could be a way to detect that that person has knowledge of certain issues, and well, that maybe we could communicate with that person in some way, but also, for the journalist to detect that suddenly there is someone who is an expert on some issue, and that person could be a possible source for a consultation. (María Ramírez, pers. comm., ELDiario.es, March 2019).

Chapter 4

That Time When the Results Started to Manifest

“We had talk enough, but no conversation.”

— *Samuel Johnson*

This chapter aims to collect the results and a comprehensive throughout analysis obtained through the use of the methodological techniques previously described in the first chapter (See § chapter 1). As stated at the beginning of this work, the purpose of this study was to explore in detail whether comments in news outlets were deliberative, to assess the quality of the debate that takes place in them, and to describe their specific features. Discourse ethics were studied to determine the discussions' impact, the language used, the acceptance of arguments, and the recognition and civility of participants in a cross-platform analysis.

First, we break down each how the methodological techniques, proposed at the beginning of this work, were applied both to the news outlets and to social networks. Second, we discuss the first part of the results concerning the quantitative assessment. Finally, we provide insight into the results of the qualitative approach of the comment sample following our fourth objective. The qualitative analysis provides evidence on the deliberative dynamics of user comments within digital-native news outlets in Spain, which was the second objective of this research. The contents of the sample of the social networks' profiles of the media selected are also included, bearing in mind the fifth objective proposed at the beginning of this work (See § Section §1.2).

Findings are supported by a plethora of graphs that aim to provide a comprehensive and detailed interpretation of the dataset selected. It is necessary to emphasize that our findings are complementary and reaffirm many of the pieces of evidence that have been found by the above mentioned scholars, however, they should not be considered conclusive considering that the study and analysis of the dynamics of discourse and audiences on the Internet is a field that is continuously changing due to the exponential technological advancement curve¹.

Besides, we have performed data compression due to the size of its nature. That is why some analysis tables, datasheets, or codebooks are not shown in this section; instead, they have been included in the § 5.4. All comments examples provided are in Spanish with a gloss translation in English.

¹See Discussion in chapter 5 for a more extensive explanation and analysis.

4.1 Results on Use-comment Analysis

As previously stated in the above paragraphs, in our sample, we examined by hand, the discursive ethics of a 1-month² sample of comments from stories belonging to the "most read" section of the day. The dynamic nature of the internet makes it incredibly challenging to select an entirely random selection of news stories. To deal with this issue we decided to opt to sample our corpus of comments by choosing a compound month method, that is, taking the first day of the week, in this case, the first Monday of the first month of the sample, and from there, alternating one day on and one day off until we entirely obtained 30 days, for a total of eight weeks.

Methodological approach

Data collection started on February 1st, 2019, and It finalized on March 27th, 2019. The reason for the choice of this sampling method was to ensure that stories did not repeat in the next sampling session. For the selection of the corpus, a cluster sampling method was chosen. In the first phase, we captured the comments below each article belonging to the "most-viewed" section from the day of the sample. Data was gathered from the landing page of each of the digital news outlets studied (See Figure 4.1, Figure 4.2 & Figure 4.3). For this process, we used *Ncapture*, a plug-in browser of *NVivo*. The sample had a pre-established schedule beginning at 10:00 in the morning and ending at 23:59 the same day. However, news items were gathered in two time scheduled sessions, one in the morning at 10:00 and one at 22:00. For each web domain, we aimed to gather a somewhat equal amount of news pieces. After an average calculation, this amount resulted in six stories per session (M= 6). At the evening session, items that were still in the ranking were updated for new comments submissions. This allowed us to work with a consistent and more balanced dataset. In this sense, some outlets' 'most read' articles varied during the day, therefore depending on the news cycle of a single day, some domains had a different set of news pieces the next collecting session at night. The final dataset consists of articles that could be both classified either into hard and soft news

²A cluster sampling method has been applied where one month, consisting of an average of 30 days, has been divided over the course of two months into two units by skipping one day each time (See: § table 1.2)

(Shoemaker & Cohen, 2012).

We applied a model adapted analysis datasheet, which was based on the theoretical framework of the discursive ethics of the philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1984; 1992) who believed that dialogue is a set of ethical, rational and moral standards that enable the construction of society and public opinion and therefore has the potential to become the engine for social change. We also applied the methodology of Masip et al. (2012). Each comment was coded into a codebook, structured upon three discourse segments: *Logic and Coherence*, *Collective Search for Truth*, and *An Agreement Based on the Best Argument*. Each one represents a coding reference followed by a set of questions. Therefore, a single comment can be classified into multiple sections depending on the versatility of the comment. Some comments cannot be classified and are excluded from the sample (e.g., Deleted comments; comments with lack of sufficient argumentation such as spam or advertisements, flagged comments). As aforementioned, every coding category was supported by a series of questions to frame each discursive ethical aspect and perform a qualitative assessment (See § Table 1.3). Consequently, each of these questions was preceded by a measurement system, based on one affirmative (YES) and one negative (NO) criteria.

These measures have been applied, in order to know in-depth, the discursive quality of the participation of the users through their comments—in the spaces enabled for this purpose. Within this objective, we also aim to find, which are the most read and commented categories and news sections, and what kind participatory trends emerge, both from within the newspapers' websites, as well as, outside of them, particularly within their official profiles on social media, specifically Facebook and Twitter, which comments have also been collected into the sample. Each of the analyzed newspapers is different in nature and present a very particular structure and HTML design that characterizes their brand and editorial line which makes them have an absolute distinction between them, yet each share one characteristic or element in common, besides from the fact that all are native digital news outlets, all of the websites sampled have a comments' sections with almost identical terms and rules of participation (See § Section §3.1). Indeed, it can be argued that there is a structural cohesiveness, both engagement tools, and functionality, seen thorough the compositional scope of all of the news outlets' sites.

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La nueva vida de los 'indepes' canarios: unidos, reforzados y aliados con...



Figure 4.1: Most-Read Section on ElConfidencial.com. Source: ElConfidencial.com. Retrieved from ElConfidencial's cover on February 15, 2019.

Comments on Facebook and Twitter were gathered from the official accounts of the news outlets. Due to large amounts of data and given the nature of the coding, only the post or tweet with the most comments recorded in a day were selected. As with the news outlets' stories, posts, and tweets on social platforms were captured to measure the discourse ethics of the comments left by the outlet's readers. Quantitatively, other aspects were measured, such as the number of users by username type, and impacts—shares, likes, retweets, and the amount of user-generated content in the form of discourse language elements like emojis, memes, and GIFs.



Figure 4.2: Most-Read Comments Section on EIEspañol.com. Source: EIEspañol.com. Retrieved from EIEspañol.com's cover on March 3, 2019.

Data were controlled and measured by combining cross-sectional analysis (Arnett & Claas, 2009) with content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018), which provided us with a deeper understanding of the data collected at the same point in time in a representative subset. Analysis measures were also chosen following Masip et al., (2011) methods. For this process, we utilized *Ncapture*, a plug-in browser of *NVivo*.

It is worth noting that due to the restrictions of the Facebook comment ranking algorithm—which we examined thoroughly in the literature review—only

those comments available in each post could be used for analysis. On Facebook, since all of the news outlet's pages were set up to display comments in a non-chronological matter (Owens, 2017), not all comments were available for extraction. On Page's moderators are in charge of the comments' visibility. As a Page admin, they can control what other visitors see comments. Currently, there are two options for moderating comments on one's Page: hiding a comment from a post or deleting a comment from a post³.

³Tips for Moderating your Facebook Page. (n.d.). Retrieved September 10, 2019, from <https://www.facebook.com/business/a/page-moderation-tips>.

lo +

Leído Comentado



Rosalía emociona en los Goya con un clásico de Los Chunguitos
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Premios Goya 2019: lista completa de ganadores
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El monólogo de los Goya afea la ausencia de Pedro Sánchez y reparte a izquierda y a derecha
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Pedro Almodóvar carga contra Vox en los Goya: "Le niego la existencia"
eldiarioes cultura - Sevilla



Todo lo que el Gobierno en Andalucía oculta de la realidad del PP: desplome de votos, fugas y ruido interno
eldiarioes cultura

Íñigo Aduriz

Figure 4.3: Most-Read Comments Section on ELDiario.es Source: ELDiario.es. Retrieved from ELDiario.es' cover on February 3, 2019.

Comments could only be collected once logged in into the system. The reason for this is that both Facebook and Twitter does not allow researchers or any user to extract data from their servers publicly without prior identification.

In the Twittersphere, tweets were collected according to the news stories previously gathered from the news outlets the same day of the recording in the evening session. Tweets that were marked as deleted or from suspended ac-

counts were not taken into analysis since the platform does not show the content of it after moderation.

In the case of social networks, and bearing in mind the objectives of this research, our is exploratory, with an inductive approach that gives it a succinct and non-generalizable character.

4.2 Quantitative Analysis

As previously stated, we only have chosen to include in our study, news outlets that provide commenting spaces for their readers, but that differ in editorial line, in political views, and type. All of the news outlets are only available online and have never been printed on paper or had a paper version, ever. This means they are in their entirety, digital natives. For our quantitative methodology, we used descriptive statistics (Favero & Belfiore, 2019) to analyze the differences found in the comments count across platforms, news genres, users' engagement frequency, comments posted after the sample, comments by user type, and deleted comments.

4.2.1 Sample

During the examined period between February 1 and March 27, 2019, a dataset comprising 704 stories, which generated 98,426 user-comments for all news outlets—both on their websites (30,935) and on their official accounts on social media (67,491) was collected (See Table 4.1).




	Outlet	Facebook	Twitter
 ElDiario.es	11,839	39,539	4,927
 ElConfidencial.com	9,464	8,714	699
 ElEspañol.com	9,632	10,358	3,254
		56,611	8,880
Subtotal	30,935		67,491
Total		98,426	

Table 4.1: Number of user-comments collected in total

More than 68% of engagement occurred within Social Networking Sites selected; out this outcome, Facebook was the preferred space for readers to interact and partake in the conversations below the line, with 59% of user-engagement observed. Twitter was the less used medium to engage in the news, getting 9% of the total gathered. The rest of the comments belonged to the news outlets representing 28% of the sample (Figure 4.4).

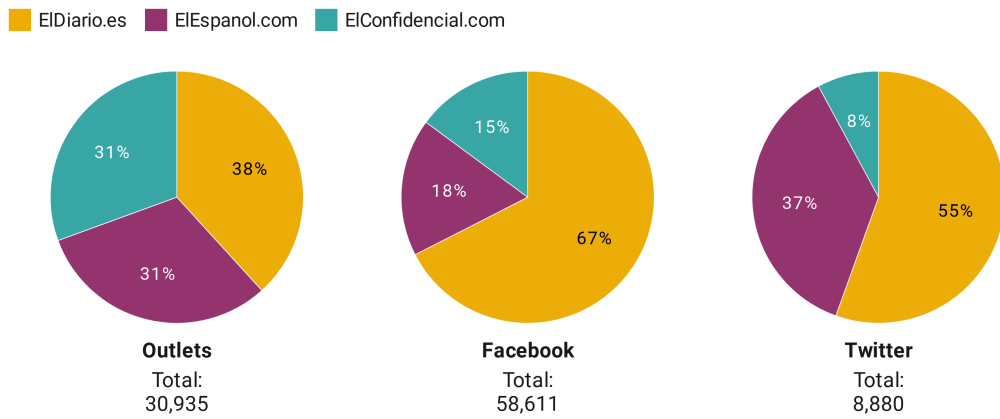


Figure 4.4: Number of user-comments collected in total

4.2.2 Comments on the News Outlets

Data consists of 30,935 comments from three news outlets (Figure 4.5), ElDiario.es (11,839), ElConfidencial.com (9,464), and ElEspañol.com (9,632) (Table 4.2)

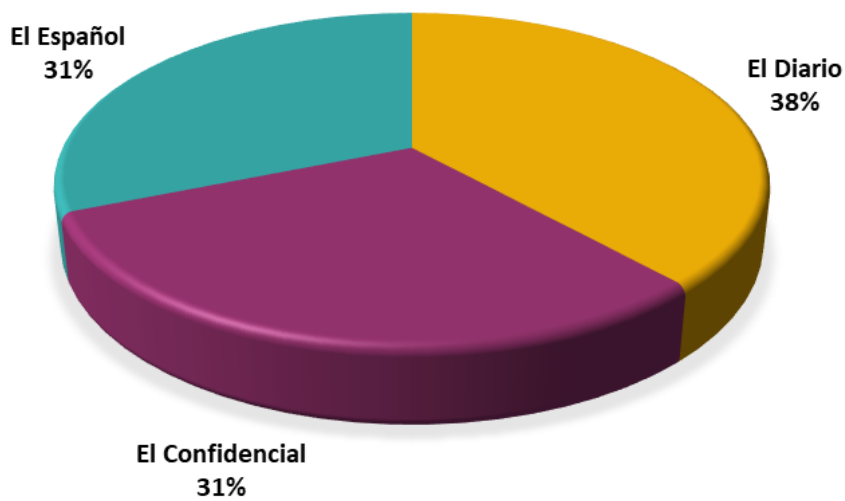


Figure 4.5: Comments' sample by news outlet (%)

4.2. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS




	Comments	Articles	Avg. Comments	Avg. Articles
	Feb - Mar, 2019	Most read	Per day	Per Day
 EIDiario.es	11,839	294	422	10
 ElConfidencial.com	9,464	205	338	7
 ElEspañol.com	9,632	205	344	7
Total	30,935	704	8,880	8

Table 4.2: Number of user-comments collected in total

Data shows that the number of user-comments collected throughout the sampling period was consistently homogeneous across publications though some days were busier than others (See Figure 4.6 & 4.7).

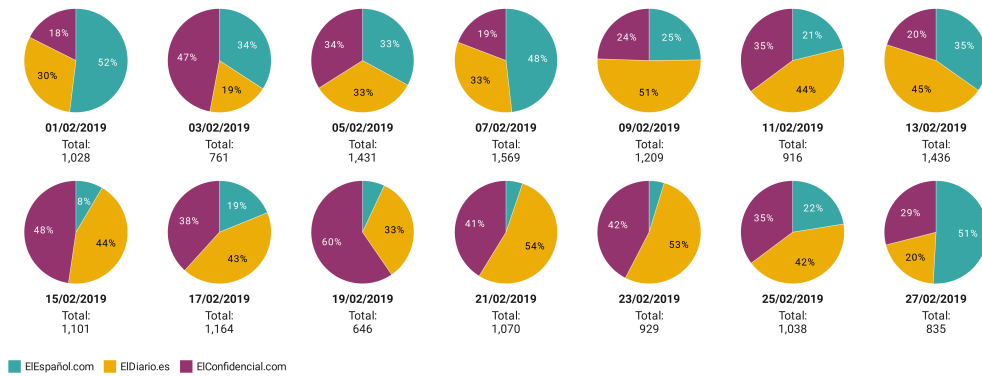


Figure 4.6: Comments Collected per Digital News Outlet in February

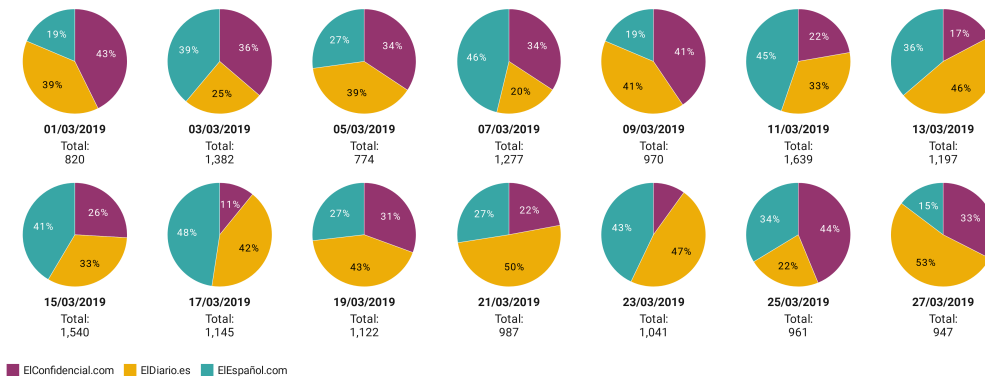


Figure 4.7: Comments Collected per Digital News Outlet in March

4.2.3 Comments On Social Networks

On social networks, the number of comments collected was 67,491⁴, distributed in 58,611 comments on Facebook and 8,880 on Twitter, coming from 532, and 591 news articles published by all the publications sampled respectively. Table 14 represents the data. Overall, 67,4% of the comments sampled came from social media. Such a result confirms findings from studies, focused on the dominance of Facebook as news content primary distributor among users and outlets (Kalsnes & Larsson, 2017; Ingram, 2015; Nielsen & Schröder 2014)

From the 704 articles published, all the publications combined, shared, or distributed 569 of them on Facebook (80.8%) and 591 on Twitter (83.9%) (see Table 14). Although, indeed, the amount of news that was not distributed on social networks by the newspapers in the sample is relatively low. Existing research on news sharing has shown the media organization's motives for news distribution on social media (Kalsnes & Larsson, 2018). As suggested by Lichterman (2016) and Owen (2016), Facebook is more prevalent for news distribution compared to Twitter. In our study case, this finding does not apply, and Twitter rose as the preferred option for publishers, yet since the difference between social networking sites is minor, we cannot assume this as a shred of conclusive evidence.

4.2.4 Stories on the outlets' Vs. on Social Networks

The distribution of news stories across the outlets' social media accounts varied from the ones published on their websites organically. As observed in the previous paragraph, every news organization has a different approach when it comes to news sharing on Facebook or Twitter (See Table 4.3). Data collected on Facebook, for instance, shows up that ElEspañol.com comes up in the first place with the totality of their news stories published, while ElDiario.es only published 74% of the stories available in the sample, and at last ElConfidencial.com with 70%. On Twitter, ElDiario.es ranks first among the newspapers, with 91% of the news available on the social network. It is followed by ElConfidencial.com, at 84%, and lastly, ElEspañol.com at 72%. It is also necessary to point out that the latter is one of the analyzed media that obtained less engagement in the social net-

⁴We counted all comments including repetitive comments published more than once. These were counted as separate ones despite having identical content or semantic structure.

work, data that we will see later on in the section of quantitative analysis. In general, Twitter emerges as the preferred SNS for news organizations to share their content, with over 83% of all news stories collected available.




	Outlet	Facebook		Twitter			
		Comments	Stories	Comments	Stories		
 ElDiario.es		11,839	294	39,539	220	4,927	270
 ElConfidencial.com		9,464	205	8,714	144	699	173
 ElEspañol.com		9,632	205	10,358	205	3,254	148
Total		30,953	704	58,611	569	8,880	591

Table 4.3: Number of comments and stories collected overall

As already mentioned in § 2.3.2, the cause of the lack of time and economic resources to carry out an adequate moderation in the commentary sections, have made many media to opt for a strategy based on encouraging the re-distribution of contents and the debate in social platforms, far from their own participatory spaces (Ihlebaek & Krumsvik, 2015; Villi, 2012). In that respect, comparative data research shows that Facebook is the primary channel through which audiences engage in higher levels of interaction, notably by sharing news, to the exclusion of Twitter (Lichterman, 2016; Nielsen; Schröder, 2014).




	Facebook		Twitter	
	Comments	Stories	Comments	Stories
 ElDiario.es	39,539	220	4,927	270
 ElConfidencial.com	8,714	144	699	173
 ElEspañol.com	10,358	205	3,254	148
Total	58,611	569	8,880	591

Table 4.4: Number of comments and stories collected per social network

It is important to emphasize that not all comments captured within Facebook were available for coding since the social network applies a comment ranking algorithm based on a quality signal basis, this means users only see comments that are timely and relevant to them. Another variable in the ranking are, posting time, content's overall quality, popularity, and users' previous reactions (See § 2.3.6). Facebook operates on an ever-changing algorithm which it fiercely defends (Oremus, 2016). and which is entirely unknown to outsiders, especially to the academic community. The company commands and controls how content

is accessed by a user based on stated interests, preferred sites, user-interactive posts, and other online habits (Facebook, 2017).

On Twitter, the limitation behind the inability to capture some comments relied on several factors, such as the users’ privacy setting, the suspension of an account by the social platform and the removal of content directly from the user or Twitter itself (See § 2.3.6).

Besides, because not all the comments captured at the beginning were selected for coding—due to time constraints—only those resulting from the most commented post on a particular day were chosen, therefore, the dataset of comments available, and as a result coded, was different and had a lower distribution of items (Table 4.5). In this sense, 61.6% of all comments selected for coding were available (Figure 4.8).

Outlet	Collected	Selected for Coding	Comments Available
ElDiario.es	39,539	12,985	7,317
ElConfidencial.com	8,714	5,183	3,325
ElEspañol.com	10,358	4,346	3,239
Total	58.611	22,514	13,881

Table 4.5: Dataset of Comments on Facebook

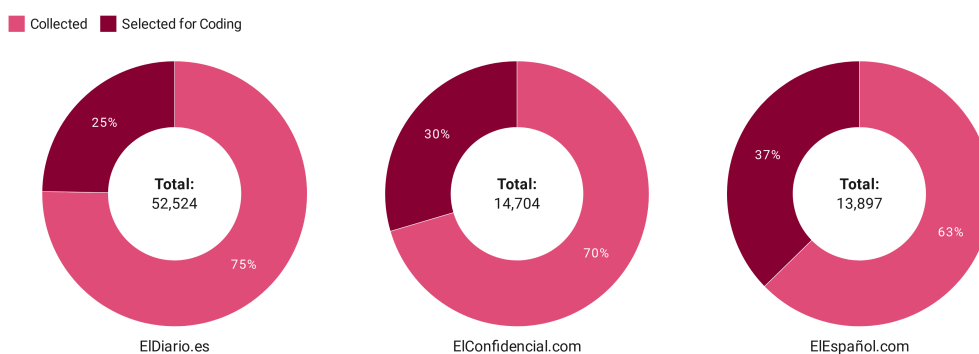


Figure 4.8: Comments Collected Vs. Selected for Coding on Facebook

Strategies to motivate readers to distribute newsworthy content social network has been a priority for the press since its boom (Krumsvik, 2013). For this reason, we consider it worthwhile to inquire into the underlying factor behind why not all the published stories are disseminated. We added a question relating to this

matter to the in-depth interviews carried out with the outlets' communication managers. Their responses allowed us to obtain a more detailed explanation behind their news distribution practices and grounds on social media. That is what each one of them expressed to us.

