

Analysis of the discursive characterization of migratory stories on Twitter: The Aquarius case

Análisis de la caracterización discursiva de los relatos migratorios en Twitter. El caso Aquarius

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The controversy that emerged around the rescuing and welcoming of the migrants who were on board the Aquarius was prominently reflected on twitter. **Objectives and methodology:** The objective of this article is to analyze the representations made around migration on this social network based upon the study of the Aquarius case. To do that, we have monitored, for four months, around two million tweets related to the Aquarius term, the influence Twitter has to create and make hoaxes go viral, and the presence of discursive strategies promoting hate speech. **Conclusions:** We observed that a stereotyping process of migrants occurred in many of the tweets posted, as well as the tendency of emotional aspects prevailing over rational argumentation. Additionally, at least eleven hoaxes related to the coverage of the case were identified.

KEYWORDS: Twitter; migration; disinformation; fake news; discursive characterization; hate speech.

RESUMEN

Introducción: La polémica provocada alrededor del rescate y la acogida de los migrantes que viajaban a bordo del Aquarius tuvo un reflejo especialmente importante en Twitter. **Objetivos y metodología:** El objetivo de este artículo es analizar las representaciones construidas en esta red social alrededor de la migración a partir del estudio del caso Aquarius. Para ello, se han monitorizado durante cuatro meses cerca de dos millones de tuits relacionados con el término Aquarius y se han analizado la influencia de Twitter en la creación y viralización de bulos y la presencia de estrategias discursivas que favorecen el discurso del odio. **Conclusiones:** Se ha podido observar que en muchos de los tuits publicados se produce una estereotipación de los migrantes, así como la tendencia al predominio de los aspectos emocionales frente a la argumentación racional. Además, se han identificado al menos once bulos relacionados con el desarrollo del caso.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Twitter; migración; desinformación; bulos; caracterización discursiva; discurso de odio.

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Translation by **Carlos Javier Rivas Quintero** (University of the Andes, Mérida, Venezuela).

1. Introduction

The journey and subsequent landing in Valencia of the migrants who were traveling on board the Aquarius in June 2018 had wide news coverage. In fact, through this case, migration, which goes unnoticed most of the times, gained great relevance in the Spanish media spotlight, being in all types of news programs for a week.

The Aquarius is a ship dependent on the French S.O.S. Méditerranée NGO, used for tasks related to sea rescue operations of migrants since 2016. The ship, which during the first days of June had rescued 629 people, could not dock at the ports of Malta and Italy due to their governments' refusal of the landing of the people who were rescued. On June 11, 2018, the Spanish Government offered the Aquarius the possibility for the migrants aboard the ship to land at the port of Valencia where it finally docked on June 17.

The Aquarius had become top news due to the fact of several factors occurring simultaneously, with far greater consequences than those posed by the landing of any other ship with immigrants at the Spanish coasts. The Aquarius case promoted public reflection about people trafficking, the role of rescue ships of the NGO in the Mediterranean and the absence of a common immigration policy in the EU, which has led the leaders of Mediterranean countries to take different measures, depending on their ideologies or the political interests of the moment.

The media prominence of the case was also on social networks and on Twitter, especially. Users took part in the media discourse exchanging their opinions as they tracked information from the media, assuming the role of public opinion constructors about immigration and expressing racist and xenophobic stances, but also of integration and coexistence. Alesina, Miano and Stantcheva (2018) presented, in the conclusions of their study of wrong preconceptions about immigration, the distorted idea users have regarding the number and nature of immigrants based upon a completely preconceived image. These conditions promoted the dissemination of numerous hoaxes which went viral and thanks to the support of new technological tools and to the boosting of debates with the aid

of trolls and bots, quickly transmitted false messages which contributed to the manipulation of public opinion (Richter, 2018).

Basing on the Aquarius case, this research intends to analyze the characteristics of the discourse around migration generated on Twitter by determining how the messages posted on this social network contributed in the forming of judgments about migrants. Therefore, it is about identifying the common characteristics in the discourse linked to the migratory story, and determining how the reality of the migrants, who traveled aboard the Aquarius, is deconstructed by the different messages posted on Twitter, especially those which promote infoxication through the creation and dissemination of hoaxes, the use of terms associated to hate speech and the forming of stereotypes.

This article is framed within the reflections around the construction of the discourse regarding immigration (Van Dijk, 1997; Bañón, 2002) and the image of immigrants in the Spanish society and in social communication media (Imbert, 1990; Santamaría, 2002; Retis, 2003; Lafuente, 2010), topics which have been addressed by different studies over the past decades. The new opinion ambits are the social media and, on them, users base on discriminatory elements (Acosta, 2015) if not on discourses of populist nature (Alonso, 2018) around migration.

2. Methodology

The construction of the corpus of this study was conducted by the automated capturing, filtering and analysis of the tweets related to the subject of study. Subsequently, this process was complemented with a non-automated qualitative analysis, focused on the most relevant days for the evolution of the case.

For this purpose, all the tweets posted from June 11 to October 25 of 2018 with the #Aquarius hashtag have been monitored in this study. This period, which coincides with the triggering of the humanitarian crisis generated around the rescuing and welcoming of the migrants who were on board the ship, facilitated the analysis of the evolution of the sentiment in the tweets in a reasonably broad context.

