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The Ongoing Transformation of the Digital Public Sphere

Editors

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Editorial

The Ongoing Transformation of the Digital Public Sphere: Basic Considerations on a Moving Target

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Abstract
The recent decades more than anything else have revealed the ambivalence not only of the articulated expectations about the digital public sphere but also of the 'real' development itself. This thematic issue of *Media and Communication* highlights some of the criticalities and specificities of the evolution of the public sphere during this period where digital communication ecosystems are becoming increasingly central. The different articles offer a polyphonic perspective and thus contribute significantly to the debate on the transformations of the public sphere, which—in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic—dramatically affect the very essence of our democracy.

Keywords
crisis; democracy; digital ecosystems; digital media; platforms; politics; post-public sphere; public sphere

Issue
This editorial is part of the issue "The Ongoing Transformation of the Digital Public Sphere" edited by Emiliana De Blasio (LUISS University, Italy), Marianne Kneuer (Hildesheim University, Germany), Wolf J. Schünemann (Hildesheim University, Germany) and Michele Sorice (LUISS University, Italy).

The emergence of digital media generated a whole array of euphoric expectations regarding the reconfiguration of the public sphere: One points to an emanating network society characterized by a de-hierarchized structure (Castells, 2011), and by a new autonomy from the 'institutional' power (Castells, 2012). Others emphasize the prospect of public debates being more inclusive, especially of those segments of the population that had been previously marginalized. Moreover, digitalization seems to entail the promise of greater transparency, inducing decision-makers to be more responsive and accountable. And finally, it has been claimed that digitalization will overcome the Westphalian political imaginary, in which the Habermasian theory of the public sphere is situated, leading to a transnational public sphere (Fraser, 2014). The recent decades more than anything else have revealed the ambivalence not only of the articulated expectations but also of the 'real' development itself. The vision of a transformed digital public sphere as a globally networked sphere, reconfigured in its power distribution and deterritorialized is challenged by the reality of a disintegrated public sphere shaped by cyber ghettos (Dahlgren, 2005), where public discourses are managed by algorithms, and geography still seems to count (Kneuer & Datts, 2020).

Hence, the transformation of the digital public sphere confronts us with basic conceptual challenges as well as with a variety of empirical puzzles, and not least the methodological questions of how to tackle the subject of research.

One first important delineation concerns the concepts of the public sphere, public space, and public opin-

ion which in the contemporary public debate are often confused. The concept of the public sphere refers to the discursive process through which the beliefs of public opinion are produced and legitimized: In essence, it primarily involves the communicative processes underlying the construction of opinion. Public space, on the other hand, can also exist without the public sphere, as in the case of the Internet or, more generally, without what are defined as mediated public spaces which tend to be framed in communicative ecosystems. The latter, therefore, become places of representation of politics and public discourse. The development of digital media has accelerated the process—active since the 1980s—of the dilution of the public sphere, which no longer runs out of public space since the latter also includes the 'peripheral' territories of civil society where interests, sensitivities, and issues are born and develop, sometimes distant from mainstream cultures. In these symbolic spaces (which often also offer themselves as physical 'territories' for comparison and debate), forms of civic engagement develop and legitimate or antagonistic or contesting instances of dominant cultures emerge.

A second aspect of the new public sphere refers to the digital platforms which have achieved increasing relevance for the dynamics of public opinion development. The process of "platformization" of contemporary societies (Jin, 2020; van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018) has led to a transformation of the spaces of public debate. The centrality of platforms, which have become places of confrontation and conflict over matters of public opinion, has facilitated the emergence of the phenomena of information disorder, bringing traditional concepts of media studies such as 'manipulation' and 'influence' back into the public and academic debate. The elements that made the topic of manipulation re-emerge are to be found precisely in digital communication, which initially seemed to be the place for the subject's autonomy and freedom. The analysis of the role of digital political communication in the mechanisms of 'manipulation' and 'disinformation' exploded dramatically with the Facebook–Cambridge Analytica affair, in 2018, but the signs of this change in the climate of public opinion around the role of the media were already present beforehand with the emergence of the ambiguous concept of post-truth.

While the digitalization of the public sphere was initially praised as the possibility of disintermediation and of creating alternative spaces bypassing the gatekeepers of the 'classic' media channels, the uncontrolled opinions produced on or by 'social' platforms risk creating a space of manipulation, a territory in which—in Hannah Arendt's (1967) perspective—truth and politics are self-excluding. Starting from this debate on the relationships between lies and politics, the theory of echo chambers also developed: Social media (and more generally digital ecosystems) would be closed and self-referential spaces, in which subjects engage in relationships only with those who think in the same way (or who have contiguous positions), effectively excluding any form of discursive hybridization and dialogue between different public spaces.

Recently, Colin Crouch (2019) noted that although regulatory institutions (from the courts to the media) continue to exist and function, decision making is now the preserve of narrow circles reserved for economic elites. This situation, which breaks the 'sentimental connection' between subjects and intermediate bodies (determining, moreover, the need for new forms of representation), favors populist political communication. Populist political communication can be considered a specific feature of post-democracy; according to Philip Schlesinger (2020) "if populism is a feature of post-democracy, then in line with this, political communication under these conditions could be better classified as operating in a post-public sphere."

The post-public sphere is located at the intersection of various phenomena, characterized by the use—unstable and by definition non-normative—of the prefix "post": 1) the post-representative trends discussed by John Keane (2013) which reveal the importance of digital communication ecosystems in the development processes of forms of occasional representation but also in the emergence of the apparent conceptual oxymoron of direct representation (De Blasio & Sorice, 2020; Urbinati, 2020); 2) the development of the 'post-political' concept, however ambiguous and mostly connected to the processes of depoliticization; 3) the affirmation of a post-democracy that makes the mechanisms of the commodification of citizenship its distinctive feature; and 4) the post-private era (Spivak, 2019) which implies increasingly blurred lines between public and private and which questions the basic idea of the *public* sphere as the inevitable and counterbalancing twin of privacy. In fact, this expansion of the private creates new trade-offs between the constant exposure to a publicness which can be categorized as a kind of absolute transparency and the loss of control over that which we want to (and should) share publicly, and that which we do not (Kneuer, 2020).

The transformation of the public sphere and the emergence of the notion of the post-public sphere intersect the development of platforms and, more generally, the process of platformization of the public sphere (Sorice, 2020). In essence, the 'platformized' post public sphere adopts the discursive modalities of neoliberalism, it is based on economic, political, and cultural power asymmetries that tend to fragment the public sphere, making it a space for legitimizing the 'single thought' instead of a place symbolic of discussion and debate. The platformized public sphere is not based on diversity (much less on its integration) but on the fragmentation of non-connected sub-publics.

This thematic issue of *Media and Communication* highlights some of the mentioned criticalities and specificities of the evolution of the public sphere during this period where digital communication ecosystems are becoming increasingly central.

In their conceptual contribution, Sara Bentivegna and Giovanni Boccia Artieri (2020) introduce the notion of the interrelated public agenda as a frame to study an ever more fragmented public sphere. Their article provides evidence of three antinomies (horizontality vs verticality, personal vs aggregative, and dynamic vs static), which are suggested as being useful for the interpretation of the transformation of the digital public sphere.

The implications for political parties and representation are examined by Emiliana De Blasio and Lorenzo Viviani (2020), who present an important analysis on the relationship between the evolution of digital ecosystems and the way in which political organizations are structured. The authors studied digital platforms of political parties in four countries and their results highlight how the new forms of mobilization and aggregation have opened up different but interconnected public spaces.

Two articles focus on the critical question of how far we can speak of a transnational digital public sphere, both presenting rather sceptical findings. Jan Kermer and Rolf Nijmeijer (2020) focus on the transnationalization of the public sphere in Europe as a background for a greater sense of European belonging. The authors warn however that this should be conceived of as a linear relationship. The Internet has enabled new actors from outside Europe to easily infiltrate the Europeanized public sphere. Furthermore, cyberspace has shown itself to be a hotbed of Euroscepticism and polarized discourse.

The other article drawing on the transnational dimension studies the transnational quality of issue publics with the example of climate change on Twitter. The multimethod analysis by Wolf Schünemann (2020) finds that there is no simple correlation between digital media use, global concerns (such as climate change), and a transnationalized debate. Thus, what crystallizes is an effect of language structuring the discourse, as well as factors such as regional or developmental status which play a role.

Several contributions refer to the discourse and the quality of deliberation as an essential part of the digital public sphere. The echo chambers thesis is examined by Pere Masip, Jaume Suau, and Carlos Ruiz-Caballero (2020) who present empirical research on the Spanish case. Their findings show that Spanish citizens who are more active on social media are more likely to be exposed to news content from different ideological positions than those who are less active users. This is an interesting perspective to investigate the role of filter bubbles too.

Another relevant issue for digital deliberation is how far it instigates (or not) polarization. Ignacio-Jesús Serrano-Contreras, Javier García-Marín, and Óscar G. Luengo (2020) offer an important contribution to the analysis of the relationships between the instances of polarization and the triggering of the deliberation processes. They propose an index to measure the polarization of each comment posted on YouTube and to analyse the average polarization of comments for each video under analysis.

With populism being an increasingly relevant phenomenon, Mario Datts (2020) raises the issue of how strongly populist frames permeate public debates. He analyses the role of 'ordinary citizens' on Twitter during the Migration Compact Conference in Marrakesh. Somewhat against expectations, he finds that populist narratives did not dominate the Twitter debate on migration. However, the empirical results indicate that ordinary citizens play an important role in the creation and dissemination of populist content. Thus, it seems that the social web widens the public sphere, including those actors who do not communicate in accordance with the Habermasian conceptualization of it.

An analysis of the Hashtag Assemblage of #metwo is proposed by Sebastian Berg, Tim König, and Ann-Kathrin Koster (2020). They are interested in hashtags as a specific tool of discursive fabrication, which also embody the active participation of the actors. Examining the hashtag #metwo in Germany in the summer of 2018, they show the hashtag assemblage's heterogeneity and potential for subaltern agency. At the same time, they demonstrate how hashtag assemblages as epistemic practices are inherently dynamic.

Finally, the article of Andreu Casero-Ripolles, Josep-Lluís Micó-Sanz, and Míriam Díez-Bosch (2020) proves how the geographical location matters for the discourse. The authors analyzed Twitter communication on the negotiation process for the formation of the Spanish government in 2015 and 2016 in three Spanish cities (Madrid, Barcelona, and Valencia). The results show that there is a correlation between the geographical location of the users and the political conversation on Twitter, despite the presumption that the Twittersphere is de-territorialized.

In sum, the studies presented confirm the ambivalence of the digital public sphere topic. Moreover, they may even question the term 'digital' because—as many authors underline—the communicative processes continue to take place in a hybrid space. Regarding the methodology, this thematic issue stands out by offering diverse and innovative methods and approaches such as geolocation, topic modelling, network analysis etc., enriching social media research in general.

While this thematic issue was being prepared, the latest challenge for the public sphere emerged: the Covid-19 pandemic. Recently, Aeron Davis (2019) identified in the logic of the 'crisis,' the framework dimension of contemporary political communication, which moreover calls into question all the theories that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. This scheme can be easily applied to the entire global communication ecosystem. The Covid-19 pandemic has further confirmed the transformation of communication processes, a substantial rearticulation of public opinion and a reshaping of the public sphere. New trends have emerged or established themselves while the critical issues arising from the exponential growth of information flow (information overload) have been confirmed. Beyond the dramatic health

aspects, the Covid-19 pandemic has also shown the unprecedented ways in which public opinion has reacted, both to the sometimes-entropic flow of information (often, moreover, of a technical-scientific nature) and to the actions taken by public authorities to limit the contagion.

This thematic issue of *Media and Communication* contributes significantly to the debate on the transformations, which—in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic—dramatically affect the very essence of our democracy.

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Conflict of Interests

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Article

Rethinking Public Agenda in a Time of High-Choice Media Environment

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Abstract
Contemporary political communication is conditioned by an information environment characterised, on the one hand, by increased choice, and on the other by the fragmentation and multiplication of the ways of consuming information. This article introduces the notion of the 'interrelated public agenda' as a frame to study this context, taking into account elements of convergence and divergence from a single viewpoint, adopting a complex analysis model which proceeds along axes which make it possible to detect a continuum in which opposing forces are in a constant, problematic equilibrium. In this sense, we identified three dimensions which are helpful in describing public agenda interrelations. First, *horizontality vs verticality*, which contains the dynamics of power, and is generated in a context of political disintermediation, through the altered nature of the media system—in the complex relation between legacy media and web 2.0, and between social, institutional actors, and others. Second, *personal vs aggregative*, which stresses the need to take account of convergences and divergences between personal orientation towards certain issues and the aggregative pressure in different media spaces in which people feel at home: from information consumption via media diets of varying complexity to active participation in the production of content or in public discourse, offline and online. And finally, *dynamic vs static*, which points to the need to orient analysis towards the relation between media spaces rather than focusing on specific spaces, thus helping, importantly, to make up for the current dearth of research in comparison with studies of single platforms.

Keywords
legacy media; media environment; political communication; public agenda; public sphere; social media

Issue
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1. Introduction

That a well-functioning democracy needs citizens who are at least minimally well-informed about matters of public importance is a widely held assumption (Dahl, 1998); how that information is be obtained, though, is a question inevitably affected by the media system in which we are placed and by the power relations existing between the various actors. It is clear that in the name of pluralism and difference, the aim of channeling citizens into a single sphere, in particular, significantly changes how they learn about political and current affair news (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2018). It is equally clear that the acquisition of information depends, first and foremost, on the interest shown by the citizens themselves, who are less and less synonymous with the "informed citizen" and more and more with the "monitorial citizen" (Schudson, 1999). Whichever citizen is chosen for reference, the effective availability of information proves indispensable to the orderly working of democratic institutions. However, in contemporary societies, the most widely shared concern, except in some rare cases, is not

the shortage of information, but the very opposite—the abundance of information. Hence, if in the past the issue at stake was the real availability and accessibility of information for all citizens, as well as the opportunity to allow space for different and contrasting interests, the focus today is on the consequences of a communicative and informative surfeit which certainly makes for diversification, but also for fragmentation.

The clearest evidence of this interest is to be found in the emphasis placed on the spread and centrality of echo chambers, described as the perverse effect of the multiplication of voices on the net and of the hemophiliac tendencies of the individual. The truth of the matter is that the phenomenon has been considerably overestimated so much so as to overshadow other questions, like the survival/transformation of the public agenda in a high-choice media environment. The adoption of a cross-media research approach after years of exclusive concentration on social media has again raised the question of a convergent public agenda. This article aims to examine afresh the concept of public agenda and to argue that it is still possible to talk about it, albeit in different terms than in the past. More precisely, we think that it is possible to talk about an 'interrelated public agenda,' which can be defined and traced thanks to the use of specific dimensions. Structured in five parts, the article begins by analysing the fragmentation of the media environment in which we are placed today; Section 3 deals with the central role of the public agenda in the study of contemporary political communication; Section 4 with the variables of the 'interrelated public agenda,' i.e., an agenda that is possible to trace in the contemporary context; Section 5 with the dimensions of the 'interrelated public agenda' seen in relation to the challenges to our conceptualisation of the public sphere in a multiplicity of public spheres; and Section 6 ends the article with a discussion of our proposal and some general conclusions about the survival/transformation of the public agenda and public sphere.

2. The Fragmentation of Media Environment

The tradition of studies of agenda-setting has showed how the salience of issues on the media's agenda influences the salience of the same issues on the public agenda: In this sense we can say that the media's agenda set the public's agenda. These studies point out how, at a first level, the media influence the perception of the hierarchy of topics; at a second level, how they structure the public's knowledge of these topics (their salience); and, at a third level, that research on agenda-setting effects point out how media can influence an integrated picture of these attributes (McCombs & Guo, 2014). In this sense, news media play a central role in building a public agenda and in citizen participation in the public sphere.

Although over the years the dominant attention of agenda-setting studies has focused on a particular aspect of its theory—the transfer of issue salience from the news media to the public agenda—in the last decade other research "has expanded to include many other channels of communication–political advertising, conversations, and social media" (McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 2014), observing the new media ecosystem, the impact of the networked media agenda on the networked public agenda, and how this affects the public sphere.

The abundance of communication, typical of the current media ecosystem, stems from the transformations introduced by the Internet and social media, as regards the production, distribution, and consumption of information, and the interconnections between mass media logic and networked media logic (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Various scholars have indicated just how complex and problematic the impact of digital media on a shared public space is. Dahlgren (2005), for example, while welcoming the opportunity to extend and pluralize the public sphere, draws attention to the risk of dispersion and of a cacophony of voices, leading to the inevitable fragmentation of the public agenda and audience. In an essay which has become a classic of media studies, Bennett and Iyengar (2008) have underlined how audience fragmentation, combined with channel proliferation, reduced the opportunities for casual contact with content that is not deliberately selected, and increased the opportunities for consuming content in line with pre-existing attitudes. In short, they recognized the typical ingredients of the fragmentation/polarization phenomenon which, some years later, would be the focus of studies on the fourth age of political communication (Blumler, 2016). This age can be described in terms of the coexistence of: a) a high choice media environment; and b) the fragmentation and multiplication of the means of consuming information. In developing simultaneously, these traits create an effect of centrifugal diversification, producing "a vibrant communicative sphere" (Blumler, 2016, p. 4) more "sensitive" to voices gaining expression, thanks, not least, to the success of the social media. Despite the fragmentation which inevitably ensues, it is still possible, according to Blumler (2018, p. 89), to talk about a "networked public sphere, albeit a rather chaotic one." Thus, while the contemporary public sphere can be considered chaotic, it certainly cannot be assumed that it no longer exists.

The challenge of studying what constitutes the chaos, divergence, dissonance, and disruption of the public sphere has been taken up and reissued by other scholars interested in tracing the transformations of political communication in a high-choice media environment. Bennett and Pfetsch (2018, p. 249) explicitly urge us to focus attention on the fact that "there are many media agendas running through mainstream and niche media and across digital platforms and blogs, which seldom converge in the authoritative power to set the 'public agenda."' This is in line with the recommendation to "analyse online and offline dissonant public spheres and ask how they relate to each other and which functions they fulfill in political communication" (Pfetsch, 2018, p. 63).

Hence, the dissonant elements singled out by many scholars in relation to the public sphere do not necessarily lead to the disappearance of a public agenda or to it simply being replaced by an idea of multiplied agendas, fragmented and unconnected from one another. Rather, the transformations of the public sphere by dissonant and more "sensitive" means than a multiplicity of non-institutionalized actors points to the need to contextualize the idea of public agenda in an "information environment shaped by the behavior of political actors as well as media actors and ordinary citizens, with reciprocal influences on all sets of actors" (van Aelst et al., 2017, p. 6).

It is necessary to bear in mind the characteristics of this media environment and the reciprocal influences among the various actors involved in the production of the public agenda; it is equally important, however, to recognise that "there are reasons to be concerned about increasing fragmentation and polarization, but that this concern needs to be tempered by empirical findings which show that neither the supply nor the demand for biased information is as widespread as is sometimes claimed" (van Aelst et al., 2017, p. 14). The appeal for caution voiced by van Aelst et al. (2017) as to the true extent of the fragmentation and polarization phenomena marks a turning point after a lengthy period in which a sometimes exaggerated emphasis was placed on the spread of forms of communicative self-segregation habitually practised by individuals when consuming political information.

In other words, the real or potential dissonance of the public agenda caused by the abundance of communication—understood as the product of numerous channels, numerous devices, numerous messages, and numerous actors—has often been operationalized as an inevitable proliferation of multiple agendas, unrelated to one another and to the more general context in which they are placed. Thus, instead of considering the public agenda as 'interrelated,' it has been ascribed and confined to the specific communicative environments in which it is created, in a state of isolation and separateness.

3. The Public Agenda between Legacy and Social Media

As many scholars have pointed out, despite undoubted signs of dissonance and disconnection, the public agenda is still central to the study of contemporary political communication. From the earliest studies carried out at a time when blogs had assumed a central role in the public political debate, it was immediately clear that the contents produced by bloggers and those produced by the legacy media were thematically convergent: "The media agenda is fairly stable across news outlets despite growing diversification of information channels" (Kook Lee, 2007, p. 754). This interrelation is further confirmed by Maier's (2010) comparative study of websites news, traditional newspapers, television, and radio.

Communication abundance, with attendant centrifugal diversification, does not appear to be reflected to any significant extent in the information provided by the individual media outlets. Even in the presence of environmental pressures designed to guarantee recognizability within what has been called the marketplace of attention (Webster, 2014), the agenda continues, to a large extent, to be shared, confirming that "the norms that govern the media overall are often more important than what distinguishes one form of media from another" (Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011, p. 33). The existence of shared norms and procedures in the field of journalism tends to promote the convergence of agendas, especially for public events and breaking news (Djerf-Pierre & Shehata, 2017).

The introduction of references to the platform characteristics which determine the outlet's publication cycle does not jeopardize the existence of a common agenda, but confirms and reinforces structuring in terms of "vertical media" (TV news and mainstream newspapers) and "horizontal media" (cable news and websites; Shaw & Weaver, 2014). The same is not true of the introduction of references to the enlargement of the sphere of action of those who can contribute to building the agenda. In the past, one could talk of the interaction of politicians and journalists as a dance, but today it is more complex and produces wholly new dynamics. This is especially true of the social media, a stage on which political actors, activists, backers, and ordinary citizens can champion causes and take stances with a view to gaining greater visibility for certain issues and mustering support. To sense the importance of this, one need only cite the transformation of the information cycles in the interaction between legacy media and social media, detailed so effectively by Chadwick (2013).

It is no accident that this is the research area most favoured by scholars who are as interested in analysing the public agenda as the intermedia agenda, understood as transference of issues salience across media (McCombs et al., 2014). The intermedia agenda approach examines the ability to dictate the issues for the media agenda in its entirety and/or for the individual media outlets (Conway, Kenski, & Wang, 2015). The centrality of the social media, and Twitter in particular, has kindled a keen interest in its agenda-building role, spanning an interlinked continuum which ranges from the top-down dominance of the news media to bottom-up messaging in which the platform influences the agenda power of legacy media, while maintaining a reciprocal relationship (Conway, Filer, Kenski, & Tsetsi, 2017). Beyond the ability of one or another media outlet to set the agenda, the research focus is the convergence/divergence between the agenda of a platform like Twitter and that of the other media. Interest stems from the fact that, given the impossibility of analysing agendas that are privately shared by ordinary users—through platforms like Whatsapp or Telegram or in the networks of relations within Facebook, for example—analysis of the Twitter agenda assumes particular importance. Side by side with the traditional actors like politi-

cians and journalists, Twitter also accommodates common users, activists/supporters of the various parties, organized groups, and so on. From this point of view, it offers an excellent vantage point from which to observe the convergence/divergence of the public agenda. Research carried out to date has revealed (albeit with different emphases and in different contexts) that the general tendency is towards convergence. In the context of the US presidential campaign, Stier, Bleier, Lietz, and Strohmaier (2018) reached the conclusion that the public agenda is still rather integrated, while Kang, Franklin Fowler, Franz, and Ridout (2018, p. 42) detect a "consistency in issue agendas between TV ads and tweets." In a different context from the election campaign, namely one of social mobilization during a debate about civil rights in California, Benkler, Roberts, Faris, Solow-Niederman, and Etling (2015, p. 594) identify and describe the existence of a "networked public sphere" which emerged as an alternative to the traditional media, yet remained interactive with them. Vargo and Guo (2017, p. 1047) place emphasis squarely on complementary interaction between agendas in concluding their research into the agenda of legacy media, news agencies, traditional media websites, online partisan media, and online nonpartisan media, when they state: "We found the network agendas of various media outlets to be highly interdependent, symbiotically networked and homogeneous. Media choices have increased dramatically during the past few years. Yet, the agenda of various media outlets were similar."

This traversal of the main lines of research into the existence or otherwise of a public agenda, following the advent of a high-choice media environment, presents a scenario which contains interesting pointers as to the direction to take in rethinking the very idea of a public agenda today. However fragmented, disrupted, and disconnected it appears, a public agenda is nonetheless still present in relation to the various media outlets.

Significant too is the presence of a cross-media information diet, bearing in mind that only a limited number of individuals admits to a monomedia diet (Dubois & Blank, 2018). The data on individual multimedia diets call for a more comprehensive reading of the public agenda itself than those undertaken in the past. This ought to start by recognising that individuals—though able to select their own contents—have the chance to come into contact with different public agendas. This means that the denial *tout court* of a shared public agenda must be revised, bearing in mind that the individual continues to consume a composite media diet. It is moreover necessary to take into account the interrelations between the various agendas—which do not necessarily tend towards divergence.

It is a question, therefore, of abandoning a simplistic, reductive approach based on artificial distinctions, and adopting one which recognizes numerous and alternative ways of reading the public agenda. These include both individual and aggregative perspectives, which emerge through the relations between various platforms and which, in a nutshell, constitute the present-day expression of information convergence in contemporary society.

4. The Constituent Dimensions of the Interrelated Public Agenda

To recognize that it is still possible to talk about a public agenda in the current media ecosystem implies observing it as an 'interrelated public agenda,' the result of convergent and divergent mechanisms concerning the complex of legacy media, of online information environments (both those closely connected to the offline organs of information and native online news sites) and of social media, in which niche audiences contribute—thanks to their communicative activism—to give visibility to specific issues.

With this in mind, we propose three dimensions in order to describe public agenda interrelations: *horizontality vs verticality*, *the personal vs the aggregative*, and the *dynamic vs the static*. They represent three axes which, in our view, are useful in getting one's bearings among the various mechanisms that generate the agenda. At the same time, the axes: (a) highlight the joint presence of different and problematic elements, communication, and power pressures which ultimately create feedback loops, which make readings of the agenda itself increasingly complex; and (b) generate a continuum within which one has to move, adopting the perspective provided by a cross and multi-platform approach and taking into account communication flows and developments over time.

4.1. Horizontality vs Verticality

Starting with an analysis of the *horizontality vs verticality* dimension entails the immediate introduction of references to the intrinsic nature of the new media system, more and more characterised in terms of relations between environments and less and less able to "converge in the authoritative power to set the 'public agenda"' (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018, p. 249). This new order supersedes not only a public agenda that is built thanks to the exercise of 'authoritative power,' but also a power structure which is no longer reproducible in present-day societies. What in the past was the fruit of a balance of power between members of the political and media elites is today the fruit of direct or indirect interaction with other subjects. Thus, not only the range of voices to be heard in the public sphere has increased (Coleman, 2017), but also the number of those who can build that sphere.

To acknowledge the increase in the number of actors taking part in public agenda building obviously does not mean according all the actors equal roles: A privileged relation in power dealings between political elites and media elites is still clearly discernible, just as Reese (1991) noted years ago. At the same time, however, this

can come under threat from the behaviour of individual subjects—such as online users—who can publicly express opinions and take positions with sufficient force to impact on the existing balance. This can happen through a sort of spontaneous, widespread mobilization or by organising collective action such as sharing and retweeting specific contents. The centrality conceded to social media by journalists and politicians alike amounts to a sort of precondition which holds them in constant tension, in search of expressions of support or possible opposition. Citizens and organised groups are therefore in a position—which does not always materialize but nonetheless exists—to directly influence the building of the public agenda.

Interaction between multiple communication platforms similarly revises existing power relations. Whether it is a question of social media, online news only, or sites of a different kind (the Breitbart site, for example), it is clear that power relations are being redefined. In this respect, the central role still accorded traditional media in deciding the public agenda (Djerf-Pierre & Shehata, 2017) does not fully account for the complexity of the question. In fact, there are more and more cases in which it is the social media and online news sites that are really instrumental in developing a piece of news (Chadwick, 2013). The proliferation of information platforms and the possibility of sharing content through social media makes it impossible today to preserve a power balance, as in times gone by. The verticality of relations, between actors but also platforms and online news sites, belongs to the past, and the power which was once invested in certain media now serves to reinforce and legitimize what is broadcast by other subjects (Harder, Sevenans, & van Aelst, 2017), in a perspective which is horizontal and interrelated.

In this sense, this dimension of the interrelated media agenda underlines the need to put issues relating to the intermediate agenda (as described in Section 2) at the centre of the analysis, in order to explore how new forms of salience of issues are produced, taking into account the temporal propagation between different media agendas and the creation of specific correspondences between agendas.

4.2. Personal vs Aggregative

The *personal vs aggregative* dimension is an analytical dimension which enables us to connect the numerous discussions and agendas produced both online and offline, ranging from those more oriented towards a personal dimension to those shared by a community of interests or by a community in its entirety. In this way, the synthesis at the root of agenda melding—i.e., "the social process by which we meld agendas from various sources, including other people, to create pictures of the world that fit out experiences and preferences" (McCombs et al., 2014, p. 794)—can be extended and also applied to the public agenda, as it is traditionally understood. This dimension is affected by the tension generated in the current media context between media spaces oriented towards personalization and the contexts, including technological ones which facilitate aggregation. We have mentioned how a high-choice media environment like the present one has acted—also from the viewpoint of the editorial strategies of both legacy media and online platforms—so as to orientate the individual among the plethora of choices through the dynamics of personalization. This is particularly true for the digital exploitation of content, of both traditional and native media, which is regulated by algorithms which treat search behaviour and exploitation as data with which to nourish themselves. Previous choices become the premises for future choices, and this occurs in a context of connected social relations where even the choices of another user within the same media environment conditions the situation that the first user encounters.

At the same time, aggregation practices are typical of the digital environment—as in the example of hashtags which blend individual contents into a collective visibility stream. By means of its Trending Topics, Twitter, for example, highlights what the system considers up-and-coming topics, according to a kind of attention ranking which is reminiscent of a media agenda without actually being one. This logic of visibility with a view to being taken up by the mass media system is at the root, for example, of many hashtag activism ventures (Segerberg & Bennett, 2011).

4.3. Dynamic vs Static

Finally, the *dynamic vs static* variable refers us to that fluid area which surrounds the relations between actors, between media platforms, and between the personal agenda and the public. It seems clear, in fact, that it is no longer possible to delimit rigidly the spaces of action and of relation, and that everything is placed in a relational context which changes extremely rapidly. This being so, it is important to orient research towards the relation between media spaces (and agendas) rather than concentrating on single-platform visions. To analyse the Twitter agenda—for example, specific themes dealt with in an aggregated manner by means of a hashtag—means taking account of thematic and discursive relations with other media or considering how other media are introduced to Twitter through sharing, and how these interrelations create an agenda which emerges from what happens on Twitter.

Furthermore, this axis indicates how the processual dimension becomes central in analysing the production of the interrelated media agenda, highlighting, for example, how, in a period marked by websites and online news constantly producing and disseminating information, the interval in which the media influence each other reciprocally is very variable, and while some issues are broadcast instantly others hover for longer on the outskirts of the media agenda and come to the fore later on (Conway et al., 2017).

5. The Interrelated Public Agenda and the "Unity of Difference" of Public Spheres

The dimensions of the 'interrelated public agenda' need to be seen in relation to the challenges to our conceptualisation of the public sphere in a multiplicity of public spheres (Rossi & Boccia Artieri, 2014). This multiplicity, however, needs to be seen in unity, beginning with the various spheres' decisive role from a political perspective, since "empirically, isolated 'public spheres' in time and space are highly unlikely phenomena due to the constantly circulating, flowing and leaking nature of communication" (Rasmussen, 2016, p. 80).

In this sense, public political discourse can be considered a uniform reality which, however, emerges in an increasingly differentiated manner in the context of a process of mediatization (Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011) which features the joint presence of different media environments, online and offline, therefore involving differentiated publics as well as specific groups and subject matters. This position is not at odds with the conviction that we need to go beyond Habermas' model of the public sphere, nor does it clash with the idea of a more complex, dynamic, and multifaceted model which highlights the connections and overlappings of a multitude of coexisting public spheres.

Rather, rethinking the public agenda as interrelated requires the researcher to undertake observations that connect and differentiate at the same time: In other words, to observe a "unity of difference" (Luhmann, 1997) of the public sphere, it is a question of rethinking this "unity in difference" of the public sphere, not so much in relation to the idea that every media platform—whether legacy media or social media—generates its own public sphere as to the possibility to observe 'a' public agenda through the convergences and divergences of the various media agendas, taking convergence and divergence as two aspects of a single form, that of an 'interrelated public agenda.'

Rather than pursue an abstract, decontextualised idea of a cohesive, one-dimensional public agenda, it makes more sense to recognise the fact that today's public agenda is the product of convergences and divergences between media agendas. These can be analysed (see Figure 1) using the three dimensions we have just outlined in relation to emerging levels of the public sphere which tend towards ever more abstract forms of aggregations (Bruns & Highfield, 2016).

These specific public spheres—technological (e.g., blogosphere, Twittersphere) or belonging to specific areas (like the political domain)—represent specific areas—even overlapping ones—within the more general Habermasian public sphere. Therefore, these public spheres do not move away from the idea that there is a current and constant public debate that concerns large audiences, audiences who are interested in a specific topic or deal with it within a specific media context (the blogger is a case in point).

We then find the production of "public sphericules" (Cunningham, 2001), which are formed by the aggregation of individuals around specific themes (e.g., human rights) and can also assume the form of counterpublics (in terms of agenda divergence). These "sphericules" carve out specific issues from more general domains and concern specific interest groups and narrower publics, not necessarily reflecting, nor empirically representing, the discourse of society. These are kinds of "vernacular voices" indicating the rise of a public that generates a discursive arena, an open exchange in a public sphere which has the ability to generate a sense of pub-

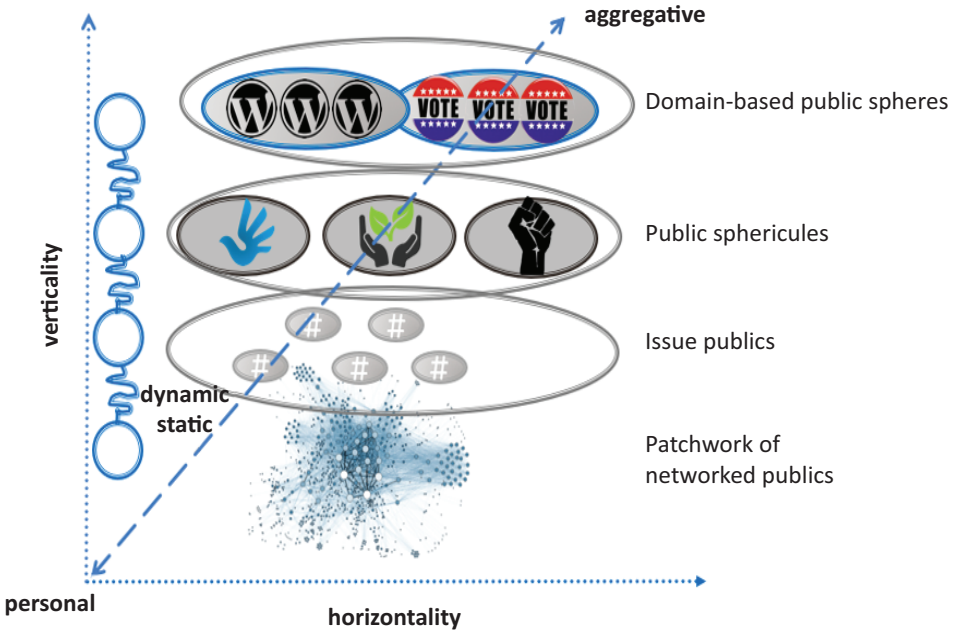

Figure 1. Dimensions of 'interrelated public agendas' and public spheres. Source: Authors composition.

lic opinion (Hauser, 1999). These "voices" are outside of generative power, and this public discourse acts as fine tuning with respect to public opinion as an element of continuous tension in discursive production.

From a more general angle and from the viewpoint of globalization, "they provide a central site for public communication in globally dispersed communities, stage communal difference and discord productively, and work to articulate insider ethnospecific identities" (Cunningham, 2001, p. 135). If we consider "public spherecules" in the context which we have described, marked by the fragmentation of the public sphere and an information environment which complexifies the possibility of producing, distributing, and consuming information, we can observe how aggregation gives rise to a:

> Communal process of gatewatching in which bloggers and citizen journalists identify and link to or directly cite relevant materials as they become available. Through such processes, content is reappropriated and reinserted into the public debate beyond the conventional spaces of the virtual, mass media stage. (Bruns, 2008, p. 68)

At a less abstract level, we find aggregations which emerge day by day around a specific issue and which nowadays find a way (especially on the web and via social network sites) of ensuring visibility—and researchability—for a debate which often peters out in a matter of days and involves a multitude of actors, institutional and otherwise, pressure groups, journalists, etc. In this sense, Habermas (2006) speaks of the emergence of "issue publics" as hubs around which the interest and conversation of a political public is focused. The unpredictability and variable success of the different issues "are influenced by everyday talk in the informal settings or episodic publics of civil society at least as much as they are by paying attention to print or electronic media" (Habermas, 2006, p. 416). In political communication, the practice of highlighting a specific issue by means of a hashtag is symptomatic of this desire to aggregate social media users and give them visibility as citizens holding a particular point of view. And this holds good whether it is played according to the verticality logic—e.g., by politicians imposing a specific hashtag in support of its position—or the horizontality logic, as in the case of hashtag activism when active citizens aim to aggregate other citizens. It needs stressing that individuals contribute to a variety of issues, to the extent that "the overlap of issue publics may even serve to counter trends of fragmentation" (Habermas, 2006, p. 422), suggesting that, in traversing the different issues, rather than the effect of separate echo chambers, one ends up by making them porous and interrelated by the discourses which converge and diverge in relation to themes which are becoming prominent.

A further level of aggregation are the networked publics (boyd, 2010), in which personal and public issues tend to converge and overlap, especially in structuring social networks which mix offline and online and find their most advanced expression in social network sites. In these media spaces, the multitude, the crowd, is transformed into a public, following the principle that every user, at one and the same time, is someone's public and has his or her own public. Agenda building here is a matter of alternating moments of production and consumption, of using private contents—narration, images, videos—to aggregate with public themes, and public contents—newspaper articles, photojournalism, news videos—to emphasise personal preferences and tastes (Boccia Artieri & Gemini, 2019). For networked publics, the combination of posts, sharings, tweets, retweets, stories on Instagram, etc., and the thousands of comments, taggings, and reactions which contribute—through the algorithms—to give visibility to specific contents, merges with contents produced by the legacy media (and which often re-emerge in online spaces) and with face to face conversations, sometimes triggered by those online and sometimes interwoven with those online, since part of the public of every ego-network is made up of people with whom one associates, in various ways, in everyday life. This patchwork of networked publics therefore constitutes the less abstract level—even if supra-individual—where public sphere themes and the various personal media agendas are part of the connecting tissue.

All this produces a need to focus on a complex context of 'interrelated public agendas' held in tension by horizontal and vertical forces, personal and aggregative orientations, and static and dynamic conditions, within a circular intermedia flow which moves between the more traditionally understood public sphere environment, represented by the general media, and the environment of thematic "public spherecules," and from here to the discussion of emerging "issue publics"—also in the wake of those built around online hashtags or communities of interest—before taking account of networked publics in which personal and collective thematic levels are seamlessly interrelated (Figure 1).

The connection flow which stems from this is made up of public themes, of editorial interests vis-à-vis typologies and niche publics, and of forms of direct engagement by the online publics themselves who, in searching for, commenting on, and sharing content and reacting publicly to it, build visible relations between the different agendas and produce retroactive effects at an editorial level.

