

Clicks and comments as expressions of the dilemma of users' news interests: the case of the Spanish-language social news aggregator, *Menéame*

Clics y comentarios como expresiones del dilema de intereses de los usuarios ante las noticias: el caso del agregador de noticias de lengua hispana *Menéame*

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. The study aims to analyse the diversity of the interests of users of social networks by identifying what kind of information audiences visit and what kind of news they comment on. To this end, the activity of the users of the most successful Spanish-language news aggregator, the *Menéame* social network, was investigated, by examining audience behaviour with respect to the content published on the network. **Methodology.** The research was carried out using a sample of 3,720 news items randomly selected from a total of 51,520 items published on the front page of *Menéame* throughout more than five years (2010-2015). The number of visits and comments that each item

received was analysed, and the two variables, clicks and comments, were related to the type of content and its thematic categories. **Results.** The results show that there is a clear opposition between clicks and comments in terms of content types, with two main trends with respect to hard and soft news items. On the one hand, on average the latter receive almost 4,000 visits more than hard items, which on average receive around 5,500 clicks. However, hard news tends to provoke a greater amount of comments than soft news. The average for the former is 66 comments, while soft news receives 10 less (55.7). **Discussion and conclusions.** Data suggest that clicks and comments express two main interests of users in front of news and that they are both opposing and complementary.

KEYWORDS: users; clicks; comments; hard news; soft news.

RESUMEN

Introducción. El estudio tiene como objetivo analizar la diversidad de intereses de los usuarios de las redes sociales identificando qué tipo de información visitan las audiencias y qué tipo de noticias comentan. Con este fin, se investigó la actividad de los usuarios del agregador de noticias en español de más éxito, la red social *Menéame*, examinando el comportamiento de la audiencia con respecto al contenido publicado en la red. **Metodología.** La investigación se llevó a cabo utilizando una muestra de 3.720 noticias seleccionadas al azar de un total de 51.520 artículos publicados en la portada de *Menéame* durante más de cinco años (2010-2015). Se analizó el número de visitas y comentarios que recibió cada ítem, y las dos variables, clics y comentarios, se relacionaron con el tipo de contenido y sus categorías temáticas. **Resultados.** Los resultados muestran que existe una clara oposición entre clics y comentarios en términos de tipos de contenido, con dos tendencias principales con respecto a las noticias duras y blandas. Por un lado, en promedio, estos últimos reciben casi 4.000 visitas más que los artículos de temática dura, que en promedio reciben alrededor de 5.500 clics. Sin embargo, las noticias duras tienden a provocar una mayor cantidad de comentarios que las noticias blandas. El promedio para el primero es de 66 comentarios, mientras que las noticias suaves reciben 10 menos (55,7). **Discusión y conclusiones.** Los datos sugieren que los clics y los comentarios expresan dos intereses principales de los usuarios frente a las noticias y que son opuestos y complementarios.

PALABRAS CLAVE: usuarios; clics; comentarios; noticias duras; noticias blandas.

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Article originally written in English by the research team
and reviewed by translator **Robert Curwen.**

1. Introduction

A notable amount of investigations conducted over the last decade found a disparity of interests among journalists and audiences regarding news. It is frequently noted that the former show a preference for hard news, while readers seek news that is softer. Researchers reached that conclusion based on the number of visits or clicks received by news as an indicator of audience interest. In this study we want to analyse if we have to persist sustaining this idea, or it is necessary to change it and conclude that the behaviour of audiences and users in front of news is more complex than previously thought.

In that sense, another factor apart from clicks has been used to measure interest in recent years, namely, the number of readers' comments. Based on this indicator, audiences attach more

importance to public issues than the earlier measurements had indicated. In the investigation we want to analyse the diversity of interests of users by examining both indicators, clicks and comments, and seeing what does each of them mean.

Our assumption is that clicks and comments are expressions of two kinds of interests of users in front of news. We analyse which kind of news visit more users and which kind of news do they comment to test if several types of news are more likely to be only visited and other types reveal a trend to be more commented.