As aforementioned, the tweets posted during June 11, 12, 13 and 17 were analyzed independently at a second stage of the study. These days, which correspond to the period from the moment when the Spanish Government decided to take the immigrants in at the port of Valencia to the landing of the very ship, were the ones having greater activity in the news coverage of this case.

2.1. Automated analysis

The messages comprised by the first group of data, 1.917.041 tweets, were directly collected through Twitter API, which allows requesting tweets samples. After eliminating duplicate messages, which were retweets mainly, the original group was then reduced to a total of 273.976 tweets¹. Form this dataset we used a standardized methodology for information analysis based on filtering, processing and subsequent identification of the sentiment associated to each tweet of the resulting corpus.

2.1.1. Filtering

The filtering process began with the identification of the languages present in the dataset. This task was carried out through Pyglot, a Python programed library which identifies the most recognizable

¹ The filtering process of the duplicate tweets was carried out through Pandas. This Python library, created to manipulate and analyze big datasets, has a function which allows eliminating duplicate entries in a simple way.

patterns of many languages. Thanks to it, we could detect tweets written in 128 different languages, and subsequently, select the 53.682 ones which were written in Spanish.

Next, we proceeded to eliminate the unrelated tweets to the subject of study and those elements lacking semantic load; for that, three different functions were created. The first one allowed conducting the preprocessing of each tweet, changing all the characters included in them into lowercase letters and eliminating diacritical and punctuation marks.

Subsequently, we created two functions aimed at identifying the tweets related to the sports drink brand “Aquarius”, to the astrological sign and the constellation of the same name. The functioning of both functions was based on the contextualization of the Aquarius term, identifying those words sequences related to each one of these areas of meaning.

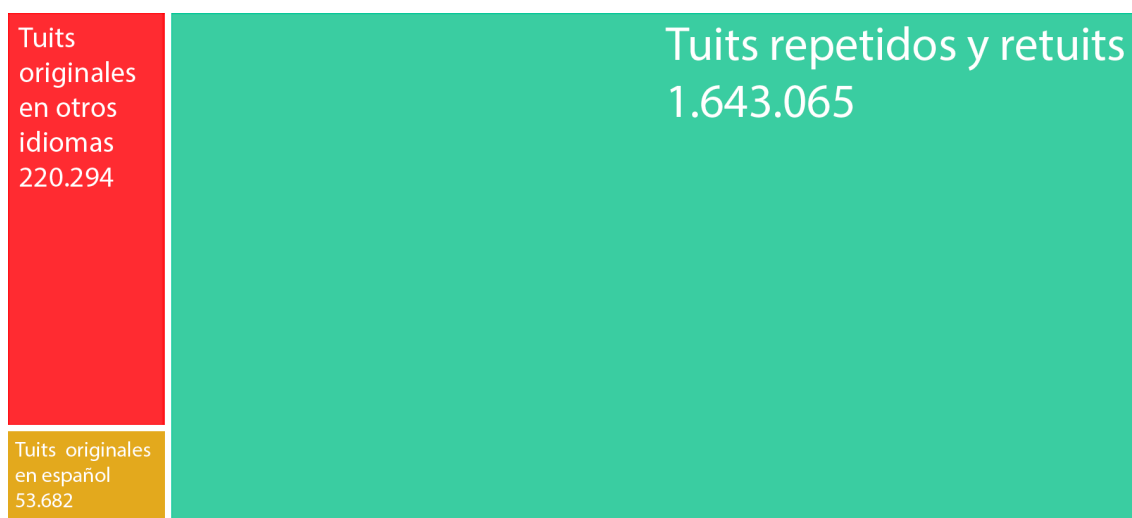


Figure 1: number of repeated and original tweets in Spanish and other languages.

Source: Authors' own creation.

Finally, on a second filtering stage, we proceeded to identify the stop words present in each tweet. In the Natural Language Processing (NLP) these words are those, such as articles, prepositions and pronouns, lacking any meaning. Generally, these types of words are eliminated, especially if, as it happens in this case, they do not influence on the disambiguation of the analyzed terms².

2.1.2. Tweets processing

Processing the tweets was essentially their lemmatization and tokenization. Lemmatization is a linguistic process to obtain the canonical form of a word or lemma from their inflected forms. Through it, plural words or conjugated verbal forms can be transformed into their correspondent lemma. That way, by using lemmatization, all the nouns in our corpus which were in plural form were transformed into their singular forms, all the adjectives to their masculine singular form (Spanish has plural masculine and feminine adjectives forms) and all the verbal forms into their infinitives³.

² The identification of stop words was conducted through NLTK and Stop-words Python libraries.

³ The lemmatization of the tweets forming our corpus was carried out through SpaCy software library.

In Natural language processing, tokenization is the division of phrases or sentences into the single words forming them to facilitate their analysis in an individualized way. This process can be executed through different Python libraries, but we opted to use NLTK with the purpose of giving greater procedural consistency to the filtering.

2.1.3. Sentiment analysis

After the data cleansing, translation, and dataset processing phases, we proceeded with the analysis of the sentiment of the tweets comprised in our corpus. To do that, we used VADER Sentiment, a tool developed by the Python Software Foundation, which performs sentiment analyses using Machine Learning techniques to classify and assess the positive or negative nature of a text in an automated way according to the words and the contexts they are in.

