Election campaign communication in universities through the Web 2.0

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Abstract: Last spring the Internet played a crucial role in the rectorial elections of the University of Vigo. Blogs and social networks ceased being simple platforms to advertise candidates' campaign proposals and became authentic means of expression in themselves. Two candidates took part in a fierce battle 2.0 in which they used the codes of the Internet to develop controversial viral campaigns, to spread all kinds of rumours, and to try to control the Internet, whose use in university election campaigns was unprecedented. This article presents the results of a comparative analysis of the online communication strategies used by both candidates in order to better understand the new use of online communication.

Keywords: Election communication, social networks, viral communication, communication strategies.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 1.1. New media and politics. 1.2. Youth and politics. 2. Method. 3. Results 3.1. Online communication used during the campaign; 3.2. Strategies 2.0 and viral communication. 3.3. The campaign's on and offline impacts. 4. Conclusions. 5. Documentary sources. 5.1. Bibliography and journals. 5.2. Other sources. 6. Notes.

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1. Introduction

Like in the other 50 Spanish public universities, the statutes of the University of Vigo (2009), in accordance with the Universities Organic Law (2001), indicate that the rector, the maximum authority of the institution, will be "elected by the University community by direct, free, secret and universal suffrage for a period of four years and

with the possibility of a single re-election". This norm specifies that elections should be celebrated as in democratic societies to decide which member of the community will direct, govern and manage the university.

In these rectorial elections, in which more than 25,000 people can participate, votes are weighted by sectors: tenure-track academic staff have 51% of the vote; all other academic and research staff 9%; students 30%; and administration and services staff 10% (*Universidade de Vigo*, 2010). This election contemplates the possibility of holding two rounds and defines specific deadlines for the submission of nominations and the election campaign.

In this period, candidates could present their election manifesto to the members of the university community, visit university premises and request the vote for their candidacy. Spanish society is accustomed to this procedure, given that citizens of age are called to participate in local, regional and national elections.

The analysis of the online strategies used by candidates in the last rectorial elections of the University of Vigo will allow us to better understand the uses of the Internet in university elections, in an attempt to understand the role played by online communication during the campaign.

1.1. New media and politics

Traditionally, politicians have used all media at their disposal to promote their ideas. This media use is unreasonable during election campaigns as candidates try to convince the largest number of people to vote for them, through the use of general communication techniques (Fernández-Souto, 2009).

Sala (2008) classifies the media according to election campaign utility and distinguishes between what happens "inside" and "outside" the campaign, which highlights the fact that many of the campaign actions undertaken by candidates occur in the background:

- Means that allow dialogue with voters (door-to-door visits, meetings in homes, meetings with voters, public events).

- Traditional media (street advertising, printed campaign material, party's press releases, advertisements in the press).

- Audiovisual media (Radio, TV).
- Direct marketing (postal and telephone marketing).
- Public relations.
- Exit polls activities.
- New media.

The last group includes the Internet, which has an enormous potential that combines institutional communication with spontaneous and viral content and facilitates the creation of content that can be used "inside" and "outside" the campaigns. This argument has been defended by Castells (2000), for whom the Internet "has a direct relationship with the organised political activity, conducted by both parties and governments of different types".

For this author, the internet can host all sorts of projects and ideas and is "an extraordinary participation instrument" that is often misunderstood by the political class, which only uses it as a conventional platform for the presentation of information and rarely uses it to maintain everyday interactive communication with citizens.

It is important to note that the innovations produced by the uses and applications of the new media have not only occurred in the most "commercial" fields of communication, but also in the political field. Maybe it is time to stop talking about new media because they came to stay long time ago and are already part of our everyday life just like any other media are.

Cortés (2009) affirms that in this new stage of the web 2.0 individuals have finally become powerful actors, so conversations have started to fill the markets, which is what individuals demand. The new marketing has changed the way companies interact with users, and obliges companies to talk to users because users are the ones building this new scenario and determining what happens in many cases. Interaction between participants is not only necessary, but mandatory.