There are many reasons. First, Facebook somehow sentences the abuse of several postings. Suppose there are days that we can get all the news out, and then we do not have time, so we try to keep a five or 7-minute interval down to 10 for publication because we have to abide by a schedule where the people are on Facebook. Social networks also depend a lot on the behavior of users who consume them on their mobile phones, so obviously many times you cannot publish them because you do not have a way to do it and then also not all the topics that we publish in *El Confidencial* end up being published in social networks. Within Facebook itself, there is a tool that shows you the interest of a particular topic within the platform. We know that in the end, Facebook does not publish it to all its audiences that follow us, but only to a percentage that is interested in the content we post. For example, if I have to publish a news item on beer properties, first I have to analyze within my audience, which public is interested in beer and this is given to you by Facebook and if then there is a 5% that is actually interested, then maybe it does not make any sense to put it up. You have to get to that level of detail to publish the pieces. That is why we bet a little bit of automation in that aspect, and two people are dedicated to seeing what kind of content is more visible and on what platform. (David Esteve, pers. comm., *ElConfidencial.com*, May 2019).

Facebook has more weight than Twitter, but we are not so dependent because, first of all, no, we do not purchase traffic, which is also what differentiates us from others. The only investments we have made on Facebook are in ads to tell people to subscribe to *El Diario*, that is, but not to promote content. The way Facebook has been working in the last few years is that you have to invest more and more money in order to get some results, and then, of course, the moment you cut it off, you can also notice a drop in traffic. In the editorial staff, we believe that it is more praiseworthy not to depend so much on social networks. It is clear that it is essential, and we do not neglect them, and we continue to produce content, but that we do not buy traffic. We do not publish all the news because it is mostly a matter of time and availability of personnel, that is, in general, we try, for example on Facebook, to publish hard news stories, which does not work as well on

Twitter, and we try, let us say we adapt a little bit to the network. Nevertheless, when we do not publish everything, it is also because we do not want to spam the reader, because in the end, every day, there is more information out there than can fit on any social network. (María Ramírez, pers. comm., ElDiario.es, March 2019).

4.2.5 User Engagement

Our findings show that most participants only posted one comment (72.6%). This figure is relatively homogeneous among ElDiario.es and ElConfidencial.com (table ??). However, it rises drastically to 94% in ElEspañol.com, thus by engaging only with one contribution, users do not take their time to invest themselves in the discussions. Some discussions threads analyzed at times felt were filled up with a series of one-time comments. Nevertheless, the presence of many unique comments precludes the existence of a fluid conversation between the readers, since the majority of unique users in the comments section contributes to the fragmentation of the debate.

Dahlberg (2001) supported this argument, reflecting that, while ideally, all members of a group have equal opportunities to post a comment, in many groups a limited number of participants are responsible for the majority of the thoughts, which contributes to the monopolization of discourse by individuals and groups within the online discourse. We are confronted with two forms of engagement, one that is active and one that is passive. The active one would be the one where the users assume a position as content producers (McQuail, 2005), while the passive ones only consume it. Passive users are also often defined as ‘lurkers’ as those “who do not post any messages in an online community” (Takahashi et al., 2003). Nonnecke and Preece (1999) demonstrate that lurkers comprise 90% of several internet communities. In this regard, unbalanced user-engagement online has been defined in three categories “heavy,” “moderate,” and “light” (Cho & Kwon, 2015). In our sample we can attest that commenting is on average “moderate,” however because a significant proportion of the commenting is made by one-timers, then engagement in our analysis is regarded as being “light.”

Deliberation and public opinion formation become practically non-existent if very few users are commenting, and if they only do so once, the conversation’s

plurality gets reduced; the nuances are limited, and conversation is concentrated in a minority of points of view. Therefore, argumentative diversity is imperceptible. This result ties well with previous studies wherein a small portion of the audience is responsible for the majority of the engagement. For example, Barnes (2015) noticed that a comparatively small proportion of total users made a significant contribution in the form of comments; however, an overwhelming majority read them.

Participation has also been studied in the context of user involvement in social networking sites, with evidence suggesting user-engagement is not evenly distributed since a few people do a substantial portion of the participatory job. This seems to be readily apparent on collaborative sites like Wikipedia, where a small portion of people proofread or edit articles (Kittur, Suh, Pendleton & Chi, 2007). Additionally, a minority of users upload content to and share it on YouTube and are the same one who participates in online discussions. This form of representation in terms of user engagement at websites is regarded as the Pareto principle, which implies that 80% of the work is done by 20% of people (Best & Neuhauser, 2006), this theory is also close to the distribution of power law in mathematics (Newman, 2005).

In the second place, fourteen percent of users engage twice. Both ElDiario.es and ElConfidencial.com have users who post more than half a dozen times, a group of between 2 and 3% community members⁵ who appear to engage in almost every news article we have reviewed and coded. Table 3737 displays the frequency of comments per user. These findings are in line with the Digital News Report 2018, which found that users of digital news in Spain are characterized by being an audience that participates. Data in our study reinforced the study, which back in 2018, concluded that 73% of users shared and commented at least one news item every week (Newman, 2018). We analyzed the number of people who left at least one comment in both in February and March, and the numbers showed an interesting pattern: comments collected on the outlets were generated by 3% of the users recorded.

⁵Data based on profiles recorded during the sample period.

4.2.6 Comments by Name Display

In the literature, as mentioned earlier, we saw how anonymity plays a role in online discussions (Coe et al., 2014; Diakopoulos & Naaman 2011; Ruiz et al., 2011; Santana, 2014). A large body of evidence on the role of anonymity in the discourse, typically shows mixed results (e.g., Ksiazek, 2015; Santana, 2014; Graf et al., 2017). On the one hand, anonymity is blamed for encouraging incivility (Borah, 2013; Scott, Rains & Haseki, 2011; Suler, 2004; Rowe, 2015). However, on the other hand, anonymous users might have the ability to potential increase engagement (Mayer & Carey, 2014). In the same context, some online commenters choose to remain anonymous in order to protect their privacy by choosing a pseudonym (Finley, 2017). Bernie Hogan (2013) observes that:

“Anonymity is a state implying the absence of personally-identifying qualities. Pseudonyms are a practice, which is often meant to facilitate non-identifiable content” (Hogan, 2013:293).

Historically, creators such as writers, have resorted to pseudonyms to protect themselves from exclusion or failure to have an identity or ethnicity different from the one predominant in society. Users also have seen to embrace anonymity as protection against the “vilification of dissent” (Reader, 2012:505). One reader argued that “anonymity allows people to speak truth to powerful institutions” (p. 503). All these views, both intrinsic and extrinsic, are grounded in the same idea that the degree of identification of the online user possesses a significant difference in his/her behavior on Web-based participatory spaces. For all the above-stated reasons, our study needed to examine the identity used by users in the comments sections of the analyzed corpus. Operationalized concepts for the display of names were taken following the study *Changing Names in Online News Comments at the New York Times* carried out by Sachar and Diakopoulos (2016).

From all the comments gathered, 17,466 users resorted to using an alias, and 9,823 picked their real name to leave a comment (Figure 4.6). The registration mechanisms in each news outlet do not prohibit one user from registering multiple names. Therefore, it is not possible to ensure that all participants were different individuals. Unfortunately, the information on the identity of the commenters could not be included in our dataset due to European data protection laws' restrictions.

Almost all of the real names used in our sample came from ElEspañol.com (Figure 4.6), it seems quite surprising that the outlet had such high differentiation from its counterparts. However, the bottom line is that the news outlet barely gets comments organically from their users. Instead, they bring reader contributions from their Facebook Page, as suggested by Laura Sanz, Product Director at ElEspañol.com (See § Section §3.3).

The use of alias or nicknames on social networks was scarcely recorded; for example, only 423 people commented with a nickname on Facebook. In Spain, most users prefer to identify themselves using their proper names. That said, a minority of users did use their initials or partially combined names. This finding supports a previous study by Ksiazek, Peer and Lessard (2016), who distinguished between user-content and user-user forms of interaction in news comments, concluding that individual lengthy comment threads may, in effect, be discussing among few users.

It has been argued, and both in psychological studies and behavioral analysis, in commenting platforms that shifting into real-name contexts are likely to improve civility. The use of alias might enable the so-called 'online disinhibition effect' (Suler 2005), which could lead to more incivility. The prevailing argument in social psychology research is that online privacy facilitates the 'de-individuation' of users (Reicher et al., 1995; Lea et al., 1994). The concept is that, in some social settings, individuals lose touch with their individual and social limitations.

	Outlets		Facebook		Twitter	
	Real-name	Alias	Real-name	Alias	Real-name	Alias
🔵 ElDiario.es	9,349	86	236	7,081	11	2,154
🟦 ElConfidencial.com	1,887	9,216	141	3,184	141	1,911
🟩 ElEspanol.com	6,230	521	52	3,187	1	389
Total	17,466	9,823	429	13,452	153	4,454

Table 4.6: Type of User Classification by News Outlet and Social Network

4.2.7 Comments Posted After the Sample Period

Within our methodological framework, we opted to choose a variable that would assist us in understanding audience participation in the comments section, days,

weeks, and even months after the story was first published. To this end, we sought to answer RQ6: “Do users continue to engage in the comments sections days after the first initial debate started?”

Nevertheless, do stories get more engagement days after they have been published? That question was imperative for our study to determine if readers were active after the initial period of comments threads or if engagement below the news was mere an ephemeral and transitory process. To test H6 (See § 1.3), researchers revised all the stories gathered six months after the finishing of the data collection. We individually reviewed each of the collected news articles. The six months were measured from the end of the sample on March 27, 2019. The target date for the observation of the post-moderated comments was set to Friday 27 September 2019. Data revealed an increase of 17.5% of new comments posted after their original collection date. ElConfidencial.com came in first place with the majority of contributions, followed by ElDiario.es and ElEspañol.com (Table 4.7). In terms of engagement, ElConfidencial.com proved to have a more dynamic and alive comment section, with a stable 23% growth across the sample period (Figure 4.9). Despite our expectations, our hypothesis H6, linked to the RQ6 (See § 1.4) is therefore not confirmed, since engagement is observed days after the news stories were initially published. Future assessments on user participation post-moderation could be focused on examining a larger corpus of data over a more extended period to determine the average amount of days and the journalistic genres that generate most comments.




Outlet	Sampled Comments	Posted after	Post-moderation	Increase
 ElDiario.es	11,839	2,024	13,863	17.0%
 ElConfidencial.com	9,464	2,030	11,662	23.2%
 ElEspañol.com	9,632	1,364	10,828	12.4%
Total	30,935	5,418	36,353	17.5%

Table 4.7: Comparison of Sampled Comments Vs. Comments Posted After Six Months

By leaving the comments sections in their articles opened, publishers enable users to engage in the news, days, months, and even years after its original publication date. It can be argued that a permanent available online sphere is the bedrock of democracy and the premise behind public opinion. However, not all news outlets leave their comments sections available for discussion. Reputable digital outlets such as the New York Times do not open all their news stories

for readers to comment on, to begin with—only 10 percent according to the outlet⁶. The underlying reason for this decision is that the newspaper relies on a 12-person staff as a moderation system that employs manual methods of review almost entirely. Thus, because of the high volume that certain types of news may attract, especially though-provoking hard news, many publications have limited access to their comment section to a single day or a few hours only. On other occasions, stories are not even open for debate at all since it is excruciatingly challenging to moderate users' opinions (Etim, 2017). In an article published back in 2017 The New York Times' Community Editor Bassey Etim reflected this issue as it follows:

Comment sections evolved, and readers began to discuss issues with one another directly. While at best, comment sections became places for dynamic conversation and exchange, they could also become irrelevant or loaded with spam and vitriol. To protect our conversations from bad actors, The New York Times's community desk reviews almost all reader submissions by hand. With 12,000 comments moderated per day, this work is labor-intensive and has forced us to close comments on stories sooner than we would like simply because we did not have the resources to sort through them all. Many of our best stories are never opened for comments at all.

The technical and human inability of many media to control their commentary sections has made many to choose to migrate their participation to social networks—as we have seen in previous passages. Such a tendency has been reduced thanks to the development and implementation of large-scale technological projects. The application of machine learning, in conjunction with artificial intelligence, has made it feasible for the media to reopen their spaces for discussion. In this sense, and as mentioned in the section on § 2.3.2 in chapter 2, large media outlets including The Times, The Washington Post, Vox Media, Los Angeles Times, among others, have begun a new wave of digital restructuring within their commentary moderation systems, in order to expand their efforts to offer their users quality participatory spaces and thus attract readers who want to organically utilize their websites for high-quality, pluralistic, respectful, constructive and meaningful deliberation (Wang; Etim, 2017).

⁶Etim, B. (2017, June 13). The Times Sharply Increases Articles Open for Comments, Using Google's Technology. Retrieved January 16, 2020, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/13/insider/have-a-comment-leave-a-comment.html>

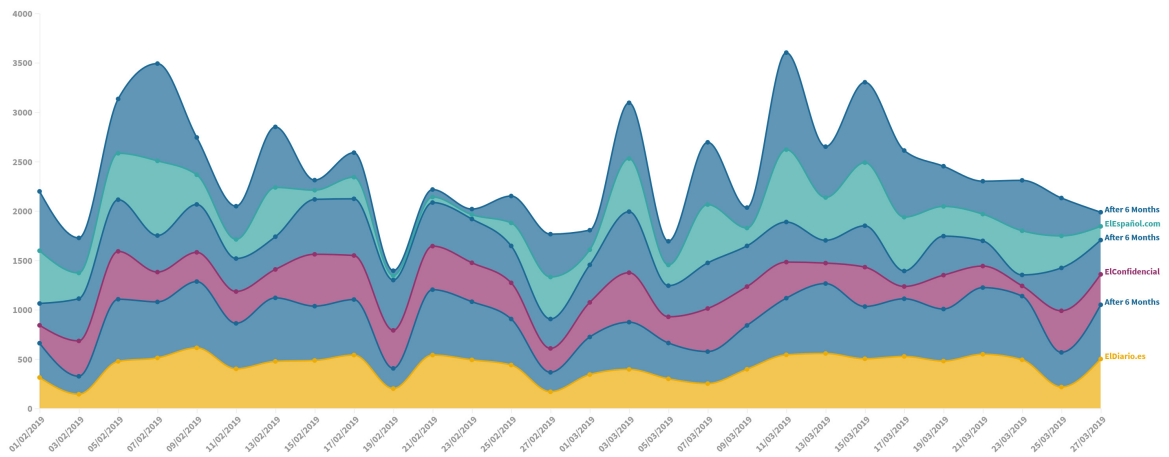


Figure 4.9: Comparison of Sampled Comments Vs. Posted After Six Months Posted by Day

Following the same method, six months after the stories gathered were recorded, news topics were examined to determine if outlets changed or switched them and also to see which topics got higher levels of engagement. Findings show that Politics continues to be a popular genre followed by stories under Society and Opinion (Figure 4.10).

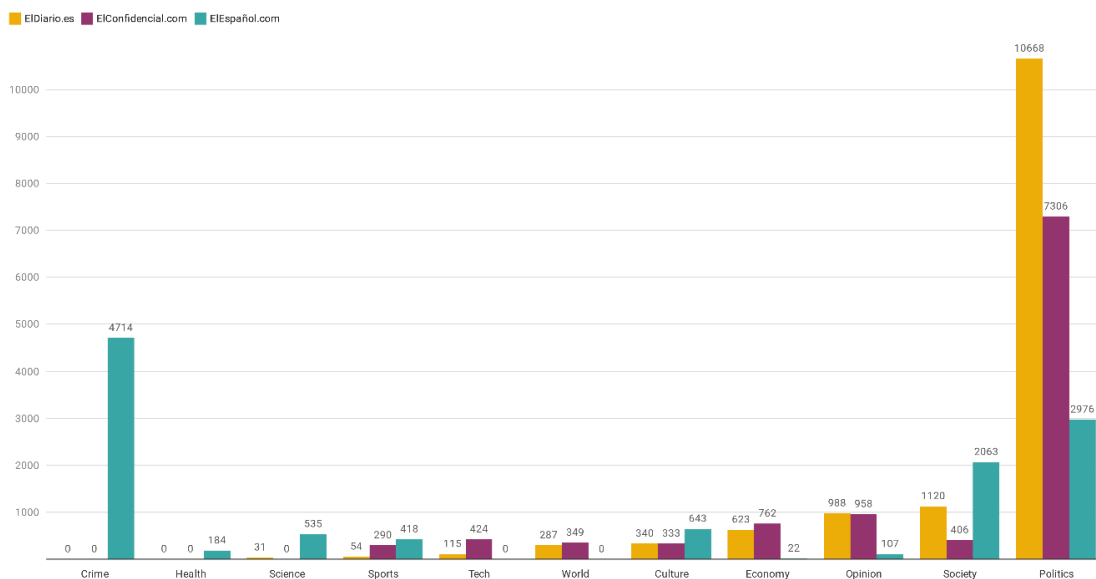


Figure 4.10: Comments by News Topics After Post-moderation

4.2.8 Deleted Comments

Of all the comments collected, only 2,37% of the total sampled ($N=30,935$) were removed post-moderation. The newspaper that deleted the majority of the comments was ElConfidencial.es, whereas the least was EIEspañol.com, in our corpus, we noticed that user-comments containing incivility; xenophobic slurs, and abusive language and personal data were deleted post-moderation the most. However, for most of the outlets, this number accounted for a small fraction of all comments coded as uncivil (Figure 4.11). In this sense, both EIDiario.es and EIEspañol.com had the least amount of uncivil comments deleted, while ElConfidencial.com removed 82% of them or 8 of every 10.

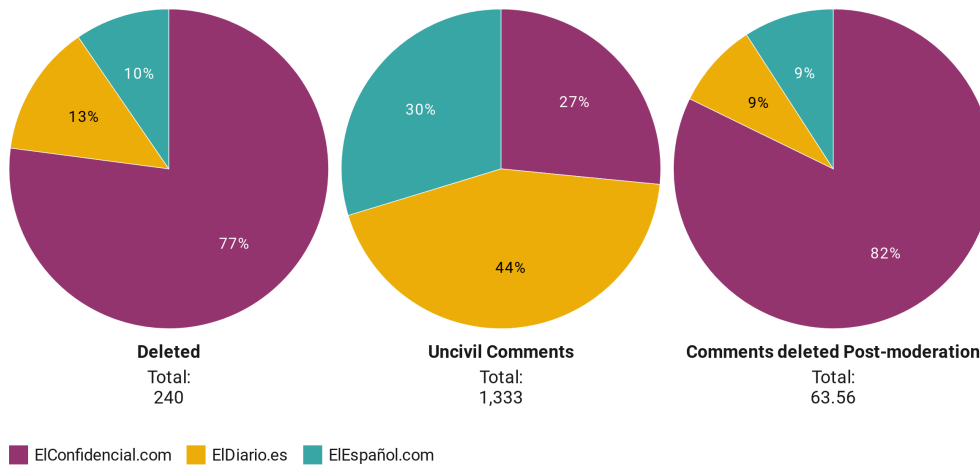


Figure 4.11: Deleted Comments Analysis

4.2.9 Most Popular News Topics

In our fourth hypothesis, we wanted to find out which news sections or journalistic genres received the most comments.

H4- Politics and Society are the news sections/topics which generate the most engagement.

H4 was tested by classifying and recording comments into the news categories in which each news outlet previously distributed them. Therefore, H4 is confirmed. It is worth mentioning that political news is a topic that in the sample varied by

name from newspaper to newspaper. For example, ElConfidencial.com is classified within their “España”⁷ section, and in ElEspañol.com, the same occurrence is observed as well. In the news outlets’ comments sample, *Politics* generated 18,316 comments in total (See Section §5.4 in 5.4), followed by *Society* (2,847), *Opinion* (1,709), *Economy* (1,197), and *Culture* (997). In contrast, *Sports*, *Science*, *Tech*, and *Health*, were the least commented with 740, 443, 418, and 147 comments, respectively⁸.

In the case of the *Sports* section, even though it has been shown in previous research that this news category often receives a lot of engagement in the comments section (Coe, Kenski & Rains, 2014), some of the news outlets analyzed does not have one. In our case, ElDiario.es is the only newspaper that lacks a *Sports* section. The reason behind this decision falls under the newsroom decision to focus on its brand image and revenue model. Ignacio Escolar founder and editor-in-chief of ElDiario.es, told Eduardo Suárez, a Reuters’ Institute Journalist Fellow, on a recent paper titled “*How to Build a Successful Subscription News Business: Lessons from Britain and Spain*,” that member started complaining after he decided to publish sports news as the audience of the newspaper grew. Since the sports coverage did not make any substantial changes in members’ growth or in revenue, they decided to drop it all together (Suárez, 2020).

On social media, *Politics* obtained 47,532 user-comments, in second place came *Society* with 6,662 followed by *Culture* (2,871), *Economy* (2,830), *Opinion* (2,695). Comments were distributed mainly on Facebook, in the social platform *Politics* came in first place with a total of 41,843 comments (Figure 4.13), the same phenomenon is seen on Twitter with 5,689 comments (Figure 4.14).

In terms of news stories distribution, a large number of comments gathered came from the *Politics* section, which came on top with 344 stories followed by *Society* with 63, *Culture* (47), *Economy* (43), and in fifth position *Opinion* with 33 articles (Figure 4.15). Topics are dominated by political issues in Spain. The most notable articles are those related to the Catalan conflict, the 2017–18 Spanish con-

⁷Spain

⁸In the sample, the section *Sucesos* came in third place. The section which translates into Spanish as “News events,” or simply *Crime* is a popular sensationalist section in several Spanish speaking countries dedicated to crime reporting. This type of journalism falls into the tabloid format and within the hard news category (Baum, 2002). In our sample, this section generated a massive amount of comments: 3,724 within the outlet and 5,205 on social media. Nevertheless, because this section is only available at ElEspañol.com; thus it was not considered for the final count of the comments corpus.

