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Millennials’ consumption of political information on television and social networks. An analysis of the 2015 Spanish general election campaign

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Abstract

Introduction. The media and their audiences are currently undergoing a phase of adaptation to the universe 2.0, in which the new generations of people who are fully educated in the digital environment are developing new information consumption models. **Objective and methods.** This article examines the behaviour patterns of millennials based on a qualitative approach that involves the daily follow-up of a Facebook group of young people and surveys about their information consumption habits during the 2015 Spanish general election. **Results.** Although television prevailed

as the main source of information during the pre-election period, other electronic devices and social media were also influential. **Discussion and conclusions.** Social networks complement the informative experience of young people, setting a possible standard of what the consumption of political information will be in the coming years.

Keywords

Millennial generation; television; elections; political information; social networks; digitisation; Internet.

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Translation by **CA Martínez-Arcos**
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1. The redefinition of television in the digital age

The classical concept of television that dominated the communications sector during the 20th century is facing the redefinition of its business model (Salaverria, 2005; Campos Freire, 2010) and the incorporation of new production and consumption possibilities (Scolari, Jiménez & Guerrero, 2012) derived from the emergence of the Internet and the advancement of new technologies.

Television is not disappearing, but rather adapting itself to a digital stage of convergence (Jenkins, 2008) and media de-massification in which the offer of contents multiply and becomes fragmented (Rodríguez & Andueza, 2015). The proliferation of devices, multiscreen consumption (Lazo & Barroso, 2008) and the increase of on-demand and over-the-top (OTT) services contribute to the definition of a new television paradigm that has been developed in, what Islas (2011) terms, a society of ubiquity: communication for all, wherever, whenever and however they want. The consumption of linear television breaks its limitations of time and space to become a service that is personalised and adapted to the habits of an audience that has also been transformed with the revolution of the Internet (Medina, 2015). The web 2.0 has increased the possibilities for participation of the public, turning passive viewers into active audiences who demand interactivity (Barceló & Sánchez Martínez, 2011) and even create added value by producing their own contents (Toffler, 1990; Quintas-Froufe & González-Neira, 2014).

The emergence of social networks has powered the value of conversation and interaction, giving place to what certain authors have termed social television (Lorente, 2011; Arrojo, 2013). Social television encompasses all the singularities of the new communicative ecosystem by combining the

audiovisual contents of traditional television with the possibility of viewer's immediate participation through the Internet. In this context, social networks have proved to be a valuable complement to both television consumption and social audience measurement tool (Gallego, 2013; Congosto, Escolar, Claes & Esteso, 2013; Huertas, 2015) in addition to traditional audience measurement methods.

2. Millennials and their information consumption habits

In the current stage of technological convergence, society is undergoing a process of adaptation to the universe 2.0, in which the younger generations are adapting better to the new ecosystem. The sectors of the population that are fully educated in a digital environment have greater ability to assimilate technological advances, which in turn allows them to take advantage of all the opportunities provided by the social web. This is the so-called millennial generation, also known as the digital generation (González Aldea & López-Vidales, 2011), the Net Generation (Tapscott, 2008) and the digital natives (Prensky, 2001). In this sense, Neil Howe and William Strauss (2000) coined the term "millennial generation" to refer to the people born between 1985 and 2000, who had grown up connected to the Internet and are familiar with computers, mobile phones and computer developments. This generation is preceded by the Generation Y (Bolton *et al.*, 2013) and is followed by the Generation Z, which has even more digital competencies.

With regards to television, the study of the Net-Generation is essential to predict the evolution in consumption habits. This is because this generation represents an older target with a voting capacity that is more distant from traditional TV and more open to experience the new television or hyper-television (Scolari, 2013). Moreover, they constitute the most active and participatory sector of the audience, as they are regular users of social networks and are accustomed to multi-screen consumption. According to the *Teens, Social Media & Technology Overview* (2015), produced by the *Pew Research Center*, 92% of teens use the Internet every day, while 73% have their own smartphone, 87% own a portable or desktop computer, and more than half (58%) own a tablet. Regarding social networks, the same study indicates that Facebook (92%) is still the most used network by teens, followed by Instagram (52%), Snapchat (41%) and Twitter (33%).

The Internet is the habitat of the millennials, but when it comes to getting information television continues to be one of the main media outlets. In fact, according to Deloitte's 2014 *Digital Democracy Survey*, television is the leading source of news in Spain (46%), followed by social networks (13%). Young people continue watching the television, but their consumption habits are completely different. The digital generations are marked by hyper-connectivity (Reig & Vilches, 2013), developing great part of their socialisation in the online universe and experimenting new forms of access to content based on mobility, interactivity, multi-tasking and, according to Bárbara Yuste (2015), speed and superficiality. The supremacy of immediacy has moved to the consumption habits of the younger audiences, limiting their capacity for reflection and interpretation of information. For this reason, digital literacy arises as essential for teens to learn to filter, analyse and synthesise the large flows of information circulating on the Internet (Ocokoljic, Cvetkovski & Milicevic, 2013).

