

# Social media audience of televised debates in the general elections of April 2019

Audiencia en redes sociales de los debates televisados en las elecciones generales de abril de 2019

**Julia Fontenla-Pedreira.** Vigo University. Spain.

[julia.fontenla.pedreira@uvigo.es](mailto:julia.fontenla.pedreira@uvigo.es)

[CV] 

**José Rúas-Araújo.** Vigo University. Spain.

[joseruas@uvigo.es](mailto:joseruas@uvigo.es)

[CV]  

**Erica Conde-Vázquez.** Vigo University. Spain.

[erikaconde@uvigo.es](mailto:erikaconde@uvigo.es)

[CV] 

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** The impact of the two debates for the Spanish national elections in April 2019 has been analyzed. They were broadcasted on *RTVE* and *Atresmedia* on April 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> respectively.

**Methods:** A telephone survey was conducted in Madrid, Barcelona, A Coruña and Vigo. Out of 8000 calls, 734 complete answers about the debates broadcasted on those dates were obtained.

**Results:** 52% of the respondents have watched one debate and from them 28% have consulted further information. From this last group, 21% have used social networks, but fewer than half have actively participated (43.2%). **Discussion and conclusions:** There is an age and gender gap in the consumption of information about the televised debates through social networks as well as in their use of each of them. Internet users prefer these networks to obtain information but they do not participate and do not give any credibility to the data offered during the debates. The topics drawing more interest are the same for the users of social networks and those of traditional media.

**KEYWORDS:** political communication; general elections; electoral debates; agenda setting; social media.

## RESUMEN

**Introducción:** Se analiza el impacto en medios tradicionales y nuevos medios de los dos debates electorales televisados celebrados con motivo de las últimas elecciones generales de España de abril de 2019, en *RTVE* y *Atresmedia*, los días 22 y 23 de abril, respectivamente. **Metodología:** Se realizó una encuesta telefónica, con más de 8.000 llamadas, en las ciudades de Madrid, Barcelona, A Coruña y Vigo, de las que se obtuvieron 734 respuestas completas con un margen de error sobre el total de la muestra inferior al 4%. **Resultados:** Un 52% de los encuestados visualizó alguno de los debates, de los que casi un 28% consulta información adicional. De este conjunto, un 21% lo hizo a través de redes sociales, aunque la participación activa se situó en menos de la mitad (43,2%). **Discusión y conclusiones:** Existe una brecha de edad y género en el consumo de información sobre los debates televisados a través de redes sociales. Los internautas prefieren estas redes para informarse pero no participan activamente ni otorgan credibilidad a los datos ofrecidos en ellos. Los temas que suscitan mayor interés entre los usuarios de redes coinciden con los de los medios tradicionales.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** comunicación política; elecciones generales; debates electorales; agenda setting; redes sociales.

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Translation by **Carlos Javier Rivas Quintero** (University of the Andes, Mérida, Venezuela).

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Televised debates: from television to social networks

Televised electoral debates have an informative interest and are an effective way for the public to gain knowledge (Gallego and Bernárdez, 2017). For the audience, they are one of the most important events during the whole electoral process, reaching historical ratings on television (Webster, Phalen and Lichty, 2014; Berrocal, 2005; Huertas, 2002), characteristic of these events that are also considered, occasionally, as historical (Télez, Muñiz and Rodríguez, 2010).

The Internet and social media have triggered an information consumption metamorphosis, giving way to the labeled “web society” (Castells, 2009), characterized by the extensive consumption of a huge amount of information in a hyperconnected world, causing the collapse of the monopoly of power that traditional media and elite had when building social and political reality (McNair, 2006), and facilitating real time monitoring of audiences who keep up with a public opinion under a continuous change process (Anstead and O’Loughlin, 2015).

New technological and audiovisual platforms contribute to the redefining of the classic role of traditional media in the shaping of public opinion (Lippmann, 1922), promoting a convergence (Jenkins, 2008) and hybridization of the media (Chadwick, 2013), in which new mediums coexist with traditional media, generating a multiscreen consumption format that allows users to share their televisual experience (Esteinou, 2017) through the forming of virtual communities (Marzal and Zallo, 2016), also permitting the possibility of sparking a debate and conversation in real time.

From this perspective, we are in the face of a new televisual model that links with both the participative theories of the audience (Livingstone, 2013; Carpentier, 2011) and the theories of the social function of television as a service of public and general interest, as well as the defense of an active political media that empowers the relation between the addresser and addressee, and that benefits from new digital resources (Tremblay, 2016; Trappel, 2016; Horowitz, 2015). These multiscreen consumption parallel realities, between social and traditional audiences, have created the concept of “social audience”, by which the number of individuals that do any mention about a televised content on a specific social network is counted (Quintas and González, 2014).