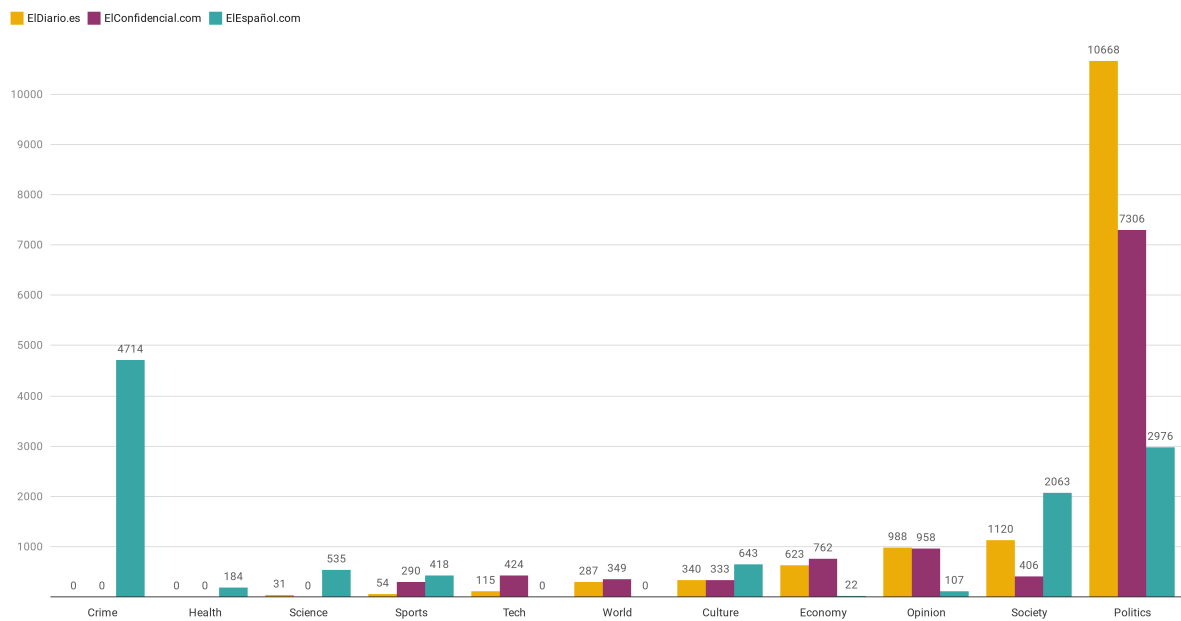


Figure 4.12: Comments by News Topic

stitutional crisis, The Trial of Catalonia independence leaders heavily influenced on the news items produced around this political issue⁹.

When asked about the reason behind users' decision to comments on specific news topics, each publication expressed its nuances in this respect. In their statements, we found the following remarks on the subject:

I would say that almost certainly the news from Spain and ultimately all those related to the Catalan conflict or from time to time as soon as there is an eruption of a new political party like VOX. The section on Spain that falls within the section of politics, national politics and then also investigative journalism that we deal with a lot in El Confidencial, for example, cases of corruption both political and economical, because, in the end, it is a bit of a subject that generates a lot of debate. It is more or less what happens with social networks, the content has a little bit of emotion, and it is what makes people want to debate. Obviously, some topics generate much debate among users or three who are there all afternoon commenting. For example, breaking news generates many comments. (David Esteve, pers. comm., ElConfidencial.com, May 2019).

Results are in line with previous findings in multi-countries studies that have

⁹Also known as *Causa del procés*.

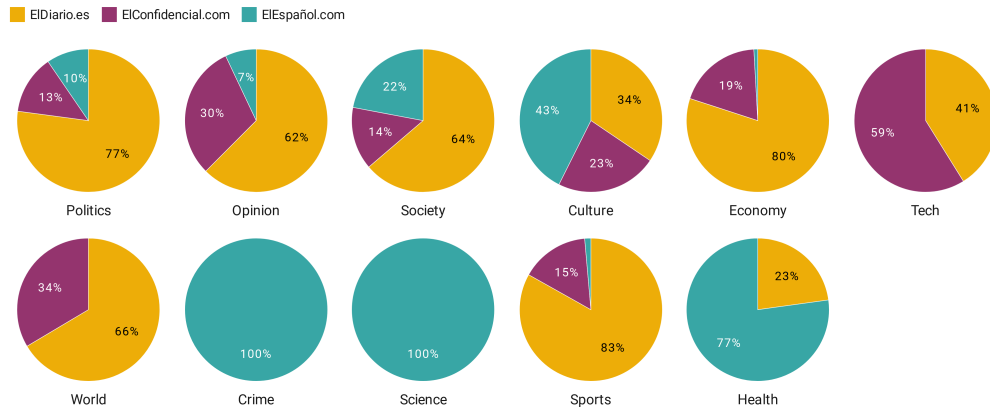


Figure 4.13: Comments by News Section on Facebook

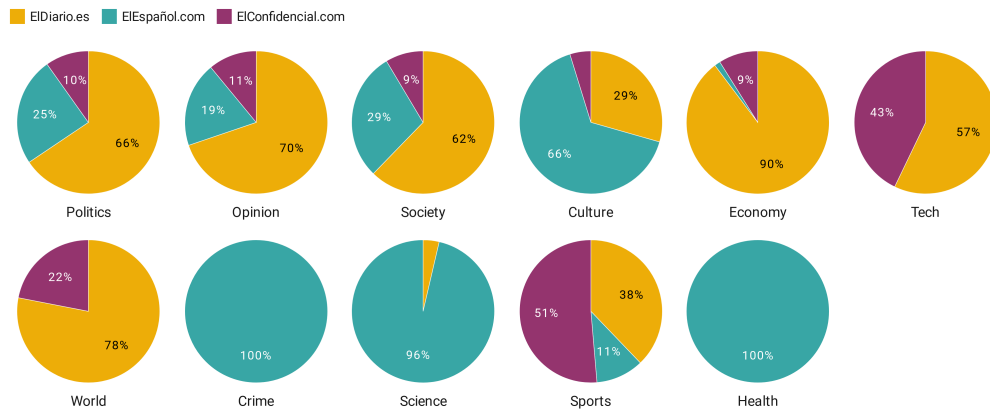


Figure 4.14: Comments by News Section on Twitter

repeatedly shown that political news stories receive the most comments (Goodman, 2013; Richardson & Stanyer 2011; Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2011; Tenenboim & Cohen 2015). Coe, Kenski & Rains (2014) found that political, economic, and international news stories were more likely to receive uncivil comments ‘soft news’ topics such as health, lifestyle, or technology obtained significantly lower amount of derogatory remarks.

Users’ motivations to leave a comment under ‘hard news’ stories are related to perceptions of the higher level of quality content. When the information offered contains so-called hard news, that is, news about public affairs such as politics and economics, the audience reaches higher levels of engagement (Krebs & Lischka, 2017). It has also been observed that the topics under debate influence

online deliberation. Larsson (2011) found that social and political participation often has an impact on online activity. While Gonzalez-Bailon, Kaltenbrunner, and Banchs (2010) noticed that within Slashdot, an online community forum described as "a form of the online public sphere" (Poor, 2005), political conversations were far more deliberative than discussions on other subjects, such as online gaming.

Moreover, Spanish Internet users who participated in the 2016 Digital News Report said they were very or extremely interested in international (64%) and political information (62%), information about their communities (76%), science and technology (64%), health and education (72%), the environment (51%), the economy (56%) and culture (51%). In terms of sports information (49%) on crime (43%) and on lifestyle (44%), respondents were less interested. On the other hand, 76% were interested in entertainment information. Besides, our data is in line with the one found by The Digital News Report for 2017—the only year in which these issues were evaluated—which indicated that 63.2% of those surveyed in Spain felt that they had a good understanding of the country's political issues, but only 42% considered themselves well qualified to participate in a discussion about them. These percentages suggest that the audience is interested in journalistic "hard news" content, even though most do not feel prepared to participate in politics in an online arena actively.

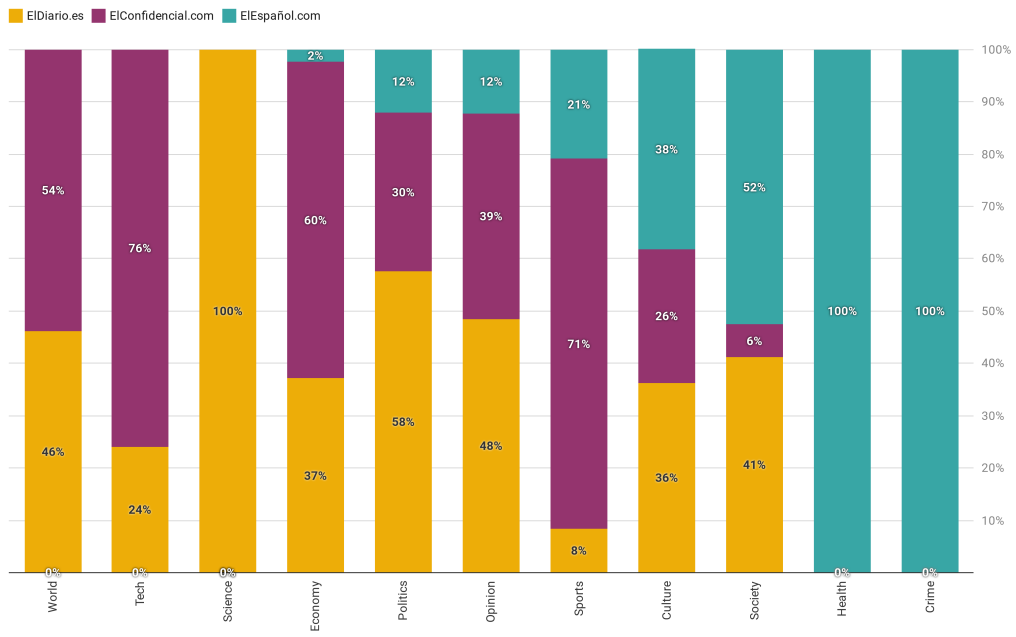


Figure 4.15: Stories Sampled by News Section (%)

4.3 Qualitative Analysis

The main objective of the quantitative analysis was to provide evidence of the users' deliberative dynamics of a selected corpus of comments based on the principles of the discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas (1992; 1984). We performed a qualitative textual analysis in a fully manual fashion. For this, a coding scheme has been devised following the parameters used in the research of Masip, et al. (2012; 2010); Ruiz et al., (2010); and complemented with the works carried by Alexy (1992). In his book, *Legitimation Crisis* Habermas (1973:107) discusses the reasons that characterize the field of discourse as it evolves from the philosophy of communicative behavior to the theory of discourse ethics:

Discourse can be understood as that form of communication that is removed from contexts of experience and actions and whose structure assures us: that the bracketed validity claims of assertions, recommendations, or warnings are the exclusive object of discussion; that participants, themes and contributions are not restricted except with reference to the goal of testing the validity claims in question; that no force except that of the better arguments exercised; and that, as a result, all motives except that of the cooperative search for truth are excluded.

In this regard, we based our coding parameters on a series of rules that are centered on the previous section on the discursive ethics of Habermas (1983), we examined through in chapter 1. The German philosopher establishes three blocks of rules which have been incorporated into the adapted datasheet that has been taken as a reference for the work of Masip et al. (2012). Every comment was coded in each of the categories before stated ethical discourse segments: 'Logic and Coherence,' 'Collective Search for Truth,' and 'An Agreement Based on the Best Argument.' Each one represents a coding reference followed by a set of questions aimed to answer RQ1, RQ3, and RQ7 primarily. Therefore, a single comment could be classified into multiple sections depending on the versatility of the comment. Some comments could not be classified and were excluded from the sample (e.g., deleted comments; comments with lack of sufficient argumentation such as spam or advertisements, flagged comments).

As aforementioned, every coding category was supported by a series of questions to frame each discursive ethical aspect and perform a qualitative assess-

ment (See Table 1.3). We operationalized these questions into the datasheet (See 5.4) and codebook. Consequently, each of these questions was preceded by a measurement system, based on one affirmative (YES) and one negative (NO) criteria. On social networks, besides from the qualitative assessment carried on comments, a quantitative analysis was applied in order to complement evidence to answer RQ7 (See § 1.4). User-comments were coded using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software *NVivo* 12 and *Ncapture*, a plug-in browser from the same manufacturer. Two coders were trained to apply the datasheet and codebook consistently. Intercoder reliability tests based on Cohen's kappa coefficient (Cohen 1960) were conducted with satisfactory results during the present study.

4.4 Results on the Discourse Ethics Approach

4.4.1 Logic and coherence

Logic and coherence is a crucial component within the process of deliberative discourse. One of the highlights of this section is to identify and find out whether those users who converse in comment threads inside the comment sections are focused on the subject of the discussion and whether they exhibit or demonstrate any intention of substantiating and contributing with arguments, the views of other users, as well as the topic of the discussion.

Do users focus on the topic of the news story?

As stated above, one element to discern the degree of logic and coherence in a conversation is whether the commenters intend to argue about the topic being discussed. Although some digital news outlets have a high number of comments, the majority of users do not stay on topic in the conversations even after automatic post-moderation and before user flagging. An essential number of comments recorded are not linked to the issue present in the published story. Nearly one-fifth of the comments in all of the media analyzed are focused on the topic of the debate being discussed (Table 4.8).

We attest that lively discussions take place in the comment threads. However, consistently across news outlets, a vast majority of participants end up debating topics or issues that have no direct relationship with the current event. Barely 1/10 of ElDiario.es' comments are about the news issue introduced by the editor in the article. This figure rises on ElConfidencial.com and is higher on ElEspañol.com (Table 4.8).

We note that those who comment occasionally tend to focus on the issue under discussion, if the latter is relevant to their daily lives or if they are topics of high widespread awareness. A clear example is in the article "The truth about the building¹⁰," published on February 23, 2019, in ElConfidencial.com. A story that generated high-quality comments, as it focuses on a prevalent topic in Spain today: the price of rent and housing in general. In our analysis, often user's intention is clearly to diverge from the topic under discussion. Occasionally, we observe that the narrative of many users falls to their interest to promote or make reference to their political beliefs or social preconceptions. Some users attempt to lobby other debate members by pushing their political or personal agendas, in the belief that by doing so, they are trying to challenge or refute the arguments of others.

On social media, the overall amount of focused user-contributions is significantly higher on Facebook (21.3%) than on Twitter (4.86%) (Table 4.8). This is due in most cases to the moderation algorithms, which are in charge of ranking low-quality content not related to the discussed topic. Despite users not focusing on the topic in question, our data show significant engagement within the posts, especially on Facebook. We observed topics with a high entertainment factor on ElEspañol's page obtained a considerable number of comments. These findings are linked to other researchers' work, which has found that comment reading might be influenced by an entertainment value (Springer, Engelmann & Pfaffinger, 2015).

Many topics are observed to have a more significant impact on the number of responses and the degree of interaction with comments. For instance, sensitive issues (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2017) and controversial topics like crime or political divisiveness (Tenenenboim & Cohen, 2015) contribute to further participation in

¹⁰Originally published in Spanish as "La verdad sobre el edificio". After the sampling took place, the article was renamed to "13, Rue del desahucio: la verdad sobre el edificio más mediático de Madrid." Retrieved November, 12th, 2019 from https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/madrid/2019-02-23/argumosa-lavapies-desahucios-alquiler-proindivisos_1842490/

news stories through comments. In our sample the latter findings are supported, one of the most commented news topics was politics, and within the issues most discussed by the users were: the new resurgence of PSOE, the corruption cases surrounded the PP, the Catalan conflict; and the Spanish presidential and municipal elections.




		Outlets		Facebook		Twitter	
		Focused Comments	%	Focused Comments	%	Focused Comments	%
	ElDiario.es	11,839	9.4	1,485 (N= 7,317)	20.2	105 (N= 2,165)	4.8
	ElConfidencial.com	9,464	15.3	692 (N= 3,239)	21.3	96 (N= 390)	2.9
	ElEspañol.com	9,632	16.2	748 (N= 3,325)	22.4	231 (N= 2,052)	6.9

Table 4.8: Are the users focused on the topic of the news story?

Do Users Try to Argue the Point?

Readers leave a low number of argumentative comments. Most users do not introduce new arguments against points of view expressed by other members of the discussion. Deliberative engagement is barely present; the dialog is intense and tends to be civilized, yet users lack the habit of arguing or accepting, even similar points of view made by another like-minded participant or adversary. This finding is intrinsically linked to previous studies, where it has been shown that users are more likely to be in agreement with the majority of participants available in the conversation, thus contributing to a lack of a real debate (Soffer & Gordoni, 2017; Chen & Lu, 2017).

In this regard, figures obtained in the sample are quite identical in almost all newspapers, with ElDiario.es coming on top with 9.4% of argumentative comments coded, and ElEspañol.com falling behind with 6.7% (Table ??). The relevance of the current political and economic affairs of most conversations meant that users tend to get carried away by them and have virtually almost no intention of continuing arguing their points or those from another user. On social media, argumentative comments arise on Twitter and include 10.2% of comments, whereas, on Facebook, they account for 6.9% of comments.

As a consequence, our findings are in line with previous studies on the ability of the Internet to promote deliberative processes. In this sense, empirical research has found that arguments on the Web produce more negative cognitive

emotions, which is why a consensus is less likely to be achieved (Baek, Wojcieszak, & Delli Carpini, 2012). The loss of agreement is commonly linked with group fragmentation situations typically emerging in online discussion forums (Sunstein, 2001, 2002; Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson, 1996).

For example, in an article published in ElConfidencial.com on February 27, 2019, about buying or renting Real Estate in Madrid titled “¿Comprar o alquilar? Depende de dónde vivas y estos gráficos te sacarán de dudas”¹¹¹². We observed a lively debate among users; arguments were introduced and points of view expressed by others with respect and logic, yet, at times some sentences had more of an ironic tone from some of the users—a habitual occurrence throughout the sample—however, in many cases the reader who stirred initially up the conversation by adding a thought-provoking response replies all with the same respect and with a thoughtful reply. Here is an excerpt of the conversation:

CIUDADANOV (2019-02-17 11:04:47 H) For the sake of a global slowdown that will touch us if or when buying a house now is nonsense. Prices are skyrocketing (for rent and for sale). Everything is about to fall. We haven't come out of the crisis; we have a 15% unemployment rate, lower salaries, etc. While we are distracted by the Catalan issue, we have lost the opportunity to change the production model. Even though Rajoy had an absolute majority, so that later the PSOE would be blamed... he could have done what he had to do! But no, it has been all about tourism and the economic bubble. Spain has been growing for years thanks to the European Central Bank's QE [quantitative easing] and cheap oil (as well as tourism). But 0 structural reforms. That is the industrial heritage of Rajoy. It's a shame. In a couple of years, apartments in Madrid for less than 100k, what do you have at stake? Unemployment 25%, people are emigrating abroad. A very bad deja-vu

In reply to CIUDADANOV's: UUSLINN (2019-02-17 12:19:09 H) I bought for 180,000 euros a year ago. I pay less mortgage + tax + condo fees than I used to pay for rent. The fees are 28% of my gross salary. Buying is not that crazy, but you have to do the math and be prepared for what could happen with rising interest or falling wages. And if it makes sense, why not? So, let each stick hold its candle when the day comes. I won't be the one to say I've been cheated into buying if things go uphill.

¹¹In English: Buying or renting? It depends on where you live and these charts will take your mind off it

¹²Sanz, E. (2019, February 27). ¿Comprar o alquilar? Depende de dónde vivas y estos gráficos te sacarán de dudas. Retrieved February 16, 2020, from https://www.elconfidencial.com/vivienda/2019-02-17/alquiler-inquilino-arrendador-arrendatario-hipoteca_1827670/

In reply to CIUDADANOV's: CLEANTEs (2019-02-17 14:22:56 H) I am unhappy with these telepreachers of the change in the production model. I would like my country to be a leader in research and development, a creator of high value-added products, but this requires a joint effort with a view to at least 50 years, and here we are unable to agree on what we are going to do tomorrow: planning and effort = Zero.

CIUDADANOV replies to all (2019-02-17 21:35:54 H) Exactly, here what prevails is the hyper short term and reaching power at all costs. Take, for example, what is happening now in Catalonia. The right-wing is obsessed with gaining power in order to apply the eternal 155 (which I don't think is legal) ...and then what? It's rhetorical because even they don't know. Where is the project of a country 10 or 20 years from now? What are we Spaniards going to do to progress in such a globalized and competitive world? Because apart from demonstrating that they have a massive one ("the flag" I mean...) they don't even let go of these things. The reason is simple: we would have to make complex agreements with many "enemies" as well as thinking, oh yes thinking, that's what the head is for. Anyway, it is much easier to hoist the flag, or " the right-wing is coming. " Spain has it really screwed up.

4.4.2 Collective Search for Truth

The primary purpose of this segment is to inquire into the relationships of recognition among the participants, through respect and acceptance, and the manner in which the viewpoints are exposed and outlined within analyzed user-conversations. It is also imperative to find out whether readers recognize and respect each other in the discussion and have exchanges of views. In this sense, it is, therefore, crucial to ascertain if there are insults, incivility, abusive language, etc., among them and on the part of the readers towards the stakeholders present in the published news, such as institutions, the media itself, the journalist who produced the news, and so on. Besides, this subsection collects the presence or absence of different viewpoints and the referrals to the arguments of the rest of the people.

Do Users Respect and Acknowledge Each Other as Valid Members of the Conversation?

A vital element of the democratic value of the discussion is that speakers consider each other as legitimate members of the dialogue (Habermas, 1992). The degree of mutual respect in interaction can be calculated by the existence of incivility, profanity, and derogatory remarks toward other users. For the German philosopher, a dialogue is a logical, ethical method for social construction. Nevertheless, in order for discourse to be an effective, ethical procedure, this must be welcomed beforehand that those parties involved are deemed to be valid debaters, i.e., that they recognize one another as individuals and can understand one another through communication fully.

Automatic moderation has achieved the goal of keeping incivility, derogatory remarks, or abusive language away from the comments sections, yet a significant amount of comments arises (Coe et al. 2014; Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011; Ruiz et al., 2011). However, it has been argued that the online environment essentially acts as a forum for the incitement of hate that readers express through their comments (Cammaerts, 2009).

Regarding the degree of mutual respect in the interaction, generally speaking, users respect and acknowledge each other as valid members of the conversation. 20,3% of all comments contained a mention or reply among users. Mentions between commenters are higher on ElDiario.es and lower in ElEspañol.com (Figure 4.16), in the case of the latter, the lack of organic engagement within their comment section is predicted to be the reason behind a small number of user-to-user interaction. Replies on social media are somehow similar to those observed in the outlets. Although on Facebook and Twitter, the interactive features are not similar and are more refined and intuitive. On Twitter, replies are scarce, with a total recorded of 257. Users prefer to reply to another participant by using their handle directly on their messages rather than making a separate reply (See Figure 4.19).

