# Communication strategies in divergence: between rigor and manipulation.
# A comparative analysis of the political communication of the United States and Spain during the initial stage of the COVID-19 crisis

Estrategias de Comunicación divergentes: entre el rigor y la manipulación. Análisis comparativo de la Comunicación Política de Estados Unidos y España frente a la etapa inicial de la crisis del COVID-19

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**ABSTRACT**

**Introduction:** On December 31, 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO, hereafter) reported the first case of a new respiratory infection, in the city of Wuhan.This study focuses on how political communication 2.0 has contributed to prevent and protect citizens, during early stages the covid-19 crisis, in a comparative perspective between USA and Spain. Specifically, the paper focuses during the first 90 days of 2020 (from January 1 to March 31), in the latency phases - oriented to preparedness and prevention- and of crisis outbreak. **Methodology:** The paper analyzes the content of the messages through the Twitter accounts of Donald Trump -@realdonaldtrump-, the White House -@WhiteHouse-, and the CDC - @cdcgov; and Pedro Sánchez -@sanchezcastejon-, the Ministry of Health -@sanidadgob-, and the account of the Moncloa -@desdelamoncloa-. By conducting quantitative and qualitative analysis. **Results:** the findings show a divergent communication strategy. While the Spanish actors followed closely the guidelines of health crisis communication; in the US, only the official accounts of @WhiteHouse y @cdcgov followed those guidelines, while in President Trump´s account, it is observed a politicized communication strategy rejecting messages from public health sources. **Conclusions:** Political communication is an essential element in a major crisis not only for good governance and management but also for the preparation and awareness of a citizenry. This study shows that the official institutional communication strategy was appropriate in both countries and that it helped to face an unprecedented major health crisis.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; Political communication 2.0; Crisis communication; USA; Spain; Twitter; Pandemic.

**RESUMEN**

**Introducción:** El 31 de diciembre de 2019 la OMS reportó el primer caso de una nueva infección respiratoria en Wuhan, marcando el inicio de la emergencia sanitaria del COVID-19. Este estudio analiza cómo la comunicación política 2.0 ha contribuido a prevenir y proteger a los ciudadanos durante las primeras etapas de la crisis. Específicamente, se examinan los 90 primeros días del 2020 (del 1 de enero al 31 de marzo), en la fase inicial -orientada a la preparación y la prevención- y de explosion de la crisis. **Metodología:** El trabajo presenta una perspectiva comparada entre Estados Unidos y España. Se analiza el contenido de los mensajes publicados en Twitter de Donald Trump, -@realdonaldtrump-, la Casa Blanca -@WhiteHouse-, y el Center for Desease Control and Prevention -@cdcgov-; y Pedro Sánchez -@sanchezcastejon-, el Ministerio de Sanidad -@sanidadgob-, y La Moncloa -@desdelamoncloa-. A través de un análisis en dos niveles, uno cuantitativo y otro cualitativo. **Resultados y Discusión:** Los resultados muestran una estrategia comunicativa divergente. Los actores españoles siguieron cercanamente las pautas de la comunicación de crisis sanitarias. En el caso de USA, si bien los perfiles de @WhiteHouse y @cdcgov siguieron con dichas pautas, en el perfil del Presidente Trump se observa una estrategia de comunicación politizada, contribuyendo a polarizar la reacción pública ante el COVID. **Conclusiones:** La comunicación política es esencial, no solo para la gobernanza y gestión de una crisis, sino para la preparación y concienciación de la ciudadanía. En el presente estudio, se muestra que la estrategia oficial comunicativa de las instituciones fue apropiada en los dos países analizados y ayudó a afrontar una crisis sanitaria sin precedentes.

**Palabras clave:** COVID-19; Comunicación política 2.0; Comunicación de crisis; Estados Unidos; España; Twitter; Pandemia.

1.    **Introduction**

On December 31, 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO, hereafter) reported the first case of a new respiratory infection, in the city of Wuhan (China), which would later be renamed COVID (WHO, 2020). From that day until January 3, 2020, 44 new cases were reported in China. From

then on, the virus spread rapidly to all corners of the world, taking advantage of the globalization phenomenon (Lipscy, 2020), making it clear that many of the risks we face today are global and shared (Simón, 2020, p. 32). In the US, the first case of coronavirus was diagnosed in an American citizen who had traveled the previous days to Wuhan; and it was on February 6, 2020, when the first death from coronavirus was recorded in the State of California. In Spain, the first local case of coronavirus was reported on January 31, 2020. It involved a German patient admitted in a mild condition on La Gomera Island. On February 24, the first cases were detected in Madrid, Cataluña, and the Valencian Community (Costa and López, 2020). On January 30, WHO declared the coronavirus an international public health emergency. Subsequently, on March 11, the emergency levels of spread of the virus led the WHO to declare a global pandemic state, which brought as the most immediate effect the confinement of millions of citizens around the world. In the US, President Trump declared a national emergency on March 13, 2020, and, in the case of Spain, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez declared a State of Emergency on March 14, 2020.