In the academic environment, much of the research has focused on analysing how the World Wide Web has impacted the daily life of the millennial generation (Winocur, 2006) and how the latter relates with old and social media (Poindexter, 2012; López Vidales, González Aldea & Medina de la Viña, 2012; Catalina-García, García Jiménez & Montes, 2015). According to a survey conducted by *The Media Insight Project* (2015), there are four groups of millennials based on their online news consumption habits: the unattached (the youngest, who only read the news when they bump into them), the explorers (who actively seek out news and information), the distracted (the older millennials, who do not tend to actively seek news) and the activists (mostly older millennials, who are more likely to actively seek out news).

In the case of political information, the new practices of the millennials are forcing the reformulation of the traditional communicative structures of this sector (Gutiérrez-Rubí, 2015), to the extent that political parties and leaders are trying to integrate digital advancements in the communication strategies of their campaigns (Anduisa, Cantijoch & Cristancho, 2010; Abejón, Sastre & Linares, 2012).

The emergence of the Internet has led to new forms of access and consumption of political news (Anduisa, Cristancho & Cantijoch, 2012), especially among the younger sectors of the population. In fact, as Antonio Alcover points out in an article published in *El Mundo* newspaper (2016), millennials are considered to be politically independent and more critical because of the ‘autonomy’ that the Internet provides (Gutiérrez-Rubí, 2013), the possibilities of access to sources of information with different points of view and the opportunities for participation and discussion offered by spaces such as forums or social networks.

Although television is still the medium of political information par excellence (Echevarria, 2013), the web 2.0 serves as a complement to a digital generation that not only consumes content, but also shares ideas and uses new media to participate actively in online social networked movements. An example of this are the 15M movement in Spain, the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong and Occupy Wall Street in the USA (Fernández-Planells, 2015). Paraphrasing Antoni Gutiérrez-Rubí (2015: 168),

“millennials [...] represent a new way to communicate, think, and act. Everything indicates that their demands will not stop and that their proactive attitude will be increasingly more contagious in the new generations that increasingly move away from the old politics”.

3. Objectives and methods

The main objective of this article is to analyse millennials’ political information consumption habits in the current digital context. To this end, the study adopts a qualitative approach (Martínez Rodríguez, 2011) as the most suitable system to deal with how-and-why types of research questions, especially when we have little or no control over the real behaviour of the objects of study and deal with a contemporary phenomenon (Escudero, Delfín & Gutiérrez, 2008). The news event selected for this study is the coverage of the 2015 Spanish general elections. Regarding the period of analysis, the

sample covers from 4 December 2015 (the start of the election campaign) to 20 December 2015 (the election day).

The study required the systematisation of the information obtained through a Facebook group of young participants, which was created according to the criteria applicable to a focus group or research community (Wayne *et al.*, 2010): a private and closed group, during a determined time frame (4 to 20 December 2015) and with a concrete target (people between 20 and 30 years of age), in the range of the millennial generation, and located, for academic or employment reasons, in the fields of politics and communication. In terms of sample size, the size of the focus groups ranges from 6 to 10 participants to facilitate interaction between them participants and control by the moderator (Krueger, 1991). In this case, we chose a group of 7 participants, with the following profiles:

Table 1. Profiles of focus group participants

Number	Gender	Age	Field
Profile 1	Man	22	Political science
Profile 2	Woman	22	Political science
Profile 3	Woman	23	Communication
Profile 4	Woman	23	Communication
Profile 5	Woman	24	Communication
Profile 6	Woman	21	Communication
Profile 7	Woman	22	Communication

Source: Authors' own creation

Image 1. Screenshot of the Facebook group



Facebook was selected as the social network to host the online focus group because it is an environment known by all the participants and has an adequate structure for the features sought for the group, especially in terms of interaction possibilities.

Given that this group or community was created to know the opinions and behaviours of young people towards the events that took place during the 2015 election campaign, the conversation was promoted by following the guidelines proposed by Francisco Parada Dueñas (2012) for this type of focus group.

To cover the quantitative aspect of the study, we conducted daily surveys on the consumption habits of the young participants, following the classic daily panel model (Huertas, 2002). These surveys were divided into 18 fixed questions and other possible questions related to special programmes (debates, interviews, etc.) that altered the usual programming of TV networks. These questions investigated six key points of television consumption:

- What has been consumed (by network and news programme)
- When was it consumed (time slot)
- Where has it been consumed (home, work, school, etc.)
- How has it been consumed (alone or accompanied)
- Through what medium or device has it been consumed (television, the web, etc.)
- Degree of use of social networks

This technique allowed us to establish participants' rate of daily consumption and, quantitatively, to extract the data that indicate the level of television use in comparison to social networks, as well as the type of programmes that are of most interest for young people and the time or place in which these media are consumed.