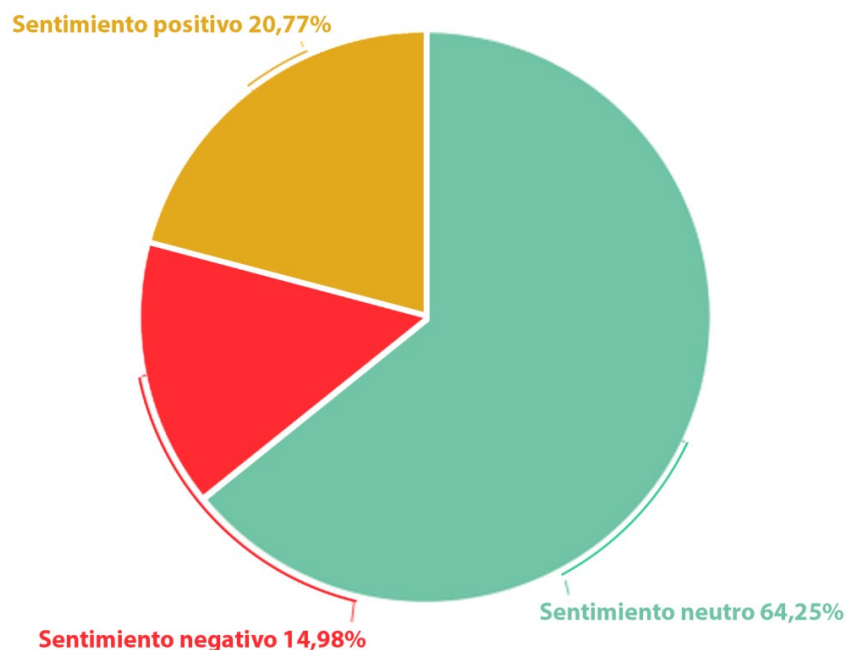


Figure 2: percentage of tweets expressing positive, negative, and neutral sentiments.
Source: Authors' own creation.

Basing on the values provided by this tool there were 8.040 tweets with a negative sentiment (14.98%), 11.152 tweets with a positive sentiment (20.77%) and 34.490 tweets with a neutral sentiment (64.25%).

Although this study is focused on the analysis of tweets expressing positive or negative sentiments regarding migrants, the convenience of conducting new researches focused on the study of inclusion mechanisms for pragmatic, contextual and ironic elements in the sentiment analyses automated processes is suggested.

2.2. Qualitative analysis

As aforementioned, after the processing and automated analysis stages, we conducted a non-automated qualitative analysis. It was grounded in two convergent perspectives: on the one hand, the analysis of the hoaxes regarding the Aquarius case generated on Twitter, and on the other hand, the study of the characterization of migrants in the tweets that form our corpus.

Although we opted to study all the tweets collected from June 11 to October 25 of 2018 for the hoaxes analysis, we preferred studying only those posted on June 11, 12, 13 and 17 for the characterization analysis, those in which the most significant milestones, which triggered greater activity on both Twitter and in the media, were registered during the evolution of the case. As a result of these samplings, we obtained a total of 23.929 tweets⁴.

This methodological differentiation derives from the specific characteristics of each of the elements analyzed. That way, when analyzing the elaboration and dissemination of hoaxes, having the greatest amount of context possible was essential to notice their evolution. And for the analysis of the discourse characterization, it was far more interesting to center this study on the moments in which the conversation on Twitter acquired greater intensity.

Once these tweets were identified, we opted for a content analysis, by which we have observed the type of interaction of the users who participated and the linguistic elements with which the messages were spotted, taking into account those common indicators among the different arguments presented.

Many of the tweets in our corpus seem to be decontextualized, either because they are reduced and synthetic comments dependent on other arguments or because they have no reference to other hashtags about the case under study, to which we can refer, apart from the one we have been monitoring (#Aquarius), providing some incomplete results. Therefore, it was essential to take into consideration a set of variables to conduct the discursive analysis of the tweets and the construction of the image of immigrants within the corpus we elaborated.

First, we have established a main topic, in this case, the journey of immigrants aboard the Aquarius to Valencia, without considering the tweets generated regarding the political decision of Pedro Sánchez of bringing the Aquarius to Spain. Human beings build their history and discourse by naming things, people, and situations. In this study, we intended to establish a taxonomy for the words with which the people on board the Aquarius are called, to be aware of the stances users on Twitter took about this newsworthy event and its protagonists.

Secondly, we have determined the main topics with fake content generated on Twitter about the Aquarius during its journey, and we have chosen one of them as reference to verify the type of information that was being disseminated, as well as the tendency and the emotional aspects of the message. We have also verified if there had been later checking actions to detect the hoax through fact-checking initiatives and projects.

Finally, the content of the tweets explicitly aimed at the migrants aboard the Aquarius was analyzed taking into account the premises of hate speech and its different tones: informative, of opinion or purely emotional, for their differentiation and later positive or negative assessment regarding the immigrants arriving from the sea.

