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From tweet to photography, the evolution of political communication on Twitter to images. The case of the debate on the State of the Nation in Spain (2015)

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Abstracts

Introduction. The study discusses the use of Twitter in politics and its evolution towards a communicative model based more on images than content. **Method.** This research makes a qualitative analysis that aims images published in the social network Twitter by major Spanish political parties and leaders, during the debate of the State of the Nation held between 24th and 25th February 2015. **Results.** The data shows a progressive increase in political communication images on Twitter and view their categories. **Conclusions.** The study states that images are more important than the text itself. In many cases, images are now the main vehicle for political communication.

Keywords

Image; Political Communication; Twitter; Spain

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1. Introduction

In the current Spanish political field, we are witnessing a double process of evolution and change in the political spectrum, with the incursion and consolidation of new parties, as well as in the new ways of communication of political action.

In a changing and flexible model of communication, social networks are now an essential part, being the common vehicle of such different phenomena as the 15-M movement in Spain, the election campaign of the American president Barack Obama in 2008 or the demonstrations in Brazil and Turkey in 2013, for example. All these events were also narrated on social networks as a communicational and political propaganda tool to persuade and quickly transmit information to the biggest number of people possible. (Christakis; Fowler 2010; Deltell; Congosto; Claes; Osteso, 2013).

Therefore, the large number of platforms, applications and social networks, and especially Twitter in the field of political communication, are creating a new public space where there is a parallel debate to the traditional media such as radio, press or television. All this, promoted by multi-device communicational strategies, as well as mobility, has as a result the spreading of contents in a viral, communal and social way, changing the relation between brands and digital users, as Bermejo points out (2013). For its part, the structure and functionality of Twitter, transforms it into an ideal medium to facilitate citizen participation in politics through communication (Moya; Herrera, 2015).

Naturally, the relation between Internet as a global communicational network and political intervention or criticism is not new. Historically and considering that before the emergence of the entitled *web 2.0* (this is the semantic and contextual network) there were already initiatives to develop explicit tools, both to move politics closer to citizens as to practice criticism and propaganda. For example, since 2003, blogs with the option to send comments were already an extended practice among politicians (Macera; Pano, 2013).

Fully launched during the second half of the first decade of the 21st century, so called social networks have built communicational structures based on applications both web and native, and for different operating systems, allowing the creation and maintenance of social and communicational relations online. Consequently, its use in different phases of people's lives has penetrated with a unique rapidity and has quickly been adopted by the political communication field as an efficient tool to contact, invigorate and persuade citizens/electors.

In particular, the social network Twitter was created in 2006 when a group of young Internet entrepreneurs, Jack Dorsey, Biz Stone y Evan Williams, started to explore the viability of establishing a social network based on short messages (SMS) gathered online (Small, 2010).

In spite of initially being conceived as a webpage in which users exchanged personal messages, it has currently become a mass phenomenon, with 140 million of active users worldwide, including 15% of North Americans with access to Internet.

Ellison and Boyd (2008) have analysed the use of these networks, and argue that social networks are services based online which allow individuals to carry out the following roles:

- a. To build a public or semi-public profile in a delimited system.
- b. To compile a list of other users with which they share a connection.
- c. To see and go through their list of connections and those made by others in the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections can change from one place to another.

Twitter's communicational model has been defined as well by Orihuela (2011) with ten characteristics that provide this network with potential and utility: asymmetrical, brief, decentralised, global, hypertextual, intuitive, multiplatform, synchronous, social and viral.

Singularly in the political field, if in general terms social networks have grown strongly, Twitter, the micro-blogging network, has done it with outstanding impact, having special importance since the electoral campaign in which Barack Obama was elected president of his country (Izquierdo Labella, 2011). At the same time, Twitter has led the way in political communication and has kept growing and improving.

We are facing a new public communicational space that grows widely and even overflows the interaction field determined by the traditional political action. It concerns a media setting that makes possible that "the institutional and technological device, typical of post-industrial societies, can present the multiple aspects of social life to the public" (Ferry, 1992 pp.19). The result of this is the consolidation of new paradigms both communicational and cognitive based on the effects of Information Technology (IT) in culture and in knowledge, which have recently been summarised by Velarde, Bernete y Franco (2015), among others.