4. Analysis and results

4.1. Young people's consumption of the TV coverage of the 2015 Spanish general election

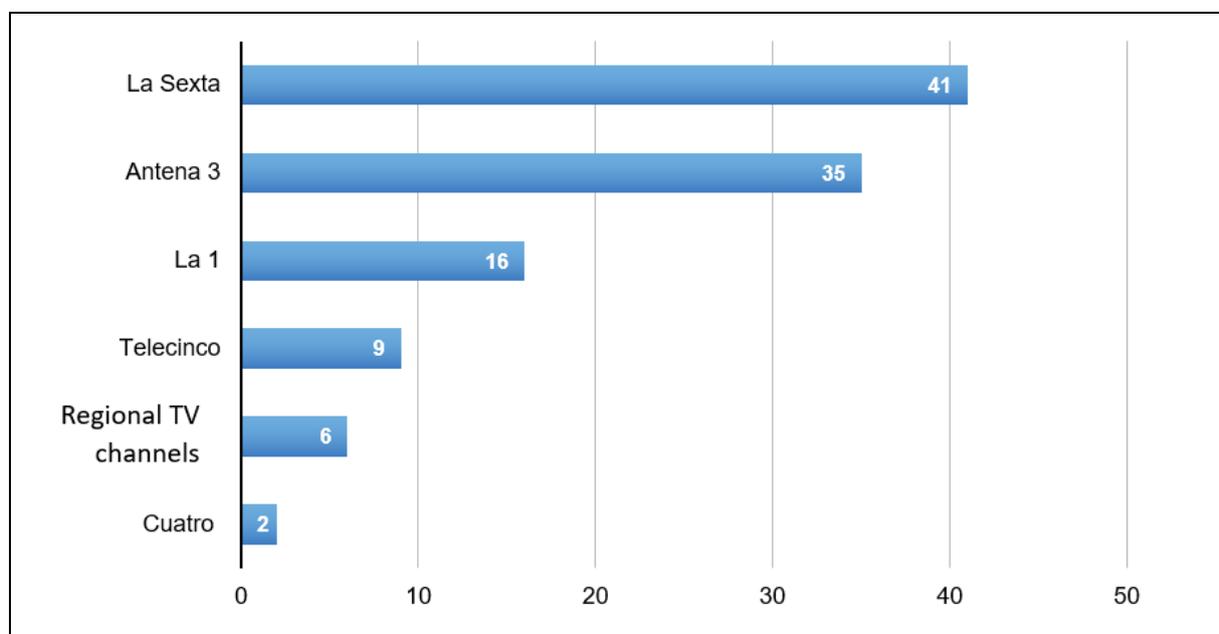
During the 2015 Spanish general elections campaign, all the national networks offered spaces dedicated to political news. Strictly informational programmes were complemented with special programming, such as debates on different networks, and the intervention of political figures in entertainment formats, as it was the case of Telecinco's *¡Qué tiempo tan feliz!* ("Such a happy time!").

The sample of participants were asked to answer a daily questionnaire about their consumption of information, to know their preferences. The first section of the questionnaire investigated the television networks that participants watched during the election campaign.

The results show a clear predilection for the general-interest channels of Atresmedia (La Sexta and Antena 3). From 4 to 20 December – inclusive –, La Sexta was watched in 38% of the times by all the surveyed millennials, followed by Antena 3 (32%), La 1 (15%) and Telecinco (8%). Only one of the respondents mentioned having watched the regional TV networks, although their consumption

was continuous during all the period of analysis. The less popular TV channel was Cuatro, which was watched by only one of the respondents on two occasions.

Figure 1. Political information consumption by TV network (4/12/15-20/12/15)



Source: Authors' own creation

In terms of news programmes, the results indicate once again that the TV networks of Atresmedia are the first choices of young people to seek out political information. However, the order is reversed this time: noon news shows on Antena 3 are the most viewed (24%), followed by the news shows of La Sexta (22%) in the same time slot. The night news programmes of both networks occupy the third and fourth places. These data contrast with the results of the 2015 audience rating report of *Barlomento Comunicación*, which found out that Telecinco news programmes were the most watched (based on the average audience of the 15.00 and 21.00 hours editions). According to Kantar Media, the nightly news programmes of Telecinco were in the Top 10 of the most-watched programmes during the election campaign, with an average audience of more than 3 million viewers and only surpassed by the debate of 7 December.

