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Political-partisan uses on public administrations’ *Twitter* accounts

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Abstract

Introduction: Institutional communication and political communication should have separate vehicles for dissemination. However, by adopting the normalization hypothesis, the tendency to a partisan misuse is also reflected in social networks.

Methods: This study analyses the *Twitter* publications of 40 Spanish institutional accounts equitably distributed between four territorial levels (state, regional, provincial and local). This is a qualitative research, essentially based on a content analysis method.

Results and conclusions: The results ratify the hypothesis that these institutional accounts are being used for propaganda and partisan purposes. Ten trends prove there is a great concern for politicians’ visibility as party agents. Therefore, in this new channel the confusion between these two areas is reinforced. This has already been detected by previous research that examined communication in an institution’s online press rooms (García Orosa & Vázquez Sande, 2012)

Keywords

Political communication; institutional communication; *Twitter*, social networks.

Contents

1. Theoretical framework. 2. Methods. 3. Results analysis. 4. Discussion. 5. Conclusions. 6. Notes. 7. References.

Translated by **Ana Varela Suárez**

1. Theoretical framework

1.1. Institutional communication in social networks

In this research we have adopted the theoretical perspective that associates the communicative dimension of every institution [1] to the precept of its own legitimation. The relational essence of the administration is conceived as the basis of its service of public interest. Therefore, we agree with the

thesis of La Porte (2012) or Cancelo & Gadea (2013) among others, who believe that “the communicative development of the entity has a direct effect on two key aspects for its existence: reputation and authority. They are both binding and they establish the principle of institutional legitimacy” (Cancelo & Gadea [2], 2013: 23).

Hence, we face a scenario in which communication must not only be bidirectional, following the democratic logics and those arising out of the emergence of the Internet, but it must also be felt by the citizens to provide the institution with legitimacy and authority as well as working in its reputation. It also must comply the legal requirements [3] supporting this civil right.

This is why the dynamics of the institution have to be adapted to the channels of their receivers, resorting to those social networks that “allow alternative forms of innovative creation that occur outside the bureaucratic rules and regulations and require the adaptation of the existing acceptable use paradigm” (Mergel, 2014: 4).

Moreover, social networks have resulted into a tool to foster and facilitate an open collaboration, defined as follows:

“An online environment that supports the collective production of an artefact through a technologically mediated collaboration platform that presents low barriers to entry and exit and supports the emergence of persistent but malleable social structures” (Forte & Lampe, 2013: 536).

Nonetheless, the communicative interrelationship between institutions and citizens that use social network as a channel requires a new scenario in which three features are necessarily involved. This has been highlighted in Criado, Rojas & Barrero (2015) when they address the “concreteness of the 2.0 nature of digital social networks in public administrations”:

“a) Citizens who are potential active agents in the production of web contents (or prosumers), b) the extension of the idea of collaborative intelligence, i.e. the evidence that public innovation is also out of the organization’s formal boundaries, c) as well as the increasing disintermediation of the activities between organizations and private individuals” (Criado, Rojas & Barrero, 2015: 158).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the opinion on the use of social networks in the public sphere divides between those who enthusiastically defend its implementation and success and those who curb this optimism, as stated by Criado & Rojas (2015: 28).

However, one of the main dysfunctions appreciated in this field is the conception of social networks as unidirectional channels. The lack of active listening and the absence of response to citizens’ demands cause some flaws, which prevents users from reaching the expected levels of interaction. This is stated in various studies (Criado & Rojas, 2012; Vázquez Sande, 2013) in which the administrations’ behaviour is more causative than communitarian in terms of relationship (Pasquali, 2007).

Apart from this, there are other gaps, such as the absence of a policy or strategy for digital social networks in more than 70% of municipalities or the lack of guidelines in almost 85% of cases (Criado y Rojas, 2015: 32-34).

Table 1. Approaches on the use of social networks in institutions

CYBEROPTIMISTICS	CRITICS
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. They transform the process of mediation between public institutions and society. 2. They contribute to know social patterns and citizens' dynamics better. 3. They generate confidence in public institutions. 4. They allow to collectively create public information. 5. They contribute to increase citizens' perception of transparency. 6. They increase the efficiency in terms of costs. 7. They foster participation. 8. They contribute to co-producing public materials and services. 9. They are essential to implement the open government. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of evidence that these technologies are meeting their goals. 2. Lack of evidence that they are offering major progress regarding the open government. 3. Low level of use on the part of citizens for interacting with public institutions. 4. Risks to citizens' privacy due to the monitoring tasks of public administrations.

Source: Criado y Rojas, 2015:28

In any case, it is necessary to address institutional communication as a process of public service. This requires dismissing its political bias and resorting to a comprehensive, integrated and coordinated management. Indeed,

“Communicating is transmitting with clarity the institutional values and identity, since they are the driving forces shaping the course to generate time-consistent actions and messages with an impact in the citizens' confidence and credibility” (Gutiérrez, 2012: 382).