And in this situation, which was believed to occur only in the field of brands, the user has showed us once again who is calling the shots. There are examples of commercial brands and many personalities whose reputation has been seriously damaged by unfortunate comments posted on the Internet. For instance, the effects caused by the disastrous tweets posted by Spanish reality TV star and singer David Bisbal when the revolts began in Egypt.

The idea of conversation, of dialogue with the people who is in contact with us in the internet, of turning the individual into the centre of this new universe, involves a new stage where the user feels comfortable and talks in thousand ways through blogs, viral videos and tweets, which leads to the creation of communities that share experiences, opinions, situations, ideas and criticism through a new type of virtual structure where they feel important. These communities are composed of people who are physically separated but are aware of their strength and influence, which authors like Saltzman and Matathia (2001) have already identified as one of the major trends in this millennium.

And this new way in which the individual communicates, and is understood, has also been reflected in the area of politics. Perhaps the most representative example is the election of the current President of the United States, Barack Obama, whose use of social networks and the Internet in general started a new way of doing politics and obtaining spectacular results in terms of popularity and participation in traditionally apolitical sectors, such as young people and women, who were attracted with the intelligent use of new technologies and strategies (Gonzalez-Esteban, 2010).

Obama's communicative strategy became a benchmark in the making of politics, although it is unlikely that this happen again in the US or anywhere else. Obama's campaign showed a new way of doing politics in which a large number of voters became involved and interested, and felt heard, attended and close to a candidate who knew how to use the new tools to connect with those willing to listen.

The Obama phenomenon has raised new questions in the development of new campaign communication strategies, where social networks and the universe 2.0 seem to present new challenges, in this case, to the political class. However, despite the 2008 USA presidential campaign had a great impact and inspired admiration in Spain, it is unlikely that something of this magnitude could happen in our country since our politicians are not very interested in using the Internet to get in touch with citizens.

Túñez and Sixto (2011) have offered very interesting conclusions on the use of the social networks by the members of the Spanish Congress of Deputies. One of the findings of this study is, for example, that only 88 of the 350 Congress members have a profile in the most widely used social network in Spain, Facebook, which is a first indication of the low level of use of this network as a form to establish direct contact with the electorate. Túñez and Sixto concluded that most of the Facebook profiles were testimonial spaces that had no interactivity or communication exchange, and only re-posted information published by newspapers.

"I general there is a wastage of the communicative potential of social networks because a) there is a predominance of passive references, in which walls only show links to news; b) there are not frequent updates; c) the use of multimedia is almost inexistent; and d) communication about personal non-political matters, which would contribute to humanise the figure of the politician, is not taken into consideration".

It is clear that not all politicians act in the same way. Spain has mayors and presidents of autonomous communities that use the internet very well. Nevertheless, the attitude of congress members reflects the attitude of the majority, despite that 99% of the politicians surveyed by Intelligence Compass [1] valued social networks positively and admitted wanting to have presence in them.

In fact, there is still a lot to do in Spanish. That is why university election campaigns are interesting, as they have experienced a significant change in the use of the new media.

1.2. Youth and politics

In the case under study, it seems that in its last rectorial elections the University of Vigo for the first time used new techniques that facilitated communication with the young voters, who have traditionally been deemed asleep but wish to participate in the society they are part of. Although occasionally the young voters do not know very well how to do it or get disappointed by the situation they witness, "this is a generation of young people that has profound democratic values, understand political parties as mechanisms for citizen participation and value their personal potential of involvement (...). But at the same time, young people tend to be critical of unions and political parties even when they are aware of their role in a democratic State (...). They also take more advantage of the technological tools designed to help people to communicate, stay informed, learn about other societies and their behaviours, and to take action" **[2]**.