To carry this task the investigation examines clicks and comments using data from the most important Spanish-speaking news aggregator, the *Menéame* social network. This web site begun at the end of 2005, after the release of Digg, but now it is more alike to Reddit, having each month around 9 million unique visitors (Martínez, 2017). The users can write a post with a link to the origin of a news in order to promote it to the front page seeking the votes of the rest of users. If the proposal gets a certain number of votes the news will appear in the main page of the site. These information items are considered the most important by the network at each moment, so they are the only news read by many users.

To carry on the study we took a probabilistic sample of 3,720 news corresponding to more than five years from the beginning of the click's counter's work on the network (from September 2010-to December 2015). The research analyses what type of news users visit the most and which ones are the most commented on.

The findings show that users prefer soft news to visit and hard news to comment. In order to understand and explain this result, the theoretical frame of the study involves several aspects. It examines the nature of interests in front of news, seeking the environment surrounding them. In the Discussion section we try to advance some insights about the implications of this reality for the fields of journalism and news media.

The interest of audiences in front of news stories can be analysed from two perspectives, although both are closely intertwined: it can be considered as something that is boosted among the readers, or something that has its source in the attitude of the readers themselves. For the first point of view, we can hold on the tradition of the agenda setting and for the second, on the uses and gratifications theory.

The agenda setting theory has been proven in many studies and it says that media have the power to establish the public agenda (Carazo, 2018, p. 17). It states that the public takes into account and keeps in mind the issues or topics that news organizations spread. From this point of view media have had traditionally the capacity to diffuse the topics that public should look at on a certain moment. It is said that online sites promote agendas that are largely comparable to traditional news media (McCombs, 2005, p. 545).

If we locate the source of the interest in the audience's own attitude, the emergence of computer-mediated communication has revived the significance of uses and gratifications theory (Ruggiero, 2000: 3). An important principle of this theory of audience behaviour is that media use is selective and motivated by rational self-awareness of the individual's own needs and an expectation that those needs will be satisfied by particular types of media and content (Katz *et al.*, 1974, p. 30). Regarding our study, news promoting political integration can conciliate a kind of activity from users as more comments, while news related to entertainment could have a tendency to attract only clicks.

The needs mentioned by the theory of uses and gratifications can be connected closely to “interests” and these can be classified as “interests to use media for important things” and “interests to use mass media as escape.” With respect to the first type, it was found that newspapers fill the need for political integration (Katz, Gurevitch & Haas, 1973, p. 2). We have to see if comments of users, as expression of higher activity, can be specially related to public issues. On the other hand, people use the media for diversion and entertainment (Katz & Foulkes, 1962, p. 377). We can approach the analysis of clicks from this side, to examine if they are more linked with news for diversion.

Although new technologies are seen as a key element for increasing participation, there is an important concern about the differences in the level of activity of users. Many investigations, based in information gathered from clicks counters and the number of shares and comments made by users, say that the amount of those that comment on news articles is relatively small in comparison with the number of readers (Diakopoulos and Naaman, 2011, p. 3). These authors found in their study about a web site of a Californian newspaper that most comments were made by a very little group of contributors, so the distribution in commenting frequency is very skewed. The same conclusion has been reached by other researchers, reiterating that only a small portion of users in a network shares information or comments on content, while the vast majority simply visits the site (Karlsson *et al.*, 2015). From this finding, it is wrong to think that access to digital technologies automatically converts people into active participants (Van Dijck, 2009).

This viewpoint has been summarized in a basic arrangement called the “1% rule” (Arthur, 2006). Just 1% of people create content, 10 % participate by means of comments or contributions and the other 89% consume the content (Arthur, 2006). Furthermore, the most active users usually have several particularities related to their views and gender, which differentiates them from the rest of the users (Friemel and Dötsch, 2015).

However, using survey data on the wider population of online news users from six different countries, several investigators have indicated that the activity of users is much more large than said before. They say that commenting on and sharing news in most countries are significantly more widespread than the so-called “1% rule”. A significant minority of Internet users take a more active part in the news and information and, particularly, commenting and sharing via social media are very widespread (Kalogeropoulos *et al.*, 2017, pp. 1-2).

In their study they found that (1) people who use a high number of different social media platforms and use social media for news are significantly more likely to also engage more actively with news outside social media by commenting on news sites and sharing news via email, (2) that political partisans on both the left and the right are significantly more likely to share and comment on news on social media, and (3) that people with high interest in hard news are significantly more likely to comment on news on both news sites and social media.