Furthermore, the incorporation of the institutions to the world of social networks represents an advancement in the five steps of participation proposed by Alguacil (2006). However, reality has curbed this optimism thanks to studies, such as that of Simelio & Molina (2014), on the use of *Twitter* by local corporations that “have not managed to take advantage of all the resources new technologies offer and use *Twitter* as if it was a traditional media prior to the digitalization and the Internet” (Simelio y Molina, 2014:490).

Pardo (2014) reached a similar conclusion after studying the use of this social network by several municipalities in the province of Castellón, and states that “social networks are both the best way and the ideal tool to encourage a closer relationship between citizens-voters and close the gap between them” (Pardo, 2014:363)

“Municipal *Twitter* accounts have evolved towards a more dynamic conception of institutional communication, even if they use their social networks as a platform to replicate the information in their web portals without obtaining full advantage of the dialogue option offered by *Twitter* to bring themselves closer to the citizens-voters” (Pardo, 2014:375).

Finally, we should not forget that, as stated by Palomar (2015), those opportunities offered by social networks to improve both the institutions’ external communications and the administrations’ internal function by implementing them. According to this author:

“Social networks and collaborative working/learning environments are the social tools more prominently adopted by public administrations during the second decade of the 21st century, both for relating with citizens and for their own internal organization” (Palomar, 2015: 16).

However, our research is framed within the external dimension of communication with the new citizenship, active on the web 2.0. “They have a voice, they interact and they have stopped being simple receivers and information consumers to become senders and producers of contents” (Subires, 2012: 220). Thus, we will exclusively focus on this aspect.

1.2. Political communication on *Twitter*

In the field of political communication, in its most partisan sense, there is a certain unanimity among theoreticians that in Spain *Twitter* was consecrated as a communication tool after the 2011 general elections, even if in these first moments its use was rather primitive.

Therefore, as highlighted by García & Zugasti (2014), there was virtually no trace of a genuine will to interact with other users in the accounts of the candidates of the two main parties (Mariano Rajoy from PP and Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba from PSOE). Indeed, only 19.7% of their analysed messages were *retweeted* and there was not a majority use of *hashtags* in them, since only 38.5% included tags (among them). On the contrary, a certain dialogic capacity was detected, given that they mentioned other users in 68% of their publications (García & Zugasti, 2014:302-304).

Apart from this, we can see the self-referential approach is prevalent, since the main topic for both Rajoy and Rubalcaba is the organization of their campaign, moving away from citizens’ main concerns. Rather, “the candidates used *Twitter*, to a large extent, as a sort of notice board or calendar of events to spread their own campaign activities” (Zugasti & Sabés, 2015:165). Therefore, “the most important issues for the citizens, according to opinion polls, were not the most recurrently addressed in the accounts of the two main candidates for the Presidency of the Government” (Zugasti & Sabés, 2015:175).

This is the reality Castells referred to with the concept “digital notice board” (Castells, 2010:12) to denote the practice of use of the Internet in which the candidate speaks just about activities and contents of his own electoral campaign. This was also noted by Segado-Boj et al., who state that “the

main Latin-American leaders are still anchored to the model of mass dissemination inherited from mass media and they have not adapted their behaviour to the most effective models in the social networks” (Segado-Boj, 2015:167).

Concerning the municipal level, even if “scientific literature focused on municipal representatives and their involvement in social networks is scarce” (Catalina et al., 2015:758), the first academic approaches highlight they repeat trends already detected at the national level, such as devoting most of their attention to political-partisan issues. In fact, 22.6% of all the *tweets* are related with the European elections, this being the most repeated topic (Catalina et al., 2015:765). This, taken together with the lack of answers, proofs that real dialogue remains elusive. In contrast, retweets attain greater weight, accounting for more than one-third (34.5%) of the total number of publications (Catalina y otros, 2015:763).

Another significant element highlighted by this study is that only two thirds of the mayors of the provincial capitals and autonomous cities have a *Twitter* account and only half of them have an active presence on them (Catalina y otros, 2015:768).

Anyway, as stated by Túñez & Sixto (2011), social networks, due to their number of participants and their conditions for monitoring messages, have become a tool to gain adepts: from planning big campaigns to the field of interpersonal communication fostered by each candidate. Indeed,

“The strategy, the frequency of emission of messages and the type of relationship adopted by politicians in these networks have an impact in their image, their public perception and even in the voting intentions. The profiles of those politicians who show a greater level of interactivity generate a greater feeling of direct contact with the electorate. This causes a better assessment and a higher voting intention towards them (Lee & Shin, 2012). Therefore, those politicians whose accounts were more prone to conversation and interaction with other users achieved a higher political payback than those who were less active or who opted for just unidirectional messages (Grant, Moon & Grant, 2010)” (Segado-Boj y otros, 2015:158).

According to López, there are four main challenges for those politicians using *Twitter*: “use it beyond the campaign, avoid propaganda, administer the account personally [...] and be transparent” (López, 2014). Hence, it is about escaping from the mere “compulsive visibility” (Sintes, 2011:179). This concept refers to the fake behaviour of politicians when they follow their advisers’ guidelines. To these we would also have to add the adaptation to the users’ dynamics in the networks. According to Franco (2014), even if the number of retweets and answers have multiplied 3.5 fold between 2010 and 2012, in the case of the Catalan Socialist Party (PSC), the reference to the party and the candidate by other users had multiplied 9.5 fold.