6. Conclusions

This article has analysed the way in which contemporary political communication is conditioned by an information environment characterised, on the one hand, by increased choice, and on the other by the fragmentation and multiplication of the ways of consuming information. It has also dwelt on the way the consequences of this change have led to the current public sphere be-

ing described in the literature as chaotic, fragmented, and disrupted. But this does not mean that today's 'dissonant' public sphere necessarily entails either the disappearance of the public agenda or a divergent, fragmentary, and multiple public agenda. More in general, as has been shown, studies on the intermedia agenda have highlighted how, in the current high choice media environment, there are strong connections as regards political communication between the legacy media agendas and the social media, and that forms of convergence (more frequent) and divergence (produced in any case by the interrelation of agendas) represent two aspects of the same coin.

In our opinion, the observation of an 'interrelated public agenda' requires us to take account of elements of convergence and divergence from a single viewpoint, adopting a complex analysis model which proceeds along axes that make a continuum visible, in which opposing forces are in a constant, problematic equilibrium. In this sense, we identified three dimensions which are helpful in describing public agenda interrelations.

First, the *horizontality vs verticality* dimension, containing the dynamics of power, generated in a context of political disintermediation through the altered nature of the media system—in the complex relation between legacy media and web 2.0, and between social, institutional actors, and others. Second, the *personal vs aggregative* dimension, which stresses the need to take account of convergences and divergences between personal orientation towards certain issues and the aggregative pressure in different media spaces in which people feel at home: from information consumption via media diets of varying complexity to active participation in the production of content or in public discourse, offline and online. And, finally, the *dynamic vs static* dimension, which points to the need to orient analysis towards the relationship between media spaces rather than focusing on specific spaces, thus helping, importantly, to make up for the current dearth of research in comparison with studies of single platforms. This relational perspective indicates that analysis of agendas and media spaces needs to be angled in terms of *re-fero* (reference to other agendas/media spaces), of *re-ligo* (in connection with other agendas/media spaces), and of the emerging context of the interrelated agenda in comparison with single, specific, aggregate agendas.

The three dimensions proposed: (a) make use of opposing poles as elements to account for the communication and power tensions in producing the agenda; and, at the same time, (b) point to the need to take into consideration a continuum between the poles in order to explain a state of flux.

These dimensions, typical of the 'interrelated public agenda,' can be read in relation to a public sphere model which takes into account fragmentation and disruptive elements, moving from a stratification which highlights the processes at work: This begins with more abstract levels, where we define public spheres in a segmentary manner; it then moves on to thematic "public sphericules" and "issue publics," down to the patchwork of networked publics in which personal and media agendas overlap and interweave.

To adopt this viewpoint therefore involves entertaining the possibility of dealing with the unity of agenda difference by means of a relational and flow-based approach, which makes it possible to bring out the dynamics of divergence and convergence and account for the evolution of the agenda over time. If the concept of agenda melding can be helpful in explaining, at an individual level, the effect/impression of harmony among the various agendas examined, at a systemic level this can be better accounted for by the concept suggested of an 'interrelated public agenda'—i.e., the outcome of the interaction of numerous reading levels. This includes the individual as well as the aggregate dimension, and takes shape thanks to the contribution of several platforms, as well as the numerous and varied logics which govern them. In this sense, the 'interrelated public agenda' is none other than the product of the contributions of numerous actors involved in various ways in the process of public agenda building, in continuous, unavoidable interaction determined by the specificities/peculiarities of the various communicative environments and by the interaction, direct or indirect, of the actors involved. The different public sphere agendas are thus treated as differentiations that operate along the same horizon, highlighting how the differences function within the same context.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Platform Party between Digital Activism and Hyper-Leadership: The Reshaping of the Public Sphere

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Abstract
The so-called crisis of representation has formed the theoretical framework of many studies on media and democracy of the past thirty years. Many researches have highlighted the crisis of legitimacy and credibility of the 'traditional' parties (Katz & Mair, 2018) and communication was considered, at the same time, one of the causes of acceleration towards post-representative politics (Keane, 2013) but also an indispensable tool for re-connecting citizens to politics. Various phenomena have developed within this framework: a) the birth of political aggregations as a result of mobilization in the digital ecosystem; b) the development of digital platforms for democratic participation; c) the birth of parties defined as 'digital' or 'platform'; and d) the growing centrality of digital political activism, both as a phenomenon within the digital communicative ecosystem (also in the context of social media) and as a result of the transformation of social movements. This article studies the role of platform parties as a space for the emergence of authoritarian tendencies (hyper-leadership) but also as an organizational opportunity for the development of new forms of digital activism. In particular, the article presents a research on the use of digital platforms (and their political and organizational consequences) by political parties in Italy, France, and Spain. The study shows the relationships between the evolution of digital ecosystems and the way in which political organization is organised, also highlighting how the new forms of mobilization and aggregation have opened up different yet interconnected public spaces.

Keywords
digital activism; digital ecosystem; platform party; post-representative democracy; public sphere

Issue
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1. Introduction

In this article, we try to highlight the relationships between the development of new organizational forms of politics (such as the so-called platform parties) and digital activism which, in turn, has intertwined both with forms of hyper-leadership (such as occurred in some forms of populism) with the emergence of reticular and horizontal political aggregations. The complex mutations involving the public sphere—to the point that the same expression seems to be declined with different meanings by different authors—are in turn closely interconnected with the now evident centrality of digital communication ecosystems. In this article, we started from the crisis (presumed but nevertheless strongly perceived) of the centrality of political parties in "post-representative politics" (Keane, 2009, 2013) which finds in the communicative ecosystems important actors for activating and speeding up that transformation. We then highlighted the evolution of plebiscitary appeal, closely connected both to the re-emergence of populisms and to the transformation of intermediate political bodies itself: The ten-

dencies towards leadership, the substantial marginalization of activists and sympathizers, and even the development of authoritarian 'leaderism' are elements that distinguish this transformation. The cases of France, Italy, and Spain—despite their respective historical, cultural, and institutional peculiarities—constitute an important territory of analysis. In these countries, in fact, different (sometimes even contradictory) phenomena emerged which are located on the complex ridge of relations between populism, new forms of digital activism, and 'platformization' processes of the public sphere. The relationships between digital parties, platform parties, and networked parties—starting from the three countries analysed—constitute an important test for social and political research. In this scenario, the transformation of the public sphere is considered as a frame element that at the same time impacts the evolution of the political parties—and, more generally, the forms of mobilisation of politics—and is influenced by the transformation of the logic of representation.

2. A Crisis of Party in Post-Representative Democracy?

The repeated use of the term 'crisis of parties' is a key feature of the wider process of transformation of 20th century political forms and, in particular, the protest against the political representation proper of liberal democracies (Keane, 2009; Merkel, 2014, 2018; Tormey, 2015). The growing distrust of the role of political parties is part of the progressive overcoming of party democracy and the crisis of legitimising the forms of democracy in its 'minimal' and 'procedural' version, with the transition to an audience democracy that to a large extent recalls the Schumpeterian theory of democracy (Green, 2010; Körösényi & Pakulski, 2012; Manin, 1997). Within this process of transforming democracy, plebiscitarism marks the overcoming of collective actors as intermediaries of democracy, in fact substantiating the democratic method in the mere possibility for voters to choose, and legitimise by voting, the leaders who govern them (Schumpeter, 2003). The challenges to the representation and role of political parties arise in discussion of the political representation proper to liberal democracies, opening the way for different developments of plebiscitarism, from leader democracy to the most radical forms of populist audience democracy (De Blasio & Sorice, 2018; Urbinati, 2019). In the changing models of representation in the post 'party democracy era,' the electoral dimension alone does not guarantee the legitimacy of democracy but only enables the 'rule of the majority,' underestimating the forms of trust, identity, and political project which comprise democracy. Furthermore, consideration of the different evolutions undertaken by representative democracy has led to hypothesised transformations in which the plebiscite dimension undermines the very foundations of representative democracy, due to the transformation of the same procedural rule of the majority (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018), highlighting the possibility of regression or rupture in democracy's path (Crouch, 2003; della Porta, 2013; Runciman, 2018). The rights of freedom, the rights of participation, the controls on power, the forms of self-government, and the horizontal accountability are in fact necessary conditions to avoid the transformation into defective democracy, in the various forms this can take, and particularly in predicting an illiberal populist democracy and ones with a technocratic or authoritarian nature (Merkel, 2004, 2018; Pappas, 2019). Starting from the de-freezing of traditional cleavage politics, after 1989, the 'hostile' climate towards political parties developed from divergent perspectives. On the one hand, the role of parties in advanced democracies has been contested for the benefit of a post-representative politics, where the intermediation of traditional forms of integration is opposed by a new protagonism from citizens. They do not limit themselves to the election period but monitor the work of institutions, up to taking on the character of a "counter-democracy" based on the power of control, veto, and judgement (Keane, 2009, 2013; Rosanvallon, 2008). On the other hand, parties as interpreters of the plural political conflict are instead challenged in the name of a 'holistic' conception of the political community that coincides with the 'majority,' in a perspective of "direct representation" that is typical of the populist version of democracy (Diehl, 2019; Müller, 2016; Urbinati, 2019). Instead of a rereading of society capable of interpreting and guiding the complexity of the transformation of democracy's social bases, the conditions are created for politicising dissatisfaction with democracy's 'unfulfilled promises.' These mainly concern the tension between democracy as 'an ideal' and democracy as 'a procedure,' the persistence of conflicting interests of multiple social groups instead of a 'monistic' people, the greater impact of the representation of interests compared to political representation, the failure to overcome the elite in representative democracy, the persistence of areas of social and political regulation which democracy has failed to enter, the role of invisible powers, and the presence of cronyism (Bobbio, 1984, pp. 7–8; Müller, 2016, pp. 62–63).

The problem of parties is therefore the broader problem of political representation, since while liberal democracy mainly develops its procedural aspect, the fact remains that governing and regulating do not amount to representing (Tormey, 2015, p. 79) and the perception of this disconnect feeds dissatisfaction with the actors of liberal democracy. On the one hand, there is no possibility of voting for the future, for a society with which people can identify and which legitimises the unequal distribution of power between the governing and the governed. On the other hand, in parallel, the established processes of personalising politics and leadership create the conditions which now result in people trusting new political entrepreneurs, leading outsiders who become the main 'confidants' of the masses and 'interpreters' of criticism of the political system and its establishment. The appear-

ance of a crisis of representation involving political parties is not new in democracy's path and can occur in different cases within the relationship between modernisation and democratisation. During the transformation processes of societies and democracies, ruptures may arise as a result of unorganised masses entering the electoral circuit, in the presence of political and party systems crises, as part of a process of personalization of politics, and finally as a reaction to the cartel parties systems' weakened accountability and responsiveness and power without legitimacy (Roberts, 2015).

In late modernity societies, the progressive weakening of traditional intermediary organizations and the growing personalization of power accompany the processes of redefining the social bases of democracy, the institutional dynamics of redistributing regulatory power to supranational institutions, the multifaceted reality of globalisation, and the development of media influence. This creates the structure of opportunities for leaders and parties that challenge traditional party politics to emerge (Meny & Surel, 2002, p. 21). In this scenario, can parties still be considered indispensable tools for democracy? Or is the political party the redundant burden of a system that has definitively embarked on the slippery slope of post-representation and post-democracy?

Mainstream parties' loss of relevance within the public sphere in advanced democracies (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000; Webb, Farrell, & Holliday, 2002) can be interpreted as a 'crisis' only if the particular balance of organizational models and functions in the period of party democracy is taken as the paradigm for evaluating political forms. The vast empirical data on distrust of parties, the falling number of members, and the increased volatility of electoral choices confirm that the actor-party is irreversibly condemned to lose its central role on the political stage (Dalton, 2004; Mair, 2013; van Biezen, Mair, & Poguntke, 2012). The categories underlying the phenomenology of the crisis of parties ultimately refer to the loss of expressive capacity for parties "without firm social roots" (Poguntke, 2002). The key feature of the debate refers to the changed relationship between citizens and parties, connected to the loss of trust and belonging generated by collective identity incentives. Participation in specific objectives, active involvement based on a system of individual values, and declining identification with parties constitute some of the most relevant challenges to representative democracy. Despite the crisis' broad phenomenology, it could be objected that to date there are no functional equivalents to parties in the capacity to structure political conflict and ensure that democracies function, and this decline actually refers to a type of organization—the mass integration party—while underestimating the capacity to adapt and transform (Dalton, Farrell, & McAllister, 2011). The crisis of parties is therefore attributable to the more general compatibility of partisanship with the forms taken by post-representative democracy (White & Ypi, 2016) and to parties' relevance in the contemporary public sphere regarding the type of functions performed and organizations adopted in transforming the linkage between politics and society.

3. Plebiscitarian Politics and New Political Parties

The relationship between the entities operating in post-integration mass democracies changes, enabling a public sphere to emerge that is no longer colonised by the logic of the party as the only pervasive actor. However, the party itself is part of a civil society ranging from the active role of individual citizens, to new social movements, to a wide range of voluntary non-state and non-economic associations, including the independent media itself (Cohen & Arato, 1992; Habermas, 1990). In this re-opened public sphere, the party no longer holds its hegemonic role, let alone the monopolistic one of "gatekeeper" (Caramani, 2017, p. 59), and within it there also begins a process of differentiating the different intra-party faces comprising the organization (Gauja, 2017, p. 27).

The party becomes a network itself, divests some functions traditionally associated with its internal organization and geographical structuring by organizational-bureaucratic penetration, and maintains the formation of the ruling class, the selection of candidates, and the procedural-electoral part (Gunther & Diamond, 2001). If these functions belong to the organization of the party proper, then there are also a series of associative realities which, though not expressly part of the party's institutional activities, nevertheless fall within the political network that shares a common process of political identification. The crisis of parties is, therefore, more properly a process of transforming the functions they perform in relation to the changing social bases of democracy and the greater relevance that individual political actors assume at the expense of parties and collective identities, with the changing behaviour of voters and elected officials within the political sphere (Karvonen, 2010). The relationship between personalization and politics not only refers to the relationship between voters and leaders but also involves the personalization of leadership and, in particular, the convergence between concentration of power and the relevance of the monocratic leadership within groups and institutions (Blondel & Thiébault, 2010; Garzia, 2014). This phenomenon concerns the leader's autonomy from the party, both in the organizational hierarchy and as a representative of the ruling party, and, finally, the personalization of election campaigns, conducted on the basis of the leader candidate's choices and personality (Poguntke & Webb, 2005). Not only, then, do the erosion of traditional cleavages and the new pervasiveness of mass communication create favourable conditions for disintermediating the relationship between voters and politicians but the entire institutional framework also favours the growth of the leader's role. The resulting process shifts accountability from the collegiate and collective dimension to the individual one, while public resources are simultane-

ously made available to the leader to "invest" in building personal consensus (McAllister, 2007, p. 572; Rahat & Kenig, 2018, p. 129). From the perspective of transforming democracy, these dynamics do not determine the end of political representation, because the personalization of top leadership continues to be embedded in a neo-elitist model of democracy. Here, the power of the elite is replaced by the power of the leader (Higley & Pakulski, 2008; Pakulski, 2012) and the party becomes the tool of the leader (and not vice versa). In other words, it is a process which, starting from the catch-all party, confirms a common tendency for political systems and parties in advanced democracies whereby "the leaders become the party and the party is nothing but its leaders" (Katz & Mair, 2002, p. 126). This democracy, however, remains exposed to the paradox of leader democracy, whereby the personalised leader can count on the legitimacy deriving from the disintermediated consensus, i.e., a growing plebiscitarian tie between leader and electors, but his power is simultaneously weakened by a lower capacity for regulation due to the lost primacy of politics when exercising decision-making power. This picture has radicalised since the 'Great Recession' in 2008, due to the scarcity of resources and the constraints imposed by austerity policies. It has led to national governments weakening further in terms of the nation-state's difficulty in coping with global economic and financial crises and the depoliticisation of spheres of public regulation, especially when attributing decision-making power to non-majority institutions (Raniolo & Morlino, 2017). The picture that emerges is one of political systems where leaders are used up quickly, not only in the event of electoral defeat, but also when they manage to reach government positions. The plebiscitarianism inherent in personalization of top leadership is an expression of a transformed configuration of the political party with its power concentrated in the leader. Here, we can observe the transition from a labour-intensive to a capital-intensive mode (i.e., a decreasing role of membership and a growing role of professional staff in electoral campaigns), verticalized decision-making processes, the declining relevance of middle managers, increased financial resources directly available to the leader, and cronyism developing within the party due to non-top personalization within the organization, especially in locally elected parties (Ignazi, 2017; Musella, 2018). It is precisely in these transformation processes that tensions arise between the procedural dimension of democracy and the increased relevance, trust, and legitimacy borne by individual political interpreters. If, on the one hand, the conditions are created for personalised leadership and the transition from party democracy to forms of leader democracy, on the other hand the leadership tends to see its trust capital rapidly deteriorate. This typology includes different political forms and cannot be traced back solely to the personal party or the party of the charismatic leader (Blondel & Thiébault, 2010; Viviani, 2017). Although the development trajectory of top leadership personalization is not unidirectional, some recurring variables act on it. In particular, it is necessary to consider the effects of the institutional set-up, i.e., all those rules, mechanisms, and institutions that shift centrality from parties to leaders, the effects of the mass media's role in the dual perspective of personalization as a focus on the activities of individual politicians and personalization as "media privatisation," i.e., a shift of attention to their extra-political characteristics, and, finally, the effects of the degree of personalization on political behaviour. This in fact corresponds to the more general personalization of politics, for both politicians and voters (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007, pp. 66–68). In reinforcing personalization, not only do 'exogenous' variables act on parties, but their use of personalised leadership constitutes a 'strategy' implemented by mainstream parties to tackle the deficit of trust. They democratise the procedures for selecting the leader, as in the use of primaries, to counter the discredit and distrust of the political class with the relegitimisation of a leader chosen by a broader selectorate than the party oligarchies, extending participation to the entire potential electorate (Pilet & Cross, 2015).

The prospect of a transition from party democracy to leader democracy calls into question the various forms plebiscite disintermediation can also take in the context of new political entities. Here, the organization of the filter between grassroots electors and membership and elected officials is overcome by substituting a leader who redefines the form of democratic representation and the forms themselves of the new parties. In fact, we are not dealing with a post-representative dimension of politics but are gradually moving away from the aggregation and articulation of interests typical of mass political parties to reach a system where the leader receives authorisation to govern, without the objective of 'representation' but with a free mandate that lets him create the people and move them in one direction, making leadership the very essence of representation (Körösényi, 2005, p. 377). In this sense, traditional political representation is transformed and the representative claim becomes increasingly important, i.e., that made directly by the leader (and the staff supporting his action), whose performance renders him the leading actor and not just a representative agent, moreover, with recognition that is not bound to a pre-established audience (Saward, 2010, pp. 66–67). In the transformation of parties, and even more so in digital parties, the leader plays a central in synthesising and symbolically expressing a social whole that is inherently fragmented and weakly institutionalised. In this sense, the hyper-leader of the digital parties makes use of disintermediation tools of the new and old media, conveying his image and acting as an "external object" that promotes the sense of community and makes bonds of solidarity possible between the group's real and virtual members (Gerbaudo, 2019, pp. 146–147). It is, however, a question of distinguishing the processes of personalization as well as the forms that plebiscite disintermediation takes in the

various challenges facing liberal democracy. On the one hand, as Mair (2002) proposes, the leader democracy cannot be identified as a partyless democracy, which in the name of directism goes beyond parties and produces anti-partyism as a relevant part of a political identity inevitably oriented towards the emergence of a populist model of representation and plebiscite democracy. On the other hand, the leader democracy continues to operate within a representative politics from a perspective of democratic elitism, with representation and delegation concentrated in the leader. Meanwhile, the "constituents," the voting citizens, remain "reactive," in that they can only play a role at election time or through the ability to exercise "eye" control (Green, 2010, p. 125), i.e., as spectator-judges able to observe politicians' behaviour via the media. In this context, the challenges to political representation emerge, now in the form of participatory and decision-making perspectives of democratisation of democracy in the various forms assumed by populism.

4. Populism and Digital Movement Parties in France, Italy, and Spain

In the transformation of advanced democracies, along with the erosion of traditional cleavage politics, a feeling of detachment, distrust, and opposition has gradually developed towards the political class and mainstream parties (Bornschier, 2010; Kriesi et al., 2012). This sentiment can take the form of apathy, with electoral abstention, and protest, with the birth of anti-establishment parties. Due to the ability of cartel parties to maintain institutional and government political 'dominance,' the challenge of a growing anti-establishment attitude has helped a large 'galaxy' of anti-political-establishment parties and populist anti-parties to emerge (Abedi, 2004; Mudde, 1996; Schedler, 1996; Viviani, 2019). The birth of these parties in European societies and democracies refers to the dynamics, on the one hand, of the transformation of mainstream parties into personalised catch-all parties, progressively inserted within state institutions as "public utilities" (van Biezen, 2004) and, on the other hand, to the process which began in the 1960s and 1970s and created a plan for anti-establishment conflict with the new left's New Politics season, the new right's silent counter-revolution, and finally the emergence of New Populism following the 2008 economic crisis and the impacts of globalisation. This process has as its unitary matrix the political crisis of legitimising representative democracies but has nevertheless produced different outcomes not only between Western European democracies and Southern European democracies, but also within the same areas. In the three case studies examined—France, Spain, and Italy—the emergence of new parties responds to variables relating to the political system format, the type of political culture, the type of institutional system and electoral laws, and the effects of the economic crisis from 2008 onwards (Kriesi & Hutter, 2019; Kriesi & Pappas, 2015). This results in different types of new parties, in particular: a) parties of the new populist right—Marine Le Pen's Front National, Matteo Salvini's League, and the Spanish party Vox; b) parties of the new populist left—Pablo Iglesias' Podemos and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's La France Insoumise; and c) anti-party parties like M5S, whose heterogeneous social bases give them the character of a "catch-all anti-party party" and "post-modern and post-ideological (non)party" (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2015; Ceccarini & Bordignon, 2016). As regards the party transformation process and the topic of post-representative politics, the two most relevant cases are Podemos and M5S. Despite their differences in terms of founding moments, the construction of their representative claim, and the type of political culture they express, they nevertheless exhibit some comparable aspects. In particular, both parties can be traced back to movement parties (della Porta, Fernández, Kouki, & Mosca, 2017; Kitschelt, 2006), i.e., networks of groups and individuals who share an identity and pursue social transformation objectives that hybridise with the organised forms of seeking electoral consensus (and power) specific to the parties, implementing a series of participation repertoires which emerge from traditional party procedures, even when they manage to gain access to government positions. As with mainstream parties, personalised leadership is decisive for movement parties, contributing and defining not only their organizational structure, but their very nature. If, in fact, the development of these parties falls within the scope of post-bureaucratic electoral parties, their form of leadership sits in a continuum, the two ends of which are forms of charismatic leadership, from a neo-patrimonial character up to the opposite extreme of movement parties that privilege assembly forms of horizontality from below in the role of spokesman (Kitschelt, 2006, p. 281). With Podemos and M5S, the role of personalised leadership is a unifying trait, albeit for M5S it passed from a phase of the leader-centred party based around Beppe Grillo to fragmentation of the leadership itself, with a leader–guarantor (Grillo), a leader–creator–owner (Casaleggio, father, and later son), and the leader in public office (Di Maio), even without institutionalising the party. Despite the different development trajectories, both parties can be traced back to the 'movement digital party,' not only for the forms of disintermediation made possible by the internet, but also for introducing digital platforms to encourage participatory and decision-making processes. This is particularly true for M5S' adoption of the Rousseau Platform (owned by the Rousseau Association directed by Davide Casaleggio) and Podemos' use of Loomio as an open-source platform. We want to highlight that we use the term 'platform' in connection with a movement party, as a specific development of a party subtype that associates the identity and organizational characteristics of the movement party with the digital platform proper of a connective party (Bennett, Segerberg, & Knüpfer, 2018). It is correct

to remember, however, that the concept of platform has been used in different ways, in reference to:

> (a) the new frontiers of digital capitalism (Srnicek, 2017) as well as the new (and sometimes disturbing) working methods coordinated by algorithms; (b) digital participation architectures, whether they are those adopted in open government procedures or whether they are used as support for deliberative processes; (c) new forms of political organization, as in the case of the digital parties; and (d) the digital reorganization of the state. (De Blasio & Sorice, 2019, p. 5727)

Here we refer to the concept of platform as new form of political organization. Alongside the organizational dimension, the most significant divergences between the two digital movement parties (M5S and Podemos) concern their relationship with political identity and their specific version of populism. In this sense, Podemos is part of the new left parties against austerity, with a populist political strategy (that does not mean it can *sic et simpliciter* be defined a populist party) and a platform of policies attributable to the new radical left (Damiani, 2020; della Porta et al., 2017). In the case of M5S, the change in the party has undergone various stages of development, from its origins as environmentalist movement parties to becoming a 'pure' populist anti-parties party (Tarchi, 2015). Unlike the other populist and anti-establishment parties found in France, Spain, and Italy, M5S is the expression of 'civic populism,' a non-party party that moves in an openly post-representative political dimension. It takes to extremes the power of control, veto, and judgement proper to monitory democracy and counter-democracy, and as such radically overcomes the distinction between the elite and the people by portraying the 'people entering the institutions.'

Observing the new anti-establishment parties found in France, Spain, and Italy from an organizational and identity point of view, different configurations can be identified as developing between populist parties of the new radical right and digital populist movement parties. Nevertheless, these organizations share the same opposition to mainstream parties and also the central role of leadership in defining the political strategy and political identity of the party.

5. Digital, Platform, and Networked Parties

Over the past few years, a broad discussion has developed on the emergence of digital parties or platform parties; on the other hand, the same uncertainty about the use of the two (sometimes overlapping) terms highlights the complexity of the matter. Paolo Gerbaudo (2019) made use of the expression "digital party," also identifying the fundamental characteristics of its organizational pattern; from a different perspective, however, Marco Deseriis (2020) argues for the existence of two different models of platform party. The first one, which is essentially in continuity (although partial) with the parties that preceded it and which innovates through the use of digital technologies for participation; and the second one, appropriately defined as a "networked party", would present the following characteristics: non-exclusive membership, decentralization, leadership function, a bottom-up division of labour, collective agenda setting, hybrid participation, and scalable deliberation (Deseriis, 2020, p. 907).

The relationships between digital technologies for participation and organizational methods constitute a non-secondary aspect in the analysis on the transformation of parties. There are many political parties of different orientations which adopt platforms of democratic participation; significantly, however, the wealth of possibilities for online deliberation remains confined to a few exceptions. It is no coincidence that even the "networked party" model, as described by Deseriis (2020), finds in the "scalable deliberation" one of its qualifying aspects, but, nevertheless, it is quite well applied in marginal political formations, albeit culturally and socially significant. Experiences as the X-Party (which significantly define themselves as a "método para el control ciudadano de las instituciones," that is, a method for the citizens' control of the institutions; Partido X, n.d.) and some national groups framed within the Pirate Parties (namely German, Icelandic, and Swedish) appear very interesting from the researchers' perspective for their connection with the social movements' networks and their capacity to mobilise people through the digital ecosystem. At the same time, they do not have the same political impact as parties such as Podemos in Spain or Five Star Movement in Italy.

The conceptual clash between 'platform/digital party' and 'networked party' is based upon several keywords but it finds a point of clear distinction in the role of leadership and in the two oppositional models of involvement (plebiscitarianism vs collective agenda setting). The differences between a platform party and a networked party, as defined by Deseriis (2020, p. 908) are presented in Table 1.

In other works (see, for example, De Blasio & Sorice, 2020) platform parties are studied as the outcome of a participatory logic even if they emerge as results of the hyper-representation phenomena. In essence, platform parties use technology as an organizational mode and a structural architecture (of a stratarchical type), but only at a secondary level are the participatory platforms used for policy-making procedures and to increase participatory (and scalable) forms of deliberation.

In Figure 1 we have tried to highlight the characteristics of the three party models: from the 'classic' one, the mass integration party as it developed mainly though not exclusively in the area of socialist tradition, to the platform party up to the variant represented by the networked party. According to Marco Deseriis, networked parties:

Table 1. The keywords of platform party and networked party.

Platform Party	Networked Party
Membership growth	Non-exclusive membership
Delocalization	Decentralization
Hyper-leadership	Leadership function
Superbase	Bottom-up division of labour
Plebiscitarianism	Collective agenda setting
Disintermediation	Hybrid participation
Distributed centralization	Scalable deliberation

Source: Deseriis (2020, p. 908).

> Advance a model of digital party that leverages the decentralized affordances of the Internet to make the party line (and the relative division of labor) emerge from the network itself.…whereas the network form is by its very nature flexible, open ended, and receptive to the inputs that come from the social body, the party form is hierarchical, structured, *partisan*, and thus less permeable to the heterogeneity of the social. Whereas platform parties have solved this tension by delegating to their leaders the task of symbolizing the unity of the party, networked parties have bet on the capacity of networks to display emergent and self-organizing properties. (Deseriis, 2020, p. 913)

Both the platform party and the networked party can claim commonality with social movements and their democratic practices of communication. We have to underline, however, that the common place idea, here is that the movements would always be horizontal, without a hierarchical structure and without a leader, by virtue of the fact that they would borrow not only the dynamics of transmitting messages but also the modalities of the adoption of decisions. Following the influential study of Donatella della Porta and Dieter Rucht (2013), it can be useful to remember that in many cases the collective dimension of the protest is organised and staged by an elite group of activists. In our opinion, it is important to underline the difference between the movement parties (della Porta et al., 2017) and direct social action (Bosi & Zamponi, 2019). If the first ones can constitute the background of some platform parties, there is no evidence that the second can represent the source for networked parties.

The studies on platform parties and on its variant of networked parties are the result of a long reflection on the transformation of the political parties, as we have explained in Sections 1 and 2. In particular, we would like to underline that the rhetoric of participation (the so-called "participationism," see Sorice, 2019) has always accompanied the emergence of new organizational forms of

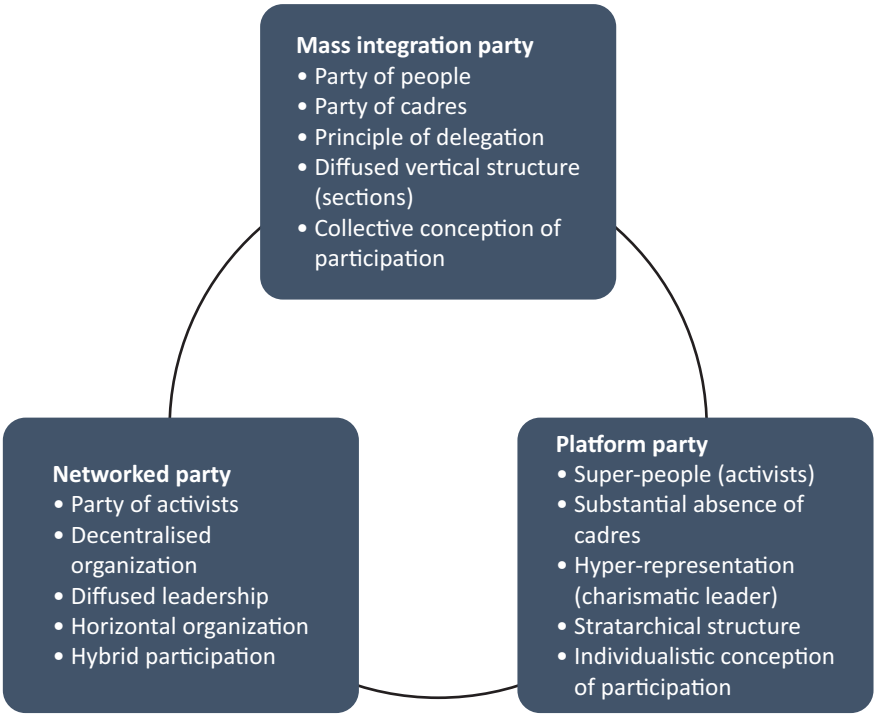

Figure 1. Characteristics of the mass party, platform party, and networked party.

politics, although such rhetoric has been very often reduced to a generic 'openness to society' and programmatically refuses an internal organization based on deliberative and participatory logics. At this stage, the use of a really scalable deliberative practice could constitute an important element of newness in the parties rooted in the use of digital tools and, in many cases, fully framed in the digital ecosystem. Technologies, indeed:

> Respond efficiently to three different tendencies of contemporary politics. In fact, they can: a) influence the organizational models of participation; b) accelerate the processes of deconstruction of intermediary bodies; c) feed the perspective of liquid democracy (a really controversial concept, usually overlapping with that of "delegative democracy"—a merging of representative and direct democracy—based upon the use of digital platforms). (De Blasio & Sorice, 2020, pp. 92–93)

6. Digital Ecosystem, Political Parties, and the Transformation of Public Sphere

In the three countries under examination (France, Italy, Spain), we observed the organization and use of digital tools of parties of different political spectrum. In particular, we investigated the cases of La France Insoumise and La République en Marche (LaREM) in France, Podemos and Vox in Spain, and Five Star Movement and the League in Italy.

The first element to underline is the existence, in some cases, of co-ordinated digital actions, not organised around a participatory platform, that constitute a minority in the total number of technologies employed (except for the cases of Podemos in Spain and Five Star Movement in Italy). The digital tools are usually functional to mobilisation practices and work essentially as elements of support for political communication. Podemos was over time transformed from a party-platform to a party that uses a platform, and this transformation is more evident since the party took responsibility in the national government. Vox presents a traditional organization and many digital tools are used, but they are basically focused on creating consensus and/or promoting mobilisation.

In France, the 'participatory programme' experiments launched by La France Insoumise move from the level of mobilisation to spaces where concrete proposals are developed, and active deliberation processes take place. La France Insoumise, in any regard, cannot be defined as a platform party: it merges together a territorial organization with the use of digital tools. In particular, its 'Platform of Action' is a tool for policy proposal and political debate. The platform gives people the chance to manage their personal agenda and opens a space of engagement for the activist to whom it also offers the possibility to check the eventual action groups with which they are registered. There are also data on current and past initiatives as well as all the reports of the activities being organised. The platform, however, does not present a decision-making space in which participants can vote on programmes; in this aspect, it is very different from the use that the Five Star Movement (in Italy) makes of its platform (Rousseau), which instead presents spaces for the proposal of and voting on specific policies or on organizational aspects of the party's life. From this perspective, if the Five Star Movement can be placed, with some caution, among the "platform parties" (see Mosca, 2018, who states that Five Star Movement should be framed in the area of the "technopopulist parties," and De Blasio & Sorice, 2018), La France Insoumise is a cross between an updated re-edition of the mass integration parties and the 'networked party.' The movement-party LaREM (a renaming of the En Marche movement launched by Emmanuel Macron in 2016 for the Presidential Election of 2017) is another example of cross-over: it presents, in fact, an horizontal structure, strongly decentralised but, at the same time, with a strong leadership and without a specific digital platform of political decision making. The analysis of the LaREM's activists presented by Bruno Cautrès, Marc Lazar, Thierry Pech, and Thomas Vitiello (2019) provides a wealth of information on the '*marcheurs*' and on the party's organization. The recent reorganization of the party's structure at the end of 2019 confirms the idea of a party horizontal in its organization, well rooted in the digital culture, but not proactive in the use of digital platforms. At the same time, it is useful to remember that LaREM has been using a platform-website based upon the 'NationBuilder Tool' (NationBuilder is a web architecture managed by Tectonica, https://www.tectonica.co, a company that uses a technopolitical approach to democracy; see also https://nationbuilder.com/network). It is a collaborative and flexible platform also used on different occasions by the Scottish National Party, the Women's Equality Party of the UK, the Belgian and Norwegian Green Parties, the UK Labour Party, and others.

Table 2 summarizes how the different analysed parties use digital tools. Table 3 shows the use of specific participatory platforms (Podemos' Particìpa, Five Star Movement's Rousseau, and La France Insoumise's Platform of Action).

In Italy, the League is a particular case of a party strongly present on social media, with a great capacity to activate people through the 'news engagement' technique (Giglietto, Valeriani, Righetti, & Marino, 2019), but with a total absence of digital participation structures. From an organizational point of view, the Lega Nord party (Northern League then only Lega—League—since 2018) is connected to a parallel movement, the League for Salvini Premier, founded in 2018, whose structures coincide with those of the party. This situation determines the online presence of two different websites (leganord.org and legaonline.it). At the beginning of 2020, Salvini's movement has put the old Northern League under controlled management, effectively de-

Table 2. Use of digital tools.

Country	Parties	Policy proposals	Mobilisation	Policy making	Decision making	Organizational tool
France	La France Insoumise *	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES
	LaREM	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES
Spain	Podemos *	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
	Vox	NO	YES	NO	NO	Partly
Italy	Five Star Movement *	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
	League	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO

Note: * Use of a participatory platform (see also Table 3).

Table 3. Characteristics of the participatory platforms used by La France Insoumise, Podemos, and the Five Star Movement.

Parties and Platforms	Space for activists	Policy proposals	Procedures for policy making	Deliberative tools	Organization tools	Is platform the only organization tool?
La France Insoumise Platform of Action	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES	NO
Podemos Particìpa	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Five Star Movement Rousseau	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES	NO

creeing its end despite the fact that it continues to exist for issues related to legal problems.

The complex relationships between digital ecosystems and political parties bring about a transformation in the role of parties within the public sphere. The development of platform parties has highlighted the dynamics of fragmentation of representation and the emergence of forms of "direct representation" (De Blasio & Sorice, 2019). In this context, the role of media ecosystems is of fundamental importance for: a) the legitimization of the hyper-leader as hyper-representative; b) building credibility of occasional forms of representation (which only in the context of the media—broadcasting and social media—take on significant social value); and c) the social diffusion of direct representation mechanisms (which exist only by virtue of an exchange activated in the first instance by the media and online political communities). The online public sphere, in fact very stratified, once again constitutes a space of conflict and, in many cases, of manipulation.

The transformation of political parties does not constitute—as is sometimes simplistically said—their dissolution; the emergence of platform/digital parties and/or networked parties and even hybrid aggregations are, if anything, evidence of the transformation of the same dynamics and procedures of political representation. The multiple forms of interaction between movements and parties, as well as the processes of re-politicization through movements, are other evidences of the transformations taking place. In this context, digital activism acts as a modality of reorganization of consensus, development of mobilization, and redefinition of the forms and modes of representation.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Identity and European Public Spheres in the Context of Social Media and Information Disorder

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Abstract
It was expected that the increasing coverage of EU affairs in national public spheres would lead to a greater sense of European belonging. The Internet was expected to foster this process. However, these expectations do not square with the current political climate of identity politics and the revitalisation of nationalism. How can this incongruence between theory and reality be understood? An intervening variable has added an unpredictability to the mix: information disorder. It is our view that this theory needs revising to include other intervening variables such as social media and information disorder. In this article, we argue that the current dynamic of Europeanised political communication is likely to compromise the civic and vertical components of EU-identity.