In this context of unprecedented uncertainty, communication became an essential element to deal with the different aspects of the situation (Casero, 2020; Ramón-Vegas et al., 2020). The health and social crisis showed, in all countries, a time period of maximum need the for clear and truthful information, especially at the beginning of the pandemic (Bustos y Ruiz-del-Olmo 2020, p. 116). Citizen's attention focused on everything related to the COVID pandemic through conventional media, but also and significantly, through social media (Nielsen et al., 2020; Larrondo et al., 2021, p. 5, Pérez 2021; López et al. 2020). Social media, in all its platforms, was massively used because of the public interest in COVID-19 throughout the planet (López et al., 2020, p. 464). Twitter was platform that concentrated the largest number of institutional messages in the first months of managing the health crisis (Pano, 2021, p. 50), because its model for disseminating political messages is extraordinarily useful (López, et al. 2020). Governments rely on Twitter to explain their decisions and policy actions (Losada-Díaz et al., 2020) due to the speed with which information is disseminated, participation without barriers in real time, wide dissemination, and the possibility of interacting and engaging in multidirectional conversations –among journalists, politicians, experts, and citizens. All of these have contributed to making Twitter crucial to political communication because of its effectiveness to reach citizens (Rivas et al., 2021; López et al., 2020; Sued and Cebral, 2020; Nicasio and Pérez, 2021). These traits are essential in reducing social uncertainty derived from the early unclear conditions of the pandemic (Sierra-Rodríguez, 2020)

In the case of Spain, according to recent studies, 78% of citizens were more informed than before the pandemic (Masip et al., 2020); and in the USA, a study by Pew Research reveals that 51% of Americans followed news related to COVID "a lot" (Mitchell and Oliphant, 2020).

Based on this, the present research aims to analyze political communication 2.0 in the US and Spain during the early phase of the pandemic, that is the phase of detection, prevention and preparation of the crisis (Coombs, 2014), in order to identify, from a comparative perspective, whether it contributed to anticipate and protect citizens during the first stage of the pandemic, as well as whether it followed the guidelines established in the literature on crisis communication. This is relevant since the institutional messages disseminated by governments must establish a direct channel with the citizenry to also define the framework of the debate, and to provide verified data and truthful information (Pano, 2021, p. 49; Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2020, p. 3). As we discussed further, the early stages of a crisis are fundamentally important to understand what information is disseminated, how is disseminated, and by whom (Sellnow and Seeger, 2021).

There is significant research in Spain and the US related to the COVID crisis (Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2020; Yum, 2020; Rutledge, 2020; Arévalo et al., 2021; Butler and Martínez, 2021; Rivas et al.,

2021, among others). Yet, little attention is given to the initial stage of the crisis. Because of this gap, this study concentrates in the initial first months of the crisis, where high levels of uncertainty and unknowns influenced the actions of public officials and then of citizens.

Crisis communication explains how organizations communicate with the public and reach the most possible positive effect when experiencing a crisis (Sellnow and Seeger, 2021). Although, there has been attempts to formalize a theory, crisis communication is mostly a model relying heavily on news framing, agenda setting and news diffusion (Ullmer et al., 2019). The most significant attempts to formalize a theory are done by Sellnow and Seeger (2021) who resort to framing as a major component of crisis communication. To operationalize framing most researchers conduct content analysis that permits the study of how news is presented to the public, related to agenda setting scholars investigate what is the priority and prominence of the news related to a crisis, and regarding news diffusion, we study the formats use to disseminate information about the crisis (Ullmer et al.,2019).

As content analysis turns fundamental to crisis communication, in this paper we concentrate in the political discourse of leaders responsible of communicating during the initial stages of the pandemic. Concentrating in the early stage of a crisis is up most important for researchers, since it is the time of multiple unknowns caused by the crisis. Also at the beginning, there is significant confusion about what to do, and what are the correct steps to follow. In other words, organizations are trying to catch up with the crisis itself and the information that can be shared to the public (Seeger and Sellnow, 2019; Coombs, 2016; Sellnow and Seeger, 2021).

In addition, recently scholars have recognized that during the early stages of a crisis, misinformation runs rampant mainly due to unintentional errors, mistakes, incorrect assumption, or incomplete information (Chavez and Freedman, 2022). However, disinformation or sharing intentionally false information with the purpose to confuse the public has also been identified by scholars who recognize that this was the case during the pandemic (Springer and Özdemir, 2022; Jamieson and Cortés-Rivera, 2021; Gottlieb and Dyer, 2020).

Polarization of social media and antagonistic positions in favor and against the public health measure emerged also during the early stages of the pandemic, in part because information is incomplete and confusing (López-García, 2020). The polarization seen in social media follows typically previous political stances and are not first created during a crisis. In other words, political party affiliation, ideological perspectives, and cultural perceptions are formed before the crisis arrive which then social media serves as a catalyst to virally exacerbate positions towards the crisis (Allcott et al., 2020). Also, because some politicians take advantage of these times to advance their political ideology or agenda, as it was the case in the USA with former Trump tweets that are studied in this research.

A new research trend relates to new communication technologies that influence the way people use political communication that produces polarization in the public discourse (Hong and Kim, 2016; Bail et al., 2018; Salmon, 2019; Campos, 2017; Arias 2016). One perspective proposes that the increase of exchanges in social media causes a "real guerrilla of statements" that include provocation, transgression, circus actions, and even incoherent confrontations (Salmon, 2019, p. 71). These actions cause polarization and increases the instability of exchanges, and worse, this leads to major political fractures (Köröotsenyi, 2013). The higher the polarization, the information received by citizens is more skewed and less objective that distorts political reality (Bail et al., 2018).