There are several researches that analyze the activity on social media during the televised electoral debates, among which the works of López-García (2016), Vergeer and Franses (2016), Trilling (2015) and, D'heer and Verdegem (2015) stand out. Certainly, one of the most mentioned theories in literature about political debate and digital social media is the Second Screens Theory (Horning, 2017; De Zúñiga, García-Perdomo and McGregor, 2015), that analyzes the factors that predict the choosing and viewing of information through the use, exclusive or combined, of different devices, from television to smartphones, tablets or laptops.

Vaccari, Chadwick and O’Loughlin (2015) refer to double screen or second screen as the group of practices that involves the integration between live broadcasting mediums and social media, that is, the structuring between the reception of traditional media content and the interaction generated from said contents. However, there is not a broad consensus either when referring to this phenomenon, in the light of an increasing variety of formats and mediums, which leads to the consideration of the multiscreen term.

In any case, this phenomenon has been studied during the past recent years, mainly focused on events of high political participation, as the case of televised electoral debates (Gil de Zúñiga and Liu, 2017).

Additionally, the increasing popularity of mobile phones and their applications has generated a line of research on how mobile communication contributes towards democratic commitment (Campbell y Kwak, 2011; Kim, Chen and Wang, 2016) to their use as second screens and exclusive screens.

## **1.2. The seduction of second screens: liking, sharing or something more**

The underlying issue is whether social media contribute to “widen” the political communication public space –and in the case under analysis, whether they contribute to citizen debate about electoral debates- giving more prominence to the participation of citizens (Wolton, 2017) or, on the contrary, they act as an echo chamber of offline mediums (López-Meri, 2016).

Different considerations and levels fall within this range, from the simple action of watching and reading to clicking on the “like” icon, being the last one the preferred form of interaction with political parties by the public, since it requires less effort and commitment from users (Martínez-Rolán, 2018). The so-called “social icons” reflect, according to some authors, short emotional (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013) and weak (Guy *et al.*, 2016) states and a low cost commitment and involvement- commenting or responding and sharing a post- (Barger and Labrecque, 2013) or even finding, listening and mobilizing a community regarding an issue (Ballesteros-Herencia, 2019)

Certainly, there are measuring tools to prove the generated interactions through social media that lead to conversation, following some of the basic dialogic principles (useful information, generation

of repeated visits and maintaining the dialogic loop), established by Kent and Taylor (1998) and adapted by Ribalko and Seltzer (2010).

Similarly, there is also an academic debate regarding the political engagement definition (the amount of responses of users about the comments posted through social media) and participation, from the consideration of it as the interaction of an audience with digital content, and the basic purpose of measuring the commitment of citizens to an organization or party and, even, their emotional involvement, just as affirmed by Pedersen *et al.* (2014).

Also, as stated by González (2013), interactions on a social network are not only the times contents are shared on the profile of a user, but also the amount of times these contents are commented, “liked” or shared by other people. Therefore, commenting and sharing a message implies a more active participation that reveals an agreement to what the original post expresses and, also, contributes to a greater dissemination (Valerio *et al.*, 2015).

Trying to find out the level of involvement and political behavior of users through the use of second screens is, precisely, one of the objectives of the second evaluations analysis, through the Orientation-Stimuli-Reasoning-Orientation-Response (OSROR) model, considered to be essential to assess not only the seeking information process, but also the processing, reasoning, orientation and possible effects of it (Hsuan-Tin, 2019) and, ultimately, their level of active contribution to the conversation.

Once discarded the informational noise generated by social media contamination (bots, trolls, etc.) and practices like “clicktivism” (Shulman, 2009), that seeks to increase the messages impact in an induced manner, we encountered actions that can go from simple “slacktivism” or in room/slack activism (Christensen, 2011), to the use of new technologies as tools to channel social unrest and civic protests that reveal the exercise of power of society through the use of social media (Caldevilla, Rodríguez and Barrientos, 2019).

In fact, just as pointed out by Dader and Campos (2017), it turns out to be quite typical the use of volunteers or professionals in political communication during electoral campaigns, to disseminate information massively while electoral debates and other prominent events of the political parties are being held, frequently through the intensive use of hashtags as a political brand strategy (Mas and Guerrero, 2019).