3. Results

3.1. The Aquarius case hoaxes

Disinformation, alluding to hoaxes and in a more polarized and even more incorrect way to fake news, can be defined as the intentional dissemination of information lying entirely or partially about

⁴ 10.454 tweets, related to the Aquarius ship, were identified on June 11, 6.334 on June 12, 3.031 on June 13, and finally, 4.110 tweets on June 17, the day the ship docked at the port of Valencia.

what is being presented. These contents are characterized by their lack of rigour and the fact of being created with the intention of manipulating public opinion through the misrepresentation of facts. Therefore, they manage to transmit a fictitious reality with the objective of unsettling the audiences who receive them (Olmo and Romero, 2019).

In this study, we have detected eleven important hoaxes so far, which promoted the creation of a negative image and rejection of the migrants who were traveling aboard the Aquarius. The first one presented in the table hereunder shows an alleged statement made by Celia Villalobos, former Member of Parliament of People’s Party: “I’m sorry they are dying in the sea, but I don’t want to see them in my country”. It is a recurrent hoax that started circulating the Internet again coinciding with the Aquarius case, which had gone viral and was already refuted on the initiative of Maldita.es on March 21st, 2017.

Table 1. *The eleven most disseminated hoaxes for the Aquarius case.*

Date it was refuted	Refuting source	Headline of the hoax
21/03/2017- 11/06/2018 12/06/2018	- Maldito Bulo/ Verne	Celia Villalobos did not say “I’m sorry they are dying in the sea, but I don’t want to see them in my country”.
12/06/2018 11/08/2018	- Verne/Eldiario.es	Immigrants will receive a financial aid of 532 Euros per month.
12/06/2018	Verne/ ONGD	Immigrants came to seize social services.
12/06/2018	Verne	Another 729 immigrants joint the Aquarius.
12/06/2018	Verne	What if terrorists arrive?
18/06/2018	Maldito Bulo	No, this image of immigrants with mobiles and tobacco does not correspond to those immigrants of the Aquarius.
19/06/2018- 21/06/2018- 26/06/2018	Diario.es/ Maldito Bulo/ Distrito.es/ Vertele/ Ecoteuve	No, Bertín Osborne has not said: “Why do all immigrants not go to the mansion of Pablo Iglesias?”
25/06/2018	Maldito Bulo	There have not been rapes on board the Aquarius: neither Oltra has said it nor proves exist.
25/06/2018 08/11/2019	- Maldito Bulo /Eldiario.es /Newtral	No, the clothes in the containers have not been thrown away by the Immigrants on the Aquarius.
25/06/2018	Maldito Bulo	An older woman has not been evicted from her home to accommodate refugees.
26/06/2018	Maldito Bulo	No, the C.I.A. has not warned the Government that among the Aquarius immigrants there are Boko Haram soldiers.
14/08/2018	Maldito Bulo	No, Ada Colau has not offered job contracts to all the immigrants of the Aquarius.

Source: Collected from «Las mentiras que se repiten sobre los migrantes a bordo del ‘Aquarius’», 2018, © EDICIONES EL PAÍS S.L; «Los bulos sobre los refugiados y migrantes del Aquarius», 2018, maldita.es – Licensed content by Creative Commons BY-SA.

Another prominent hoax presented in the table, was the one stating the existence of an alleged message from the C.I.A. to the Spanish government warning of the presence of Boko Haram terrorists among the migrants aboard the Aquarius. It was a meme which acquired some relevance when it was interpreted as a message of official nature. After a search for the “Boko Haram” term in the universe of tweets of our corpus, we found 18 tweets in total, from which 14 of them helped disseminating the hoax directly. To detect other similar messages about this same hoax, we filtered

the “terrorist” term, obtaining 44 tweets in total, from which 17 were direct disseminators of the hoax.

Tweets with an evident partisan nature have also been identified: “Only one fifth of the migrants on that ship come from war, the rest are mafias from more than 20 countries, without considering possible terrorists among them <https://t.co/WyIkOY4bdd>” (12/06/2018). The link here included redirects users to the official VOX Twitter account, on which there is an image with the following message: “? In VOX we wonder who benefits from people trafficking, taking advantage of their despair, with cases such as the #Aquarius one. Spanish people will have a hard time due to the irresponsibility of Pedro Sánchez and his collaborationist attitude with illegal immigration mafias” (12/06/2018).

This tweet, in addition to narrating an event which does not do justice to reality, redirects us to an account which has content from a political party, and that, additionally, promotes outrage about the arrival of migrants in Spain. That way, some of the most typical emotions on social media are easily identified in these messages; such as fear, rage or competitiveness. Emotions which trigger anger and outrage states in individuals and that can be magnified and manipulated to obtain a specific benefit: “Fiction is more profitable than real news, because it generates emotions; fake news is designed to outrage” (Peirano, 2019, p. 48).

By analyzing the generated chain responses from these hoaxes, the way of thinking of users who interact is easily distinguished. They tend to feel identified with the message, and also with this social community which is now called “group emotions”; we have the following tweet as an example: “I understand humanitarian problems. I know Spanish people who struggle making ends meet, pensioners who scrape out a living, young people without expectations... Many come in search for job opportunities, but there are also guerrillas who have committed murder, undercover terrorists... #Aquarius” (11/06/2018). These users think and share the emotional orientation of the group with those who feel identified (Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, Schori and Gundar, 2009).