This new reality 2.0 is not only about conversations but also about taking decisions, and therefore individuals do not only get connected, but also interact, create content, modify it, provoke new situations, participate in decision-making, and promote activities at the local and global levels. Examples of this reality are the "anti-establishment" public demonstrations or the *macro-botellones* (outdoors alcohol drinking sessions usually by young people) that took place in Spain. In this new reality individuals also show their ability to react to adversity. Examples of this are the reaction to terrible cases, such as the disappearance of Marta del Castillo, which involved the organisation of many online activities to show support, help in the search for clues, and the posting of posters across Spain.

In other words, this new possibility of communication has given enormous power to individuals and in particular to young people who have really grown with the new media and their possibilities.

The use of these new tools, already common for young people, is what can really help politicians and governments to reach this group of individuals.

They must take seriously this form of interactivity and way of talking because otherwise they will be left outside the spectrum of influence of these generations. We are talking about young people who are permanently connected through computers or mobile devices of many types, which provide access to all kinds of contents. Therefore, politicians and governments need to convince individuals to let them be part of their world, not to tell them what to do, but to listen to them and understand how they think. Digital devices have increased the time and intensity of contact that

users can have with the contents that interest them, be it information, entertainment or contact with friends and communities (Creafutur, 2010).

Regarding the changes caused by this type of consumer, Cesar García (2008) argues that we need to identify the ideas that the new types of individuals want to include in their time, and the entertainment activities and options that they consider to be worthy of their time. In this case, Garcia speaks of *advertainment*, the entertainment advertising or new advertising, but these ideas can also be applied to the area of politics. The idea no longer is that brands should reach the consumer, but to make a brand capable of attracting consumers and their interests, so that it is the consumer who seeks the brand. In politics there are more reasons to apply this idea.

These new human beings have endless possibilities around them. The amount of events, entertainment activities and travelling options from which these new humans can choose throughout their life is so large that all of these options compete against each other, and only those that are interesting will be paid attention to. Brands have done everything they can to get to the consumer but the game has changed, and they now need to make the consumer to get to them and the same thing applies to politicians, who need to make voters to look for them and pay attention to them.

We have already mentioned that young people's lack of interest in politics and everything around them is not just a lack of involvement but, in the majority of cases, is caused by their disenchantment with the political class or the unattractiveness of politicians' message. We are not talking about the unattractiveness of the content, but about the choice of channels to reach this audience.

All people knows that "they must be in the social networks", however, being there is not enough, particularly when the young audience are expert users of these platforms, which has led them to develop new forms and codes of communication, and to know better when to participate or not in a given issue. Calderón (2010) believed that in the year 2010 the public administrations would discover the social media and would begin to speak with the citizen, although without exploiting its full potential, which is what happens to political parties and most of their protagonists.

In the same way brands need to communicate with their audiences, political candidates also need to reach their audience to be able to explain to them who they are, their proposals, their points of view and their plans of action. The idea is to create and position their brand as politicians, to become visible, to generate positive feelings, and to establish a strong connection (Fidel, 2010).

But it is clear that for this reason, politicians must choose the proper channels, the relevant messages and contents, and the right audience. Not all strategies are appropriate for all audiences. The social networks, viral campaigns and blogs are perfect communication tools for a specific audience and that is what politicians have

not realised yet. The use of the Web 2.0 tools has a lot to do with the ways in which people interact and communicate, and the way they are understood. For young people the social media is part of their life, like getting dressed in the morning, while for older people the social media are tools whose use must be learnt.

Politicians are beginning to use the new tools but many of them only use them occasionally or abandon them in non-election periods (Cabezuelo and Ruiz, 2010), a time when they should be more dedicated to get closer to the electorate.

An article published in the online newspaper *Puro Marketing* (2010) stated that, according to a study carried out by Nolite about Spanish voters' perception of their mayors, only 5% of the electorate was willing to follow a political candidate in their social networks. Another article indicates that, according to the same study, 76% of voters would not become fans of a politician in their social network. Voters admitted they visited the websites of political parties and candidates during election campaigns, but the results of the study show that the online initiatives carried out in Spain have obviously not obtained the success, participation and results obtained by others online campaigns. This situation will change insofar as these tools are correctly used and adjusted to the target voters, their codes and their interests, which is something that can be observed in the case under study.