All of this considering the users having a tendency to prefer homophily, that is, to bond with similar others, with no possibilities of opening up to what they consider to be different (McPherson, Smith and Cook, 2001), through the setting of information bubbles (Davies, 2018) and echo chambers (Del Vicario *et al.*, 2018), that causes a strong biasing of opinions.

Ultimately, the discussion on the possibilities of conversation and political debate on social media moves among who support that social networks add noise and distraction –even causing a shorter memory and comprehension, undermining the capacity of the audience to deliberate and discuss (Gorkovenko and Taylor, 2019) - and who point out that it is a complement and a voluntary and intentional second assessment, that contributes to expanding the possibilities of persuasion and drawing attention on electoral campaigns, therefore increasing cognitive and behavioral commitment (Chadwick, O’Loughlin and Vaccari, 2017).

### 1.3. Thematic agenda

Interaction between media and the citizenry has been traditionally understood as a process by which the former ones manage to position and target some topics of their agenda among the priorities of the second ones, just as established in the agenda-setting theory (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). From this theory, one wonders whether, in a similar way, the problems of citizens can become topics of interest to media and political figures.

The emphasis that media place on topics during the coverage of an electoral campaign influences on the selection, prioritization, focus and framing of them, according to the priming (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987) and framing (Reese, Gandy and Grant, 2001) theories.

In the same way, electoral debates are a process that allows us to observe which are the topics in the agendas and the campaign topics of the media, politicians and citizens, as well as the possible existence of a thematic intersection and correlation.

The analysis of debates permits us to address both the media and the political agenda concurrently, and analyze the possible monitoring and impact of both by citizens, bearing in mind the role of press, first, in the prioritization and setting of topics during the pre-campaign stage and, then, the underscoring of them during campaign by television (López-López, Puentes-Rivera and Rúas-Araújo, 2017).

In this sense, it is especially relevant to know how citizens present different agendas or framings and, specifically, for the matter under analysis, if the topics of interest to citizens, who followed the debates through traditional media (printed press, radio and television), coincide with the topics deemed as a priority by users on social media.

Precisely, some of the evidence on the existence of a clear assembling between the media and political agendas when structuring the topics of discussion on televised debates (Rúas-Araújo and Mazaira-Castro, 2019) spur the monitoring and analysis of the topics and issues of interest to users on social media, to prove the possible similarities or differences between traditional and new audiences.

## 2. Methods

This research was carried out based on the following objectives:

- O1: To identify the different audiences that use social media to obtain or expand information regarding the televised debates on April 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> of 2019.
- O2: To observe and compare the issues that aroused the greatest interest among audiences of new and traditional mediums.
- O3: To detect if web surfers participated through comments or messages shared, as well as the moment when they did so; before, during or after the televised debate was held.
- O4: To know the amount of trust users of social media put in the data provided by the candidates on the televised debates.

To this end, we conducted a survey to know which the consumption patterns on social media were during the televised electoral debates broadcasted by *RTVE* and *Atresmedia* group during the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> of April respectively, regarding the general elections of April 2019.

To carry out this research we used a quantitative methodology based on the conduction of a telephone survey to a simple random sample of the general population in the selected area. This telephone survey consisted of 22 questions that were asked and processed as of the day after the second debate (April 24<sup>th</sup>).

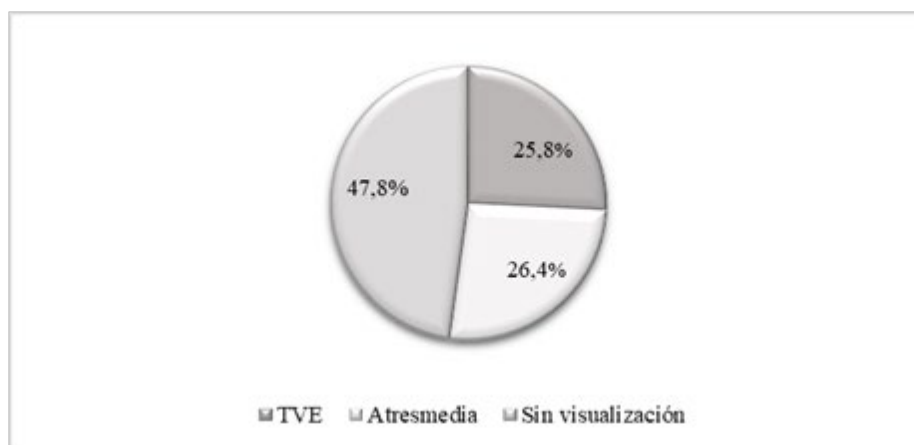
8.000 phone calls were conducted in the city regions of Madrid, A Coruña and Vigo, covering a population of 6.204.000 people, out of which 734 complete answers were obtained with a margin of error lower than 4%.