Twitter, unlike other social networks, is an open circuit which promotes debate. On it, the greatest amount of sentiment is not found in the first message, but it increases as the conversation develops. However, it can be considered as a positive element about this network, unlike WhatsApp for instance, the possibility of refuting a hoax quickly, allowing the media to activate the mechanisms they have available to stop the flourishing of fake information. New fact-checking initiatives, which emerged internationally at the beginning of the twenty first century, are a good example of how to combat hoaxes on social media and other mediums.

Unlike traditional verification that journalists conduct before publishing news, the main function of journalistic verification based on fact-checking techniques, is to verify information after being published. As pointed out by Bill Adair, founder of Politifact: “Verification is the editorial technique used by journalists -including fact-checkers- to verify the accuracy of a statement” (Verification Handbook, 2013). This verification would consist in proving if the statements made by someone, especially political actors, or the contents generated by users, are truthful, fake or inaccurate, through the checking of data and facts.

These initiatives act as a firewall for disinformation on social media. Hoaxes that went viral during the journey of the Aquarius were refuted mainly by the newspaper *El País*, with a tweet posted on @el_pais, the official Twitter account of the journal. On it, there was a link to an article published on June 13, 2018, in its Verne section, in which the circulating hoaxes about the Aquarius case were gathered. For their part, from @ElObjetivoLaSexta, a tweet was published on June 17 with a video

clip of their television show hosted by Clara Jiménez, founder of Maldita.es, refuting the most popular hoaxes: “With the arrival of the #Aquarius the hoaxes about the refugees have once again emerged on social media... @cjimenezcruz is going to go over them...”. Similarly, @Malditobulo also did its own post to refute the tweet on June 26, 2018, which generated 26 comments, 495 retweets and 284 likes, with this message: “No. The C.I.A. did not warn the Government that among the people who were on board the Aquarius there had been “Boko Haram” soldiers. We received confirmation from the Ministry of Internal Affairs. There is no evidence of otherwise. Trump’s phrase is not real, either”.

Together with the tweet there was this image:

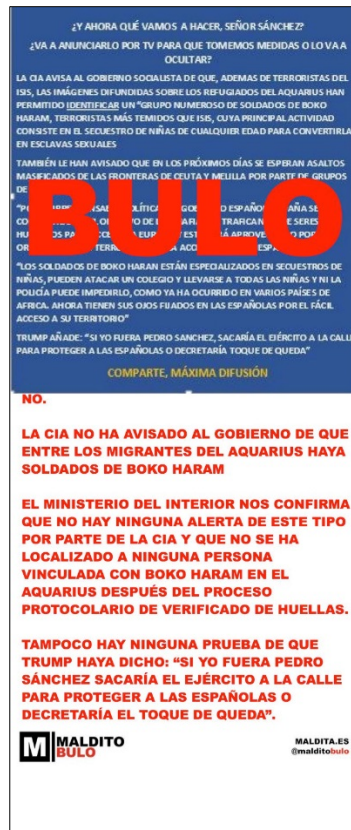


Figure 3: Meme and refutation of the hoax that went viral with the message: “The C.I.A. has warned the Government that among the Aquarius migrants there are Boko Haram soldiers” from Malditobulo maldita.es – Licensed content by Creative Commons BY-SA.

3.2. Immigrants characterization in the Aquarius case

Traditional media have managed how to stop the misuse of discriminatory terms by writing guides and style guides, and that way elaborating a more respectful discourse towards migrants. However, it is very difficult to delimit the contents of messages on social media without a direct intervention of the accounts of users and promote a more respectful discourse regarding certain topics in “this defining moment in cyber hate history” (Citron & Norton, 2011, p. 1.435).

In this research corpus, collected from Twitter, we have found interactions and comments from users full of violence against immigration and against the people aboard the Aquarius who were arriving in

Valencia. Texts with cathartic sentiment and simplistic belittling and smearing (Trejo Delarbre, 2017) which could fall into the so-called hate speech: “Any form of expression, which disseminates, promotes or justifies racial hate, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or any other form of hate based on intolerance” (European Commission, 1997).

A broad definition that the Spanish Criminal Code defines in its article 510 as follows: “[Shall be punished] those who publicly encourage, promote or incite, directly or indirectly, hate, hostility, discrimination or violence against a group, part of it or against a specific person because they are part of it, for racist, anti-Semitic or other reasons related to ideology, religion or beliefs, family situation, the belonging of its members to an ethnicity, race or nation, their country of origin, sex, orientation or sexual identity; gender, illness or disability” (2019).

However, although it is evident that hate speech burst into the opinions of the tweets regarding immigration topics (and the Aquarius case is not an exception), hostile and violent expressions that are exchanged from a merely ideological and partisan perspective are more prominent regarding the decision of the Spanish Government of letting the ship dock at the port of Valencia⁵. But not because of this a more positive discourse is constructed in the comments around immigration and the Aquarius immigrants, which are the focus of this study, but on the contrary, the image of the people who were rescued by the ship is misrepresented in a Manichean attitude establishing two differentiated segments. There is a clear reaffirmation of group belonging from users in both segments: for or against the migratory policy, and therefore, the polarization between *them* (those coming from outside the country) and *us* (those who live in Spain).