Keywords
Europeanisation; information disorder; public sphere; social media

Issue
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1. Introduction

Most scholars agree that 'European identity' and the 'Europeanised public sphere' exist in some shape or form (e.g., Risse, 2010). Studies have shown that EU affairs are becoming more salient in the national public spheres that comprise Europe (Eder & Kantner, 2000; Kriesi & Grande, 2012; Risse, 2010). These concepts share three things in common: their definitions are hotly contested; they are understood to be socially constructed; and they are being increasingly co-opted by European studies scholars (e.g., Machill, Beiler, & Fischer, 2006). This is unsurprising given the growing consensus of 'post-functionalism' which posits that further integration is contingent on the general publics' receptiveness to other levels of attachment. However, post-functionalists ignore an elephant in the room: the mass media (de Wilde, 2019). The latter is, after all, the linchpin connecting political actors to civil society. Nonetheless, post-functionalists—and their derivatives—widely agree that 'feeling' a sense of belonging to Europe is axiomatic to the prospects of 'ever closer union.' In recent years, 'politicisation' has entered the academic fold for its normative potential to popularise European affairs and foster transnational communication. Some scholars even claim that the increasingly transnational setting of public spheres and politicisation can foster a European identity (e.g., Eilders & Lichtenstein, 2010). Our article critically evaluates the latter claim which belies the complexities of an increasingly chaotic social world. We therefore urge scholars to consider the phenomenon of online 'information disorder' on social media, which we argue, has a destabilising effect on the transnational public spheres' functioning and ergo post-national identity formation.

2. The Concept of European Identity and the European Public Sphere

2.1. European Identity

In its broadest sense, European identity means a sense of attachment to Europe which is understood either as a cultural, geographical, and/or political entity. This is an uncontroversial definition, but it still tells us little about the concept's intensionality. As with most concepts, things get complex as one descends the ladder of abstraction. European identity is a widely contested and elusive concept, and endeavouring to define it in a few lines would belie its complexity. We therefore focus on the concepts common-denominator dimensions. Bruter's (2003) distinction between civic and cultural components is an instructive starting point. The former is understood as "the degree to which they see themselves as citizens of a European political system, whose rules, laws, and rights have an influence on their daily life" (Thomassen, 2009, p. 188). The latter "may be defined as an individual citizen's identification with a particular social group" (MacMillan, 2013, p. 59). Cultural identity can be constructed inclusively in terms of universal or cosmopolitan values, or exclusively through (sub-)nationalistic or 'Fortress Europe'-type frames. Generally speaking, cultural identity is more prone to exclusivity as culture is habitually understood as an autochthonous set of norms, behaviours, and practices. On the contrary, civic identity is generally more receptive to 'outsiders' as the latter can adopt the laws and institutions of the host identity. Moreover, citizenship can, in theory, be legally amended to accommodate 'outsiders' and culturally heterogenous groups. EU citizenship is a paradigmatic example of the latter. In light of studies from social psychology, individuals tend to identify both with their nation, first and foremost, and the EU, secondly, when the latter's civic or cultural identity is congruent with their national identity. Conversely, when the EU and the nation are constructed incompatibly in respect of laws, institutions, goals and values, exclusive identities become more likely (Wenzel, Mummendey, & Waldzus, 2007).

In order to delimit the scope of our argument, we distinguish between vertical and horizontal identity: the former consists of dually identifying with one's nation and the EU, whereas the latter consists in identifying both with one's nation and other European countries or Europe as a whole. However, these horizontal and vertical identities are not mutually exclusive. In fact, politicians and the mass media generally use the terms 'EU' and 'Europe' interchangeably. Pro-Europeans tend to equate EU-scepticism with the lack of identification with Europe; however, it is logically conceivable to hold anti-EU sentiments and still 'feel' European in the horizontal sense. We argue that the current dynamic of Europeanised political communication is likely to compromise the civic and vertical components of EU-identity. A caveat is in order: Civic and cultural identity are not mutually exclusive and may overlap. Indeed, we even countenance the possibility of national cultural-identitarian frames adversely affecting civic attachment to the EU whilst leaving 'Fortress European' identity intact. The bottom line is identity is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon, particularly when levels of attachment beyond the nation state are considered. We therefore delimit our argument to the civic dimension as previous studies (see Bruter, 2003) have demonstrated that EU news predominantly affects the civic components of identity, and EU news coverage largely manifests as a vertical constellation of national actors addressing EU-level actors (Koopmans & Statham, 2010).

2.2. European Public Sphere

As with identity, the Europeanised public sphere is a conceptual black box. Trenz (2008b, p. 278) broadly defines the Europeanised public sphere as a "process that enlarges the scope of public discourse beyond the territorial nation state." Although scholars disagree on its normative dimensions, most scholars agree on what Europeanised public sphere's look like. A panoply of different adjectives have been iterated to describe the public sphere: 'fragmented,' 'anarchic,' 'differentiated' (E. O. Eriksen, 2007), 'heterogenous,' 'agonistic' (Mouffe, 2007), 'pluralistic' (Sicakkan, 2012), 'polymorphic,' 'polyphonic' (Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007), and so on. The common denominator of these superlatives are the public spheres' lack of uniformity and unitarity. It is widely accepted that all public spheres have historically fallen short of their normative ideals. For example, when judged against the normative benchmark of inclusiveness and accessibility, we can confidently assert that the 18th century 'bourgeois public sphere' (the '*bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit*' in German) never existed, as women and the working class were largely disenfranchised from participating in public debates. However, many concepts exist along a continuum from minimum to ideal-type requirements. 'Europeanisation,' 'democracy,' and 'public sphere' are three apposite examples. Our argument is thus predicated on an empirical understanding of the deliberative public sphere model. Based on the findings from psychological and media studies on information consumption and processing, we countenance an agonistic and irrational model of the public sphere. An ideal public sphere presupposes respectful debate thereby leading to rational assessment and the internalisation of information. However, this does not necessarily materialise in actual discourse, particularly regarding the framing of European identity. Moreover, recent studies—examining how humans process and internalise information—reveal an individual's proclivity to modify newly acquired information in order to reinforce pre-existing beliefs (Southwell, Thorson, & Sheble, 2017). However, we acknowledge that a normative checklist is necessary prior to establishing if the phenomenon in question exists. We therefore turn our attention to the

minimum normative requirements of the Europeanised public sphere.

A Europeanised public sphere should contain the 'same issues' (what Medrano, 2003, calls '*thematische Synchronizität*') at the 'same time' (Eder & Kantner, 2000) and employ 'similar aspects of relevance' (Adam, 2012; Eder & Kantner, 2000; E. O. Eriksen, 2007; Lindner, Korthagen, & Aichholzer, 2018), that is, "with similar frames of interpretation but not necessarily with the same opinions" (Kantner, 2015, p. 87). However, these conditions are not sufficient in themselves, as the 'parallelisation' of national debates can still suffice without the spherical levels 'interacting' or 'overlapping' with one another (Nitoiu, 2013; Wessler, Peters, Brüggemann, Kleinen-von Königslöw, & Sifft, 2008). The Eder–Kantner formulation lacks the dimension of 'communicative linkages' between speakers across different spherical levels (Koopmans & Statham, 2010; Pfetsch, 2004). This has led some scholars to insist on "discursive interchange" (Adam, 2012) or "increasing mutual interconnections between national public spheres" (Brantner, Dietrich, & Saurwein, 2005, p. 8). Europeanisation is understood as a bi-directional process which implies a continuum from minimum (i.e., visibility of EU actors and interconnectivity) to optimal conditions (i.e., references to a common identity, the same frames of references, rational debate, etc.). At a minimum, the first three conditions should be satisfied to be able to talk meaningfully of a Europeanised public sphere. The last requirement, however, distinguishes 'Europeanised national public spheres' from 'nationalised public spheres' reporting European issues more frequently.

With the above in mind, a logical next step is to establish whether a Europeanised public sphere exists in some shape or form. In regard to the first two requirements (see above), several studies have detected '*thematische Synchronizität*' across national public spheres (Eder & Kantner, 2000; Kriesi & Grande, 2014; Risse, 2010; Trenz, 2008b). Concerning the third requirement, it has been consistently demonstrated that—as far as newspapers (Bossetta & Segesten, 2019; Koopmans & Pfetsch, 2003; Pfetsch, 2004), television (Brantner et al., 2005; Grill & Boomgaarden, 2017) and social media (Hänska & Bauchowitz, 2019) are concerned—national public spheres are embedded within a larger European network of communication. It is less clear whether the fourth condition has been satisfied although most studies conclude that there are converging 'structures of meaning' across national media arenas (Bärenreuter, Brüll, Mokre, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2009; Bossetta & Segesten, 2019; Eder & Kantner, 2000; Kantner, 2016; Risse, 2010, 2014). The most notable critics of this view are Medrano and Gray (2010) and Statham (2007) who found discernible cross-national differences in how the EU is represented. We can tentatively conclude, in light of a review of the literature, that a thin veneer of Europeanisation exists, notwithstanding the fact that national public spheres are still heavily embedded in national communicative structures. We therefore doubt the suppositions of deliberative scholars who claim that the current setting of Europeanised public spheres are conducive to forging a European identity.

3. The Public Sphere and Identity in the Digital Age: Theoretical Background

One thing most scholars can agree on is public spheres affect identities in some shape or form. Social constructivism is currently the dominant paradigm on approaches to identity (E. O. Eriksen, 2007; Heller & Rényi, 2008; MacMillan, 2013). Communication scholars have underlined different aspects of communication as crucial to the congealment of identity, such as: 'discourse' (Fearon & Laitin, 2000; Wodak, 2007); 'narratives' (Eder, 2009; Loseke, 2007; Scalise, 2013), and 'deliberation' (Dewey, 1927; Risse, 2014). Scholars such as Derrida emphasise the performative and enacting quality of discourses (Derrida, 1988). In a similar vein, Delanty posits that social identity is sustained by what he calls 'dialogic identity' (Delanty, 2005). Despite their subtle nuances, most constructivists agree that identity is (re-) produced through media communication. The media are not mere purveyors of the news; they determine what is reported (i.e., 'gate-keeping') and how it is reported (i.e., 'agenda-setting') through a panoply of framing devices such as 'valence,' 'sentiment,' and 'issue-framing' (de Vreese & Kandyla, 2009; Schuck & de Vreese, 2006; Van Cauwenberghe, Gelders, & Joris, 2009). The media largely determine what kinds of narratives (Eder, 2009), deictic constellations, and symbols dominate the public sphere (Billig, 1995). Furthermore, editorials render the media as political entrepreneurs in their own right (Voltmer & Eilders, 2003). The role of the media is even more decisive in a European context as most people can only obtain information about Europe through them. As Risse pithily remarks, "the [European] public sphere is what the media make of it" (Risse, 2010, p. 115).

With social constructivism firmly in the driving seat, scholars have shifted their attention towards the public sphere which is regarded as the locus of national identity formation (de Wilde & Trenz, 2012; Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2010; Sicakkan, 2012). There is a rich body of scholarship that underlines the co-constitutiveness of national identity and the public sphere. Bauer (1881–1938) was probably one of the first scholars to establish the link between communication and national identity. He argued that the nation was a "community of fate" ("*eine Schicksalsgemeinschaft*" in German) engaged in "general reciprocal interaction" (Bauer, 2000, as cited in Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007, p. 70). Similarly, Deutsch posited the theory that national consciousness emerged through strongly bounded patterns of social interaction: "People are held together 'from within' by this communicative efficiency, the complementarity of the communicative facilities acquired by their members" (Deutsch, 1966,

as cited in Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007, p. 70). Public spheres were crucial to the construction of a nationally 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983) through "technically reproduced print languages [that] have unified fields of linguistic exchange, fixed national languages and created idiolects of power" (Anderson, 1983, as cited in Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007, pp. 70–71). Habermas originally conceived of the '*Öffentlichkeit'* as a figurative space located within national boundaries (Habermas, 1991). For him, the public sphere went hand in glove with the rise of the nation state. According to Billig's theory of 'banal nationalism,' nationhood is frequently flagged through the reproduction of national symbols and re-iteration of deixis (i.e., words such as 'our,' 'we,' 'here,' 'this,' 'the nation') that "continually point to the national homeland as the home of the readers" (Billig, 1995, p. 11). Other scholars have underlined the importance of the mass media in crystallising a national consciousness (Cohen, 1994; Gellner, 2006).

However, scholars agree less on whether Europeanised political communication can help forge a European identity. Nonetheless, there are several proponents of this theory (Hennen et al., 2020; Pfetsch, 2005; van Os, 2005; Wodak, 2007). For instance, Eder (2009) argues that European identity emerges through the sharing of European narratives. Risse posits that European identity emerges out of contestation in the Europeanised public sphere: "Debating European issues as European questions…is likely to increase political identification levels with the EU" (Risse, 2014, p. 156). Even the face of neofunctionalism, Haas (1958), envisaged the "shifting of loyalties, expectations and political activities toward a new centre" (i.e., European identity) through socialisation processes in which economic and political interests would converge (Haas, 1958, p. 16). Other scholars underline the importance of 'mediatised discourse' for the congealment of European identity and empirical evidence is aplenty (Olausson, 2010; Scalise, 2013; Triga & Vadratsikas, 2018; Valentini, 2006). For example, Koopmans and Pfetsch (2003, p. 30) conclude that German quality newspapers "emphasise the collective identities, norms and values that Europe should stand for." Trenz carried out a study into framing concluding that journalists tend to see Europe through a European pair of glasses (Trenz, 2008a). Van Os (2005) identified a general feeling of belonging to Europe among French political parties. Similarly, Van Cauwenberghe et al. (2009) detected thematic synchronicity in EU news coverage across national public spheres. However, one should bear in mind that there is a notable selectivity-bias in the newspapers chosen with tabloids largely neglected from analysis.

Where does the Internet fit into the debate? Before the turn of the millennium, most scholars assumed that the Internet would herald an era of global governance, universal cosmopolitanism, and the rise of post-national identities. McLuhan's (1964) cliché of the 'global village' was the academic watchword, and scholars were optimistic about public spheres' identity-making function. This position is intuitively appealing: In theory, cyberspace is a boundless, de-territorialised infrastructure of communication, and the Internet has dramatically reduced transaction costs of cross-border communication. And, research on social movements has demonstrated the capacity of the Internet to foster transnational identities (Della Porta & Mosca, 2006). Nonetheless, these expectations do not square with the current political climate of identity politics and the recent revitalisation of nationalism. A combination of increasing politicisation and information disorder on the Internet calls for scholars to re-evaluate the ostensibly linear relationship between the public sphere and identity.

4. The Europeanisation of Public Spheres and the Thin Prospect of a European Identity

4.1. The Re-Structuring of Political Conflict and Identity

In our view, the relationship between the public sphere and European identity has been overstated. Implicit to the 'Euro-optimistic' standpoint (e.g., Bruter, Risse) is the assumption that transnational political conflict would replicate the left–right contestation seen within national democracies. However, these assumptions do not sit comfortably with the 'transnational/integration-demarcation' cleavage theses (Hooghe & Marks, 2017; Kriesi & Grande, 2006, 2008). To put it crudely, the latter assumes that cultural-identitarian conflicts would prevail over economic-utilitarian ones. Recent empirical evidence lends support to these assumptions. Kriesi and Grande (2012) found that identity has become the most effective political mobiliser of this 'integration–demarcation' cleavage. A corollary to the preceding point is to consider what is being contested. Bartolini and Hix (2006) distinguish between two types of contestation: 'isomorphic' and 'constitutive.' The former relates to European issues that closely mirror national issues (e.g., tax reform, welfare policy). Contestation of this kind is typically structured along the left–right dimension which is considered normatively desirable because of its potential to foster transnational left–right coalitions of 'collective action' beyond the nation state (Habermas, 2012). In contrast, constitutive contestation poses questions that strike at the heart of the polity (e.g., questions relating to membership, treaty change, geographical boundaries of the Union etc.). In short, isomorphic contestation challenges policy and constitutive contestation challenges polity. It is difficult to imagine the emergence of a 'thick' European identity in the context of constitutive contestation. The latter is more susceptible to polarising binary categorisations (e.g., 'In/Out' or 'Remain/Leave') as they tend to provoke questions of group membership (i.e., EU membership of Turkey). In contrast, contestation on isomorphic grounds invokes a range of opinions which cannot be easily placed into two opposing camps: Indeed, our assertion appears vin-

dicated as the left–right dichotomy is beginning to lose some of its explanatory power in predicting electoral trends. It does not follow that isomorphic contestation is not susceptible to polarisation, but we suspect constitutive contestation is more ideologically charged as it tends to elicit questions that touch on the highly emotive question of 'who we are?' (i.e., group membership). And, as Marks and Hooghe (2003) implicitly argue, the prevalence of constitutive contestation is indicative of deficient levels of support for a polity. By the same token, ideological contestation along the left–right dimension only tends to dominate when the boundaries of a polity are accepted (Marks & Hooghe, 2003). Interestingly, previous studies indicate that Eurosceptic parties tend to focus predominantly on the constitutive issues of membership (Christensen, 1996; Taggart, 1998). This is unsurprising given that the jurisdictional boundaries of the EU are still uncertain. Nonetheless, scholars are right to point out that contestation per se is not necessarily equivalent to being anti-EU (think of 'Euro-criticism') and contestation can be, democratically speaking, normatively desirable (Follesdal, 2014). We expect, however, the predominance of constitutive contestation to adversely affect EU support, and ergo a civic sense of belonging to the EU.

4.2. Identities: Inclusive, Exclusive, or Both?

A common denominator of the Euro-optimistic view is conceiving of multiple and inclusive identities. Whether scholars understand multiple identities as 'hierarchical' (i.e., a 'Russian doll,' e.g., national first, Europe second) or 'intertwined' (i.e., a 'marble-cake,' e.g., the enmeshment of national and European identity), most scholars agree that identities are inclusive (Bruter, 2005; Citrin & Sides, 2004; Marks, 1999; Medrano, 2003; Medrano & Gutiérrez, 2001; Risse, 2010). Several studies suggest that high levels of national identity are also consistent with strong EU support (cf. Citrin & Sides, 2004; Marks & Hooghe, 2003). Eurobarometer surveys have shown that a dual sense of attachment to both the nation and Europe has increased, albeit modestly. This has led to the assumption that the increasing salience of one identity (national or European) in the public sphere would not adversely affect other levels of attachment. However, identities are (re-)produced in many ways and there is no logical reason why this cannot apply to identities of an exclusive kind. In fact, several studies have shown that the Internet is a seedbed for the production of exclusive virtual communities. The kind of identity that is constructed in the public sphere has implications for European integration. A study by Marks and Hooghe (2003) has shown that people who hold an exclusive national identity are less likely to support and identify with the EU (Anderson & Kaltenthaler, 2001; Deflen & Pampel, 1996; Klingeren & Boomgaarden, 2014). The effect is even stronger in countries where EU integration has become politicised (Marks & Hooghe, 2003). Furthermore, identities are more likely to be conflictual if national identity is framed in cultural instead of civic terms (Smith, 1992). And socioeconomic factors (e.g., economic decline, migration, etc.) are likely to amplify the effects of exclusive-identity framing, making national identity come into conflict with European identity (Cinpoes, 2008). In sum, a combination of exclusive-cultural-identity framing, politicised European debates, and a deteriorating socioeconomic situation, are likely to disrupt the EU integration process. Where does the Internet fit into the triadic relationship between public spheres, politicisation, and identity?

The Internet is likely to foster politicisation for two reasons. Firstly, politicisation, by definition, opens up conflict to new actors (de Wilde & Leupold, 2015) who have easy access to new mediums of communication in which to participate in debates. Secondly, the Internet is expected to increase polarisation. The Internet is largely unmediated thereby creating a fertile environment for the permeation of divisive discourses. This has enfranchised new voices, many of whom are no friends of European integration. Social media has been found by one study to strengthen the Eurosceptics hand. There is no a priori reason why they should benefit but they have done (TNS Global, as cited in Cerulus, 2015). Moreover, a plethora of studies have shown that the Internet reinforces—or at least, reflects—ethno-cultural identities and can rouse nationalism (Barisione & Michailidou, 2017; Derman & Ross, 2003; Koopmans & Zimmermann, 2003; T. H. Eriksen, 2007). According to several studies, national identity (Miller & Slater, 2001) and nationalism (Caiani & Parenti, 2009; Gidişoğlu & Rızvanoğlu, 2011; T. H. Eriksen, 2007) are thriving on social media (Barisione & Michailidou, 2017). As Diamandaki puts it, "the Internet—a placeless medium—allows for the (re)creation of place…[cyberspace is] another archive, mirror, and laboratory for the negotiation of national and ethnic identity" (Diamandaki, 2003, pp. 3–4). Without explicitly addressing the public sphere and identity debate, these studies contradict the notion of the Internet as a 'global village.' Notwithstanding this, we acknowledge that it is probably too hasty to jump to the conclusion that the Internet serves to embolden national allegiances of an exclusive kind (Gidişoğlu & Rızvanoğlu, 2011; T. H. Eriksen, 2007). There are several caveats: Firstly, participation in cyberspace still represents a fraction of civil society, and questions can be raised about the generalisability of these findings beyond the cases studied; secondly, we cannot demonstratively claim that a collective identity would emerge or whether they merely reflect pre-existing identities emanating from a negligible minority; lastly, assuming that online communities foster offline identities, we cannot confidently assert that these identities would be of an exclusive kind as offline interactions might override these sentiments. Only time will tell if the increasing use of the Internet will foster post-national identities or dismantle the 'global village.'

4.3. Europeanised National Public Spheres: The Current State of Play

Most scholars have settled on the notion of the 'Europeanisation of national public spheres.' In other words, Europeanisation takes national public spheres as starting points for the emergence of European identity. Most scholars accept that some modest form of Europeanisation is taking place within national publics spheres, particularly, in terms of increasing EU coverage and converging frames of reference. However, it would be a speculative to assume that a European identity would emerge on this basis. The media are heavily embedded in national institutional structures. As a result, EU news is reported with a heavy national accent. Indeed, several studies support this claim, most notably, Medrano's study (2003) which shows the dominance of national frames (see also Bijsmans & Altides, 2007). This has led some scholars to describe the Europeanised public sphere as nationally 'segmented' (Wessler et al., 2008). The Internet does not seem to alter this dynamic. Even in cyberspace, studies have shown that these spaces are nationally embedded (Barisione & Michailidou, 2017; Koopmans & Zimmermann, 2003). In short, both online and offline spaces tend to tell European stories through a national filter.

The logic of mass-media reporting means that there is little prospect of national frames disappearing in the foreseeable future. The media are institutionally and culturally structured along national lines; therefore, they are hardwired to evoke national identity and frame stories in ways that appeal to national audiences. With reference to news value research, we can begin to understand why national frames persist. The media scholar (Schulz, 1982, as cited in de Wilde, 2019, p. 1196) proposed four criteria which determine 'newsworthiness': valence (i.e., controversy, aggression, success, values); identification (i.e., ethnocentrism, emotions, personalisation); relevance (i.e., concern, consequence, proximity); and status (i.e., elites, leaders). As national media outlets mainly cater to national audiences, the former are likely to evoke national identity as it is the most salient identity to the reader/listener. Indeed, one study has shown that the 'we' tends to be the nation (Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2010). Mass media are more likely to report on national executives (status) and domestic actor/issues (relevance) that the reader can relate to. Eurosceptic actors are also expected to receive a disproportionate level of attention because they tend to fuel controversy (valence). De Wilde (2019) rightly argues that these criteria should also apply to politicians given that their political claims propensity to resonate with wider audiences largely hinges on the mass media. Identity-politics can thus be understood as a logical and successful media strategy as political claims that lack an identitarian component contain less news value. This has led de Wilde (2019) to hypothesise that increasing media coverage of EU affairs could actually strengthen national identities. He convincingly argues that media logic functions to empower what he calls 'discursive intergovernmentalism,' that is, the media portraying the EU as a zero-sum game between nations rather than a project of common endeavour. In short, the mass media are likely to be an impediment to a consolidated Europeanised public sphere and ergo European identity (de Wilde, 2019).

Public spheres are highly fragmented, and this applies to the local, national, and European level. This implies that public opinion and will formation are also fragmented. The EU consists of 27 nation-states containing their own nationally structured and culturally embedded news outlets speaking different vernaculars. 'Europe' is constructed differently within and across countries and varies according to the type of medium and media outlet. It is not unreasonable to claim that Europeanised public spheres are probably even more fragmented than national ones as there are over 27 different national 'narrative networks' (Eder, 2009) to reconcile. And, recent evidence suggests that there is little prospect of national cleavages coalescing into transnational coalitions of collective action. In contrast, national public spheres possess the legitimising glue of national identity and pre-existing cultural, political, and media institutions to bind these fragmented narratives together. Moreover, previous research has shown that negative valence of the EU and national indexicality are more prevalent in 'tabloid' vis-à-vis 'quality' newspapers (Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2010). In contrast, quality newspapers are more likely to adopt European frames of reference and support European integration (Trenz, 2008a). These differences have contributed to the social stratification of support for European integration as poorer and uneducated people are the tabloids main market. The importance of social class as a predictor for EU support is well-known in the scholarship on public opinion. This fragmentation has culminated in a discernible mismatch between elite perceptions of Europe and the general public (Medrano, 2009).

5. Information Disorder: A Disruptive Factor of the Public Sphere?

Epistemological inquiries into the nature of knowledge and truth, and human comprehension thereof, are as old as time. Yet it seems recent political events such as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump have brought the importance of truth in public discourse to the forefront. Since then, the study of 'information disorder' has become a burgeoning field of study. Information disorder is the trinity of 'disinformation' (i.e., the deliberate intent to spread false information), 'misinformation' (i.e., the accidental spreading of false information) and 'malinformation' (i.e., true information spread with the intent to cause harm; Corcoran et al., 2019). The observations we made earlier—namely, the rise of identity politics, increasingly politicised European debates, and the non-actualisation of a strong European identity—can be

partially attributed to disruptive information. Claiming that the process of communication is imperfect is not a novel assertion, but some of the recent scholarship on how 'information disorder' can disrupt discourse and democracy, may help to explain why a strong European identity has proved elusive. These studies highlight that the manner in which people acquire, process and store new information, does not appear to be congruent with the congealment of a European identity.

Much of the scholarship on information disorder revolves around social media. Though there are many potential components of a digitalised public sphere (news websites, blogs, vlogs, instant messaging apps), the three major contemporary social media networks (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) weigh heavily on both polemics and research of contemporary media influence. This may prove to be an overestimation, but in an assessment of a potential Europeanised public sphere, the impact of social media should not be overlooked. Social media have the potential to foster transnational communication; their influence and embeddedness with traditional media, and their widespread adoption as an instrument of political communication (Klašnja, Barberá, Beauchamp, Nagler, & Tucker, 2018) make them crucial to the emergence of transnational identity. Of course, the popularity of utilising social media for 'information campaigns' (which target the EU) is a decisive factor as well (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019); the latter can be regarded as one of the main compounding factors for the Europeanised public spheres' woes. This is where the dichotomy of the 'EU' and 'Europe' becomes important. Travelling and having friends abroad can significantly shape one's attachment to 'Europe,' but it is the 'EU' that has been, and still is, a major point of contention in the process Europeanisation.

False narratives have been part of the discourse on the EU for decades, but social media in particular have the potential to be influential in this regard. It remains an open question whether media actually have any influence, in general, and social media, in particular. This article has already ascribed a modest role to traditional media in fostering Europeanisation. In a similar vein, recent studies on the effects of disinformation in the European elections and the 2016 US Presidential elections are cautious in overstating the influence of disinformation on social media (Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Fletcher, Cornia, Graves, & Kleis Nielsen, 2018). This, thus, begs the question: Why would social media and information disorder be deemed potentially pernicious to the congealment of a Europeanised public sphere? Because information disorder has the potential to unravel the social fabric and weaken the social capital of the public sphere itself by casting doubt on the existence of truth and accountability. Though the peddling of false narratives in traditional media cannot be excluded, editorial responsibility and journalistic standards, at least, ensure minimum levels of accountability which are not present in social media. As Klinger and Svensson (2014) have argued, social media follows a different logic than traditional media. Direct links between content creators and their audiences are made possible, and even encouraged, since popularity increases the visibility and resonance of content. Social media logic gives precedence to virality over factuality, which can prove disruptive when the topic of discussion is something as complex as the EU. There is the danger of emotive language and simplified narratives predominating.

Social media utilise cognitive principles with quick and short messages that often contain more emotionally charged content than traditional (news) media. Social media's reach may still not be as big as the latter, but their influence is growing. The EU is aware of information disorder's pernicious effects on the media landscape, as demonstrated by the many fact-checking initiatives it supports, such as EUvsDisinfo. In spite of these efforts, countering information disorder with facts has not proven sufficient to negate false narratives (de Cock Buning et al., 2018). However, studies have shown that informing people of the existence of manipulative and false information makes them better equipped to identify false narratives (Roozenbeek, van der Linden, & Nygren, 2020), suggesting that it is not all doom and gloom for contemporary public spheres. Research has shown that negative information travels faster and further, which is more commensurate to the strategies and frames used by Eurosceptic politicians and the media (Balahur, Flore, Podavini, & Verile, 2019). Moreover, the complexity of European politics and the potential economic benefits deriving from membership do not necessarily translate into appealing and acceptable media content. Compounding matters is the EU's constitutional and organisational complexity which makes it more vulnerable to misunderstanding and thus to misinformation. Combined with the human propensity to retain the first information that one consumes on a given topic and heuristics that favour modifying new information to fit pre-existing beliefs (Southwell et al., 2017), one could argue that there is a home advantage for national identity over the more abstract and nascent European identity. With the above in mind, information disorder should be considered as an inherent part of the Europeanised public sphere since both the spread and processing of information cannot preclude the dissemination of falsehoods.

6. Conclusion

It was expected that the increasing coverage of EU affairs in national public spheres would eventually lead to a greater sense of European belonging. Although the public sphere and mass media were pivotal to the development and sustenance of a nationally imagined community, there are compelling reasons to doubt whether a similar dynamic would hold in a transnational setting. Identity is a multifaceted and multifactorial phenomenon; it is understood both as a product of national public discourses, but also as a determinant

of Europeanised public spheres. However, as Checkel (2014) aptly reminds us, the public sphere is only one locus where identity can be constructed. Transnational exchanges at the micro level also help to foster identification with Europe. In short, we endorse Checkel's (2014) view for advocating a more comprehensive approach to identity as created through social communication (providing that the right scope conditions are in place) and social contact (as in Deutsch, 1966). With this in mind, we argue that establishing linear relationships predicated on the public sphere alone is a perilous route to take. The current deliberative setting of the public sphere is not commensurate to a collective EU identity. Politicisation has expanded the scope of conflict to other actors such as Eurosceptics. The Internet has enfranchised new actors from outside Europe to infiltrate the Europeanised public sphere more easily. Furthermore, cyberspace has demonstrated to be a hotbed for fuelling Euroscepticism and polarising discourse. And, as previous scholars have theorised and demonstrated empirically, these divisions are predominantly structured along the cultural-identitarian dimension. With the rise of identity politics, political parties are evoking stronger and more salient national identities to mobilise support. Moreover, we argue that the preponderance of constitutive contestation is likely to hamper support for the EU and feelings of attachment towards Europe. Although we acknowledge that people can hold multiple inclusive identities, it does not follow that all identities are of this kind. It is not national identity per se but exclusive kinds which have negative implications for European levels of attachment. Lastly, Europeanised public spheres are nationally segmented and highly fragmented. Social media and the rising tide of information disorder have exacerbated this dynamic through their exploitation of human cognitive functions and prioritising virality over factuality. Due to the embeddedness of online and offline media within national structures, and a nationally entrenched media logic, there are meagre prospects of this changing in the near future. A healthy public sphere should therefore account for more than factual discourse alone in order to foster a European identity.

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Article

Ready for the World? Measuring the (Trans-)National Quality of Political Issue Publics on Twitter

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Abstract
This article presents a multi-method research design for measuring the (trans-)national quality of issue publics on Twitter. Online communication is widely perceived as having the potential to overcome nationally bound public spheres. Social media, in particular, are seen as platforms and drivers of transnational communication through which users can easily connect across borders. Transnational interactivity can be expected in particular for policy fields of global concern and elite or activist communication as practiced on Twitter. Nevertheless, there is still a lot of evidence for the enduring national structuration of political communication and publics as it results from a shared language (mostly), culturally defined media markets, established routines of social and political communication, and sociocultural stocks of knowledge. The study goes beyond measuring user interaction and also includes indicators of cross-referential cohesion. It applies a set of computational methods in network and discourse analysis and presents empirical evidence for Twitter communication on climate change being a prime issue of global concern and a globalized policy agenda. For empirical analysis, the study relies on a large Twitter dataset (N ≈ 6m tweets) with tweet messages and metadata collected between 2015 and 2018. Based on basic measurements such as geolocation and language use, the metrics allowed measurement of cross-national user interactions, user centrality in communicative networks, linking behaviour, and hashtag co-occurrences. The findings of the exploratory study suggest that a combined perspective on indicators of user interaction and cross-referential cohesion helps to develop a better and more nuanced understanding of online issue publics.

Keywords
climate change; cross-referential cohesion; issue publics; national structuration; network analysis; transnational communication; Twitter

Issue
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1. Introduction

Online communication and social media have undeniably extended the possibilities for every user to reach out to the world of other users in a shared communicative environment. This not only holds true for the so-called "produser" (Bruns, 2009) and his/her ability to realize one-to-many communication to large audiences bypassing the traditional gatekeepers of public communication (Shirky, 2008). Reaching out to the world is also meant in the literal sense; by reducing the role of media gatekeepers, the internet and social media are widely regarded as bearing the potential to overcome nationally bound publics co-constituted to a large extent by classical media institutions, and move them towards a new state of the "online networked public sphere" (Benkler, 2006). The fundamental technical architecture of the internet provides the technical connectivity for transnational public spheres to emerge beyond nation-states and national identities (Cairncross, 2001). In contrast, however, nationally structured public spheres seem to be quite persistent. As mass media research has already shown, me-

dia markets are embedded in systems of socio-cultural structuration, most often at a national scale (Straubhaar, 1991, 2010). In accordance with such research, non-essentialist theories and studies on nationalism have emphasized the role that mass media play in the social construction of national identities (Anderson, 2006; Kielmansegg, 2003, 2013). Whether the structural transformations of public spheres induced by the internet and social media are able to break up this co-foundational relation is yet to be determined.

In this article, I seek to contribute to this fledgling field of research by providing an integrated set of indicators for the empirical analysis of social media communication. This should help to answer the question of how (trans-)national online issue publics are. How do (trans-)national flows of communication differ between policy fields and among national user communities? Going beyond measurements of user interaction as applied in Social Network Analysis the approach presented here is innovative in that it builds on a more sociologically informed discourse theoretical perspective. Consequently, it includes a set of indicators for cross-referential cohesion of online communication at different dimensional levels. In order to test the measures introduced and to explore the (trans-)national quality of a prominent case, I apply the multi-method research design to the global Twitter debate on climate change (#ClimateChange).

The article contributes to the field of research on social media and political communication in several ways: First, it presents innovative empirical indicators for the (trans-)national quality of online communication. Second, it provides instructive insights for the case included. Third, it offers a set of methods for further application.

2. Transnational Twitterspheres versus Structural Nationalism

2.1. Transnationalisation of the Public Sphere

Where internet development in general and social media, in particular, are expected to induce structural transformations of public spheres expectations of transnationalisation are often included in this developmental story. Indeed, scholars of online communication and the "networked public sphere" have argued for an opening up of social communication across borders (Benkler, 2006; Cairncross, 2001; Castells, 2008). Internet technology and social media would make social interaction less dependent on being at the same place (Giddens, 1991) but would open up "electronic elsewheres" (Berry, Kim, & Spigel, 2010) as new places for social interaction (Papacharissi, 2015). Moreover, structural changes induced by digitalization even affect the very concept of the public sphere with a network of public spheres and issue publics emerging instead of a single, widely shared public as constituted by traditional mass media (Bruns, 2008, p. 69). Twitter plays an important part in this development with hashtag functionality being crucial for the dynamic emergence of (ad hoc) issue publics (Bruns & Burgess, 2011).

An important field of scholarly research on transnational public spheres has been focussed on European integration and so-called Europeanization (Risse, 2010, 2015). A wide range of concepts, different operationalisations, and methodologies were used. Communication flows were measured by network analysis (Bennett, Lang, & Segerberg, 2015) or claims analysis (Koopmans & Statham, 2010). Others turned towards discourse analytical approaches (Kantner, 2015; for an overview, see Pfetsch & Heft, 2015). A number of works put a particular focus on internet communication and social networks (Bennett et al., 2015; Koopmans & Zimmermann, 2010; Ruiz-Soler, 2018). As to the fundamental question of European public spheres, results diverge. If there is a common baseline, however, it is that transnational publics cannot be expected to appear "above and beyond the various national or issue-specific public spheres," but rather through the "Europeanization of national and other public spheres" (Risse, 2015, p. 17). Given the persistence and prevalence of national publics, more nuanced approaches are required in order to reveal what may well turn out to be the gradual transnationalisation of issue publics. Kantner's theoretical conception of "transnational discourse arenas" (Kantner, 2015), meaning national public spheres that reflect different degrees of transnational political communication, measurable by topical coherence, the timing of media reporting, and aligned framings, might be a helpful orientation for a more nuanced approach. The combination of indicators in this article follows a kind of reversed logic, as network indicators might reveal a high degree of transnational interactivity with remarkably lower topical coherence as measured by indicators of cross-referential cohesion.

Not surprisingly, the issue of transnationalisation has also been intensely discussed in social movement research where transnational movements had been investigated long before digital change became a phenomenon and heavily affected mass communication (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005; Tarrow, 2005). Activists can be seen as more adaptive for globalised communication environments and good test cases given their self-interest in connecting transnationally to drive their agendas regarding global issues. New media, of course, have been embraced as potential drivers of the developments under study (Della Porta & Diani, 2011; Vicari, 2014). As Dahlgren (2013, p. 35) stated: "The web facilitates protest and solidarity on the global arena." Recent empirical works have studied the role of social media in general and Twitter in particular for inter- and transnational climate activism (e.g., Chen, Tu, & Zheng, 2017; Segerberg & Bennett, 2011; Stier, Schünemann, & Steiger, 2018).

Empirical studies on transnational online communication of social movements, however, have presented a mixed picture. Focused on transnational protest move-

ments, scholars have on the one hand found evidence for transnational interaction via Twitter, e.g., in the cases of Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions or the anti-austerity movements in Spain and Greece (Theocharis, Lowe, van Deth, & Garcia-Albacete, 2014). However, on the other hand several studies have questioned these results by emphasizing the difference between digital interconnectedness and substantial interaction and discourse (Kneuer & Richter, 2015). Thus, even from the perspective of social movement studies, one could argue with Gerbaudo (2012, 2014) and others that the more substantial exigencies of transnational mobilisation "cannot be reduced to the material affordances of the technologies it adopts but also involves the construction of shared meanings, identities, and narratives."

2.2. Structural Nationalism in Mass Media Communication

Countering expectations of transnational public spheres, previous work on mass media communication emphasized the fact that what is said to be global communication is more or less an aggregation of "culturally defined markets" (Straubhaar, 1991, 2010). In the same vein, even for more recent trends in the digital media environment, scholars concluded in line with cultural proximity theory that "structural factors have a powerful influence on patterns of media use" (Taneja & Webster, 2016). The theoretical fundaments of cultural proximity cannot be reduced to media markets, however. Therefore, I propose structural nationalism as a theoretical perspective that also includes insights from non-essentialist theories of nationalism (Anderson, 2006; Billig, 1995) as well as the sociology of knowledge (Berger & Luckmann, 1966/1990). From this perspective, one would expect to find at least traces of national structuration even in online communication and elite-centred Twitterspheres.

