

Images published on Twitter as a form of political communication. The case of the general elections in the year 2016 in Spain

Las imágenes publicadas en Twitter como forma de comunicación política. El caso de las elecciones generales del año 2016 en España

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. The purpose of this article is to analyze the images published, by the main candidates, during the electoral campaign to the presidency of the Government of Spain in June 2016. **Methodology.** This research carries out a qualitative analysis through the use of content analysis. The typology of each image is studied, which in total suppose a corpus of study of 1325 images. **Results.** The data reveal the construction of the political communication that each candidate transmits to the voter in the social network Twitter. **Conclusions.** In this work two essential conclusions are reached: First, the image is established as the communication tool on Twitter, finally, an excessive use of Twitter in electoral time does not imply greater success among the audience.

KEYWORDS: image; Twitter; political communication; propaganda; elections.

RESUMEN

Introducción. El propósito de este artículo es analizar las imágenes publicadas, por los principales candidatos, durante la campaña electoral a la presidencia del Gobierno de España en junio de 2016. **Metodología.** Esta investigación realiza un análisis cualitativo a través del empleo del análisis de contenido se estudia la tipología de cada imagen que en total suponen un corpus de estudio de 1325 imágenes. **Resultados.** Los datos revelan la construcción de la comunicación política que cada

candidato transmite al elector en la red social Twitter. **Conclusiones.** En este trabajo se alcanzan dos conclusiones esenciales: En primer lugar, la imagen se asienta como la herramienta de comunicación en Twitter, finalmente, un uso excesivo de Twitter en tiempo electoral no implica un mayor éxito entre la audiencia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: imagen; Twitter; comunicación política; propaganda; elecciones.

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1. Introduction

In recent years we have witnessed a process of change in the political landscape that has influenced on several levels. Since 2009 (Criado, Martínez & Silván, 2012) there has been a constant introduction of Spanish politics in the world of digital social networks, specifically on Twitter. However, it is not until 2014, with the constitution of the Podemos party, and with the shift from regional to national politics of the political formation Citizens, that the importance it has on the party's image, the candidate and the effective and propagandistic presence in social networks is really amplified. All this within a context where, for the first time in 40 years, the bipartisanship between the conservative Popular Party (PP) and the Socialist Party (PSOE) was called into question (Marcos, Alonso and Casero, 2017). In this sense, in accordance with Davis, Bacha and Just (2016) within the new political landscape, no "serious" candidate now ignores Twitter.

Today, online images acquire a relevant position within the strategy of parties and candidates, since the internet has reshaped the political phenomenon (Martínez, Piñeiro, 2016, p. 145). In turn, Segarra, Muñoz and Casero (2016), report that, regardless of the ideology or the antiquity of the party, in the previous electoral campaign some parties were still betting on "the unidirectionality that traditionally characterizes communication in conventional media" (2016, p. 54). The fact is, candidates use Twitter to mainly disseminate their activities and campaign events instead of addressing policies and different topics that may be of interest (Jungher, 2016).

As a means of political communication, we must now add to the traditional media of direct mail and television advertising, "email, text messages, websites and a variety of social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat" (Kang; Franklin; Franz; Michale; 2017). This fact makes convergence culture prevail, where new and old media interact in increasingly complex ways (Jenkins, 2008, p. 17). For their part, authors such as Machado and Capdevilla (2016) clarify that the growth and use of electoral campaigns on the internet generate a series of tools that go beyond traditional political discourse, evolving into a more innovative one based on interaction and thematic depth, characteristic of the new media compared to the mediatized classics. In the social network Twitter, any act that involves the user, including the simple act of sharing a link, requires the existence of trust and reciprocity with the network or issuing source that created it (Holton *et al.*, 2017).

The reasons why Twitter is the social network most used by politicians are, together with resource economics; the possibility of articulating complex messages in which texts, images, sound and their multiple possibilities are combined; and the speed of publication and update through mobile devices. Likewise, the exponential increase in the use of the social network Twitter by parties and politicians, is due to the fact that they obtain the same advantages as with the media, eliminating the

intermediation factor (Gallardo and Enguix, 2016; Larrondo; Meso; Pérez, 2016,); in an environment where “proximity, closeness and empathy are sought, instead of separation and distancing”. (Rúas, Capdevilla, 2017, p. 146).

