


Polarisation and emotional discourse in the political agenda on Twitter: disintermediation and engagement in electoral campaigns

Polarización y discurso emocional de la agenda política en Twitter: desintermediación y engagement en campaña electoral

Polarização e discurso emocional da agenda política em Twitter: desintermediação e envolvimento em campanhas eleitorais

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Abstract

The relevance of social networks as agenda setters and prosumers as simultaneous content creators and consumers outside the media encourage political communication to focus on the use of digital platforms as part of their direct persuasive strategy towards the user-voter. This research analyses the first-level agenda and the political discourse on Twitter as a space of micro-segmentation to delve into the strategy of personalisation, polarisation, and the emotional discourse of political candidates during the election period. To test this process of disintermediation, a case study on the six main candidates for elections of the Region of Madrid during the election campaign (April-May 2021) has been conducted. The method combines a content and discourse analysis concerning the tweets published by the political representatives on their Twitter profile during this period (N=817), as well as the videos (N=637) and images (N=202) that accompany them. The codification was carried out using a self-developed software that allows users to download the tweets, obtain the interactions and classify the messages according to four categories: the source of the tweet; the topic, differentiating between political issues and citizen concerns according to the CIS (2021); the framing; and the multimedia storytelling elements. The main results confirm that, in disintermediated political communication in social networks, political leaders use a personalist, polarised and emotional discourse, with high engagement concerning multimedia storytelling. The research confirms a discourse about politics, but not about policies.

Keywords: political communication; polarization; disintermediation; agenda-setting; engagement; Twitter

Resumen

La relevancia de las redes sociales como agentes fijadores de la agenda, y de los prosumidores como creadores y consumidores simultáneos de contenido al margen de los medios, incentivan una comunicación política centrada en el uso de plataformas digitales como parte de su estrategia persuasiva directa hacia el usuario-votante. Esta investigación analiza la agenda temática y el discurso político en Twitter como espacio de microsegmentación para ahondar en la estrategia de personalización, polarización y discurso emocional de los candidatos políticos en periodo electoral. Para comprobar este proceso de desintermediación comunicativa, se realiza un estudio de caso centrado en los seis candidatos principales a las elecciones de la Comunidad de Madrid durante la campaña electoral (abril-mayo, 2021). La metodología combina un análisis del contenido y de discurso en torno a los tweets emitidos por los representantes políticos en su perfil de Twitter durante este periodo (N=817), así como los vídeos (N=367) e imágenes (N=202) que los acompañan. La codificación se realiza mediante un software de elaboración propia

que permite descargar los tweets, obtener las interacciones y clasificar los mensajes en torno a cuatro categorías: fuente del tweet; temática, diferenciando entre asuntos políticos y preocupaciones ciudadanas según el CIS (2021); encuadre o framing; y elementos de narrativa multimedia. Los resultados principales confirman que en la comunicación política desintermediada en redes sociales, los líderes políticos emplean un discurso personalista, polarizado y emocional, con alto engagement en torno a la narrativa multimedia. La investigación constata un discurso electoral que versa sobre política, pero no de políticas.

Palabras clave: comunicación política; polarización; desintermediación; agenda-setting; engagement; Twitter

Resumo

A relevância das redes sociais como agentes de definição de agenda e prosumers como criadores e consumidores simultâneos de conteúdos fora dos meios de comunicação social encorajam a comunicação política centrada na utilização de plataformas digitais como parte da sua estratégia de persuasão directa em relação ao utilizador-votante. Esta investigação analisa a agenda temática e o discurso político no Twitter como um espaço de micro-segmentação para mergulhar na estratégia de personalização, polarização e discurso emocional dos candidatos políticos no período eleitoral. Para testar este processo de desintermediação comunicativa, é realizado um estudo de caso centrado nos seis principais candidatos às eleições da Comunidade de Madrid durante a campanha eleitoral (Abril-Maio, 2021). A metodologia combina uma análise de conteúdo e discurso dos tweets emitidos pelos representantes políticos no seu perfil no Twitter durante este período (N=817), assim como os vídeos (N=367) e imagens (N=202) que os acompanham. A codificação foi realizada utilizando o nosso próprio software que nos permite descarregar os tweets, obter as interações e classificar as mensagens de acordo com quatro categorias: fonte do tweet; assunto, diferenciando entre questões políticas e preocupações dos cidadãos de acordo com o CIS (2021); enquadramento; e elementos narrativos multimédia. Os principais resultados confirmam que na comunicação política desintermediada sobre redes sociais, os líderes políticos utilizam um discurso personalista, polarizado e emocional, com elevado envolvimento em torno da narrativa multimédia. A investigação encontra um discurso eleitoral que é sobre política, mas não sobre políticas.