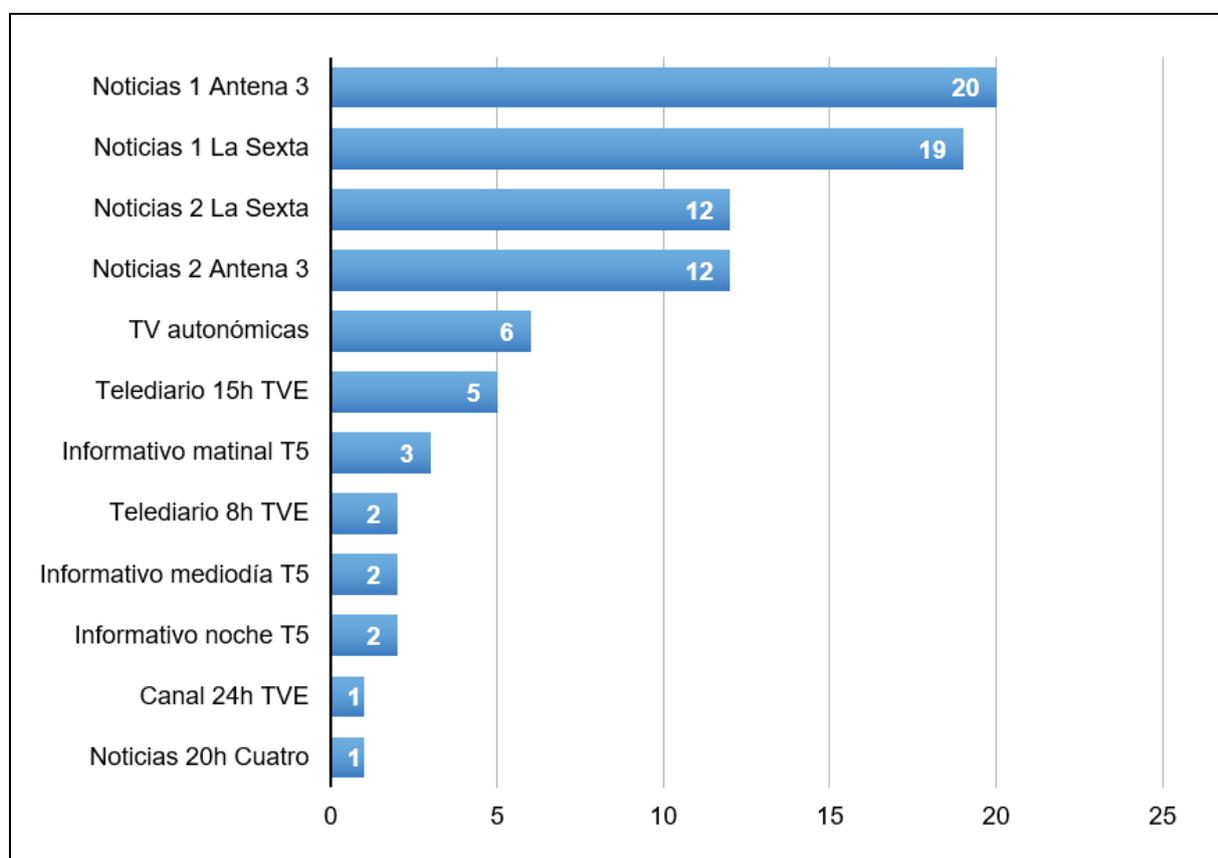
The analysis of the questionnaires also indicates an undeniable preference for the noon and night editions of the news programmes over the morning editions, which were selected 8 times (the 8 AM news programme of TVE and the morning news programme of Telecinco).

The non-news programme watched the most by participants during the election campaign was *Al rojo vivo* ("Red hot"). This daily morning space of La Sexta was selected 32% of the times, followed way behind by *Los desayunos de TVE* ("The breakfasts of TVE") (17%).

In general, there is a dominance of the morning programmes that mix information with entertainment – including *Espejo público* (13%) – and formats such as *Salvados* (13%), *El intermedio* (11%) and

La sexta noche (6%) -broadcast weekly by La Sexta, with the exception of *El intermedio*. *La sexta noche* and *Salvados* are programmes of debate, feature reports and interviews, and focused on political news during the election campaign. According to the daily rating data provided by Kantar Media, these programmes are usually backed by the audience of the network. Meanwhile, *El intermedio* is a comedy show that deals especially with political news and targets the younger sectors of the population, including the millennial generation. Other entertainment programmes that interviewed politicians or covered political events during the election campaign include *¡Qué tiempo tan feliz!* (Telecinco) and its interview with Mariano Rajoy on 12 December, watched by one of the respondents. *El objetivo* (2%), *El debate de La 1* (2%) and *Las mañanas de Cuatro* (2%) were the least watched by the sample of participants. Here, the morning programme of Cuatro deserves a special mention because it is broadcast daily.