Besides, it should be considered that political communication, in its most propagandistic aspect, continues interactive outlines and processes used mainly and increasingly by commercial advertising online and through mobile applications. This connects the consumption of ideas, products or services online with aspects such as information or the active and social bond among users (Ruiz-del-Olmo; Belmonte, 2014 pp. 75). In the political field, "to the extent that the success of parties depends on the opinion of citizens, more than the opinion of activists and historical parties' affiliations, the resources used to create public opinion become crucial for electoral success" (Valera; López, 2014).

The general objectives of this study have been formulated following a classic and famous principle by Kuhn (1962), who believes that there are paradigms based on the production of knowledge in each scientific and technic revolution.

1.1. The evolution of Twitter in Spain

An important fact is that 47% of Spanish members of parliament were users of Twitter in 2011, this percentage grew up to 52.85% the following year and in 2014 it turned into 58.28% (Moya; Herrera,

2015). Agreeing with Orihuela (2012), since the emergence of blogs or political logbooks in the media setting, when the war and invasion of Iraq took place in 2003, no other platform online had had such an impact on media until the arrival of the social network Twitter in 2006.

Concurrently, it has been defined that interest towards politics is 23% higher among Twitter users in relation to the total of online users. With regard to Spain, Twitter is one of the most popular social networks with 8 million registered users, according to a study published by Semiocast in January 2012. That same study points out that 29% of these users are daily active, either to update their profile or to comment and post information. For brands, this defines a creative, innovative and low-cost strategy (Swanson, 2011).

In this sense, Twitter offers a unique opportunity to analyse public opinion: messages exchanged by users can contain useful information about their preferences and reactions to political messages and events, in an environment that is accessible for investigators.

As a result, Twitter's micro-blogging service has become one of the most relevant communication spaces in current politics. Its users, specially the young ones, have a larger predisposition to establish interactive communication with the rest of users based on political debate, as well as increasingly using images, along with text or by themselves. Several business and empirical studies point to this direction; for example, the recent *1st Political barometer on networks*, carried out by the company *Síntesis*, reveals that more than 20.000 users give their opinion on politics every 24 hours, gathering a total of one million users that monthly talk about this matter.

With reference to the Spanish case, an estimation based on the analysis of Barberá and Rivero in 2012 indicates that there are at least 400.000 active users on Twitter in Spain. All these users are interacting constantly, using messages of 140 characters, exchanging opinions and discussing about recent events as they happen. The content and structure of this conversation are accessible with Twitter's API (Barberá; Rivero 2012).

Thus, out of 23 million of users that use Internet in Spain, 73% has a profile on some social network in contrast to a 27% that does not. Facebook is still the most used social network. This way, 88% of users online have a profile on this social network, and 56% on Twitter, according to facts of the same investigation.

1.2. Why is Twitter used in Spanish politics?

With its singularities and limitations, as we will later point out, Spanish politics and its ways of propaganda and public debates are not unconnected to global communicational trends in occidental democracies, specially the increasingly powerful media marketing of North American politics.

Several studies have highlighted a historical turning point in the pairing of politics and social networks. In certain way, there is an agreement on the fact that electoral campaign on social networks started to become relevant after Barack Obama's success in 2008 during North American

presidential elections (Benítez, 2012; Castells, 2009; Franch, 2013). Nowadays, a political campaign without a specialized team that manages these tools seems to be inconceivable (Bustos, 2014).

With use of a sophisticated package of online tools based on social network technologies, messages and making followers part of the success, it was possible to create a social, viral and contagious influence that undoubtedly helped Obama in his ascent to the white house. Concurrently, all of the process helped changing the way of conducting politics and communicating with electors in United States (Borondo, Morales, Losada, Benito 2011).

Later, during election time, all those echoes quickly crossed the Atlantic. Both the press and Spanish politicians supposed that this movement would arrive and permanently change their way of working. The most advanced teams started creating some of the first profiles. At the same time, stimulated situations were gradually generated: surprise press headlines, spontaneous calls and virtual meetings to debate on different subjects.

Until very recently, many political candidates, used to television routines, have had difficulties to understand the phenomena of social networks (Ayuso, 2013). Twitter has quickly become one the most relevant communicational spaces in current politics.

In conclusion, social networks such as Twitter are also changing the universe of political communication, defining a new informative and computerised society, as Manuel Castells (2006) has defined.

In this way, this social network has become one of life's and public communication's settings that best summarizes the blend of politics with propaganda and the spreading of communication from political parties and leaders.