Furthermore, this underutilization of social networks by Spanish politicians it is not an isolated occurrence, since it is also observed in other countries such as Germany, Italy or England (Espino-Sánchez, 2014:54).

Finally, the academic production has mainly been oriented towards the study of networks during electoral campaigns (Segado-Boj et al., 2015:159) and has revolved around two major aspects, frequently from a non-inclusive perspective. Zugasti & Pérez (2015) hold that part of these studies

have been focused on the use politicians make of *Twitter*, whereas the other part have studied how citizens use this social network when they talk about politics. In this sense, there is a growing interest in this topic within the Spanish scientific context. This is evident even in those case studies focused on the use of social networks in the internal processes for renovating the parties (Pérez & Nicasio, 2015).

1.3. Boundaries with political communication

The starting point of this research lies in the diffuse behaviour of political parties, placed on the borderline between the public and private sector (Bartolomé, 2012). Thus, even if they are entities with a clear private origin, nature and function, their presence and integration in the governance of institutions after democratic elections result into the perception that they belong to the public sector.

However, the objectives they seek are clearly different, or at least from a theoretical point of view: whereas political parties are oriented towards reaching electoral goals (winning elections, consolidating into key political forces or simply keeping relevant), institutions should be focused on public service. Therefore, given that their objectives are so different, both governments and professionals from the field of communication should emphasize the need of keeping these two areas clearly separated. Indeed, the protagonists of communication also diverge: they are actors of the party in the political field whereas they are citizens in the institutional field. In fact, institutions are communicative agents of the first sectors, opposite to political parties, framed within the second sector. This traditional classification of these sources, also stated in García Orosa & Vázquez Sande (2013), entails a distinction between three different parameters (sender, message and receiver) [4]. Apart from this, we claim that whereas institutional communication should be oriented towards its informative function, that of the second sector has a persuasive nature.

But the truth is that, as we proved in a previous study which analysed the institutional online press rooms of all the Spanish municipalities with more than 50,000 citizens,

“Their dynamic [of communication cabinets in city councils] repeatedly crosses the boundaries of public administration. On the one hand, this is due to the lack of own space and information about the opposition groups -who are obviously part of the city council and thus should have a proportional space in institutional communication. On the other hand, it results from the features of the information and the conducted communication” (García Orosa y Vázquez Sande, 2012: 411).

Therefore, we have detected realities such as an overexposure of the figure of the major in the information issued (the politician as *framing*), press releases referring to purely political contents with a supra-municipal nature or the combination of institutional and political statements aiming to answer to the opposition or reproach previous governments, among other tendencies.

This may be due to the own labour dynamics in institutional communication cabinets, in which these boundaries seem to have disappeared. According to Gutiérrez (2012) these departments are characterized by the fact that “the activity tends to focus on a political communication based on a permanent campaign, pre-eminence of the image of the political leader and scarce orientation towards the public service” 378).

This situation clashes with the strategic nature that, from a leadership role, should contribute to help the institutions to strengthen relationships of trust with the citizens in a clearly bidirectional process: “towards the public, because they obtain the information and a commitment from the entity; and from the public towards the organization because it understands how to respond to the demands and improve its service through listening and interacting” (Gutiérrez, 2012: 381).

1.4. The normalization hypothesis

One of the central hypothesis that can explain the normalization of the confusion between these two areas, which leads to *self-legitimization* of this attitude and thus these practices, can be the increase of the number of members in the institutional communication team. They depend on the politician responsible for the administration. The figure has increased from 40% in 2000 to 72.3% in 2007.

In this way, the report *Communication Management in Public Administrations* presents three facts that support this hypothesis:

a) “Political officer’s communication” is the third most assumed exclusive responsibility by those responsible for the institution's communication (69.2%), only surpassed by contacts with the media (95.4%) and external communication (81.5%). This means the occupation and preoccupation for the political officer is way ahead of other tasks such as communication with citizens (49.2%) or internal communication (13.8%) to name a few examples. Moreover, this 69.2% exclusive dedication contrasts with 3.1% of those cases that allocate this “political officer’s communication” action to different areas and 26.2% that share it between this and other area.

b) Among the features workers in this field consider to be the most instrumental to perform their job, “loyalty to the political leader” (73.8%) is considered more important than other features such as “specialized training in communication” (72.3%) or “concern for the common welfare of citizens” (60%).

c) The factor considered to be the most relevant for achieving a successful institutional communication is neither the communication strategy (just for 41.5% of the interviewees), nor the involvement of the institution in the communication process (41.5%) or the growing professionalization of the teams (33.8%). On the contrary, the most relevant factor for them is the implication of the institution’s leaders (52.3%). This contrasts with the above-mentioned parameter of involving the institution in the communication process (41.5%).