Whilst these new channels of communication do not replace some traditional political communication tools such as territorial campaigns, they enhance them (Coiutti; Sánchez, 2017. page 381). In short, as Dhalegren (2005) points out, “new interactive media occupy a prominent place, they also serve to facilitate communication links between citizens and the holders of power in society”. (p. 148).

1.2. Images published on the network as political communication

The 90s was a decade determined by the political use of television through images and campaign spots, where the image event was the pillar of the candidates’ political construction. Currently, construction of the politician’s image passes, irrevocably, through digital space and the use of social networks (Baggiolini, Castor, 2016, p. 160).

The voter seeks to determine the politician's proposals in electoral time and faced with the impossibility of direct contact “the information that people obtain and on which they base their decision to vote comes from the media” (Aruguete, Riorda, 2016, p. 173). In this constructive process, where what is intended is to offer a joint image, all the media, including Twitter, determine the process that will result in the global image of the candidate. Images rank, in this way, as a fundamental element when understanding modern political communication and political communication in social networks, where “the personalization of politics and the concern over the image of the political leader has engendered a new type and concept of political leadership characterized by its visibility, by the permanent symbiosis with the media” (Crespo & Moreno, 2015, p. 91).

Lei Guo, Jacob A. Rohde and H. Denis Wu (2018) suggest, although reference to the specific appearance of opinion leaders, that there is a relationship between offline reputation and influence on Twitter. We cannot ignore that, in a political campaign, all factors have great relevance, and everything that affects it daily can have a great impact on Twitter, either positively or negatively.

Technological advancement allows for communication with politicians in a different way, thanks to instantaneity developed by information technologies and applied through social networks such as Twitter. This implies the constant construction of the politician’s profile, which makes the digital image in social networks different from what we could traditionally perceive through the media, and whose objective, in the words of Richard (2008, p. 77) “is the distorted representation of the individual in order to inspire a positive reaction in the observer”.

In short, the image that the user perceives is essentially formed by the following elements: the content of the tweets and the images they can include, the polarization that emerges from the information disclosed on Twitter and the images themselves, both profile and cover, as well as those that the same parties and politicians upload to the microblogging network. According to Ventura (2012), to study the components of a profile it is necessary to apply multimodal analysis proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen, (1996, 2002) based on the following parameters that the author raises: choice of user name; the use of photographs; the selection of colours; and the profile description, composed in verbal form. In this way, the scheme of articulation and analysis of multimodal (or multisemic) texts (Cope & Klatzky, 2010, page 115) are presented by the deconstruction of both verbal and visual components within the levels of content and expression (Olave, 2013, p. 47).

There are previous studies such as Quevedo, Portalés & Berrocal (2016) at the local level and Bustos and Ruiz del Olmo (2016) in the regional elections in Andalusia. In this text the profile image presented by the political candidate on Twitter has been examined, including photographs, colors and presentation texts, following the line of research of these authors.

This analysis revolves around this social network and, as has been previously established, around image as the main, but insufficiently studied, element of political communication applied to the electoral campaign profiles of the main parties that took part in the general elections on June 26, 2016 in Spain.

2. Methodology

The present study is based on a mixed methodology where qualitative and quantitative elements converge. According to Anguera (1986) there is a transformation of the qualitative to the quantitative also due to technological evolution. The new tools of data management, as well as specific software for the study of the qualitative, bring us ever closer to a methodology that converges towards the use of both methodologies, known as triangulation or mixed strategies, which offer us a superior overview of the facts of the analyzed empirical reality.

What is proposed in this study is a methodological triangulation using perspectives or data from diverse methods, in the same investigation. Specifically, in this case a content analysis of the candidate's profile was undertaken, which is a research technique used to make inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specific characteristics within a text. Its use is traditionally related to images or texts that appear in the media, such as newspapers, magazines and even television and currently, the internet and social networks (Rose, 2012).

In this field, content analysis is used to analyse a large number of images, and these should assure a representative sample for later use (Rose, 2012). Krippendorff (1980) and Weber (1990), point out a series of strategies for the composition of image samples: randomization, systematization and stratification. In addition, as noted above, in order to triangulate and verify conclusions in some cases, quantitative methodologies have been used as a complementary methodology, which allows reliable and universal conclusions to be obtained, exploring a set of already existing data (Lafuente & Marín, 2008, p. 10). In short, content analysis focuses more on the image itself, than on its composition. It is a method based on three pillars: validity, replicability, and the use of coded categories. In turn, these must be exhaustive, exclusive and enlightening. For these purposes, it is a valid research technique because it allows formulation of reproducible and valid inferences from the data obtained from Twitter that can be applied to its context.