Figure 2. Political information consumption by news programme (4/12/15-20/12/15)

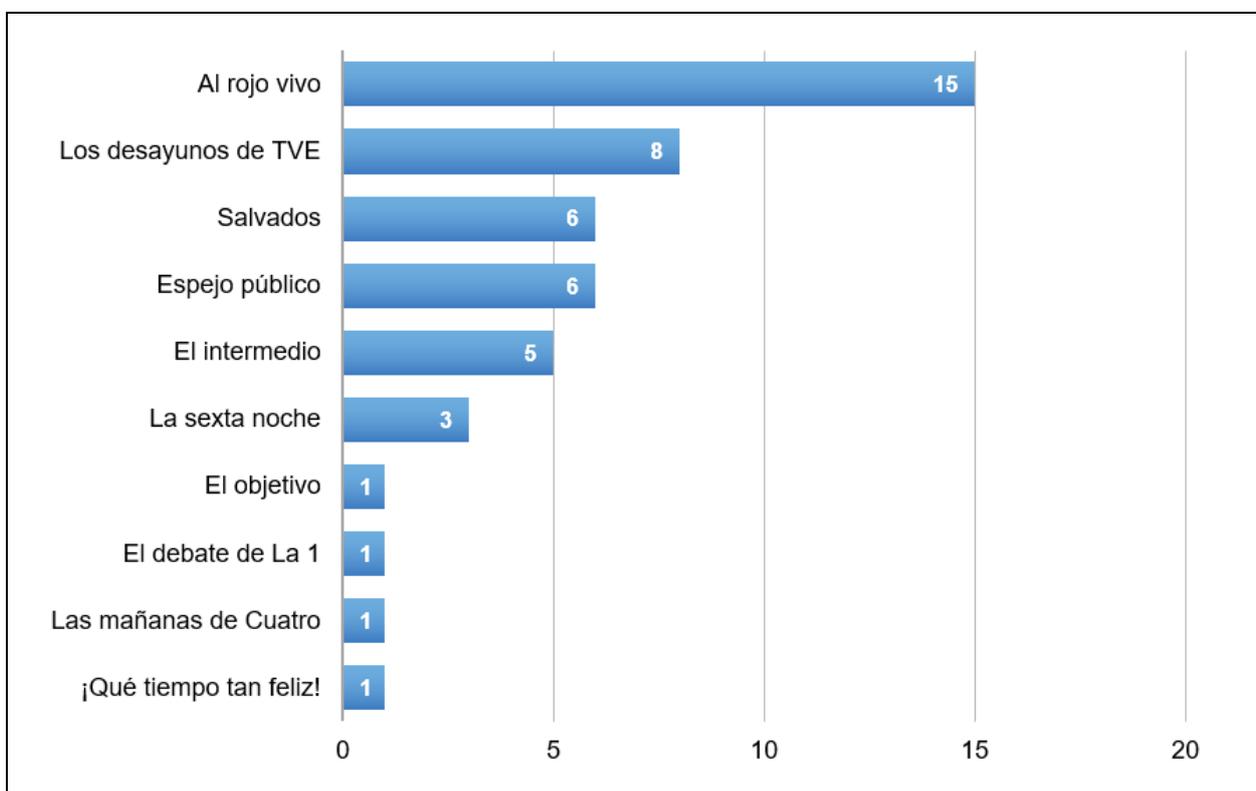


Source: Authors' own creation

The extensive coverage of the electoral campaign reveals the interest of the medium of television in politics, and the loyalty of viewers towards this type of content. According to *Barlovento Comunicación*, the audience share of programmes such as *La sexta noche* increased slightly during the months before and after the elections -going from 8.4% in September 2015 to 9.5% in October and 10.5% in February 2016. In this sense, research participants showed a true interest in the

peculiarity of the 2015 election campaign due to the volume of related information broadcast by television.

Figure 3. Consumption by information programme (4/12/15-20/12/15)



Source: Authors' own creation

Profile 4: “With respect to the past elections, I find a substantial difference in media coverage. The classic “face to face” of the Television Academy was complemented with the debates organised by the media corporations, which gave voice to the new political forces. Likewise, the analyses offered by various programmes and, in general, the time that most of them have devoted to the analysis of the campaign of the main candidates to Congress was considerably higher than in the previous elections”.