In any case, it must be clear that the first thing is to arouse the interest of the target public. The aforementioned study by Intelligence Compass establishes that Obama's model sought to ignite the flame on the Internet and to make users to be the ones who start the wave of interest and generate all kinds of positive content about the candidate. This study indicates that in Spain this flame would be difficult to ignite because citizens are not interested in politicians and citizens are the ones stopping the generation of content.

Espelt (2010) claims that citizens are increasingly aware of the power of social networks and that this will "cause" small revolutions in the evolution of Spanish politics, which will make parties realise that they must begin to govern with the citizens and not without them.

Hopefully the research presented in this article will show that things are starting to change, albeit very slowly.

2. Method

The academic interest of this research lies in the extraordinary importance that the blogs and social networks had in the rectorial elections, when they ceased to be simple platforms used to inform candidates' proposals to become authentic means of expression in themselves.

This situation triggered a fierce battle 2.0 in which the two rectorial candidates used the codes of the Internet to develop controversial viral campaigns, to spread all kinds of rumours and to try control their image in the Internet, whose use was unprecedented in university elections.

This situation leads us to hypothesise that in the last rectorial elections at the University of Vigo the Internet became a vote mobilizing platform. This medium has become the main instrument of participation and whose influence, outside the usual channels used in electoral campaigns, has been notable in the results obtained by both candidates.

The research technique selected to verify this hypothesis was the case study, which allows investigating in details those events that the researcher cannot control and responds to questions like "how" and "why" (Yacuzzi, 2002). From this perspective, it is necessary to firstly investigate the background information surrounding the event under analysis in order to be able to address the course of events afterwards.

3. Results

In its 20 years of history, the University of Vigo has had two schools of thought: one represented by the Nova Universidade (New University, hereinafter NU) and another represented by the Alternative University (hereinafter AU). These groups have their own plans to government the university, for which they have provided, by the spring of 2010, one and three rectors, respectively.

In view of this unequal distribution, it is worth focusing on the AU, which in the last rectorial elections faced challenge of extending its term in office which was chaired by Domingo Docampo from 1998 to 2006 and Alberto Gago from 2006 to 2010. This twelve-year term in office was disrupted by the adaptation of the university's academic offer to the European Higher Education Area, which precipitated the replacement of Alberto Gago as the candidate for the 2010 rectorial elections.

In this context, Labour Law Professor Jaime Cabeza, who was listed as number two in the NU team during the 2006 elections, presented his candidacy in April 2009, 13 months before the rectorial elections and without knowing who would replace Alberto Gago as candidate of the AU, which was not be made public until January 2010.

From the first moment he was designated as candidate, Cabeza began an intense campaign of visibility within and outside the university community. For example, he met up with the General Secretary of Universities of the Xunta of Galicia and the

mayors of the cities where the smaller campuses of the University of Vigo (Pontevedra and Ourense) were located.

All this activity generated an important visibility and presence in the media before the election campaign had begun. Despite this, his presence in the media was very common, either through interviews in the press and local television channels. He also used his blog to criticise the AU's government of the university. His activity was very reminiscent of the opposition national parties, especially as the election period was getting closer when the activity became more constant. This attitude can be reflected in the candidate's blog **[3]**.

The candidate of the AU was Salustiano Mato, Professor of Zoology and Vice-Rector of research during the term in office of Domingo Docampo. He also was prominent member of the Government of the Xunta of Galicia and directed the R&D policy from 2005 to 2009. These credentials were beneficial for his image among professors but were harmful among students, which were responsible for 30% of the vote and for whom the candidate had been unknown and alien in the last years.

The proximity of the elections, scheduled for 20 May, 2010, forced the AU candidate to start an explosive and intense campaign three months and a half ahead of the elections in order to be able to design his plan of action and to form its government team, as well as to disseminate his promises among the members of the university community, which one year in advance knew the proposals of Cabeza, who was the favourite rectorial candidate and had maintained an efficient information strategy.