After collecting the answers of the respondents, the data elicited from the sample was analyzed with the aim of establishing a tendency of the televised electoral debates impact through traditional and new mediums, in addition to describing the profile of these audiences.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Who has watched the electoral debates

52.2% of the respondents watched one of the two debates broadcasted on RTVE and Atresmedia group (April 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>), obtaining similar results for both channels.



**Graphic 1.** *Debate Viewing.*  
**Source:** Authors' own creation.

Out of the group of people who followed the first debate (RTVE, 25.8%) 24.9% were from Madrid, 23.9% from Barcelona, 26.8% from A Coruña and from Vigo 28.3%. As for sex, 28.5% were men and 23.3% were women, and by age, 21.1% were under the age of 35, 29.3% were from 35 to 55 and 26.8% were older than 55.

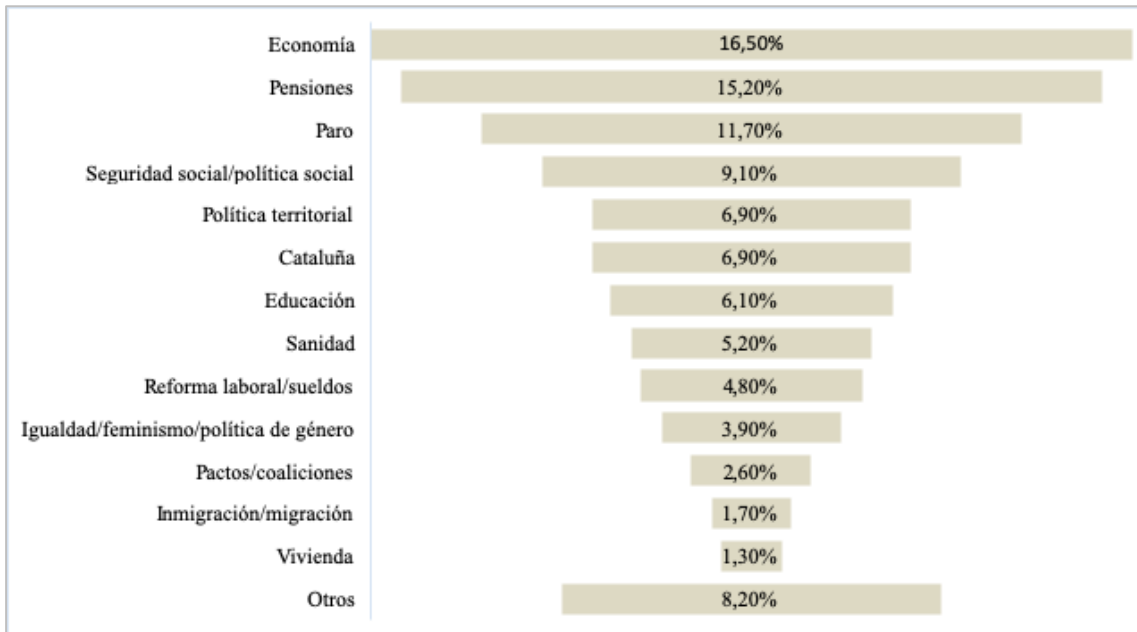
From the data elicited from the second broadcasted debate on Atresmedia group, 26.6% belonged to Madrid, 25.7% to Barcelona, 28.9% to A Coruña and 25.3% to Vigo. As for sex, 29.75% of the public were male and 23.3% were female; by age, 29.7% were from the under the age of 35 group, 29.3 % from 35 to 55 and 27.9% older than 55.

#### 3.2. What topics aroused interest the most

As for topics, economy and pensions were the topics that aroused the greatest interest to respondents (from 15% to 16%), followed on a third level of relevance by the strike (almost 12%), as well as



social policies (9%). Regarding territorial policy, the independence of Cataluña or topics of social nature like immigration or gender violence, the number of respondents who placed greatest emphasis to these topics drops considerably.