A lot of previous studies on international online communication have indeed found such traces and impediments of communicative flows. Scholars researched web traffic, be it with a focus on e-mail, hyperlinking, web audiences, or Twitter following (State, Park, Weber, & Macy, 2015; Takhteyev, Gruzd, & Wellman, 2012; Taneja & Webster, 2016; Taneja & Wu, 2014), and in effect questioned the supposedly transnational character of internet communication (Hale, 2012; Taneja, 2017). As part of their comprehensive presentation of tools and methods to study the geography of Twitter, Leetaru, Wang, Cao, Padmanabhan, and Shook (2013) also tested geographical proximity as a factor increasing the likelihood of regular interaction (measured by @mentions and retweets). While they find average distance for pairs of interacting users indeed decreasing at an exponential rate for users with up to 9 interactions per month, for users with a greater number of interactions the average distance increases again. Their finding suggests that up to a certain degree, geographical distance does indeed matter for user relationship intensity—with the 500 to 600 miles being the minimum for users who interact up to nine times per month, supporting a potentially higher relevance for nationality or national discourse community than for locality. In contrast, the increasing distances above this threshold point to the role of celebrities etc. for whom geography matters less (Leetaru et al., 2013, pp. 23–24). This again speaks for differentiated approaches of measurement as presented in this article.

3. Case Selection and Expectations

3.1. Case Selection

As a test case for the exploratory study, I selected the international Twitter debate on climate change represented by the hashtag #ClimateChange. Climate policy is a paradigmatic case of a globalized policy agenda, with climate change affecting people across the world and thus putting territorial political order and nation-bound approaches of political action under stress (Held, 1997, p. 258). Climate change has been the core concern of global environmental policy development for more than two decades since the famous Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development) in 1992. Intergovernmental efforts including multiple stakeholders have been institutionalised at a high level with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) established in Rio and the so-called Conference of Parties (COP) gathering all kinds of stakeholders from across the world for an annual flagship event. Three COPs are included in the dataset.

3.2. Expectations of International Variation

The transnational quality of Twitter communication shall be assessed by measuring the degrees of actual user interaction and cross-referential cohesion. Measurements of user interaction are actor-based. On Twitter, users can deliberately link to other users by @-mentioning them, thus including their Twitter handle preceded by the @ symbol. Moreover, they can refer to a particular post another user has made by retweeting it. As done in a lot of other Twitter studies, we take both actions as user interactions (Schünemann, Steiger, & Stier, 2015). In contrast, cross-referential cohesion is not based on user interactions but topical references. References can be made within the Twittersphere with the use of hashtags or other web content that is referred to using hyperlinks. Both kinds of references are indicators of how a message is embedded in wider networks of content and discourse. The variation between national user communities for both sets of indicators might be instructive for gaining a deeper understanding. From existing research and theoretical reflections, three tentative expectations can be derived for the exploratory study.

First of all, I expect Twitter communication on climate change to show a greater variation for indicators

of cross-referential cohesion than on cross-national user interaction (Expectation 1). Users who interact cross-nationally on Twitter might still leave cultural imprints by the content that they share and the references they make, be it within the sphere of the platform (hashtags) or beyond (URLs). Moreover, countries represented in the dataset cannot be treated as equal. Previous works have shown that especially the size of a national community and whether it belongs to the Anglo-Saxon language sphere affect the likelihood of transnational interaction (Hale, 2012; Takhteyev et al., 2012, p. 75). Thus, cross-national user interaction is expected to be lower for English-speaking countries than for user communities with English as a foreign language (Expectation 2). In contrast, given their cultural proximity, cross-referential cohesion is expected to be higher for countries from the Anglo-Saxon sphere (Expectation 3).

4. Data and Geolocation

4.1. Data Collection

Twitter is a unique data source for interactional data of a large user community around the globe (Takhteyev et al., 2012, p. 73). Data access for researchers is still relatively easy and comprehensive. There are important downsides to using Twitter for social science research as well (boyd & Crawford, 2012; Jungherr, 2014; Ruths & Pfeffer, 2014), most importantly its elite bias as Twitter is certainly not the platform for the masses. However, it is relevant for political information and activism alike. It can hardly be ignored by actors of strategic communication. While elite actors active on Twitter can be regarded as informants for broader domestic publics in the sense of so-called two-step flow communication (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948), at the same time and in a reverse direction, they can be expected to leave their domestically formed discursive imprints on the global debate as well.

We used Twitter's Streaming API (application programming interface) by applying the R package StreamR (Barberá, 2013) for automatic data collection. We streamed data for an extended research period of almost two and a half years between August 2015 and January 2018, acquiring about 10m tweets in total, from which around 6m tweets could be kept for the final dataset after data cleansing and geolocation of users.

4.2. Geolocation

The geolocation of users is an essential preparatory step for further analyses as any measurement of (trans-)national interaction or structuration of social communication requires that messages can be ascribed to a national origin. Precise geoinformation with coordinates is included in the metadata provided by Twitter only for a marginal share of tweets, namely for users who enabled geotagging in their user settings. In order to make assessments on the national background of users, I used the geographical index of the Data Science Toolkit (DSTK), a collection of open-source tools and open datasets provided by data scientist Pete Warden (2011). Geolocation, as applied for this article, takes self-reported user-location as input from the metadata obtained via the API. Previous research has shown that taking entries in the location field as input data for geocoding tools—geolocating users as opposed to their tweets—provided better coverage and accuracy (Leetaru, 2013, p. 14). Moreover, as critics might point to the lack of reliability of user-reported locations—the findings presented in empirical research support the assumption that a majority of users are truthful when filling in the location field (Leetaru, 2013., p. 17). The DSTK geocoder returned geolocation data for 59.2% of tweets collected. The subset of geolocated tweets remained comprehensive with around 6m tweets posted by roughly 1m users. I used the subset of accurately geolocated data (by geotagging) as a reference for the evaluation of DSTK geolocation. Taking the 'naturally' georeferenced tweets as a "sensor-based gold standard" for assessing the quality of geocoding is a common evaluation practice in the field (Leetaru et al., 2013, p. 13). This way I measured an accuracy level of 81% of tweets (for a comparison to other tools, see Takhteyev et al., 2012, p. 76).

Activity on Twitter is highly unequally distributed across the world with the platform being most heavily used in the US. This general observation for online communication has been well documented by previous research (Barnett & Park, 2014). It is illustrated by the World Map depicted in Figure 1. Most tweets were posted by US users with a share of 44.2%, followed by other Anglo-Saxon countries, ranging between 7.7% for Canada, and 10.3% for the UK. France, the host country of COP21 in December 2015, is the first continental European country in the ranking with 2.1%. I included the top 20 countries for the comparative analyses presented below. This meant a lower threshold for inclusion at 0.6% of all tweets sent as reached by Indonesia and Kenya.

4.3. Language Use

Language use is a fundamental aspect of connected communication across cultures and national communities as every social interaction relies on the peoples' ability to understand each other, which in most cases means to share a common language (Takhteyev et al., 2012, p. 75; Taneja & Webster, 2016, p. 176). English has a special function in this regard as it serves as a global language (Crystal, 2012). Consequently, as previous works have shown, English is the dominant language in cross-nationally linked issue publics online (Hale, 2012). Other linguistic communities are more likely to be linked via English sites than bilaterally. Content that is provided in other languages than English will likely not be recognised by international audiences at all (Hale, 2012, p. 146). Nevertheless, previous work has shown for gen-

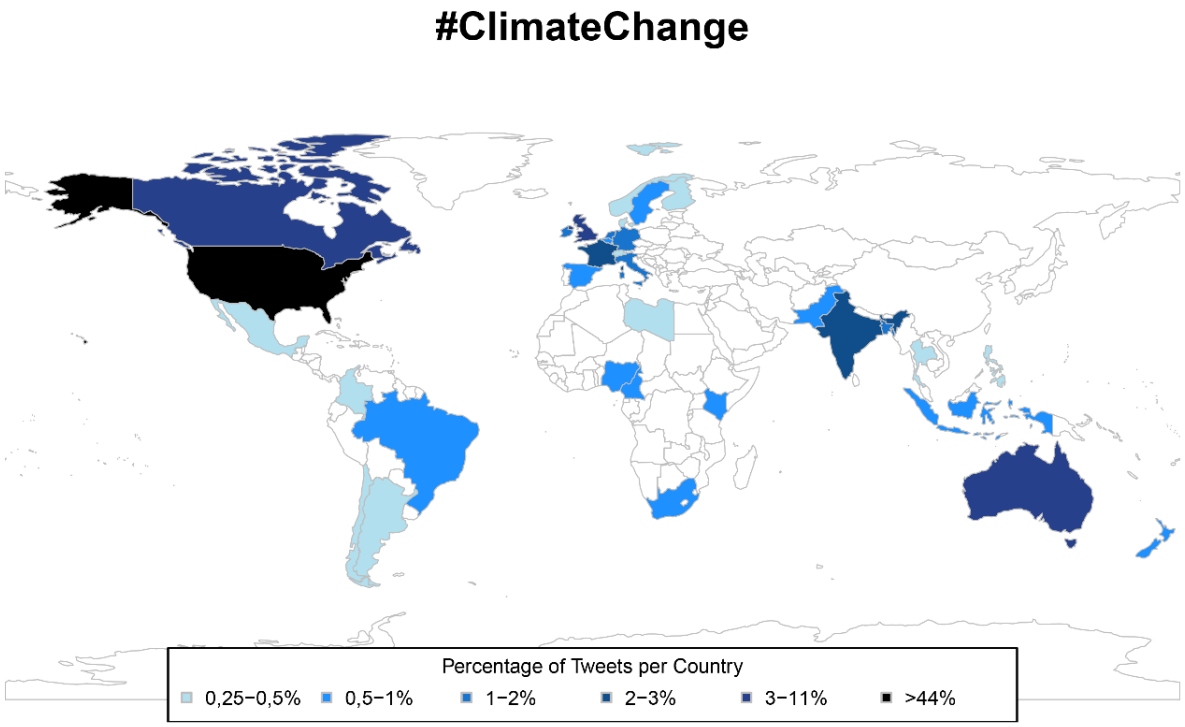

Figure 1. World map of Twitter activity for #ClimateChange between August 2015 and January 2018. Note: A detailed frequency table for all countries is provided in Supplementary File, appendix A. Source: Author, prepared with R worldmap.

eral Twitter communication, that users tend to dominantly write tweets in their own languages (Leetaru et al., 2013, p. 11). This, however, is obviously not true for this English-language hashtag taken as query term for data collection. Against potential critique, it is important to note that the use of English for tweeting is nevertheless widely spread across linguistic communities across the world and thus not exclusive to Anglo-Saxon or Western countries (Leetrau et al., 2013, p. 11). Obviously, as Figure 2 illustrates, English is the all-dominant language in the dataset for this study as well. Data collection with the international English language hashtag #ClimateChange as a query term has, of course, introduced a strong bias to find English language communication. Thus, language cannot be taken as an indicator of discursive cohesion itself. The measured extent to

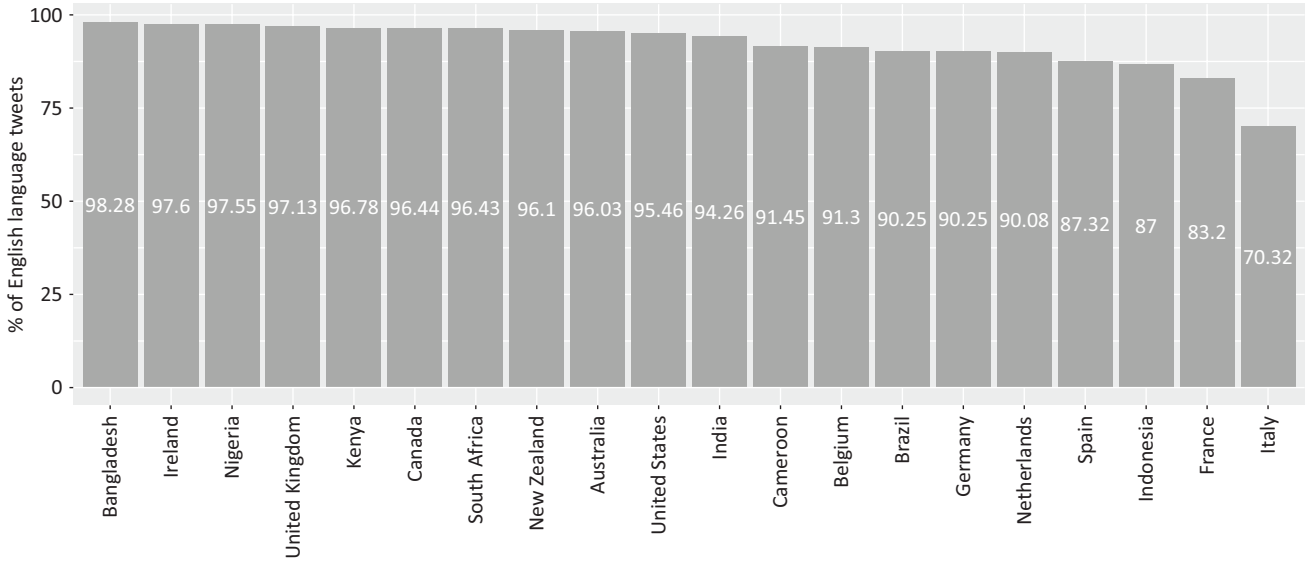

Figure 2. Percentages of English language tweets by country. Notes: Only the 20 most frequent countries in the dataset were included. Values for the detected language of a tweet were directly taken from the metadata provided by Twitter. Source: Author, prepared with R ggplot2.

which English is dominant or—inversely put—the extent to which users also write in other languages might, however, give a rough comparative impression of linguistic structuration. Unsurprisingly, Figure 2 shows higher percentages of English language tweets for countries with English as the official language (all countries on the left-hand side of the axis until Cameroon). Countries with English only as a foreign language have lower values, with the Romanic speaker communities of France and Italy being at the bottom of the list.

5. Empirical Indicators

For the study of the transnational quality of issue publics on Twitter, I propose a combination of indicators that are grouped into network indicators (cross-national user interaction and network centrality) and indicators of cross-referential cohesion (hyperlink referentiality and hashtag co-occurrences).

5.1. Network Indicators

5.1.1. Cross-National User Interaction

The analysis of user interaction is the most basic and straightforward measurement of (trans-)national interaction among the methods applied. Twitter communication is taken as what it is, a network, with users acting as nodes and retweets and @-mentions as links between them. This operationalisation is well established in social science Twitter research (Ruiz-Soler, 2018). It is important to note that this is a lower-bound definition of interaction. Twitter ties, in general, are relatively weak (Takhteyev et al., 2012, p. 74). In contrast to network analysis based on e-mail traffic (State et al., 2015) or users who follow each other on Twitter (Takhteyev et al., 2012), the links defined for this study do not require nor express any pre-existing social ties of users. In correspondence to the other indicators included, the links of the network reflect an awareness of other users and/or exposure to their content. The comparative indicator is the percentage of outgoing cross-national linkages in a directed network.

5.1.2. Network Centrality

Going beyond counting interactions, network analytical measures can help to better understand the actor-based structuration of an issue public based on actor centrality. Which actors are central to a debate? Which are the most influential, which are most listened to? The results of Twitter network analysis do not only tell something about the Twittersphere. In fact, relational structures in a Twittersphere issue public already reflect discursive structuration beyond it. Many accounts, for instance, that attract the most attention on Twitter (indegree centrality) only seldom write or reply to others (outdegree centrality) as Ruiz-Soler (2018, p. 438) and others have shown in previous research. Their relative standing within the network is thus not derived from their activity on the platform but from holding a prominent speaker position in the general debate. For the purposes of this article, this is best reflected by indegree centrality. Indegrees were calculated for all nodes in the global network and the national subgraphs. The resulting frequency distributions were then correlated with each other. I used Pearson's R for calculating correlations with every pair of values for the respective entries from the global distribution and the distribution for the respective national cases having been taken into account (see Leetaru et al., 2013). This resulted in a list of 20 correlation coefficients, one per country.

5.2. Indicators of Cross-Referential Cohesion

5.2.1. Hyperlink Referentiality

Hyperlinks are at the core of internet technology (Benkler, 2006). Hyperlink analysis helps to better assess how users realize the potential interconnectedness of internet technology in their actual communication. Hyperlinks serve as a proxy to measure awareness of content across national or linguistic borders (Barnett, Chung, & Park, 2011; Taneja & Webster, 2016). This understanding of hyperlinks is well established in previous literature on the blogosphere (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Hale, 2012) and is transferable to social media (Jacobson, Myung, & Johnson, 2016). As Leetaru et al. (2013) have shown, a considerable share of sent tweets globally contains hyperlinks (almost 16%, see Leetaru et al., 2013, p. 26). Given the fact that with URLs, Twitter users mostly refer to other online content provided beyond Twitter, hyperlink analysis opens an analytical window to the wider mediascapes that users populate. For hyperlink analysis, link shorteners—as standard in Twitter communication—needed to be re-translated for obtaining the actual URLs—I used longURL for R (Rudis, 2016). URLs were again shortened to domains in order to compare referenced sources of content. From the resulting lists, dominant content service providers such as Facebook, Google, and of course Twitter itself have been removed before comparative analysis. From that, I built frequency distributions for the global dataset and for national subsets. A high correlation—expressed with Pearson's R—in domains referred to between a single national user community and the global distribution would thus indicate a higher degree of cross-referential cohesion.

5.2.2. Hashtag Co-Occurrence

Hashtags have become a core element of Twitter usage. They are user-created metatags that serve as dynamic markers of issue publics themselves (Bruns & Burgess, 2011). In practical use, hashtags are often accompanied by further hashtags that might relate subdiscussions to a broader Twitter debate. This allows

the study of co-occurrences of hashtags. Hashtag co-occurrences have been used to analyse trends in Twitter debates (Steinskog, Therkelsen, & Gambäck, 2017). From a discourse theoretical perspective, they can be read as connectors between topically oriented discourses or as frame-bridging elements connecting different contexts of social sense-making regarding certain commented on events (Eriksson Krutrök & Lindgren, 2018). As Twitter communication cannot be conceived as separate from broader public debates, co-occurrences of hashtags might carry substantial information on the discursive structuration of those debates. For the analysis, I obtained hashtags co-occurring to the main hashtag that had been used as a query term. From that, I built frequency distributions for the global dataset and for national subsets with a high correlation between them indicating a higher extent of cross-referential cohesion per national user community.

6. Results

6.1. Network Indicators

Network indicators include the share of actual cross-national user interactions, thus retweets or @-mentions that referred to other users of a different national community, and the correlation of indegree distributions per country, equally based on retweets and @-mentions as links of the network. The values per country are depicted in Figure 3, sorted in descending order by indegree correlation. As the entire dataset reflects the prevalence of US users in Twitter communication so does the network built for this study. US accounts are by far the most frequently referred to. This, to a large extent, explains why cross-national links are a kind of standard for the observed communication ranging from 88.5% of all interactions for the UK to almost 100% for Cameroon with the obvious exception of the US itself with only 52.3% of interactions towards other national user communities. While this would typically underscore assumptions of cultural dependency, one should keep in mind the inequality of Twitter usage reflected in the dataset. If one, for a contrastive picture, disregards all links towards US users, data points for all other countries drop to values around the 50%-line. Both curves showing lower values for English-speaking countries with high Twitter populations (UK, Canada, and Australia) suggest that those countries are somewhat less connected to the cross-national debate than the other countries. This is most clearly illustrated by correlations of indegree. In clear contrast to the very basic statistics on language use, most of the countries with English as the official or major language (Bangladesh), with the notable exception of the UK, are now positioned on the right-hand side of the figure, thus with the lower values of correlation. On the other side, at the top of the list just behind the US itself, we find large user communities from non-English language countries such as Brazil, Germany, France, and Spain.

Table 1, in addition, allows for a cursory qualitative glance at what kinds of users are most central to the global network and to selected country subnetworks. I selected the cases to be included for the table according to their position in Figure 1 (thus correlation values for indegree distributions) with the US representing the dominant user community, Germany as the first European country in the list and Indonesia as the user community with the lowest correlation (respective lists for all 20 countries are provided in Supplementary File, Appendix B). The top 10 lists depicted are mainly

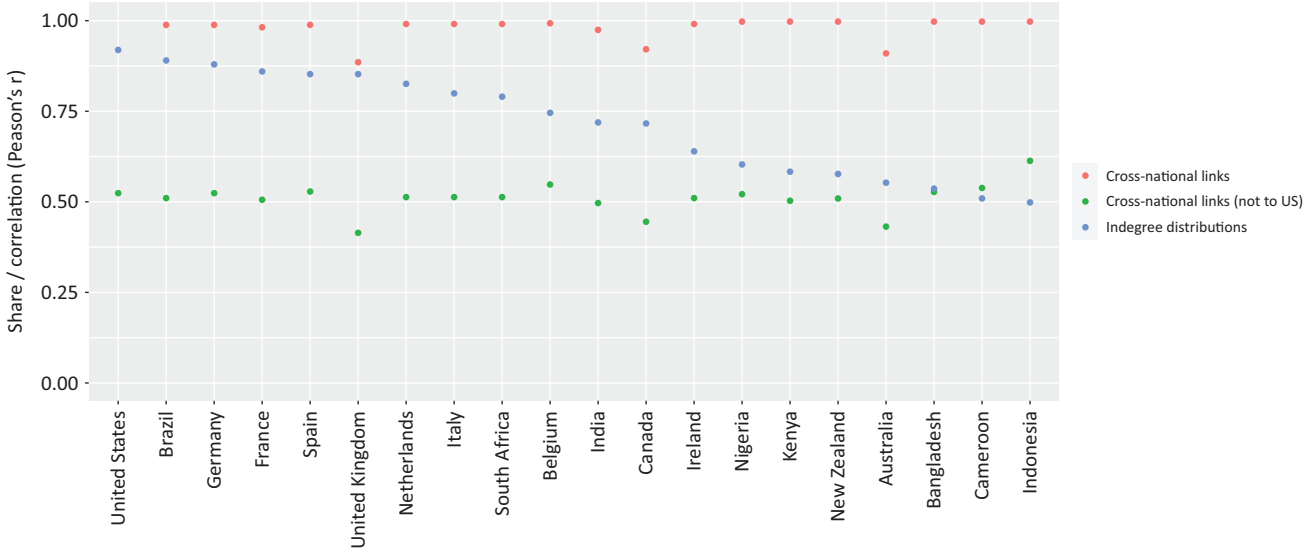

Figure 3. Network indicators (share of cross-national links and indegree correlation) per country. Notes: Only the 20 most frequent countries in the dataset were included. Sorted in descending order by indegree correlation. Network analyses were exerted with igraph for R. N (tweets) = 6,041,024; N (users/nodes) = 1,197,515; N (edges) = 4,260,896. Source: Author, prepared with R igraph and ggplot2.

Table 1. Top 10 users measured by indegree for the global network and selected country subgraphs.

Rank	Global	US	Germany	Indonesia
01	leodicaprio	realdonaldtrump	unfccc	wscmedia
02	realdonaldtrump	leodicaprio	leodicaprio	examinercom
03	unfccc	badlandsnps	greenpeace	greenpeace
04	greenpeace	potus	wef	leodicaprio
05	potus	biologistdan	realdonaldtrump	humanity4frica
06	badlandsnps	climatereality	unep	unicef
07	wef	greenpeace	un	unfccc
08	biologistdan	algore	climatereality	wef
09	climatereality	unfccc	anttilip	who
10	unep	billnye	cop23	unep

composed of actors from US politics and administration, UN organisations, and programmes (like UNEP) and fora (COP23 for Germany), as well as other international organisations like the World Economic Forum, NGOs (especially Greenpeace), and some individual activists (Leonardo DiCaprio as a celebrity and climate activist). While one cannot read too much into this comparison of the top entries only, the top-10-lists include some interesting hints to international variation with the US and Germany having more entries in common with the global list, and there being slightly more international organisations and NGOs with higher ranks in the case of Germany, and especially Indonesia, than for the US.

6.2. Indicators of Cross-Referential Cohesion

As indicators of cross-referential cohesion, I propose web-based cross-referentiality represented in tweets as shared URLs and discursive linkages as seen in hashtag co-occurrences. Figure 4 integrates the two indicators into a comparative plot. The descendant order of the plot is according to shared URLs. Overall, correlation is highest for shared URLs with values ranging mostly between .59 for New Zealand and .93 for the US. Ireland constitutes a remarkable outlier though with only r = .26. Cross-referential cohesion measured by hashtag co-occurrences shows overall lesser correlations with a comparable variation, ranging from .55 in the case of Australia to .94 for the US. Here again, Ireland and New Zealand have much lower values (.34 and .33 respectively). Both countries need to be more deeply investigated in further research. Nevertheless, I leave them aside for the further discussion of results in this article as their highly divergent discursive patterns might be explained with a high degree of automated activity, professional propaganda or trolling. At least, qualitative insights obtained by the inspection of the top-50-lists of hashtag co-occurrences and shared URLs (as pro-

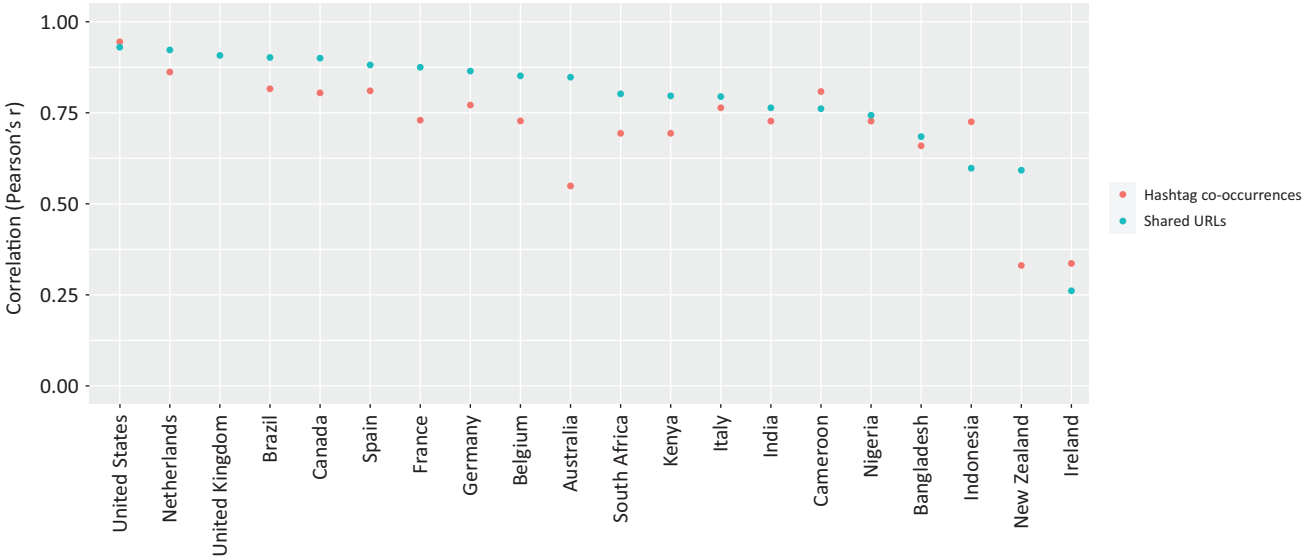

Figure 4. Indicators of cross-referential cohesion (correlations of hashtag co-occurrences, shared URLs) per country. Notes: Only the 20 most frequent countries in the dataset were included. Sorted in descending order by correlation of shared URLs. N (tweets) = 6,041,024; N (unique domains) = 37,271; N (co-occurring hashtags) = 291,053. Source: Author, prepared with R ggplot2.

vided in Supplementary File, Appendix C) lend support to this assumption.

Leaving the controversial cases aside, overall Figure 4 shows the highest correlations for a number of developed countries of the OECD world (plus Brazil) on the left-hand side of the plot. On the right-hand side, there are the newly industrialised and developing countries, except for Italy. This general trend line would not be completely but partly blurred when sorting by hashtag co-occurrences (e.g., for Cameroon). Australia is a remarkable case, coming from the opposite angle, as hashtag co-occurrences have the lowest correlation of all cases (except for the two outliers). The Australian user community stands out as a particular case and seems to be more independent from the global debate when measured based on a more discourse-oriented indicator.

The top 50 co-occurrences for the global debate and selected country cases are depicted in Figure 5. Besides the US, with Australia and Kenya, I selected two countries at the bottom end with regard to the correlation of co-occurring hashtags (the respective lists of top 50 co-occurring hashtags are provided in Supplementary File, Appendix D). The findings are illustrative for the cultural and political specificities of the Australian issue public and indicate a somewhat separate national issue public with a focus on Australian politics and administration ('#auspol'), Australian activism ('#stopadani') or regional environmental risks ('greatbarrierreef'). Particular patterns of frame bridging as typical for the combined use of hashtags are also illustrated by the Kenyan case where besides regional references ('#Africa') and regional initiatives like '#weaaare' prominent references are made to the fight against hunger ('#zerohunger') and for foodsecurity ('#foodsecurity').

7. Discussion and Conclusions

The multi-method research design presented in this article allows the study of the (trans-)national quality of issue publics on Twitter regarding different dimensions. I proposed a separation into network indicators and indicators of cross-referential cohesion. As expected, variation is higher for the more discourse-oriented indicators (Expectation 1). Yet, this tendency is already visible in in-

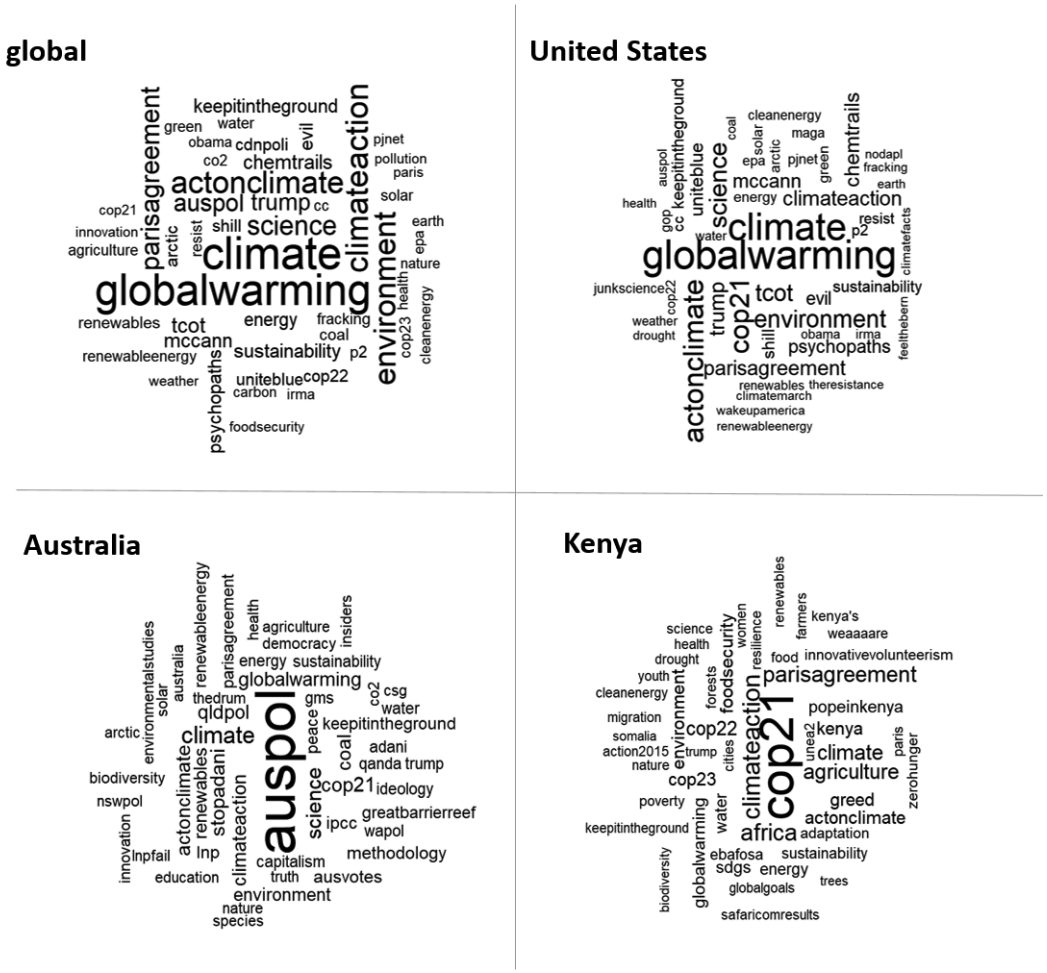

Figure 5. Wordclouds of top 50 co-occurring hashtags for #Climate Change in the global Twittersphere and selected national user communities. Notes: N (global) = 291,053; N (US) = 178,060; N (Australia) = 46,148; N (Kenya) = 8,602. Source: Author, wordclouds prepared with R wordcloud.

degree centrality distribution. This underlines the dual character of Twitter links as both marked user interactions and discursive events. In support of Expectation 2, comparative observations of user interaction suggest an effect of language in the sense that communicating in the mother tongue allows for a somewhat higher separation of debates from the global stream of communication while cosmopolitan elites tweeting in English as a foreign language are more cross-nationally active. In contrast, when looking beyond user interactions and including user centrality, it seems that other factors such as regional or developmental status also affect the results. This, of course, makes much sense especially regarding the overall topic and policy field represented by this case study: climate policy. While this would be in line with previous research (Hale, 2012), it is important to keep in mind that at least the linguistic effects can partly be ascribed to the choice of hashtag with users from non-English speaking countries using the English hashtag decidedly for their international communication while tweets obtained based on the initial query for users from countries with English as the official language also reflect national debates. This fundamental divergence might also be part of the explanation for the differences observed for indegree distributions.

This bias should, however, produce lesser effects for the indicators of cross-referential cohesion as they should reveal traces of national structuration also for cosmopolitan elite communication. Thus, including shared URLs and hashtag co-occurrences as further indicators allows for more nuanced findings. In fact, in contradiction to Expectation 3, it seems that it is not cultural proximity in a linguistic sense that is having an integrating effect on the user communities of the Anglo-Saxon world. Instead, regional and developmental statuses seem to matter more when explaining variation, with Australian users serving as an illustrative case in this respect.

To conclude concerning the broader research question, whether Twitter allows for a transnational quality of issue publics, the findings presented above yield a mixed picture. They certainly do not suggest national encapsulation or isolation as the degree of cross-national user interaction is high. The US as the dominant and much more self-sufficient user community needs to be considered as a special case, of course. Otherwise, the more indicators reflect the structuration of discourses, the more they show variations that help to produce nuanced insights into the (trans-)national structuration of online issue publics.

However, to corroborate the preliminary findings presented so far and to find causal explanations, further research needs to be done, i.e., by including additional case studies and by inspecting the development of indicators over time. Moreover, the fluidity of hashtag use needs to be considered for data collection as well as the limitations of studying a single platform such as Twitter and the taking of only a single hashtag as query term for data collection. Despite those limitations, this article aimed to introduce a set of indicators into the methodology and to test it on a prominent case. Further applications should follow. As most of the indicators included can be adapted for use beyond the Twittersphere as well and further indicators—most importantly indicators for the measurement of discursive structuration (e.g., topic modelling)—can be added to the methodology, there is a lot of potential for more nuanced approaches to the measurement of (trans-)national structuration to thrive in future.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

Incidental Exposure to Non-Like-Minded News through Social Media: Opposing Voices in Echo-Chambers' News Feeds

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Abstract
Debates about post-truth need to take into account how news re-disseminates in a hybrid media system in which social networks and audience participation play a central role. Hence, there is a certain risk of reducing citizens' exposure to politically adverse news content, creating 'echo chambers' of political affinity. This article presents the results of research conducted in agreement with 18 leading Spanish online news media, based on a survey (N = 6625) of their registered users. The results highlight that high levels of selective exposure that are a characteristic of offline media consumption are being moderated in the online realm. Although most of the respondents get news online from like-minded media, the figures related to those who also get news from media with a different media ideology should not be underestimated. As news consumption is becoming more 'social,' our research points out that Spanish citizens who are more active on social media sites are more likely to be exposed to news content from different ideological positions than those who are less active users. There is a weak association between the use of a particular social network site and gaining access to like- and non-like-minded news.

Keywords
incidental exposure; news consumption; polarization; selective exposure; social media; Spain

Issue
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1. Introduction

Although positive discourses have dominated academic views about how Internet-related technologies may affect life in democratic societies (Curran, Fenton, & Freedman, 2012), in recent years we have seen a growing concern regarding their potential for pernicious effects (Sunstein, 2018). Concerns relate to the potential lack of exposure to politically divergent ideas, which might deprive citizens of the alternative viewpoints they need for deliberation and decision-making, and cause western democracies to become less informed (Sunstein, 2009) and less tolerant to opposing views (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Rather than contributing to the creation of democratically necessary agonistic spaces in which dialogue and understanding of 'the others' might happen (Mouffe, 2013; Ruiz et al., 2011), it seems that online environments are promoting the isolation of citizens within small like-minded groups (Sunstein, 2018) or 'solo spheres' (Dahlgren, 2013). The recent controversy about how easily fake news spreads within Western societies (Balmas, 2014; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016) seems to reinforce the theories that defend that citizens are nowadays more capable of filtering the nature and origin of the information they consume, being more likely to be exposed to like-minded information rather than neutral or antagonistic points of view (Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014). From a twentieth-century media

landscape in which incidental exposure to news was frequent, it seems that we have been moving towards a post-broadcast era characterised by a high-choice media environment in which possibilities for selective exposure have been constantly expanding (Prior, 2007). Despite this evidence, recent research has also found that some online spaces such as social media might have a positive effect in undermining the effects of selective exposure mechanisms (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016), creating incidental ways by which citizens might make contact with opposing points of view or political perceptions (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Barbera, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015). This article aims to contribute to these discussions by studying if social media use increases Spanish citizens' exposure to non-like-minded news. Although selective exposure to traditional news has been researched in the country (Humanes, 2016), there is a gap in research about the particular effects of social media. Moreover, we will focus also in analysing the effects of different platforms on accidental exposure, rather than just studying social media in general terms. Our survey-based research points towards the existence of echo chambers within Spanish social media; however, Twitter and Facebook present different results, the former being more likely to facilitate access to ideologically challenging content. In order to better present these findings, our article will start with an analysis of current research on selective and incidental exposure, continuing then to introduce the methodology used and the findings. The article concludes with a discussion about the relevance of our findings in relation to the existing literature in the field.

2. Selective Exposure and the New Media Environment

The nature of the new media environment (Press & Williams, 2010) and how it might have transformed behavioural patterns of media consumption have been issues of great interest in media studies in recent decades (Knobloch-Westerwick, Johnson, & Westerwick, 2013; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010; Schrøder, 2015). Among these, a topic that has attracted a great deal of interest in academia is the study of the effects of the Internet on the distribution and consumption of news media. In a media system dominated by broadcasted and printed news media (Prior, 2007), there was a general agreement about the extent to which media consumption and selective exposure were operating. Developed several decades ago (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985), selective exposure theory argues that citizens tend to choose among the media landscape the news content that matches their political and ideological positions. Several authors have proved that thanks to the diversification of media choices in a post-broadcast era (Prior, 2007) it has become easier for citizens to avoid non-like-minded information about public affairs (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Balancing selective exposure mechanisms, former research has also found traces of incidental exposure or balanced exposure (Lacour, 2015; Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2017), behavioural patterns that might allow citizens to avoid the pernicious effects of selective exposure through consumption of non-like-minded news or non-biased information. Furthermore, although admitting the importance of selective exposure mechanisms, some other authors point out that this is more pronounced just for those citizens who are already engaged or highly politically active (Prior, 2013; Stroud, 2011).

