

Research on political information and social media: Key points and challenges for the future/ Andreu Casero-Ripollés

1. Introduction

Social media have caused a great wave of changes in society and also in politics; a wave that has left in its wake a lot of research about the impact social media have had on political information. The objective of this article is to present a comprehensive panorama of the main transformations that social media have introduced in the production, distribution, and consumption of political information. At this end, an in-depth review of the previous literature was carried out, and the most significant findings are highlighted. Likewise, we also offer an approach to the pending challenges for research in this field that is characterized by its dynamism.

The consolidation of social media in political communication has placed technology at the center of academic debate. Although this is not the only factor behind the transformation of this field, its protagonism is inescapable.

The architecture and technical characteristics of social media open and close possibilities of reconfiguration of the processes of production, circulation, and consumption of political information. They create or spoil opportunities for the redistribution of power in the communicative scenario.

Digital platforms are changing political information, but they are not replacing journalism and conventional media. This produces a new hybrid environment in which the two logics, the one linked to digital media, on the one hand, and the one associated with the mainstream media system, on the other, sometimes coexist harmoniously, generating cooperation and synergies, and on other occasions collide causing conflicts and tensions. In any case, both overlap and interrelate constantly.

The new logic of network media orbits around concepts such as self-production, user-generated content, social connectivity, virality, incidental consumption, affective audiences, and datafication. Its introduction into the communication system is causing changes in the information cycle and in the role of journalism. Currently, media professionals are not the only ones managing that process, and the production and distribution of political information involves more actors and more media and platforms. Ordinary users, who are not part of the political or communicative elites, can intervene more actively and influence the information dynamics. In addition, a wide variety of media (blogs, social networks, instant messaging services, collaborative video portals, digital newspapers, etc.) contribute, together with television, radio and the press, to shape the information field. The boundaries between media tend to be diluted, enhancing interdependencies. Taken together, this new scenario provides a more fluid structure of opportunities. Therefore, Chadwick (2017) raises the need to replace the traditional concept of news cycle with political information cycle. Inside this cycle, production, diffusion, and consumption are subject to various changing processes, which are analyzed in the following sections.

2. Transformations in production

Social media expand the number and type of actors that interact and negotiate in the field of political communication. From a scenario marked, almost exclusively, by the relations between journalists and politicians, we are moving to a more open and decentralized panorama in which a greater number of actors participate in the exchanges that contribute to define the public sphere, thanks to digital platforms. This decisively affects the production of political information.

Any user can develop content autonomously. Thus, professionally created information coexists with content generated by users in an amateur way. In a century we have gone from a scenario marked by scarcity to one characterized by informative abundance, and even overload.

Abundance has great potential since it facilitates citizens to get information on political issues. It can even be an ally of the democratic project since it enables transparency and accountability on the centers of power, although, for this, it is necessary to activate processes of political monitoring. Social media allow citizens to promote and carry out these processes of scrutiny and public control over the power.

However, the abundance of information also generates instabilities, conflicts, and contradictions in the political scenario. Greater quantity is not necessarily equal to higher quality. This poses numerous challenges such as filtering, attributing relevance, and contextualizing political information. A key aspect connected to this has to do with the extension and facilitation of misinformation. The strong decentralization in the production and distribution of information provided by social media, together with the anonymity that favors the digital environment (difficulty of knowing who is behind the content), are factors that bring on this phenomenon. This means the emergence of fake news that, as has been shown in Brexit and in the victory of Donald Trump, can have important effects on the political and electoral dynamics and generate serious democratic consequences.

Social media production facilities have caused the content circulating through them to be manipulated to assemble, add, or remove information. This opens the way to reframing processes, reallocating meaning, or recontextualizing information that can alter its meaning. The creation of satirical memes by thousands of users from statements by a politician or aspects of current events, such as elections or a motion of censure, have become a common practice. This connects with the growth experienced in the digital environment by infotainment. On the one hand, the networks allow new intimate personalization strategies that show the intimacies of the life of politicians with the will to humanize their figure and achieve the support and attention of citizens through “likes” and followers. On the other, they allow the emergence of new communicative practices based on spectacularization or infosatire. A good example of this was the participation of Esquerra Republicana’s Congress deputy Gabriel Rufián, who submitted himself for two hours to questions on any topic of the users’ choice on the controversial Foro-Coches website in January 2017.

The production of political information in social media can also affect the process of setting the public agenda. Both political and social actors use these digital platforms to promote their issues and demands and try to place them at the center of public debate. In this sense, previous research has identified strategies such as the reversed agenda-setting, which in Spain has been highlighted in the a case of the Plataforma de afectados por la hipoteca (Platform of people affected by mortgages), or the two-way street mediatization of politics, such as the one carried out by Podemos, which gives politicians the ability to condition the media agenda. In both cases, the digital front is an indispensable element, although not exclusive, for the implementation of this type of dynamics.