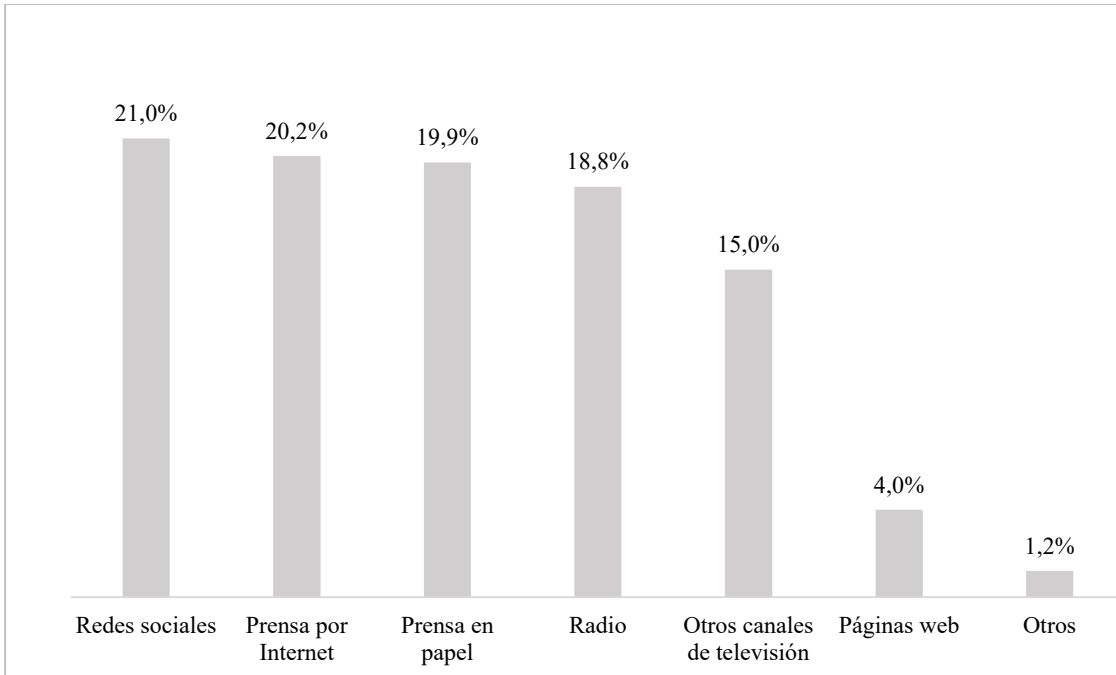


**Graphic 2.** *Interest of the audiences in the topics of the televised debate.*

**Source:** Authors' own creation.

### 3.3. Who seeks information about televised debates in other media

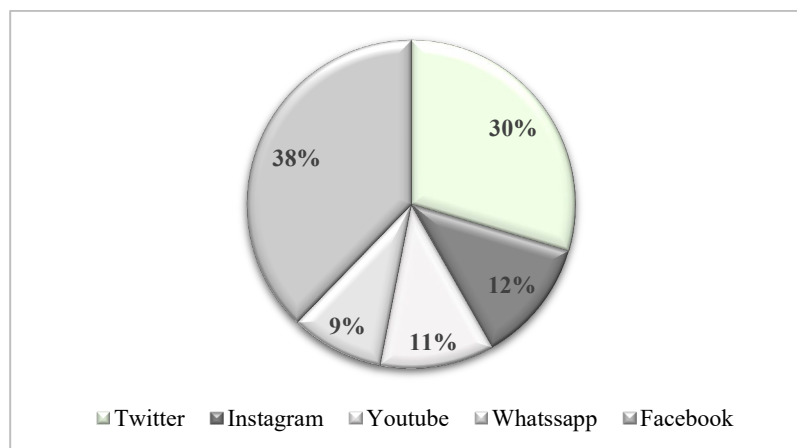
From the people who watched both televised debates, only 27.8% obtained further information about them through other mediums (printed press/the Internet, radio, social networks or other websites) being mostly those in the 35 to 55 age group who performed this research. As means for inquiring information, the different social media took the lead with 21%, followed by Internet digital press and printed press.



**Graphic 3.** *Further information inquiry about the televised debates.*  
**Source:** Authors' own creation.

### 3.3.1. Televised debates on social networks

From the group of people who claimed to inquire into one of the two televised debates on April 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> through social media, Facebook stood as the favorite social media as a means of consultation, followed by Twitter with a significant difference from other social networks (Instagram, WhatsApp and YouTube) that played a secondary role and only got 32% of audience combined, something that contrasts to the current growing tendency of these websites.