1.3. The State of the Nation Debate

The Debate of the State of the Nation, established by the Spanish president Felipe González in 1982, has become, along with the debate on national budgets, one of the most important political moments, institutionally in Spain, despite of its lack of obligatory nature.

Since 2013, it has become a great phenomenon on social networks, being in more than one occasion the most discussed subject online (*trending topic*), often producing a worldwide effect.

The increased use of Twitter from its users during the days of the State of the Nation Debate is something that happens in a bidirectional way. That is, it is only the users that participate giving their opinion and discussing on different subjects talked about in this political event, it is also politicians and parties themselves the ones that, in a organised and intentional way, try to start an argument or convince their followers using their official profiles on Twitter.

The debate of this present year 2015 provides are the following facts: their activity online increased during the days that the debate took place, exceeding an average of 20.5 tweets during the month of February. In the case of People's Party (*Partido Popular*), they posted up to 84 tweets during the 25th

February, the last day of the Debate of the State of Nation. Something similar happened with the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español), which passed from an average of 41,73 tweets to 111 during the 25th February 2015.

1.4. Images on social networks

Such as it has been established throughout this study, there is a tendency to use Twitter just as any other element of political and electoral communicational strategies. However, its use seems to be evolving and become something more than just messages of 140 characters. This is, it is noticed that turning to the use of images during most important political events is continuously increasing, to attract new followers or to criticise and start an argument with political rivals.

In an essentially iconic society, images have become the most important way of communication. It has to kept in mind that most of citizens' political experience is indirect, it reaches citizens through some kind of communication that gives distant facts and opinions from their surroundings (Vallés 2000 pp. 289) or “pseud-surroundings” in Lippmann's (2003) words. Journalistic stories or reports are some of the elements that define a half-true, half-artificial and, in any case, an indistinguishable universe.

According to Ubreva (2008), images have an intense capacity of interrelation with thoughts; massively distributed on social networks, its influence is ambiguous. On one hand, images contribute to the construction of social and cultural representations, and they also make possible real and objective interpretations of the environment (González, 2000). On the other hand, and in an opposite direction, they also contribute to homogenize visions of the world that are motivated by reference groups (Miguel, 1996), this is, political parties and groups.

In relation to what has been said, it is very important to analyse images shown online, and especially on Twitter, images that political parties and leaders use, since those images are an essential part of political and media discourse (Ardévol y Muntañola, 2004). It was to be expected that in a matter of time the limited characters for messages on Twitter would be reduced or completed by the overwhelming presence of pictures and videos. As a matter of fact, the company has improved the inclusion of pictures and videos, creating specific networks for them, such as *Periscope*.

This is a second phase of what is described as a new way of creating political communication through social networks. In this context, some facts prove and reinforce previous statements:

- Out of all 113 tweets posted by the Popular Party during the State of the Nation Debate, 54 contained pictures or videos.
- In the Spanish Socialist Workers Party's case, 59 tweets of all 111 posted during the State of the Nation Debate contained pictures or videos

Therefore, due to the previously mentioned importance that images are gaining, as a way of political communication on the social network Twitter in Spain, a study of this subject seems essential.

2. Objectives, hypothesis and methodology

Considering that at the moment representation systems, promoted by digitalization and social networks, have become models, the present text's general objective is the analysis of a communicational model based on the use of images on social networks.

A second specific objective is the study and analysis of the use of Twitter in Spanish Politics and its evolution towards a communicational model based mainly on images, more than contents, studying a particular case, focused on the State of the Nation Debate (2015).

2.1. Hypothesis

The general hypothesis of this research, based on the study of the case of State of the Nation Debate, is that political communication in Spain has changed, attaching importance to social networks in general and Twitter in particular. And specifically, the increase of the use of images and its importance regarding texts online confirm a transformation of the communication model of political parties and candidates. What is more, data can prove the increase of images in political communication on Twitter and represent its categories, which depend on the political situation of the leader and party (Government, opposition, new or consolidated, etc.)

2.2. Methodology

This present investigation is classified as a qualitative research of images being a way of political communication. The analysis of content is, for those purposes, a valid investigation technique because it allows formulating, using data obtained from Twitter, valid inferences that can be applied to its context, according to Krippendorff (1990). For Cook and Reichardt (1986), qualitative investigation has constitutive elements and, among other characteristic, it's reliable, valid, data is real, rich and profound. It's oriented to the process. It's based on reality, oriented to discoveries, exploratory, expansionist, and it's descriptive and inductive.