Palavras-chave: comunicação política; polarização; desintermediação; agenda-setting; envolvimento; Twitter

1. Introduction

The digital communicative reality that unfolds in social networks prioritises interpersonal contact without any space-time boundaries (Cruz *et al.*, 2010; van Dijck, 2016), thus making interactions, any sense of belonging, identity and information all virtual (Islas & Ricaurte, 2013).

The expansive use of these platforms (Newman, 2021) and its direct and disintermediated influence in public opinion turns them into a key aspect for political communication and activity (Trottier & Fuchs, 2015; Boulianne, 2019; Highfield, 2016; Small, 2011; Yamamoto *et al.*, 2019). Politics go from being official sources to prosumers that create and share their own content (Chia, 2012). Direct informants who can reach their target audience without intermediaries, competing with informative or entertainment content (Eldridge *et al.*, 2019; Rubio-Fabián, 2019; Harder *et al.*, 2017), in which a growing information gap of thematic interests in relation to the media's power of influence can be observed (Diez-Gracia & Sánchez-García, 2022).

In a context in which “the prosumer is the core axis or driving force of marketing strategies and digital advertising” (Fernández-Gómez *et al.*, 2022, p. 3), social networks become an opportunity to attract voters. Based on segmentation and microtargeting strategies (Quevedo *et al.*, 2021), this occurs through political communication formulas that seek audience engagement by mixing the interests of the public agenda with political marketing tactics that focus on the personalisation of candidates (Oliva *et al.*, 2015) and on spectacularization or politainment (Berrocal *et al.*, 2017). This dynamic forms a “media circuit in social networks (...) powerful enough to overlap and replace the institutional circuit” (Barberis, 2021, p. 135). Thus, social media consolidate their position as an agenda-setting agent (Palz, 2016), “an integral part of today's newsgathering” (Bruno, 2011, p. 64), with a newsworthiness criteria and a source for newsmaking (López-Meri, 2015).

Official and institutional sources, as well as political representatives themselves, take advantage of the publication of their own content to become agenda-setters (Aruguete, 2017), highlighting the issues that benefit their interests and dispensing with the media as traditional intermediaries to convey their messages to citizens (Parisi & Rega, 2011). This disintermediation takes place in three areas: agents, messages and communication spaces (Robles-Morales & Córdoba-Hernández, 2019). Thus, social networks, politics and agenda are integrated as part of the process of relevance perception and the shaping of public opinion:

“By emphasising certain issues and phrases a candidate (...) can try to be associated with certain issues and certain views and thus give voters certain associations that might affect their political views over time” (Borgebund, 2019, p. 169)

This agenda's *priming* effect (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) is added to the framing of these issues. Politicians provide an interpretative frame for their target by selecting and omitting aspects of reality (Ardévol-Abreu, 2015; Rowling *et al.*, 2013), building their own agenda, which takes part in the informative dissemination among the political elite, the media and the voters (Conway *et al.*, 2015).

In short, social networks are gaining strength in the generation of public opinion and in shaping the beliefs, values and attitudes of citizens (Lai & To, 2015). They are becoming extra communication channels in addition to the traditional ones, which results in a hybrid and micro-segmented media system (Chadwick, 2013) that combines the logics of all of them. In this way, social networks “have significantly affected classic media theories and concepts, including agenda setting, newsmaking or framing” (Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018, p. 2).

Based on this prior context, this research aims to analyse the thematic agenda and the political discourse disseminated on social networks during the election campaign, in order to delve into the effects of possible polarisation and emotional discourses. With this main axis, we analyse the thematic selection and its treatment in the messages of political leaders through the study of Twitter as the most widespread social network in cyberpolitics (Pallarés & García, 2017).

The research has a double methodological objective. We first tested a self-developed software for the codification of issues, frames and engagement in the discourse of social networks. We then conducted a case study focused on the 2021 elections in the Region of Madrid (Spain). We therefore analysed the construction of the discourse of the six main candidates for the regional presidency with four secondary objectives in mind: to analyse which issues were selected by these political leaders as part of their agenda (O1); with which frames they were presented (O2); whether or not they relied on multimedia elements pertaining to the digital media to communicate them to their potential voters (O3); and what diffusion they achieved (O4). This approach enabled us to analyse the disintermediated political discourse directed to the audience of social networks as a micro-target, as well as to verify the polarisation and emotional treatment of the political agenda.