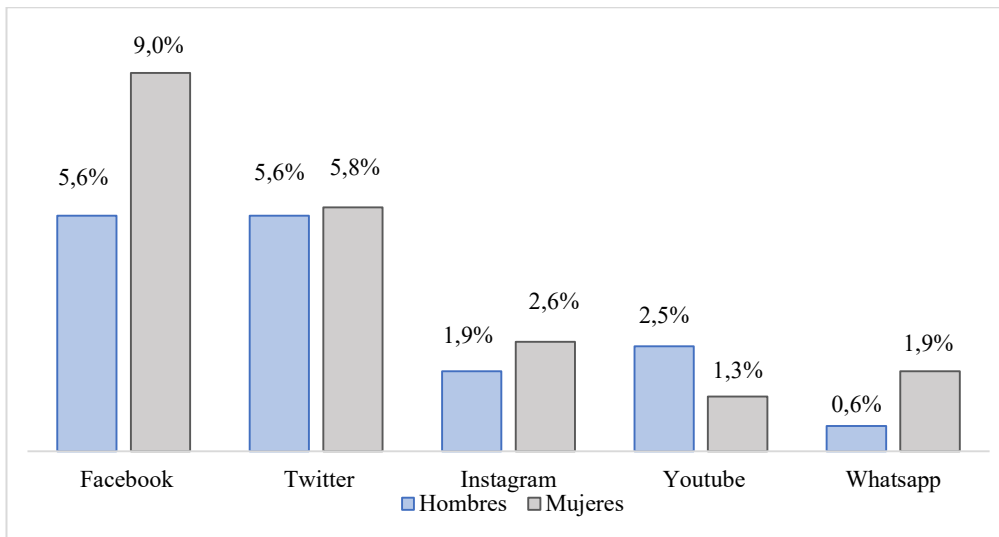
**Graphic 4.** *Other means of consultation.*  
**Source:** Authors' own creation.

As for the profile of the people who used social networks as means to inquire into the televised debates, the following results were obtained based on socio-demographic variables: women paid more attention than men (almost 21% of female audience against 16% male), being Facebook and



Twitter the sites that drew greater interest from web surfers (9% and 5.6% for Facebook and 5.8% and 5.6% for Twitter)

Regarding the age, people under the age of 35 were the ones who used them as means of information the most (45%), with Twitter having more prominence (15%) followed by Facebook (11.7%). Social networks played a secondary role among users older than 35 years old since they preferred other mediums such as printed press and the Internet, gathering around 16% of the attention without any website distinction.

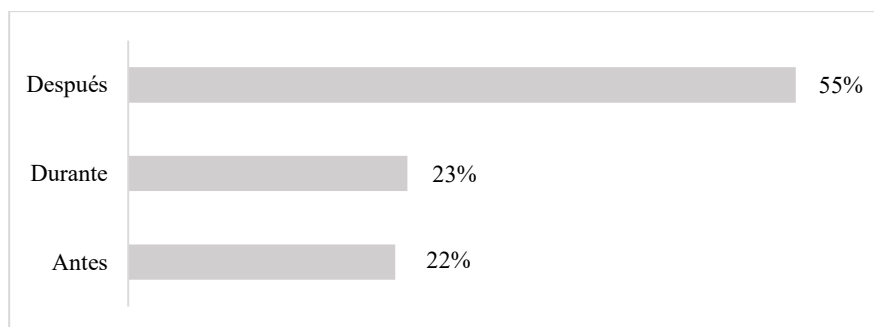


**Graphic 5.** Use of social media regarding the electoral debates.

**Source:** Authors' own creation.

As for the participation of web surfers, only 43% of the respondents were part of the actively involved cluster, being formed by people in the 35 to 55 age group, without any distinction between men and women.

Regarding the participation/consulting frequency, over half of the people surveyed (55%) acknowledged having interacted with content related to both debates on social media, being the reactions very even, for before and while the debates were being held.