The widespread adoption of the Internet as well as online spaces such as social media sites, however, has recently brought some new debates to the table. The patterns of cross-media consumption (Schrøder, 2015) and the hybridity of the media system (Chadwick, 2013) that characterize the new media environment are challenging the traditional common understanding of how citizens receive news. Consequently, although some audiences are still more engaged with traditional news media (and therefore, their patterns of media consumption and selective exposure are similar to those of some decades ago), some other sectors of the audience use social media in a way that is challenging formerly established theories in media studies, such as selective exposure.

Regarding selective exposure theory, some authors follow Sunstein's fears (2002, 2018) about the pernicious effects that the use of new communication technologies might have in democratic life. Recent research has shown how the Internet could be cultivating homophily between like-minded citizens (Colleoni et al., 2014), reinforcing selective exposure mechanisms. As citizens are increasingly adopting social media sites as a relevant source of news, the question of how this affects the diversity of media consumption and exposure to non-like-minded news has become ever more relevant (Newman et al., 2017; Sunstein, 2018). A particular effect of these trends might be the promotion of echo chambers or 'solo spheres' that could result in citizens only consuming news content which is in line with their existing political positions or ideological values (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Pariser, 2011). Working on the assumption that citizens group in social media with like-minded people and share content in relation to their political beliefs, some authors have proposed that the public sphere could become divided into several smaller spheres in which diversity of points of views is absent (Dahlgren, 2013). This would suggest there is a risk of citizens' consumption of non-desired or politically adverse news content being limited, which could present a serious threat if society became so divided that citizens were isolated from spaces to meet 'the others' who might have different points of view (Mouffe, 2013). By only engaging with like-mined citizens, these 'private' or 'solo' spheres can make it easier for individuals to be manipulated by political elites or partisan news media, as well as making it easier for fake news to be disseminated (Bakshy et al., 2015; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016) as proven by the recent scandal involving Cambridge Analytica.

Regarding news' dissemination on social networks, two key issues need to be addressed. Firstly, although social networks sites do not publish their algorithms, the systems that decide what we can 'see' in our timelines, it is known that Facebook prioritizes content shared by friends or family with whom we tend to interact more, rather than content shared by journalists or news media. Therefore, these sites prioritize the creation of filter-bubbles (Pariser, 2011) in which citizens receive information according to pre-established algorithms designed to attract their attention, prioritizing the content that we are more likely to agree with or to like more. Citizens seem to have no say in the nature of the information received or the configuration of the algorithms.

On the other hand, in the measure that social networks have become one of the main sources of news (Newman et al., 2017), contacts on social networks such as Facebook are now highly relevant as 'secondary gatekeepers' (Singer, 2013), increasing their importance in news' dissemination and transforming the ways in which citizens receive informative content (Guallar, Suau, Ruiz-Caballero, Sáez, & Masip, 2016). This forces news media to engage in an unfair 'battle for attention' against content selected and filtered by citizens (Thorson & Wells, 2016), who normally publish on social networks a mix of informative and entertainment formats. Hence, competition for users' attention is then fierce for information providers, who need to compete against each other but also against entertainment formats (Davenport & Beck, 2001; Lanham, 2006), forcing them to adopt formats that might catch quickly the attention of citizens surfing the web or checking news feeds on a social network (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Consequently, the main objective for the news media is that their stories attract a high level of attention to cause users to share them, making it more likely that they will spread around audiences' news feeds (Anspach, 2017). In the end, it is the common user who has the 'power' to decide to share the content, and thus control over the content's degree of dissemination. According to authors such as Sunstein (2018), a system of news' distribution that allocates such a great power on citizens is more likely to produce echo chambers and reinforce the consumption of like-minded news. Moreover, such a system also reinforces political polarization, as it prioritizes content shared by those closest to us whose political positions and values we normally tend to agree with.

3. Towards a Positive Approach

Although some parts of the academic literature on the subject are cautious or pessimistic about the effects of social networks on the dissemination of news content, and its implications for public opinion and democratic life, there are also some more positive voices (Bakshy et al., 2015; Boxell, Gentzkow, & Shapiro, 2017). A recent report pointed out that Internet users are more likely to be exposed to non-like-minded news rather than tending to avoid such information that might challenge their political beliefs (Newman et al., 2017). Other authors also disagree about these fears, contributing with recent research that actually points towards mechanisms that favour incidental exposure rather than selective exposure (Dubois & Blank, 2018; Flaxman et al., 2016; Garrett, 2009; Lacour, 2015).

The point of discussion is to determine if social networks, rather than increasing the effects of selective exposure, are, in fact, generating environments in which incidental exposure to political differences is more "likely to occur, at least on occasion, whether or not it is explicitly selected" (Brundidge, 2010, p. 696). Some authors adopt a positive understanding of the role of social media in news consumption, pointing out how online spaces mix entertainment and informative content. Previous research argued that this characteristic of social networks might positively affect news exposure: even those citizens who are more disengaged with news and normally access social media for entertainment purposes are more likely to be exposed to information about public issues (Mitchell, Kiley, Gottfried, & Guskin, 2013). Despite being informed about public events, a kind of content that they would normally never or barely access, the fact that they have other citizens among their contacts who do access and share this content might aid in exposing them to news, even if these are from an opposite ideological source or point of view (Bakshy et al., 2015; Barbera et al., 2015).

A series of studies conducted in the United States by the Pew Research Center (Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010; Mitchell, 2014) point in this direction, with social media users from the USA more likely to report being exposed to a high number of publications that challenge their political positions or ideological values. It seems then that contacts in online environments such as social networks are not ideologically closed spaces and that citizens have others among their contacts who maintain politically relevant ideological discrepancies (Purcell, Rainie, & Mitchell, 2010). Following this point, according to Garrett (2009), there is no evidence that when a citizen is exposed to non-like-minded news they will avoid it in greater measure than ideologically affine ones. Moreover, Garrett (2009), following biased-assimilation theory (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Munro et al., 2002) shows evidence that citizens are more likely to spend more time analysing information that challenges their political perceptions and values. If this is the case, social media might promote a more varied diet of news sources and political positions than more traditional means of news consumption (Baresch, Knight, Dustin, & Yaschur, 2011; Messing & Westwood, 2012).

4. Aims and Methodology

In order to contribute to these debates, this article presents data gathered from users registered on Spanish news sites. Results follow a line of research that points

towards a more complex understanding of the role of social media in selective exposure and news consumption in a country characterized by a polarized media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Newman et al., 2017). Previous research (Humanes, 2016; Valera-Ordaz, 2018) has shown how in Spain there is evidence of selective exposure, driven by political affinity, in news consumption through traditional media. More specifically, it seems that it is newspapers that have higher levels of selective exposure, with Spanish newspapers being affiliated with political parties and/or political positions (Humanes, 2014). This is in line with the nature of the political and media system: Being part of the polarized pluralist model Spain has, among other characteristics, a higher identification of news media with political ideologies and/or political parties. Consequently, in their media choices, citizens tend to choose those news media that reinforce or defend their political positions (Roses, 2011). Previous research into television and radio has also identified patterns of selective exposure, albeit to a lesser degree than in press consumption (Humanes, 2014). These results are consistent with a media system, like the Spanish one, which has several problems of pluralism, as the Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) reflects. According to the results obtained by the MPM, the Spanish media system has a highly partisan news media, with strong connections between the media and political and economic elites (Masip, Ruiz, & Suau, 2017). Consequently, in such a highly polarized media landscape, citizens are affected by a lack of incidental exposure to content that might challenge their political positions or beliefs (Masip, Suau, & Ruiz, 2018).

Previous research has been focused on legacy media, however it has not addressed the influence of social networks sites on selective exposure. Recent data from the Spanish Statistics Institute shows that around eight in ten Spaniards regularly use the Internet and among those 86% use social networks (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019). There is a need then to assess if those citizens who are more active online show different patterns of selective exposure than the general public studied in previous research. Therefore, our first research question is as follows:

> RQ1. Does the level of social media use favour access to non-like-minded news, thus limiting the effects of selective exposure?

Furthermore, there is also a need to start to differentiate among the effects on selective exposure of different social media sites (Dubois & Blank, 2018). While 53% of the Spanish population accesses news through social media (Newman et al., 2019), with Facebook being the most popular social site for news (47%), the use of WhatsApp is starting to rival it (36%), and Twitter now has 16% of users. It is obvious that different social media are used in different ways. Intending to avoid generalizations of 'Internet use' (Hirzalla, van Zoonen, & de Ridder, 2010), this research intends to focus on how the different social networks affect selective exposure. So far, previous research has normally focused on the effects of a particular social network, normally Twitter thanks to the ease of access to its data. Hence, our second research question is the following:

> RQ2. To what extent does the use of a particular social network effect selective exposure and the pluralism of news consumption?

To answer the research questions a quantitative approach was selected, based on a survey of registered users of online news media which had a print counterpart. Registering was free of charge at the time of carrying out the survey, with registration allowing users to comment on news and access other features. The survey was possible thanks to a collaboration agreement with 18 Spanish news sites, all of them having a paper counterpart. The media outlets had a daily average circulation of more than 162,000 copies during the second half of 2016 and around 3,000,000 unique viewers.

A self-administered questionnaire, which contained 40 questions, was sent by e-mail to registered users in 2016. Media outlets did not provide the total number of registered users they had, nor their socio-demographic data. Hence, the final sample is not the result of a selection made by the researchers, but it includes those people who voluntarily accepted and decided to collaborate (self-selected). A total of 6,625 questionnaires were eventually returned. Given the number of responses collected, it is reasonable to expect that the results could represent a broad spectrum of registered users in the participating media. Demographics for the sample are provided in Table 1.

5. Results

We obtained 6,625 responses from users registered in news sites. Table 1 shows the demographics and Internet use of the participants. We had more male participants (65.8%) than female (34.2%). Age was grouped in categories, and the majority of participants being in the over 55 age range (46.63%). Both genre and age are not representative of the Spanish population as a whole. However, demographic features are consistent with those of Spanish newspaper readers. Newspaper readers are mainly male (60,7%) and older than 35 (35–54: 41.1%; ≥55: 39.4%).

Among participants, the Internet is the main source of news (57.6%), and it is an important, although not the main source, for the other 40%. Only 2.4% of the respondents did not use the Internet as their main source of news.

More than a half of respondents (52.2%) are registered in a like-minded medium (30.2%), or more than one (22%), and 43.5% are registered in both like-minded and non-like-minded media. Surprisingly, 4.3% reported

Table 1. Demographics and Internet and media use.

	Response	N
Age	Male	4386 (66.2%)
	Female	2239 (33.8%)
	Total	6625 (100%)
Age	16–24	233 (3.5%)
	25–34	435 (6.6%)
	35–54	2867 (43.3%)
	≥55	30890 (46.6%)
	Total	6625 (100%)
Internet as a source of news	Most important	3254 (53.7%)
	Important, but secondary	2581 (42.6%)
	Secondary and not important	225 (3.7%)
	Total	6060* (100%)
Use of social networks	Very often/Often	1040 (31.6%)
	Sometimes	1426 (35.7%)
	Rarely/Never	1790 (32.7%)
	Total	4256* (100%)
Registered in	A like-minded medium	1572 (33.23%)
	More than one like-minded medium	1131 (23.91%)
	Like-minded and non-like-minded medium	1872 (39.58%)
	Only to non-like-minded medium	155 (3.28%)
	Total	4730* (100%)

Note: * Valid responses.

that they had only registered in media with a different ideology.

That a majority of respondents are registered in like-minded media can be considered as foreseeable. However, it is remarkable that more than 40% of people surveyed are registered in non-like-minded media. These results indicate that the Internet could diminish the effects of selective exposure, contradicting authors such as Sunstein (2018) and Iyengar and Hahn (2009), as it offers greater scope for accessing alternative points of view.

For this research, it is also interesting to underline that 67.3% of respondents use social media regularly, and 32.7% do not or scarcely use it. The average use of social networks is slightly lower than the Spanish population as a whole (70.3%; IAB, 2017). These results can be explained by the overrepresentation of the over 55 age group, 48.3% of whom rarely or never use social media according to IAB data.

Overall, around two thirds (65.8%) of respondents follow media outlets on social networks, and almost 50% also follow journalists. There is a direct relationship between the intensity of social network use and the following of news sites ($\chi^2 = 861.9617$, df = 2, $p < .05$) and journalists ($\chi^2 = 543.3126$, df = 2, $p < .05$). Although this relationship is stronger for the media (Cramer's V = 0.450) than for journalists (Cramer's V = 0.357).

We also asked participants where they get their news from. As expected, the level of access to news media is higher regarding like-minded news media than non-like-minded. Based on a 5-point scale (5 = Very frequently, 4 = Frequently, 3 = Sometimes, 2 = Rarely, 1 = Never), 62% of respondents access like-minded media frequently or very frequently (M = 3.7, SD = 1.23). Just 27% get news from non-like-minded sources frequently or very frequently. However, if the results are extended to those who also sometimes access non-like-minded media, the figure rises to 60.9% (Non-like-minded media: M = 2.8, SD = 1.22).

Results show that commenting (M = 2.5, SD = 1.4), sharing (M = 2.63, SD = 1.49), and receiving (M = 2.81, SD = 1.54) news, is much more frequent in the case of like-minded news media. For non-like-minded news media, the percentage of people who comment (M = 2.04, SD = 1.25), share (M = 1.9, SD = 1.2), or receive (M = 2.07, SD = 1.2) news from these opposite point of view sources is only around 12–15%, with the percentage increasing to 30% only if we include those who do this sometimes.

Degree of activity on social networks entails significant differences in both getting ($\chi^2 = 21.263$, df = 4, p = 0.000) and commenting on ($\chi^2 = 223.91$, df = 4, p = 0.00001) news from non-like-minded media (see

Table 2. Chi-square test for independence.

		Degree of use of social networks			
		Very often/Often	Sometimes	Rarely/Never	Totals
Getting non-like-minded news	Very often/Often	331 (290.55) [5.63]	371 (398.38) [1.88]	487 (500.07) [0.34]	1189
	Sometimes	368 (354.57) [0.25]	512 (486.17) [1.37]	575 (610.27) [2.04]	1451
	Rarely/Never	345 (394.89) [6.30]	543 (541.45) [0.00]	728 (679.66) [3.44]	1616
	Totals	1040	1426	1790	4256
	$\chi^2 = 21.263$	df = 4	$p < 0.000$	Cramer's V = 0.05	
Commenting non-like-minded news	Very often/Often	266 (159.97) [71.86]	213 (218.12) [0.12]	172 (273.80) [37.85]	651
	Sometimes	256 (191.3) [21.85]	279 (262.36) [1.06]	248 (329.32) [20.08]	783
	Rarely/Never	518 (689.59) [42.70]	934 (945.53) [0.14]	1370 (1186.88) [28.25]	2822
	Totals	1040	1426	1790	4256
	$\chi^2 = 223.91$	df = 4	$p < 0.0000$	Cramer's V = 0.162	
Sharing non like-minded news	Very often/Often	268 (129.76) [147.29]	167 (177.91) [0.67]	96 (223.33) [72.60]	531
	Sometimes	268 (181.32) [41.44]	318 (248.61) [19.37]	156 (312.07) [78.05]	742
	Rarely/Never	504 (728.03) [69.41]	941 (999.47) [3.42]	1538 (1254.60) [64.02]	2983
	Totals	1040	1426	1790	4256
	$\chi^2 = 496.26$	df = 4	$p < 0.0001$	Cramer's V = 0.2415	

Table 2). Differences are more significant in what regards commenting on (Cramer's V = 0.162), than getting (Cramer's V = 0.05) news. Contingency tables and χ^2 tests show results that are poles apart. Among the respondents, those who use social media more frequently are more likely to get news from non-like-minded news media. In contrast, less frequent users of social networks are less exposed to politically adverse news content. This pattern is repeated regarding commenting on news, although the differences are stronger. Regarding the sharing of news on social media, differences are more evident than getting and commenting ($\chi^2 = 496.26$, df = 4, p = 0.001). Thus, active users of social networks are still more likely to share news from ideologically opposed positions (Cramer's V = 0.2415).

In line with the results obtained by Newman et al. (2019), respondents tend to have Facebook as their most popular social network for getting news. However, it is also interesting to highlight the growing role of WhatsApp, which is already more used than Twitter to interact with news. Friends are the main diffusers of news, followed by media outlets (Table 3).

Results also show that there is an association between consuming news from like- or non-like-minded news media and the use of a particular social network. As shown in Table 4, the use of Facebook is connected to getting and sharing like-minded content. In contrast, Twitter is strongly connected to getting and sharing news from both like-minded and non-like-minded news media. The connection with non-like-minded news media is less strong than from like-minded media but stronger than the relationships of these variables in Facebook. Finally, there is no significant relationship between the use of WhatsApp and getting or commenting on news from like-minded or non-like-minded news media.

Table 3. Social networks used for getting/sharing/commenting news by sources.

	Facebook	Twitter	WhatsApp	Instagram
Media outlets	2059 (25.5)	1239 (25.9)	953 (18.4)	*245* (15)
Political parties, NGOs…	1261 (15.6)	776 (16.2)	521 (10.1)	148 (8)
Friends	2482 (30.7)	938 (19.6)	2925 (56.5)	679 (41.5)
Journalists	860 (10.6)	847 (17.7)	213 (4.1)	137 (8.4)
Celebrities	304 (3.80)	285 (5.90)	75 (1.4)	200 (12.2)
Non-professional journalists	1119 (13.8)	706 (14.7)	492 (9.5)	227 (13.9)
Total	8085 (100)	4791 (100)	5179 (100)	1636 (100)

Note: More than one response was possible.

Table 4. Chi-square test for independence.

	Use of social networks and selective exposure		
Activity	Social network	χ^2	Cramer's V
Getting news from like-minded media	Facebook	$\chi^2 = 10.92927$ df = 1 p = 0.000947	0.04437211
Getting news from non-like-minded media	Facebook	$\chi^2 = 3.029262$ df = 1 p = 0.0818	—
Getting news from like-minded media	Twitter	$\chi^2 = 46.89763$ df = 1 p = 7.48e-12	0.0925307
Getting news from non-like-minded media	Twitter	$\chi^2 = 14.80282$ df = 1 p = 0.000119	0.05209271
Getting news from like-minded media	WhatsApp	$\chi^2 = 3.085377$ df = 1 p = 0.079	—
Getting news from non-like-minded media	WhatsApp	$\chi^2 = 0.8117424$ df = 1 p = 0.368	—
Sharing news from like-minded media	Facebook	$\chi^2 = 424.7293$ df = 1 p < 2e-16	0.2770362
Sharing news from non-like-minded media	Facebook	$\chi^2 = 159.2166$ df = 1 p < 2e-16	0.1701038
Sharing news from like-minded media	Twitter	$\chi^2 = 250.198$ df = 1 p < 2e-16	0.2126289
Sharing news from non-like-minded media	Twitter	$\chi^2 = 95.33175$ df = 1 p < 2e-16	0.1313093

6. Conclusions

Results presented in this article offer some relevant insights concerning the debates around whether the Internet and social networks contribute to greater chances for selective exposure or if, conversely, they offer possibilities for incidental exposure to non-like-minded news (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2013; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010; Schrøder, 2015). Our research goes in line with the body of research that interprets the effects of social networks in news selection and distribution as being positive (Flaxman et al., 2016; Garrett, 2009; Lacour, 2015), contributing to the discussion by showing results from Spain and adding some relevant nuances that we will discuss further in this section.

These results are encouraging in the Spanish context, insofar as they open the door for greater exposure to challenging content. In this sense, social media sites could provide a degree of balance within a highly polarized media system which suffers from a lack of pluralism (Masip et al., 2018). This has been reflected by a high level of distrust towards journalists and traditional news media institutions (Newman et al., 2017). Not surprisingly, former research (Humanes, 2016) has shown high levels of citizens' selective exposure regarding traditional news media (press, television, and radio stations). Nevertheless, the effects in Spain of online environments such as social networks on pluralism and selective exposure had not yet been deeply analysed before this article.

Our research shows how these high levels of selective exposure that are characteristic of offline media consumption are being moderated in the online realm. Although most of the respondents are mainly registered with and get their news from like-minded media, the figures related to those who also get news from media with a different ideology should not be underestimated. According to our findings, most of our respondents access non-like-minded media at least 'sometimes' (60.9%), but 27% do so frequently or very frequently. If social networks are taken into account, we found a direct relationship between higher use of these online spaces and a higher reception of non-like-minded news. Therefore, we can affirm that social media use increases the chances of incidental exposure to news from diverse political and ideological views (RQ1). This relationship is stronger in those activities that entail a higher degree of commitment and active attitude (sharing and commenting) rather than those that could be considered as a more passive activity (receiving news in the newsfeed and Timeline). In this sense, our findings support previous literature that defends the positive effects that social media might have in moderating selective exposure (Bakshy et al., 2015; Boxell et al., 2017; Dubois & Blank, 2018). Moreover, our findings also refute recent

claims about the relevance of echo chambers or filter bubbles: although this might be true for some citizens, most Spaniards do not inhabit such online environments of ideological affinity.

Regarding the second research question, we found that there is an association between the use of a particular social network site and gaining access to like- and non-like-minded news. However, this association is weak. While Facebook is connected to getting news with a similar ideological position, Twitter allows users to access both dissenting and consenting information. The difference could be related to the effects of algorithms in Facebook's news-stream (Pariser, 2011), which limit the exposure to conflicting viewpoints or to the different nature of the contacts in these two social networks. Further research on the impact of age on the results is also needed, as the over 55 age group is overrepresented within our sample. It is worth noting that older generations access social media less frequently than other age groups, although they do get news more frequently.

To conclude, in a media system such as the Spanish one, characterized by polarization and news media partisanship, citizens have typically been highly affected by a lack of incidental exposure to content that might challenge their political positions or beliefs. Our findings contribute to a better understanding of how elements of the hybrid media system, such as social media, affect traditional patterns of selective and incidental exposure. It seems that Spain could provide evidence against the echo-chamber theory, as Spanish citizens more active in social networks such as Facebook or Twitter are more likely to be incidentally exposed to non-like-minded content. However, the conclusions of this research are limited, as exposure to non-like-minded content is just a first step. Discussion, engagement, and efforts to understand the others' position are also key elements of a healthy democracy. Although exposure to others' opinions is needed, there is no proof that it alone can generate a less polarized society. Further research has to address the role of social networks in shaping Spanish society, especially regarding issues where citizens' views are polarized over a contested political issue that has divided society. Hence, our research points towards an interesting future line of research: The effects that exposure to non-like-minded media has in shaping or influencing citizens' existing views or political positions.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Measuring Online Political Dialogue: Does Polarization Trigger More Deliberation?

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Abstract
In recent years, we have witnessed an increasing consolidation of different realms where citizens can deliberate and discuss a variety of topics of general interest, including politics. The comments on news posts in online media are a good example. The first theoretical contributions called attention to the potential of those spaces to build a *healthy* (civic and participatory) public sphere, going much deeper in the process of political dialogue and deliberation (Fung, Gilman, & Shkabatur, 2013; Lilleker & Jackson, 2008; O'Reilly, 2005; Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011). Polarization has been configured as a constant feature of the quality of the mentioned dialogues, particularly in Mediterranean countries (polarized pluralists' cases). One of the research challenges at the moment has to do with the scrutiny of polarization within the political deliberation provoked by news stories. The goal of this article is the analysis of political dialogue from the perspective of the polarization in the increasingly popular network YouTube, which is presenting very particular characteristics. Using a sample of almost 400,000 posted comments about diverse topics (climate change, the Catalonian crisis, and Political parties' electoral ads) we propose an automated method in order to measure polarization. Our hypothesis is that the number of comments (quantitative variable) is positively related to their polarization (qualitative variable). We will also include in the examination information about the ideological editorial line of newspapers, the type of topic under discussion, the amount of traceable dialogue, etc. We propose an index to (1) measure the polarization of each comment and use it to show how this value has behaved over time; and (2) verify the hypothesis using the average polarization of comments for each video.

Keywords
algorithms; polarization; public sphere; social media; text mining; YouTube

Issue
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1. Introduction

Political interaction is essential for democratic societies. Through dialogue, citizens clarify their points of view, come into contact with the opinions of other parties, and shape the problems that people need to face (Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011). Some scholars have pointed out that conversations about topics of general interest are a requirement for the integral understanding of democratic life and, consequently, are fundamental in order to provide the meaning of effective political participation, reinforcing the legitimacy of democratic systems (Rubio, 2000; Scheufele, 2001).

In the last decade, we have witnessed the proliferation of different online spaces for discussion, information exchange and deliberation that were pointed out as potential spheres for political dialogue. Around the end of the first decade of the 21st Century, when social

media—understood as applications and websites employed to share information and build networks between people (Osborne-Gowey, 2014)—started to gain attention in detriment of other traditional 1.0 online platforms (online newspaper blogs), journalists, analysts, and scholars began to speculate about the real possibility to generate domains where regular citizens could find a space to share information, to portray social and political events, to exchange opinions, and to dialogue, far away (at least in theory) from the biased editorial alignment of international news corporations. Those platforms create a networked sphere of political discussions that is structurally independent from the traditional arena of politics or news; yet, it connects with the two through official affiliations and real-life interactions (Lindgren, 2011). Hence, we have observed the transformation of the public sphere, from a traditional model based on a strongly hierarchical and mainly one-way mass communication, to a network-based multidirectional and horizontal communication (López García, 2006).

Most of the communication research attention on political deliberation in the last years has been focused on the interactions observed in Twitter and Facebook (Conover et al., 2011; Grusell & Nord, 2012; Gruzd & Roy, 2014; Jaidka, Zhou, & Lelkes, 2019; Marichal, 2016; Oz, Zheng, & Chen, 2018). We assume that behind this fact is not only the traditional leadership of those social networks, but also the relatively easier logistic process of extracting and generating samples for analysis. These studies are focused on platforms that were designed to link people together. YouTube, instead, was built as a video log, although its functions are shifting to a more social media like logic. The inclusion of a recommendation system, likes and dislikes, combined with the management of data, enable us to consider YouTube as an online social network (Ma, Wang, Li, Liu, & Jiang, 2013). Thus, it is considered more than just a place to watch and share videos, since it is also used as a learning tool (Allgaier, 2019).

The goal of this article is the analysis of political dialogue from the perspective of the polarization in YouTube, which presents very particular characteristics. Launched in 2005, YouTube is the biggest online video platform worldwide, featuring a wide variety of user-generated and corporate media content, and the second largest social network, in terms of monthly active users, after Facebook. YouTube has more than 1,900 million users that logged in every month, generating more than 1,000 million hours of content, with local versions in 91 countries. Our final purpose is to check what kind of polarization patterns might be observed from comments on YouTube. To this end, we will analyze the comments regarding the most popular videos on three topics: Election commercials, climate change and the Catalonian political conflict; each of which observed in the context of Spain. The final ambition of this proposal is to make methodological progress in the understanding of online political dialogue by the measuring of polarization with an innovative quantitative tool.

2. Political Deliberation

Citizens in democracies, particularly in the Western world and as a consequence of technological developments, are in the best position to participate in public discussions. New environments have displayed an impressive potential to improve democracy, creating more inclusive, receptive, deliberative and participatory political systems, in other words, contributing to the consolidation of an effective public sphere. This central concept has been defined by contemporary political theorists as a communicative space in which matters of common prominence are considered for discussion by those concerned and affected, in a way that fulfils a number of ambitious normative criteria (Dahlberg, 2004). Statements should consist of arguments, supported by an appropriate reasoning whose validity can then be checked by others. The process requires understanding from other participants, and a true and honest effort to come to a shared conclusion. All interested parties should be allowed to participate. Finally, the best arguments should prevail (Schäfer, 2016).

Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, and Rucht (2002) proposed different models of public sphere in today's democracies. They distinguished four types of traditions where this concept finds arrangement, and specified the criteria that each perspective endorses and emphasises regarding who participates, in what sort of processes, how ideas should be presented, and the outcome of the relation between discourse and decision-making. Consequently, we can point out different combinations of criteria based on four theory types: Representative Liberal, Participatory Liberal, Discursive, and Constructionist (Ferree et al., 2002, p. 316).

Social networks show great potential for achieving greater political inclusion and participation, for example, giving visibility to voices marginalized by the mainstream (Berry, Kim, & Spigel, 2010; Bimber, 1998). Social networks also enable engaged citizens to approach other interlocutors to share information, contrast opinions or forge a position regarding a major public event. Therefore, networks have a very high potential to provide the perfect environment to foster dialogue around important policy issues. Unlike other traditional media, social media have facilitated a connection between people, regardless of distance, geographical location or political affiliation. The advent of online media has been considered as a second structural transformation of the public sphere.

Many scholars in the last years have contributed to the discussion on the updated notion of digital public sphere. This new notion includes some renewed important aspects. Following Schäfer, we approach the concept of communicative sphere from a broad perspective, including social media, websites, social network sites, weblogs, and micro-blogs; in all cases, sites where participation is open and freely available to everybody who is interested, where matters of common concern can

be discussed, and where proceedings are visible to all (Schäfer, 2016).

However, the literature shows little agreement on the true scope of the political transformations by social media. Beyond some commonalities, the existing schools of digital public sphere theory differ in what kinds of communication they consider desirable. For almost three decades, different academic contributions (mainly theoretical) have asserted strong hopes and fears regarding the development of an online public sphere and its effects on society. Therefore, there are great doubts about the articulation of an effective, more inclusive and deliberative public sphere which is self-mediated (Chadwick, 2009; Hindman, 2009). We can say that social networks may not be definitive when generating a unified public sphere. Similarly, it is difficult to calibrate how the new social media will consolidate two-way communication channels with institutions, parties and candidates. On the one hand, no one seems to question that online media provide a relatively open, easy, and fast access to information, enable more people to make their voices heard in society, and help to produce new kinds of communication. On the other hand, we can point out other factors stated by some pessimistic scholars: Firstly, equal access to online sources of participation is a fiction, thanks to multiple digital divides. Secondly, the danger of fragmentation into small communities of like-minded people veers from a real exchange between participants (e.g., filter bubbles). Thirdly, the inevitable pressure of economic influences on a biased selection of topics to be discussed. And, lastly, the lack of social courtesy derived from an absent face-to-face communication leads to an irrational, emotional and somehow unrespectful interaction (Schäfer, 2016). In that sense, many skeptics understand that a high level of anonymity can exacerbate uninhibited communicative behaviors, moving in the direction of increased disrespectful and even aggressive political discussion (Rowe, 2014). In this sense, we can observe examples of polarization, radicalization or activism in the so-called trolls. This is what Byung-Chul Han calls 'swarm democracy' (Han, 2014), which could be defined as the private sum of reactive multitudes, which move on the basis of discharges of flattery or disqualification and which, like an earthquake, shake up the spaces provided by social networks. Rather than promoting rational and informed deliberation, social media work by amplifying and modulating an atmosphere of individual and collective feelings and actions (Arias Maldonado, 2016). Thus, the interaction between personal networks is altered, with small-scale movements that, together, will produce enormous effects (Granovetter, 1973). The zero threshold would be filled with individuals who are ready for action and prepared for conflict (Petersen, 2020).

In addition, in recent times we have been able to see how the dissemination of biased and malicious information (fake news), primarily aimed at altering perceptions of political discourses, distributing misinformation or directly manipulating, has influenced the dynamics of online political conversations, and even political outcomes. A recent report from the Pew Research Center estimates that two-thirds of the links tweeted on the most popular pages belong to automatic, non-human accounts (Wojcik, Messing, Smith, Rainie, & Hitlin, 2018).

Currently, polarization has been included as one of the main social and political phenomena of the present century, being a traditional object of study within political communication (see, for example, the excellent study by Sunstein, 2002), especially from the media (Prior, 2013) or political perspectives (Gentzkow, Shapiro, & Taddy, 2016). In that way, the work by Hallin and Mancini (2004) proposed a definition of polarization as partisan coverage by the media and has even constituted the basis of their different models of political and media systems. However, polarization has also been defined as a media or even a political effect (Bernhardt, Krasa, & Polborn, 2008). In addition, we can find other perspectives where this process can be considered as the distance between opposing political views. Some traditional studies in the case of the United States in the last decades are good examples: those focused on the increasing divergences between Democrats and Republicans (Mason, 2014). Those studies on polarization have increased in recent years, especially in the wake of the current political situation in the United States, where there seems to be a feeling of growing dislike and distrust between the supporters of both parties. In fact, the term 'affective polarization' is used to describe it (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, & Westwood, 2019). These contexts offer new meanings and measures that state a potential direction of this development. The case of Spain is not an exception: The political boundaries represented in the national parliament have become sharper in recent years, and two very different and antagonist blocs actively emerged. The phenomenon generated new parties within political wings (Bramson et al., 2017). This portrayal is also replicated at the regional level with another kind of polarization with particular variables and settings. In this sense, we are addressing different and complex involvements developed over time, across populations and comparatives studies (Bramson et al., 2017). Thus, assumptions about the notion of polarization continue open. Its main meaning is related to the growth of the space between poles, caused, mostly, by the influence of emotions and beliefs, above evidence and reason (Goldman & O'Connor, 2019; Mason, 2014; Olsson, 2013). Such distinctions could drive to extreme positions (Fletcher & Jenkins, 2019; Gidron, Adams, & Horne, 2019).

Naturally, with the evolution of the mass media paradigm, new ideas are emerging that reflect the scope of change. One such change (Bessi et al., 2016) is the emergence of non-mediated processes, at least by journalists (Prior, 2013). Another is that the new public sphere is fundamentally virtual. Recently, scholars have found multiple evidence that social media and the general Internet environment can cause an increase in po-

litical or ideological polarization (Tucker et al., 2018). Particularly, research on online deliberation has identified a series of problems with online debate: Groups are often composed of like-minded people, so issues that generate disagreement or difficulty tend to be avoided. At the same time, a spiral of analogous reasoning occurs where deliberation does not exist (Wright, Graham, & Jackson, 2017). To reflect that, some authors coined the concept of 'echo chambers' (Bail et al., 2018). Those chambers have the effect of isolating individuals from opposing points of view, spinning the polarizing effects. But there are authors who claim that these effects can come from selective exposure, for example on Facebook (Spohr, 2017). However, almost all these studies focus on the consumption of information on Facebook or Twitter (Conover et al., 2011), defined even as junk news (Narayanan et al., 2018).

Continuing in this vein, social network products must be approached from new perspectives due to new semantic styles and the large amount of data available. Our aim is to understand how deliberation occurs and whether it could be derived from an apparent polarization (Bramson et al., 2017).

3. Design

Our basic assumption is that an increase in political deliberation should trigger more polarization. Hence:

> H1: There is a direct relation between polarization and deliberation.

Given the volume of literature on social media polarization, the lack of operational definitions is surprising. Scholars often assume that polarization is a result of differing views on ideological or political issues, but offer few clues on how to measure this dynamic. From this perspective, we can define polarization as "the existence of two or more alternative and relatively coherent visions that contradict their most important elements. Polarized coverage tends to strongly criticize the opposing view, making the public more reluctant to consider the opposing position legitimate" (Balán, 2013, p. 477).

But the problem still persists: How do we measure polarization? We propose to use Balan's definition centered in the existence of criticism to try to create a consistent way to measure this concept. Polarization, then, implies that people "hold overwhelmingly positive views of their own co-partisans and highly negative views of those on the other side of the political spectrum" (Gentzkow, 2016, p. 13). Therefore, we can affirm that the wider the distance between positive and negative statements, the greater polarization of the topic (or text). In fact, polarization itself can be the aforementioned distance.

Nowadays, there are different tools for measuring positive and negative texts, fundamentally sentiment analysis. This type of analysis, used routinely by both industry and academia, is the basis of many tools and computer algorithms. Sentiment analysis—and opinion mining—is the field of study that analyzes people's opinions, sentiments, evaluations, attitudes, and emotions in written language. It is one of the most active research areas in natural language processing and is also widely studied in data mining, Web mining, and text mining (Liu, 2012). Although sentiment analysis can use different techniques, there are usually two approaches: The use of a supervised learning algorithm trained with human coded data; or the use of a lexicon (a dictionary) to infer the tone of the text through an automated analysis (based on the presence of a specific keyword, a group of them, or a *bag* of words). The first approach works well when dealing within specific topics (García-Marín & Calatrava, 2018) and the second is more transversal but may offer less accuracy if the lexicon is not adequately created (Boukes, van de Velde, Araujo, & Vliegenthart, 2019). Although sentiment analysis has been justly criticized, it does offer some useful information to researchers, as long as it is based on well-weighted dictionaries (Boukes et al., 2019).

There are not many sentiment lexicons for languages other than English, but the number is growing. However, many of them are just automatic translations using different resources, such as Google Translator, which can lead to important mismatches. In the case of the Spanish language, there are several dictionaries designed specifically for sentiment analysis. In this research we are going to use ML-SentiCon. We consider it an ideal resource: It has been evaluated (something not too common) and corrected (at least in 4 of 8 layers), and consequently is not a mere translation. It has 8 layers, depending on reliability, from more to less reliable. The first layer has 97.73% and the last 61.29%: We have decided to use 6 layers, accumulating 2848 words with a reliability of 86.09%. The results are significantly lower than those obtained for the English language but we understand that they are enough for the measurement of polarization in the Spanish language (Cruz, Troyano, Pontes, & Ortega, 2014). Since sentiment analysis is not an accurate measure of polarization, in this article we propose a way to measure polarization from our corpus. We propose the development of an index to quantify this phenomenon, through the weighting of values with which to operate (Ferrando, 1987, p. 34). To that end we have operationalized the polarization of a comment (*Pc*) from the distance between the sentiment analysis of the comments (*S*) and the median of the sentiment analysis aggregate of all the comments of each processed video (*Me*), in absolute number. In this way we obtain a number that can take any value between 0 and 2, where 0 is no polarization and 2 is the maximum polarization:

$$Pc = |(S - Me)|, \text{ where } S \in [-1, 1], p \in (0, 2)$$

Then, the median of the polarization measure has been calculated again to give each video an average polarization ($Py = Me \vee (S - MeS) \vee py = Me(pc)$) that was useful to relate this dimension *e* to the rest of the vari-

ables of each video. Therefore, the results of applying the formula are as follows: a measure of the polarization of each comment, used to show how polarization has behaved over time; and, second, a measure of the average comment's polarization of each video, used to observe the specific connections in order to demonstrate our hypothesis.

The database is composed of YouTube video interactions. We decided to use YouTube because it stands out from other social media in that the video is the primary piece, leaving the text on a secondary level. However, the interactions that open up within it are multiple. In this way, we will have the possibility of analyzing very broad patterns of behavior (number of views, likes or dislikes, replies,…), as well as the potential relationships between them.

Data extraction took place on October 25, 2019. The collection was based on three topics and two search patterns, producing a total of 600 videos, disaggregated as shown in Table 1. The first pattern was the use of the following keywords in the YouTube search engine: "cambio climático" (climate change) and "independencia de cataluña" (independence of Catalonia), from which the 200 most viewed videos per topic were selected. The second search pattern was selected from the YouTube channels of the five Spanish parties with the most parliamentary representation after the April 2019 elections: PSOE, PP, Ciudadanos, Podemos, and Vox. The 40 most viewed pieces posted by political groups within their respective channels were selected, resulting in a total of 200 videos. Out of the total 600 videos, 19 of them had the comment board disabled: 12 of these were from political parties, 4 on "independencia de cataluña" and 3 on "cambio climático."