A mixed method has been used to carry out this analysis, but with preponderance of the inductive method. For the inductive method, categories are created based on the reading and examination of compiled material without taking in consideration original categories. This way, temporary and emerging categories are suggested. These categories, as coding advances, are consolidated, modified or suppressed based on of the comparison of data included in the unit of analysis (Rodríguez; García 1996).

The consideration of mixed process derives from the investigator taking, as in this case, as starting categories some already existing or predefined, formulating more when this starting repertoire turns out to be ineffective, this is, it does not contain any categories in its system to fill a logging unit. Therefore, a mixed processed was used In this present research, but almost all analysis categories came from the inductive method based on viewing images of political communication.

In summary, qualitative categories were designed a priori and *in vivo*, using as assistance software a CAQDAS (*Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software*) tool. In this case, the application *Atlas.ti* was the chosen one. It allows an effective management of all the images recollected online, establishing these as a Hermeneutic Unit for its analysis.

On a secondary level and concurrently, posted photos and videos were quantified to obtain complementary data to the qualitative investigation.

2.3. First description of the analysis

As described before, this text carries out an analysis of content, which object of study is the images posted by main Spanish political parties and leaders on the social network Twitter, during the State of Nation Debate held during 24th and 25th of February of 2015.

In particular, this study, which belongs to a broader investigation project, focuses on the two first political parties with parliamentary representation in Spain: People’s Party and Spanish Socialist Workers Party, as well as its national leaders, Mariano Rajoy and Pedro Sánchez, respectively.

2.4. Analysis corpus and categories

In a first approach to the definition and establishment of the study’s categories, following the previous exploratory processes, the next data was gathered:

- All tweets posted by the main Spanish political parties and its leaders, which contributed to a sample of 291 tweets.
- Besides, all images inserted in those tweets were extracted, generating a total of 124 static images and 12 videos.

Once the data was examined, first through preliminary analysis, and later using the inductive method, the following categories were established for the study, such as shown in the following table 1. Limitation of the sample provided the establishment of only 8 analytic categories, of qualitative nature, but enough to include all political communication of both parties on Twitter:

Party / Candidate	<i>Campaing photography</i>	<i>Criticism of rival</i>	<i>Proposals</i>	<i>Propaganda images</i>
	<i>Data balance</i>	<i>Humour</i>	<i>Highlight achievements</i>	<i>Other</i>

Table 1 Analysis of posted images by main parties and its leaders during the State of Nation Debate (author’s elaboration)

3. Results

In a first contextualization of the study, it is necessary to check the distribution of the number of tweets and images for each leader and party.

This setting offers a clear environment of the use of images from the parties and political representatives, providing percentage data that contributes to state the main hypothesis of this investigation, that has established that images are an growing element and is becoming even more important for political communication on social networks, such as can be observed in figure 1. It is shown in this figure the increase of the use of images compared to text, approaching nearly half of all the tweets; subsequent researches, which belong to the same subject should corroborate or not this tendency:

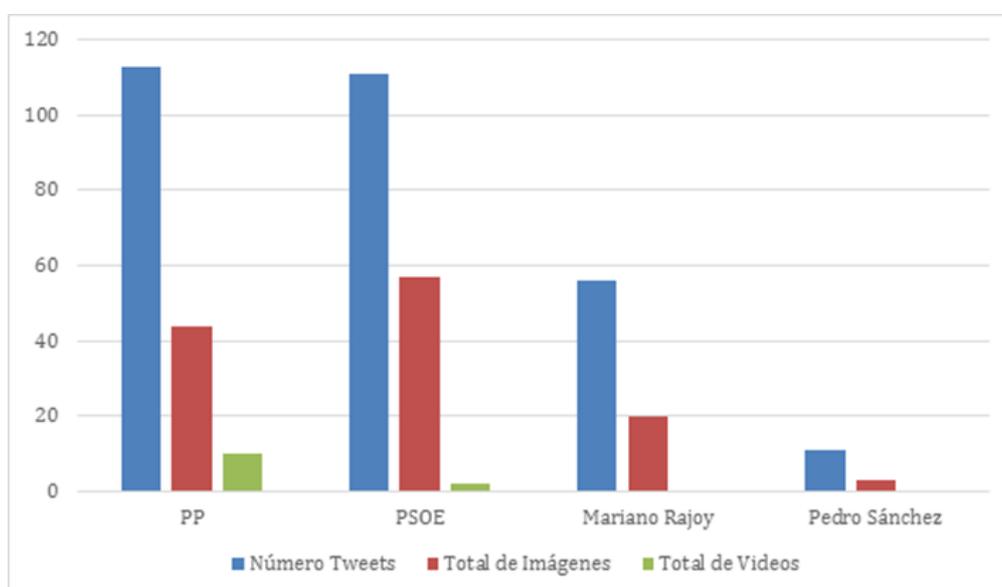


Figure 1. Representation of the distribution of Tweets (author's elaboration)

3.1. Analysis of images from the main political parties

Once the context is established, it shown at continuation the used of different images that each party have used based on the table mentioned in methodology

Figure 2 shows the use of images from the People's Party, divided into the analysis categories. People's Party prioritizes its images on Twitter in its proposals, in its electoral propoganda and in its criticism of rival, leaving the balance of data in a third place. This fact is very significant considering that one of the main functions of the Government's party is evaluating all the achieved goals over the year, especially in electoral year, which is why such a low percentage in this aspect is surprising.

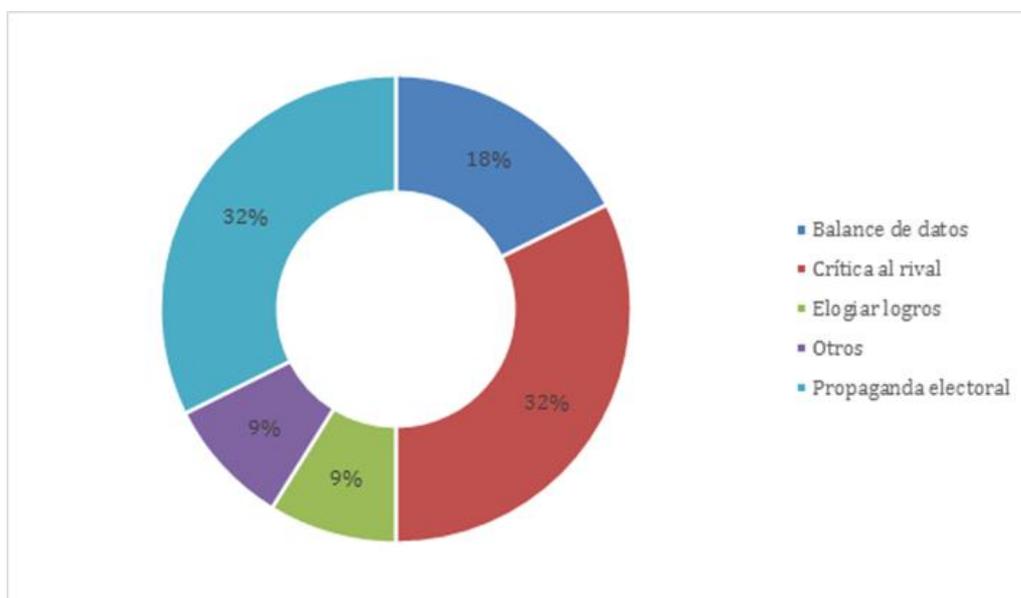


Figure 2. Representation of the distribution of images from the People's Party (author's elaboration)

For its part, the Spanish Socialist Workers Party bases the majority of its images, 56%, on criticising the Government. In this case, this is due to its function of opposition to the Government, which activity has as a main task questioning everything approved and presented by the party ruling the Government, tiring and even ridiculing governmental action, as shown in figure 3:

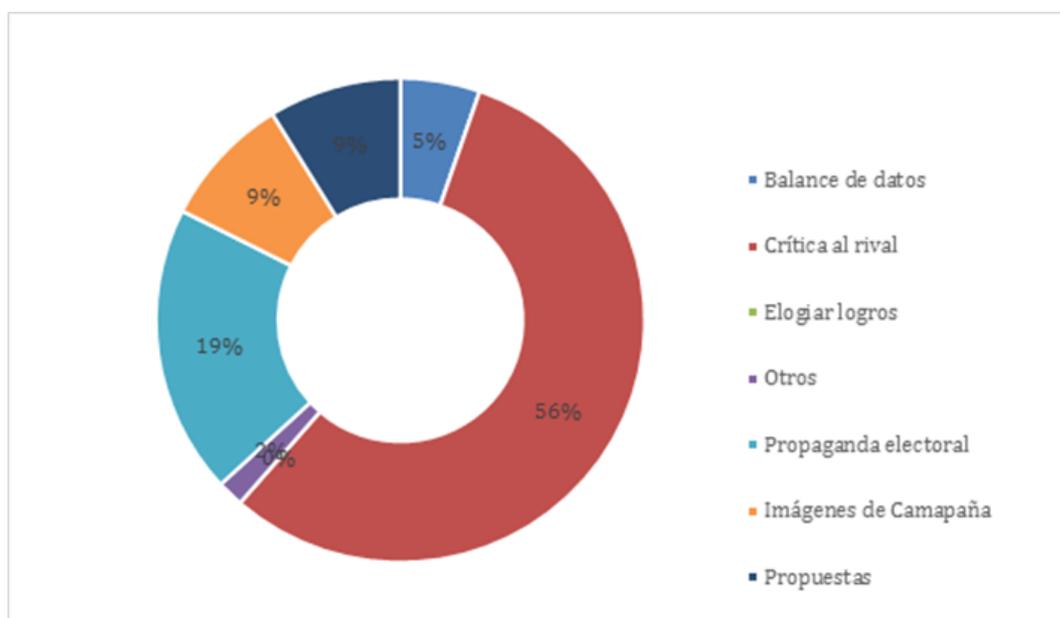


Figure 3: Representation of the distribution of images from the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (author's elaboration)

3.2. Videos on Twitter from the main political parties

The use of videos is still very limited. Parties use videos in a more thematically balanced and numerically reduced way, compared to the use of pictures. This way, we can observe how percentages between the different categories have a more equitable relation, in the People’s Party case, in comparison to images as described in Figure 4:

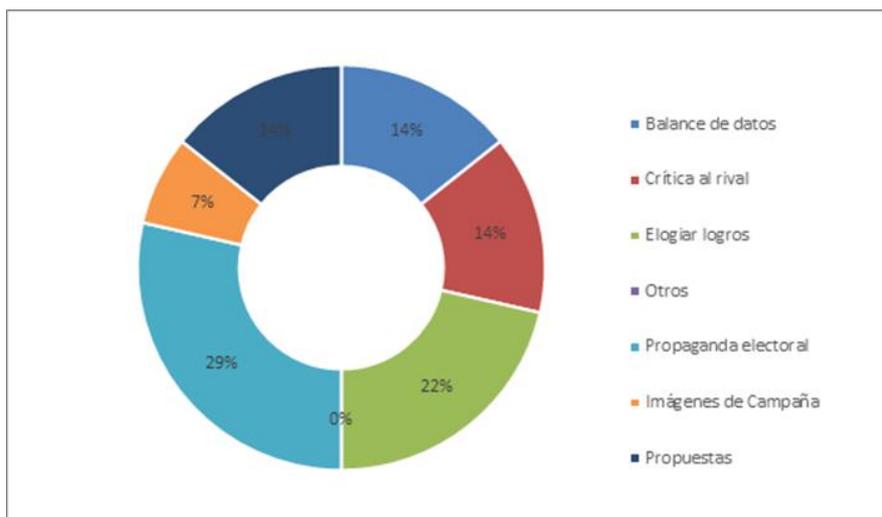


Figure 4. Representation of the distribution of videos from the People’s Party (author’s elaboration)

For its part, the Spanish Socialist Workers Party uses Twitter as a weapon of political battle before any other consideration, this is, the total of videos inserted in the State of the Nation debate tweets posted during the 24th and 25th of February have critical or scathing contents.