Aware of the disadvantage, Salustiano Mato opted for using the Internet and its possibilities to communicate with the members of the community of the University of Vigo.

3.1. Online communication used during the campaign

The first measure taken by the AU candidate, Tano Mato, was the launching of a personal blog, in January 2010, to share his ideas with the university community. However, Jaime Cabeza took this measure since 2009.

Both blogs were oriented to provide personal information (profile, curriculum vitae, etc.), proposals to govern the university, and information for journalists.

Both blogs allowed subscriptions via RSS and had links to a great variety of social networks. Since Cabeza launched his blog earlier, the debate started there. Cabeza's posts received an average of more than 10 comments from users. It is important to note that the objective was to attack a way of doing university politics. The debate focused on all kinds of subjects, and there were sections to classify the proposals directed to academics, students, and administration and services staff.

Salustiano Mato's blog, on the other hand, was much more informative and until April, 2010, in the middle of the campaign, it barely showed any activity, as it occurred in the wider political sphere, as mentioned above.
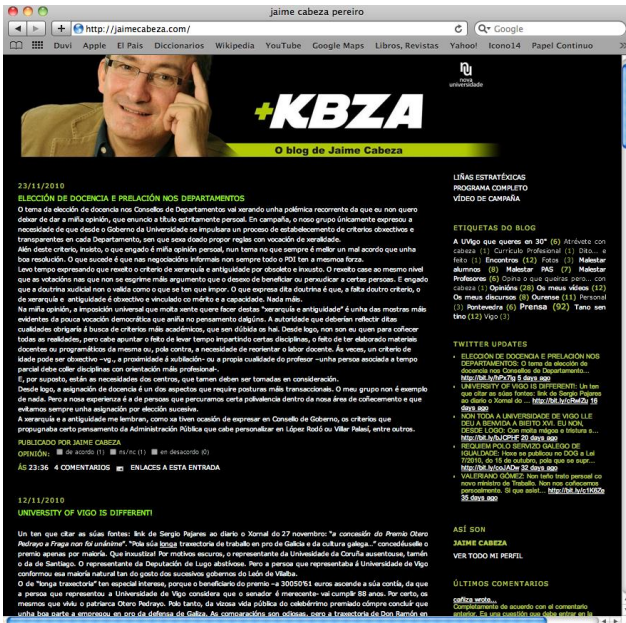

Figure 1: Jaime Cabeza's blog (2010)   Figure 2: Salustiano Mato's blog (2010)

3.2. Strategies 2.0 and viral communication

As expected, during the campaign the activity of both candidates intensified through the posting of comments, news, new proposals and reports of activities, etc.

Both candidates changed the interface of their blogs and integrated their campaign's themes and images in them; multiplied their appearances in social networks like Tuenti and Facebook. It is important to note that Tuenti was preferred over Facebook among university students (aged 18 to 23 years) even though they believed Facebook was a more complete tool (Monge-Benito and Olabarri-Fernandez, 2011). The debate was opened and especially on the Internet.

The new design of the candidates' online spaces allowed the download of government plans and proposals. The most visited sections in these spaces were those promoting debate. There was an exponential increase of anonymous comments and accusations, as well as jokes, which were common in the political arena but unprecedented in the electoral history of the University of Vigo.

In other words, the campaign went from being traditional to being more open and dynamic. New tools allowed the greater expression and implication of the

candidates' supporters. The rectorial campaign in the University of Vigo ceased to be unidirectional and became multidirectional; it was no longer just a race between two candidates but a race which involved the active participation of the whole university community.