Again, it is a stereotyped identity construction of the image of immigrants with negative classifications (Revilla, 2011) to which said duality leads, resulting in “social systems of dominance and inequality” (Van Dijk, 2011, p. 294) as those emerging when it comes to immigrants.

“Choosing one name or another, adding or removing an adjective, favors or makes difficult a specific representation of reality” (Portolés, 1997, p. 21) and the homogeneous representation of migrants, from the perspective of *us*, as the construction of a positive image, and from *them* as a negative one, this determines many of the strategies and linguistic mechanisms associated to immigrants (De la Fuente, 2006).

The names with which they are labeled and referred to are adjectives working as nouns: “immigrants”, with a semantic sense beyond its own meaning of a person arriving from an undeveloped country; “Africans”, term with geographical origin in the positive tweets, but also in other message with some derogatory sense, and “refugees”. This term is used ironically (the quotation marks provide that change in its sense in the text of the comment), questioning what it means to be one and the difficulties it entails: “Eh! I did not fall from the #Aquarius, but I was on the ship, too. Where can I go to pick up my package? The Aquarius “refugees” will also have paid jobs, home, and free circulation in Spain <https://t.co/YCsatfVbnf> (13/06/18).

⁵ It is important to point out that in many of the tweets from both the users supporting the migratory policy established by the Spanish government and those who disagreed with said policy, defamatory and intimidating messages were collected. Some examples are: “You are a disgusting mean person. I wish you would never have to be in the shoes of those on the #Aquarius! Oh, no, hold on, because you earn 8.000 euros per month from the State you are against! Brave bad blood you are. In addition to “laughing” we can now see your true colors. <https://t.co/vDhhNfswWU>” (reply to a tweet posted by Gabriel Rufián); “If you dare claiming the possibility of forsaking 600 people in the open sea, it is because you are one big son of a bitch! #Aquarius”; “I would say that our country is in the hands of morons and traitors, but we do not longer have a country. #Aquarius”

This comment quoted the text almost literally from the headline of a piece of news published on an online medium, OKdiario, which amplified the information and clarified what the benefits mentioned in the body of the chronicle meant. The media are responsible for transferring the information, but so are Twitter users for manipulating it or eliminating the terms to benefit their stance in the comment posted. The opinion dependent on newsworthy references regarding the case is mixed with an anecdotal side of the information and with other components such as the predefined beliefs of users. That way, what emerges as a result of interests, desire or misinterpretation is presented as a true fact.

The Aquarius migrants, “victims” of a socio-political situation, are also pitied by many of the users who try to empathize with those people and understand their vulnerable situation: “I do feel proud that, amid this humanitarian crisis, my country welcomes the #Aquarius victims, and it is not about making your home available because there are mechanisms and resources which work perfectly” (11/06/18); leaving aside the fact that these people are not seeking compassion, but to be subjects having rights and responsibilities in the welcoming country (Gallardo, 2008).

Some web surfers showed their pride about the reaction in favor of immigrants, although it was not the final solution, it depended on effective, safe and human policies (“Before, too, but since I became a mother the suffering of a child hurts deeply. Seeing those kids having a slight opportunity of living better than they would have in their country... I’m excited”, 17/06/18; “#Aquarius, a necessary solution for 629 victims of the first world management. Now we have to find a solution so there are no more Aquarius”, 12/06/2018), for them to no longer be “castaways”, desperate lost and wandering people (“And how do you call those who are drifting on a ship in the middle of the sea? Castaways, right? And what is the international assistance law for #castaways? That’s it. It is said. The only thing left to do is to provide help and stop making excuses”, 11/06/18).

Or the “slaves” title, word that appears as opposed to “mob” or “traffickers”, terms used to identify NGOs or the Aquarius crew. Not forgetting that those people arriving on the ship could still be slaved when they land in Spain: “They will be treated as slaves when they get here, being cheap workforce” (12/06/18).

“Illegal immigration” and “irregular immigration” are syntagmas with an already high level of signification that in many occasions generates a “symbolic power” (Bourdieu, 1977); hashtags that come from social inertia and insufficient immigration policies which make immigrants into inhuman beings, with limitations in their rights. Additionally, if these terms come together with adjectives like “massive”, they contribute to defining the Aquarius situation as a risk to society and highlighting how immigrants are subjects who are outside the established regulation:

“And with the #Aquarius case, the season for massive illegal immigration is officially open for welcoming in our country. What difference does it make the 15% of strike, 40% of strike in young people, public administration deficit, collapsed public services; let another 600 more come <https://t.co/DzUrybcNYt>” (11/06/18).

The metaphors “invasion” (“Go #Italy and the #LegaNord! Serious people against the #invasion of illegal immigrants, 13/06/18), “avalanche” (“It is typical of businesses and demagogues to deny the avalanche of boats as a result of the call effect of the #Aquarius”, 17/06/18) and “influx”⁶ (“What is going to happen when people in Africa spread the word that the Spanish Prime Minister welcomes

⁶ Among the 23.929 tweets our corpus comprises, the word avalanche appears 11 times. The words invasion and influx are present in 20 and 5 tweets, respectively.

you personally as a refugee? There would be influxes of ships brining Africans”, 11/06/18) reaffirm what has been stated before: impetuous movements of lots of people with threatening intentions.