The distance and the image of political reality create a negative effect that relates directly to disinformation. Specifically, during COVID, there was a public health polarization that affected directly the response of citizens to the pandemic (Allcott et al. 2020; De Bruine et al., 2020; Calvillo

et al. 2020). As a simple example, two studies. On the one hand, Lipsitz and Pop-Eleches (2020) show how in the Democratic states mobility was reduced more than in the Republican states, even when contagions soared; on the other hand, in an NBC/Wall Street poll conducted between March 11 and 13, to the question "Are you worried about your family catching the coronavirus?", 69% of Democrats said yes, and 40% in the case of Republicans. In fact, the correlation between political polarization and higher mortality rates is not a phenomenon exclusive to the USA and has also been studied in the European context by Charron et al. (2020).

During major crisis events, elected officials in high governmental positions are recommended to follow preestablished and defined communication protocols by international and national public health agencies (CDC 2018, 2014; Ministry of Health, 2013; WHO 2017, 2005). The guidelines provide the steps to communicate properly about outbreaks, epidemics, and pandemics. The protocols even list the governmental positions as to who should communicate, how, what and how often they should communicate. Usually, press conferences with the accredited news media are the most favorable model recommended by these protocols, follow by intense repetition and language clarification over social media. Most of the crisis literature also delineates that the responsibility of leaders of national public offices have a paramount duty to share reliable information to help citizens when facing a major crisis (Coombs, 2014; Ulmer et al., 2019; Mercado and Chavez, 2016). In developed nations, the communication model typically has followed the recommendations provided by their own officials, specially from those whose scientific or technical expertise has been vetted and proved over time (Seeger and Sellnow, 2019). In major health crisis is important to ensure effective communications, that is why is necessary to focus on the main international health organization, especially on the WHO Strategic Communication Framework which is organized in to six principles: 1) accessible 2) actionable 3) credible and trusted, 4) relevant, 5) timely, and 6) understandable. WHO always strives to ensure these principles are at the core of its communication activities and are reflected in the full range of materials and guides to disseminate social media messages (WHO, 2017). Similar guidelines for crisis communication are recommended by the USA CDC (2018), and by the Spain Ministry of Health (2013).

The major departure from traditional communication protocols started by Trump who used his social platforms to contradict, misinform and disinform the citizens (Lockhart, 2019). Trump as he arrived to the White House, continued to use the social media megaphone to not only cultivate his political base but to also to contradict, disparage, and disregard statements provided by expert members of his government (Ott, 2017; Ouyang and Waterman, 2020; Ott and Dickinson, 2019). This was particularly troublesome when the President attacked government officers reporting about national security, economics, foreign policy, health, commerce, and other vital issues (Rutledge, 2020).

As the COVID turned into a pandemic, most countries were alerted by the information provided by China health officials and from public health officers of the WHO. It was evident by the end of March 2020, that the pandemic would cause major disruptions to the daily living of everyone on the planet. And that is when a bifurcation of governmental actions took place, on one hand most governments follow the rigor of scientific research and on the other some governments decided to follow political goals ignoring public health expertise (Rutledge, 2020).

During a crisis, political communication adjusts its parameters to unify and follow guidelines that ensure the wellbeing of citizens. Yet, in the USA that scenario short lived after Trump declared a health national emergency on March 13, 2020. Just two weeks after the general lockdown, the President started to deny and minimize the pandemic, and worse, he rejected the recommendations of public health officials. False statements and advice were provided by Trump when he even attacked Governors who imposed stringent rules to reduce the spreading of the virus. This resulted in a trend where his

followers became more infected by the virus than the opponents of his views (Chung and Jones-Jang, 2021).

In the American case, the President decided to use the pandemic to establish an image of disregard and rejection for scientific-public health recommendations. Trump even decided to attack and confront with disinformation any health recommendation provided by the WHO, the Center for Diseases Control and the National Institute of Infectious Diseases (Kessler et al., 2020).

And yet, other nations and their governments decided to follow the recommendations and protocols of international and domestic public health experts. In Spain, this was clearly displayed by the administration of Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez. Some studies point out that, since the first moment, the communication strategy of the Spanish Government was active, disseminating constantly the information regarding the pandemic to the citizens (Pulido and Lozano, 2021), following the principles of public accountability. Along the same lines, Rivas, et al. (2021) analyze Pedro Sánchez's account on Twitter, from October 1 to 31, 2020. The results show that his messages demonstrated a significant institutional discourse, reviewing his daily activity. This governmental aspect also occurs on the La Moncloa portal, where he mainly reports on the action of the ministries dealing with the pandemic. Likewise, another study on the use of hashtags in various institutional profiles, including that of Pedro Sánchez, also shows that the use of hashtags focused on the dissemination of political management messages. The labels (or hashtags) used by the President referred to issues related to crisis management that the government intends to put on the media agenda, such as the vaccination plan and contagion containment measures (Pano, 2021).

## 2.    Objectives

Based on the context explained in the previous section, the present research analyzes the content disseminated, in the case of the US, through the Twitter accounts of Trump -@realdonaldtrump-, the White House -@WhiteHouse-, and the CDC - @cdcgov-. In the case of Spain, the messages disseminated on the accounts of Sánchez -@Sánchezcastejon-, the Ministry of Health -@sanidadgob-, and the account of the Moncloa -@desdelamoncloa- were studied.