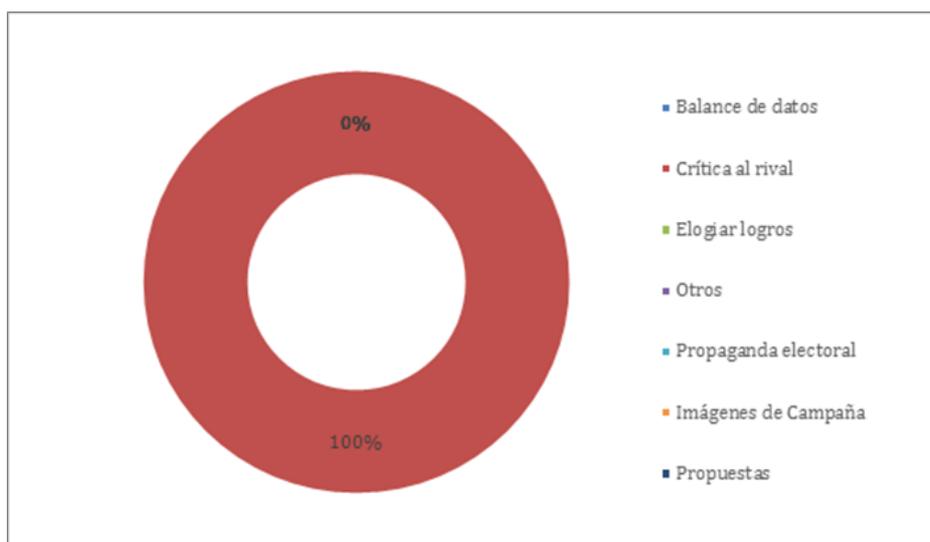


Figure 5. Representation of the distribution of videos from the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (author’s elaboration)

As established previously, the dissemination of videos on social networks that are exclusively focused on harsh criticism and diatribes towards the political rival, concurrently to its opposition role; both communicational lines are coherent and homogeneous.

3.3. Images from the principle candidates

In this part, we highlight the lack of activity from one of the leaders, Pedro Sánchez, with little experience and preparation in the Secretary-General position in the party at that moment. It is evident that the Secretary-General of the Spanish Socialist Workers Party was hardly active during the days concerning the State of the Nation Debate from the social network point of view.

Data is very contuse in this aspect; in contrast to the 56 tweets posted by the leader of the People's Party, Mariano Rajoy, Sánchez only posted 11 tweets, what makes his data more poor and summarised than the current president of the Government. From here on, the analysis of images from the profile of the president of the Government shows the typical communication strategy of who governs, this is, it focuses on the successes achieved during his mandate, as in propaganda communication, more simple and direct, leaving the criticism of the rival on a second level.

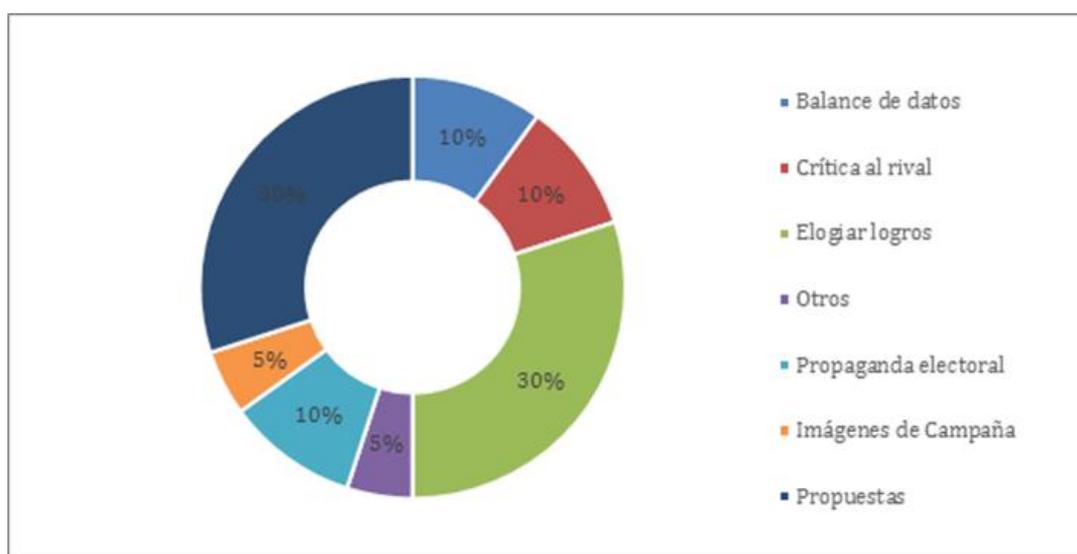


Figure 6. Representation of the distribution of images from Mariano Rajoy (author's elaboration)

In figure 7, the management of Pedro Sánchez's Twitter's profile can be observed, which, even though it stands out for its poor activity, the fact of the great use of images, in proportion to the number of tweets, is not irrelevant.