In reply to #2: Hanna (07/02/2019 - 01:39h): I agree to the whole thing, except for the "inflammatory speech" part. I would have called it an inflammatory speech or an incendiary harangue, and with some resentment among legionnaires and bishops.¹³

¹³Escolar, I. (2019, February 6). Felonía, golpismo, alta traición. Retrieved Febru-

In an article on the statements of former Catalan leader Josep Antoni Duran i Lleida, a politician and member of the Catalan and European parliaments in the 1990s, a topic that tends to be very controversial in the comment sections, users debated the process of Catalan self-determination with great respect and recognition among themselves.

#59 Micki (15/03/2019 - 12:03h): It is the Spanish people as a whole who have sovereignty. If the Catalan Nation (Països Catalans) wants to achieve independence, they must first convince a strengthened social majority, and then with that strength, the rest of the Spanish people may accept the partition of sovereignty and of Spain.

In reply to #59 Micki: #67 (15/03/2019 - 13:26h): I don't know the point of your comment here, but I'll answer it. No, Catalonia's independence does not require a reinforced social majority; it requires a large one. The only way to know if this majority exists (one more vote in support than against) is to hold a referendum. If in this referendum the yes vote wins, then we must take into account what the rest of Spain wants. But you know what? The Catalan parliament asked for this FIVE YEARS AGO, to hold a consultation (or referendum) in Catalonia, and if it won the yes then try to settle the issue with the central government following all the established legal channels. I repeat, following all the established legal channels—no doubt about it.

#41 ster6356 (15/03/2019 - 10:03h): Quite right, this one and many like him, not to mention them. It's the best way.

In reply to #41 #55 Gibreel (15/03/2019 - 11:47h): I don't agree. I want to be informed of everything. I'm very clear on the editorial position of this newspaper, and I share it quite a bit, not entirely. I insist; I want professional interviews well done even to the devil. You learn a lot on the commentary forum.

On Facebook, for example, we noticed users sometimes post their thoughts under another user's reply instead of creating a new reply, the majority of the time, comments in the form of a reply are aligned with the previous argument, but sometimes they are entirely off-topic. Facebook generated most of the users' replies with all the outlets almost consistently getting the same figures, with ElConfidencial.com placing first place followed by ElDiario.es and ElEspañol.com (Figure 4.17). It is essential to mention that one should not confuse a reply with mention, primarily if we refer to social networks. While in the participatory

ary 17, 2020, from https://www.eldiario.es/escolar/Felonia-golpismo-alta-traicion_6_865173503.html

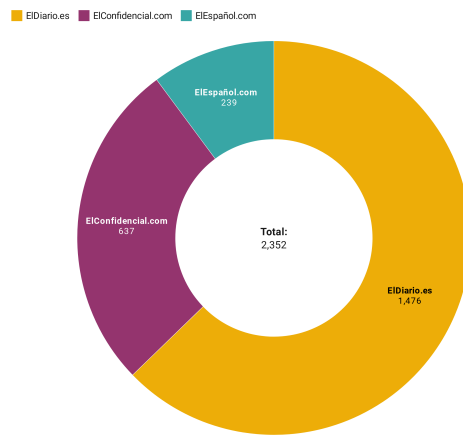


Figure 4.16: Replies among users by publication

spaces of the newspapers analyzed, the mention and response features do not usually have a prominent distinction, in social networks, this varies. According to Facebook, *@Mentions* allows users who have commented on a Page to have a public conversation with the Page and vice versa. Users can be mentioned by The Page publicly in a comment or a reply within a particular post. For this to happen, “the User must have commented on the Page post or be the author of the Page post.”¹⁴

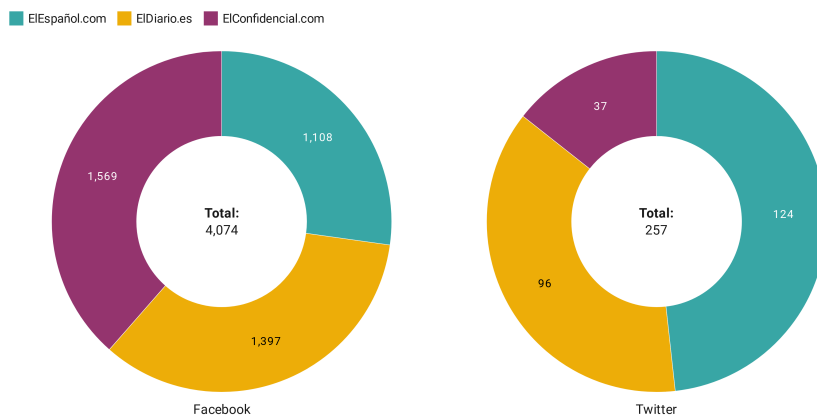


Figure 4.17: Number of Users Replies by Social Network

User mentions on Twitter differ from those on Facebook; on the microblogging platform, users often confuse the *@reply* with the *@mention* function (Fitton et al., 2014). According to Twitter, a mention is a “tweet containing another

¹⁴Facebook For Developers, *@Mentions*, Retrieved February 12, 2020 from <https://developers.facebook.com/docs/pages/mentions/#mentioning-a-user-in-a-comment>

account’s Twitter username, preceded by the "@" symbol. For example: “Hello @TwitterSupport!”¹⁵ while a reply is “is when you respond to another person’s Tweet.” Replies only appear in the feeds of the specific person the reply was intended to, and also to anyone who follows both the sender and the recipient. However, it does not appear in the feed of anyone following the sender.

Mentions among users on social media are predominantly higher on Facebook with ElConfidencial.com, where 4 out of 10 comments include a user mention. ElEspañol.com and ElDiario.es finish the ranking with 1 out of 10 and 2 out of ten comments, respectively. Twitter mentions are scarce and represent less than 3% in all the digital outlets analyzed (Table 4.18).

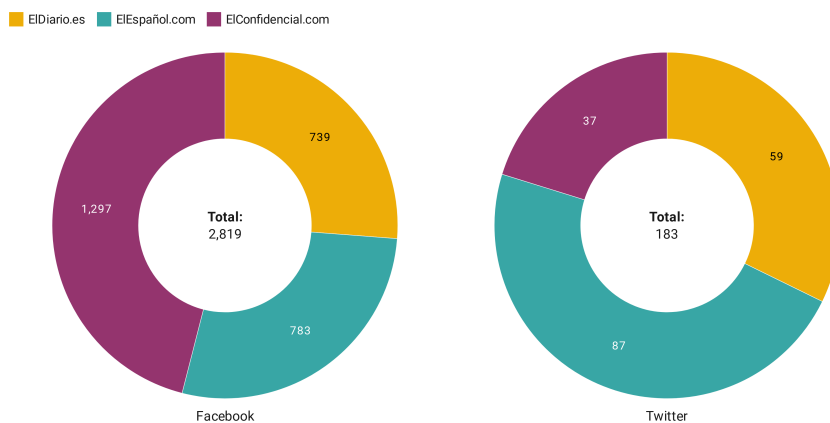


Figure 4.18: Mentions Among Users by Social Networks

The presence of incivility, profanity, or derogatory remarks was also an aspect thoroughly examined across the sample, and it was also a crucial element of this discourse category. Uncivil and nonrational attitudes in online debates are detrimental to rational-critical discourse deliberation (Habermas, 1984). We observed that, in comparison with previous scholarship, incivility is relatively low (Table 4.9). When present, these sorts of remarks are mostly used against personalities in the stories (politicians and celebrities) and power structures, journalists and editors in chief, and not against other contributing members, at least in the majority of the cases. In total, 12.7% of all contributions contain uncivil language of behavior.

One of the most verbally abused political figures within the dataset is Pablo

¹⁵About different types of Tweets. (n.d.). Retrieved February 13, 2020, from <https://help.twitter.com/en/using-twitter/types-of-tweets>

Casado. The leader of the Partido Popular was at the time of the sample on his way to becoming a presidential candidate and was also being prosecuted, among many other Spanish politicians, for obtaining university degrees without meeting the academic qualifications needed (Galvez, 2020). Here are some of the comments coded containing incivility against him:

SocialismoHastamancharse (05/02/2019 - 19:40h) Says the useful jerk, CASADO, 'I did not see anything, I don't know' ... [continues]¹⁶

Huge_Head (05/02/2019 - 20:10h) And this piece of work pretends to rule a country. Well, if Trump could, I'm sure he'd believe he could, but I think he's a bigger idiot than the Yankee.¹⁷

Waiter (11/02/2019 - 12:21h) Casado, a fascist civil warrior, intellectually diminished and usurper of academic titles, claims to be the coup leader of Spain in the 21st century and to rule in the style of the Paca la Culona... Poor fool, if you're just a wimp of crazy Aznar, who also has no role to play. The real players of this game are hidden, motherfucker!¹⁸

Pitxurri (11/02/2019 - 13:08h) What about the silent majority? Casado, you're a son of a bitch ...no offense¹⁹

QUÉMÁSPUEDOPEDIR (2019-02-09 12:37:34 H) Casado is a hysterical, cynical, despicable, manipulative, biased, narcissistic politician. These aren't derogatory, and they're descriptions.²⁰

FERNANDOMINGAROS (2019-02-23 08:50:12 H) Casado is a moron. Once they took away his disguise as a super-intelligent guy with studies at Harvard, Georgetown... and discovered that they were talks at ARAVACA-Madrid ... where he went to have coffee and buns, the real Casado has been revealed. A right-wing extremist, brainless and at the command of Aznar and Aguirre (his rotten political references). There is nothing left but a mouthful of insults every time he opens his mouth and I don't understand

¹⁶Agueda, P. (2019, February 5). La Guardia Civil revela que el PP pagó con facturas falsas un acto de las Nuevas Generaciones de Pablo Casado. Retrieved February 16, 2020, from https://www.eldiario.es/politica/Guardia-PP-Nuevas-Generaciones-Casado_0_864764273.html

¹⁷*Ibidem*

¹⁸Aduriz, I. (2019, February 11). Casado afirma ahora que él no insultó a Sánchez pese a llamarle "felón, traidor, incapaz, ilegítimo" o "desleal". Retrieved February 16, 2020, from https://www.eldiario.es/politica/Casado-insulto-Sanchez-llamarle-traidor_0_866863349.html

¹⁹*Ibidem*

²⁰Méndez, R., Romero, J., & Esteban, P. (2019, February 9). La división interna, la revuelta pata negra... así naufragó el 'Diálogo por Presupuestos'. Retrieved February 16, 2020, from https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2019-02-09/gobierno-relator-independentismo-presupuestos-semana_1813930/

how they don't kick his ass and put a person in charge who at least has an IQ on the average in Spain.²¹

We also observed examples of uncivil comments in the other political spectrum. In contrast with the above comments referred to Pablo Casado. The derogatory term to 'podemita' comes to light in several of the users' contributions. The term is used to attack voters or left-wing sympathizers or those with progressive and liberal ideas, as described by Ellis & Roldán-Riejos, (2017), the term often "entails negative connotations inspired in belonging to a sect." Here are some of the examples we found in our sample:

cromapons (09/02/2019 - 09:49h) The podemitas on the trapeze, seeing how fascism is eating up Spain and not going out in the streets to support democracy. And these are the ones who were willing to tear down the walls as needed? I pity their lack of determination.²²

Lamelibrabqui0 (09/02/2019 - 15:54h) An illiterate podemita collaborating with the coup d'état, it's a good thing Vox is coming to return all this riffraff to his sewer.²³

fb_10207405582710059 (23/02/2019 - 16:29h) Without the Podemita vote these two clowns will be left behind by VOX.²⁴




	Outlet	Total	Facebook	Twitter
	Eldiario.es	4.9	3.2	8.8
	ElConfidencial.com	3.7	4.0	0.9
	ElEspanol.com	4.1	2.5	8.5

Table 4.9: Presence of Incivility, Profanity and Derogatory Remarks (%)

In terms of abusive language and insults, it is also shown that there is a use of derogatory remarks towards social groups that arise from the configuration of

²¹Collado, Á. (2019, February 26). Vox amenaza decenas de escaños del PP en la España interior... que pueden ir al PSOE. Retrieved February 16, 2020, from https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2019-02-23/pp-vox-elecciones-generales-casado-psoe-escaños_1841902/

²²Rodríguez, P. (2019, February 9). Colau avisa por carta a Juncker, Tusk y Tajani que el juicio del 1-O puede tener consecuencias para Europa. Retrieved February 20, 2020, from https://www.eldiario.es/catalunya/Colau-Juncker-Tusk-Tajani-Europa_0_866163410.html

²³*Ibidem*

²⁴Caballero, F. (2019, February 23). Las primarias de Más Madrid elegirán por separado a los cargos de gobierno y al resto de la lista de Carmena y Errejón. Retrieved February 20, 2020, from https://www.eldiario.es/madrid/participarias-Madrid-alternativa-Carmena-Errejon_0_871063148.html

the 'enemy character' that provides the point of view of some users. This includes citizens belonging to minority groups: Women (feminists), LGBTQ members, and immigrants (Chen et al., 2018; Ziegele, Breiner, & Quiring, 2014). Similarly, we observed a discriminatory and hostile tone towards Catalonians, their culture and traditions, Catalunya, National Independentism. This sort of Anti-Catalanism remarks are present in every news outlet and are motivated by the recent trial of the Catalan separatist leaders and the political conflict brought by the Catalan Independence Referendum, which gained prominence in October 2017. The self-determination referendum, which was outlawed by Spain's Constitutional Tribunal and boycotted by those opposed to independence, has plunged Spain into its most profound political crisis since the death of Gen. Francisco Franco in 1975 (Minder; Turp et al., 2017).

CARLES NOLA (2019-02-17 08:19:09 H) That's what independent Catalans are: a handful of mediocre people who impose their mediocrity on the other half of Catalans.²⁵

AUGUSTO (2019-02-17 18:52:35 H) [...] And what was Morenes playing at while the Catalan Taliban were outraging Spain?²⁶

R. G. (2019-02-20 20:59:38 H) And now, after the COUP, they want us to believe that the "CATALAN DONKS" are flying with their ears. [Continues]²⁷

On Facebook, fewer derogatory comments are perceived, although they are slightly more prominent in the comment sections of the analyzed media and higher on Twitter (Table 4.9). Incivility does not depend on the media where the news is published, nor on its editorial line, nor the news topic. Disrespect and incivility are perceived throughout and, it is appropriate to stress this, they are addressed to people and institutions of all kinds, including of course other readers

²⁵Brunat, D., Sánchez, C., & Zarzalejos, J. A. (2019, February 18). Vuelve el azote del 'procés': "Si Cataluña tuviera ejército sería igual que Turquía". Retrieved February 16, 2020, from https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/cataluna/2019-02-17/cataluna-independencia-populismo-lopez-tena_1820666/

²⁶Diego, S. de, Gabilondo, P., Parera, B., & Tena, B. (2019, February 26). Sexta sesión del juicio al 'procés': así declararon Santi Vila y Jordi Sánchez. Retrieved February 16, 2020, from https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2019-02-21/juicio-proces-declaraciones-sanchez-vila_1833958/

²⁷Lamelas, M., Diego, S. de, Romero, J., & Barcelona. (2019, February 19). Un 155 largo en Cataluña con el apoyo de Vox: el sueño que alberga Puigdemont. Retrieved February 16, 2020, from https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/cataluna/2019-02-17/155-largo-cataluna-apoyo-vox-sueno-puigdemont_1827682/

Coe, Kenski, and Rains (2014) showed in their study of incivility that news on specific topics was far more inclined to harbor abusive comments. Namely, stories about politics, economics, or the world received one uncivil commentary for every four comments published, compared to the category of "soft news" topics - technology, lifestyle, or health - where the amount of incivility was considerably lower. The only exception to this rule was sports, where the degree of incivility was substantial.

In the same vein, Oz, Zheng, and Chen (2018) concluded that user discussions on topics considered sensitive, those with a heavy moral burden, tend to have enormous incivility and impoliteness. These issues, however, were also those with the most considerable volume of deliberative and discursive elements. Another study carried out on Facebook pages of 42 media outlets in North America over 18 months highlighted that the ideology and type of media had a relationship with the civility of the readers' comments. Thus, media with thoroughly conservative angles or ideology and local media were more likely to host uncivil comments than liberal and nationally covered newspapers (Suet al., 2018).

Recognizing that there is a meager rate of deleted or moderated comments in online media, it seems clear that users try to avoid offending others directly and try to express their anger or hate with other rhetorical tactics, such as irony, sarcasm, and jokes. While insults are easily detected by filtering software and algorithms, and most of the time, they are detected by automated moderators, and demeaning dialect involves further rhetoric subjective assessment.

Disrespect nullifies the argumentation of a fellow participant, disrupts the flow of the discussion, and fosters irrationality within participatory spaces. In virtue of this reflection, Zhang (2013:4) reflects upon this:

Another factor that shapes the relationship between disagreement and politeness is participants' relational needs. If a participant desire to develop and maintain a positive relationship with others, then he or she will be polite when communicating the disagreement. Hence, the relationship between disagreement and mutual respect can be affected by two factors: the need to address the disagreement transparently and the need to maintain a positive relationship with others. Given that diversity likely leads to disagreement among discussion participants and that it is unclear to what extent disagreeing discussants attempt to fulfill their needs of explicit expressions of opinions and/or positive interpersonal re-

relationships, the relationship between diversity and mutual respect is yet to be determined. This begs the question of how diversity may influence reasonable discussions by affecting the levels of opinion heterogeneity as well as mutual respect in online discussions.

Do users provide a different point of view than other comments?

The second question to be dealt with in this section is whether users who focus their interventions on the topic under discussion provide numerous or different points of view. We can state that in the analyzed conversations, pluralism is strongly resented. The conversations frequently have a polarized tinge: the majority and minority viewpoints, each of the members belonging to these two groups, are enclosed within their arguments, which leads to a gradual deterioration of the quality of the comments, discursive clutter and abusive language are observed as well. All these factors are the cause of polarization. Few voices try to add a third approach and introduce other points of view.

Substantive dialogue can only become valid; only the intentions of the actors are clear. However, the prerequisite of engagement in substantive debate, is that one's intentions must be fully accessible to the examination and challenge of others. The willingness to verify authenticity is itself a crucial part of the discussion. Without these motives, there cannot be any cooperative search for truth (Habermas, 1990). In the newspapers included in the corpus of the sample, these statements are tangible. In practically no case do the results exceed the 10% threshold, except in ElEspañol.com which obtains 9.4% of different points of view in its debates on its Twitter page. On the microblogging site ElDiario.es obtained the same metrics, a result aligned with the ones gotten from their webpage. (Table 4.10)




	Outlet	Facebook	Twitter
	ElDiario.es	5.4 (N= 11,839)	5.4 (N= 7,317)
	ElConfidencial.com	3.0 (N= 9,464)	2.0 (N= 3,239)
	ElEspanol.com	3.9 (N= 9,632)	9.4 (N= 3,325)

Table 4.10: Do users provide a different point of view than other comments? (%)

Do users question each other and ask for clarification on expressed views?

If we take into account the high level of participation registered in our sample, therefore, the fact that the lack of interest of the users towards the views expressed by others is staggering (Table 4.11). There are times when commentators are challenged to clarify views expressed, and they do so in a demeaning, harsh, and critical tone.

In reply to #93: 128 ManfredvonRichtofen (07/02/2019 - 18:32h) Forgive me, but reading your commentary I had several doubts: who is the supremacist group you are talking about? Being VOX a supremacist group, would you allow them to promote any referendum? Do you really believe that the unity of any country is defended without dialogue, without giving voice to the people and threatening the use of force, either with the army or the police?²⁸

ELISENDA ALCÁINE V (2019-02-03 - 20:33:51 H) It's a shameful GALA, not a single word about what is happening in Catalonia with our political prisoners, where there are left-wing comedians who defend Venezuela and everything but the Catalans, because we do not exist and of course what to say about the presenters, if they talk about the prisoners, they are out of work in Spain, and of course, la pela is la pela ['Money is the money' expression from Catalonia*]²⁹*

In reply to ELISENDA ALCÁINE: OLYMPIA (2019-02-04 17:44:49 H) Don't go overboard with the champagne that you don't know what you're writing...

In reply to ELISENDA ALCÁINE: FY FAEN (2019-02-03 21:03:36 H) What political prisoners? If there were political prisoners in Spain, the racist Torra would already be behind bars, madam. If you are referring to the gang that has violated the Constitution and the Catalan statutes of autonomy, we are talking about something else. Is it not a crime to break the law? Being independent is legitimate, but breaking the law is not. To have ideas is not a crime; to break the law is. Differentiate—enough of taking everyone for a fool.

²⁸Ugarte, I. S. de. (2019, February 6). Alfonso Guerra, el nuevo líder carismático de la derecha. Retrieved February 17, 2020, from https://www.eldiario.es/politica/Alfonso-Guerra-libro-Constitucion_0_865114606.html

²⁹Medina, M., Cantó, P., Arjona, D., & Sevilla. (2019, February 5). Arde Sevilla: los Goya se ponen incendiarios contra los políticos. Retrieved February 19, 2020, from https://www.elconfidencial.com/cultura/cine/premios-goya/2019-02-03/goya-2019-cronica-asi-fue_1800834/

In the next example, we can see that a discussion about a story published in ElEspañol.com’s Facebook page³⁰ focused on the house robbery of Juan Guaido (Figure 4.19), Venezuela’s interim President, turns uncivil when users within the conversation do not know how to separate a partisan issue with their own opinions or views:




	Outlet	Twitter		Facebook	
		DPV	UAC	DPV	UAC
 ElDiario.es	5.5	2.9	4.2	5.4	14
 ElConfidencial.com	3.5	3.7	14.0	2.0	12
 ElEspanol.com	1.0	3.5	10	9.4	13

Table 4.11: Do users question each other and ask for clarification on expressed views? (%). DPV stands for Diverse Points of View. UAC stands for Users Asking Clarifications

4.4.3 An agreement based on the best argument

In this section, we are keen to learn more about whether or not the users who intervene in the debate adopt the arguments of other participants, and whether or not they use other sources of information to support their arguments. In the latter case, we investigate if the sources mentioned are akin or not to the point of view of the person who is citing them. According to Habermas (2018), argumentation within the conversation “sets in motion a cooperative competition for the better argument, where the orientation to the goal of a communicatively reached agreement unites the participants from the outset. The assumption that the competition can lead to “rationally acceptable,” hence “convincing,” results are based on the rational force of arguments” (Habermas, 2018:44).

Do users endorse an argument of another user?