The main objective (M.O.) of this study is to examine how political communication 2.0 has contributed to prepare, anticipate and protect citizens during the first stage of the pandemic, as well as whether it followed the guidelines established in the literature on crisis communication, without losing sight of the interaction with citizens. Specifically, during the first 90 days of 2020 (from January 1 to March 31), in the latency phases - oriented to preparedness and prevention- and of crisis outbreak -from March 9 in Spain, when the Ministry of Health changed the scenario to reinforced containment, which implied the adoption of drastic measures, culminating in the approval of the state of emergency decree[1] throughout the country on March 14; and from March 13 in the USA, when Trump declares a State of National Emergency in the country[2]. The third phase, the explosion phase, began in early April with the worsening of the crisis (Crespo and Garrido, 2020, p. 13, 14).

To meet the objective set by this research, the following research questions are formulated:

*R.Q 1: How many messages have been posted with coronavirus content in the profiles studied in the USA and Spain?*

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[1] Royal Decree 463/2020, of March 14, declaring a state of emergency for the management of the health crisis situation caused by COVID-19

[2] Proclamation 9994on March 13, 2020; declaring national emergency concerning the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

*R.Q 2: Taking into account the content of the messages published during the period analyzed, do they contribute to prepare, anticipate and protect citizens during the first stage of the health crisis?*

*R.Q 3: What is the degree of interaction of citizens in relation to the messages posted on the Twitter profiles analyzed, and what are the priority channels through which they interacted with the accounts studied - retweet, like and/or comment?*

*R.Q 4: Did the government accounts studied followed crisis communication guidelines?*

## 3.    Methodology

To achieve the objectives and answer the questions posed above, a social research method based on content analysis of political texts (Anduiza et al., 1999), considered a consolidated technique to determine the positions of political parties (Alonso et al., 2012, p. 10), is used. The main objective pursued through content analysis is the structured representation of a large volume of data, as well as the manual coding of the data. The authors collected the data from Twitter, using the github.com application during the summer and fall of 2020 from all the accounts mentioned above. All tweets scrapped were posted between January 1st and March 30th, 2020, and the data included the textual content of the post, time and date, as well as other metadata (replies, likes, and retweets). All tweets were scraped and added to a database where only messages containing COVID-19 pandemic related information were selected for the analysis.

To study the tweets, which make up the whole sample, was carried out on two levels, one quantitative and the other qualitative. For the quantitative analysis, the total number of tweets published in the period indicated as described, in the six profiles to be analyzed, where collected and counted. In addition, the total number of retweets, the total number of likes and the total number of comments were recorded in the messages with content on the coronavirus, to measure the degree of interaction of citizens with the profiles examined.

For the qualitative analysis of the content of the messages posted on the profiles analyzed, the following coding scheme was considered:

1) Messages with information (information about the coronavirus, evolution of the pandemic, websites with official information, frequently asked questions and answers, information that refutes hoaxes...).

2) Messages announcing policy proposals that are approved and will be put into action.

3) Messages of defense and achievements of the work carried out by the U.S. Government and Spain.

4) Preparedness messages (messages aimed at citizens to prepare for coronavirus)

5) Messages with disinformation (messages containing elements not contrasted with official sources or untruthful information that is shared to cause confusion and deception (Chavez and Freedman, 2022) for economic, ideological or some other reason" (Ireton and Posetti, 2018, p. 44)).

6) Critical messages (towards other political parties, political leaders, national and international organizations, other countries).

7) Critical messages towards the media (critical messages directed towards the work of the media and its publications).

8) Messages of support to the public (to keep citizens' spirits up and thank them for the great effort made to stop the spread of the virus).

9) Others (in this variable we code those messages that do not respond to the previous ones).

Of these, it is to be noted, after reading the entire message so that they are mutually exclusive variables[3].

## 4. Results and Discussion

As for the quantitative analysis, once all the information was collected and systematized, a total of 4,718 messages were posted on the six profiles studied, from January 1 to March 31, 2020. 2,851 messages have been posted on the three US profiles studied. Specifically, 1,178 messages posted on Trump's account, 1,139 on The White House, and 534 on the CDC profile. Of these, 1,341 are messages with content about COVID, Trump posted 77 messages about coronavirus, The White House 976 messages, and the CDC 288 messages. Thus, of the total number of messages posted 47 % refer to the pandemic.

In Spain, 1,867 posts were found in the three profiles analyzed. Specifically, 336 in Pedro Sánchez's account, 584 in the profile of the Ministry of Health and 947 in that of La Moncloa. Of these, 839 are messages with content related to the COVID. Specifically, 86 messages with COVID content were published in Pedro Sánchez's profile; 427 messages in the profile of the Ministry of Health; and 326 in the profile of La Moncloa. All this means that 45% were messages with content related to the pandemic.

Comparison of the data shows, firstly, that the accounts-profiles analyzed in the USA posted a greater number of messages with content on the COVID (1,341 messages), compared to the profiles examined in Spain (839). However, the total number of messages published, both the profile of Pedro Sánchez and the profile of the Ministry of Health published, in total, a greater number of messages with COVID content. This may be because the management of the COVID in Spain was carried out through a single command, that is, for the purposes of the state of emergency, the competent authority was the Government of Spain[4], as opposed to a federal management and delegated to the states in the USA. Secondly, the institutions (Ministry of Health, La Moncloa, The White House and CDC) published a greater number of messages with content about the COVID -with a total of 2017 messages-, compared to the political leaders (Pedro Sánchez and Donald Trump) -with a total of 163 messages-.