That given, it is hardly surprising that one of the main conclusions of this report goes as follows:

“The reality of some communication managers seems to be very focused on fostering and preserving the public image of the political leader. The organism has projects and performances that can be attractive to citizens and that are not always well disseminated or handled by communication. In this regard, the function of communication should improve its degree of integration and interaction with the institution as a whole, and not only with its governing bodies. Some consider that the evolution could be symbolized with the complement of the current profile or a dedication with a “political” nature with a complementary profile or a greater attention to “institutional” communication. Furthermore, the feeling of “temporariness” exposed by many of the interviewed communication managers, does not help them to face new challenges with a “less

political” scope and more focused on strengthening or developing the institution”. (DirCom, 2007: 82)

2. Methods

Regarding the selection of analysis units in our sample, it is important to clarify that *Twitter* was selected as the social network that best represents the institutional practices in the digital domain, since it is the most established of them [5].

Concerning the sample, we will choose representatives from all the territorial levels in which the Spanish state is distributed: the accounts of the central, regional, provincial and local administrations. For this purpose, we will select 10 units of each type until reaching a total of 40 so that the results of the study can be significant and representative, without having an over-representation of some levels with respect to the others.

With regard to the criteria, for both the central and regional administration (we have opted for the Galician Administration due to proximity reasons) we will follow the current order of precedences in which the configuration and structuring of both governments is stated [6]. For the provincial and local cases we have taken demographic reasons as benchmarks, being the province and the provincial capital the basic unit, respectively. In order to obtain a real representation, we will combine the ten most populated provinces with those ten provincial capitals with the lowest number of inhabitants. For this purpose, we will use data from INE 2015 and the territorial structure as a source, especially as regards the existence or not of county councils.

Table 3. Units of analysis in this research

Ministry of (N1)	Regional Ministry of (N2)	County Council of (N3)	City Council of (N4)
Foreign Affairs @MAECgob	Pres., PPAA and Just. @XuntaVice	Barcelona @diba	Teruel @PrensaAyTeruel
Justice @justiciagob	Treasury [7]	Valencia @dipvalencia	Soria @Ayto_Soria
Defence @Defensagob	Env., Sp. Planning	Sevilla @Dipusevi	Huesca @aytohuesca
Economy and Compet.[8]	Infrastr. and Housing	Alicante @dipuAlicante	Segovia @segovia_es

Home Affairs @interiorgob	Econ., Employ. and Indus.	Málaga @diputacionMLG	Cuenca @aytocuenca
Public Works @fomentogob	Cult., Educ. and M.C.	Cádiz @diputacioncadiz	Mérida @ayto_merida
Education and Culture @educaciongob	Sanitary Service	Vizcaya [9]	Ávila @Ayto_Avila
Labour and Social Af. @empleogob	Social Policies	A Coruña @Dipucoruna	Zamora @AytoZamora
Industry and Energy @minindustriagob	Rural Affairs	@minindustriagob @DPZaragoza	Ciudad Real @AYTO_CIUADR EAL
Agric., Fisheries and Food @magramagob	Sea	Pontevedra @depo_es	Palencia [10]

Source: Prepared by the authors.

As shown in Table 3, we have combined an “intra-institutional” with an “inter-institutional” analysis. In levels 1 and 2 i.e. state and regional the units have been selected within an administration, whereas in levels 3 and 4 i.e. provincial and regional the accounts belong to different entities.

The research technique used for this study was the analysis of content, since it is the most suitable for addressing the research questions. We have applied this method to review those publications gathered under the tab “*Tweets & replies*” in each account. This will help us to determine whether there is any interaction with the users, clear manifestation of a public-oriented service.

Finally, the analysis has been performed manually and in a non-automated way. In order to obtain as faithful a reflection as possible of an average citizen’s use experience, every institution has been addressed individually through their *Twitter* account.

For this purpose we have developed research cards with various items in which we have collected relevant features both with the most “static” aspects (name of the account, profile picture or bio

data...) and those contents published during the date of collection of the 280 analysis units compiled in our non-random sample.

Although the number of taken units may seem insufficient, we consider that the real value of this research relies on its capability of being an initial approach that can serve as a starting point for future researchers seeking to discern the political-partisan use from the public-institutional use on *Twitter*. Furthermore, this figure is conditioned by the configuration of the Spanish territorial structure and to avoid an overrepresentation of the units N3 and N4, since these are more county councils and city councils than departments in the central (N1) and regional governments (N2).

3. Analysis of results

The first result is related with the level of presence of the different administrations on *Twitter* detected at the four levels of this research. In this sense, 90% of the central, provincial and local administrations have been checked, in contrast to 10% of the regional. This highlights a clearly unsymmetrical trend owing to the correspondent territorial scope in our sample universe.

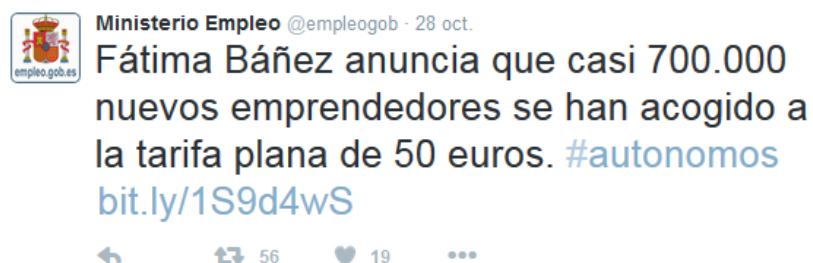
In the following section we present a Decalogue of trends we have detected in our analysis units. They reveal how the interests of the political party governing the institution at issue, leaving aside the orientation of public service that must prevail in these contents.