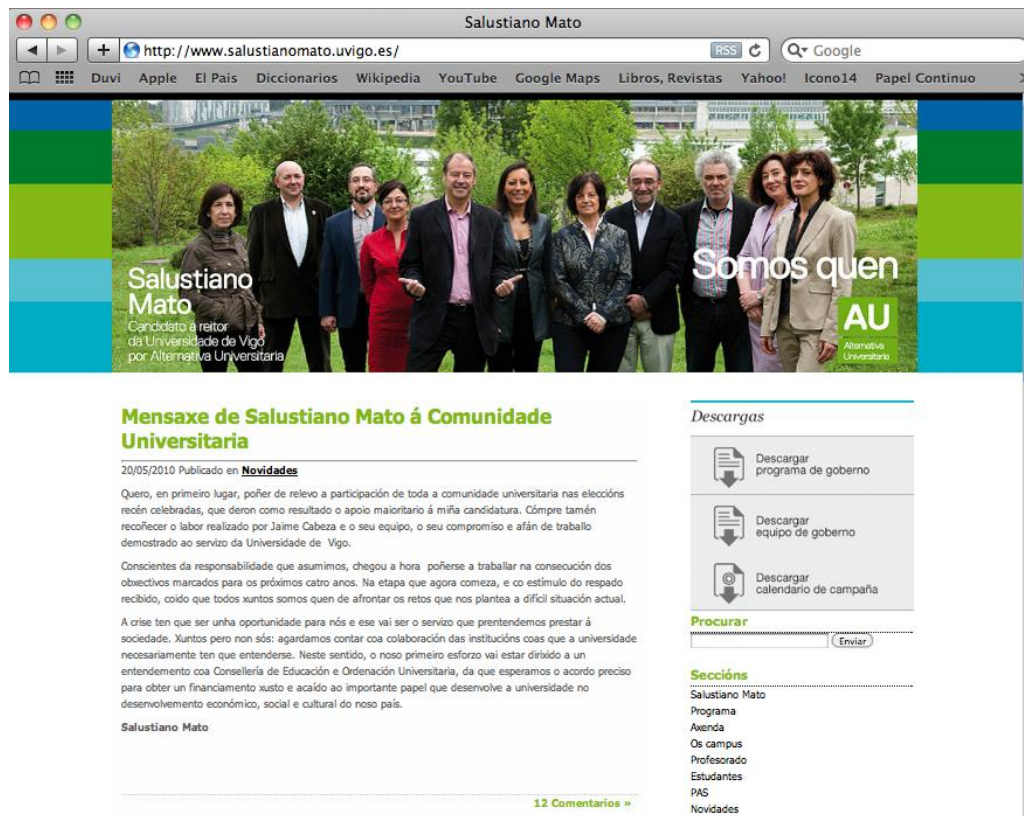Figure 3: Facebook page of Jaime Cabeza (2010)

Figure 4: Website of Salustiano Mato - www.salustianomato.uvigo.es (2010)

Word play took place in the internet, and their main protagonist was the AU candidate, Tano Mato, perhaps because his name was more appropriate for this. For instance, in the websites of his political adversary, Tano Mato was called "Tano sen Tino" (which combined his nick name and the Galician expression "sen tino", which means "without success") and "Mato me mata" ("Mato kills me").

In the case of Jaime Cabeza, his surname, which in English means "head", was used by his own team to name his blog: +Kbza, which also uses the sms language to appeal more to young people. The surname was also used in the creation of tags within the blog: "Pensa o que queiras… pero con cabeza" ("Think what you want... but with Cabeza).

Humour was not the only strategy used in the campaigns. Accusations of different types also appeared in the electoral confrontation:

SALUSTIANO MATO promete 10.000 a la delegación de Escuela Superior de Ingeniería Informática, si gana a 2 días de las elecciones. ESO SI QUE ES JUEGO LIMPIO!!!

Figures 5 and 6: Examples of accusations in Facebook

Figure 7: "Euxtanomato" website / http://www.euxtanomato.es (2010)

Already at the beginning of the election period, candidates used formats that had not appeared in previous university election campaigns. Jaime Cabeza organised different types of contests (*La universidad que tú quieres*/The university you want) through his blog to get more interaction with the university community, and made a video that spread among the university community ans was downloaded more than 700 times during the election period.