However, respondents were a little tired of the continuous appearance of political leaders in diverse programmes. According to an interview with the expert in political communication from the University of Navarra, Marta Rebolledo, published by *El Mundo* newspaper on 6 June, 2016, the current Spanish political context follows the trend of the so-called pop-politics. Politicians used TV programmes to reach the less interested sectors of the public and to publicise their most personal facets. Their appearance in entertainment shows, such as *El hormiguero* and *¡Qué tiempo tan feliz!*, allowed them to send messages in informal and subtle ways. However, focus group participants highlighted the double-edged weapon that this political strategy represents.

Profile 2: “Priority has been given to the personal facets of candidates (going to entertainment programmes, and doing much more personal acts). I think that this has exceeded the electoral proposals. Thus, in my opinion, while this has been a very interesting campaign, at the political level, to me, it has been quite insignificant.”

Imagen 2. Screenshot of the Facebook group



Profile 3: “I think that the continuous presence of candidates in all type of entertainment programmes has resulted very tiresome and little helpful. I think that we have seen many empty speeches, with few specific proposals, many attacks between parties and speculations of pacts. I think that there has been a lack of analysis and explanation of proposals and coherent projects for the future”.

Likewise, the focus group and the questionnaires included specific questions about the three debates broadcast nationwide during the election campaign: the one broadcast on 7 December between the four main political parties -PP, PSOE, Podemos and Ciudadanos, which was broadcast by Antena 3 and La Sexta; the one broadcast on 9 December between the nine political forces that competed in the elections -PP, PSOE, Podemos, Ciudadanos, IU-UP, UPyD, UDC, PNV and DiL, which was organised by RTVE and broadcast by La 1; and the debate of 14 December between the Socialist leader Pedro Sánchez and the PP leader Mariano Rajoy, which was organised by the Academy of Sciences and Arts of TV and broadcast by La Sexta, La 1 and Antena 3.

All respondents watched fragments of the debates broadcast on the 7 and 14 of December, while only two people claimed to have watched the debate between the 9 parties on La 1. The remaining participants claimed that the main reason not to watch this debate were the changes in programming, since although it was aired in prime time, its broadcasting was initially planned for the 00:15 hours.

Similarly, the debates constituted one of the most discussed events of the campaign among the research participants. In order to promote the interaction between participants, we raised issues about their general perceptions about the formats offered by the different networks. Although their political views differ, there is a certain coincidence in the appreciation of the innovative debate organised by Atresmedia, which was also followed up via social networks by most participants. The face-to-face debate between the leaders of the PSOE, Pedro Sanchez, and the PP, Mariano Rajoy, received the worst criticism.

Profile 6: “I think it was a quite novel format [Debate 7D] in comparison to the previous debates. I also followed it through social networks and the truth is that I was paying more attention to the social networks than to the debate (which is also influenced by the fact that the quality of the web streaming was pretty bad). In addition to the tweets of the parties, memes and other content circulating in the network, it got my attention that fictional series such as *House of Cards* were tweeting about the debate”.

Profile 7: “I was more interest in the debate of 7 of December because it was a constant give and take between Mariano and Pedro”.

Profile 4: “I found the debate of the 4 of December to be more interesting. The emergence of new political forces is already a reality in Spain, and that is why I find most interesting a debate which gives voice to these new candidates and political parties. Also, the format designed by Atresmedia was, in my opinion, more attractive than the classic “face-to-face” broadcast today”.

Profile 5: “Although everyone says that the two-person debate is more rancid, I find this format to be more orderly than a mass debate in which the replicas end up diluted either for the lack of time or to put in disadvantage a particular leader in talking-minutes. This is not to say that the debate today has been better than the four-person debate. Although the face-to-face formula is good, the eighties aesthetics and the over-repeated arguments make the debate to fails from start to finish.”

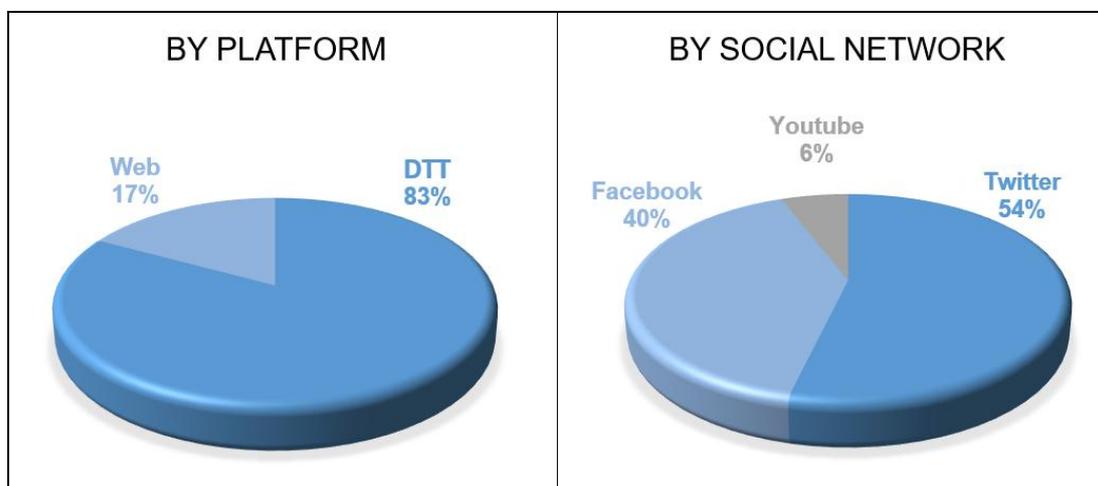
4.2. Social and multiscreen consumption: social networks and web platforms