Users usually do not support other users’ argument. The overall percentage on the news outlets was 3.3% and on Social Networks 2.9% (Table 4.12). The fact

³⁰Español.com on Facebook, E. (2019, January 31). El Español, #ÚLTIMAHORA Militares chavistas han rodeado la casa del presidente interino de Venezuela. Retrieved February 19, 2020, from <https://www.facebook.com/elespanol2015/posts/2040603202721736>

that there is seldom support among users may discourage some to have a more constructive dialogue. At the same time, the lack of communicative agreement among commenters impedes the creation of a public sphere and disrupts further collective dialogue.

Consensus building, which is collectively mediated by dialogue and assisted by the participants in the discussion, is the objective of conversation and collective inquiry (Meyer & Woodruff, 1995). As argued by Jonansen & Hermidez (2002:237), "argumentation is a fundamental process of social negotiation through informal reasoning." One of the core principles in Habermas's philosophy of discourse ethics is that an argument implies a "principle of universalization" that allows people to discuss the same set of assumptions before entering into the functional debate (Habermas, 1990). Without argument support, interpersonal dialogue, and, therefore, the formation of opinion and ultimately, an agreement is not foreseeable.




	Outlet	Facebook	Twitter
 ElDiario.es	1.03 (N= 11,839)	0.27 (N= 2,165)	1.28 (N=7,317)
 ElConfidencial.com	1.09 (N= 9,464)	0.21 (N= 390)	0.21 (N= 3,239)
 ElEspanol.com	1.17 (N= 9,632)	0.63 (N= 2052)	0.30 (N= 3,325)

Table 4.12: Do users endorse an argument of another user? (%)

Do users mention or refer to other sources?

The presence of references and mentions to other sources is rare within the conversations; the share of comments representing this category is 0.6% of the total. Sources can serve as a supplement to the discourse, or nuance or enrich the views or position of other users. Out of the few sources (192 in total) provided by users, 5 out of 10 contain a high number of unqualified data, inaccurate or outdated figures, or in some cases, untraceable facts and figures. Only very few readers provide an adequate link to the topic under discussion (Table 4.13). This situation is similar, as we have seen in the case of the argumentative nuances.

The sources provided or mentioned by the participants were virtually non-existent across all media analyzed, with an overall of 6.7% of sources being

introduced, and, in cases where they were embedded, they were usually not related to the topic being discussed. Readers do not cite sources that complement, nuance, or broaden their viewpoints or the opinion of other users. The few sources observed generally are not focused on improving the debate but on generating conflict or controversy, and most of them are related to the ideological struggles of the users themselves, moving away from the subject of the discussion.

On social media, the same tendency is also observed. On Facebook, 112 comments with embedded links are gathered, 0.19% of the total sampled, while on Twitter, the amount is slightly higher, with 81 comments, which represented 0.91% of all the comments gathered on the site. The news outlet which received the most sources was ElConfidencial.com, both on Twitter and Facebook, while on Facebook, ElEspañol.com was ranked first. Even though ElDiario.es received a high number of user-engagement in the dataset, its audience did not provide enough argumentation through sources, even if they were not linked to the issue at stake.




	Outlet	Facebook	Twitter
	ElDiario.es	1.4 (N= 11,839)	0.71 (N=7,317)
	ElConfidencial.com	0.5 (N= 9,464)	1.01 (N= 3,239)
	ElEspanol.com	0.08 (N= 9,632)	1.26 (N= 2052)

Table 4.13: Do Users Mention or Refer to Other Sources? (%)

Many of the links provided to support the information inside the article, most of the time, are not related to the news item where the comment was introduced. From time to time, we identify users supplying information from unknown sources or unverifiable origin, or of questionable provenance. Occasionally links sources from alternative media are observed, in which users attack the media or try to spread conspiracy theories, hoaxes, or urban myths that have gone viral on social networks, for example, the ones that usually disseminate within Reddit's message boards. Sources cited under this scheme are used to refer to dubious related issues, mostly to reassert the users' own thoughts or beliefs. When opposing sources are cited, it is done to undermine and debunk the journalist or the newspaper ideology.

One particular example arises in an article reporting a sexist attack toward the

female football club in Terrasa. The piece published under the name “Futbolistas veteranos del Terrassa gritan "guarras" e "iros a fregar" a jugadoras durante un partido de la liga femenina³¹.” Within the piece, a high percentage of sexist and misogynistic comments are detected. It is worth noting one user who tries to deflect the focus of the conversation by providing links to a similar sexist event, the rape of a girl in Sabadell by six minors of foreign origin. The user also attacks the newspaper and its editor-in-chief for not giving the necessary importance to such an issue, but for focusing their efforts on issues that demean football with sexist accusations.

In reply to #93: VOXero_de_Marinaleda (05/02/2019 - 00:38h) No, you can't say anything. That's what Soros pays you for. So you can talk about any "macho" act played by Spaniards, and so that when a Moor rapes a girl, YOU'LL BE QUIET AS A WHORE. But it's okay, we say so.

<https://bit.ly/3hhB1Tp>

<https://bit.ly/35mIuPL>

All of Spain knows about it. 6 arrested for raping a girl in Sabadell. This newspaper has also released the story, but as far as you are concerned... That genius called Escolar has put it in the local section of Catalonia, instead of in the section (or focus) of "macho violence". Why? For the usual reasons: the girl was raped by a MOORISH SQUAD. The protected ones of the progre system. 6 sons of bitches, those who cross the strait in a dinghy and sneak into our country with the permission of the socio-progressive government. This is the mob Carmena refers to when she says that " they are the best". They know that once they touch land, they are already in a "little house," and the police can't do anything, thanks to the laws and the politicians we have. ...] Does Soros pay you so much to do this crude and crawling manipulation that no one believes you anymore? Do you have so little dignity, to seize the truth and sell it for a handful of bills? YOU MISERABLE, HYPOCRITICAL, COWARDS. PIECES OF SHIT WITH NO DIGNITY.³²

Only a few exceptions arise when commenters introduced verified and related links onto the conversation. One example observed was on an article published

³¹ In Spanish: Terrassa veteran footballers yell " whores" and " go scrub" at players during a women's league game. El Diario Catalunya, E. (2019, February 04). Futbolistas veteranos del Terrassa gritan "guarras" e "iros a fregar" a jugadoras durante un partido de la liga femenina. Retrieved April 22, 2020, from https://www.eldiario.es/catalunya/Jugadoras-Terrassa-enfrentan-masculino-insultos_0_864413729.html

³² *Ibidem*

by ELDiario.es on February 3rd, 2019, titled “Cómo Vitoria-Gasteiz aumentó un 78,5% los viajes en transporte público,”³³ an article about the how the city effectively has implemented several mobility strategies to promote and increase the use of public transport. One user adds a link from a citizen’s initiative in Madrid, where a group of civilians discusses urbanism and topics related to public architecture.

DABAMA (03/02/2019 - 20:25H) I wish something like that would happen in Madrid! We have bus stops every 50 m (it is recommended to bring a sandwich and a canteen for the eternal bus trips). The civil society proposed a plan of trams with a priority of passage, which would be the ideal complement to the metro (much more expensive to build and maintain). <https://ecomovilidad.net/madrid/ejes-tranviables-conclusiones/> Without maintaining the mayor’s office and GAINING the community, it is difficult to see.

On another instance, this time about an article about far-right party VOX titled “Los traumas que esconden las listas de Vox y que están metiendo al partido en problemas³⁴,” one user on ElConfidencial’s Facebook page confronts—providing him with links (Figure 4.20)—another one about the legitimacy and the investigations that surfaced about the party’s scandals and problematic new members, whom a lot of them have serious criminal records according to the story:

³³ In Spanish: How Vitoria-Gasteiz increased by 78.5% the number of trips on public transport. Álvarez, C. (2019, February 03). Cómo Vitoria-Gasteiz aumentó un 78,5% los viajes en transporte público. Retrieved April 22, 2020, from https://www.eldiario.es/ballenablanca/365_dias/Vitoria-Gasteiz-aumento-viajes-transporte-publico_0_864063641.html

³⁴ ElConfidencial.com on Facebook, E. (2019, January 31). El Confidencial, Los traumas que esconden las listas de Vox y que están metiendo al partido en problemas. Retrieved March 12, 2020, from <https://www.facebook.com/elconfidencial/posts/10157222681496926>



Figure 4.19: Example of users asking for clarification on expressed views on Facebook.

Caption In Spanish: *Nieves Viña Rodriguez*: “All those who think in favor of maduro, should see their children and relatives die of hunger or lack of medicine. I can’t deal with this.

Carolina Rodriguez in reply to Nieves Viña Rodriguez “and it is Maduro who makes that the drugs don’t make it to their destination?”

Mauro Santos Rivas: “Yes Carolina in case you didn’t know, they talk about such a blockade, what blockade? Goods continue to arrive from the United States as a vehicle for discharge and others, but watch out for the Chavista high command and others who suck on the boat, from Europe they also arrive and from Russia the weapons? Or is it that for weapons there is no blockade and for medicines there is? Don’t come with the story of the blockade because we Venezuelans know the truth and if you think it’s a lie and you eat the bullshit that some guests say, you are going to go to the socialist paradise to see how you live!”

Facu Martinez in reply to Carolina Rodriguez “It’s the fucking miserable socialism, it’s the fucking miserable dictator and it’s the fucking miserable corrupt system and it’s the fucking miserable inept government and it’s the fucking narco-state it has set up in Venezuela?”



Figure 4.20: Example of a user referring to a news source to another.
Caption In Spanish: Post Title “The vox-listed scars that are getting the party in trouble.”

Ivan Garrido: “This is a lie. A member can perfectly well have a shady past. It’s located and discharged. A candidate is impossible because the process to become one is exhausting, with an infinite number of screens and you are required to have a criminal record. You’re manipulating as usual against Vox.”

Julio Sanz: [provides links contradicting Ivan’s comment]

Are The Sources Related to The Point of View of Most of the Users?

Sources provided by the users are not only virtually scarce but also, when provided, they do not follow the point of view of the majority or are aligned with the issue being discussed. However, a small amount of comments shares arise.

As mentioned in the above discursive categories, the readers who are involved

in the comments section do not usually cite sources that complement, qualify, or enrich their point of view or the standpoint of other users. As we have seen in the case of the arguments, this situation is also exceptional. In the case of this extraordinary event, the accuracy of the links is not usually the main feature of the quotation or source provided. The references are often general, without any examination, and lacking high accuracy. It seems that the reader only reads the headline of the news or a particular blog entry and that this is enough to convince the rest of the readers that their argument or point of view is the most accurate and should be predominant.

In this sense, it is evidenced that on Twitter, a considerable amount of sources arise, especially on ElDiario.es and on ElEspañol.com's handles (See Table 4.14). The links provided are often in the form of previously tweeted information highly related to the news item. In the following examples, we can observe users who provide a more accurate source aligned with the issue published. In the first image³⁵, an article Tweeted by ElEspañol.com about the elections' polls is challenged by a follower, which provides another result from LaSexta, an outlet characterized by being center-left and opposed to the first (Figure 4.21 & Figure 4.22). In the second figure³⁶, we see the case of the missing records on the millionaire grants that Silvia Clemente gave to her husband when she was the Minister of Agriculture of the Government of Castilla y León. A user nuances the piece of news with an article in the Catalan newspaper La Vanguardia, where it is stated that there have been no signs of evidence destruction, adding, "It would not be bad to contrast before giving biased information of one's own opinion"

4.4.4 Discursive Aspects of Social Networks

The analysis of the discourse language elements on social networks considered the presence of memes, emojis, and animated GIFs in the comments. In the case of memes, we found that the users of ElEspañol.com use them the most with

³⁵ElEspañol.com on Twitter (2019, March 11). El PSOE y sus aliados rondan ya los 185 escaños gracias a la división del centro y la derecha <https://t.co/GkTcbNQTIV>. Retrieved June 23, 2020, from <https://twitter.com/lespanolcom/status/1105053955808260097>

³⁶ElDiario.es on Twitter (2019, March 01). EXCLUSIVA | La Justicia rastrea las ayudas millonarias que Silvia Clemente dio a su marido: Varios expedientes han desaparecido de la Junta de Castilla y León <https://t.co/SUTKGM5Ji> Por @lauracorama [pic.twitter.com/BUHicOtBfZ](https://t.co/BUHicOtBfZ). Retrieved June 22, 2020, from <https://twitter.com/eldiarioes/status/1101365293471985664>




	Outlet	Facebook	Twitter
 ElDiario.es	0.5 (N= 11,839)	1.4 (N= 2,165)	0.5 (N=7,317)
 ElConfidencial.com	0.3 (N= 9,464)	0.4 (N= 390)	0.4 (N= 3,239)
 ElEspañol.com	0.00 (N= 9,632)	1.23 (N= 2052)	0.3 (N= 3,325)

Table 4.14: Are The Sources Related to The Point of View of Most of the Users? (%)

3.4% of comments on Facebook containing memes, whereas ElDiario.es comes in first on Twitter (1.8%). The memes tend to have a political and sarcastic tone (Figure 4.24 & Figure 4.25). The use of GIFs does not come up as a surprise, since its prevalence is ubiquitous online. On social media, the widely use and exposure of pre-existing media objects applied and utilized by users in different and unrelated ways as a representation of specific feelings, thoughts, gestures and reactions is quite common. Reaction to animated GIFs pulled from mainstream movies and TV shows are detached from their context in order to replicate moments of behavior or dialogue (whether a smile or a nod, a sigh or a chuckle, to more dramatic actions) that could be used as a person's response to a prior reply or to another argument, not always deployed as a reference of the original work per se (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). As VanArendok (2020:1) has stated

GIFs are the most common out-of-context excerpts of longer video works, so expressive and self-sufficient that they can communicate an idea without carrying along any of their original framework.

Databases of GIFs, such as imgur, Tenor, and Giphy, which have been embedded within Social Media Sites and messaging apps all over, are being used both for uploading and popularizing images and GIFs, and also have been observed to being used and loaded within news organizations posts. In the sample, GIFs are mostly present on Facebook with 4.2% of all comments gathered. On Twitter the share is particularly similar with 3.5%. GIFs are not perceived since commentary spaces on the news outlets do not support them as a form of commenting.

In the case of emojis, the majority recorded tend to be accompanied by written text. Emojis represent 11% of all the comments collected on social media. On Facebook they are identified in 2 out of 10 comments, and on Twitter in 1 out of 10.

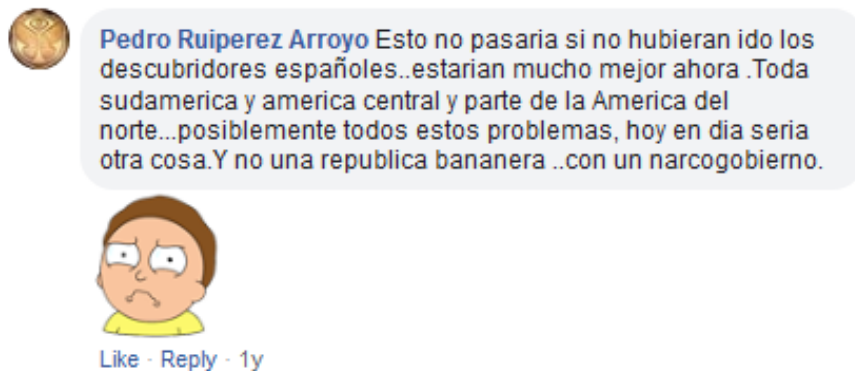


Figure 4.23: Example of emojis being used on Facebook. Source: EIEspañol.com’s Facebook page

The presence of GIFs to convey an idea or argument is still scarce, yet figures are entirely consistent across sites (See Table 4.15). It can be argued that Facebook’s new algorithm for comment ranking has limited the number of low-quality comments on public pages. In our sample, we could verify that comments with a poor grammatical or syntactic structure—contained short phrases, an emoji, a GIF, a link, or an Internet shorthand acronym such as ‘LOL’ or ‘Hahaha’—were ranked lower than comments with a more substantial amount of characters.

	Facebook			Twitter		
	Emoji	GIF	Meme	Emoji	GIF	Meme
Eldiario.es	7.2	0.8	0.4	4.3	1.5	1.8
ElConfidencial.com	6.8	1.2	0.03	1.9	0.6	0.24
EIEspanol.com	9.1	2.2	3.4	4.8	1.4	1.5

Table 4.15: Presence of digital discourse language elements on Social Networks (%)



Figure 4.21: Example of users providing sources on the ElDiario.es' Twitter account

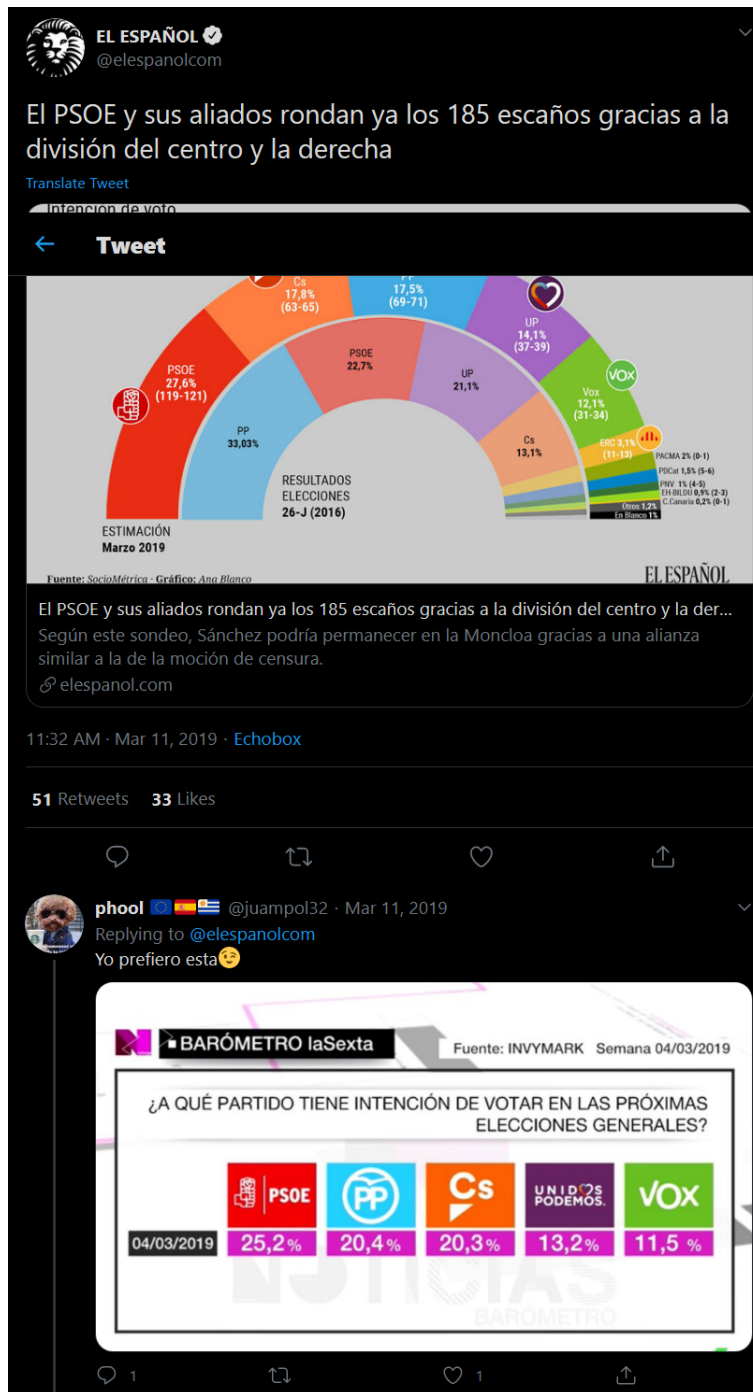


Figure 4.22: Example of users providing sources on the ElEspañol.com’s Twitter account



Figure 4.24: Examples of User-generated Memes found on Social Networks. Captions in clockwise order: (1) “You can’t go any lower. BOCACHANCLAS. A comedy from the PARTIDO POPULAR.” Retrieved February 19, 2020 from <https://twitter.com/eldiarioes/status/1094866204366462976> (2) “The three idiots who appear in this photo want to come back to the time their needed their husband for everything. How cute!.” Retrieved February 19, 2020, from <https://www.facebook.com/elespanol2015/posts/2040603202721736>. (3) “And dear friends, these things happen, because assholes don’t have natural predators.” *Ibidem* (4) “We must abolish the law of violence, protect the man and strengthen the hunt.” Retrieved February 19, 2020, from <https://twitter.com/elespanolcom/status/1106254313935028224>



Figure 4.25: Examples of User-generated Memes found on Social Networks II. Captions in clockwise order: (1) “I Like it. VOX to the General Elections.” Retrieved February 21, 2020, from <https://twitter.com/elespanolcom/status/1105053955808260097> (2) “Popcorn or Candy? Lets see what these suckers say” Retrieved February 21, 2020, from <https://twitter.com/elconfidencial/status/1097014795654508545> (3) “GÁ GÁ ... GÚ GÚ GÚ ... GRRRR ... GÁ GÁ.” Retrieved February 21, 2020, from <https://twitter.com/eldiarioes/status/1110285715924008962> (4) “In his head it was spectacular.” Retrieved February 22, 2020, from <https://twitter.com/elespanolcom/status/1106254313935028224>

Chapter 5

Conclusions or What Did We Learn from It

I am making significant progress here.

I have faith in myself.

Man is a mystery: if you spend your
entire life trying to puzzle it out,
then do not say that you have wasted
your time. I occupy myself with this mystery,
because I want to be a man.

— *Fyodor Dostoyevsky*

5.1 Conclusions

Based on the findings presented in the examination of user-comments within digital news outlets in Spain, the general conclusions of the study are identified. Next, the main findings concerning the research questions, examined at the beginning of this dissertation, are summarized in this chapter. In addition, the limitations of this research are stated, and recommendations for further research into the future of discourse ethics in digital newspapers are also explored.

In this concluding chapter, I proceed to review the hypotheses and research questions initially proposed at the outset of this study. Such hypotheses were formulated from the literature review and following an assessment of the current state of research on the deliberative dynamics of user comments in Spain. I aim to validate or reject them in light of the empirical work carried out. The following lines are intended to confirm or reject the hypothesis raised at the beginning of this work (See § 1.3).

5.2 Review of the Research Questions

Based on the analysis of online ethics discourse in readers' comments, I proceed to draw the following conclusions. First, the goal of this thesis was to study the users' discourse ethics dynamics within the realms of digital native news outlets and in their official accounts on Social Media in Spain. Following the principles regarding deliberation defined by Habermas (1994, 1983) and based on the codebook adapted on his normative approach, the contents of a sample of user-comments were analyzed in order to identify the language used, to recognize the existence of respect, recognition, and acceptance among the speakers and to illustrate the logical, discursive, and argumentative elements of the debates examined.