Not all citizens benefit equally from these possibilities when it comes to producing content. The education level and the frequency of use of these platforms are factors that condition the creation of political information in the digital environment. This generates digital inequalities that have real democratic costs.

Previous research shows that the main use that political actors give to social media is the dissemination of information, especially of their own production, taking advantage of the self-production advantages offered by digital platforms. This implies that the interactive possibilities are relegated to the background. Politicians preeminently seek to connect with citizens directly by

resorting to self-presentation and self-expression. In this framework, the construction of its image has gained a new impetus. Social media allow emotional connection with users and generate authenticity around a political leader, so that he is perceived as reliable, genuine, and close. To this objective is oriented a large part of the content production of politicians. More than offering information by itself, the main purpose is self-promotion. The use of Instagram is revealing in this sense.

One of the main promises that accompanied the arrival of social media was their potential to establish interactions between the actors of political communication, enabling the establishment of a dialogue between them. This faculty was attributed positive effects on democracy as the reduction of disaffection or the rapprochement between rulers and the governed. However, the use given to these platforms shows that both politicians and journalists underutilize their dialogic potential. They hardly encourage conversation with users and rarely interact with them, responding to their questions or comments online, although citizens see digital platforms as an adequate space to express their opinion. The dynamics of controlled interactivity have been imposed, in which, in order to avoid losing control over the communicative process, the interaction is ignored or minimized, and the dissemination of information prevails. As a result, production assumes a strong role.

3. Novelties in the distribution

The digital environment introduces notable novelties in the distribution of political information. The main one has to do with the multiplication of the platforms through which content circulates. We have gone from a scenario in which the dissemination of information was carried out through television, radio, and the press, to another where it is more decentralized. This has meant a loss of control over the flow of information by journalists who are no longer the only ones acting as gatekeepers. Now any user can access digital channels to circulate their messages. This circumstance increases the ease of the dissemination of information. Social media have introduced self-distribution, in which the users themselves decide through which channels they initiate dissemination of a content.

The result is a media environment much more dense, saturated, and complex, in which legacy media coexists with a growing multiplicity of digital platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, or YouTube, among others. This entails a high communicative fluency, the fragmentation of the audience, and the increase of the choice possibilities, being able to even generate a balkanization of the public sphere.

The incorporation of the users into the distribution, together with the architecture of the social media, has caused changes in the circulation of political information in the digital environment. In this context, three forms of filtering coexist that condition the diffusion of content:

- 1) The first is the editorial selection, exercised by journalists and media.
- 2) The second is of a technical filtering, launched by the owners of the platforms, and is linked to the algorithms that determine which information is most visible to users.
- 3) The third is the social filtering, associated with the connectivity that digital media propitiates. As a result of this, our network of contacts and friendships conditions, in part, the information we receive through digital platforms.

Linked to this triple filtering process, especially algorithms and the exchange based on social connectivity, a new form of circulation of political information emerged: virality. This property,

which implies a rapid and massive distribution of content through digital platforms thanks to the exchange between users, constitutes one of the ideal characteristics of the logic of networked media. In addition, it is a differential element with respect to the logic of legacy media. Re-tweeting a message, sharing content, or clicking on the “like” button, users contribute to expanding the circulation of content and attributing relevance to others. The public, together with the algorithms, has a key role in the distribution, which assumes a more horizontal model. Capturing and mobilizing the attention of the audience means generating more attention on this type of content. Virality is based on the principle of popularity and is associated with the attention economy, since its activation ensures a broad audience and a high potential for attention. This new mechanism of circulation of information, typical of the digital environment, coexists with the vertical diffusion practiced by legacy media. Despite this, the latter no longer has a monopoly over what circulates and what does not in the political sphere, something that has important repercussions on the political content that reaches the audience.

Another element that influences distribution is the technical configuration of social media. The architecture of each digital platform is different and, therefore, each one has its own differential characteristics. This fact affects, notably, the circulation of content. So, for example, previous research highlights that Twitter is more appropriate for the dissemination of news and current content while Facebook is more oriented towards the creation of user communities and, therefore, to organization and mobilization. WhatsApp, on the other hand, is directed towards the exchange of personal information and YouTube and Instagram are associated with the dissemination of photographic and audiovisual content, with a special focus on entertainment in the first one. Therefore, although political information can circulate on any platform, its distribution parameters can differ significantly depending on the characteristics of the channel, conditioning its dissemination.