One of the peculiarities that characterise the millennial generation is their ability to assimilate new environments and technologies. The analysis of the answers of the young people surveyed on their television consumption, through the web, DTT, tablet, and other devices, shows that television continues to be the favourite medium for consuming audiovisual information. These results are consistent with the post-election results published by the Spanish Centre for Sociological Information (CIS) after the 2015 general election campaign, which indicate that 58.3% of Spaniards obtained political information from television with a daily or almost daily frequency. However, the young people in the sample obtained information from the web on 17% of the times, breaking the barriers and limitations of the traditional television system.

With respect to other media, the value of the press in its online edition stands out. In this sense, all surveyed millennials reported that during the election campaign they obtained political news through various digital newspapers, including *El diario*, *El Huffington Post*, *Ctxt.es*, *La Voz de Galicia*, *El Mundo*, *El País*, *El Español*, *Público*, *El Confidencial*, *La Información* and *Faro de Vigo*.

Although the television is the medium of political information par excellence, according to the report of the CIS, the print press still prevails among the Net Generation. The use of new technologies by this generation is higher than in other age ranges, but its political news consumption is based on the combination of traditional and new media, moving towards habits that are more typical of hybridisation than of substitution.

Figure 4. News consumption by platform and social network (4/12/15-20/12/15)



Source: Authors' own creation

The use of the social networks also is also confirmed in all cases. Their use as sources of information make these kind of tools good allies for the millennial generation. The most used social network is Twitter, selected 54% of the times, followed by Facebook (40%) and YouTube (6%).

Although the results of the surveys and the online focus group evidenced a great use of social networks by the sample of young participants, their active participation in social networks is limited. In fact, only 4% of the times have they posted a comment or a tweet on matters relating to political news in social networks. In cases in which certain interaction was demonstrated, this interaction concentrated on the microblogging network, Twitter, and accompanied by some of the hashtags that were trending topics at that moment: #GatetesConGarzon –in relation to the leader of the United Left party (IU)– , #7DEIDebateDecisivo –in relation to the debate held on the 7 of December– and #EncasadeElisa –an edition of the *Salvados* show on energy poverty– .

The contents that circulated in social networks during the election campaign and, especially, those derived from the televised debates, generated greater participation in the focus group. The creation of memes, parodies, etc. gave a more informal tone to a serious informative subgenre. In this regard, several research participants highlighted the election campaign of the United Left party (IU) due to its comedic approach.

Profile 2: “The irruption of social networks has constituted a transcendental change. From users to political parties, the activity on Twitter and Facebook has increased dramatically. In fact, along with television, social networks have been the pillar of the campaign strategy of most political parties”.

Profile 1: “At the level of social networks, undoubtedly, the campaign of the United Left, and at the audiovisual level, the videos of Nós seem impeccable”.

Profile 3: “Mainly, I have followed the news through social networks because the start of the election campaign has generated a large number of reactions on these platforms, and I think it is interesting to see the how news media and users alike react to this through hashtags”.