The final result of the search, and subsequent cleansing, produced a total corpus of 391,591 comments divided into:

- "Catalonian independence": 162,789
- "Climate change" (as a hoax or scientific fact): 124,820
- Political parties' videos (their official channels): 103,982

Of course, we decided to use these three topics because we understand that they are susceptible to producing polarizing behavior.

4. Results

We believe that the proposed measure of polarization has a great explanatory potential (Figure 1). In the three cases analyzed, the images show important details that, to a great extent, portray the actual informative dynamic. In the case of Catalonia (at the top in Figure 1), there are two clear points: September-December 2017 and September-October 2019. Both are the moments of greatest tension in the political conflict: The first represents the failed declaration of independence and, the second, the Supreme Court's decisions on some pro-independence Catalonian politicians (with minor peaks that coincide with elections in Catalonia in recent years). The second case, on climate change, is less evident, since there are no important events in this regard, although there is a clear increase in polarization during the analyzed years. And finally, in the case of political parties, there are also some peaks that mainly correspond to electoral periods in Spain. That is, we think that, in fact, measuring polarization as the difference between positive and negative feelings has great explanatory potential.

As mentioned before, we consider the three topics as potentially polarizing. Although the proposed index shows great explanatory potential, Table 2 indicates that the hypothesis is negative. That is, the relationship between the number of comments and their polarization is not positive in all cases. Specifically, there is a positive, although weak, relationship for the cases of climate change and political parties, but not for the Catalonian political conflict.

Of course, the same behavior is reproduced with the rest of the variables: The number of visits, comments, likes or dislikes present the same results. This is not really surprising, since they are numerical variables that tend to increase as a whole (i.e., the more visits, the more likes, dislikes, and comments). We understand, then, that contextual differences, specific to each topic, affect the results.

At the moment, it seems difficult to understand how the deliberations in social media could become polarized. There may indeed be underlying factors that favor it, such as confirmation bias and content promotion algorithms. Both situations could encourage the construction of echo chambers (Bessi et al., 2016). However, in our study we have observed that there are aspects that differ. In the case of videos on climate change and those of

Table 1. Analyzed videos and comments from YouTube.

	Videos	Views	Comments	Likes	Dislikes	Views for comment	Med_Pol	SD
Catalonian independence	192	37.765.741	163.545	430.074	151.717	230	0.23	0.07
Climate change	186	68.460.219	104.175	1.019.987	67.450	657	0.19	0.10
Political parties´	159	44.239.860	124.019	672.596	123.015	357	0.20	0.08
Total	537	150.465.820	391.739	2.122.657	342.182		0.20	0.08

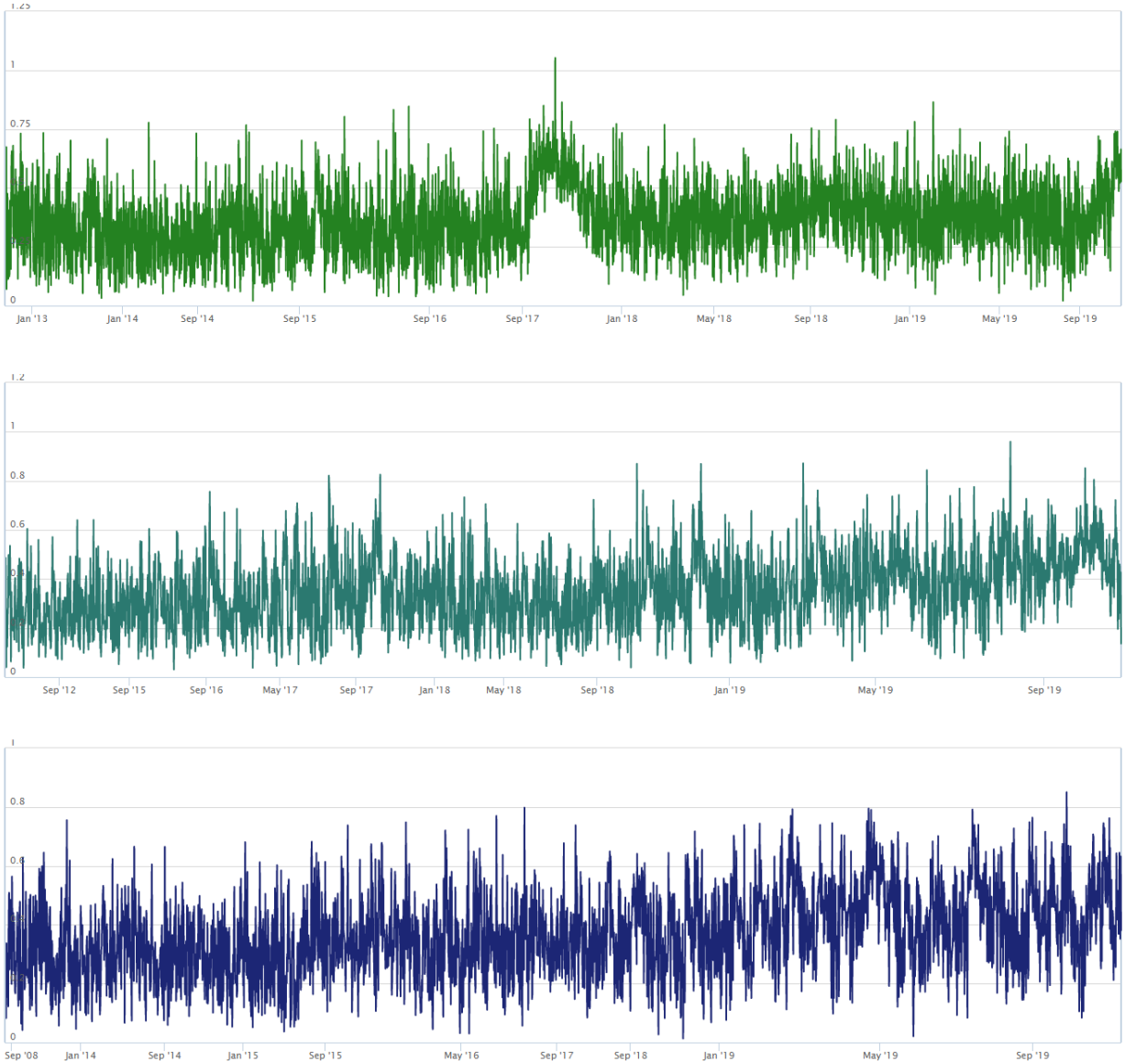

Figure 1. Polarization through time: Catalonian independence, climate change and political parties (from top to bottom).

political parties, the presence of this polarization could be influenced by the presence of active trolls that radicalize the conversation. Nonetheless, there could also be external factors that we have not controlled. However, the conflict in Catalonia behaves differently. Although the index does seem to be illustrative, the correlations reject the model based on the fact that greater participation produces greater polarization. However, the behavior of deliberation in the Catalonian conflict is similar to the other issues on very specific dates, such as September and October 2017 (see Figure 1). In that year, 2017, different events took place, such as the so-

Table 2. Spearman correlations (polarization) (R_s).

	All (n = 537)	Climate change (n = 186)	Catalonian independence (n = 192)	Political parties (n = 159)
Publish_date	0.161**	0.265**	0.090	0.043
ViewCount	0.048	0.215**	−0.027	0.151
Comments	0.269**	0.311**	−0.005	0.400**
Likes	0.100*	0.228**	−0.076	0.220**
Dislikes	0.144**	0.248**	−0.015	0.236**

Notes: * significant at $p < 0.01$; ** significant at $p < 0.001$.

called Disconnection Law or the October 1st referendum (in both cases serious and polemic attacks against the Spanish constitution). These two events attracted a great deal of media attention and, accordingly, also the interest of YouTube users. This trend seems to be manifesting itself again in the following major media event, which took place in October 2019 (ruling of the Spanish Supreme Court on the events of 2017). Undoubtedly, there are temporal trends that, unlike previous periods—such as 2014-, are more likely to relate greater participation to greater polarization, as occurred in the other two issues. These discrepancies open the door to new ideas that should be investigated, to explain how in certain scenarios polarization is not instigated by participation.

So, how do we interpret the Catalonian case? The first thing we can say is that, surprisingly, the Catalonian case is characterized by less polarization (except for some very specific dates). This fact, on the other hand, may be consistent with some findings by the academic community. Firstly, perhaps the most obvious factor is the traditional media attention. When this is greater, the behavior of polarization seems to resemble that of other issues. However, when there is not such a presence, the open discussions linked to these videos are not affected by constant polarization, leaving the polarization index without very high values (which does not mean, in any case, that it is positive or negative). Secondly, this argument can accommodate (not replace) a moderate influence driven by filter bubbles. That is, a separation in media consumption could occur according to ideological position. That consumption would be moderated, surely, by activism (the more activism, the more consumption of related information). And the effect would be similar: a low polarization, since the ideological point of view of the participants is similar.

At present, these effects act as echo chambers and filter bubbles. This conception has been intense, especially since 2009, when Google began to modify its search engine to suit the user (Pariser, 2011). While filter bubbles are generated from an unconscious action of the user, echo chambers must prevail consciously, hence one may be part of the other. The assumption that differentiates the two is the willingness and predisposition for users to manifest in the creation of an environment (Klapper, 1960; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015; Rubin, 2002) governed by scales of reliability: constituents (unaided), major fundraisers, local media, colleagues, national media, advertising & lobbyists (Scruggs, 1998). In order to construct the bubble within the network, and to generate the alteration of behavior, it is necessary to develop both analogical and digital reflections (Holbert & Stephenson, 2003).

In the case of the other two topics, a partisan (ideological) predisposition towards the topic under discussion is especially palpable in the videos of political parties where the predisposition towards certain channels is influenced by external factors (Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015). This would make focus on certain YouTube channels (not on specific videos) interesting, such as those of political parties.

If that is true, the data would show that YouTube content is permeable to the traditional media agenda (which, in turn, can be an indicator of the popularity of an issue, not its origin). In other words, there are moderators to be controlled. This dynamic could cause the debate to shift and polarize in YouTube (due to the possibilities that the platform offers). In other words, events of great media interest (the dates mentioned of 2017 and 2019 for the Catalonian case or the specific dates of the political parties' election campaigns), are more favorable to a positive correlation between participation and polarization.

5. Conclusion

The first conclusion is that the main hypothesis has not been fully verified. There are no significant relationships suggesting that increased participation leads to increased polarization, at least at the aggregate level. There are indications that such a relationship may exist at specific time periods or for specific issues. This shows (especially in the Catalonian issue) that there are intervening variables (the context, the issue, the time frame, etc.) that have not been controlled. These variables are not playing comparable roles in the three topics under examination. This could help to explain disparities in the significance. Despite this, new computer techniques do prove useful for a better understanding of these phenomena, especially when working with large data sets. Thus, we believe that this study sheds light on YouTubers' behavior, which is part of our purpose. However, it is necessary to develop different tools to understand the functioning of polarization in social networks. The methodology presented has proven to be reliable during the analysis in measuring the polarization of YouTube comments. According to its conception, it could be used on different samples of very different nature. In turn, YouTube has shown to be a network without as many limits as Facebook or Twitter, and less opaque.

As Sunstein (2008) points out, to the extent that there are different social media networks, and within them an almost infinite variety of compartments, regular users end up choosing their interlocutors and the most comfortable space for them. In this sense, it is argued that networks constitute 'echo chambers' in which we only hear the echo of our own predispositions. Consequently, in such spaces contact between groups with different opinions could be more difficult and reinforcement mechanisms could become the main effects. Moreover, the fragmentation of public opinion can have a reducing effect on social cohesion.

Thus, we could expect a deeper radicalization of the opinions of Internet users who never confront their potential opponents online. Therefore, a mechanism similar to that announced by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet in the 1940s (1960) could emerge, based on selective perceptions, which would be reactivated in a

somewhat different way. These mechanisms would point in a similar direction by reinforcing rather than challenging or opposing previous inclinations towards public issues.

As we insisted before, there is a tension between an 'optimistic' approach, which argues that social networks enable interaction between different citizens and thus foster pluralistic debates, and a critical approach, which argues that networks facilitate segregation across ideological lines and then reduce debates by avoiding the contact of contradictory opinions. Discussions about the potential and actual role of social media in public debate are often foreshortened to a mere contest between utopian and dystopian perspectives (Bruns, 2018): It is the balance between utopian and dystopian visions that unveils the true nature of the Internet as a public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002). Although, in order to conclude, we can affirm that the social media, undoubtedly, show a great capacity to respond to citizens' needs. This fact becomes much more important in the current context of disaffection and political unpredictability. The possibilities of social networks are enormous. In political terms, we can recognize beneficial effects: (a) they help to make political discourse more pluralistic; (b) they facilitate greater public involvement and allow citizens to monitor and control power and participate in decision-making; (c) they produce and offer more information; and (d) they provide new formats for the transmission of political content. Even so, the revolution presented by the media is complex and on countless levels. We are talking about systems that are growing all the time, changing the process and the function. This kind of evolution can be seen in the constant dynamism used in the algorithms they employ. In this way, we could find enormous improvements in the development of computing applied to the web. In that sense, we can underline the adjustment implemented by Google in its browser and platforms—YouTube is a good example of it (Covington, Adams, & Sargin, 2016), going from simple machine learning to elaborate neural networks. We assume that the contribution from academia will be to enhance models and techniques of research in order to prevent, insofar as possible, adverse potential effects.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Social Media, Populism, and Migration

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Abstract
Several scholars have attributed high hopes to social media regarding their alleged ability to enable a nonhierarchical and freely accessible debate among the citizenship (Loader & Mercea, 2011; Shirky, 2011). Those hopes have culminated in theses such those describing the social web as being a 'new public sphere' (Castells, 2009, p. 125) as well as in expectations regarding its revitalizing potential for the 'Habermas's public sphere' (Kruse, Norris, & Flinchum, 2018, p. 62). Yet, these assumptions are not uncontested, particularly in the light of socially mediated populism (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018). Interestingly, research on populism in the social web is still an exception. The same is true for the populist permeation of the social media discourse on migration, as a highly topical issue. This study seeks to elaborate on this research gap by examining to what extent the Twitter debate on the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM) was permeated by populist content. For this purpose, almost 70,000 tweets on the most important Hashtags referring to the GCM that took place in Marrakesh in December 2018 were collected and the 500 widest-reaching tweets analysed in terms of their populist permeation. Against initial expectations, the empirical findings show that populist narratives did not dominate the Twitter debate on migration. However, the empirical results indicate that ordinary citizens play an important role in the creation and dissemination of populist content. It seems that the social web widens the public sphere, including those actors who do not communicate in accordance with the Habermasian conceptualization of it.

Keywords
migration; populism; social media; Twitter

Issue
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1. Introduction

It is widely assumed that social media has become an integral part of the public sphere (Castells, 2009; Papacharissi, 2009; Shirky, 2011). Castells (2009, p. 125), as one of the most prominent proponents of a network society, even speaks of the emergence of a 'new public sphere.' However, there are also critical voices (Kruse, Norris, & Flinchum, 2018) stating that citizens do not engage on social media in a way that matches the well-known criteria from the concept of 'communicative rationality' as established by Habermas (1984, 1989). Already in the late 1990s and early 2000s, researchers were able to demonstrate that illiberal voices were more visible on the Internet than liberal ones (Hill & Hughes, 1998, p. 153) and hypothesized that the "growth of virtual counter-public spheres" (Downey & Fenton, 2003, p. 199) would lead to an increasing impact of rightist actors on the public debate. This article intends to contribute to the long-running discussion on the influence of digital media on the public sphere by analysing the populist permeation of social media discourse on migration. The focus on populism and migration seems reasonable since populist communication strategies have to be seen as the exact opposite of the Habermasian ideal of communicative rationality and thus as a challenge for the public sphere (Privitera, 2018). The populist challenge is especially noticeable in the public debate on migration, which has recently become a major issue (Heidenreich, Eberl, Lind, & Boomgaarden, 2020, p. 1261). While there are studies on the degree of populist pervasion of mass media (Rooduijn, 2014), as well as on the mass media

coverage of migration (Eberl et al., 2018) and the social media discourse on migration (Heidenreich et al., 2020), no research concerning social media, populism, and migration has been conducted so far.

The main empirical objective of this article is to form a better understand the characteristic of the populist discourse concerning migration on social media. For the purpose of this article, the global Twitter discourse on the intergovernmental signing conference of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM) in Marrakesh in December 2018 will be examined. This study will focus on Twitter due to its significance for the agendas of the mass media and thereby for the wider perception of political issues. It has been shown that mainstream news media frequently respond to trending topics on Twitter (Araujo & van der Meer, 2020, p. 634), which can be observed especially well concerning the mass media coverage of tweets by the US American President Donald Trump (Fuchs, 2017, pp. 53–54). The usage of Twitter as a source for news media is very common among journalists. One might even speak of "a reversed agenda-setting pattern" (Araujo & van der Meer, 2020, p. 647). Thus, debates on Twitter influence the public debate outside the Twitter realm.

The following questions will guide the investigation: (RQ1) how strongly was the Twitter discourse on migration permeated with populist content during the signing conference on the GCM? Since this article deals with migration, in other words, with the core issue of right-wing populist actors (Jagers & Walgraave, 2007, p. 322; Lutz, 2018, p. 517), this article is especially interested in the number of right-wing populist tweets. If it emerges that there were (right-wing) populist tweets, the following question arise: (RQ2) which populist communication strategies were employed? Thus, this study sheds light on the degree of populist content in the online discourse regarding migration (content dimension: What is published?) and about populist communication strategies (strategic dimension: How is populist content published?). It needs to be stressed that this article is not solely interested in social media activities of political actors who are well-known for their populist attitude, but also in those of 'ordinary' citizens since their populist activities also have to be examined if one wants to fully understand populism on social media. Moreover, the concept of the public sphere requires the "equal and protected participation" (Kruse et al., 2018, p. 63) in public debates. Since social media is credited with free access and a non-hierarchical structure of debate, it seems to match those key features of the Habermas's public sphere. Even though the focus of this article is on social media and populism, it aims to make an empirical contribution to the primarily theoretic debate on the public sphere.

In Section 2, a brief explanation of the GCM is presented. The following part of the article intends to present a conceptualisation of the term 'populism,' as well as an overview of the current state of research on populism and social media. A specific focus is placed on the role of non-elite actors in the realm of populism since this aspect has been widely neglected by academic research. Before the empirical part of the study is described in detail (Section 5), I will give an insight into the research design of this article and its methods (Section 4). The article concludes with a summary of the main findings and an indication of further aspects to be examined (Section 6).

2. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration

The GCM is seen as an extremely important compact in the realm of international migration policy since it is the "first negotiated United Nations document to address migration governance comprehensively and to receive wide support" (Bloom, 2019, p. 481). The GCM is the result of a UN Resolution—the so-called New York Declaration of 2016 (United Nations Human Rights, 2016). This declaration places the GCM in the wider context of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The New York Declaration launches a sequence of intergovernmental consultations and negotiations towards the development of a GCM. This subsequent process concluded with the adoption of the GCM by 164 UN member states at a signing conference in Morocco. The formal endorsement by the UN General Assembly took place on December 19th (International Organisation for Migration, 2019). The agenda, as well as the compact, stresses the potential of migration for enriching the societies of the recipient countries. The main objective of the GCM is the reduction of risk and vulnerability during the migration process by establishing an international framework. The final version of the GCM includes several mentions of the state's human rights obligations concerning migrants (Guild, Basaran, & Allinson, 2019; United Nations, 2020). The closing statement of the signing conference by Louis Arbor (Special Representative of the Secretary-General for International Migration) includes the notion that the GCM has to be seen as "a re-affirmation of the values and principles embodied in the UN Charter" and as a commitment "to safer and fairer ways of managing borders" (United Nations, 2018). Although the GCM is not legally binding, and although the principle of state sovereignty remains unaffected (Bloom, 2019, p. 482), its adoption was preceded and accompanied by an extensive and mostly adversarial debate in several countries which even lead to some governments to refuse to sign it (e.g., US, Hungary, Poland, Austria, Italy). The US government, for example, rejected signing the GCM with reference to its right to decide "how to secure its borders, and whom to admit for legal residency" (US Mission to the United Nations, 2018). Other governments made a similar argument. The potential loss of sovereignty seems to have influenced the debate, although the compact in its own right has given no cause for this fear.

3. Populism and Social Media

Despite the frequently mentioned ambiguity in terms of the populism concept (Müller, 2016, p. 2), one finds central elements that have been part of most definitions of the concept. One of the oldest, though most important elements of populism, is the "reference to an analogical basis which is the people" (Laclau, 1979, p. 165). The appeal to 'the people' as a very basic aspect of populism confronts researcher with the problem that 'the people' "is a concept without a defined theoretical status" (Laclau, 1979, p. 165). This might be one reason for the "ambiguity surrounding 'populism"' (Laclau, 1979, p. 165). Bearing this in mind, a meaningful conceptualization of populism, as a prerequisite for a valid operationalization (see Section 4), needs additional definition criteria. Thus, almost all conceptualizations of populism contain anti-elitism as a second very basic criterion. Anti-elitism is, in the words of Canovan (1999, p. 3), "directed not just at the political and economic establishments but also opinion-formers in the academy and the media." It seems important to understand that "populism challenges not only established power-holders but also elite values" (Canovan, 1999, p. 3). Mudde (2004, p. 543) sums up the aforementioned conceptualization fragments well when he states that populism "considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups" and in which the so-called pure people are exploited by a corrupt elite. Thus, populists prefer politics to be "an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people." The last aspect refers to the alleged goal of populists, namely to ensure that the will of the people is enacted against the resistance of the so-called elite. Analysing the recent academic debate on populism, it seems fair to conclude that the aforementioned core elements of the long-standing discussion about a useful conceptualization of the term populism—people-centrism, anti-elitism, and restoring the sovereignty of the (good) people—are more or less consensual (Meléndez & Kaltwasser, 2019, p. 520). Those elements point out that "populist politics is not ordinary, routine politics," but politics with an "extra emotional ingredient," that "can turn politics into a campaign to save the country or to bring about a great renewal," as Canovan (1999, p. 6) put it. Right-wing populism can be understood as a specific characteristic of populism (Krämer, 2017, p. 1295). One of its special characteristics is its strong emphasis on 'the others' (Bobba, 2019, p. 16). This aspect refers to groups other than the elites who are suspected of endangering "people's values, identities and rights" (Bobba, 2019, p. 13), namely to "different ethnicities, cultures, or nations" (Krämer, 2017, p. 1296).

Most of the research on populism has been conducted in terms of traditional mass media. Academic research on populism and mass media has revealed, among other things, an "affinity between a populist communication style and 'media logic"' (Sorensen, 2018, p. 2). Interestingly the same seems to hold for populism and the logic of social media. Bartlett (2014, p. 106) considers that populist actors would profit from the prevalence of said new digital media since their inherent logic would match perfectly with their communication style. There is plenty of research on the logic of social media, from which we know that "emotional, controversial, even violent content typical of much populist activism" (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018, p. 3) is shared by users of those social networking sites much more frequently than messages with a balanced expression of opinion. This is why populist messages frequently have such a resonance on social media (Bobba, 2019, p. 11). Due to the horizontal network architecture of Twitter and other social media tools, messages can spread to huge publics: "In the context of Twitter, a handful of hops in a retweet chain is enough to reach a substantial audience and saturation is usually reached within one day" (Araujo & van der Meer, 2020, p. 636).

As journalists are especially interested in trending topics, populist news on social media is very likely to spill over in the traditional media system and thereby extend the reach of a tweet dramatically. Moreover, populist tweets often contain a higher news value, since journalist tend to select negative and sensational content, which has been well described by the theory of news selection (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Lippmann, 1922; Östgaard, 1965). The key news factors, described in the theory of news values, also seem to be an important selection criterion for the public, as Araujo and van der Meer (2020, p. 637) put it with reference to Eilders (2006). Thus, populist messages on Twitter and other social media platforms are very likely to be exported and noticed beyond the boundaries of their origin (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Araujo and van der Meer (2020, p. 647) witness a dynamic interplay between Twitter and traditional media. The connection between traditional media and digital media was prominently described by Chadwick (2017) who named this new communication eco-system a 'hybrid media system.' Especially "'elite' populist actors" (Krämer, 2017, p. 1294), such as political parties, know about the different media logics and the connection between the traditional and the new media and apply a populist communication style, not only because it matches their worldview, but also strategically to spread their messages on social media and traditional media. This strategy comes as no surprise, since populist actors, as Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018, p. 3) put it, "have everywhere constantly relied on the visibility and the ensuing popularity assured by the coverage, both critical and supportive, of mainstream and popular media." It should be noted that social media is used by populist actors to "bypass the forceful power of mass media" (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018, p. 3), as well as to influence their agenda (Casero-Ripollés, Sintes-Olivella, & Franch, 2017, p. 689).

The majority of the studies in the field of social media and populism deal with the communication of well-known populist politicians and political parties and

in particular with right-wing populist actors (Arzheimer, 2015; Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2016; Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018; Stier, Posch, Bleier, & Strohmaier, 2017). This focus is quite reasonable since the usage of populist communication strategies is most obvious in the context of professional politicians who are known for their populist attitude, such as Matteo Salvini from the rightist Italian party *Lega Nord* (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018, p. 4). Right-wing politicians are particularly successful on social media, as several authors, including Bobba (2019) with regard to Italy, demonstrates. Ernst, Engesser, Büchel, Blassnig, and Esser (2017, p. 1356), have furthermore shown that "politicians belonging to right parties use populist communication strategies most frequently" (see also Jagers & Walgraave, 2007). Besides research on "'elite' populist actors" (Krämer, 2017, p. 1294), only minor attention has been given to "non–elite actors" (Krämer, 2017, p. 1294). Yet, most of the social media users are just average citizens. To the best of the authors' knowledge, so far only Hameleers and Schmuck (2017, p. 1425) distinguish "between populist politicians and ordinary citizens as communicators of populist messages" in an empirical article. The authors (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017, p. 1428) examine the effects of populist social media messages on the attitude of Austrians and Netherlanders in terms of blaming the government and migrants. A distinction is made between the effects of politicians' messages and messages from ordinary citizens. The authors are able to demonstrate that participants of the study who identify with the sender of a populist message, accept this message and become themselves more populist (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017, p. 1437). This finding is true for messages from politicians and ordinary citizens, which clearly indicates that theoretical as well as empirical knowledge on populist online activism of ordinary citizens is necessary in order to fully understand the populist penetration of today's (virtual) public sphere (Krämer, 2017, p. 1296). The need to fill this research gap has become even more urgent since the finding of Taggart (2018, p. 81), who demonstrates that a populist attitude is a potentially facilitating factor for many forms of political engagement. Anduiza, Guinjoan, and Rico (2019, p. 110) state that it is not distrust and frustration (Meléndez & Kaltwasser, 2019, p. 521) nor the feeling of being humiliated by the elites (Eberl & Seubert, 2017, pp. 4–5), but it is the framing of elites as evil forces that political engagement thrives on. Engagement against the hideous elite thus may become a moral imperative. Furthermore, it is plausible that the populist idea of a political system in which the people should express their will directly exerts a positive effect on the political engagement of the bearer of this idea. Consequently, populist attitudes seem not to facilitate conventional modes of political participation, like voting, but more direct forms, "such as petition signing and the online expression of political views" (Anduiza et al., 2019, p. 109). These findings indicate that citizens with a populist identity are particularly active in non-electoral times, which has also been shown to be true by Pirro and Portos (2020). Since Facebook, Twitter, and all the other newly emerged tools are easy-to-use, with cheap and wide-reaching information and communication technologies, they have to be seen as perfect instruments for professional and non-professional actors with a populist attitude to disseminate their political positions.

The findings presented so far indicate that the social web is far from being able to match the Habermasian criteria of communicative rationality. However, there are strong—albeit mostly theoretical—voices that speak in favour of the social web, as the new realm in which a nonhierarchical and truth-seeking discourse might take place (Loader & Mercea, 2011; Shirky, 2011). The debate on the deliberative potential of social media has not yet been finalized. Section 5 will shed some more light on this debate by examining the Twitter discussion on migration regarding its populist permeation. Before, an insight into the research design and methodology is given.

4. Research Design and Methodology

4.1. Sample

For the analysis, almost 70,000 tweets (including metadata, such as the sender's information) on the ten most important transnational hashtags on migration were mined ($N = 69{,}153$). The following hashtags have been streamed, using the R package streamR which simplifies access to the Twitter application programming interface (Barberá, 2018): #GlobalCompactMigration, #Global Compact, #UNMigrantCompact, #GCM, #Migration Compact, #CompactOnMigration, #Marrakesh Declaration, #ImmigrationPact, #MassMigration, and #MigrationPact. The data collection phase for Twitter communication on migration lasted for two weeks from December 5th, 2018 to December 19th, 2018, covering the period before the signing conference of the GCM in Marrakesh took place and the days following the conference. Since several tweets were simply re-tweets with (exactly) the same content, only the widest-reaching doublets were kept. Thus, the sample was reduced to 14,566 tweets.

4.2. Measuring the Populist Permeation of the Twitter Discourse

Since populism has to be seen as a complex construct, automated methods should not be used for coding the populist content of a tweet. Thus, most empirical studies on social media and populism work with manual coding (Ernst et al., 2017). This article will follow in these (methodological) footsteps. As it is hardly feasible to code each tweet on migration, an indicator is needed to identify the level of populism in the Twitter debate on migration: the populist permeation of the 500 most popular tweets in the sub-sample of 14,566 tweets. The popularity of a tweet is measured by its number of re-

tweets and appreciations (so-called 'favoritings'). The share of tweets that can be classified as populist will be investigated (RQ1). If it emerges that there are populist tweets, the question arises: Which populist communication strategies have been used (RQ2). In addition, an automatically conducted word pair analysis of the initial sample of almost 70,000 tweets will be applied to check the validity of the results from the manual coding procedure.

To classify populist tweets, a content analysis coding schema is used that was established by Ernst et al. (2017). See Table 1 in the Supplementary File for this article, which is available online. The schema consists of nine sub-categories of populism or rather communication strategies, which represent the three core dimensions of populism: (1) anti-elitism, (2) people-centrism and (3) restoring the sovereignty of the people. Due to the article's special interest in the occurrence of right-wing populism in the context of the migration debate on Twitter, an anti-migration dimension is added to the coding schema that consists of a modified set of the anti-elitist sub-categories. By using that schema, one or more than one sub-dimension of populism can be assigned to each tweet (unit of analysis). Since the existence of a single dimension hardly indicates that any particular tweet is populist, only those tweets that contain at least one communication strategy from at least two of the three core dimensions of populism (anti-elitism, people-centrism, restoring the sovereignty of the people) are coded as populist, furthermore, tweets need to additionally contain at least one anti-migration statement to be coded as right-wing populist. Figure 1 illustrates the coding approach. The first statement is coded as an anti-elitist statement, since it calls the Irish government treacherous (discrediting the elite) and the second statement as people-centrist, as it states a monolithic people and stresses the people's virtues. Because there are only two populist dimensions in this tweet, it is coded as a populist one, but not as a right-wing populist one due to the lack of an anti-migration statement. It should be noted that the coding was only conducted by one coder. This surely has to be seen as a methodological shortcoming.

4.3. Bot or Not

In the academic, as well as in the public debate the activities and the influence of fake profiles on Twitter are subject of controversial debate. This is why many academic researchers use bot detection applications. Yet, frequently used programs to detect bots have recently been criticised by Twitter for their "extremely limited approach" (Roth & Pickles, 2020), which may cause "false negatives (i.e., bots being classified as humans) and false positives (i.e., humans being classified as bots)," as Rauchfleisch and Kaiser (2020, p. 1) put it. With regard to inauthentic content from human Twitter users (e.g., state-driven trolls), the situation becomes even more complex. Yet, there is recent research indicating that "that their effect on social platforms was minor" (Zannettou et al., 2019, p. 218). Interestingly, journalists, who are very important disseminators of Twitter content, seem unfamiliar with 'fact-checking and verification services'—despite the controversies on the malicious use of automation on Twitter and the alleged influence of trolls. The same seems to be true for the public (Varol & Uluturk, 2020, p. 98). It would seem to follow that neither the majority of professional opinion-makers nor its recipients distinguish between authentic and inauthentic content on Twitter. This comes as no surprise since it is actually not that easy to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic activity. Taking all the above arguments into account, an examination of tweets regarding their authenticity (was this particular tweet created by a bot, a troll or an authentic user?) is not conducted. However, it needs to be stressed that the empirical results of this study potentially might have been influenced by inauthentic content. This has to be taken into account when reading the following section.

5. Empirical Findings: The Populist Permeation of the Twitter Dialogue on Migration

First of all, it is interesting to note that all of the 500 widest-reaching tweets are re-tweets. Most of them refer to professional political actors. Yet, only 12 tweets match the applied operationalization of a populist tweet (2.40 percent) and only two the conceptualization of right-wing populism. Additionally, it should be noted that their reach has to be considered as rather low since only one of those tweets initiated more than 1,000 retweets and favoritings (see Table 2 and Table 3 in the Supplementary File). Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that 10 of those 14 (right-wing) populist tweets contain at least one anti-elitist and one people-centrist statement. This indicates that anti-elitism and people-

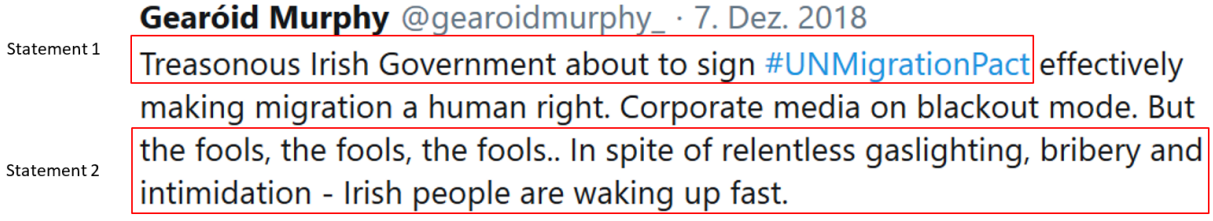

Figure 1. Coding of a tweet: Example for the coding approach. Source: Murphy (2018).

centrism is the most frequently used populist combination in the discourse on migration. Furthermore, we found both dimensions occur most frequently (Figure 2), yet, in most cases not combined. This finding supports the classical conceptualization of populism, in which anti-elitism and people-centrism have been seen as the two very basic elements of populism (Canovan, 1999; Laclau, 1979). By taking a closer look at the anti-elitist dimension, one finds that blaming and discrediting elites occur the most. Regarding the people-centrist dimension, stating the existence of a monolithic people has to be seen as the most prominent communication strategy.

A prominent example of a populist tweet is one created by the leader of the UK Independence Party in Wales stating that "any politician who willingly signs up to the #MigrationCompact has betrayed their people" (Shelly, 2018). This tweet contains the two core elements of populism: anti-elitism (all politicians that sign the GCM are fraudsters) and people-centrism (the people will be betrayed). The description of elites as being treasonous to the people, who are described as sharing common feelings, desires and opinions on the GCM seems to be a popular strategy of populist actors in the realm of the Twitter debate on the GCM since this accusation can be found in several other populist tweets. There is talk about, e.g., the "treasonous…Government" (O'Neill, 2018), government acting "is against its own people" (Martin, 2018), "High Treason against" (Walters, 2018) the people, betrayal of "our children" (Sabhat28, 2018), or the people who are united by their rejection of the GCM (see Table 2 and Table 3 in the Supplementary File).

Furthermore, some Twitter users allege "a conspiracy of silence" (Gormally, 2018) of the "corporate media" (O'Neill, 2018) and politics and as being "on blackout mode" (O'Neill, 2018) with regard to the GCM. It is alleged that "the media and political establishment so far have refused to inform or consult with the…people" (Gormally, 2018). In addition, it is alleged that the GCM prohibits criticism of migration ("under this pact, stories like this will be banned"; Shields, 2018). These findings support the thesis of Canovan (1999, p. 3), who states that populism not only challenges political actors but also those actors, who allegedly disseminate elite values against the will and the basic interests of the people. Moreover, toying with the human fear of the unknown and the stranger is detected. One author writes that by signing the GCM "#ISIS terrorists" (Walters, 2018) will be imported and another that it "could extinguish" (Tenacious, 2018) the identity of his country. The GCM is also described as a possible threat to the sovereignty of the people and as a compact that "dictate(s) immigration policy and removes sovereignty" (Greine, 2018), as well as a contract that gives "control of our borders and sovereignty to a corrupt unelected bureaucracy" (Orchard, 2018). The two right-wing populist tweets contain as additional elements anti-migration strategies (see Table 3 in the Supplementary File), namely the (implicit) description of migrants as "non-citizens" (Shields, 2018), welfare recipients and "terrorists" (Walters, 2018). Those

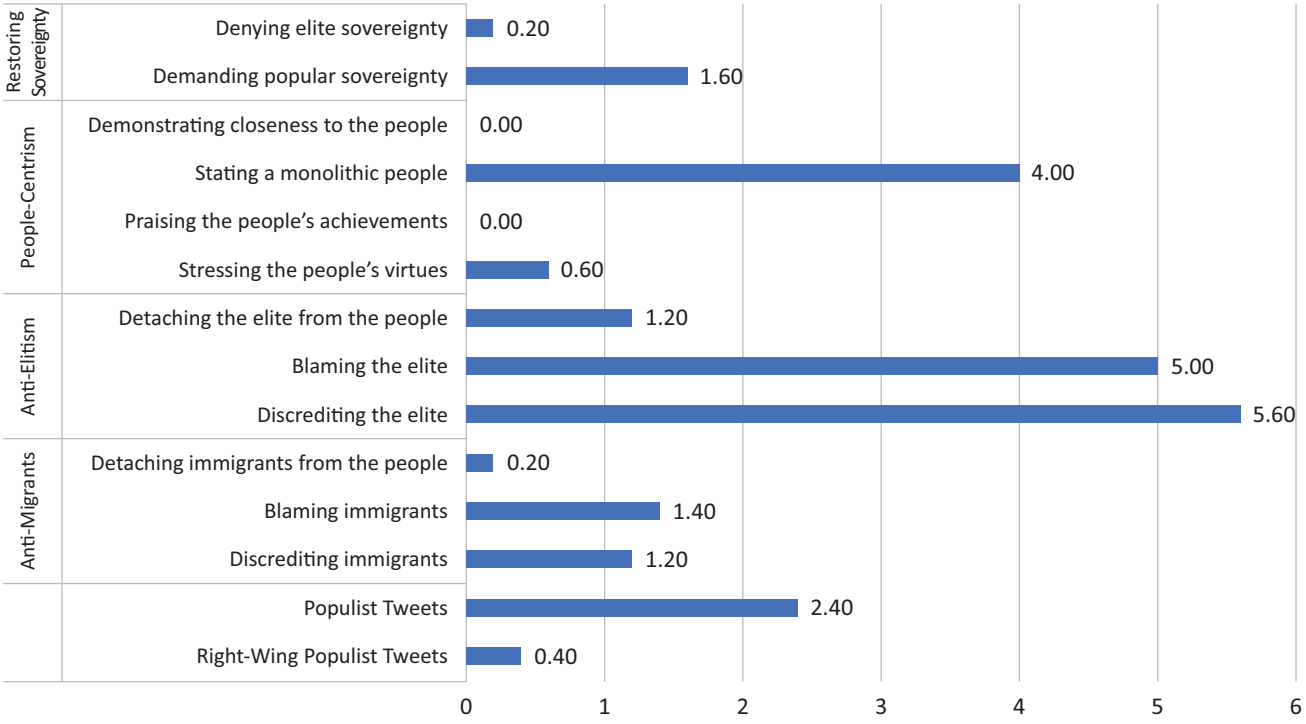

Figure 2. Share of all (right-wing) populist tweets and all populist communication strategies among the widest-reaching tweets (N = 500 tweets).

tweets indicate that there has indeed been a populist "campaign to save the country" (Canovan, 1999, p. 6).