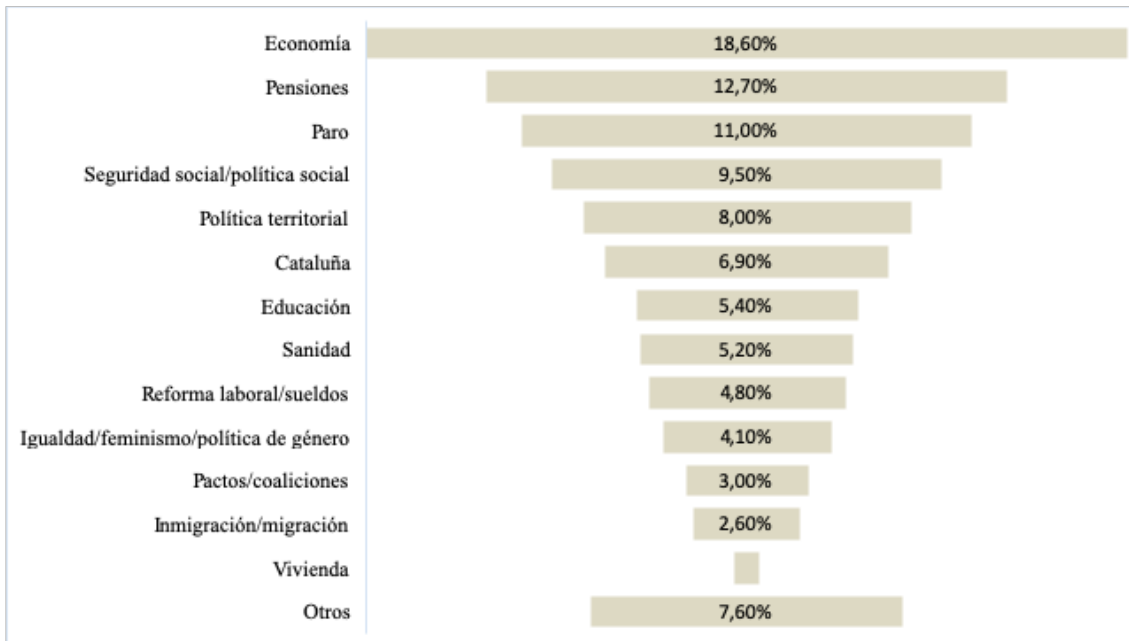


**Graphic 6.** Debate consultation.

**Source:** Authors' own creation.

Another purpose of this research is to observe if there were coincidences between the topics that interested the people on social media more in comparison to the traditional media audiences who

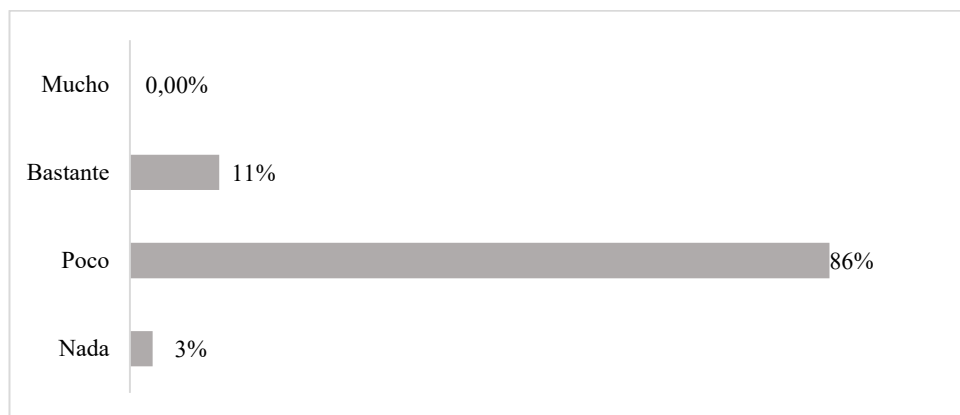
followed the debate. These results can be found on graphic two (economy, pensions and strike). As a general guideline, web surfers continued to have the same selection criteria as the case of traditional media users, but they did on a different level of importance: the topics regarding economic topics had 18.6% while pensions and strike dropped to 12.70% and 11%, respectively. The rest of the treated issues maintained the same ranking order in both cases and with similar figures.



**Graphic 7.** *Topics of interest on social media.*

**Source:** Authors' own creation.

On another note, social media audiences put little trust in the data and figures provided by the candidates during the debates (graphic 8).



**Graphic 8.** *Credibility of the data on social media.*

**Source:** Authors' own creation.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

The results of the conducted survey of this research showed that, referring to the first objective, in the consumption of televised debates through social media, an age and gender gap, in the way

information regarding said debates was consumed, were noticeable: women were more active than men, while young people lost touch with traditional media to get into what was happening around electoral debates, spawning new proactive profiles on the web.

On the other hand, Facebook and Twitter drew more interest from users to access information regarding the televised debates, despite these ones having experienced a setback in their growing pattern in comparison to Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp. Web surfers benefited from their main asset: information in real time from the very televised debate and in which active listening to other users (mainly on Twitter) made exchange of information possible.

Despite Instagram doubling the number of registered users at an accelerated rate, it did not fall within the preferences of users when getting informed about current issues, such as the televised debates. Since it is considered to be a social network where image is the priority in support of brands and, in addition, it does not allow generating web traffic on its timeline through posts and redirecting users to other profiles, whether they are the ones of the very network channels that broadcasted the debate or of the political candidates. This, however, is possible on Facebook and Twitter, this last website –normally open- also permits accessing posts of the so-called political “influencers”, people with some renowned reputation in this ambit, and generating conversational threats which builds the trust that users put in them.