The following sections were considered as categories that semantically explain the images emitted: campaign photography; rival criticism; electoral proposal; electoral propaganda; balance of data; humor; highlighting achievements and others. This cycle begins in the immersion phase of the phenomenon under study, during which preliminary data were collected, based on participant observation and exploratory interviews, in the manner of the grounded theory. Then a process of delimitation of the object for study, and collection and immersion in scientific literature on political communication in social networks was carried out.

Subsequently, considering the theoretical framework constructed during this phase, the new empirical data are collected and discussed. The discussion of results should not be only descriptive, it should be proactive, ethical and problematic. The strength of its arguments comes from the questioning that was made about the object of study, the development of the theory, and the list of

evidence and conclusions. Specifically, in this case a content analysis was undertaken of the candidate's profile. Several authors describe this technique as accurate and objective, among them we can point out the opinion of Ole R. Holsti (1969): it is any research technique that allows inferences to be made by systematically and objectively identifying specific characteristics within a text.

As indicated above, in order to triangulate and verify conclusions, in some cases quantitative methodologies have been used as a complementary methodology, which allows obtaining more reliable and universal conclusions, that is, "to understand social and economic reality we need a set of data, already existing or created by ourselves, over time or at a specific time" (Lafuente & Marín, 2008, p. 10). The following statistical techniques are noteworthy, which are included within the quantitative method, and which have been applied to complement the qualitative methods explained above: data collection, ordering and presentation of data, treatment and exploitation of data.

The analysis period was between June 10 and 24, 2016, including the electoral campaign and excluding the day of reflection and ballot day, since, in accordance with the Official State Bulletin, the electoral campaign ended at 00:00 hours on June 24. As regards the constitution of the analysis, it consists of all the tweets issued by the four main candidates of the 2016 general elections, namely: Mariano Rajoy, Pedro Sanchez, Albert Rivera and Pablo Iglesias. This resulted in an overall total of 2190 tweets. For the analysis to generate absolute data, the universe of the study itself is the corpus. Nothing is said about the code book, nor about how the content analysis is done (quantitative and/or qualitative). On the one hand, several images are mentioned and, on the other hand, several tweets, which is the study and the criteria. In addition, it is necessary to refer to other studies with similar objectives and replicate some methodological criteria.

3. Results

The present analysis revolves around political communication issued by the four main political profiles on social networks, specifically on Twitter. At this point, the study focuses on the number of images shown by each of these profiles, as well as their typology as explained in the methodology. In absolute figures, as shown in the following figure 1, the numerical relationship between tweets and images is shown globally:

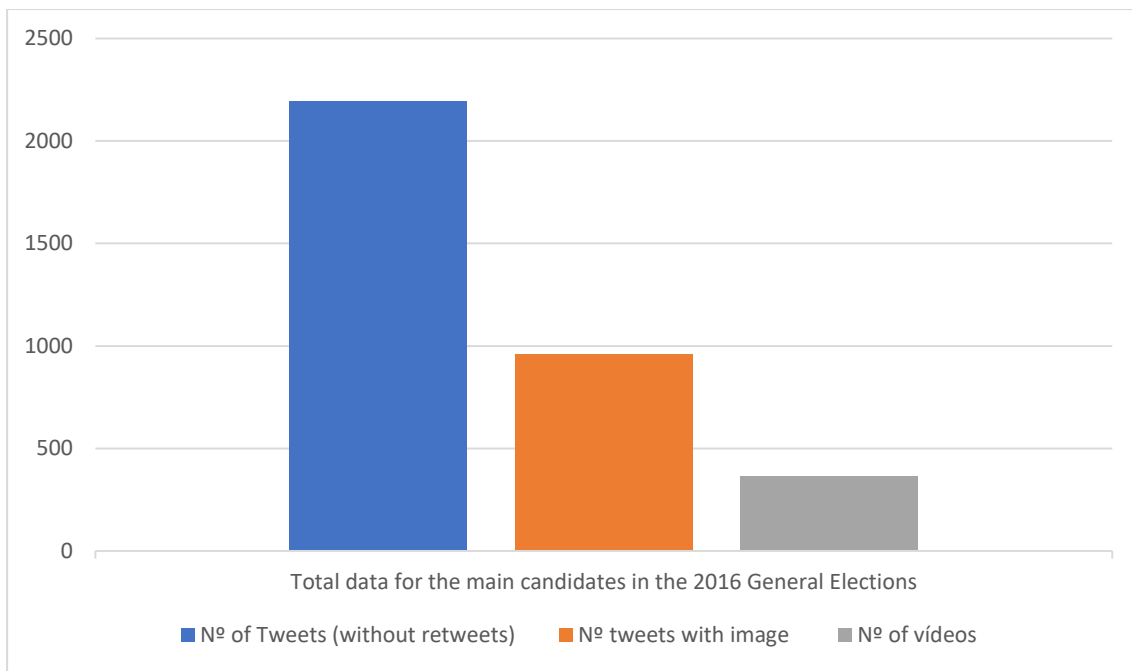


Figure 1: total number of Tweets and images and videos in those Tweets.
Source: the author.

The previous chart shows how image keeps gaining ground, with regards to the analysis of the main candidates' profiles: Mariano Rajoy, Pedro Sanchez, Albert Rivera and Pablo Iglesias. In fact, overall, image and video represent 60.5% of the total. These data consolidate the trend in use of image that has already been analyzed in other contexts, as is the case of the Andalusian regional elections that took place in 2015 (Bustos and Ruiz del Olmo, 2016).

On that occasion, the percentage of images in relation to the number of tweets for candidates who attended these elections was 32.7% of the total. Consequently, the first result that is evident is that image is on the rise on the social network Twitter. In fact, it is becoming the main form of communication. Following this premise, an analysis that goes one step beyond mere percentage analysis becomes necessary. As established in the methodological section, below, the images that candidates published in their profiles during the electoral campaign between June 10 and 24, 2016 are analyzed in more detail. This offers an overview of the type of message that each candidate tries to transmit to his audience. In addition, it can be observed whether the traditional model of political communication is replicated, based on campaign events and rallies, or if, on the contrary, candidates tend to offer their public another type of contact which is more appropriate for the social network environment.

3.1. Mariano Rajoy

The leader of the Popular Party was the most active candidate during the electoral period. According to the data, Mariano Rajoy published a total of 748 tweets during the electoral campaign, excluding retweets from the analysis. In total, the president of the government at the time of the analysis, made a total of 1,177 publications in this social network if the retweets are included. However, the corpus collected here focuses on the number of tweets with image, excluding the study of retweets, since these can contain images and other elements of the audio-visual world. Thereon, the general data for Mariano Rajoy's profile offers the following results: a total of 322 images and 135 retweets. Thus 60.09% of the tweets issued during the elections from Mariano Rajoy's profile, contained some

visual element, whether it was image or video. In this first case study, the relevance of images in political communication is already noticeable, since the most active candidate includes graphic components in more than half of his tweets. As for the content thereof, it is summarized in the following illustration:

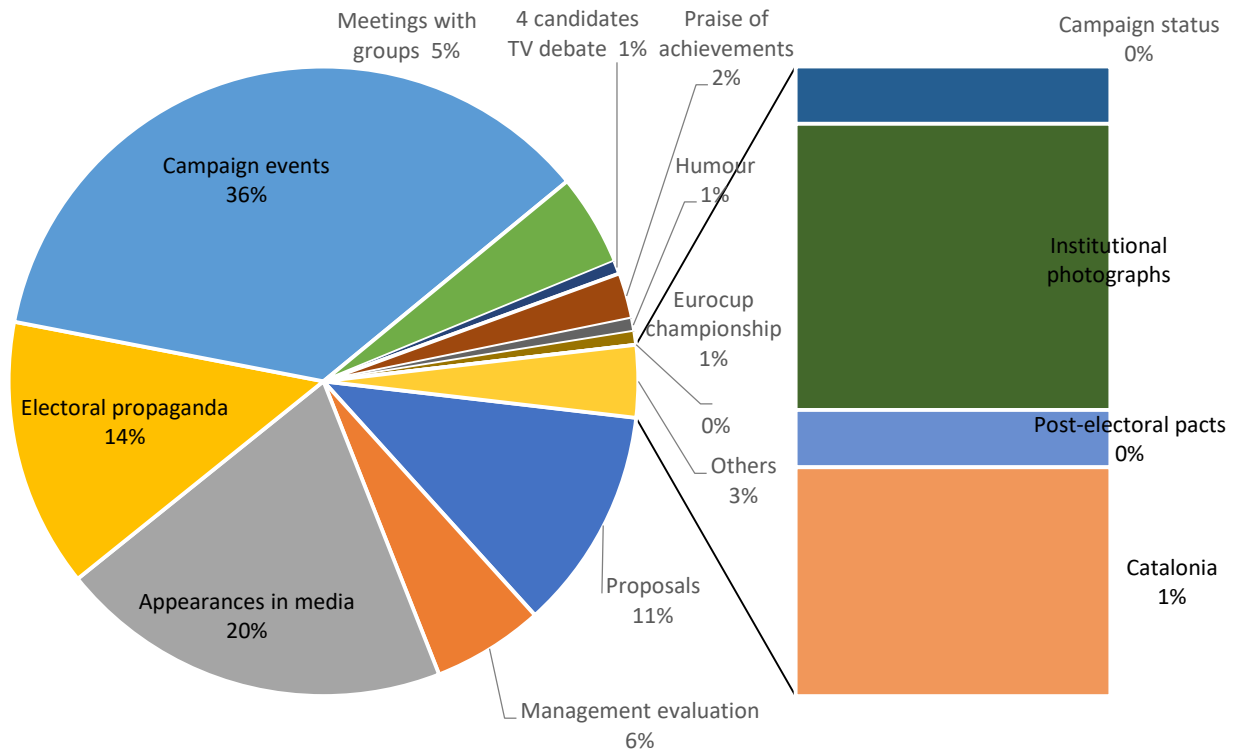


Figure 2: typology and content of the images issued by the candidate Mariano Rajoy.
Source: the author.

The previous Figure 2 shows some particularly relevant elements. If it is emphasized that this political moment in Spain took place due to a lack of consensus among the main parties after the elections held six months earlier, it is surprising that 0% of the images are devoted to this element. In terms of figures, this section holds 2 images specifically. Campaign events, at 36%, and appearances in the media, at 20%, take up 56% of the total images issued. As a result, a model is replicated where the candidate's image prevails over interactive communication. The electoral proposals, 11%, and balance of management, at 6%, represent the other key components of images issued by the Popular Party candidate.

3.2. Pedro Sánchez

The leader of the Socialist party, Pedro Sanchez, ranks third in activity level on Twitter during the election campaign with a total of 662 communications in this medium. On this occasion, the audio-visual content linked to these tweets does not exceed 50%, standing at 49.9%. Thus, Pedro Sánchez also generated a large amount of information through images and videos. Specifically, during the election campaign he issued a total of 208 images and 119 videos (which does not add up to the supposed 662 communications). Regarding the typology of the tweets, one could report and conclude visually how the general secretary of the Spanish Socialist Party focuses mainly on his own image as a candidate, often decontextualized from the party he represents, and trying to link itself, very obviously, with other media.