These terms recap two of the stances of the users opposing to the arrival of the Aquarius in Valencia: immigration as an onerous problem without a law, resulting in the establishment of a state of conflict and crime, which is going to be mentioned further on.

The expressions and terms promoting hate within the discourse of the tweets in our corpus have also been categorized in this article in a more or less explicit manner, or somewhat symbolic, more dependent on the context, and for that we have conducted a basic division.

With invective a degrading and derogatory belittling of immigrants is established. The use of terms for insulting and attacking in the discourse, which do not require an extra context to know we are dealing with explicit aggression:

“#Aquarius, screw the moors! Screw all those who defend them! Screw this traitor government!” (11/06/18). Or the creation of derogatory terms (“*moronegrada*” [EN: black moors]) adding the “influx” metaphor, a movement which is going to be hard to control, and ending it with a clear threat of “expansion”: “As soon as the black moors arrive, the wave of xenophobia and lack of solidarity will arrive in Spain. Some of us are going to be responsible of expanding it”, <https://t.co/kSQ1N8AArN> (11/06/18).

There are also cases in which an ironic tone is used with the purpose of reducing that semantic load. However, what it does is to reaffirm the existing prejudices towards a race or a skin color: “I am not racist, c’mon; I do not support the black footballers of my team. #Aquarius” (11/06/18) or “This was the last straw that broke the camel’s back... we already have TOO MANY GOOD LITTLE MOORS here, fuck!!!!” (11/06/18). In this last case, in addition to the intensifier “too”, the force of the diminutive replicates the pragmatic context in which it is immersed and counters the affective value of this diminutive with belittling, incorporating disdain and contempt. Additionally, the use of the adjective “good” leads to an ironic sense.

Neither the whys nor the causes that produced the newsworthy event were found in the tweets; there were no incentives to possible solutions in the comments, either; instead, there was an amplification of the topics, a competition for drawing the attention of Twitter users with vulgarisms which give greater aggressiveness, falling into the accusation of a crime: “600 additional invasive cocks looking where to stick it in, and the country is in hydrological deficit. When will we have enough saturation in population and third-worldism to be happy?” (11/06/18).

This filthy discourse with accusations and insults is used directly under the protection of anonymity and the virtuality aspect of this interaction. The tweets replicate a minimum repetitive discourse, by which people use the simplification figure of speech to stigmatize immigrants, calling them threats and conflict instigators: “It gives me great peace welcoming rapists and criminals in my land. You have no shame #VikingosTeam <https://t.co/epWjv0vVTv>” (13/06/18); “And it is not an isolated case. It happens every day because immigration is not being controlled and throngs of criminals come. Who are being affected? The Spanish people and the immigrants who come here to truly work in their search for a better life, but of course, brainless kindness prevails. <https://t.co/xJtO4kPehW>” (17/06/18).

“Throng”, “too many”, and “overflown” are terms which measure upward and define situations of racism, xenophobia or, in any case, aporophobia; fear and rejection towards poverty. “It is the phobia

towards paupers which leads to rejecting people, races and those ethnicities who typically have no resources, and therefore, cannot offer anything, or may seem unable to do so” (Cortina, 2017, p. 21). These and other comments referring to the Aquarius case, although they might seem to be constructed on the bases of superiority rhetoric, they reveal the fact that users who write them feel their cultural and national identity is threatened by the one of the immigrant (Cea, D’Ancona, 2009) therefore, they end up rejecting those favorable treatments foreign people coming into Spain could receive from the institutions in this country. As an example, some tweets taken from the corpus about the alleged aids immigrants receive: “The typical human feces who prefer bringing people from outside to give them homes, salaries, aids, etc., while there are compatriots sleeping in parks, jobless families and our elders without decent pensions” (13/06/18); “Those arriving in Valencia this Friday will be welcomed as refugees and will receive 532 euros per month. They already have houses waiting for them and all their needs covered. These 629 will cost us: $532 \times 629 \times 12 = 4.015.536$ ”; “A 500€ payment per person that is going to be paid from our taxes. Women can now beware because several rapists are coming down of that ship” (17/06/18).

These discourses establish some defamatory and even impossible comparisons without knowing other variables: “First, you have got to mend all those jobless or retired Spanish people who have to go to trashcans in order to eat because they don’t have enough... and then the rest... if you keep up like this, I won’t fucking vote for you... fix this country first” (11/06/18); “HEY //629 IMMIGRANTS INTO SPAIN. Maintenance, housing, economic aids, schooling, health, clothing... each one of them will cost us more than 2.000 euros per month to say the least, 1.4 million per month, 17 million euros per year. Meanwhile Spanish people be like” (11/06/18).

Fear is instilled with these comments: a whole collective is seeking to take the rights away from the citizens of the country that is welcoming them: “The #Aquarius is heading to Spain. If pensions are endangered it is easy, we remove the aids to illegal immigration promoted by mafias and voilà, savings!” (13/06/18).

Finally, immigrants are incapacitated to integrate into the society in which they arrive by an alleged exploitation of the health-care system and usage of the welfare state, placing them in a situation of social and economic deficit. “But, when are these bastards going to work? Are they hired as professional rapists, hawkers or riot instigators? Because they are fully trained at doing that”, <https://t.co/ffCd0alwWD> (17/06/18).