Many scholars and professionals believe that the number of clicks expresses clearly the interest of the users and the audience. Analysing data from this source they conclude that journalists want to publish information with socio-political significance and that the public prefer entertainment (Boczkowski *et al.*, 2011; Dick, 2011; Domingo, 2008; Lee *et al.*, 2014; MacGregor, 2007; Robinson, 2011; Singer, 2014; Thorson, 2008).

However, other authors, instead of only taking the number of clicks into account to measure the interest of the audience, have used other kinds of indicators. They say that “clicks only tell part of the story” (Kormelink and Costera Meijer, 2015, p. 14). For example, headlines can tell users interested

in particular topics too little and then these users click the story, while other times the headline gives them enough information, and they do not need to click.

One early example about the nature of comments in online news media and their connection to socio-political topics (hard news) was the BBC's Election 97 Web site, what showed to political experts that the audience was highly interested about electoral issues (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 22).

Paradoxically, news stories receiving the most comments in online media do not coincide with the most visited, so sensational topics and curiosity-arousing elements get many more clicks, but, on the other hand, political and social issues are the items that receive many more comments (Tenenboim and Cohen, 2015). In this context, researchers assume that the decision to write on a story and thus share ideas in a public forum, indicates a special concern for the news, so comments can be understood as an expression of a deeper interest (Ksiazek, 2018).

Several investigations sought the factors to explain the amount of comments. The number of users supplying comments in a news article may be indicative of the importance, interestingness, or effect of the said news article (Tsagkias *et al.*, 2009, p. 1765). Negative news articles receive much more comments than positive news articles, and readers do not like to comment on the odd news, which may be because most of them are deviated from facts (Liu *et al.*, 2015, p. 774). This reinforces the idea that comments are specially connected with news considered most relevant.

In a qualitative study, MacGregor (2007, p. 1097) interviewed online journalists and found that gatekeepers monitor audience data to re-weigh their editorial priorities. According to this study, in response to a story with more clicks, some journalists would expand the coverage of it, provide additional analysis for it, or publish information of the same type.

In the Internet era journalists can know very quickly how is acting the audience regarding how many are reading a story, what stories they prefer or what they comment (Vu, 2014, p. 1094). Technology makes it possible for news companies to register news consumption by tracking clicks, and how much time they spend reading or viewing. It is a wide conclusion that "the most viewed news" label incites a higher edition of topics related to such items, although professionals can feel that to base their work in this kind of data is not according to their professional demands (Welbers *et al.*, 2015).

2. Methodology

This study of clicks and comments and their relation to hard and soft news in the social news network *Menéame* is conducted with the aim to answer these two main questions:

RQ1. Which kind of news visit more users, hard or soft ones?

RQ2. Which kind of news comment more users, hard or soft ones?

In order to answer both questions, two hypotheses have been established closely related to the insights given by the theoretical frame presented above:

H1. Users prefer soft news to click

H2. Users prefer hard news to comment.

Although the social network *Menéame* started on December 2005, the click counter began to work on the network on September 15, 2010, and consequently this analysis considers the following five years until the end of 2015.

The universe under study consists of 51.520 news items that appeared during that period. They were included in 2,576 top pages, each of which contained 20 news items. Due to this peculiarity, cluster sampling was used to select the units: 186 top pages were chosen at random, which add up to a total of 3,720 news units. This means that the sample works with a 99% confidence level and a 2% margin of error.

Two main variables of the study were taken using available information on the aggregator's own site: a) the number of comments made on each news story and, b) the number of clicks.

The third main variable, news type, presented us with the laborious task of deciding how to classify the news. The social network itself requires that the editing user include the information in one of four possible categories: current news, leisure, culture, and technology, but this classification was not adequate for the study. On the one hand, the categories included both hard and soft news to varying degrees, while distinguishing between the two is essential in this investigation. On the other hand, users themselves choose the category for their news, so the reliability of the coding cannot be guaranteed.