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[3] After the categorization of all the analyzed tweets, a control phase of the results obtained was carried out. For this purpose, 10% of the total sample studied was selected to undergo a new coding by a researcher outside the present investigation, according to the pre-established variables. The percentage of coincidence found was within the terms established by Igartua (2006) to guarantee the reliability of research of this type.

[4] According to article 4 of Royal Decree 463/2020, of March 14, declaring the state of emergency for the management of the health crisis situation caused by COVID-19, for the purposes of the state of emergency, the competent authority will be the Government. For the exercise of the functions referred to in the Royal Decree, the following will be delegated competent authorities, in their respective areas of responsibility: the Minister of Defense, the Minister of the Interior, the Minister of Transport, Mobility and Urban Agenda and the Minister of Health, under the superior direction of the President of the Government.

**Figure 1.** *Percentage of messages published with -and without- information related to COVID-19 in the official accounts of Pedro Sánchez, La Moncloa and the Ministry of Health, from January 1 to March 31, 2020.*
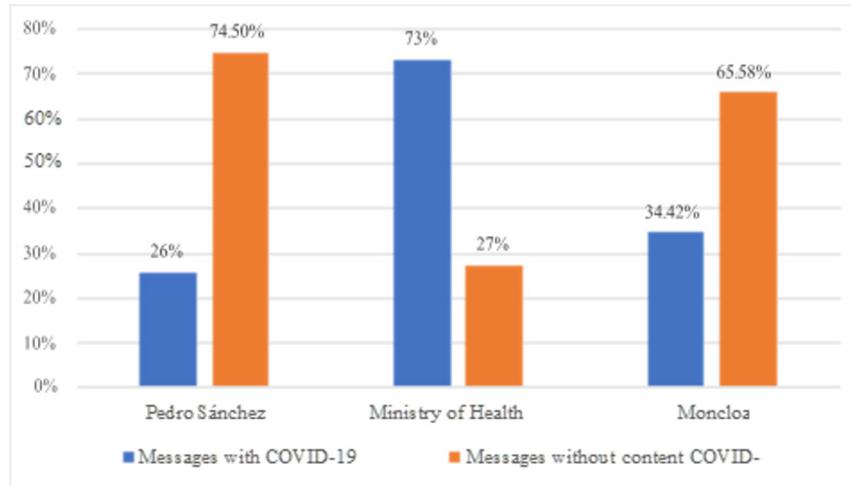


**Source:** Own elaboration based on data extracted from Twitter.

**Figure 2.** *Percentage of messages posted with -and without- information related to COVID-19 on the official accounts of Donald Trump, White House and CDC from January 1 to March 31, 2020.*
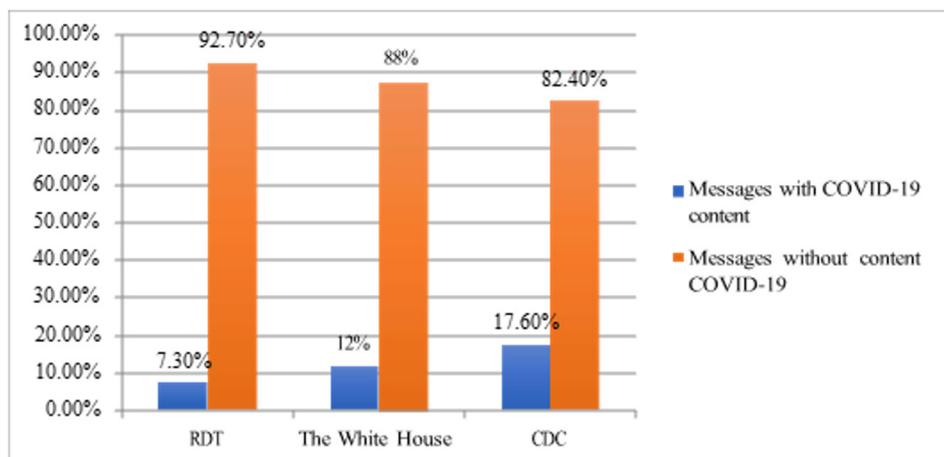


**Source:** Own elaboration based on data extracted from Twitter.

In terms of qualitative analysis, firstly, the profiles of Trump and Sánchez show a different communication strategy. On the one hand, the former devotes more than half of his messages with COVID content to disinformation (35%) and criticism against the WHO, the opposition and the media (23%) –following the strategy of the politics of blaming (Jaworsky and Qiaoan, 2021)–, as well as trying to evade his responsibility for the management of the pandemic (9%), issues that do not appear in the messages published in Sánchez's profile. The discourse of political confrontation is evident in tweets such as the one published by Trump on March 27, in which he states "Anti-Trump Network @CNN doing whatever it can to stoke a national Coronavirus panic. The far left Network pretty much ignoring anyone who they interview who doesn't blame President Trump. "@trish_regan @FoxNews Media refuses to discuss the great job our professionals are doing!"

Or the one published on March 9 in which he attacks both Democrats and the media by stating that "The Fake News Media and their partner, the Democrat Party, is doing everything within its semi-considerable power (it used to be greater!) to inflame the Coronavirus situation, far beyond what the facts would warrant. Surgeon General, "The risk is low to the average American". Likewise, he claimed to have the situation under control on March 24, which is at the time when deaths and cases increased daily (Muccari and Chow, 2020). When he published "The Coronavirus is very much under control in the USA. We are in contact with everyone and all relevant countries. CDC and World Health have been working hard and very smart. Stock Market starting to look very good to me!" the WHO declared the USA was likely the new epicenter of the pandemic (WHO, 2020). He also devotes only 28 % of his messages to informing the population, which reveals an inconsistency in his COVID thread on Twitter, thus affecting the President's credibility as a reliable source of information in the face of the crisis (Muccari and Chow, 2020).