3.1. Framing of the action

One of the most evident possibilities of an institution for its political use lies in the “framing” or “approach” the action of the administration is provided. This is reflected in the subject who performs these activities. Therefore, it is no coincidence that a self-interested confusion between the real subject (the administration charged to public funds) and the discursive subject (the political representing the institution who performs such action) is sought.

This self-interested use is clearly perceptible on the *Twitter* account of the Ministry of Employment and Social Security, where 90% of the spread contents included the name of the Minister (Fátima Báñez), even if the nature of the data is institutional, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Political Framing in the account of the Ministry of Employment.



Source: @Empleogob (screenshot taken on the 11/02/15)

In fact, as a result of this confusion, the institutional account of the Ministry of Vice-presidency of Galicia covers activities with a clearly personal nature about its political representative, both from

the point of view of the substance and from the way they are transmitted. This is portrayed in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Political Framing in the account of the Vice-presidency of the Government of Galicia.



Source: @XuntaVice (screenshot taken on the 11/02/15)

3.2. Protests or claims to administrations with other political colour

The second clear political use on the institutions' *Twitter* accounts arises as a consequence of claims or protests to administrations with other political colour, either on its own initiative or by re-distributing contents created by other users of this social network. In this sense, Figure 3 depicts how the County Council of Pontevedra (governed by the PSOE) shows the opinion of a Socialist MEP, Isaura Abelairas, about the "cuts" of other administration (the Government of Galicia, with a PP government) in the area of a very sensitive matter, as it is gender-based violence. Therefore, the institutional *Twitter* account is offering a partisan particular view about an issue that, even though it is in the public interest, neither offers guarantee of being impartial nor is it framed within the orbit of the institution action of the City Council of Pontevedra. On the contrary, it is more focused on the political profile, without denoting the role of the entity that spreads this opinion.

Figure 3. Use of the institutional *Twitter* account to protest against the action of an administration controlled by other party.



Source: @Depo_es (screenshot taken on the 11/02/15)

3.3. Clear political use of an institutional *Twitter* account

Thirdly, we have detected there have been clear political uses completely dissociated from the administration that spreads these contents. We are talking about the following *tweet* by the County Council of Pontevedra (Figure 4), which retweets a piece of news about the positioning of this provincial administration “against the macho politics by men and woman in the PP”.

Figure 4. Use of a *Twitter* institutional account to criticize the main opposition party.



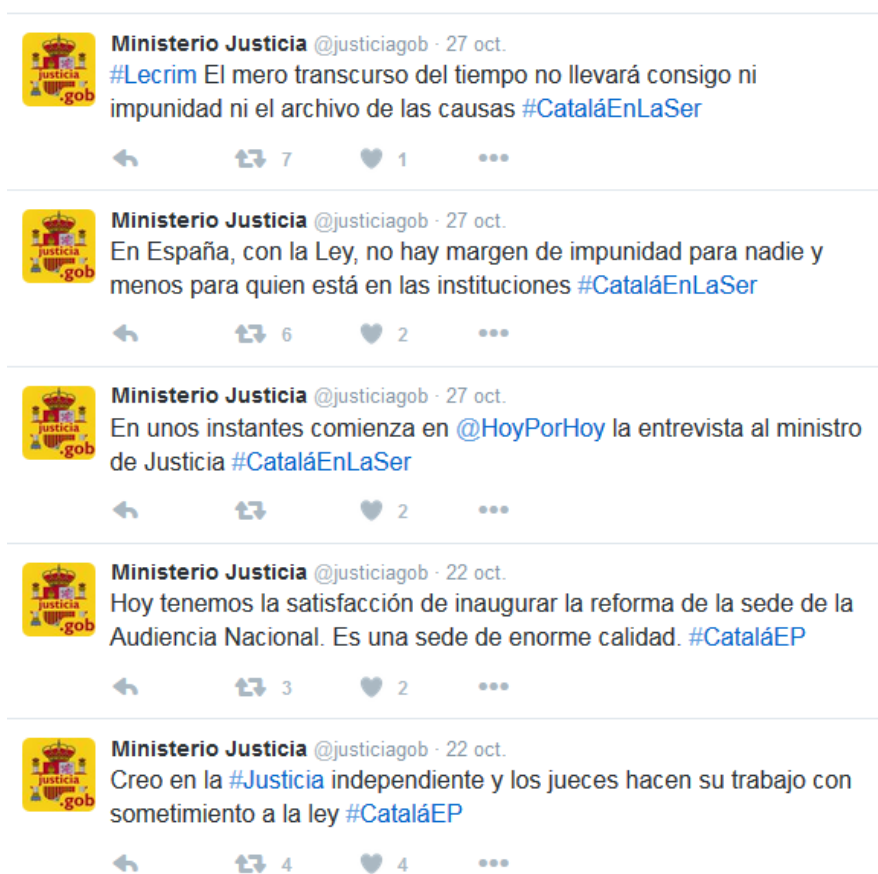
Source: @depo_es (screenshot taken on the 11/02/15)

Therefore, even if the political positioning as an institution can be consider a clear mistake, the fact of sharing it on the *Twitter* account reinforces and amplifies the scale of this publication. This is the opposite of behaving as a public service, since it is an exclusively partisan claim.