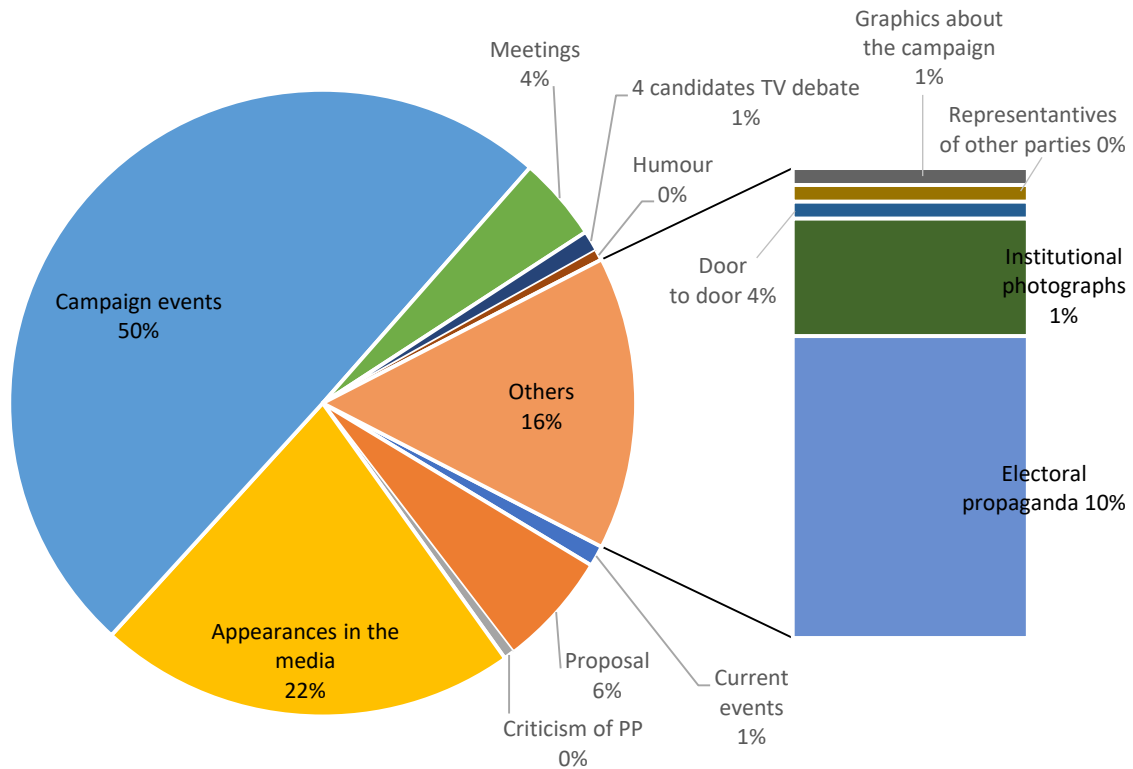


Figure 3: typology and content of the images issued by the candidate Pedro Sánchez.
Source: the author.

The previous Figure 3 defines how the structure of the images published in Pedro Sanchez's Twitter profile is centred on focusing attention on the candidate himself. For this reason, 50% of the images are related to or represent campaign events. Similarly, the other relevant percentages in relation to media appearances, 22%, and electoral propaganda, 10%, confirm the strategy sustained in Pedro Sánchez's profile, whose purpose is to represent a candidate who is present in various scenarios, and who tries to connect with voters by making himself known through all possible channels. In addition, he aims to transmit the image of a candidate who is close to the voter, who explains his program from house to house and neighbour to neighbour. The previous situation in which the Socialist Party obtained its worst results in the history of democratic elections cannot be ignored.

3.3. Albert Rivera

The Citizens party candidate is one of those who places most importance on the presence of images in tweets in managing his Twitter profile during the 2016 election campaign. Accordingly, as many as 69, 9% of the tweets contained an image or video. Albert Rivera issued a total of 384 tweets that included at least one image and 81 in which a video was inserted. The data themselves reveal a remarkable tendency towards the use of image to the detriment of text. As far as the typology of the images, the general semantic content reveals the use the candidate has made of these, as shown in the following illustration.