On the other hand, Sánchez devotes half of his messages to present, publicize and explain the proposals or measures that, although sometimes unpopular, are taken by the Spanish Government to curb the spread of the virus -following the guidelines set by the WHO-, as well as its social and economic effects. This is the case of the announcement of the confinement, the approval of the ERTE[5], the delay in the payment of taxes, social aids to vulnerable groups, etc. After this variable, the information on the state of the pandemic and the messages of support to citizens (18.5 % in both cases) in which the Prime Minister encourages Spaniards and praises their response to the harshness of the situation, choosing to accompany them with the hashtag *#EsteVirusLoParamosUnidos* (#ThisVirusWeStopItUnited) become relevant. Such is the case, for example, of the one published on March 28: "these are very hard days, but they are decisive days [...]. The majority of Spaniards have opted for solutions and solidarity. When this happens, we will remember that in difficult times, resisting, united, Spain gave the measure *#EsteVirusLoParamosUnidos*".

Similarly, the relative weight of the messages in which the Prime Minister seeks to educate on how to act to prevent contagion, as well as to cope with day-to-day life during confinement, is also significant, occupying 10 % of his messages - as opposed to only 3 % of the messages in the case of Trump's profile-.

Thus, it can be seen from the above that while in the case of Sánchez more than 90 % of his messages have content that could be useful to the public in the context of a crisis of this caliber, in the case of Trump such messages only account for 34 % of the total number of tweets with COVID content published in the period analyzed. This shows how the former followed the guidelines of crisis communication, published by WHO (2017) something that is not entirely present in the publications of the latter.

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[5] The acronyms means "temporary labour force adjustment plan".

Secondly, there is a clear similarity in the content of the messages published by the Ministry of Health and the CDC. Thus, in both cases just over half of the messages analyzed are classified in the information variable. This is consistent with the fact that these are the profiles of the institutions of reference in the health management of the COVID crisis. However, while the CDC profile devotes the rest of its messages to helping citizens in relation to prevention measures and response to the health emergency, the profile of the Ministry of Health devotes only 14 %, although 21.5 % are proposals or measures that in some way will help citizens to stop the virus, and it should also be noted that it is common for messages classified in another variable as predominant -information or support to citizens- to also include references to prevention measures for citizens. All in all, both profiles have the essential purpose of being an objective, reliable and official source of continuous and transparent information on the evolution of the health problem and its consequences for all purposes.

Thirdly, around three quarters of the messages posted by The White House and half of those published by La Moncloa present information on the state of the health crisis. This, which is linked to the institutional nature of the profiles, is evidence of their role as an official source for providing the public with relevant data on the evolution of the COVID. On the one hand, in the case of The White House, this is further enhanced by the fact that the second most used variable (in 25 % of the messages) is the one that presents messages intended to prepare citizens for the pandemic and its effects. On the other hand, in the case of La Moncloa, it is striking that, together with this variable, and with a similar relative weight, there are messages advertising the measures and proposals of the Government; this shows that this profile is in an intermediate position between the informative messages that predominate in the profile of the Ministry of Health and those of political content that are more relevant in the profile of Sánchez. Both profiles show a meticulous adherence to the guidelines of crisis communication, published by WHO (2017).

**Figure 3.** *Content of the messages, as percentages, published on the six analyzed accounts:*
*@realDonaldTrump, @Sánchezcastejon, @WhiteHouse, @desdelamoncloa, @cdcgov-.*
*@sanidadgob (percentage)*
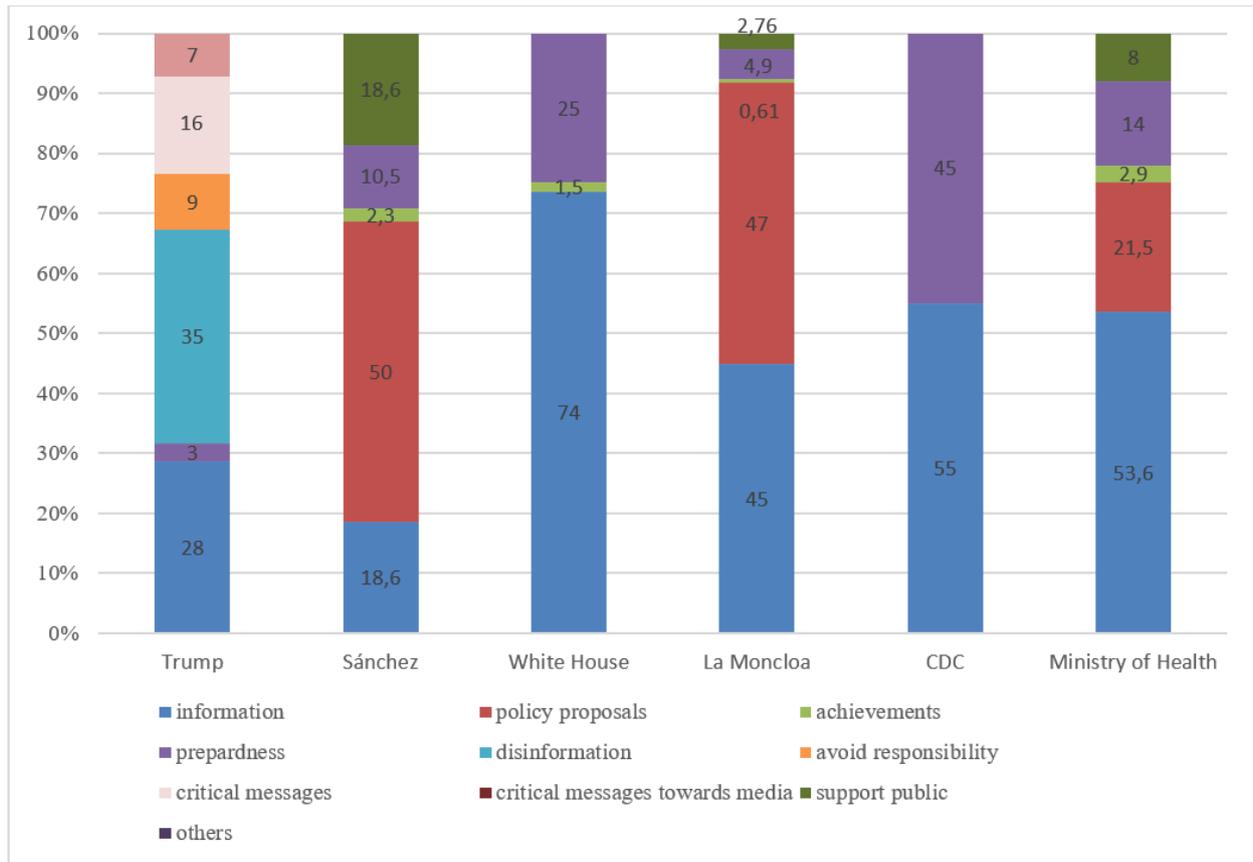