Second, a series of specific objectives were introduced in order to examine the different the engagement and interactivity tools available in every news outlet, describe the moderation policies and systems used in each the comments sections; corroborate the journalists' involvement in the conversations, and lastly, to determine the most commented news, the news sections with the most com-

ments, and the users' favorite news topics.

Hypothesis	Result
H1: The conversations generated from the comments seek the dialectical confrontation, are not constructive and tend to be little enriching. There is a dialogue between participants, but there is not discourse continuity in the debates.	The hypothesis receives support
H2: User-engagement does not provide any kind of journalistic relevance to the native digital newspapers analyzed.	The hypothesis is partially confirmed.
H3: Journalists rarely engage in the comments section with the readers.	The hypothesis is confirmed.
H4: Politics and Society are the news sections/topics which generate the most engagement.	The hypothesis is proved.
H5: The majority of the debates take place within the outlets' social media official accounts.	The hypothesis receives support.
H6: Follow up user engagement in the comments section within the outlets is scarce.	The hypothesis is partially rejected.
H7: Users use new forms of visual commentary such as memes, GIFs, and emojis.	The hypothesis is confirmed.

Table 5.1: Confirmation or rejection of the suggested hypotheses

This study was aimed at contributing to the growing body of research on user comments on digital newspapers. In chapter 2, I introduced the seven research questions that have guided this thesis up until this point. I will now review how they have been answered:

1. Dialogue between users is fragmented. User-engagement is confined within a reduced number of participants who monopolize the deliberative course of

the conversation, which showed low-quality discourse findings

In terms of the first research question in the study, which overlooked the deliberative elements of the user comments. We can affirm that the conversations examined are rich in textual quantities but not in discourse quality. Fewer debates are observed where users provide additional points of view to those expressed by fellow commenters. Additionally, and even though some users recognized each other as valid members of the conversation, and there is acknowledgment about their presence and contributions between them, a low number of argumentative comments are revealed. Most comments remain irrelevant to the issue being discussed, and a vast majority of users do not focus on the topic of the news story. Only 13.3% of readers intend to argue on the topic being discussed.

On the other hand, the analysis also shows that only a small number of users try to argue the point being raised by the majority (7.8%). In addition, the dialogue is monopolized by a small number of commenters. A predominant share of comments comes from a reduced number of contributions. This confirmation has also been reached by several studies, most specifically in datasets of content analysis from various cultural settings, where one-time comment share had ranged from 67 to over 80 percent (Graham & Wright, 2015; Ruiz et al., 2011; Springer, 2014). These type of users, which I define as the “power commenters,” have not only developed a sense of “ownership” over the comments spaces—most probably due to the amount of time and effort dedicated in this communicative activity—but also control the viewpoints of the majority and have the tendency to suppress them by alienating those who disagree with them or are not in line with their expressed ideologies.

As in the real public sphere, the sample of comments analyzed does not follow the discourse aspects of the Habermasian public sphere (1992;1984). Two decades after Dahlberg (2001) suggested that Internet discourse falls short of the requirements of the public sphere, his affirmations still are in line with the current state of digital deliberation in digital outlets in Spain, which is: there is low rational-critical debate. Nevertheless, enabled participatory spaces available in all the news outlets studied do allow deliberation and fulfill one of the components for democratic engagement and freedom of expression in web-based spaces. Scholars Amy Gutmann & Dennis Thompson (1998:12) reflected that deliberation should not be confined to formal settings but “embrace virtually any setting in which citizens come together regularly to reach collective decisions

about public issues.” Constructive deliberation has yet to be marked by respectful treatment among users, openness to other’s opinions, rationality, logic, and civility.

1.1 Incivility is low yet not wholly absent and hampers discourse feasibility between users.

Despite the low level of incivility found in our study, we are convinced that the media studied has yet to diminish the level of incivility within their discussion settings. Our analysis reveals that, collectively, 12.7% of all comments contain uncivil behavior. However, even a meager presence of incivility and anonymity still poses a limitation for the formation of a proper public sphere, impedes the flourishing of public opinion, and prevents effective communication. The use of irony, mocking, and other abusive or grotesque dialectical expressions equate with what Gardiner (2004) described as the Bakhtinian public sphere, which is a more entertaining public sphere rather than a rational, logical one (Dori-Hacohen, 2012; Weizman & Dori-Hacohen, 2017). It is worth noting that preceding studies have supported this finding explicitly where high concentrations of incivility in online participatory public spaces have been found (Coe et al., 2014; Gervais, 2015). Despite the previous evidence, technological advancement has led to the introduction of more rigorous moderation and fully automated moderation technologies that have accomplished the purpose of ensuring pejoratives, abusive language, and overall incivility away from the comments section (Ruiz et al., 2010; Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011).

In this sense, the deployment of automated procedures and the efforts by El-Diario.es—starting from mid-2020—to mitigate the negative deliberative dynamics within their comments section, are the right path towards a shift that several digital newspapers will have to embrace if they wish to remain afloat in the ever-changing online landscape. Similarly, the results presented here echo the findings of previous evidence, which indicate comments, in particular non-civil comments, are detrimental to users’ engagement (Coe et al., 2014; Stroud et al., 2016). Abusive language has been demonstrated to harm media organizations’ credibility and might also have an adverse effect on users’ perceptions of news quality (Prochazka et al., 2016).

Understanding that there is still a low rate of removed or moderated comments in digital news, it seems evident that users seek to avoid straightforwardly in-

sulting others rather than try to vent their emotions or hatred with other semantic tactics, such as irony, sarcasm, and jokes. Whereas derogatory remarks are easily identified by sorting advanced algorithms, and most of the time, they are recognized by computerized moderator variables, insulting language entails even farther subjective rhetoric.

2. User-comments continue being regarded by the news organizations as one of the bedrocks of online deliberation. However, the engagement is not being fully utilized in the newsroom due to the high turnover of contributions and lack of financial and human resources

According to the statements provided by the interviewees in each publication, the comments of the users continue to be deemed as one of the participatory and democratic aspects most valued by the digital press. Due to its inherent digital native structure, the contributions of the readers are of reference and bring added value to the newsrooms, its journalists, and the editorial mission of the news organizations. Nonetheless, the high level of participation below the stories and in the official accounts of the newspapers analyzed in the social networking sites, it is exceptionally demanding and challenging for the newspapers to filter, flag, and categorize the conversations and threads being generated within their sites. Such inability, in many instances technical or due to a lack of human capital, makes it impossible for the media to benefit from the deliberative contributions of its readers and to be able to ascertain their opinions so that they can later be incorporated into the development or editing of news items.

3. Journalists go below the line to engage with their readers only if it is indispensable. Reciprocal engagement between the media and their audience is almost non-existent

In recent years, the move from an ad-based business model to towards a subscription business one has pushed a culture of reciprocal journalism where users and reporters create communities, dialogue and sufficient fruitful engagement within their realms and around news production (Lewis, Holton, & Coddington 2014; Wright, Jackson & Graham, 2020). What seems to be clear is that, in our research, the presence of journalists and editors throughout the discussions and within the comment threads is limited, if not completely absent. Engagement is only taken into consideration and is often done when it is appropriate to address a misspelling error or to clarify a particular nuance. All the subjects questioned

acknowledged that they would like their reporters to engage more actively in the discussions below the line, adding that the complexities and points of view of the journalists will encourage productive exchanges in the discourse between them and their readers. Unfortunately, and as evidenced by Mendez, Palomo & Rivera (2020), Zeller & Hermida (2015), the newsrooms' practices and culture is still resilient and resistant to change. The comments sections are still considered to be in complete isolation, like "segregated playgrounds" (Singer et al., 2011), where users express their opinions and debates aspects of the political sphere, but without visibility nor attention from the newsroom. By the same token, under the definitions of online user-generated content, only a small fraction of the comments analyzed made a direct reference to either correct inaccurate facts or to critique the spelling of the news stories published. Points of disagreement between users were mainly the actors present in the story, their stances and the factual information reported, instead of the news reporter their figure and newspapers' legitimacy, integrity or competence. This finding echoes previous research findings (Borton, 2013; Freund, 2011)

Nonetheless, one of the reasons why this discursive interchange does not actually occur is to avoid falling into null and mundane arguments with specific commentators, particularly if they have to deal with complicated, nuanced issues which, by their definition, may well have a more contentious or volatile angle, such as news about extremism, sexual harassment or immigration, these are just an example of subjects that reporters do not like to be engaged in when it comes to participation in the comments section. By not using the features available on their own website to participate in public conversations with their readers, newsrooms are wasting potential valuable information from their audience feedback, which could be used in the production of news stories and reportage. This claim has been supported by research carried out by Graham & Wright (2015) and Jakobs (2014). Recent advances in the computational algorithm have the capacity to effectively and accurately detect, interpret, and collect meaningful information from feedback from the audience and to incorporate this knowledge back into content production processes.

4. Politics and society are the news sections that receive the most user-engagement

These news categories are also identified as the one with the most articles published by the media. The level of controversy that many news items, specifically 'hard news' ones, bring with them, as well as the current political and social

situation in Spain, prompts the digital media to invest more effort and resources in reporting on issues within these two categories. Users have a distinct inclination to comment on political news. Previous data on motivators obtained by Ziegele, Weber, and Köhler (2017) are largely consistent with the evidence in our research. Political interest and engagement have been identified as significant predictors for the use of the commentary feature below the news (Chung, 2008; Larsson, 2011). Users tend to invest cognitive/emotional effort in the discussion of political and socio-economic matters, as demonstrated in past studies (Ksiasek & Springer, 2020; Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011; Springer et al., 2015).

5. Users prefer to engage with the news on Facebook. The social network accounts of the news outlets receive higher concentrations of engagement, significantly greater than their organic visits to their websites.

Facebook continues to be a referential scenario for user-engagement; at the same time, the social platform generates the most share of comments. On Twitter, a higher number of comments reached a more global argumentative agreement among its participants, despite the low share of comments in the dataset. Users resort to social media intending to interact around news topics and issues that matter to them. In this regard, social media offer scientists a rare opportunity to examine user reactions to posts in real-time contexts over some time. It is essential to recognize that comment-level interaction observed can be regarded as a form of interpersonal communication, as also evidenced by Ballantine et al., (2015), and Smock et al., (2011). Users not only engage with news posts only to discuss the news but also to talk about themselves and topics that matter to them, which often are not linked to the issues being discussed by the story published or by the majority. The sheer complexity of interpersonal interactions of social media environments, as explained by Bruns & Moe 2014, also complicates the perception of how users see, interact, and interpret news posts from media organizations.

The public nature of the debates, often defined as 'mass personal communication' (Ballantine et al., 2015, Carr et al., 2008, O'Sullivan and Carr, 2017), offer new opportunities for rational discourse. In this sense, comments also have the potential to impact the experience of the user and the information being consumed by them (Waddell and Sundar, 2017) and, as a result, may impact the online communication and information-seeking actions of the reader. Social media has been a critical element for the distribution of journalistic content and will

continue to be, what remains to be seen is whether journalists and users will be able to build community and become catalysts for this public sphere of exchange and debate and whether social media companies will be able to control vitriol and incivility inside their public spheres. So far, the results on Facebook have been positive in terms of quantities but poor when it comes to argumentative discourse. The spaces that were called upon to develop this role, the comments, have failed resoundingly. Despite their success to connect readers under the same arena, users who seek a space for discussion based on current issues, flee from them, disappointed by the lack of respect not only for what they comment on but also for how opinions are expressed and the type of language used by others. The lack of cohesion in the conversation, meaning the absence of a structured conversation, makes the discussion chaotic, filled with a wide arrange of arguments yet without being cohesive and coherent.

The share of user-comments vary considerably between news sites and social platforms. The migration of the audience outside the realms of the media's participatory spaces is not a new phenomenon, in fact, is one that has been studied in the past decade extensively, bringing significant evidence to the state of the art of deliberative participation online (Hermida, 2012; Ju, Jeong, & Hsiang 2014; Kalsnes & Larsson 2017). Despite the change in Facebook's feed algorithm several times, the media is still dependent on the network's traffic and relevance, using them as news platforms.

6. Follow-up user-engagement continues to be relatively active in comparison to the initial period of comment generation after the stories' initial publication.

The eruption of a variety of news media models has led to the segmentation of the audience, which means that digital news outlets have had a difficult time trying to keep their readers under their own spaces (Trilling et al., 2016; Bruns, 2018). In the case of user-engagement in the comments sections, it was thought this tendency would continue, that engagement was only ephemeral, and that participation across channels was not continuous. Despite being regarded as communities (Porter, 2014) engagement below the line has been found to be inconsistent and discontinuous, these communities described by Watson et al., (2019:1849) as "loosely knit ones," at times did not developed sufficiently to build a sense of belonging, a virtual one (Porter, 2014; Watson et al., 2019). Previously supported evidence in the field of journalism and participatory audiences

online have come to the conclusion that user communities that actively participate on media sites only thrive when audiences cultivate and create long-term bonds with the news website brand and its ideological lines, as well as the mutual interactions with other readers (Lewis, Holton, & Coddington, 2014). In this sense, user-engagement in our sample is continuous and relatively active even weeks after the start of the discussion. Most of the news stories that continue to have in action engagement were published under the politics section.

7. Memes, emojis, and GIFS represent a new form of digital discourse language

The research reveals that the comment threads within the social network accounts of the outlets selected have several particular communicative patterns and features that are not registered in the participatory spaces of the digital news media, mostly due to lack of technical support or because of the design aspects. The presence of graphic communication, mostly in the form of emojis, memes, or animated GIFs, are quite generalized and recorded throughout the entire dataset. The evidence of graphic communication used for social engagement within the comments on a wide array of subjects (Meso et al., 2017) enables individuals to synthesize thoughts, scenarios or statements in a clear, fun, personalized and efficient manner as previously suggested by Castellano Parra et al., (2020); Gómez-García, (2013); Freire (2016); Highfield & Leaver (2016) and Meso et al. (2017).

5.3 Research limitations

It should be borne in mind that the study has a number of limitations. The findings of our research should only be interpreted in the light of these.

First, since the analysis of user-comments was restricted to a case study method, during a short period, it is imperative to address that findings are limited to the compound month examined. The share of comments only come from the news stories most read on a particular day; thus articles with a significant discourse contribution have not been considered, the no inclusion of these stories mean that less popular themes and topics might not have been observed in the sample. The same can be applied to the posts included on social media. By only examining user-engagement below the pieces which attracted the most attention or have a more predominant element of newsworthiness, the scope of the research confines the evidence into what has been previously described as the consensus of the majority (Soffer & Gordoni, 2017; Masullo Chen & Lu, 2017).

Second, the following limitation concerns the need for a more technical approach, due to the author's insufficient knowledge of algorithm programming, some tasks had to be performed in a semi-automatic fashion. This limitation has made it unattainable to track the range of unique users in the study. An additional aspect that was not possible to measure is the time slots preferred by users when discussing the study. Furthermore, finally, the number of replies and mentions made by one particular user towards another was an important factor that could not be assessed. Such data present in the sample was not adequately covered or examined due to my inability to cross-check such attributes because of their high throughput.

Third, single interviews carried out during this research were not significant in terms of scope and scale. Besides, the overall time—on average, one hour—with each interviewee perhaps, was not sufficient to fully grasp the hypotheses introduced. Statements were rich and diverse, and at times conclusive and aligned with previous scholar evidence, yet a methodological approach in which serial interviewing (Read, 2018) is applied throughout multiple occasions would improve the reliability and validity of the findings in future research. The constant and sometimes unpredictable world on online communications requires that researchers revisit key participants for further follow-ups and to obtain a more

multi-layered nuance.

Fourth, the longitudinal aspect of the sample meant that the share of comments for examination had to be reduced. Even though almost one hundred thousand user contributions were gathered, more time for the analysis and measure of discourse ethics could have been devoted. In addition, the author's delimitation of the study, to be carried out in a limited period could also be considered a limitation.

Fifth, an inherent limitation of data collection for user-engagement on Facebook, was that we were unable to collect and measure data from click-through postings. The media did not provide metrics on their reader engagement activity in social media stories either, which meant a significant part of the evidence on total or proportional engagement on the news stories gathered was not assessed.

Sixth, self-reported and pre-existing data on the outlet's audiences and metrics applied in the study also represents another limitation since it cannot be independently verified. In the same vein, the research relies on statistics from data collection firms, so the results, therefore, rely on the accuracy of the evidence obtained. For example, in the case of SimilarWeb, the company only allows full access to 3-month data sets at the time, and the data from its traffic sources are limited in the free version.

5.4 Discussion

First, the study is based on data that was collected during a limited period, and even though, the digital news outlets selected for the sample are ranked as one of the most visited and relevant ones in Spain, further research should be carried in order to analyze data over an extended time including other minority news outlets to the scope and obtain more detailed aspects of the discourse ethics behind the comments sections. Spain is a country with a unique linguistic heritage in Europe. This sociocultural attribute is a perfect starting point to thoroughly comprehend the online discourse of its citizens. Comparative research that analyzes the behavior and dynamics of the readers of digital native newspapers in different autonomous communities, not only examining the discursive components of the Spanish language but also collecting data in major languages such as Catalan, Basque and Galician among others, should be undertaken. Therefore, our findings cannot be automatically generalized to the entire state of online discourse within the Spanish digital media. Thus it is relevant to continue exploring alternative and potentially new discursive perspectives inside and outside the outlet's informative boundaries.

Second, the limited number of AI technologies and tools available in Spanish, such as neural networks for discourse analysis, poses a significant challenge for any scientist trying to analyze large chunks of linguistic data. Nowadays, there is still no available technology to thoroughly and automatically analyze online public discourse. The lack of available technological resources and advancements presents a significant challenge, not only for any social scientist aiming to examine big chunks of data but also for those researchers in computational fields as well. Perhaps, the most significant contribution in future works can be made through the development and implementation of in-depth machine learning that could be used to process more dimension of data, study outcomes from the past, and master the capacity to collect, understand and subsequently trace previous language patterns to help make real judgments in real-time.

Third, more work should also examine more thoroughly the connection regarding media pluralism as well as the level of discussion in news comments shown by our results. Trying to compare the pluralism of news stories with the heterogeneity of views in readers' conversations would also provide empirical evidence for this objective. Another fruitful line of inquiry could investigate the

users' motivations for engagement within the news organization's deliberative spaces.

Fourth, contributions below the line are intricately rich and diverse when it comes to discourse, facts, and sources. New technological advancements, specifically in AI and algorithms, bear the potential to identify and retrieve this useful information from the readers. User-generated content below the line can be used as potential future data or facts into the production process of news. News organizations ought to invest in the implementation of machine learning tools inside their comment section's features and as part of their participatory strategies. Only in this way will they have the opportunity to take full advantage of their users' feedback. By implementing user commentary within their journalistic practices, for example, user contributions can help journalists in the newsroom when reviewing an article, filtering a political backlash, monitoring a mass social movement in real-time, and understanding about both the thoughts and perspectives that users have about their outlet. At the same time, the analysis of user content implemented in the creation of news stories is also a substantial topic for future research projects, in which the information provided by the readers can be examined in comparison with those produced by specialized journalists. In addition, the new AI tools to moderate and enhanced conversations could be implemented by the outlets. The future relies on the successful development and application of AI software and machine learning models to the betterment of online discourse experience.

Lastly, future work could also investigate similar relationships in other social networking sites, like YouTube or Instagram. It is also important to stress that some social media sites depend heavily on ever-evolving algorithms that they adamantly protect and which often are shrouded in mystery to outsiders, a situation that complicates the current state of empirical research in the field of communications within social, digital environments. More tools and collaboration between researchers and stakeholders within technology companies need to be materialized, without a close partnership with these enterprises, academia run the risk of losing valuable and precious sets of data for the research projects.

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Appendix

A.1 Datasheet 1. User-comment Discourse Ethics Codebook

I. Identification Record					
No. of datasheet:	Outlet:	Publishing date:	Date of capture:	No. of comments	
Headlines:		Sections:		Author/Agency:	
II. Information Concerning the Conversation					
No. of users:		No. of mentions among users	No. of replies:	Average user-intervention	
Using an alias	Using real-name				
Presence of links		Presence of ads or self-promotion	Contrast with other media:	Contrast with other sites:	
III. Social Networks					
Facebook			Twitter		
No. of comments	No. of shares	No. of <i>likes</i>	No. of comments	No. of retweets	No. of likes
No. of memes	No. of GIFs	No. of emojis	No. of memes	No. of GIFs	No. of emojis
IV. Discourse comment ethics					
Logic and coherence					
Do users focus on the topic of the news story?					
Do users try to argue their point?					
Collective search for truth					
Do users respect and acknowledge each other as valid members of the conversation?					
Does the comment add interest to the debate?					
Does it contain incivility, profanity or derogatory remarks?					
Does it provide a different point of view than other comments?					
Do users question each other and ask for clarification on expressed views?					
An agreement based on the best argument					
Do users endorse an argument of another user?					
Do users mention or refer to other sources?					
Are the sources related to the point of view of most of the users?					

Source: Adaptation of Masip's methodological proposal (Masip, et. al., 2010)

A.2 Datasheet 2. User-comment Discourse Ethics Codebook in Spanish

I. Registro de Identificación					
Nº de Ficha:	Diario:	Fecha de Publicación:	de	Fecha de Captura:	Nº de comentarios
Titulares:		Secciones		Autor/Agencia:	
II. Información referente al debate					
Nº de Participantes		Nº de menciones entre usuarios/as		Nº de réplicas	Promedio de intervención de un usuario
con alias (nick)	con nombre propio				
Presencia de enlaces		Presencia de publicidad o autopromoción		Contraste con otros medios:	Contraste con otros sitios:
III. Redes sociales					
Facebook			Twitter		
Nº de comentarios	Nº de <i>shares</i>	Nº de <i>likes</i>	Nº de comentarios	Nº de retuits	Nº de likes
Nº de memes	Nº de GIFs	Nº de emojis	Nº de memes	Nº de GIFs	Nº de emojis
IV. Ética discursiva del comentario					
Lógica y coherencia					
¿Los usuarios centran sus intervenciones en el tema que es objeto de debate?					
¿Los usuarios exponen argumentos sobre el tema de debate?					
Búsqueda cooperativa de la verdad					
¿Los hablantes se respetan y se toleran como interlocutores válidos en la conversación?					
¿El comentario aporta interés al debate?					
¿Hay descalificaciones?					
¿Los hablantes que centran sus intervenciones en el tema de debate introducen matices/comentarios a otros puntos de vista?					
¿Los hablantes se interpelan y piden aclaraciones a puntos de vista expresados?					
Un acuerdo basado en el mejor argumento					
¿Los hablantes hacen suyo un argumento de otro hablante?					
¿Los hablantes mencionan o remiten a otras fuentes?					
¿Son las fuentes afines al punto de vista de la mayoría de los hablantes?					