3.4. *Twitter* solely to serve the Minister’s interviews

The Ministry of Justice is a unique case in our analysis, since this account merely shows activity to inform about the inerviews given by its leader. As a result, the only published *tweets* echo Rafael Catala’s statements in two different media, reinforcing the clear secondment of the contents with hashtags (#CataláEnLaSer and #CataláEP). Therefore, the political use of this channel (in theory institutional) is clear, since its level of activity is reduced to the interviews with the Minister. This is portrayed in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Ministry of Justice’s *Twitter* activity.



Source: @Justiciagob (screenshot taken on the 11/02/15)

As if this were not enough, only a couple of publications can be considered as relevant for the citizens (one *tweet* about the increase in the budget of the Ministry and other about the investment in the inauguration of the renovations at the National High Court Headquarters). The rest of them have a clear political nature or are irrelevant for their receivers, either because of their content (e.g.

redundancy about the independence of justice or prosecutors) or because they are incomplete due to the lack of context (“Archives Retrieval and Management Office will locate and manage the crime-related properties #CataláEnLaSer”).

3.5. The addition of non-casual lexical nuances

In other cases, the partisan use of the institution on *Twitter* is related with the addition of non-accidental lexical nuances in the contents spread through this social network.

This is the case of the Provincial Council of Valencia that in one of the analysed *tweets* adds an unnecessary epithet from the point of view of public interest (“new”) to reinforce the idea of a break with the previous government with other political party. This is clearly shown in Figure 6, which depicts an account that in its profile boast of being institutional, as attached on the right.

Figure 6. The “new” Provincial Council of Valencia



Source: @dipvalencia (screenshot taken on the 11/02/15)

3.6. Overrepresentation of the institution's agenda

Figure 7. Overrepresentation of the institutional agenda



Source: @MAECgob (screenshot taken on the 11/02/15)

Sixthly, we have detected that those *tweets* related to the agenda are prevalent, on many occasions without a clear orientation towards public service but more as a mere justification of the institutional action. Indeed, this information usually appears stripped of context, with the apparent intention of showing there is activity. However, they do not pay attention to the public's interests that are more concerned about the consequences these actions may bring that learning about the action per se.

Sometimes this agenda is presented on *Twitter* with a picture of the Minister. Therefore the objective seems to be the capitalization and profitability of all the actions included in the agenda. This states a trend of a clear association between these activities and the Minister in particular, as portrayed in Figure 7.

Other times, the misuse comes from the lack of explanation of the issues addressed or the implications these meetings and trade fairs have for them, since they are not in the interest of citizens. In this sense, the institution simply describes the action but they do not specify how this affects the main receivers of the message.

3.7. Search for politicians' visibility with institutional RT

There are other reprehensible uses when the symbolic flow of this institution is used for reinforcing and fostering the political figures of the entity's government by *retweeting* the contents these leaders share. It is about associating some actions to political representatives. The trend is to create an intentional confusion between both areas, since these institutional accounts have their own resources to spread these same messages avoiding such a personal and sometimes self-interested approach.

Figure 8. Retweet by the Provincial Council of Málaga of one of its president's tweets.



Source: @diputacionMLG (screenshot taken on the 11/02/15)

This is the case of the Provincial Council of Málaga, where the vehicle for promoting the Costa del Sol in a tourism fair is a *tweet* from the president of the institution. This is later retweeted by the institutional account (Figure 8) clearly aiming to link this action from the administration to the president of the entity. Obviously, it is not a question of forbidding this relationship between both accounts, but the administrations should pay attention not to foster undesirable associations from a democratic point of view.

Therefore, the following questions arise: Was it really necessary that the communicative resources, in form and substance, used to transmit these contents were exactly those? Or it is a result of a clear interest to link these actions to certain politicians?

3.8. Tweets with isolated presentist images of the politician

Eightly, there is a trend that can be considered as a hybrid between two of the above-mentioned (the first, i.e. the new political framing and the sixth, i.e. the overrepresentation of the agenda contents). This trend clearly deviates from the orientation towards public service that must characterise these institutional accounts. Indeed, this just disseminates the participation of the politician in events non-related with the Ministry and focused on the political representative.

Figure 9. Tweets with presentist and out-of-context images of the Minister.



Source: @empleogob (screenshot taken on the 11/02/15)

Therefore, the single communicative goal that can be detected in cases such as Figure 9 is to associate the Ministry to the Minister, without gathering specific arguments or actions supporting her presence in this forum. In fact, the *tweets* are clearly stripped of context and cannot be considered of public interest at all, since they do not provide any relevant information to citizens, not even about the speech delivered on this occasion.

3.9. Logics of unidirectional communication

The ninth trend that allows us to place these institutional accounts in the orbit of political communication is related to the communicative logics of these profiles. They are exclusively focused on disseminating their contents and they do not pay attention to citizens' demands or the questions asked through this social network.