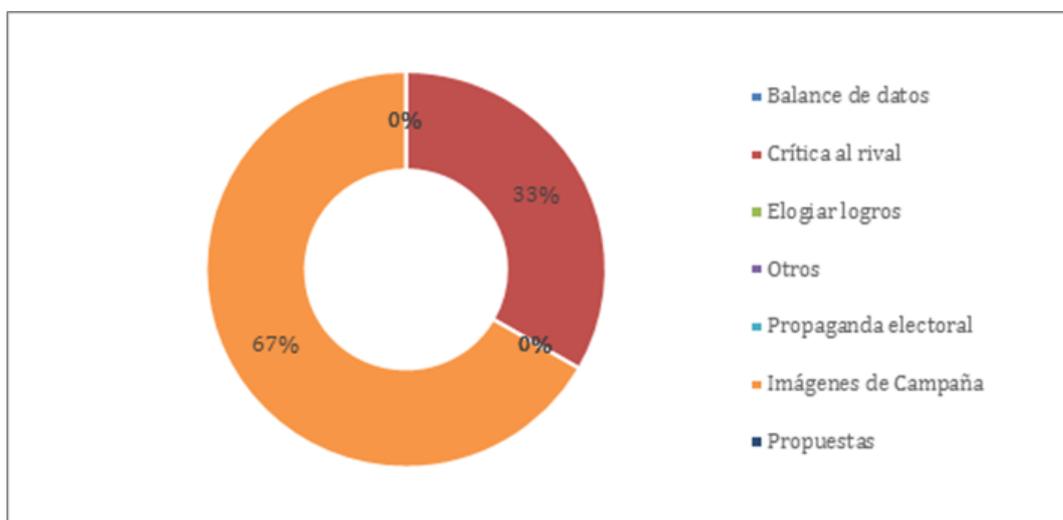


Figure 7. Representation of the distribution of images from Pedro Sánchez (author's elaboration)

As it can be appreciated, the relation of images reaches such a high value and number, that even posting a scarce number of tweets, a images is nearly always included among them, which contributes to the formation of a more powerful and uniform political communication regarding contents.

4. Conclusions

Social networks and specially the use of Twitter in Spanish politic have become an essential concept of political communication to citizen that seems to be more influential every day. Along the present investigation, the importance of the use of the social network Twitter in the Spanish political field, and its communicational activity, is notified. Therefore, currently a political campaign without social networks is unimaginable.

Referred to the range of results, firstly, it is made clear, that there is a continuous increase of images (in its form of photograph or video) on the profiles of the main political parties and leaders on this social network. This progressive increase of the use of images that prevails or accompanies 140 characters is due to the bigger persuasive and propagandistic impact that images have before words. This way, in the brief but significant period analysed, 38.9% of tweets posted by the People's Party, from its official profile on Twitter, had some sort of picture or video. Equally, this fact is also patent in the case of Spanish Socialist Workers Party, even in a more emphatic way, increasing figures to 51.35%.

Therefore, it is demonstrated that progressively, the use of images is more usual than text on Twitter in the political field. In this investigation, in which an exponential used of these are proved, it is made clear that its used will grow even more significant, becoming its own communication vehicle.

During the State of the Nation Debate, the values that main political parties wanted to disseminate were reinforced. Seven great categories that described the totality of the communicational intentionality of analysed images were defined: evaluation of national data, criticism of political rival, compliments to own achievement, propaganda images, campaign images, political proposals and others.

This way, it can be concluded that the totality of images posted by the official profile of Spanish Socialist Workers Party were used to critique the Government, what indicates its current role on an institutional level, in this case, as the opposition.

The position of the People's Party is more complex and is marked by the contractual situation in which it's in. on one hand, shows the imaged of a governing party, institutional with balanced and positive governmental action and, at the same time, it tries to criticise its rival highlighting the actions carried out by the past socialist Government. Both dynamic axis are resolved generating a great quantity of images of political communication and electoral propaganda on Twitter.

For its part, the display of achievements made possible by governmental action and the presentation of proposals prevailed on the profile of the president of the Government, Mariano Rajoy. As an institutional leading figure, his criticism of other parties took up a scarce proportion of disseminated images from his official account.

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