Source: adaptation of Masip's methodological proposal (Masip, et. al., 2010)

A.3 Stories Selected for Coding on Facebook

Date	Outlet	Headline	Link	Likes	Comments Recorded	Shares	Comments available for coding
01/02/2019	ElDiario.es	Íñigo Errejón 'Una fuerza que se dice muy de izquierdas pero no gana, no le cambia la vida a la gente'	https://www.facebook.com/eldiarios/posts/2579039452111911	890	366	130	164
	ElConfidencial.com	Cabify De ruta con un taxista esquirol de Madrid La huelga no está consiguiendo nada	https://www.facebook.com/elconfidencial/posts/10157093961736926	463	160	66	76
	ElEspañol.com	Los militares cercan la casa de Guaidó 'Hago responsable a Maduro de lo que me pase'	https://www.facebook.com/lespanol2015/posts/2040603202721736	2500	552	3600	237
03/02/2019	ElDiario.es	Casio vende calculadoras rosas para que "las mujeres tengan una mejor experiencia en su entorno de trabajo"	https://www.facebook.com/eldiarios/posts/2581704381845418	1.200	267	276	187
	ElConfidencial.com	Así prepara el independentismo la venganza contra las empresas que dejaron Cataluña	https://www.facebook.com/elconfidencial/posts/10157098758686926	568	100	137	75
	ElEspañol.com	El 'boom' del guacamole de Mercadona: radiografía de la salsa más exitosa del supermercado	https://www.facebook.com/lespanol2015/posts/2043531982428858	2.300	204	611	204

05/02/2019	ElDiario.es	Futbolistas veteranos del Terrassa gritan "guarras" e "iros a fregar" a jugadoras durante un partido de la liga femenina	https://www.facebook.com/eldiarios/posts/2584885331527323	4300	651	2300	474
	ElConfidencial.com	Hacienda estudia que los padres devuelvan lo desgravado en la concertada desde 2015	https://www.facebook.com/elconfidencial/posts/10157103666856926	1200	206	621	105
	ElEspañol.com	Exfoliación vaginal "para borrar el rastro de tu ex": la peligrosa moda íntima	https://www.facebook.com/espanol2015/posts/2048075988641124	956	152	403	121
	ElDiario.es	Alfonso Guerra, el nuevo líder carismático de la derecha	https://www.facebook.com/eldiarios/posts/2589525121063344	1900	723	1036	550
07/02/2019	ElConfidencial.com	Sánchez se empuña en perder las elecciones	https://www.facebook.com/elconfidencial/posts/10157108738726926	1200	240	172	80
	ElEspañol.com	La efímera ilusión de Antonio con su primer contrato: víctima de un camión con 4 compañeros	https://www.facebook.com/espanol2015/posts/2051187448329978	2600	333	1117	314
09/02/2019	ElDiario.es	La Justicia da la razón a los Franco sobre la propiedad de las estatuas del Pórtico de la Gloria	https://www.facebook.com/eldiarios/posts/2592093094139880	2100	419	493	268
	ElConfidencial.com	El desplome de Sánchez	https://www.facebook.com/elconfidencial/posts/10157113529011926	863	197	206	96
	ElEspañol.com	El desesperado llanto de los policías que no	https://www.facebook.com/espanol2015/posts/2052825808166142	1400	81	158	58

25/02/2019	ElDiario.es	Enseñanos qué es un embarazo, Pablo Casado	https://www.facebook.com/eldiarios/posts/2621439021205287	1500	67	1396	67
	ElConfidencial.com	Torra deja plantado al Rey y a Sánchez en la foto de familia del 'stand' de España	https://www.facebook.com/elconfidencial/posts/10157154931611926	101	88	19	88
	ElEspañol.com	Podemos perderá la mitad de escaños y será quinta fuerza por detrás de Vox sin las confluencias	https://www.facebook.com/lespanol2015/posts/2079097458872310/	461	267	76	117
	ElDiario.es	Montoro apunta sin pruebas a que la Generalitat pudo "engañar" a Hacienda para pagar el 1-O	https://www.facebook.com/eldiarios/posts/2625092460839943	366	102	104	70
27/02/2019	ElConfidencial.com	Asaltan la embajada de Corea del Norte en Madrid con rehenes y robo de ordenadores	https://www.facebook.com/elconfidencial/posts/10157157912086926	4600	107	1083	81
	ElEspañol.com	Los tres divorcios que ha provocado el asesinato de Ardimes entre su lista de amantes	https://www.facebook.com/lespanol2015/posts/2080755102039879	672	177	234	107
01/03/2019	ElDiario.es	"Ministro del paro": lo que decía Ciudadanos de su nuevo fichaje cuando estaba en el Gobierno de Zapatero	https://www.facebook.com/eldiarios/posts/2626690437346812	1000	170	871	74
	ElConfidencial.com	La subida del SMI no llega a las asistentes: "Me han puesto	https://www.facebook.com/elconfidencial/posts/10157162409276926	645	114	400	102

		entrevista de alta tensión							
	ElDiario.es	Anticapitalistas se desgaja de Podemos en Madrid	https://www.facebook.com/eldiarios/posts/2635715579777631	505	225	136	52		
07/03/2019	ElConfidencial.com	Soberanistas radicales amenazan con violar a la secretaria judicial que declaró por el 1-O	https://www.facebook.com/elconfidencial/posts/10157176312266926	1100	268	662	111		
	ElEspañol.com	Manuela, la madre del asesinado por Pilar Baeza: "No fue violada, todo es mentira"	https://www.facebook.com/lespanol2015/posts/2093498364098886	679	66	316	66		
	ElDiario.es	El Mundo, ABC y La Razón publican un anuncio de HazteOír contra las leyes de violencia de género en el 8M	https://www.facebook.com/eldiarios/posts/263959606272916	4100	518	1997	101		
09/03/2019	ElConfidencial.com	Semana negra para las defensas: 'mosos' y policías 'rescatan' la acusación de rebelión	https://www.facebook.com/elconfidencial/posts/10157181074991926	1200	91	203	81		
	ElEspañol.com	L., el cirujano al que no le temblaba el pulso al grabarse vídeos porno con compañeras	https://www.facebook.com/lespanol2015/posts/2096458507136205	858	113	148	113		
11/03/2019	ElDiario.es	Casado alienta la teoría de la conspiración a los 15 años del 11M: "Las víctimas merecen saber toda la verdad"	https://www.facebook.com/eldiarios/posts/264386935295587	1100	438	661	111		

A.4 Stories Selected for Coding on Twitter

Date	Outlet	Headline	Link	Retweets	Likes	Comments available for coding
01/02/2019	ElDiario.es	La Casa Blanca amenaza a Maduro con Guantánamo si no deja la presidencia	https://twitter.com/eldiarioes/status/1091373863252848640	175	128	44
	ElConfidencial.com	Cabify De ruta con un taxista esquirol de Madrid La huelga no está consiguiendo nada	https://twitter.com/elconfidencial/status/1091232934315548672	13	10	8
	ElEspañol.com	El 'pequeño Nicolás' se presentará a las europeas para defender a los millennials desencantados	https://twitter.com/elespanolcom/status/1091066252825690112	373	359	133
03/02/2019	ElDiario.es	Casio vende calculadoras rosas para que "las mujeres tengan una mejor experiencia en su entorno de trabajo"	https://twitter.com/eldiarioes/status/1091679628098453504	50	37	33
	ElConfidencial.com	La peligrosa deriva reaccionaria de Pablo Casado	https://twitter.com/elconfidencial/status/1091935570387861504	16	20	21
	ElEspañol.com	Las cuentas de Letizia: algo no encaja si se paga vestidos, retoques, ayudantes y viajes	https://twitter.com/elespanolcom/status/1091974542136885248	9	8	13
05/02/2019	ElDiario.es	La Armada abre un expediente disciplinario por falta grave a un militar que firmó el manifiesto contra Franco	https://twitter.com/eldiarioes/status/1092730300734439424	708	379	109
	ElConfidencial.com	Los separatistas ni se lo imaginan	https://twitter.com/elconfidencial/status/109266374813579673Z	11	13	7

13/02/2019	ElDiario.es	salto al vacío con su hijo en brazos	https://twitter.com/eldiarioes/status/1095582343639662592	144	202	29			
	ElConfidencial.com	El juicio a la rebelión que nunca existió	https://twitter.com/elconfidencial/status/1095580010348507136	4	14	10			
	ElEspañol.com	La 'coronación' de Montero: la ministra de Hacienda hace más que números	https://twitter.com/elespanolcom/status/1095653624674480129	320	596	50			
	ElDiario.es	La humillación de Alsina a Torra que ha hecho que el president dé pena hasta a sus detractores	https://twitter.com/elconfidencial/status/1096399226613854211	79	72	26			
15/02/2019	ElConfidencial.com	Las mentiras de Pablo Casado en su comparecencia tras la convocatoria de elecciones	https://twitter.com/elconfidencial/status/1096428921958981637	15	18	9			
	ElEspañol.com	Malestar en el PSOE por la "innecesaria purga" a Barreda y Rodríguez antes de urnas	https://twitter.com/elespanolcom/status/1096157186902933506	13	15	5			
17/02/2019	ElDiario.es	Cancelaciones de rodajes en la industria del porno hasta que se aclare si Nacho Vidal tiene VIH	https://twitter.com/elconfidencial/status/1096799182197792768	70	202	35			
	ElConfidencial.com	Carmena y Errejón arrancan su campaña conjunta: "Hay algo más importante que ser de izquierdas y es la justicia social"	https://twitter.com/elconfidencial/status/1097014795654508545	78	72	46			
		Un 155 largo en Cataluña con el apoyo de Vox: el sueño que alberga Puigdemont							

01/03/2019	ElDiario.es	La Justicia rastrea las ayudas millonarias que Silvia Clemente dio a su marido: varios expedientes han desaparecido de la Junta de Castilla y León	https://twitter.com/eldiarios/status/1101365293471985664	532	256	42
	ElConfidencial.com	Cao de Benós: "La embajada de Corea del Norte no tiene ni aire acondicionado"	https://twitter.com/elconfidencial/status/1101407980422156288	0	8	6
	ElEspañol.com	De una lechuga por 55.000 euros a un palo rojo de 5.000: las 11 obras más ridículas de ARCO	https://twitter.com/elespanolcom/status/1101160126105440258	3	4	8
03/03/2019	ElDiario.es	El vicepresidente de la Junta andaluza dice que "los consejeros cobran poco" y el PSOE le reprocha que su regeneración sea subirse los sueldos	https://twitter.com/eldiarios/status/1102318734507573250	166	121	46
	ElConfidencial.com	El gigante alemán que traicionó a España: el pacto oculto de T-Systems con Puigdemont	https://twitter.com/elconfidencial/status/1102090866661810176	126	91	27
	ElEspañol.com	José Antonio, mártir de las denuncias falsas de su ex mujer: hasta de abusar de sus hijos	https://twitter.com/elespanolcom/status/1102095135997870080	428	328	55
05/03/2019	ElDiario.es	Las diferencias entre Pablo Casado y Santiago Abascal	https://twitter.com/eldiarios/status/1102834127282200576	21	34	10
	ElConfidencial.com	"La trampa del Fairy, un chaleco rajado, artes marciales...": Milla	https://twitter.com/elconfidencial/status/1103072080990334976	5	13	3

		habla de un 1-O "violento"						
	ElEspañol.com	Los 3 'zascas' de Inés Arrimadas a Pepa Bueno en una entrevista de alta tensión	https://twitter.com/elespanolcom/status/1102633785730965504	19	41	28		
07/03/2019	ElDiario.es	El PP se retira de la manifestación del 8M por su manifiesto "politicizado y partidista"	https://twitter.com/eldiarios/status/1103409418274770944	23	26	44		
	ElConfidencial.com	Soberanistas radicales amenazan con violar a la secretaria judicial que declaró por el 1-O	https://twitter.com/elconfidencial/status/1103566452781539328	141	52	69		
	ElEspañol.com	"Sujetos vinculados a la embajada marroquí" intervinieron en el 11-M, denuncia Villarejo al juez	https://twitter.com/elespanolcom/status/1103191672668807169	116	71	12		
09/03/2019	ElDiario.es	Rivera gana las primarias de Ciudadanos con el apoyo tan solo de 7.792 afiliados y un 32% de participación	https://twitter.com/eldiarios/status/1104408932162908160	87	61	39		
	ElConfidencial.com	La expopular Silvia Clemente da un vuelco a Cs y gana las primarias de Castilla y León	https://twitter.com/elconfidencial/status/1104360643128381440	24	20	17		
	ElEspañol.com	La "revisión policial" del 11-M oculta los principales misterios de la mochila de Vallecas	https://twitter.com/elespanolcom/status/1104294879822336000	20	34	16		
11/03/2019	ElDiario.es	Casado alienta la teoría de la conspiración a los 15 años del 11M: "Las	https://twitter.com/eldiarios/status/1105087224238882816	99	58	168		

A.5 Number of Articles Published by News Topic

	Politics	Society	Culture	Economy	Opinion	Health	Sports	Tech	World	Crime
ElDiario.es	203	26	17	16	16	0	2	6	6	0
ElConfidencial.com	107	4	12	26	13	0	17	19	7	0
ElEspañol.com	42	33	18	1	4	32	5	0	0	70
Total	352	63	47	43	33	32	24	25	13	70

Note: The crime section was only available at ElEspañol.com, for that reason was not considered for the final counting.

A.6 Number of Comments by News Topic

	Politics	Opinion	Society	Culture	Economy	Tech	World	Crime	Science	Sports	Health
Facebook	41843	2258	6055	2514	2606	637	340	4539	678	783	276
Twitter	5689	437	607	357	224	56	41	666	440	37	16
Total	47532	2695	6662	2871	2830	693	381	5205	1118	820	292
ElDiario.es	10668	988	1120	340	623	115	287	0	31	54	0
ElConfidencial.com	7306	958	406	333	762	424	349	0	0	290	0
ElEspañol.com	2976	107	2063	643	22	0	0	4714	535	418	184
Total	20950	2053	3589	1316	1407	539	636	4714	566	762	184

Resumen

At the University of the Basque Country, it is mandatory to present a summary of the thesis in Spanish or Basque if the dissertation is not published or defended in either of the two languages mentioned (Article 13 of the Doctoral Studies Academic Regulations). It is my honor to provide you with a summary in Spanish in the following pages.

Contenido de la tesis doctoral

En el Capítulo 1, se introducen y se explican con detenimiento y detalle el propósito, el objetivo, las hipótesis, las preguntas y las metodologías de la investigación. En este mismo apartado exploramos cada una de las técnicas y métodos aplicados a una muestra de comentarios hechos por los usuarios debajo de las piezas informativas en tres periódicos nativos digitales en España.

En el Capítulo 2, se traza y expone un extenso abanico de definiciones. Del mismo modo se estudian las características más relevantes en términos conceptuales y operativos en torno al periodismo digital y al usuario como elemento primordial dentro de los confines de la participación deliberativa en la red. Además, desempaquetamos las teorías, estudios y planteamientos de una larga lista de académicos, expertos y periodistas en el ámbito del periodismo digital y las dinámicas de los usuarios en Internet. El propósito de un marco teórico es guiar al lector en la navegación a través de las profundas aguas del periodismo en línea y sus desafíos, ventajas y virtudes a través de una serie de actores, paisajes y perspectivas en todo el mundo y dentro de una multitud de escenarios participativos e interactivos. Este capítulo se basa en las teorías referentes a la esfera pública digital, la democracia deliberativa y el actual papel que cumplen las redes sociales en la distribución de de contenido noticioso. Por otra parte, junto con el marco teórico se integra el concepto del *engagement* disruptivo, específicamente, la conceptualización de la incivilidad, el anonimato y los procesos de moderación y filtración de la participación de las usuarias en línea a través de inteligencia artificial y nuevos mecanismos computarizados.

El Capítulo 3 se centra más específicamente en el análisis cualitativo desde la perspectiva de los medios de comunicación analizados. Aquí discutimos con las personas clave responsables de la moderación, del contenido y de establecer y poner en marcha los canales participativos, la moderación y las normas legales

y éticas en cada uno de los medios nativos digitales analizados. Adicionalmente, se hace un análisis extenso de las prácticas periodísticas existentes en sus respectivas redacciones y dentro de sus propios canales de participación. También se muestra una visión pormenorizada de las todas y cada una de las técnicas metodológicas examinadas a fondo en el capítulo 1.

El Capítulo 4 se examina la ética discursiva a través de la aplicación de métodos de contenido cualitativo y el análisis textual de 98.426 comentarios de usuarios. En este capítulo también se discute a gran medida los aspectos expuestos en la metodología del capítulo 1. Asimismo, se introducen y se esbozan una serie de resultados y evidencias exhaustivos. Los resultados proporcionan al lector una comprensión global de las dinámicas del discurso de comentarios generados por el usuario debajo de las piezas informativas dentro y fuera de los espacios de los medios de comunicación, del mismo modo le ofrece una completa visión general de la cultura actual de los comentarios en España, sus características de participación y expone matices inéditos sobre nuevas formas de el lenguaje discursivo en Internet.

En el Capítulo 5, abordamos las conclusiones relacionadas con las hipótesis y las preguntas iniciales de la investigación, las cuales fueron planteadas en el cuerpo principal de este trabajo. Finalmente, concluimos discutiendo las limitaciones encontradas a lo largo de la investigación y proponemos soluciones futuras en el campo de los estudios del discurso en línea dentro del contexto de los contenidos generados por los usuarios y los medios nativos digitales. En este apartado se aboga por el desarrollo y la exploración de las tecnologías basadas en la inteligencia artificial y los enfoques de aprendizaje por máquina para automatizar el análisis de los comentarios de los usuarios en el mundo académico y alentar a los medios de comunicación a utilizar la automatización para la moderación de los comentarios y filtrado de contenido del usuario con potencial para que pueda ser usado en las salas de redacción.

Introducción

Objetivos

El objetivo general de esta tesis es estudiar la participación de la audiencia y la dinámica del discurso de los comentarios de los usuarios generados en los tres principales medios de comunicación digitales de España.

Entre los objetivos específicos que esta investigación se propone alcanzar están:

1.1 Estudiar el contenido de una muestra de comentarios para identificar el lenguaje utilizado, la existencia de un diálogo, el reconocimiento entre los hablantes, el trato respetuoso entre ellos, la aceptación de los argumentos de otros hablantes, además de aspectos lógicos y coherentes del discurso presente en los debates.

1. Estudiar los diferentes instrumentos de participación e interactividad disponibles en cada medio de comunicación.

2.2 Describir las políticas y sistemas de moderación utilizados en cada uno de los espacios de participación habilitados.

1. Cuantificar los comentarios y el *engagement* generados a partir de las noticias publicadas en los perfiles oficiales de los medios de comunicación analizados en las redes sociales, en Twitter y en Facebook, respectivamente.

3.1 Analizar la ética discursiva de los comentarios generados en las cuentas oficiales de las redes sociales -Twitter y Facebook- de los medios de comunicación indicados.

1. Examinar el contenido de una muestra de comentarios para identificar las noticias más comentadas, las secciones de noticias con más comentarios y los tópicos favoritos.

Antecedentes

En las últimas décadas han surgido en línea lugares, comunidades y redes que antes eran inimaginables (Bowen, 1996; Goode, 2009). Estos nuevos escenarios de escala mundial permiten que el ciudadano común pueda abierta y democráticamente debatir, comentar, y curar temas, intereses e ideas comunes y específicas dentro de los florecientes ecosistemas digitales (Papacharissi, 2004). El discurso en línea ha hecho que aumente la participación política, fortaleciendo y empoderando en su camino los derechos de los ciudadanos (Cammaerts y Audenhove, 2005), mientras que al mismo tiempo, las nuevas innovaciones de las tecnologías de la información y las comunicaciones, como la popularización del teléfono inteligente, han contribuido a revitalizar la esfera pública (Ruiz y otros, 2011). A

pesar de los beneficios de esta transformación digital, el engagement, las interacciones y el contenido de los usuarios también ha aportado una serie de matices negativos y desventajas. A medida que aumenta la cantidad de información disponible en Internet y que más personas empiezan a participar en la esfera pública digital y dentro de plataformas sociales como Twitter y Facebook (Kies, 2010), el número de inconvenientes y retos en el discurso que se maneja en línea se ha disparado y multiplicado desorbitadamente (Aurigi, 2016). El incitación al odio (Waldron, 2012); los bulos (McNair, 2018); la desinformación; los trolls (Vergeer, 2018) y el incivismo (Coe, Kenski y Rains, 2014) son sólo algunos de los problemas más comunes que enfrenta el discurso en línea en la actualidad. Estos tiempos difíciles hacen que nos preguntemos si estamos siendo testigos de la reinención del periodismo digital (Salaverría, 2019) y de una nueva e intrincada realidad discursiva dentro de las esferas públicas en línea, como las secciones de comentarios de los medios de comunicación nativos. A la luz de lo anterior, la importancia de analizar la ética discursiva a partir de los comentarios de los lectores en los dentro de los confines de estos medios de comunicación es crucial, ya que actualmente existe un vacío investigativo en este ámbito. En el presente estudio se examinan explícitamente los periódicos en línea, un medio digital que todavía no se ha abordado en los estudios existentes sobre la participación y la ética del discurso en línea. Se analizan tres publicaciones de noticias digitales nativas de referencia en España, ElDiario.es, ElConfidencial.com y el ElEspañol.com, incluyendo sus secciones de comentarios y sus perfiles públicos en Twitter y Facebook.

Metodología

Para el desarrollo de esta tesis, hemos elegido múltiples marcos metodológicos compuestos de varias técnicas. En las ciencias sociales, es bastante común el uso extensivo de métodos de investigación que están a favor del uso de numerosos métodos. Este tipo de enfoque de investigación se describe como multimétodo o multirretrato (Campbell y Fiske, 1959). En nuestra investigación, decidimos abogar por un método mixto, tanto cuantitativo como cualitativo, para validar y cotejar los datos recogidos provenientes de tres fuentes diferentes.