Yet, it needs to be stressed (again) that not many tweets were found that contained at least two populist statements representing at least two different core dimensions of populism and almost none that additionally contained at least one anti-migration statement—as already mentioned. However, it is interesting to note that 13.6 percent of the tweets analysed contain at least one populist sub-category and thereby a soft form of populism, as Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018, p. 7) have called social media messages with "only one populist reference." This finding is in line with the finding of Ernst et al. (2017) who found slightly more than ten percent of their social media sample contained at least one populist reference.

The results of an automated analysis of the most frequently used word-pairs in the overall sample of almost 70,000 tweets support the result of the manual examination of the sub-sample (N = 14,566 tweets), because no word-pair was found that would have indicated that the discourse on migration was strongly permeated by populist narratives (see Table 4 in the Supplementary File). Yet, the results indicate that the Twitter discourse on migration during the signing conference was predominantly critical against the compact, since the fifth, sixth, and seventh-most frequently used word pairs refer to a video of demonstrators against the GCM in Brussels—one of the most popular tweets in the sample (Figure 3). Furthermore, the word pair 'protest rt' occurs among the top 10 word-pairs, indicating that tweets showing protest against the GCM occur very frequently (rt means 're-tweet').

Examining the Twitter profiles of the senders of the 12 populists' tweets, it seems like those users are ordinary citizens (see Tables 2 and 3 in the Supplementary File). Among other indicators (no obvious affiliation to a certain political party; no self-description as being a politician etc.) the moderate number of followers (range: 144–6,565) supports the assumption that we are indeed referring to normal citizens and not famous people or well-known professional politicians. This observation is interesting, as it indicates that ordinary citizens can be quite influential on social media. Moreover, it shows that populist communication in the digital sphere needs not to be the exclusive domain of professional politicians or political organizations, but also the matter of ordinary citizens. Yet, one has to recognize that those ordinary citizens did not create their own content but re-tweeted that of other users. Interestingly, 5 of the 12 populist tweets were initially created by ordinary citizens. Furthermore, the tweets of professional political actors, such as the leader of the UK Independence Party in Wales, were more re-tweeted and favorited than those of normal citizens. Nevertheless, it is striking to find populist tweets from ordinary citizens that were disseminated with the help of other ordinary citizens. Those non–professional actors seem to act as important disseminators for populist content and as creators of populist narratives. Almost the same is true in case of the two right-wing populist tweets. Both were created by non-elite actors with a rather low number of followers and both were re-tweets. However, the re-tweeted users were no ordinary citizens but a (former) Irish journalist and a nationalist party from Canada.

Figure 3. Tweet with a video of demonstrators against the GCM. Source: BasedPoland (2018).

6. Conclusion

In light of the aforementioned results, the remarkable and maybe surprising result is that the Twitter discourse on migration during the period of the signing conference on the GCM has not been dominated by (right-wing) populist narratives (RQ1). Although the debate on the GCM must be seen as predominately critical against the compact in general and against migration in particular, only very few (right-wing) populist tweets were found among the most popular tweets. Yet, it is interesting to note that most of the few (right-wing) populist tweets contain anti-elitist and people-centrist statements. It seems like those dimensions are, as previous work has already indicated, the most important ones in the realm of online populist communication (RQ2). The populist (re-)tweets identified were published by ordinary citizens and not by professional politicians. Furthermore, half of the populist tweets were initially created by other ordinary citizens. Yet, one-third of the populist tweets identified were originally created by professional political actors, indicating that ordinary citizens also seem to be very important disseminators of (right-wing) populist content created by professional politicians.

Finding populist content among the widest-reaching tweets demonstrates that while the populist penetration of the discourse on migration on social media might be less strong than expected, professional, as well as non-professional populist actors might influence the attitudes of a large number of people. We have to keep in mind that tweets might create populist attitudes among their recipients (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017, p. 1437). Moreover, journalists looking for a good story (Chadwick, 2017) might have used those few (right-wing) populist tweets to indicate a larger critical assessment of the GCM on social media. Thus, even when the empirical results reveal only a few populist contents and even when some of this content might be created by bots or trolls, this content might have been very influential. Interestingly, the findings indicate that populist online activism goes beyond the organized groups, movements, etc., of civil society. We might face a new type of political activism making use of the social web to spread (right-wing) populist narratives that do not match the assumptions being made in the concept of the public sphere in terms of an alleged civil character. It follows that social media indeed seems to provide free access for the citizenship and thus the opportunity to participate in political issues, such as in the case of the GCM. However, such kind of populist participation can hardly be seen as enriching the public sphere, but rather as an element of its corruption. This finding is in line with previous empirical work on the role of social media for the concept of the public sphere (Kruse et al., 2018, p. 82).

Yet, it needs to be emphasized that the presented findings are limited to Twitter. Against the empirical data presented by Ernst et al. (2017, p. 1357), one might assume that the migration dialogue on Facebook is penetrated to a greater degree by populist statements. Unfortunately (at least from a scientific point of view), Facebook has shut down most parts of its application programming interface. Thus, it is virtually impossible to determine whether the presented findings are also true for the migration discourse on Facebook. One option would be the (re-)examination of already queried Facebook data under the aspects of this article. Furthermore, there is a huge research gap in the usage of other social media tools than Twitter and Facebook by populist actors, such as Telegram, WhatsApp, and Instagram. In particular, Telegram and WhatsApp seem to be interesting cases, as it has already been shown that those tools were extensively (mis)used by right-wing actors (Davis & Straubhaar, 2020; Urman & Katz, 2020).

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

Political Opinion Formation as Epistemic Practice: The Hashtag Assemblage of #metwo

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Abstract
The article contributes to the literature on the political use of hashtags. We argue that hashtag assemblages could be understood in the tradition of representing public opinion through datafication in the context of democratic politics. While traditional data-based epistemic practices like polls lead to the 'passivation' of citizens, in the digital constellation this tendency is currently challenged. In media like Twitter, hashtags serve as a technical operator to order the discursive fabrication of diverse publicly articulated opinions that manifest in the assemblage of tweets, algorithms and criticisms. We conceptualize such a critical public as an epistemic sensorium for dislocations based on the expression of experienced social imbalances and its political amplification. On the level of opinion formation, this constitutes a process of democratization, allowing for the expression of diverse opinions and issues even under singular hashtags. Despite this diversity, we see a strong tendency of publicly relevant actors such as news outlets to represent digital forms of opinion expression as unified movements. We argue that this tendency can partly be explained by the affordances of networked media, relating the process of objectification to the network position of the observer. We make this argument empirically plausible by applying methods of network analysis and topic modelling to a dataset of 196,987 tweets sampled via the hashtag #metwo that emerged in the German Twittersphere in the summer of 2018 and united a discourse concerned with racism and identity. In light of this data, we not only demonstrate the hashtag assemblage's heterogeneity and potential for subaltern agency; we also make visible how hashtag assemblages as epistemic practices are inherently dynamic, distinguishing it from opinion polling through the limited observational capacities and active participation of the actors representing its claims within the hybrid media system.

Keywords
#metwo; assemblages; big data; datafication; democracy; epistemic practices; hashtag; network analysis; topic modelling; Twitter analysis

Issue
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1. Introduction

In recent years we could observe 'discursive assemblages' with regard to hashtags as part of the culture of discussion in social networks (Rambukkana, 2015, p. 3). Discussions about hashtags like #whyididntreport or #metoo manifest themselves mainly on the Internet, are independent of or precede street movements, and are thereby characterized by using keywords to generate publicity for specific topics. Following this understanding,

we argue that such hashtag assemblages could be understood as an alternation of the epistemic practices of datafication in the context of democratic politics. We will first lay out how rational and scientific epistemic practices such as opinion polling emerged in democratic contexts, what problems resulted from this, and how the conditions of the digital constellation now enable different formations such as hashtag assemblages. We then stress that the need for objectification through a comprehensive analysis remains relevant, if the added complexity, heterogeneity and 'conflictivity' of hashtag assemblages is not to be lost. Based on an empirical analysis of the case of #metwo, which dealt with racism, identity and integration in Germany, we discuss the emancipatory potential of hashtag assemblages and conclude with an evaluation of the conditions that allow hashtag assemblages to serve as a representation of public opinion.

2. Datafication of Public Opinion as Epistemic Practice

We tend to associate the idea of public opinion primarily with opinion polls, i.e., the epistemic practice of structuring aggregates of individual opinions by market research companies and public relations experts, but rarely with emancipatory democratic practices. However, representations of public opinion have changed significantly over time, from lottery and elections over protests, petitions, or surveys, to leaflets, consultative fish bowls, and, more recently, the evaluation of social media data (McGregor, 2019; Splichal, 2012). Besides obvious continuities in big data analytics, new ways of representing public opinion have emerged as well. The changing media infrastructure has played a significant role in this development, though it would be fallacious to assume some kind of determination or path dependency. New socio-technological conditions provide a relational plurality of affordances, i.e., possibilities of actions depending on "digital actors (firms, governments, as well as digital subjects) and the digital environment" (Ettlinger, 2018, p. 3). This also applies to the differentiated practices through which public opinion is constructed: "In every polity there exist distinctive relationships among conceptions of 'the public,' the dominant techniques for assessing 'public opinion,' and the media through which members of the public may express their desires" (Herbst & Beniger, 1995, p. 94). Following this idea, we suggest considering hashtag assemblages as a new, experimental way to link "democracy and technology…through a co-evolutionary process of mutual enabling" (Hofmann, 2019, p. 4; cf. Berg, Thiel, & Rakowski, 2020). They emerge as a different expression of public opinion that is suited to the communicative conditions of a networked communication structure and democratic adjustments like counter-democracy or monitory democracy (cf. Keane, 2018; Rosanvallon, 2008).

The comprehensive social transformation of modernity seemed to dismiss an informed public as a mere phantom (Lippmann, 1993), depriving representative government of an epistemic sensorium for orientation and legitimation, while paving the way for a new paradigm: quantification, and with it approaches such as survey research, objectification, and datafication:

> Vexing problems of the industrial age, from poverty and labor unrest to commercial leisure and urban vice, were the proximate cause for both the emerging notion of the 'social' and the invention of tools to observe it. Social surveys were born of this complex. (Igo, 2007, p. 25)

Statistical survey data promised to provide insights into needs and preferences of citizens, a suitable way to access and represent a public opinion that has become illegible. Felix Keller emphasizes this progressive aspect of opinion polls as an attempt to bring citizens together, if not physically in the forum, then diagrammatically in the epistemic practice of statistical representation. The tension fostered:

> A dynamic of representation of the 'political audience,' which appropriates the latest knowledge techniques in order to include the audience of the state in the political communication cycle, to represent it in the political order. In this way, ever new figures of the audience emerge: by no means stable figures and also figures that are contradictory in themselves. (Keller, 2007, pp. 153–154)

For contemporaries, datafication combined scientific objectivity with democratic feedback and therefore connected to the political paradigm of government by opinion. For what was coined as a technology of democracy was particularly successful since it ultimately promised to solve a persistent problem:

> How does this vague, fluctuating, complex thing we call public opinion—omnipotent yet indeterminate—a sovereign to whose voice everyone listens, yet whose words, because he speaks with as many tongues as the waves of a boisterous sea it is so hard to catch—how does public opinion express itself in America? (Bryce, 1995, p. 232)

Due to such new ways of knowing, public voice and the forgotten man had found a new expression and "the firm establishment of a public opinion polling industry…homogenized the definition [of public opinion] and stabilized it for the foreseeable future" (Converse, 1987, p. 13). Especially in its early days, it was framed as an instrument of inclusion and progression in mass society, an epistemic sensorium for social dislocation. Its success was followed by legitimation and cultural power (cf. Moon, 1999).

However, the success of polls was not so much based on their democratic foundations, even though George Gallup in particular succeeded in selling his national town hall meetings as a finger on the 'pulse of democ-

racy' (Gallup & Rae, 1940). Much more important was the actual entrepreneurial work of leading figures such as Gallup or Elmo Roper, who came from the advertising industry and knew how to market their technologies of mass feedback to the government (Beniger, 1983, p. 483). The criticism of this conceptual revaluation is abundant: Lindsay Rogers (1940) early on emphasized the plebiscitary dimension of this technology and stressed that polls are no technological fix for the practical problems with direct democracy for they cannot grapple with the need to craft compromises. Blumer (1948) pointed out that the individualistic reconstruction of opinions leaves the structures of social organization and power unreflected (cf. Bourdieu, 1979). Later on, Habermas criticized the socio-psychological revaluation of behaviorism that devalues the intersubjective formation of opinion and judgement, reframing a critical public to an object of communicative manipulation (Habermas, 1991).

These criticisms are still justified as new forms of 'scraping the demos' emerge, meaning "practices of gaining information about citizens through automated analysis of digital trace data which are re-purposed for political means" (Ulbricht, 2020, p. 427; cf. Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2015). The rationality of big data analytics is precisely aimed at perpetuating and enhancing the legitimacy of quantified and datafied knowledge practices to represent democratic voices that spread in other fields of society—even activism, as David Karpf points out with respect to activist organizations like MoveOn.org: This idea that "some of the most important impacts of digital technology lie not in the capacity of disorganized masses to more easily speak, but in the capacity…to more effectively listen" (Karpf, 2017, p. 1) resonates with Beniger's observation:

> That the historical significance of surveys is not, like the older communications media of elections and social movements, to enable us to speak our minds. It is rather to enable those who commission the surveys to find out what is on our minds—whether we want to tell them or not. (Beniger, 1983, p. 479)

These asymmetrical relations between the scraper and the scraped hardly strengthen inclusion or subaltern positions, as the pollsters have claimed. On the contrary, epistemic practices like predictive analytics rather afford populist performances based on the claim to possess true knowledge on the will of the people (Baldwin-Philippi, 2019; cf. Urbinati, 2019; Gerbaudo, 2012). It can therefore be concluded that the quest for an epistemic practice suited to democratic requirements has by no means been resolved in the digital age. However, the shared stories which constitute hashtag assemblages now seem to offer an opportunity to generate an epistemic sensorium for societal problems that takes up the promises of democratic inclusion once again and thereby in some aspects moves closer to the early promises of opinion research.

2.1. Hashtag Assemblages: (New) Epistemic Practice of Public Opinion

In the course of digitalization, a restructuring process is taking place, which sociologist Andreas Reckwitz describes as the 'culturalization of the technological' (Reckwitz, 2017, p. 227): Modernity was characterized by an industrial rationality, which found its expression especially in processes of standardization leading to an adjustment and unification of modes of behavior. Cultural forms of action and expression were influenced to a significant degree by forms of 'doing generality.' This applies to the specific field of industrial production as much as to the rational standardization of individual behavior in various forms of surveys and the concept of opinion polls in mass society (Herbst, 1993, p. 61).

In the digital constellation, however, practices of standardization are increasingly being replaced by new logics. A "technological reversal is taking place: from the technical culture of industrial modernity to the cultural machine of late modernity" (Reckwitz, 2017, p. 228). Here, practices of digitalization play a significant role. The universal medium of the Internet emerged as an 'architecture of participation' (Healy, 2015, p. 190) and enabled cultural forms of sense making which are no longer oriented to the paradigm of generality, but to decentralization and diversity. This constellation enables communicative assemblages of meaning to emerge and be shaped in a different and accessible way, even for complex societies and dispersed groups of people, through the entanglement of mass media with the grounding principles of social media, i.e., programmability, popularity, connectivity and digital datafication (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, pp. 5–7; cf. Reckwitz, 2017, p. 230). All citizens with access to the Internet and digital devices are basically able to participate in debates on social media, including attempts to change, discredit or reinforce them. Since these assemblages are technically based on formal computerization, they can also be sorted and ordered as media becomes programmable (Manovitch, 2001, p. 27), thus revaluing the hashtag for communicative action. The hashtag enables users to "create links independently and without any knowledge of programming, and thus…paved the way for the highly praised 'social' and participatory era of the internet" (Bernhard, 2019, p. 3). Correspondingly, the hashtag allows for assemblages to emphasize dynamism and subaltern agency in issue definition by appropriating the technological logic of algorithms. In converting a large number of personal experiences about social imbalances through narrative and programmable connectivity, they allow their experience to amplify and reach a threshold where debates become newsworthy for established outlets in the hybrid media system, fostering a politicization of such issues (Phillips, 2018).

Hashtag assemblages also afford political actors or journalists a new form of the epistemic sensorium, allowing "for a more public, relational, and temporally

sensitive representation of public opinion" (McGregor, 2019, p. 4). However, this complexity does not necessarily translate into an appropriate rendering. Although the research literature predominantly acknowledges the heterogeneity of the groups and confirms the opinion struggles that take place within them (cf. Drüeke & Zobl, 2013), with reference to the reporting by media outlets, however, there is a much stronger emphasis on the homogeneity and uniformity of the hashtag. Rather than treating hashtag assemblages as dynamic and multifaceted discursive spaces, their representation in media and public debate oftentimes reduces them to a unified movement, a singular voice. As such, digital opinion formations are conceived as an expression of social issues that, while open-ended on their input side, somehow qualify a singular reading of their output. In this way, public opinion treats hashtag assemblages as an epistemic sensorium in line with earlier practices such as polling. What remains disregarded, however, is how the access to this data is mediated by the platforms' networked structures and intrinsic affordances. Contrasting this notion, we would like to evaluate a hashtag's heterogeneity for a specific case, that is #metwo.

3. The Case of #metwo

The empirical case is concerned with a public debate in Germany, emerging in the aftermath of the FIFA World Cup. What initiated the debate was a statement from leading team player Mesut Özil, whose parents were born in Turkey and came to Germany as guest workers in the 1960s. He accused high officials of the German Football Association as well as some football fans of racist afflictions against his person (Özil, 2018). The event then led to a nationwide debate on racism and integration in Germany. On Twitter, this debate became viral after a call to action from activist Ali Can sprouted into a multifaceted chorus of Germans narrating their experiences with racism. The initiator urged his followers in a video to tell a personal story about their experience with a migration background in Germany: "Let's show in a post that we stand against racism! I am not only German because I follow their rules or am successful. I am always German—as much as I am the other" (Perspective Daily, 2018, own translation). Correspondingly, the hashtag #metwo was chosen to indicate the split between two identities felt by many Germans with a migration background. Many tweets reported racist and discriminatory experiences from everyday life, in particular exclusion, humiliation through insults or physical violence but also disadvantages and non-recognition in school and working life. Eventually, the issue would be picked up by politicians, such as foreign minister Heiko Maas and Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Topçu, 2018).

While Twitter's user base in Germany remains relatively small with an estimated 12% of the population using the platform (whereas the most popular social media platform, Facebook, reaches 50%; Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019, p. 87), its popularity among politicians and journalists gives it increasing potential for agenda setting (Jungherr, 2016). Accordingly, news outlets were quick to discuss the hashtag #metwo in their online sections. By mid-August, articles on the topic were published in almost all major German news outlets' online publications (for an overview of articles published in German news outlets, see Appendix 1 in the Supplementary File). Their content ranged from personal narratives and debates on racism in German society to comments on and criticism of the movement. What all of these reports and comments had in common, however, was the depiction of the hashtag as a unified movement sharing the same goals and agenda. This assumption is in part due to the affordances of Twitter as a platform, which quantifies tweets by their hashtags and promotes these as 'trending topics' when a certain threshold is reached. In that sense, every user utilizing the hashtag is contributing to the trending of certain topics, which in turn helps news outlets to assess which Twitter topics have become relevant for a larger audience. At the same time, data access for users of the platform is mediated by follower networks, affording effective information diffusion primarily between relatively homophilic users (Barbera, 2013; Myers, Sharma, Gupta, & Lin, 2014). These affordances can conceal the fact that the use of a certain hashtag does not necessarily imply a shared agenda but can just as easily indicate criticism, reframing and attempts at hijacking. As we shall see, this one-dimensional reading of hashtag assemblages by actors employing this epistemic sensorium overlaps with their relative position within the Twitter network surrounding the hashtag #metwo.

3.1. Methods and Data

In order to analyse the multifaceted and normatively charged discursive space convened under #metwo, we conducted an in-depth analysis of Twitter data. Sampled via the hashtag #metwo from both Twitter's REST and Stream API, we retrieved a total of 196,987 tweets between July 27th (about two days after the hashtag had been spawned) and August 31st (when the discussion had died down considerably). This sample allowed us to examine the discourse from its original intention to a contested space of competing narratives. To investigate this shift, we employed a number of methods in order to analyse both the networks found within the sample and the topics discussed between their members. Apart from descriptive analyses concerning the occurrence of additional hashtags in the sample, we employed the Louvain algorithm to detect communities. This algorithm aims to maximize modularity via a 'greedy' approach, with its implicit notions of hierarchy and self-similarity resembling the communities naturally found in social networks (Blondel, Guillaume, Lambiotte, & Lefebvre, 2008). Mentions, replies, quotes and retweets between users formed the (directed) edges

of the network so analyzed. Communities containing more than 2% of the total user population were classified via their five most influential users as determined by their PageRank (Brin & Page, 1998). In line with assumptions about the platform's power-law distribution (Myers et al., 2014), these users' Twitter profiles and tweets in the sample served as proxy for identifying the political affiliations and structural positions most strongly shaping opinion formation within communities. Via the stm package for R (Roberts, Stewart, & Tingley, 2019), a structural topic model was employed to identify meaningful topics within the sample before calculating their prevalence in the detected communities. Hashtags used and the day of the tweet's publication were employed as prevalence variables in the structural topic model, allowing us to take into account both hashtag-based classifications of content and the fluctuation of topics over time to improve results. In order to assure reproducibility and stability of the model, the spectral method of initialization was employed (Roberts, Stewart, & Tingley, 2016). Following methodological suggestions of Schofield and others, words were lemmatized and stopwords removed only after computation of the model (Schofield, Magnusson, & Mimno, 2017; Schofield & Mimno, 2016). In line with guidelines of Roberts et al. (2016, 2019), we employed statistical measures to evaluate topic models with different numbers of topics before settling on a model with 15 topics. These topics were then classified by most strongly associated words and clearly assigned tweets. The results were controlled with the results of a qualitative analysis of a subsample of tweets. By manually reviewing 1,000 randomly selected tweets from the first two days in the sample, we validated the correspondence between the topics found by the model and those raised by the users in the sample.

3.2. Co-Occurring Hashtags and Subdiscourses

Considering hashtags as markers for discursive spaces, an analysis of the co-occurring hashtags under #metwo reveals multiple subdiscourses, each with their own agenda and temporal dynamics (see Figure 1). For the purpose of this analysis, we examined the 10 most frequent co-hashtags in terms of their dynamics and content. While #deutschland (#germany) und #rassismus (#racism) are rather self-explanatory and give context to the debate, the remaining hashtags constitute subtopics and apply framing not apparent in the hashtag #metwo. For example, activist Ali Utlu initiated #mygermandream and its synonym #germandream to describe positive experiences by migrants and Germans with a migration background, as well as hopes for a multicultural Germany, thus forming the (brief) counter narrative to #metwo. Mentions of #özil, on the other hand, connect to the debate about football player Mesut Özil leaving the German national team, which spawned the larger debate about racism in Germany and the hashtag #metwo. #metoo links the debate to the correspondent debate on sexism while #mequeer spawned a subdiscourse on discrimination against LGBTQIA* people. The co-use of these two hashtags with #metwo points to experiences of intersectional discrimination.

In contrast to these discourses, #kochallenge was used as a marker for a narrative about 'violent migrants' who assault elderly people as part of a 'challenge.' The sharp rise and decline in the sample points to an attempt

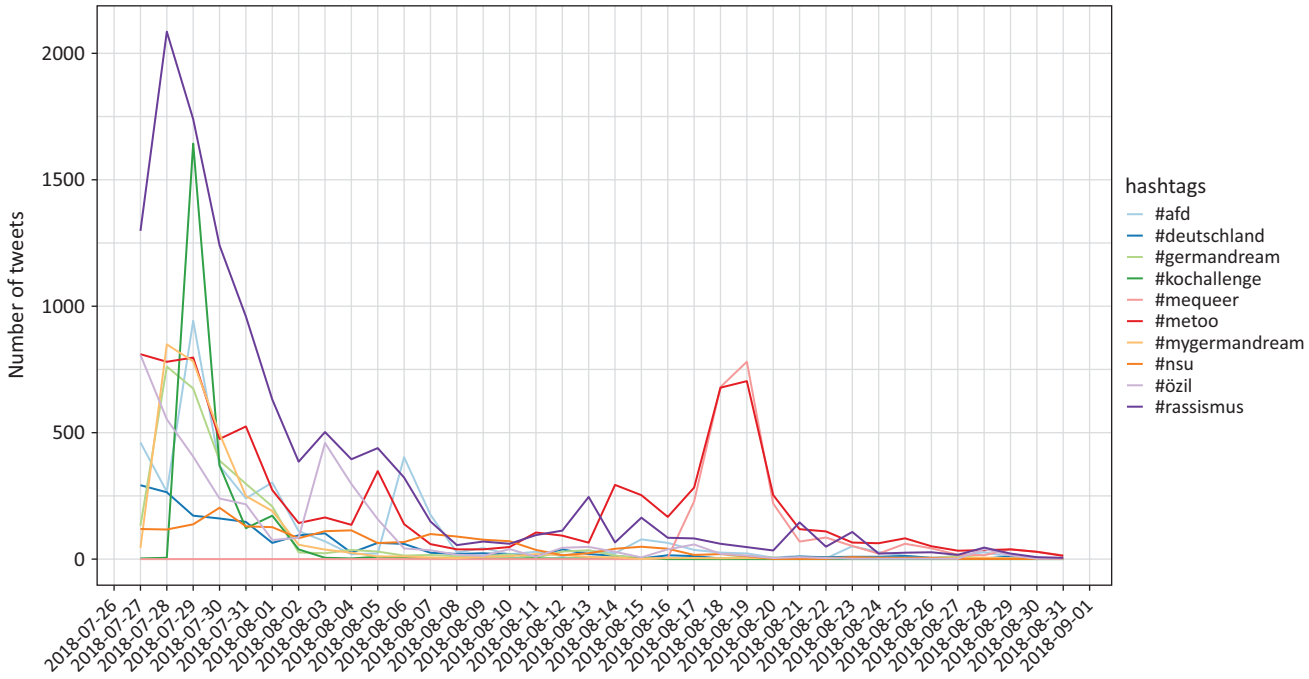

Figure 1. 10 most frequent co-occurring hashtags in the sample over time.

at hijacking and discrediting the discourse by reversing victimhood. Meanwhile, #afd references the German far-right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) both positively (as an alternative to 'over-migration' and the 'politically correct' debate of #metwo, as its co-occurrence with the #kochallenge indicates) and negatively (as a driver of racism in Germany). Lastly, #nsu is concerned with the murders carried out by the extreme-right terror organization NSU (National-Socialist Underground) and conspiracy theories about their alleged cover-up. These narratives, for the most part, include the purported involvement of migrant criminals and the Turkish secret service, and thereby attempt to reframe the murders as an issue external to German society rather than acknowledge structural racism. Most of these tweets can be found in the vicinity of a particular account named @nsu_leaks, which can be regarded as an extreme-right conspiracy hub. The appearance of these tweets under #metwo, again, points to an attempted hijacking of the discourse.

In sum, the analysis of the co-occurring hashtags in the sample reveals two things: the fragmentation of the discourse into vastly different subtopics and the intention of certain actors to reframe the debate for their own political purposes. While some of these frames work to broaden the agenda of the original debate, others aim to disturb and discredit it. And even though these subdiscourses may in themselves contain contestation and discussion, they reveal the variety and embeddedness within overlapping discourses rarely reflected in the public perception of political hashtags.

3.3. #metwo Networks

Figure 2 shows the network graph with users colored according to their community membership, revealing a fragmented network of diverse communities. The largest community we found is what we call the 'sincere' #metwo community. The highest-ranking users are activists who shared personal stories about experienced racism and the debate as well as the left-leaning news outlet taz (tazgezwitscher) commenting favorably on the hashtag. The second largest community in the network is what we termed the 'right-wing community.' On the one hand, this community's most prominent users include influential, seemingly 'ordinary' users without party affiliations, but on the other hand, there are also many within this community who represent distinct political persuasions such as the conservative journalist Birgit Kelle (*Die Welt*) and the AfD politician Jens Eckleben. All shared content either criticizing the debate or reframing it in terms of racism against Germans or violent migrants (e.g., via the hashtag #kochallenge). Further clusters formed around Özil (who, despite being extensively referenced, never posted under #metwo himself), #metwo initiator Ali Can, and news outlets commenting on the issue—in particular the outlet *Zeit Online*. Interestingly, we could observe a cluster characterized by politicians, including the Minister of Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas, tweeting under the hashtag. Another community of particular interest formed around the hashtag #germandream and its initiator, Ali Utlu. This cluster was also characterized by green party politician Cem Özdemir's and journalist Düzen Tekkal's personal narratives on the issue as well as, interestingly, *BILD* reporter Filipp Piatov, who commented on how white men are underprivileged in the #metwo debate. Two additional communities were characterized by either left-wing activists or web personas such as bloggers and youtubers as their most influential users.

The plurality of communities tweeting under the hashtag #metwo illustrates not only the various actors within the seemingly unified hashtag public, but also their interaction with each other. This interaction is illustrated in Figure 3 (for relative interaction values see Appendix 2 in the Supplementary File). While it may be surprising to some to find such strong activity by right-leaning and extreme-right activists under a seemingly leftist hashtag, we can also see how their interaction is strongly self-referential, with the community's strongest outgoing connection being to the #germandream community. While the sincere #metwo community also strongly references its own members, it is the most frequent outgoing connection for all communities except the right-wing. This means that this community remained at the core of the debate, acting as a point of reference for other actors, such as news outlets or politicians, shaping public perception of the hashtag with its content. Reciprocally, content from the communities surrounding news outlets, the web community and Ali Can was picked up by the #metwo community. The strong right-wing community, in contrast, attempted to criticize and lay claim to the debate. As the analysis shows, however, these attempts were not picked up by the broader audience, as only a small share of content from this community was referenced by other communities. The right-wing community, even though the second largest community in the sample, therefore had limited influence on the broader debate and remained unable to reframe the hashtag assemblage with their agenda. As such we can see that the perception of a hashtag assemblage must be shaped by the network position of the actors utilizing Twitter as an epistemic sensorium. The central position of the #metwo community allowed for the shaping of the debate, contributing to the perception of a unified movement by news outlets and politicians in the public debate both on- and off-platform. While large in numbers and highly active, the right-wing community did not manage to make itself heard in the broader debate, as its content was not picked up by actors outside the community. In other words, it is highly likely that the issues indicated by the hashtag #metwo were perceived adversely between the right-wing and the #metwo communities. Due to its different uptake by public actors, however, the sincere #metwo narrative prevailed.

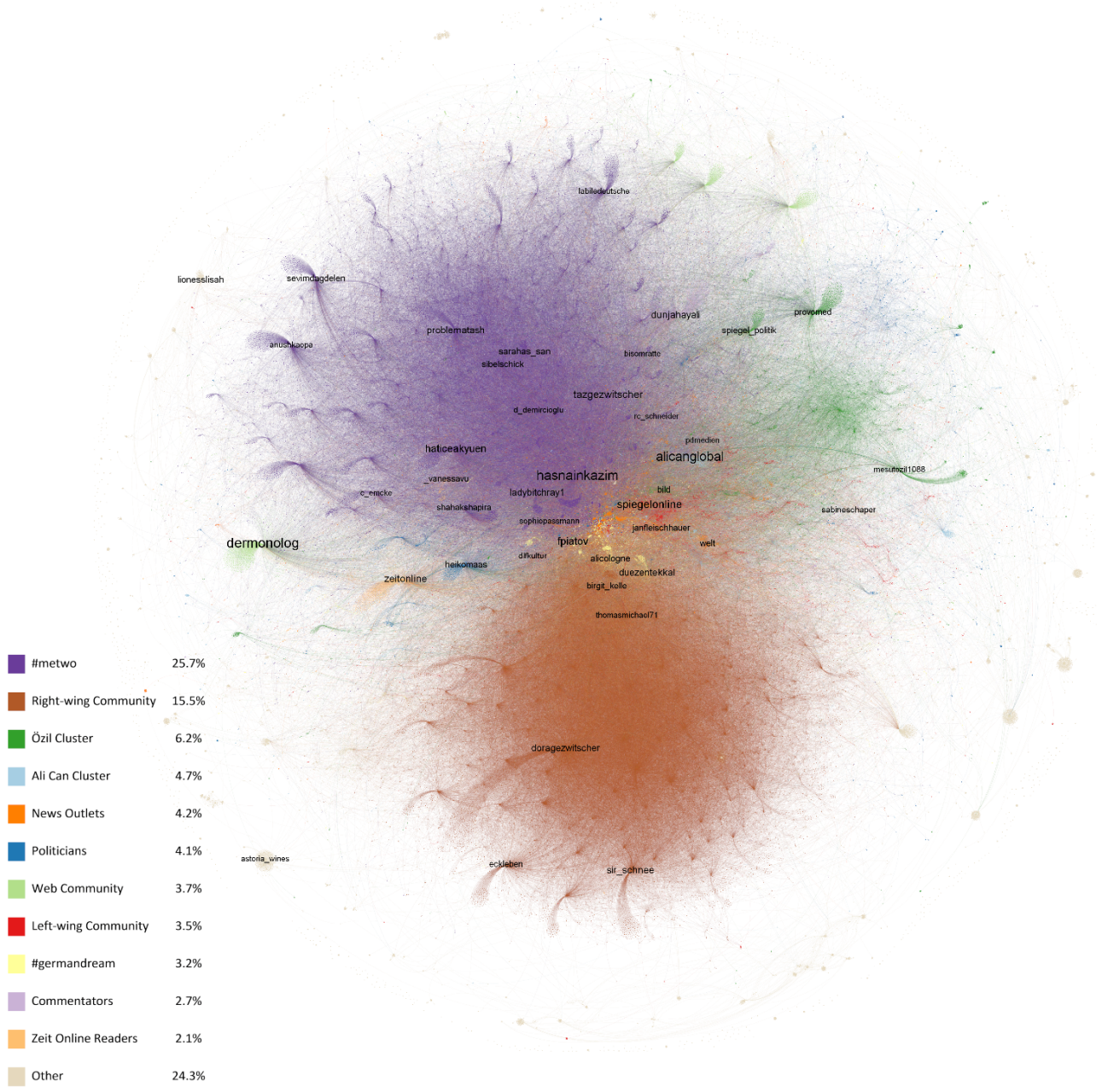

Figure 2. Network graph of communities. Node and label sizes according to PageRank. Share of communities annotated in legend. Graph layout with ForceAtlas2 (Jacomy, Venturini, Heymann, & Bastian, 2014) in Gephi (Bastian, Heymann, & Jacomy, 2009).

3.4. #metwo Topics

In order to verify a different discourse between communities, we analyzed the results of the structural topic model and calculated the distribution of topics within the communities described above. The results can be found in Figure 4, with exact numbers reported in Appendix 3 in the Supplementary File. We will point to a few results of interest. For one, the matter of implications and justifications of the debate, including whether or not people have a right to 'complain' about racism via the hashtag, was discussed most often by commentators and the web community. This topic also had the biggest share of the debate in the #metwo community, with reports on the matter popular there as well. In this community, personal stories of experienced racism (especially concerning education) were most prevalent across communities. The broader debate on racism and integration in Germany was most strongly picked up by commentators, the community of *Zeit Online* readers, and politicians. The topic also held a considerable share within the community of news outlets. While opinions on these matters in the sample are by no means unified, the sparking of this very debate had been one of the main goals of #metwo's initiators. This topic's distribution among communities representing actors relevant in society beyond

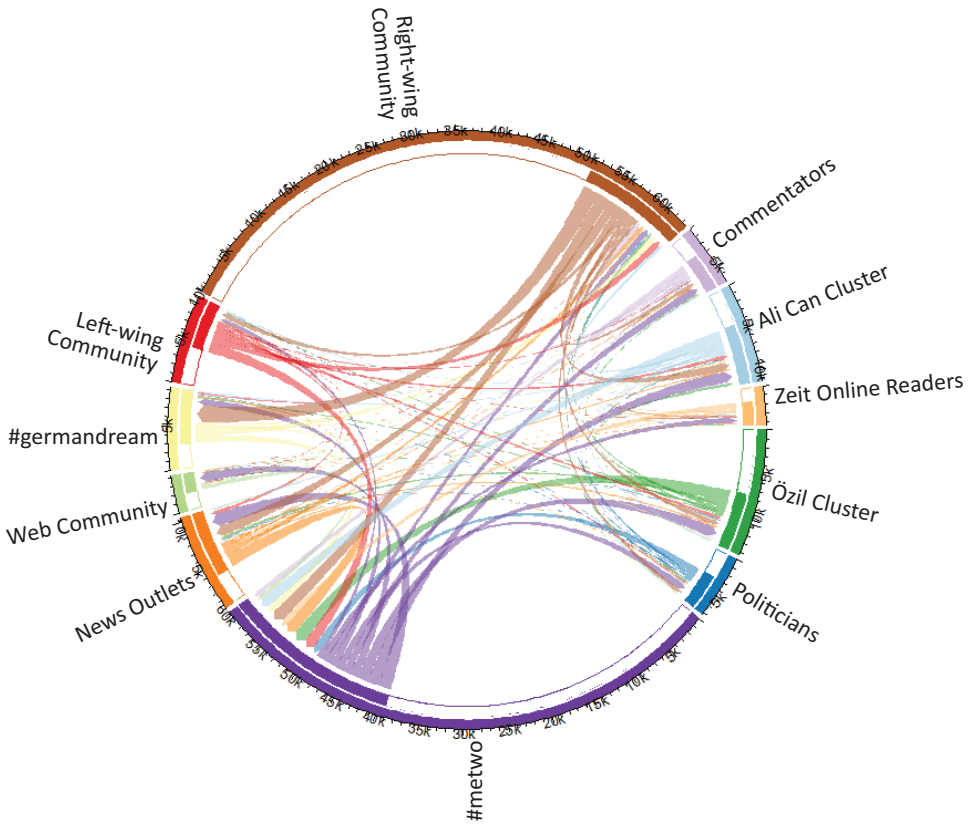

Figure 3. Community interaction in absolute numbers of tweets in thousands. White area indicates the share of interaction within communities. Visualization via circlize (Gu, Gu, Eils, Schlesner, & Brors, 2014).