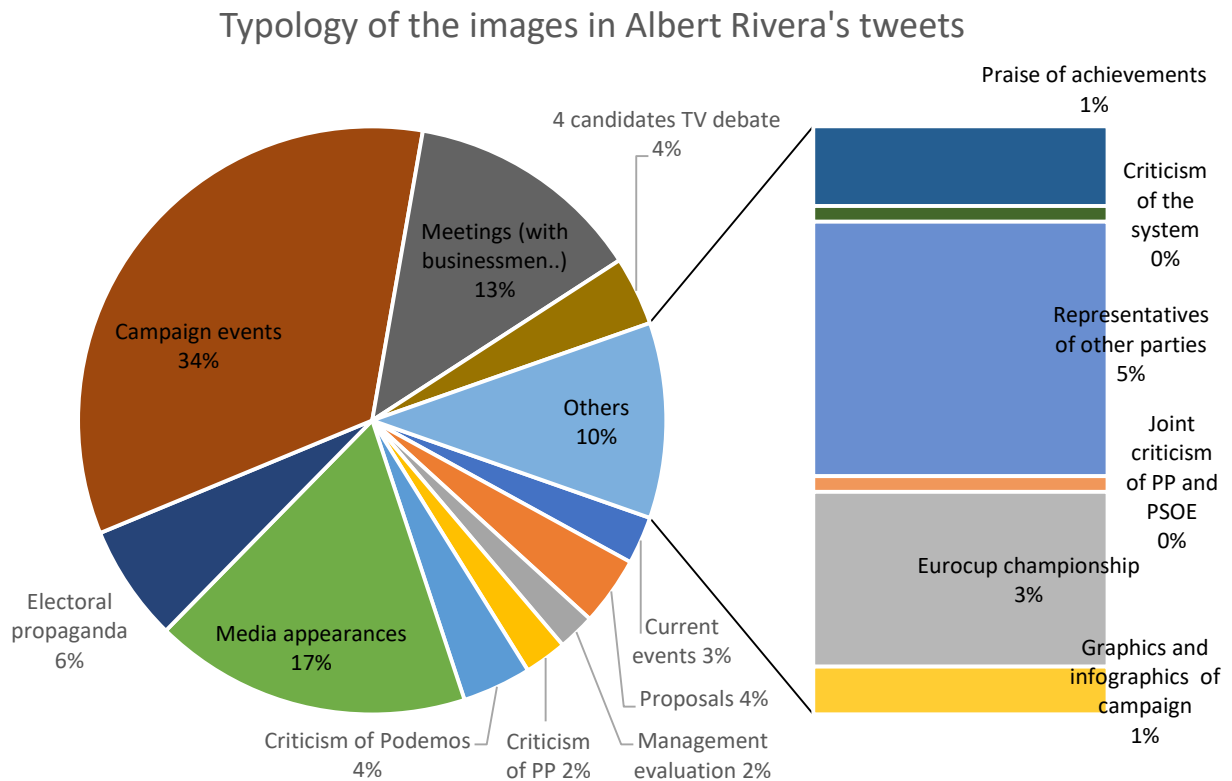


Figure 4: typology and content of the images issued by the candidate Albert Rivera.
Source: the author.

The case of the candidate Albert Rivera's profile images proves interesting; although it is true that, as in the previous cases, campaign events are of great importance, 34% of images, and media appearances, 17%, which in total represent 51% of the images; other fields acquire a special interest. Thus, images that are criticisms of the Podemos party, 4%, and the Popular Party, 2% were shared from the Citizens' leader's official account. In previous cases they focused more on the party's image and on the person himself, rather than on criticism of other parties or members of the campaign. Another relevant fact is the involvement and connection of these visual communications with the business world, unions and other groups, which in this case represent 13% of the total images. Another aspect that in this case emerges from the very idiosyncrasy of these elections, is that no space is dedicated to images about future pacts or ideas of alliances that may take place in the future.

3.4. Pablo Iglesias

The general secretary of the political formation Podemos stands out in these elections for having very moderate activity. In fact, during the entire electoral period he only published a total of 110 tweets. It is a small number compared to the rest of the candidates and shows a strategy that reveals or intends to demonstrate that he, unlike other candidates, has managed his own account and has shared from his own perspective what he considers to be best for his image. In this case, a smaller number of tweets seek to convey communication that is more truthful and characteristic of the candidate, giving the appearance of authenticity and authorship. A high percentage of the 69.9% of tweets published by Pablo Iglesias contained an image or video; in addition, the use of audio-visual content, not only visual content, stands out. As shown in the following Figure 5, a unique aspect stands out: in addition to campaign events and other categories that have been shown throughout the study, content related

to support received personally or to the party itself, from other network accounts has been shared from his profile.