As for WhatsApp, the low registered outcomes were derived from people still considering it as an instant messaging application among their inner circles and, therefore, of a personal and private nature, which is why access to content regarding the televised debate only revolved around to what these intimate circles shared within their own universe of contacts.

Regarding YouTube social network, even if it offers social features by which more information can be obtained regarding televised debates, especially after they have been held and broadcasted –it is a platform that acts as a repository of the networks to watch the whole debate- it did not manage to be positioned within the favorites of the audiences in the field under study, just to make moments or more anecdotic comments of the very debate go viral, like the phrase “Are you done lying? Now, it is my turn” from Albert Rivera to Pedro Sánchez, the books swapping between the two candidates or the scroll Albert Rivera used to explain in detail all the cases of Employment Regulation Record (ES: Expediente de Regulación de Empleo| ERE) in Andalusia to Pedro Sánchez.

As for the second objective (O2), both social and traditional media audiences showed their main concern towards issues of economic, strike and pension nature. Correlating the socio-demographic data of the social media users surveyed to their very own manifested interests regarding the debate, we can affirm that the group of young and middle age people were the ones who showed greater disaffection with the current economic outlook and the strengthening of the strike, although they placed even less importance and interest to issues directly connected to these, such as the legal reform or salaries.

As for the third objective (O3), differences between users with passive participation (those who feed off information, or were plainly seeking related content, but never generating them) and people who showed active participation, meaning they shared and commented information, were clearly noticeable. Therefore, we are facing linear participation, with scarce feedback, in which “watching” rather than commenting, sharing or “liking” prevails, basically because these actions are considered to be a way of showing the political stance of the person to close audiences.

Regarding the last research objective (O4), aiming to know the level of trust social media users put in the data provided by the candidates during the televised debates, the figures brought forward the

absolute distrust that audiences have of the party leaders, as well as of the whole Spanish politics. On the other hand, neither the information provided on the televised electoral debates swayed over the voters nor was decisive when mobilizing electors to vote for one political force or the other at the ballot box. Additionally, the data provided during the televised debates did not necessarily linger in the memory of the audiences, while, on the contrary, a post that went viral on social media (whether it was a video, a meme or a tweet) tended to be remembered longer and influenced on swing votes.

In any case, apart from the measuring of audiences, the issue whether the second “screening” of information (derived from the use of second screens), influencing on political participation and the voting choice, aligned with what was expressed by the authors and researchers mentioned earlier, remains for discussion.

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## **AUTHORS:**

### **Julia Fontenla-Pedreira**

She has a degree in Journalism from Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, and Master in Language and Business Communication from Universidade de Vigo. Predoctoral researcher in IPT (Integral Professional Training) (FPI) linked to the I+D+R project (Retos) "DEBATv, Televised Electoral Debates in Spain: Models, Process, Diagnosis and Proposal (Ref. CSO2017-83159-R), financed by Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness (MINECO), Research State Agency (AEI) and the European Region Development Fund (ERDF) from the European Union (EU).

[julia.fontenla.pedreira@uvigo.es](mailto:julia.fontenla.pedreira@uvigo.es)

**Orcid ID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8770-4761>

### **José Rúas-Araújo**

He is a full professor of Electoral and Institutional Communication at the Social and Communication Sciences Faculty of Universidad de Vigo and head of the Advertising and Audiovisual Communication Department at the same institution. He is the leading researcher of "DEBATv, Televised Electoral Debates in Spain: Models, Process, Diagnosis and Proposal, (Ref. CSO2017-83159-R), I+D+R project (Retos) of the Science, Innovation and Universities Ministry. His lines of research are political communication and neurosciences applied to persuasive communication.



[joseruas@uvigo.es](mailto:joseruas@uvigo.es)

**Orcid ID:** <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1922-9644>

**Google Scholar:** <https://scholar.google.es/citations?user=DLiqzqkAAAAJ&hl=es>

**Erica Conde-Vázquez**

She is majored in Advertising and Public Relations from Universidade de Vigo, Master in Marketing, Consultancy and Political Communication. She is currently a doctoral candidate at Universidade de Vigo in the project of I+D+R project (Retos) “DEBATv, Televised Electoral Debates in Spain: Models, Process, Diagnosis and Proposal, (Ref. CSO2017-83159-R), financed by Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness] (MINECO), Research State Agency (AEI) and the European Region Development Fund (ERDF) from the European Union (EU).

[erikaconde@uvigo.es](mailto:erikaconde@uvigo.es)

**Orcid ID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4898>