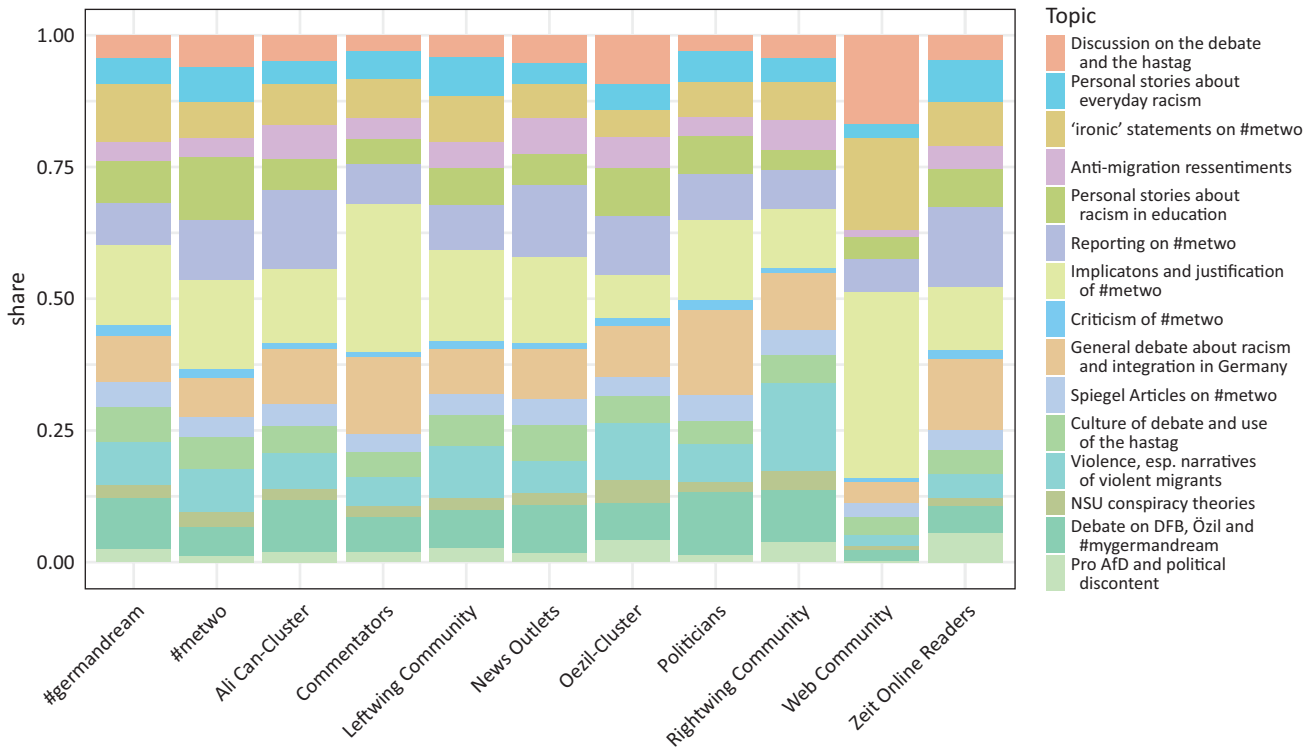

Figure 4. Topics found under the hashtag #metwo and their relative share of tweets within communities.

Twitter may well be one of the reasons that the debate, which started on the platform, reached a larger audience and led to further political action.

Anti-migration resentments as well as political discontent and pro-AfD statements were distributed among communities relatively evenly. This can be attributed to the fact that these statements are mainly found as replies to other tweets, especially news articles, and thus disseminated across communities. While also discussing the topics of the hashtag's implications as well as racism and integration in Germany, the most frequent topic within the right-wing community centers on stories of violence. A closer analysis revealed that, in this community, the topic consists mostly of narratives of violent migrants, especially under the hashtag #kochallenge. As such, this topical framing was an attempt to shift victimhood from migrants and their experiences of racism to Germans and their (alleged) experiences of violence at the hand of migrants. The topic of football player Özil, the German Football Association (Deutscher Fußball Bund) and, in this context, the hashtag #mygermandream, was a matter of debate in most communities outside of the sincere #metwo one. This topic was most popular in the community characterized by politicians, followed by the one characterized by the #germandream initiator and the right-wing community. This shows how the attempt to reframe the discourse in less critical terms through narratives of successful migration in Germany intersects with the broader debate about Özil, which initially started the critical hashtag #metwo. This reframing as a potential solution to the issues raised resonates particularly well with more conservative actors, such as politicians and certain members of the right-wing community.

In sum, these results point to a fragmented discourse in topics, users and political intentions within the seemingly unified hashtag #metwo. Instead of a united community with a clear agenda, there were different claims being made to the hashtag and attempts to steer the discourse in service of various political goals, including the negation of Ali Can's original goal: exposing the racism in German society that impacts citizens' everyday life. The prevalence of certain discourses both on the platform and in the broader public debate can be attributed to the interaction within and between communities. The issues detected in a hashtag assemblage as an epistemic practice therefore not only depend on open-ended user input, but also are equally dependent on the visibility of these positions as shaped by the affordances of the platform and its users' preferential content consumption. The content ascribed to a hashtag, therefore, is not an objective constant, but rather a process as dynamic and subjective as its formation.

4. The Epistemic Practice of Hashtag Assemblages

The empirical analysis emphasized three positive aspects in particular that hashtag assemblages offer as epistemic practice of opinion formation. First, they enable persons affected by social problems to represent their issues in their own choice of expression, contributing to the valorization of subaltern agency. But, as the analysis made clear, they can also be related to a wide range of other problems, situating those problems intersectionally in an assemblage of different, but connecting experiences. Second, it not only allows those citizens affected to raise their voice(s), but anyone to oppose or comment on these claims. The analysis revealed the variety of communities posting under the hashtag. The fragmentation into those communities has to be acknowledged, making it all the more important for third parties like journalists to not only represent one opinion as the main claim of the hashtag, but to engage with the conflictive, multifarious portfolio of the assemblage. Both aspects relate to a third one: the dynamic character of hashtag assemblages. The assemblage does not represent a reflection of social preferences, but political arguing and judgment formation in the making, shaping the issue concerned, its scope and implications.

As an epistemic practice, it enhances the civic part of opinion formation, i.e., "the more informal processes of knowledge making by which states and their citizens arrive at collective settlements regarding the epistemic foundations of public life" (Miller, 2008, p. 1896). Be it the questions asked and issues raised in traditional surveys or the use of statistical or machine learning models to mine users in social networks, opinion polling and 'demos scraping' empower the epistemic authority of experts on the basis of specific knowledge regimes. In contrast, hashtag assemblages bring the forgotten man and woman back in right from the start. Marking tweets with a hashtag serves as a shibboleth to a political public and allows a plurality of voices to contribute their own experience to the opinion-forming process.

However, one should not fall for the 'myth of us' and mistake contributions on social media platforms to be a natural expression of political collectivity or the will of the people (cf. Couldry, 2015). Hashtag assemblages are a representation, embedded in social hierarchies and power structures on social media. Even though hashtag assemblages are basically open to all citizens, they are still affected by gaps in participation based on economic or technological inequality, resulting in another form of epistemic inequality (cf. Dalton, 2017). Twitter is an elitist medium, especially in Germany. A significant share of tweets relates to established news outlets while central hubs, like Hasnain Kazim or *Spiegel Online*, benefit from their social connections in the hybrid media system, as measured in scope or number of followers. For the journalist or politician looking to infer social issues from these assemblages, their own network position on the platform may crucially shape the access to the very data they are looking to utilize. At the same time, these actors' participation may significantly shape the discourse entailed by the hashtag due to their position in the hybrid media system. As such, the epistemic practice of reading a hashtag assemblage is as dynamic as its creation.

In the democratic representation of social issues, a practice of objectification remains irreplaceable. Since there is no direct access to reality, a form of structured abstraction is needed to represent the issues at hand. For opinion polling, this process has been shaped by scientific principles, leading to a highly structured formation process and an objectification mostly independent from the observer's perspective. As such, they had the great advantage of being able to generate objectivity in a form of a general and abstract representation. The analysis shows, however, that, for hashtag assemblages, this representation is highly dependent on the observer's perspective, mediated by dynamic network structures. While the open-ended forms of participation afforded by these platforms hold great potential as an epistemic sensorium, the perspective of the Twitter interface does not allow for an objective representation but instead is designed for dynamic participation within the assemblage. For hashtag assemblages, there is a double contingency in the process of objectification: It is inscribed both in its formation and observation. The open-endedness of input is accompanied by a strong dependency on the network position of the observer. As such, the representation of a hashtag assemblage depends not only on the input, but also on the visibility of input to actors that can further disseminate and act on the issues at hand. As demonstrated by the analysis, counternarratives of the hashtag were unable to prevail within the broader debate, as their highly active proponents within the right-wing community were unable to disseminate their message. Rather, the perspective of the centrally situated, sincere #metwo community dominated the public debate, allowing their rightful criticism against social injustice to be heard by a broader audience.

For actors that rely on the bigger picture in order to assess these representations of public opinion in a way that acknowledges complexity, heterogeneity and its conflictual formation, digital tools such as network analysis and quantitative text analysis can provide the methods for a more objective representation by fostering a form of reflection and 'trained judgement' (Daston & Galison, 2007). However, even an inclusive and reflexive epistemic sensorium for social dislocation does not ensure a political solution. Especially complex forms of social inequality and racism are persistent and granular, preventing easy solutions. The awareness raised in hashtag assemblages, however, may at least point to existing problems and by chance provide the participants with the knowledge that they are not alone, but that their issues are collective political problems.

In conclusion, the condensation of individual and diverse narratives in large numbers, the "power of the…concept data" (Rosenberg, 2018), is combined with the "power of the narrative form" (Yang, 2016): the capability to take part in the framing, to provide experience and meaning, to steer audience participation and understanding. It emphasizes the importance of subjective experience and participation to constitute a public opinion on social and political problems: "Big data delivers numbers; thick data delivers stories" (Wang, 2013). Hashtag assemblages can be subscribed under the logic of counter-publics or monitory democracy. Above that they can also connect to the early and progressive tradition of datafication as epistemic practice, giving it a new, emancipatory twist. If this emancipatory potential of hashtag assemblages is to be fulfilled, however, the dynamic nature and the double contingency inherent in their process of representation must be fully taken into account.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

Digital Public Sphere and Geography: The Influence of Physical Location on Twitter's Political Conversation

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Abstract
Social media has instituted new parameters for the political conversation in the digital public sphere. Previous research had identified several of these new phenomena: political polarisation, hate speech discourses, and fake news, among others. However, little attention has been paid to the users' geographical location, specifically to the role location plays in political discussion on social media, and to its further implications in the digital public sphere. A priori, we might think that on the digital landscape geographical restrictions no longer condition political debate, allowing increasingly diverse users to participate in, and influence, the discussion. To analyse this, machine learning techniques were used to study Twitter's political conversation about the negotiation process for the formation of the government in Spain that took place between 2015 and 2016. A big data sample of 127,3 million tweets associated with three Spanish cities (Madrid, Barcelona, and Valencia) was used. The results show that the geographical location of the users directly affects the political conversation on Twitter, despite the dissolution of the physical restrictions that the online environment favours. Demographics, cultural factors, and proximity to the centres of political power are factors conditioning the structure of digital political debate. These findings are a novel contribution to the design of more effective political campaigns and strategies, and provide a better understanding of the dynamics of the digital public sphere provided by Twitter.

Keywords
big data; democracy; digital public sphere; geography; political communication; political discussion; social media; Twitter

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1. Introduction

Digital media are being configured as the dominant infrastructures in our society (Hepp, 2020). These technologies are entangled with a growing number of social activities that increasingly depend on them for their development. This causes a deep mediatization that determines how we construct our social world and that gives to the digital a central place in it (Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

Social media in general, and Twitter in particular, is becoming an important tool in the social interactions of millions of people. Twitter's orientation towards connectivity and conversation makes it the preferred space to articulate political debates within the digital environment (Van Dijck, 2013), an aspect that confers a privileged position to this platform in the construction of the digital public sphere.

Previous research identified different facets and dynamics of the incidence of Twitter in the public sphere (Casero-Ripollés, 2018; Campos-Domínguez, 2017). Phenomena such as political polarisation, hate speech discourses, and the spreading of fake news, among oth-

ers, have been extensively studied. Nevertheless, there remain significant and relevant issues pending analysis. Particularly pertinent among these is the role of the geographic location of users in online discussions of common public interest and civic affairs. Digital media introduce significant changes in relation to space. A priori, it should eliminate the restrictions and limits imposed by the material environment for physical reasons (Cairncross, 1997). In digital media, anyone can participate in public discussions without sharing the same geographical space. This provides the opportunity to open up and broaden the public debate to bring in more social players and other voices, producing significant transformations in the digital public sphere. The analysis of this change is highly relevant.

The aim of this article is to find out to what extent Twitter users' geographic location affects their participation and their influence in the online discussion generated by significant political events. To do this, the digital conversation concerning the negotiations to form a new government in Spain between 2015 and 2016 was studied by applying machine learning techniques. A big data sample of 127,3 million tweets linked to three cities has been used. These data lead to highly significant and innovative findings contributing to understanding the dynamics of the digital public sphere.

2. Transformations in the Digital Public Sphere

Digital media have introduced new parameters and conditions for the political debate in the public sphere (Castells, 2013; Fuchs, 2014). The main transformations can be identified in three particularly relevant processes: diversification, polyphony, and connectivity. These digital affordances provoke positive and negative outcomes for the dynamics of the public sphere and, ultimately, for democracy itself.

Digital media allow diversification of participants in the public discussion and increases the number of participants involved in it (Ruiz et al., 2011). Unlike mass media, social media offers the facility to produce and disseminate information and opinions to all. It makes mass self-communication possible as everyone is equally a sender as well as a receiver of messages (Castells, 2013). It reduces the access threshold to public debate for everyone alike. As a result, the public sphere is more diverse and is not monopolized by journalists and politicians, as in the past (Chadwick, 2017). From a purely elitist viewpoint, these two participants are central, and also indispensable, for the articulation of public opinion (Habermas, 2006). In contrast, the digital public sphere is becoming a more open and competitive landscape, which opens it up to new participants (Feenstra, Tormey, Casero-Ripollés, & Keane, 2017). In this virtual domain, the emergence of new social movements and political activists (Lievrouw, 2011) is particularly significant. Research reveals that the media are losing their capacity for social influence, which is becoming more distributed (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). In a context dominated by the uniformity produced by mass media, the internet generates high doses of heterogeneity, and conditions not conducive to the control of communications in the digital-based public sphere (Rasmussen, 2016).

Another substantive change process, related to the previous one, is that social media opens up the possibility that new voices can be heard in the digital public sphere (Coleman, 2017). Plurality is promoted and expanded, and, with it, public debate with the potential for more propositions to be put into circulation. Digital media allow people's free expression, encouraging freedom of speech (Shirky, 2011). This generates a polyphony of voices. This represents a significant shift towards a more democratic public sphere (Benkler, 2006). It corresponds to the Habermasian ideal that public debate needs input from citizens who give voice to society's problems (Habermas, 2006). Nevertheless, broadening the range of voices that can be heard does not prevent aggressive ones emerging—those related to hate speech and incivility, and discursive styles linked exclusively to populism (Fuchs, 2017). Moreover, this also creates a communicative abundance. From a critical perspective, the effect produced is a cacophony and dispersion of public voices (Dahlgren, 2013). Many smaller spaces coexist within the public sphere, segmented by the multiplicity of public issues in circulation. The personal dimension of digital media dilutes the concept of common public interest as a set of issues relevant to a political community (Rasmussen, 2016). The result is fragmentation and balkanization of public debate in the face of the emergence of high-choice media environments (van Aelst et al., 2017). This generates dissonances in the assortment of opinions in circulation, amplifying the effect of selective exposure to information and coincident opinions, reinforcing preconceived ideological positions and increasing political polarisation (Barnidge & Peacock, 2019). In consequence, a more disrupted public sphere emerges (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018).

The digital domain also drives changes in the political information environment that has an impact on the public sphere. These changes affect the supply, regarding the quantity and quality of news and public affairs content provided, and the demand related to the amount and type of information the public wants or consumes (Esser et al., 2012). The result affects the political information that reaches people and, therefore, also their political knowledge, generating a significant impact on the public debate about democracy. The diversification of participants and information sources, coupled with the expansion of platforms on which to access news, is generating a hybrid system of political communication, in which old and new media coexist (Chadwick, 2017) and, in turn, favours the emergence of new information consumption and political participation habits (Gil de Zuñiga, Huber, & Strauß, 2018). This process is weakening the authority of traditional media as news sources (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Carlson, 2017). The result is the ease with

which fake news can circulate, and the rise of disinformation (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). To this already complex and saturated news landscape, we must add the crisis in the forms of representative politics (Tormey, 2015) that is causing social apathy, distrust of representatives, and new forms of extra-representative political participation (De Blasio & Sorice, 2019), phenomena that have a direct impact on the public sphere.

Finally, yet another transformation introduced by digital media in the public sphere is the emergence of networked publics. One of the essential characteristics of social media is its connectivity (Van Dijck, 2013). These platforms allow people to find and connect with others who have shared interests (Tufekci, 2017). This implies that the public sphere becomes a distributed discursive infrastructure (Benkler, 2006) and increases internal connectivity. Thus, networked publics are groups or constellations of people who may be in different physical locations, but nevertheless are connected to each other by who and what they are (Ito, 2008). In their formation, mobilization, connection, and disconnection, what plays a key role is the expression of sentiment and the structures of feeling that result in affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015). Emotions go on to play a key role in the articulation of networked publics and the dynamics of the public sphere as a whole. Moreover, the digital environment provokes an unbalanced participation, in that not all users are equal, nor do they have the same options to shape the public sphere (Dagoula, 2019; Fuchs, 2014).

3. Impact of Geographical Location on the Twitter Political Conversation

The use of social media by citizens generates large volumes of data. These frequently incorporate a significant amount of geographic information that allows us to know how citizens act in space and what the incidence of the location of users is in online interactions. These data open new opportunities to study the interrelation between geography and the digital environment (Fearnley & Fyfe, 2018). Georeferenced user information linked to social media can also reveal a wider range of social, economic, and political phenomena (Laniado, Volkovich, Scellato, Mascolo, & Kaltenbrunner, 2017; Shelton, Poorthuis, Graham, & Zook, 2014; Takhteyev, Gruzd, & Wellman, 2012). Therefore, it can be used to analyse the incidence of the geographical location of Twitter users in political conversation. In this sense, it offers new possibilities for studying how the public sphere is configured in the digital context.

The analysis of the impact of social media in relation to the role of distance has been based on two main perspectives. The first is the death of the distance's thesis (Cairncross, 1997). This technodeterminist-based approach affirms that digital communication is capable of erasing all kinds of distances and substantially varying the ways in which, until now, relations between citizens have been established. In other words, distance ceases to condition spatial interactions between citizens. Twitter, like the rest of social media, allows users to communicate and connect around mutual interests without being restricted to interact with those close to them in terms of spatial proximity. In this sense, users of this digital platform establish social links based on shared interests instead of based on shared places. For this reason, they can interact with citizens in geographically distant spaces, avoiding physical restrictions. Geographical proximity ceases to matter as people living in distant cities are as accessible as their immediate neighbours via the internet. Digital technologies can make the obstacles imposed by geography smaller and smaller. In this way, they lead to placelessness (Leamer & Storper, 2001). This represents the end of geography, or its influence on society and on the lives of citizens, something that goes to the extreme of maintaining that the physical world is replaced by the online environment, offering new opportunities and advantages outside the old limits.

This offers new opportunities for citizen participation in the configuration of the digital public sphere. Social media, such as Twitter, allows citizens to participate in public debate regardless of where they are physically located. This allows a reduction in the costs of political participation and the generation of new opportunities to expand the public sphere to more citizens, who are no longer affected by the limitations imposed by physical distance. In this context, geography is no longer a conditioning factor for the articulation of public discussion. Thus, some researches detect a weak affinity between Twitter users and their physical proximity. The latter plays a minimal role in their interactions and conversations on this digital platform (Leetaru, Wang, Cao, Padmanabhan, & Shook, 2013). Other studies reveal that users are much more interconnected on Twitter with users living in all parts of the United States than in space outside the Web. Everything is related to everything else, but things that are physically closer are more related in the physical environment than in the digital one (Han, Tsou, & Clarke, 2018).

Against this position, we find the 'geography matters' thesis. This perspective affirms that, despite the potential of digital technologies to overcome distance, geographical proximity remains a key factor that determines who communicates with whom (Arthur & Williams, 2019; Laniado et al., 2017). Despite the fact that social media offers the promise of transcending distance, connecting everyone to everyone to else, physical distance considerably limits ties and interactions in the digital space. Pre-existing social ties between places and citizens play a key role on Twitter. The conversation on this platform is influenced by the spatial location of the users (Takhteyev et al., 2012). Geography continues to be a determining factor in the digital platforms and in their use by citizens.

Physical proximity continues to be important in the formation and maintenance of the social ties in social media. Citizens are less likely to establish distant online connections than nearby ones (Lengyel, Varga, Ságvári,

Jakobi, & Kertész, 2015). In fact, 39% of the links between Twitter users take place in an area of less than 100 km (Takhteyev et al., 2012). Twitter networks in the United States are spatially constrained and follow established network patterns that are constrained by national borders and population density (Stephens & Poorthuis, 2015). As in the physical world, the intensity and depth of interactions and ties between citizens decrease as distance increases in the digital environment.

Despite Twitter's ability to transcend physical distance, it retains strong local connectivity (Palmer, 2016). Local events attract greater attention on this platform for those who live nearby and are capable of generating a greater degree of conversation between them (Yardi & boyd, 2010). The connections on this platform are frequently within the same city. They reflect existing "social neighbourhoods" without a digital connection. Networks on Twitter with links formed over 500 km are less likely to be transitive and to function as a cohesive community (Stephens & Poorthuis, 2015). Interactions on this platform mainly replicate existing social and spatial patterns offline (Kellerman, 2016). It is impossible for Internet users to completely disconnect from the material world in which we citizens are embedded. The interactions between citizens on social media cannot do without the virtual dimension or the physical dimension. The two are interrelated and cannot be dissociated (Warf, 2013). Consequently, they are influenced in part by geographic restrictions.

Under this approach, geography and physical distance are configured as exogenous forces that condition the development of political conversation on Twitter. Therefore, it can affect the configuration of the digital public sphere. The geographic location of users, especially their material proximity, may condition their role and ability to influence public debate online. Therefore, the greater the physical distance between users, the greater the difficulties in establishing a digital interaction (Lengyel et al., 2015) and the more complex it will be to influence public discussion. Therefore, as in the offline world, only a relatively small proportion of actors are able to influence the process of public opinion formation (Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944).

Twitter has a geography that combines digital and material dimensions. Therefore, several factors affect the interactions that occur within this digital platform. First, language plays a key role in predicting links between users. Therefore, it constitutes an element that limits or expands the interactions and, therefore, the participation of more or less users in a public discussion on Twitter (Takhteyev et al., 2012). Second, regional identities also influence digital political conversation (Arthur & Williams, 2019). Geographically anchored national and cultural backgrounds largely determine who communicates with whom and the influence in the digital environment (Kulshrestha, Kooti, Nikravesh, & Gummadi, 2012). Third, the Twitter conversation is influenced by the activity spoken of and the spatial distribution of the users (Lansley & Longley, 2016). Finally, the concentration of the population determines the volume of tweets produced (Longley & Adnan, 2016). Therefore, the places with the highest accumulation of inhabitants contribute with a greater number of contents to the public sphere generated by Twitter and, therefore, can affect the digital conversation with greater force. Despite its digital materiality, Twitter is intrinsically connected to the offline world and is subject to identity, cultural, linguistic, and demographic restrictions derived from the material world.

In spite of the importance of the interrelation between digital media and geography, there is still scarce research that has studied this topic in relation to political communication. Arthur and Williams (2019) demonstrate that regional identity and sentiments, originating from the offline world, are capable of decisively determining both communication and user interactions on Twitter. Furthermore, Bastos, Mercea, and Baronchelli (2018) explore the geographical dependencies of the echo chamber communication on Twitter during the Brexit campaign. Their results reveal that echo chambers in the Leave campaign are associated with geographic proximity, while the inverse relationship occurs in the Remain campaign. Contrary to expectations, this research shows that echo chambers are not restricted to patterns linked to the digital environment but are also associated with pre-existing physical ties subject to geographic space. Thus, the influence of the geographical location of users for their communication practices within social networks is demonstrated.

According to these researches, the 'geography matters' thesis seems to be relevant in the field of political communication. The digital network and physical distances are related, reflective, and co-constructive (Stephens & Poorthuis, 2015). And it is precisely this link that makes the study of the impact of geography on Twitter so relevant for the analysis of the transformations suffered by the public sphere in the digital environment.

Consequently, we can assume that physical proximity and geographical location of users have an impact on interactions on social media, although once inside the media, it is possible to act without spatial constraints. Nevertheless, research on this topic in the field of political communication is emerging and is still scarce. For this reason, this research addresses the following questions:

- RQ1. What is the influence of the geographical location of users living in main cities in the debate that takes place on Twitter about a highly relevant political event, such as the negotiations on the formation of the government in Spain despite the death of the distance in the digital environment?
- RQ2. How does the volume of the population of the cities affect, depending on the geographical location of the users on Twitter, their influence on

the political conversation on this digital platform about a highly relevant event in the main cities of Spain?

- RQ3. How does proximity to the centres of political power in the cities where Twitter users are located impact their influence on the political conversation on this social media about a highly relevant event in Spain?
- RQ4. How do the cultural and linguistic aspects related to the geographical location of Twitter users affect their influence on the political conversation on this digital platform about a highly relevant event in the main cities of Spain?

4. Methodology

This research focuses on Twitter users' activity. The choice of this particular microblogging service is motivated by its relevance, not only as having shared content but also as being real-time. Moreover, as our object of study focuses on the field of political communication, choosing Twitter is justified as the space *par excellence* used by political players and journalists to communicate on, talk about, and discuss politics in the social media environment, due to the high presence of these players on this platform (Casero-Ripollés, 2018).

The methodology is based on machine learning applied to the digital behaviour of Twitter users (Kliegr, Bahník, & Fürnkranz, 2020). Conversations on Twitter about the negotiations on the formation of the government in Spain are identified in an automated fashion. Machine learning algorithms specifically designed for this research detect these messages on Twitter, so that they then become part of the sample. Subsequently, the inclusion, or not, of tweets considered dubious was refined manually to ensure consistency and validity of the sample.

The sample focuses on the period from the day after the general elections held in Spain on December 20, 2015, until the dissolution of the Parliament and the call for new elections on May 2, 2016, triggered by the inability to form a government. This is a period of 133 days. Therefore, the sample includes messages and discussions on the negotiations to form a government. This is an event of great relevance to political life. Something that favours the ability to trigger public sphere debate.

For the purpose of carrying out the required analysis, we selected three Spanish cities: Madrid, Barcelona, and Valencia. Their inclusion is motivated by two factors. First, they are the three most-populated cities in Spain. In 2016, Madrid had 3,1 million inhabitants, Barcelona 1,6 million and Valencia 787,000. Secondly, they are the three cities with the greatest relevance and role in the Spanish political life. Their relationship with the centres of power is clearly differentiated (Villacañas, 2014). Madrid is the seat of the main political institutions (Parliament and Government) and has central preponderance in political life because of this. Barcelona is the capital of a historic nation, which, in recent years, has felt the momentum of an independence project to create their own State standing apart from Spain (Micó-Sanz & Carbonell, 2017). Traditionally, it has maintained a strong rivalry with Madrid that has exacerbated this process. Finally, Valencia occupies a peripheral position with respect to the centres of political and media power and its ability to influence them is lower (Mollà, 2014).

The data has been obtained directly from the Twitter API. As a starting point, 145 accounts were selected for the analysis. They belong to representative Twitter users within the political field (leaders and parties) and media (journalists and opinion makers or political commentators). Their selection is based on three criteria: their activity on Twitter (number of tweets published), their popularity on this social media (number of followers), and their public relevance outside of the Internet (position held: media directors, well-known journalists, political leaders, members of Parliament or public officers, among others). The first two criteria are indicators of the digital relevance of users considered relevant by previous literature (Dubois & Gaffney, 2014; Riquelme & González-Cantergiani, 2016). The group of accounts included in the analysis meet the criteria of a strategic sample. All followers from these 145 Twitter profiles have been incorporated in the analysis, using a snowball sampling strategy. A total of 24 million accounts approximately were included.

Because of the large amount of data generated, derived from the total of 24 million accounts, for operational reasons it was decided to limit the analysis to 10,000 accounts for each of the three cities studied. Thus, population differences between the three cities are eliminated and the data is standardized for comparative analysis. To identify these 30,000 most influential users, the accounts were selected within each city according to a Pagerank calculation (Page, Brin, Motwani, & Winograd, 1999), which determines a node's importance within a universe based on the importance of their followers. Once these accounts had been selected, the duplicate accounts occurring in more than one city were eliminated. This process resulted in the 24,389 accounts analysed. The tweet sample volume generated by these profiles during the period analysed was 127,3 million messages.

The data analysis procedure is based on the creation of 7 different groups of Twitter accounts, defined depending on the degree of influence of each one (see Table 1). A first block, formed by 3 groups, comprises of users that are only influential in their home city (groups 1 to 3). A second block, which also includes 3 groups, comprises accounts influential in 2 cities simultaneously (groups 4 to 6). Finally, the third block, formed by a single group (7), comprises users who are influential simultaneously in the 3 cities studied.

For the analysis of the incidence of the geographic location of users in the political conversation on Twitter, two indicators have been taken into account: the num-

Table 1. Groups of accounts according to their degree of influence in the different sample cities.

Group	Cities	Number of Twitter accounts
Group 1	Barcelona	7,517
Group 2	Madrid	6,422
Group 3	Valencia	5,733
Group 4	Valencia + Madrid	2,234
Group 5	Barcelona + Madrid	1,139
Group 6	Barcelona + Valencia	450
Group 7	Madrid + Barcelona + Valencia	894
TOTAL		24,389

ber of tweets published and the number of retweets. The first is an activity indicator because it measures the volume of production of information and user reviews in a particular community or city, as is our case. It involves diffusion of content and proposals within the digital public sphere and is related both to the polyphony of voices (Benkler, 2006; Coleman, 2017) and the diversity of players participating in the online discussion (Ruiz et al., 2011). The creation and dissemination of messages can potentially influence the digital conversation in the construction of the public agenda and political events framing processes. For their part, retweets perform several important functions on Twitter: a) its rebroadcasting promotes the transmission and spread of information and opinions throughout the platform; b) they enhance the public visibility of content, proposals and users; and finally c) they serve to recognise and endorse other users and opinions (boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010). This is related to networked publics (Ito, 2008). The use of retweets increases the potential influence of a message or a user to third parties (Cha, Haddadi, Benevenuto, & Gummadi, 2010). In view of this, these two variables are taken as valid indicators to measure how influence is articulated within the digital public sphere provided by Twitter.

5. Results

5.1. Participation Volume in the Digital Public Sphere on Twitter

The analysis reveals that Madrid was the city whose users generated the most tweets (19 million), compared to Barcelona (18 million) and Valencia (15 million) (see Table 2). However, Barcelona users made more retweets (62 million) compared to Madrid (55 million) and Valencia (38 million; see Table 2). This data shows that the total population is a factor that affects the number of tweets produced. Nevertheless, this variable does not decisively determine retweets production because the second city in population (Barcelona) clearly outperforms the first (Madrid). This reveals that the geographic location of most content creation does not coincide with most redistribution of content in the digital public sphere provided by Twitter.

These results show also that the profile of Valencia users is geared more towards consumption and redistribution of third-party-content-produced messages. This is consistent with the fact that Valencia is the city least connected with the centres of political and media power and with fewer possibilities to influence them. This finding reveals inequalities and gaps in the Twitter digital public sphere between different geographical locations according to their proximity to the centres of power.

The results of the retweets analysis allow us to observe that Valencia is the most closed city. That is to say, no other city has such a high number of retweets from users in the same geographical location: 8,2 million (see Table 3). On the contrary, the most permeable and open city was Madrid with 4,5 million retweets.

If we consider the retweets made by users of other cities, we can see that the population and proximity to the centres of power are factors that affect the articulation of the digital public sphere on Twitter. Thus, Madrid made 10 million retweets originating from the other two cities (Barcelona and Valencia; see Table 3), a figure that drops to 8,7 million in the case of Barcelona and 5,5 for Valencia.

5.2. City Influence in the Digital Public Sphere on Twitter

The analysis of the 7 groups established (see Table 1) allows us to observe the influence of the accounts in the 3 cities. The most active in terms of production of

Table 2. Overall activity (in millions) by city.

City	Number of tweets	Number of retweets
Madrid	19	55
Barcelona	18	62
Valencia	15	38

Table 3. Retweets registered based on the geographical location of users (in millions).

	Barcelona	Madrid	Valencia
Retweets Barcelona	6,4	3,2	5,5
Retweets Madrid	3	4,5	7
Retweets Valencia	2	3,5	8,2

messages were influential users in all three cities simultaneously (Madrid, Barcelona, and Valencia; Group 7) with 185,000 tweets per day (see Table 4). Conversely, they have the least retweets made (22,000 daily). This data shows that users who are more focused on creating content to share have a greater capacity to influence more geographical areas in political discussion on Twitter. To be influential beyond your city or community requires deploying an intense tweet production activity. Conversely, retweets do not produce such a significant effect in this sense.

From the retweet analysis, we can observe that the groups that use this feature are the ones concentrating users related to a single city (see Table 4). Moreover, the more remote the city is from the centre of power, the more the retweets generated. This shows that these users are more oriented to consumption and redistribution of views and information than the creation of new opinions in the digital public sphere on Twitter.

This data allows us to once again detect the establishment of relationship dynamics between different geographical locations. The lowest intensity of Twitter message production, indicating less connection and contact between city communities, occurs between Barcelona and Valencia, on one hand, and Madrid and Valencia, on the other (see Table 4). Similarly, the volume of users tweeting daily in group 3 in Valencia is the third smallest of the seven groups. This highlights the peripheral position of Valencia in the Twitter discussions about forming a new government in Spain.

From the analysis of the number of users that make up the seven groups (see Table 1), we can observe that the number of influential users in one of the cities is clearly superior to the rest. The sum of the percentage of users only influential in Madrid, Barcelona, and Valencia (groups 1 to 3) is 80.66% of the total accounts (see Figure 1). Conversely, users simultaneously influential in the three cities surveyed account for 3.67% of to-

Table 4. Daily activity in groups' accounts according to their degree of influence in different cities in the sample (in thousands).

Group	Tweets/day	Retweets/day
Barcelona	125,000	140,000
Madrid	68,000	114,000
Valencia	52,000	149,000
Barcelona + Valencia	23,000	10,000
Barcelona + Madrid	135,000	17,000
Valencia + Madrid	29,000	30,000
Valencia + Barcelona + Madrid	185,000	22,000

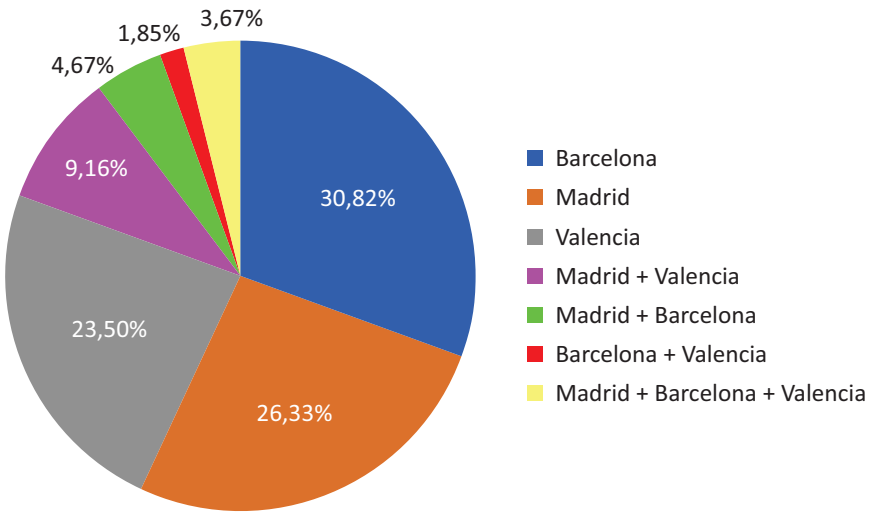

Figure 1. Percentage of users in each group according to their influence by city.

tal accounts: 894 out of the total of 24,389 (see Table 1). This highlights the existence of a power-law distribution in the number of influential users in the entire digital network, that is to say, in all three cities at the same time. Therefore, only a minority are able to exert an influence on the entire digital public sphere provided by Twitter. The rest only have a limited local influence, restricted to a single city.

Finally, the data shows the low connection between accounts located in Madrid and those situated in Barcelona. Despite being the two main urban centres in Spain, only 4.67% of users are influential in both cities at the same time (see Figure 1). The historic rivalry, heightened by the independence process (Micó-Sanz & Carbonell, 2017), and the disparity in cultural and linguistic factors may explain this lack of connection on Twitter detected between these two user communities, which, geographically speaking, are the two principal ones in the country.

6. Conclusions

Our research provides evidence that geographical location does indeed matter in Twitter political conversations. Our data, based on a sample of 127,3 million tweets, reveal that the physical space where users are can act to condition their activity and have influence on the digital public sphere linked to this social media platform. Although going digital dissolves barriers to public debate imposed by being in a physical offline space and allows discussions to be virtualized, our findings provide strong evidence that geography continues to have a significant impact on interactions between Twitter users regarding highly relevant political events. This research supports the 'geography matters' thesis in this digital platform (Bastos et al., 2018; Stephens & Poorthuis, 2015; Takhteyev et al., 2012).

Another contribution of this study is the identification of some of the main factors that provoke this fact in the field of political communication. Thus, in the first place, the volume of a city's population affects the number of tweets produced in a digital political conversation, although not the number of redistributed retweets. Until now this has been demonstrated at a general level (Longley & Adnan, 2016), but not specifically for the political arena. Population size affects the amount of information and opinions put into circulation: Users who live in cities with more inhabitants create and contribute more content in the digital debate about politics. Second, our findings suggest that proximity to physical power centres is related to the influence of users linked to those locations in the digital public sphere provided by Twitter. This is evidenced in our case with the examples of Madrid and Valencia. The first city, the seat of the institutions of the Spanish State, dominates in the number of tweets and retweets. On the other hand, Valencia, which occupies a position far from the centres of power, is configured as the community most closed in itself and is situated in a peripheral position both in the production of tweets and in the re-diffusion through retweets. This reveals the existence of inequalities and gaps in the digital public sphere between the different cities in the political conversation on Twitter.

A third relevant element is the cultural aspects, external to the digital network (Kulshrestha et al., 2012). The existence of cultural differences between cities contributes to connecting or disconnecting the users linked to them. In our case, this dynamic is evident in the case of the relationship between Madrid and Barcelona. The fact of being linked to a strongly established own culture and being involved in an independence process (Micó-Sanz & Carbonell, 2017) leads to users of the latter city to have a low connection with users in Madrid, the country capital. According to previous research (Arthur & Williams, 2019), our data suggest that the regional identities of users affect political conversation on Twitter.

Finally, our findings allow us to make another significant contribution. Only a small number of users (3.67% of the total) is influential in the three cities simultaneously. This responds to the parameters of a power-law distribution in which the power to condition the digital public sphere provided by Twitter is concentrated in a few hands. Consequently, the majority of users who participate in public debate online have a locally limited capacity to influence. This suggests that there are also opinion leaders (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944) in the digital domain, whose influence is related, in part, to their geographical location. The influence on this social media platform is unequal because not all users have the same possibilities to shape the public sphere (Fuchs, 2014).

In conclusion, the material space where users are located acts on the political conversation on Twitter. Geography affects how users interact in the digital public sphere, articulated by this social media platform, despite the fact that the debate takes place in a virtual environment. Far from the death of distance, our findings affirm that the physical location of users is able to condition their activity, their content and their dynamics of influence on Twitter beyond the transformations imposed by the digital environment. These findings are a novel contribution to the design of more effective electoral campaigns and political strategies and provide a better understanding of the dynamics of the digital public sphere provided by Twitter.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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