Los métodos cualitativos y cuantitativos se emplearon para complementarse y no colisionar entre sí. Al mismo tiempo, una metodología mixta es un vehículo

para una descripción fiable, convergente y más holística de las unidades examinadas dentro del estudio. Observando la cuestión de la investigación desde dos perspectivas diferentes, se puede tener una versión muy definida del fenómeno social en cuestión. La triangulación, tal como la define Denzin (1978:291), es la "combinación de metodologías en el estudio del mismo fenómeno". Por lo tanto, al ejercer dos métodos, nuestra creencia aumenta porque la credibilidad de los resultados es válida y no un subproducto de un único artefacto metodológico (Bouchard, 1976).

Para estudiar los objetivos (véase 1.2), se combinaron varias técnicas metodológicas. Entre las técnicas utilizadas tenemos: Entrevistas en profundidad, cuantificación de los comentarios a través de software informáticos, análisis cualitativo del contenido a través de programas informáticos cualitativos especializados NVivo y análisis textual.

También hemos elegido el enfoque del estudio de caso porque consideramos que es apropiado para indagar y responder interrogantes de gran complejidad desde una perspectiva cualitativa. Académicos como Yin (1988; 2017) y Nord y Tuckers (1987) recomiendan este método cuando se estudia un fenómeno contemporáneo en un contexto real. En nuestro caso, el análisis de la ética discursiva de los comentarios de los usuarios de los principales diarios nativos digitales en España, su impacto, así como el estudio discursivo del contenido de los lectores en Internet. Una cuestión que no ha sido ampliamente documentada anteriormente. Parece apropiado entonces, incluir una investigación de estudio de caso dentro de nuestro contexto metodológico.

Siguiendo estos criterios, utilizamos el análisis de contenido, que nos permitió, además de obtener una visión cualitativa de los comentarios, obtener también matices de carácter cuantitativo. Por consiguiente, en términos cuantitativos, estableceremos inicialmente un número medio de comentarios generados durante el período de muestreo, así como la frecuencia de temáticas y tópicos, las secciones de noticias más comentadas en general, el número de usuarios por su alias y nombre real. Los datos se controlaron y midieron mediante la combinación de un programa informático cuantitativo como el programa informático de análisis de datos cualitativos asistido por ordenador Excel. NVivo 12NVivo es un programa informático de análisis de datos cualitativos (QDA) utilizado para la investigación cualitativa y de métodos mixtos, desarrollado por Tom Richards en 1999. En concreto, se utiliza para el análisis de datos de texto, audio, vídeo

e imágenes no estructurados, incluidos (pero no limitados a) entrevistas, grupos de discusión, encuestas, medios sociales y artículos de revistas. El uso de diferentes técnicas metodológicas nos permitirá hacer un análisis transversal y compuesto. Esta técnica se utiliza a menudo para investigaciones que recogen datos sobre variables relevantes una sola vez de una variedad de personas, sujetos o fenómenos. Los datos se recogen todos al mismo tiempo (o en un corto período de tiempo (Arnett y Claas, 2009)., lo que nos proporcionará una comprensión más profunda de nuestra investigación por medio de datos recogidos en el mismo momento en una población de muestra o en un subconjunto representativo. Los estudios transversales son útiles para medir la prevalencia, pero no la incidencia, de los factores de interés, ya que no se intenta seguir los mismos eventos, personas, condiciones a lo largo del tiempo, lo que significa que no hay un seguimiento prospectivo o retrospectivo (Mann, 2003).

Muestra

La muestra comenzó el primer lunes de febrero de 2019 hasta finales de marzo de 2019, y estaba compuesta por un período de un mes compuesto. Tomamos el primer día de la semana, en este caso, el primer lunes del primer mes de la muestra, y a partir de ahí, alternamos un día hasta completar un mes, durante un período total de ocho semanas. La intención de esto era asegurar que las mismas historias no se repitieran en la siguiente sesión de muestreo. De la misma manera, estas fechas han sido elegidas de manera que la muestra no coincida con las elecciones europeas de mayo de 2019; las elecciones generales y las elecciones locales en España en abril y mayo respectivamente.

La recopilación de datos comenzó el 1 de febrero de 2019 y finalizó el 27 de marzo de 2019. La razón de la elección de este método de muestreo fue asegurar que las noticias no se repitieran en el siguiente período de muestreo. Para la selección del corpus se eligió un método de muestreo por conglomerados. En la primera fase se recogieron los comentarios que aparecían a pie de página de cada artículo perteneciente a la sección "más vista" del día de la muestra. Los datos se recogieron de la página de inicio de cada una de las publicaciones digitales estudiadas (Ver 4.1, 4.2 y 4.3). Para este proceso, usamos Ncapture, un plug-in de NVivo. La muestra tenía un horario preestablecido que comenzaba a las 10:00 de la mañana y terminaba a las 23:59 del mismo día. Sin embargo, las noticias se recogieron en dos sesiones programadas, una por la mañana a las 10:00 y otra a las 22:00. Para cada dominio web, nos propusimos recopilar una cantidad algo

equitativa de noticias. Después de un cálculo promedio, esta cantidad resultó en seis historias por sesión ($M=6$). En la sesión de la tarde, los artículos que aún estaban en el ranking se actualizaron para incluir nuevos comentarios. Esto nos permitió trabajar con un conjunto de datos más consistente y equilibrado. En este sentido, los artículos "más leídos" de algunos medios variaron durante el día, por lo tanto, dependiendo del ciclo de noticias de un solo día, algunos dominios tuvieron un conjunto diferente de noticias en la siguiente sesión de recolección de la noche. El conjunto de datos final consiste en artículos que pueden ser clasificados tanto en noticias duras como blandas (Shoemaker y Cohen, 2012).

Aplicamos un modelo de ficha de análisis adaptada, que se basó en el marco teórico de la ética discursiva del filósofo Jürgen Habermas (1984; 1992), quien creía que el diálogo es un conjunto de normas éticas, racionales y morales que permiten la construcción de la sociedad y la opinión pública y, por lo tanto, tiene el potencial de convertirse en el motor para el cambio social. También aplicamos la metodología de Masip et al., (2012). Cada comentario se codificó en una ficha de codificación, estructurada en tres segmentos de discurso: "Lógica y coherencia", "Búsqueda colectiva de la verdad" y "Un acuerdo basado en el mejor argumento". Cada uno representa una referencia de codificación seguida de un conjunto de preguntas. Por lo tanto, un solo comentario puede ser clasificado en múltiples secciones dependiendo de la versatilidad del comentario. Algunos comentarios no podían clasificarse y se excluían de la muestra (por ejemplo, los comentarios borrados; los comentarios sin suficiente argumentación, como los que tenían publicidad o que eran incoherentes, o que habían sido marcados negativamente por otros usuarios). Como ya se ha mencionado anteriormente, cada categoría de codificación se apoyó en una serie de preguntas para enmarcar cada aspecto ético discursivo y realizar una evaluación cualitativa (véase § 1.3). En consecuencia, cada una de estas preguntas fue precedida por un sistema de medición, basado en un criterio afirmativo (SÍ) y otro negativo (NO).

Estas medidas se han aplicado, para conocer en profundidad, la calidad discursiva de la participación de los usuarios a través de sus comentarios-en los espacios habilitados para ello. Dentro de este objetivo también se pretende encontrar cuáles son las categorías y secciones de noticias más leídas y comentadas, y qué tipo de tendencias participativas surgen, tanto dentro de las páginas web de los periódicos, como fuera de ellas, especialmente dentro de sus perfiles oficiales en las redes sociales, en concreto Facebook y Twitter, cuyos comentarios también se han recogido en la muestra. Cada uno de los diarios analizados presenta una

naturaleza diferente y una estructura y diseño HTML muy particular que caracteriza su marca y línea editorial, lo que hace que tengan una distinción absoluta entre ellos, pero cada uno comparte una característica o elemento en común, además de que todos son medios de noticias digitales nativos, todos los sitios web de la muestra tienen una sección de comentarios con términos y reglas de participación casi idénticos (Ver § 3.1). De hecho, se puede argumentar que existe una cohesión estructural, tanto en lo que respecta a las herramientas de participación como a la funcionalidad, visto a través del alcance de la composición de todos los sitios de noticias.

Resultados

Durante el período de estudio entre el 1 de febrero y el 27 de marzo de 2019, se obtuvo un conjunto de datos de 704 artículos, y un total de 98.426 comentarios para todos los medios de comunicación (Tabla 2). ElDiario.es fue el sitio de noticias que más comentarios produjo, representando el 38 % del total de la muestra, seguido por ElEspañol.com (31,1 %) y ElConfidencial.com (30,5 %). En las redes sociales se recogieron 56.611 comentarios; sin embargo, debido a las restricciones de datos, tanto en Facebook como en Twitter, sólo se codificaron 13.811 comentarios en Facebook (25 % del total) y 8.880 en Twitter (51 % del total). De todos los comentarios reunidos, 17.466 usuarios, recurrieron al uso de un apodo y 9.823 eligieron su nombre propio para comentar. Los mecanismos de registro de cada medio de comunicación no prohíben que un usuario registre varios apodos. Por lo tanto, no es posible asegurar que todos los participantes sean personas diferentes. Los apodos en las redes sociales apenas se registraron; por ejemplo, solo 423 personas comentaron con un apodo en Facebook. En España, la mayoría de los usuarios prefieren identificarse con sus nombres propios. Dicho esto, una minoría de usuarios sí utilizaron sus iniciales o nombres parcialmente combinados.

La mayoría de los participantes comentaron sólo una vez (72,6 %). Esta cifra es relativamente consistente en ElDiario.es y ElConfidencial.com. Sin embargo, aumenta drásticamente hasta el 94 % en ElEspañol.com. Al realizar una sola contribución, los usuarios no se involucran en el debate. El catorce por ciento de los usuarios se implicó dos veces. Tanto Eldiario.es como ElConfidencial.com tienen usuarios que publican más de media docena de veces. Esta cifra incluye un grupo de entre el 2 % y el 3 % de miembros de la comunidad que parecen participar en casi todos los artículos de noticias que revisamos.

El análisis de los elementos del lenguaje del discurso en las redes sociales consideró la presencia de memes, emojis y GIFs animados en los comentarios. En el caso de los memes, encontramos que los usuarios de ElEspañol.com son los que más los utilizan, con un 3,4% de comentarios en Facebook que contienen memes, mientras que ElDiario.es es el primero en Twitter (1,8%). Los memes suelen tener un tono político y sarcástico. En el caso de los emojis, la mayoría de los registrados tienden a no ir acompañados de ningún texto. La presencia de los GIF para transmitir una idea o un argumento es todavía escasa, pero las cifras son totalmente coherentes en todos los sitios. Se puede argumentar que el nuevo algoritmo de Facebook para clasificar los comentarios ha limitado el número de comentarios de baja calidad en las páginas públicas. En nuestra muestra, pudimos verificar que los comentarios con una estructura gramatical o sintáctica deficiente -con frases cortas, un emoji, un GIF, un enlace o un acrónimo abreviado de Internet como "xd" o "Jajaja"- se clasificaron en un nivel inferior al de los comentarios con una cantidad más sustancial de caracteres.

Ética discursiva de los comentarios

Lógica y coherencia

Otro elemento para discernir el grado de lógica y coherencia en una conversación es si los oradores tienen la intención de discutir sobre el tema que se está discutiendo. Aunque algunos medios de comunicación digitales tienen un alto número de comentarios, la mayoría de los usuarios no permanecen en el tema de las conversaciones incluso después de la postmoderación automática y antes de que el usuario haga sus observaciones. Un número esencial de los comentarios registrados no está vinculado al tema presente en la noticia publicada. Por el contrario, en los hilos de los comentarios tienen lugar animadas discusiones. Sin embargo, de manera sistemática en todos los medios de comunicación, la gran mayoría de los participantes terminan debatiendo temas o cuestiones que no tienen relación directa con el acontecimiento actual. Apenas una décima parte de los comentarios de ElDiario.es se refieren a la noticia introducida por el editor en el artículo. Esta cifra es más alta en ElConfidencial.com y es superior en ElEspañol.com. En las redes sociales, la cantidad total de contribuciones de usuarios enfocadas es significativamente mayor en Facebook (21,3%) que en Twitter (4,8%).

Se escribe un número bajo de comentarios argumentativos. La mayoría de los

usuarios no introducen nuevos argumentos en contra de los puntos de vista expresados por otros miembros del debate. El compromiso deliberativo apenas está presente; el diálogo es intenso y tiende a ser civilizado, pero los usuarios no tienen el hábito de argumentar o aceptar, ni siquiera los puntos similares planteados por otro participante o adversario de ideas afines. Las cifras obtenidas son idénticas en casi todos los periódicos, destacando ElDiario.es con un 9,4% de comentarios argumentativos codificados. La relevancia de la actualidad de la mayoría de las conversaciones hace que los usuarios tiendan a dejarse llevar por ellas y no tengan prácticamente ninguna intención de seguir argumentando sus puntos o los de otro usuario. En los medios sociales, los comentarios argumentativos surgen en Twitter e incluyen el 10,2% de los comentarios, mientras que en Facebook representan el 6,9% de los comentarios.

Búsqueda colectiva de la verdad

En cuanto al grado de respeto mutuo en la interacción, en general, los usuarios se respetan y reconocen mutuamente como miembros válidos de la conversación. La presencia de descalificaciones, blasfemias o comentarios despectivos es baja. Cuando están presentes, este tipo de observaciones se utilizan sobre todo contra personalidades de las noticias (políticos y celebridades) y las estructuras de poder, y no contra otros miembros contribuyentes. En total, el 12,7% de todas las contribuciones contienen incivildades. También se muestra que hay observaciones despectivas, y cuando están presentes, éstas tienden a ser aplicadas a grupos sociales específicos. Esto incluye a los ciudadanos que pertenecen a grupos minoritarios: mujeres, miembros del colectivo LGBTQ e inmigrantes (Chen et al., 2018; Ziegele, Breiner, & Quiring, 2014). En Facebook se perciben menos comentarios despectivos, aunque son ligeramente más destacados en las secciones de comentarios de los medios analizados y más en Twitter. La segunda cuestión que debe abordarse en esta sección es si los usuarios que centran sus intervenciones en el tema objeto de debate aportan puntos de vista numerosos o diferentes. Podemos afirmar que en las conversaciones analizadas, el pluralismo está fuertemente resentido. Las conversaciones suelen tener un matiz polarizado: los puntos de vista de la mayoría y de la minoría, cada uno de los miembros pertenecientes a estos dos grupos, se encierran en sus propios argumentos, lo que lleva a un deterioro paulatino de la calidad de los comentarios, se observa también un desorden discursivo y un lenguaje abusivo. Todos estos factores constituyen el origen de la polarización. Existen pocas voces que intentan añadir un tercer enfoque e introducir otros puntos de vista. El diálogo sustantivo sólo

puede ser válido sólo si las intenciones de los actores son claras. Sin embargo, el requisito previo para participar en un debate sustancial es que las intenciones propias sean plenamente accesibles al escrutinio y la interpelación de los demás. La voluntad de verificar la autenticidad es en sí misma una parte crucial del debate. Sin estos motivos, no puede haber ninguna búsqueda cooperativa de la verdad (Habermas, 1992). En los periódicos incluidos en el corpus de la muestra, estas afirmaciones son tangibles. En prácticamente ningún caso los resultados superan el umbral del 10 %, excepto en *ElEspañol.com*, que obtiene un 9,4 % de puntos de vista diferentes en sus debates dentro de su página en Facebook.

Un acuerdo basado en el mejor argumento

Los usuarios no suelen apoyar el argumento de otros usuarios. El porcentaje global en los medios de comunicación alcanzó el 3,3 % y en las redes sociales el 2,9 %. Las fuentes proporcionadas o mencionadas por los participantes son virtualmente inexistentes en todos los medios analizados, con un total de 6,7 %. Las fuentes apenas se utilizaron y, en los casos en que se recurrió a ellas, no solían estar relacionadas con el tema que se estaba tratando. Los lectores no citan fuentes que complementen, maticen o amplíen sus puntos de vista o la opinión de otros usuarios. Las pocas fuentes observadas generalmente no se centran en mejorar el debate sino en generar conflicto o controversia, y la mayoría de ellas se relacionan con las luchas ideológicas de los propios usuarios, alejándose del tema de discusión.

La creación de consenso, que es mediada colectivamente por el diálogo y asistida por los participantes en el debate, es el objetivo de la conversación y la indagación colectiva (Meyer y Woodruff, 1995). Como sostienen Jonansen y Hermidez (2002:237), "la argumentación es un proceso fundamental de negociación social a través del razonamiento informal". Uno de los principios fundamentales de la filosofía de la ética discursiva de Habermas es que un argumento implica un "principio de universalización" que permite a las personas discutir el mismo conjunto de supuestos antes de entrar en el debate funcional (Habermas, 1990). Sin el apoyo de un argumento, el diálogo interpersonal y, por lo tanto, la formación de la opinión y, en última instancia, un acuerdo no es previsible.

Las fuentes proporcionadas por los usuarios no sólo son prácticamente escasas sino que, cuando se proporcionan, no siguen el punto de vista de la mayoría o están alineadas con el tema que se está debatiendo. No obstante, se plantean

algunas observaciones compartidas.

Como se ha mencionado en las categorías discursivas anteriores, los lectores que participan en la sección de comentarios no suelen citar fuentes que complementen, califiquen o enriquezcan su punto de vista o el de otros usuarios. Como hemos visto en el caso de los argumentos, esta situación también es excepcional. En el caso de este fenómeno extraordinario, la exactitud de los enlaces no suele ser la característica principal de la cita o de la fuente proporcionada. Las referencias suelen ser generales, sin ningún análisis, y carecen de una gran exactitud. Parece que el lector sólo lee el titular de la noticia o una entrada concreta del blog y le basta para convencer al resto de los lectores de que su argumento o punto de vista es el más exacto y debería ser el predominante. En este sentido, se evidencia que en Twitter surgen una cantidad considerable de fuentes, especialmente en ElDiario.es y en las cuentas de las redes sociales de ElEspañol.com. Los enlaces que se proporcionan suelen ser en forma de información previamente twitteada y muy relacionada con la noticia.

Conclusión

El análisis de los comentarios de los lectores en los tres medios de comunicación nos permite, en primer lugar, concluir que los comentarios no tienen carácter deliberativo. Tres de cada cuatro usuarios (72,6 %) sólo emitieron un comentario durante el período examinado. La presencia de muchos comentarios únicos impide la existencia de una conversación fluida entre los lectores. El importante número de usuarios individuales en la sección de comentarios fragmenta el debate. Además, si bien todos los miembros del debate tienen las mismas oportunidades de publicar un comentario, en casi todas las secciones de comentarios de todos los medios de comunicación analizados, un número limitado de participantes es responsable de la mayoría de los argumentos y puntos de vista expresados, lo que contribuye a la monopolización del discurso por parte de individuos y grupos en las conversaciones en línea (Jensen, 2016). En segundo lugar, el estudio revela el perfil de baja calidad de los debates que tienen lugar en la sección de comentarios de los medios de comunicación. No obstante, la mayoría de los comentarios siguen siendo irrelevantes para el tema que se está debatiendo, y una gran mayoría de los usuarios no se centran en el tema de la noticia. Sólo el 13,3% tiene la intención de argumentar el tema que se está abordando. Sólo un pequeño número de usuarios intenta argumentar el asunto

(7,8%). Asimismo, los usuarios rara vez apoyan los argumentos de otro usuario o mencionan o se refieren a otras fuentes. La diferencia entre los datos recopilados para las redes sociales puede deberse a la eficacia de los algoritmos de moderación que se encargan de clasificar los contenidos de baja calidad no relacionados con el tema tratado. El grado de respeto mutuo en la interacción, elemento vital del valor democrático del debate en el que los participantes se consideran miembros legítimos del diálogo (Papacharissi, 2004), se calculó sobre la base de la existencia de incivilidad, blasfemia y comentarios despectivos hacia otros usuarios. A este respecto, el estudio muestra que, en general, el 12,7% de todas las contribuciones contienen descalificaciones. Cabe destacar que los estudios anteriores han registrado altos niveles de incivilidad en los espacios participativos en línea (Coe et al., 2014; Gervais, 2015); sin embargo, los avances tecnológicos han permitido el surgimiento de sistemas de moderación más robustos y de moderación automática que han logrado el cometido de mantener los insultos alejados de la sección de comentarios (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011; Ruiz et al., 2010). No obstante, sigue habiendo un número importante de comentarios negativos. Al reconocer que existe una escasa tasa de comentarios eliminados o moderados en los medios en línea, parece claro que los usuarios tratan de evitar ofender directamente a los demás e intentan expresar su ira o su odio con otras tácticas retóricas, como la ironía, el sarcasmo y las bromas. Si bien los insultos se detectan fácilmente mediante programas informáticos y algoritmos de filtrado, y la mayoría de las veces son reconocidos por los moderadores automatizados; el dialecto degradante implica una evaluación retórica subjetiva adicional. Por último, y en relación con lo anterior, el estudio también muestra que la sección de comentarios de los medios digitales de noticias y las redes sociales tienen otras pautas y características específicas basadas en sus plataformas de distribución. Entre ellas figuran los emojis, los memes o los GIF animados. Todos ellos son una forma de comunicación gráfica utilizada para el comentario social de una gran variedad de temas (Meso-Ayerdi, Mendiguren-Galdospin, & Pérez-Dasilva, 2017) y su uso permite a los usuarios sintetizar una idea, un escenario o un enunciado de forma sencilla y ágil (Freire, 2016; Gómez-García, 2013).

Publicaciones y actividades científicas

Los resultados de este trabajo doctoral han sido presentados en varios congresos y conferencias, por ejemplo, en las II Jornadas Doctorales de la UPV/EHU en 2019, donde fui galardonado con el premio a la mejor presentación dentro de la categoría "Mi tesis en 180 segundos"; en los Doctoriales transfronterizos de 2019 celebrados en la Universidad de Pau et des Pays de l'Adour, Francia, donde tuve la oportunidad de presentar un póster dentro de la sección de ciencias sociales y por último en la digikomm2019, "Annual Conference of the German Communication Association's Division Digital Communication" en Berlín, Alemania. Además, los resultados de esta investigación han sido también publicados en un artículo científico titulado "Behind the comments section: The ethics of digital native news discussions." (2020), en la revista *Media and Communication*, 8(2), 86-97.