Keeping in mind the importance of suitably ascribing hard and soft news, we worked to establish a good set of categories, which raising the final rank to 14. Nine of them are commonly used in news media publishing: Politics, Economy, Justice, Health, Education, Society, Culture and shows, Science and technology, and Sports. Four more were selected because their importance in the Spanish context in those years (Corruption, Immigration, LGBT and Violence and discrimination against women). All of them were completed with the category "Others". The Kappa index gave a score of 0.78, so the level of agreement between coders can be considered as excellent, following the proposal of Fleiss *et al.* (1981, p. 604).

Next, these 14 categories were redistributed depending on whether they were hard, soft, and general news, following the methodology proposed by Lehman-Wilzig and Seletzky (2010), who argue the need to create a third intermediate type because the one reserved for soft news has to date included very heterogeneous thematic blocks. The final distribution was as follows: a) Hard news: Politics, Economy, Justice, Education, Corruption, LGBT, Immigration, Violence and discrimination against women; b) Soft news: Society, Culture and shows, Sports, Others; c) General news: Science and technology, Health.

3. Results

3.1. Which kind of news do users click more

The *Menéame* social network shows the number of clicks that each news story receives, which serves to establish the number of visits to that story. Clicks are an indicator of the preferences of the majority of users as consumers, as opposed to the number of comments, which are indicative of the motivation for socio-political issues of the most active members.

Table 1. *Thematic of news and type of news ordered by the average number visits.*

Thematic category	Number of news stories	Clicks	Average	Type
Others	13	136716	10,516.6	Soft
Society	750	7478077	9,970.8	Soft
Culture and shows	258	2316598	8,979.1	Soft
Science and Technology	451	3449751	7,649.1	General
Education	73	547177	7,495.6	Hard
Sports	60	405917	6,765.3	Soft
Violence and discrimination against women	47	305021	6,489.8	Hard
Economy	510	3206690	6,287.6	Hard
LGTB	24	146642	6,110.1	Hard
Health	88	527316	5,992.2	General
Immigration	18	105867	5,881.5	Hard
Politics	1062	5955405	5,607.7	Hard
Corruption	270	1192421	4,416.4	Hard
Justice	96	299471	3,119.5	Hard
Total	3720	26073069	7,008.9	

Source: own elaboration.

Three thematic categories included in soft news receive much more visits. A pointless category, “Others”, composed mainly by humorous stories and oddities, gets the most, 10,516 in average. Then, two categories follow, “Society” and “Culture and shows.” On the opposite, most of the hard news categories get less visits: “Justice”, located at the end of the list, is the one that gets the smallest average number, with almost 7,400 less clicks than “Others”. The categories included in general news, “Science and Technology” and “Health” are located in the middle of the list.

Table 2. *Hard, soft and general news and average number of clicks.*

	Number of news	Clicks	Average
Hard news	2,100	11,758,694	5,599.4
Soft news	1,081	10,337,308	9,562.7
General news	539	3,977,067	7,378.6
Total	3,720	26,073,069	7,008.9

Source: own elaboration.

The summary in table 2 show that soft news receive in average almost 4,000 more clicks than hard news (9,562.7 and 5,599.4 clicks, respectively).

3.2. Which kind of news do users comment more

Six thematic categories included in the hard news type get the highest amount of comments. They are Violence and discrimination against women, LGBT, Education, Politics, Economy and Immigration.

Table 3. *News by thematic category and type ordered on average comments.*

Category	Number of news	Comments	Average	Type
Violence and discrimination against women	47	4,562	97,1	Hard
LGTB	24	2,270	94,6	Hard
Education	73	6,884	94,3	Hard
Politics	1,062	94,508	89	Hard
Economy	510	41,338	81,1	Hard
Immigration	18	1,373	76,3	Hard
Sports	60	4,290	71,5	Soft
Justice	96	6,842	71,3	Hard
Society	750	52,339	69,8	Soft
Health	88	6,122	69,6	General
Culture and shows	258	17,795	69	Soft
Corruption	270	17,193	63,7	Hard
Science and technology	451	24,561	54,5	General
Other	13	670	51,5	Soft
Total	3,720	280,747	75,5	

Source: own elaboration.

On the other end, a soft news type category, others, which had the higher amount of visits, obtains the lower number of comments in average (51.5), while Politics, a category included in hard news type, having been the third with less clicks, is now the fourth category with more comments.