Therefore, it has been detected how the nature of the dialogue is left aside. This would grant these administrations on *Twitter* a greater legitimacy, as they would provide a real public service if they paid attention to citizens' demands.

In this sense, it must be highlighted that just 0.01% of the ministries' *tweets* are an answer to a user (a single *tweet* of a department of the central government). This percentage drops at level 2, i.e. regional administration, in which no *tweet* is an answer. The situation is not better in the provincial institutions, in which the percentage of *tweets* with answers is 0.03% (three *tweets* from Barcelona during a conversation with a user). The figure for the provincial institution is 0.02% (two interactions of the City Council of Cuentá with two different users).

In a nutshell, we have verified that the desired functions of dialogue and public service that one would expect from these institutional accounts does not occur. On the contrary, unidirectional models closer to persuasive goals and more typical of political communication are those prevailing.

Even their *Twitter* profiles, created by the managers of these institutional accounts, show this preference. Except for a single case where the County Council of Valencia made reference to "institutional communication", the other examples show terms typical of a unidirectional model: "all the information of the city instantly updated" (City Council of Ciudad Real), "breaking news" (County Council of Málaga), "press service" (City Council of Teruel" or "to inform you about the events and news of the city, to stay close to citizens" (City Council of Huesca).

3.10. *Tweets* of political communication between institutions

Finally, another dynamic we have detected to support the hypothesis that sometimes the institutions' *Twitter* communications are more oriented towards the political than to the citizenship dimension are those cases in which the disseminated contents are more related to the potential collaborations between administrations. The political approaches are prioritized for giving this support, without any actual impact on the citizens. Therefore, they are not transmitting an institutional content but presenting the political decision of offering this collaboration, as it is the case of the City Council of Alicante (Figure 10).

Furthermore, in other cases this orientation towards the public service is questioned by the type of the messages disseminated, such as condemning an attack. Even if this is a communicative action that makes full sense in the area of international relations, it is doubtful that from the point of view of the orientation towards the public service, the *Twitter* account of this entity is the relevant channel to spread this type of message. Similar situations occur in other cases such as a manifesto put together for the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists, among others.

Figure 10. Political tweets related to other administrations and not to the citizens.



Source: @dipuAlicante (screenshot taken on the 11/02/15)

4. Discussion

Despite the frequent confusion between the institutional and the political areas in the Spanish public context, the truth is that there is hardly any academic study on this subject. This undoubtedly limits the scope of our research since we cannot compare our data with other studies from a longitudinal and comparative point of view.

Indeed, the only reference we know is the one we presented some years ago (García Orosa & Vázquez Sande, 2012), but there are two important differences between the two studies: the analysis units were strictly from municipalities (N4) and online press rooms. In any case, in the section “Conclusions” we will establish a comparison between the results from 2012 and 2015, since it is the only study we can take as a basis to introduce a comparative perspective and check whether the trends are taking hold or they are divergent.

However, this does not mean that the scientific literature is not interested in institutional communication or, above all, the political communication. They are approaching them wholly independently, renouncing to this space for dialogue and tension between them both, due to the nature (private) of the agents occupying the institutions (public). Thus, this research will have been useful if it succeeds to encourage the scientific production on this subject with an undeniable ethical-legal and democratic background.

Finally, we can name two essential research lines arising from this study: with the application of cyberetnographic techniques, examining whether the receivers are aware of this partisan uses and their opinion on this matter. On the other hand, we consider to be relevant the fact that by participant observation we could conclude whether the emergence of these trends lies in the professionals’ practice or directly in political orders and, if so, what is the reaction of the institution’s communicators.

5. Conclusions

The intra- and inter-institutional analysis of tens of institutional *Twitter* accounts of the administrations at four levels (state, regional, provincial and local) has placed us in a scenario that reinforces, three years later and through a new channel or media (a social network), the trends of partisan uses we already detected back in 2012 in the online press rooms of the Spanish City Councils (García Orosa & Vázquez Sande, 2012). Therefore, those trends we highlighted back them as the thematic focuses with information that prioritise the political actor above the own event have

been perpetuated, the negative opinions about other administration regarding other subjects in which the entity does not have competence, or the institution as a loudspeaker for the claims to other administration governed by other political colour.

To this lines of action already discussed we add now some new ones, such us using *Twitter* exclusively for disseminating the media interviews of a minister; introducing self-interested or irrelevant nuances among the 140 characters of a *tweet*; overrepresenting the events in the agenda instead of offering information oriented towards public service, providing visibility to determined politicians of the government by *retweeting* this information from the institutional account; or publishing messages whose content is more focused on other administrations than on citizens. To sum up, the unidirectional persuasive logics of communication, closer to political than to institutional communication are those that prevail.

Indeed, as proved by numerous studies (Criado & Rojas, 2015), the management of social network in the institutions frequently rests in the communication cabinet of the entity, more focused on political projection than on public service (Dircom, 2007). In conclusion, we can state that there is a translation of those bad praxis detected in other areas (the relationship with the media or the online press rooms) to the social media by these same actors.