The level of verbal aggression increases in parallel to identification, with a group affiliation repeating the rejection of immigrants in their comments. A tone of strong ideological nature that justifies a hypothetical criminal tendency of immigrants: rapists, murderers... “Do we know who they are? Do we know what they have done? Do we know if they are criminals or if there is a killer among them? We don’t know who you are going to let into Spain. More expenditure and more insecurity” (11/06/18).

Or even terrorist: “Well, tough luck for them, poor people. He and the C.I.A. have decided that resources are going to the refugees, among which there are rapists. We don’t know if there are jihadists” (13/06/18).

We have not been able to establish whether the fallacies Twitter users repeat come from ignorance based on an alleged knowledge or are used with the purpose of misinforming and creating an atmosphere of misrepresentation of what is real, which leads to excessive generalizations and a set of negative qualities of immigrants. But according to what has been presented in this research, many of the comments are based on hoaxes, and on fake and misread news or facts. Some people quote

relevant public figures, such as Mónica Oltra⁷, vice-president of the Generalitat Valenciana: “We have to assist the women who might have suffered from sexual assaults during the journey”. Is she openly saying there are rapists on the ship coming to Valencia? #Aquarius” (13/06/18), or consolidated institutions, such as the Civil Guard: “Civil guards warning of the #Aquarius arrival: ‘Spain cannot take this anymore’” (17/06/18). That way, people avoid taking direct responsibilities for what has been written or seek media support to provide greater credibility to their comments.

Additionally, some of the tweets, which are repeated throughout the days, use a provocative tone deliberately to rupture main threats on Twitter, revealing the possibility of them being trolls: “Why are people calling human catastrophe what in actuality is an INVASION of Europe? (11/06/18); “#Aquarius –a modern slaves trafficker- seeking a port to unload the 629 immigrants it has picked up making the slaves trafficking work of mafias more effective” (11/06/18).

Ultimately, among the analyzed tweets during this study, we have found an emphasizing and homogeneous discourse of the figure of immigrants which hinders a better understanding of the people who were aboard the Aquarius, except those tweets belonging to the media that conducted an informative monitoring, presenting them in a more individualized form, giving them names and faces. Journalists informed of their informative labor about the conditions in which those people were since they departed from Africa and some coping stories in their tweets: “There are more than a dozen pregnant women and a more than a hundred children; many others have skin wounds due to the fuel or sea water” (12/06/18).

The analysis has been focused on the denominations in the comments collected from the corpus and the negative and stereotyped treatment immigrants have received, even if it is true that the majority of tweets have been written in their defense beyond the decision made by the Spanish Government: “Taking care of the #Aquarius migrants helps a lot to make some retards understand they are people. They are no 629 numbers who want to steal jobs, they are 629 people” (11/06/18).

This study demonstrates that there are still some people making immigrants scapegoats for the problems or political decisions of our society, and even though others try to educate these individuals with facts and proven data of their false belief, they not only tend to maintain their opinions, but instead, they hold on more passionately to their convictions (Mantzaris, 2017). Only a well-informed audience will be capable of rejecting hoaxes and arguments based on frenzy and the lowest emotions as opposed to rational argumentation which generates a reflection on the immigration situation in Europe.

4. Conclusions

The result provided by the automated sentiment analysis of our corpus proves that, in spite of the controversy stirred around the Aquarius case and its great impact on the media, the majority of tweets posted do not present either a positive or negative sentiment about it.

However, a deeper analysis of the tweets demonstrates that users tend to put their ideological and political beliefs first before the “factual information” that reveals an opposite reality from their

⁷ Mónica Oltra, in an interview granted to *Canal Cuatro* (on the Cuatro al Día Show, June 13), made some unfortunate statements by saying that it would be necessary “specialized attention [for] women who might have suffered any type of sexual aggression, rape or might have been victims of trafficking during the journey”. According to the vice-president, her statements were misread: she meant rapes during the journey from the departure countries, before being rescued by Médecins Sans Frontières on the Aquarius. That way, the hoax was refuted from the alleged rapes. Maldita.es: <https://maldita.es/malditobulo/no-ha-habido-violaciones-abordo-del-aquarius-ni-oltra-lo-ha-dicho-ni-hay-pruebas/>

current belief. Meaning that, even if the dissemination of a reality, just as it occurred, should be enough to deem it as truthful, the ideological stances and the “group emotions” generated in people are still more firm at a general level than the very reality.

Even if there are hoaxes with the only purpose of damaging the image and reputation of other individuals, in the majority of cases the intention is to obtain some kind of benefit. It is essential that the media work together to fight disinformation and to avoid manipulation of public opinion based on emotions rather than data and facts.

In this case, we have proven that, although the fact-checking labor has been executed correctly, only a few mediums have taken part in this task. Even though there are more initiatives immersed in this checking labor, the truth is that, up until now, this discipline does not have a relevant place in the media editorials in Spain yet, something that is, without question, distressing due to the volume of dubious origin contents being received daily in the newsrooms.

Likewise, this analysis allows checking how the stereotyping process around migrant is reinforced due to the scarce presence of information and proven sources, contrary to what happened in traditional media. Discourses are reduced to opinions and a set of labels with which immigrants are called. Messages are based more upon emotional judgments than upon any type of rational argumentation. Therefore, how immigrants are called will be fundamental for social cohesion to exist.

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