However, Tano Mano was the candidate who took more advantage of the possibilities of the Internet to distribute contents in a viral way through the initiative "Eu x Tano Mato" ("For Tano, I would kill"), a slogan inspired by the first and last names of the candidate and a phrase made famous by Spanish celebrity Belén Esteban ("yo, por mi hija, mato" / "For my daughter, I would kill").

A website named after the campaign's slogan "Somos Quen" (a typical Galician expression that means "Who are are") was developed by an anonymous group. The website, which was sponsored by the campaign's team, had an Obama-styled aesthetic and an autonomous image designed by a known t-shirts brand that enjoys great popularity among young Galician people. The website was an initiative of the staff

who wanted to show their support in the elections in a totally different way, and not through the official website.

This website launched four videos made by and aimed students. These videos were very successful, particularly the first one, in which a woman, the candidate's alleged mistress explains his best qualities. All the videos presented fictional testimonies of support to the candidate by his so-called friends. In addition to the mistress, the videos presented the alleged components of the triangle music band of which the candidate is a member, a space monkey and even his psychoanalyst.

Figure 8: Video presenting the candidate's alleged mistress (2010)

Figure 9: Video presenting the triangle band (2010)

The first video was very controversial and provoked all kinds of accusations from Jaime Cabeza's Party, but also had unprecedented media coverage in the University of Vigo, as it was downloaded more than 30,000 times in only 6 days. The video even

managed to become news in the national channels. For instance, *Telecinco* included the video as one of the news items in its news programmes.

The objective was to promote Salustiano Mato among students as a dynamic person interested in many issues. As mentioned, the controversy provoked alarm in the various social groups, which started an in-depth debate about the limits of the Internet. However, this helped the AU candidate to win the vote of the students, which was a critical factor to win the elections and become the fifth rector of the University of Vigo.

3.3. The campaign's on and offline impacts

The use of the new technologies in this campaign had great impacts:

- 31,900 search results on Google (2010)

- 582 news items in the media, including three news reports on national TV channels.

- All the news reports emphasised the role played by the internet, and the influence of the Web 2.0 in the election campaign of the University of Vigo, and its results.

Most news items focused on the controversial videos of the "Eu x Tano mato" website and incorporated screenshots and clips published in this website, as well as some of the images created by the other party to counteract them.

We can see the impact in the following news item, which alludes to the celebrity that made famous the phrase that was used to name the website supporting Tano Mato and enjoyed great reception among students, who recognised the intelligence of the website's creators to increase notoriety in a new way.

Figure 10: Example of criticism to the "Euxtanomato" campaign in the press. *Faro de Vigo* (2010)

4. Conclusions

After the previous exposition we can draw the following conclusions:

- The Internet has had a fundamental influence in the rectorial elections in the University of Vigo.

- For the first time candidates used tools such as social networks to publicise their nominations and proposals.

- The most important functions of the Internet were its role as a transmitter of information and its ability to generate debates that were unusual in the election campaign but had a high capacity of influence.

- The appearance of a platform that was different from the official platforms of the candidates provoked a change of attitude in a sector of the electorate with respect to other elections, were the electorate had a more passive attitude and candidates were only expected to offer information.

- The emergence of new formats and proposals, like viral videos, brought about a change in the attitude of the youngest electorate.

- The emergence of viral videos, critiques, responses and proposals forced candidates to work harder to face totally new situations.

- Viral advertising was a success in achieving important impact and notoriety, particularly for the candidate of the Alternative University.

- A campaign of this type marked the beginning of originality in a field that is sometimes too restricted to speeches, proposals and institutional visits.

The possibilities of the Internet that were used in this campaign are a peculiarity that, for Castells (2000), "allows the development of a series of new forms of social relation" and has a clear influence on the public sphere.

With these words we also want to support the corroboration of the hypothesis that stressed that in the last rectorial elections of the University of Vigo, the Internet became a platform that mobilised the vote.

This research article lacks surveys and polls to support its arguments and profiling results and thus opens new lines of research aimed at strengthening the link between election campaigns' online communication and its impact in the vote. Importantly, this article has shown some of the uses of the Internet as a space for participation that has its own codes of expression.

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