Finally, it is necessary to highlight the urgency of making the institutions managers (in the communication area and above all in the political one) abandon their paternalistic vision of the public administration, so that the entities they manage will be able to combine participation and transparency dynamics. They should engage and involve the citizens as real interlocutors and an essential component for decision-making. Only in this way public management and institutional action can be re-legitimised in a context of great disaffection and disapproval. And, obviously, the political and partisan use of the institutional resources will not help on this path.

6. Notes

1 First of all, it should be clarified that in this research we will use the term “institutional communication” to refer to the communication emanating from public administrations, despite the wide variety of proposals and contexts that can be framed within this conceptual umbrella. As stated by Caro (2012) this is sometimes a result of the vagueness of the limits of this notion.

2 In Cancelo & Gadea (2013) the relationship between these two concepts has been proved by the increase of public insecurity in situations of social crisis owing to the lack of institutional communication. This fosters an increase in the use of the Internet against the silence of the administrations of the Mexican cities of Monterrey, Ciudad Victoria and Xalapa. Furthermore, one of the key points revealed in this research is that public institutions are the least legitimate vehicle or source to emit and disseminate messages when a risk is identified. This task should be performed by media, friends or family (Cancelo & Gadea, 2013: 27). The authors concluded that “proactive demand gets a silence of news as institutional response. Therefore, these results in the news attention being focus in traditional media as transmitters of information” (Cancelo y Gadea, 2013: 29).

3 This refers on the one hand to article 18.1., of the Law 7/1985 Regulation of the Basis of Local Regimes, which establishes the right of “being informed, upon its reasoned request, and address requests to the municipal administration regarding all the municipal files and documentation, in accordance with the provisions of the article 105 of the Constitution”; and on the other hand to article 6 point 1 of the Law 11/2007 regarding citizens’ electronic access to public services, in which recognizes “the citizens’ right to interact with public administrations using electronic media for the exercise of the rights provided in the article 35 of the Law 30/1992 about the juridical regime of Public Administration and the common administrative procedures, as well as to obtain information, present consultations and claims, make requests, express consent, state claims, make payments, carry out financial transactions and apply against resolutions and administrative acts.” It is worth indicating that in the article 35 of the Law 30/1992 the following rights are addressed: “**a)** To be informed, at all times, about the stage of proceedings which are of interest to the party in question, and to obtain copies of the documents pertaining hereto.; **b)** To identify the authorities and the staff at the Public Administration service who are in charge of dealing with the proceedings; **c)** To obtain a certified copy of the documents that are presented, which are provided together with the originals which are returned unless such originals are to be used in the proceedings; **d)** To use the official languages of the Autonomous Community, in accordance with the provisions established in this Law and the rest of the Legal System; **e)** To lodge pleadings and submit documents at any stage of the proceedings before the hearing, which must be considered by the competent authority when writing the motion for a resolution; **f)** Not have to present documents which are not actually stipulated in the regulations for the procedure in which they are participating, or which are already in the hands of the acting Administration; **h)** To access Public Administration registers and archives pursuant to the terms established in the Constitution or in other Laws; **i)** To be treated with respect and deference by the authorities and civil servants, who should make it easier for citizens to exercise their rights and fulfil their obligations; **j)** To hold the Public Administrations and the service staff accountable, whenever it is legally fitting; **k)** Any other right that is acknowledged by the Constitution and Law”.

4 **Table 2. Communication in the first sector vs. second sector**

	FIRST SECTOR (INSTITUTION)	SECOND SECTOR (PARTY)
SENDER	Public <u>administration</u> (public sector, non-profit)	Company, organization (private sector, profit-oriented)
MESSAGE	Function: inform Ultimate aim: information of public interest	Function: persuade Ultimate aim: profit
RECIPIENT	Administered	Consumer

Source: García Orosa & Vázquez Sande (2013:315-317).

5 Criado & Rojas (2015:31) proved that in those Spanish city councils with more than 50,000 inhabitants *Twitter* is being homogeneously used (99.2% of them), closely followed by *Facebook* (96.7%) and then *Youtube* (79.3%).

6 In the case of the central administration

https://www.protocolo.org/ceremonial/presidencias_y_precedencias/orden_de_precedencia_de_los_ministerios.html and in the case of the regional

administration http://www.xunta.es/dog/Publicados/2015/20151005/AnuncioC3B0-041015-1_es.html

7 According to the results showed by *Twitter* search engine there are no other Regional Ministry with *Twitter* accounts. This contrasts with the existence of at least two accounts for the leaders of the areas of Social Policies and Environment and Space Planning, as well as various entities linked to those Regional Ministries without presence in this social network (Galician Crafts, Energy Institute of Galicia or Counselling of school libraries...)

8 It does not have presence in *Twitter* except for an account that seems official but has been outdated since 4th July 2014 and parody account with a single *tweet* from 2012, thus both excluded. This contrasts with the fact that other public entities ascribed to this Ministry, such as CIEMAT, do have an account.

9 There is no *Twitter* account linked to this County Council.

10 Despite some entities from this City Council, such as the Local Development Agency are in *Twitter*, the City council has not an own account.

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