Image 3. Screenshot of the Facebook group

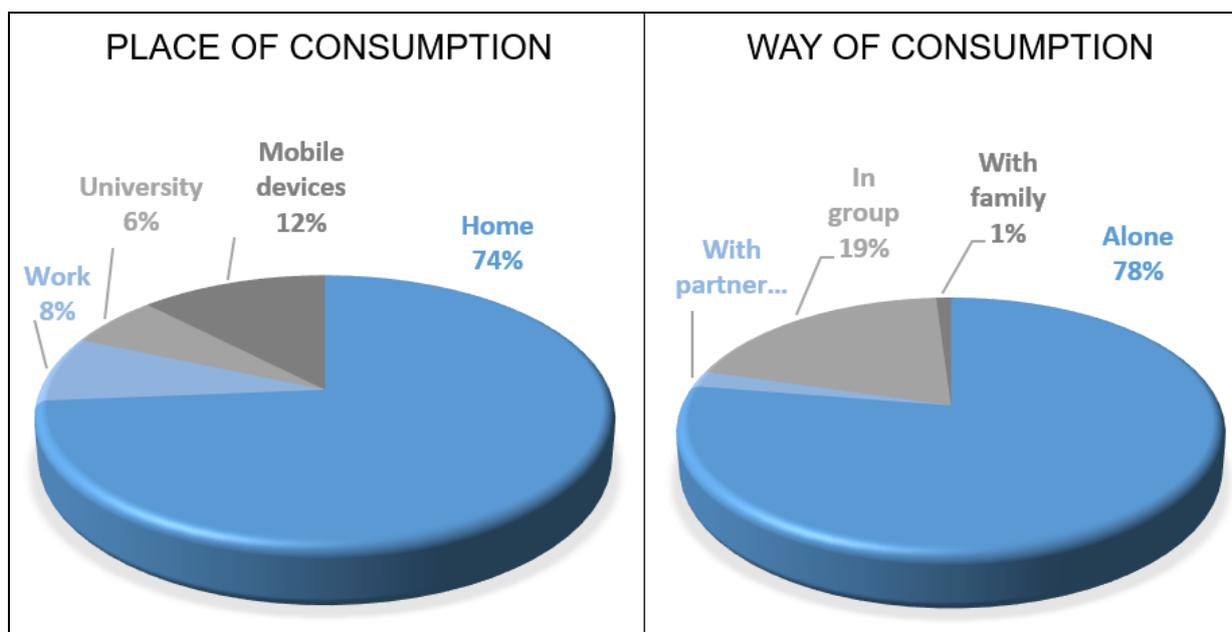


4.3. New routines: how, when and where is political information consumed?

The incursion of the Internet into the new communicative system has transformed people’s TV consumption habits. The results of the questionnaires show diversity with regards to the place in which young people access information. The consumption of news from television at home is predominant (74%), but the consumption of news in mobile devices (12%) and external places such as the workplace (8%) and university (6%) are also significant.

The millennial generation is moving away from the traditional consumption, and is adapting it to its needs and accessing content through new devices and platforms. In contrast to family viewing, which was predominant in the early years of television, young people develop a more individualised and personalised consumption that translates mostly in solitary viewing. The surveyed millennials watched television on their own 78% of the times, in group in 19% of the times, with a partner in 2% of the times, and in family in just 1% of the times.

Figure 5. Information consumption by place and mode (4/12/15-20/12/15)



Source: Authors’ own creation

Similarly, the time in which information is consumed varies. Given that millennials are not subject to the fixed broadcast schedules of traditional television, they access contents at different times and via different routes. According to the results of the survey, the night slot from 21.00 to 24.00 hours (29%) is the preferred one. However, consumption also occurred during less common time slots, such as 09.00 to 13.00 (14%) and 15.00 to 18.00 (12%). The time slot less selected by the sample of millennials were the 08.00 to 09.00 (1%) and 24.00 to 02.30 (2%).

The ease of access to information from anywhere, anytime has allowed millennials to create new and more individualised behaviours, which has also allowed them to experience the election campaign in a more active way.

5. Discussion and conclusions

People's TV viewing patterns have been transformed as a result of the new digital context, particularly among the age groups with higher technological literacy. Against the traditional static and one-way consumption, the so-called millennial generation develops information routines based on personalisation, multimedia and multiplatform.

In this scenario, the emergence of social networks and the proliferation of devices have allowed unlimited access, wherever and whenever, to current affairs news. However, millennials' new routines have not excluded traditional media. Although their preferences to obtain information are clearly conditioned by social media, other media such as television and newspapers –both consumed especially online– are not losing protagonism.

The results of the focus group gathered for this research show a clear predilection for television as primary source of political information, combined with the consultation of several printed newspapers in their web version and social networks, like Twitter. Therefore, there is a clear interest on televised information, but also a discontent with the excess of news produced by the continuous appearance of political leaders -both in information and entertainment programmes- and the traffic generated in social networks. Although the consumption of news programmes has been wide - particularly the debates and formats such as *Al rojo vivo*, respondents have excluded products that are less tied to the world of politics because they considered their content to be “little useful”.

On the other hand, despite the theoretical trends that point towards a more active public, the level of participation of millennials on social platforms has been limited. The participants of this study, who are regular users of various networks, have used them mainly as sources of information and not as a space of interaction. They have acted this way, as an informative complement of a consumption habit that is increasingly more of a hybrid between new and old media.

While millennials' habits are marked by the inclusion of new technologies and the ease of access to political information, television continues to be the main medium, although each time more different from its traditional form. Consumption through various devices and in deferred ways is gaining weight, added to the complement of social networks that provide added value through opinions and user-generated contents which, together, provide a consumption experience -especially for live broadcast- more suited to the needs of the future generations.

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