**Source:** Own elaboration based on data extracted from Twitter.

If attention is focused on interaction with citizens through the channels provided by Twitter (likes, replies and retweet), it should be considered as a starting point that there are six accounts-profiles with a very different number of followers. While it is true that the channels of interaction are not limited to followers, since we are talking about open public profiles, it is not less true that such a reality initially conditions the "echo effect" that the social network allows. Even considering this limitation, we have chosen to analyze interaction by comparing, on the one hand, the average response per self-made tweet published on the profiles and, on the other hand, by determining the preferred means of interaction selected by users of the network in messages with COVID content published during the period analyze.

To achieve trust as the basis of communication, it is essential to actively involve citizens (Qiu et al. 2018), through proactive and bidirectional communication spaces such as Twitter which allows a more direct relationship between institutions/representatives and citizens. During the initial stages of the health crisis, citizens resorted to a greater extent to the profiles of both political representatives and institutions in order to obtain the most updated information possible on the virus, its spread, the measures to be taken as an individual, state policies to curb the pandemic, etc. in a context of absolute uncertainty and ignorance generated by an unprecedented global emergency.

The results show that in five of the six profiles analyzed (except for @white_house) citizen interaction during the period analyzed is, on average, much higher in messages with COVID content compared to those published in the same period with content unrelated to the health problem. In this sense, for example, the average number of comments per tweet in the profile of Sánchez is three times higher in messages with COVID content during the period analyzed, as well as being multiplied by fourteen in the case of the profile of the Ministry of Health or almost twice as high in the profile of Trump, while the CDC has an average of seven times more likes in its messages with COVID content and the profile of La Moncloa has three times more retweets on average in messages published with content related to the health crisis. This result coincides with previous research (Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2020) which shows how, in crisis situations, citizens turn to official sources to obtain the necessary and truthful information.

In addition, considering the average per message, the priority way of citizen interaction in messages with COVID content is the like, followed by retweet and comment, with the only exception of Sánchez, which presents more comments than retweets. This is in line with previous studies (Pérez and Nicasio 2019, p. 159). For interaction, this means that despite being the least effort for the social network user, it also allows the purpose of expanding the content of the messages to be fulfilled, which is extremely important in the context of a health emergency, as well as allowing the user to return to the message with which he/she has interacted on other occasions.

**Table 1.** *Total number of retweets, comments and likes on messages with and without COVID-19 content posted on the account of Donald Trump, Pedro Sánchez, CDC, Ministry of Health, The White House and La Moncloa.*

| | COMMENTS | | RETUIT | | I LIKE | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Messages with COVID-19 content | Messages without content COVID-19 | Messages with COVID-19 content | Messages without content COVID-19 | Messages with COVID-19 content | Messages without content COVID-19 |
| | Media | | Media | | Media | |
| D. Trump | 23,800~ | 13,700~ | 26,300~ | 22,100~ | 122,300~ | 102,200~ |
| P. Sánchez | 1. 300~ | 432~ | 920~ | 500~ | 3. 127~ | 1. 555~ |
| CDC | 122~ | 12~ | 883~ | 123~ | 1389~ | 195~ |
| Ministry of Health | 57~ | 3~ | 292~ | 51~ | 403~ | 81~ |
| The White House | 900~ | 1,600~ | 3.000~ | 3.100~ | 11,100~ | 11,000~ |
| La Moncloa | 92~ | 20~ | 203~ | 60~ | 277~ | 101~ |

**Source:** Own elaboration based on data extracted from Twitter.

## 5.    Conclusions

Governmental political communication might be a fundamental tool for preparing citizens in combating misinformation and disinformation in major crisis situations (Casero, 2020; Jones et al., 2009; Paek and Hove, 2019). A context such as the health crisis, marked by double uncertainty -that is, about how the situation is going to evolve out of the ordinary and how to act appropriately- is the one that leads citizens to turn more frequently to institutional profiles as a reliable source of information and interact with them, as shown by the most recent studies (Wang and Zhuang, 2018; García et al., 2020; Túñez et al., 2020) and this research.