Table 4. *Average comments by news type.*

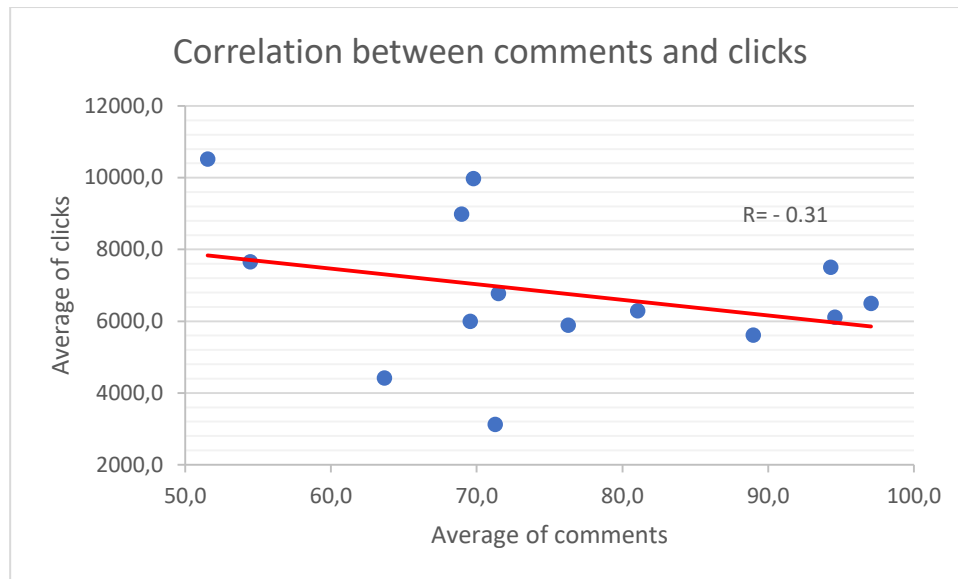
Type	Amount	Comments	Average
Hard news	2,100	174,970	83.3
Soft news	1,081	75,094	69.5
General news	539	30,683	56.9
Total	3,720	280,747	75.5

Source: own elaboration.

A clear difference between types of news can be seen in table 4: hard news get more comments than soft news on average (83.3 and 69.5 respectively) and general news are the ones that get least comments (56.9).

3.3. Relationship between clicks and comments

It seems that clicks and comments work in an opposite way. As it is seen in Graphic 1, if we correlate the average of comments of the thematic categories with their average of clicks the result is $R = -0.31$. This means that there is a negative correlation, with a moderate strength, showing this tendency: an increase in clicks means a decrease in comments, and vice versa.



Graphic 1: correlation between clicks and comments by thematic categories in the news of the front page of *Menéame*.

Source: own elaboration.

This negative correlation points that comments and clicks are the indications of very different interests of the users of the network. The interest for public matters, expressed by the comments, has a tendency to work disregarding the interest for entertainment, manifested by the clicks.

3. Discussion and conclusions

The findings indicate that clicks and comments are indicators of two kind of interests of the readers. If we examine these motivations in the light of the uses and gratifications theory, the conclusion is that clicks are more connected with entertainment while comments relate to participation in public issues.

The findings indicate that both elements work with an opposite logic in the social network *Menéame*. There is a clear tendency: as comments increase, clicks decrease, and vice versa. If we project this result to the field of news media, the implication for journalists is that it is not convenient to rely only on one of the elements to make decisions for gatekeeping and edition, especially on clicks. Users can visit massively several kind of news, but actually commenting means much more concern and interest for public issues. The fact that hard news get more comments leads us to think that the criteria for relevant news of these users are more close to those traditionally attributed to journalists.

Contrary to this, clicks are the manifestation of the motivation for entertainment and scape. Users enjoy leisure given specially by soft news, knowing that they have been promoted with the votes of other users so, presumably, even these news can have some guarantee that they will respect several basic requirements.

The community of users of the social news network *Menéame* moves in a permanent dilemma to choose among the engagement with the most relevant news from the socio-political point of view and the foray into the news for scape. The first ones are worth for them to engage in a higher participation while the last ones only deserve a click. Further investigations are needed to see if these characteristics attached to this community are common in other social networks.

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