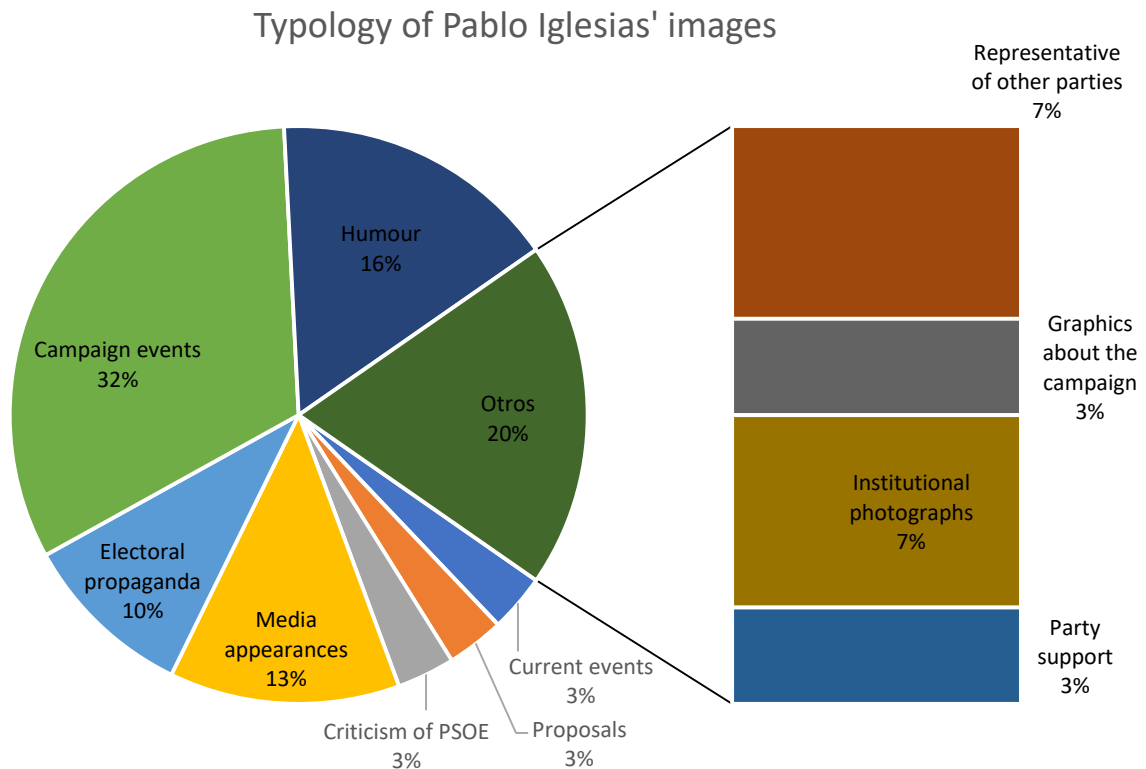


Figure 5: typology and content of the images issued by the candidate Pablo Iglesias.
Source: the author.

Although factors and strategies common to the rest of the candidates are evident, it is very important to assess the category of images that represent external support to the party, a 3% of the total, and criticism of the Socialist Party, which represents 3% of the total; a logical action given that both parties shared a certain electoral base. The institutional photographs and those in which other political leaders appear also occupy a very important spectrum. It is a unique profile, because as noted above, it is the profile that had the least activity during the election campaign and, yet, was one of those that used the most images.

4. Conclusions

Throughout the present study it is evident that in the field of political communication in social networks and specifically in Twitter, image is gaining more and more ground over text. Relevance acquired by audio-visual content is far superior to elections at other levels, such as the regional elections in Andalusia the previous year, and it is a consolidated trend.

In this sense, in almost all the candidates' profiles, there is in excess of 50% inclusion of visual and audio-visual content in their tweets during the electoral campaign of June 2016, except for Pedro Sánchez, who remains at 49.9%. Even so, the figure is very high. On the other hand, the leaders of the new parties, Pablo Iglesias and Albert Rivera, are those who gave more importance to visual representation in their communications to voters. In both cases reaching 70% of visual and audio-visual material included in their tweets. An initial conclusion is that political communication in

social networks is noticeably different between old and new parties, at least in the social network Twitter.

On the other hand, the leader of the conservative Popular Party stands out; the strategy followed by Mariano Rajoy also gave great importance to image, 60.09% of content seeking to match the percentages of the new parties and placing image as a new form of political communication in social networks, a situation which definitively consolidated in Spain after the 2016 general elections.

Finally, the visual strategy of the Podemos candidate, Pablo Iglesias, is highlighted. Compared to his competitors, he opted for a more austere strategy, being the candidate who shared the least content, seeking supposed authorship or authenticity of the communicator. In terms of percentage he was one who included the most images and videos, along with Albert Rivera.

Regarding the content, representation and typology of images and videos, images labelled “campaign events” and “media appearances” are common to all profiles, as a central element of their strategy. The rest of the typologies and their variability respond to the unique strategy of each candidate’s campaign team. It would be very interesting for the candidate to focus his future strategy on other areas that create added value for citizens. This first step towards visual communication should lead to another, where correct use of the possibilities offered by the Twitter social network is really made, compared to the traditional method of communication where the leader’s image is made visible through campaign events and rallies. This is, undoubtedly, a challenge that will have to be faced in future polls and elections.

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