Governmental institutions, in good measure fulfill their duty and having a certain awareness of this need, use all the means at their disposal to respond to the citizens' demand for relevant, truthful and reliable information. Social media is one of the means used, even more so when their characteristics entail immediacy, to disseminate information without barriers and with unlimited frequency. In addition, social media also offers the possibility of bilateral and direct interaction of the citizen. This is highly relevant in emergency situations as it allows the creation of spaces for horizontal conversation with the citizen, generating trust and credibility.

From the results of this research, two of the three Spanish government profiles analyzed have a higher total weight of messages with COVID content in the period analyzed, which can be justified by the existence of a single command in the response to the crisis. On the other hand, it is also worth noting that in Trump's account he is the one who publishes the lowest total and relative number of messages with COVID content during the period analyzed. In fact, at the time he paid more attention to the race for the Democratic Party nomination for the White House. His concentration was on the political agenda for his reelection.

Similarly, a greater percentage weight of messages with COVID content was observed in the institutional profiles analyzed (White House, La Moncloa, Ministry of Health and CDC) compared to the weight of the same in the profiles of political leaders (Trump and Sánchez). This is linked to the fact that the governmental institutions were positioned as the main source of information during the health crisis, being the main political actors responsible for managing it, while the leaders combine their governmental role with a political nature, which led them to publish messages in which a certain political strategy can be glimpsed or related to issues unrelated to the COVID. This responds to R.Q1 regarding the volume of messages published in the period analyzed that are related to the health crisis.

On the other hand, as regards the subject matter of the messages related to the health crisis, there is a clear predominance of the information variable in the institutional profiles: both in the case of the Ministry of Health and the CDC; and in the case of the White House and La Moncloa, although in the latter case there is also a relevant relative weight of the proposal's variable. In the case of political leaders, Pedro Sánchez shows a profile in which the messages with COVID content mostly present the political proposals approved by his government, which is a sign of a communicative strategy of announcing the "successes" or the "good work" of his governance. On the contrary, in the case of Trump, the most common variable is that of disinformation, a question that breaks with the patterns of good crisis communication and good governance, which is reinforced by the presence of messages with critical content and in which he evades his responsibility in the management of the crisis. In this sense, his discourse, despite the critical juncture in which it is framed, does not differ from his usual line, showing traits of a populist leader, tending to polarization and division (Hatcher, 2020; Nicasio et al., 2020), with the negative consequences that this can have for citizens, leading to health decisions based on political ideology (Allcott et al., 2020; De Bruine, 2020; Calvillo et al., 2020). All this shows a convergent communication strategy in the profiles of the institutions analyzed in Spain and the USA,

as opposed to a divergent strategy in the accounts of the Presidents of both countries. Thus, and in response to R.Q2, on whether there is a contribution to foresee, anticipate and protect citizens during the first stage of the crisis, the answer is yes in all cases except for Trump.

Regarding the degree of citizen interaction, the comparison between messages with and without COVID content published during the study period, shows a more intense activity by Twitter users in relation to the former. This is evident in all profiles except for the White House, links with studies that highlight the exponential increase in the use of social media during emergency situations (Wang and Zhuang, 2018; Wukich, 2016).

In addition, the results show a user preference for the "like" as a priority way to interact with the profiles analyzed. This is extremely important for the authors of the tweet because it allows dissemination beyond the followers of their profiles, as well as for the user who resorts to the functionality in question because it allows him/her to consult the content of the tweet immediately on his/her own account. In this way, R.Q3 is answered.

Finally, and in response to R.Q4, it can be concluded that the analyzed accounts-profiles comply, except for @realdonaldtrump, with the parameters of political crisis communication. In this sense, the presence of two clearly differentiated models of communicative management of the COVID crisis can be observed, one based on the presence of objective information, contrasted with official sources and trying to respond to citizen demands, and the other focused on polarization, falsehoods, and social and political attacks. While it is true that an emergency of such magnitude cannot be solved only with a good communication strategy, it is no less true that this is an essential element not only for good governance and management but also for the preparation and awareness of a citizenry lacking knowledge or previous experience in a major crisis. That is why the institutional communication strategy was appropriate in both countries and helped to face an unprecedented major health crisis.

This work contributes to expanding the academic literature on the communication of political and health crises, especially in their initial stages, where information is essential for citizens due to unawareness and uncertainty. In this sense, it is empirical evidence on how a major health crisis should and should not be faced, as well as the importance of having crisis political communication guidelines and how to follow them. Despite the contribution that this implies, two limitations of the study should be borne in mind. On the one hand, the content of the responses to the tweets posted in the accounts studied has not been analyzed because of the large volume of responses would make a further work needed. In this sense, it is proposed as a future line of work. On the other hand, the tweets extraction program, which is available online, requires a simple Phyton script that lets the user to download the tweets content. Despite our efforts to reduce errors or missing units of analysis, it is possible, that as in any other API program, to expect that few messages from any the accounts studied were missed.

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