2. Material and methods

To reach the set objectives, this study analyses the messages shared by the six political parties with representation on the Assembly of Madrid: Isabel Díaz Ayuso (PP), Ángel Gabilondo (PSOE), Pablo Iglesias (UP), Edmundo Bal (Cs), Rocío Monasterio (Vox) and Mónica García (MM). In short, the refined sample comprises 817 tweets, retweets and quoted tweets published during the election campaign period, from April 18th to May 2nd (Comunidad de Madrid, 2021). The coding of 367 videos and 202 images inserted in the messages analysed were included in this selection, taking into account that they are a key element of the engagement strategy of the political discourse in social networks together with the textual discourse¹.

The coding is done by means of a self-developed software. The process is divided into three phases. In the first step, Twitter’s API REST (Application Programming Interface for Representational State Transfer) is used to download the required tweet history (Arcila

et al., 2021). The messages disseminated by the six leaders were filtered and extracted through a developer account, resulting in the previously detailed sample.

In a second phase, the items collected for analysis were imported to the application, which allows the tweets to be visualised, coded and their values saved in a structured database through predetermined categories, carrying out the content and discourse analysis at the same time. The first content analysis is able to objectively and systematically identify the characteristics of the messages, texts and discourses (Stemler, 2001; Wimmer & Dominick, 2013). This technique has already shown its validity in the digital paradigm applied to user-generated content in social networks (Lai & To, 2015), also positioning itself as a rigorous, reliable and replicable method in the specific case of Twitter (Small, 2011) and in online political communication (Gil-Ramírez *et al.*, 2019). Discourse analysis is used as a heuristic tool to study “the materiality of signs, that is, the effects of discourses on social reality” (Santander, 2011, n.p.). Specifically, this research applies this technique to both the messages of political representatives, actors in the analysed process, and to discursive political action, within which electoral campaigns are framed (van Dijk & Mendizábal, 1999).

The application of this self-developed tool is tested in this case study of an electoral campaign through a content analysis, both textual and multimedia, as well as a discourse analysis that puts together four specific categories for analysing polarisation, the emotional approach, disintermediation and micro-segmentation through the codification of the message source: the thematic or first level agenda; framing; multimedia; and engagement through the above mentioned dissemination metrics.

-C1. Message source. The tweet is classified according to whether it is a message written directly by the candidate, a retweet or a quoted tweet. In the last two cases, whether this is done by the political party or a political party colleague, by a public figure or media outlet, or by an institution, company or organisation is specified.

-C2. Thematic level of the agenda. Messages are coded around the topics of the public and political agenda present in the surveys of the Sociological Research Centre (April, 2021), adding other ‘meta-topics’ that are specific to the analysed time period, such as allusions to political opponents, dissemination of news, attendance at events, appreciation of and requests for votes from their audience, or dissemination of personal matters (Rodríguez-Díaz & Castromil, 2020).

-C3. Agenda framing level. Framing is collected through a prior taxonomy by Ballesteros-Herencia (2020), based on other authors (Capella & Jamieson, 1997; De Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Dimitrova & Kostadinova, 2013; Muñiz, 2015). So it differentiates between emotional-personalistic appeal frames; strategic message game; thematic or political positioning; logistical-mobilising; pedagogical-dialectical; and invitations to media follow-up. To this typology, we have added two new frames of our own elaboration: a reaffirmation framing, which uses the exposure of messages, news or third-hand events to legitimise the candidate’s position; and an identity frame, which alludes to the unity or common experience of citizenship, party, or region, and so on.

-C4. Multimedia agenda level. This specifies whether the tweet includes images, video, GIF format or hyperlinks (Palau-sampio & Sánchez-García, 2020).

The reliability of these categories is obtained through reproducibility (Krippendorf, 1997) in test-retest conditions (López-Noguero, 2002), with percentages of agreement of 100% in the type of message; 87% in the first level of the agenda; 82% in the second level of the agenda; and 100% in the multimedia elements.

3. Results

3.1. The source of the message: personalism of the candidates and disintermediation

The empirical work brings to light a first disparity between candidates in the number and distribution of the messages they send to their audience on Twitter during the studied period of the electoral campaign (Table 1). Considering the first category, related to the source of the message (C1), the results show a tendency of the leaders towards a self-authored discourse (between 60%-70% of the content) that is supported by quotes and retweets to their party or political colleagues and, to a lesser extent, accompanied by messages from public figures or the media. Monasterio (Vox) is the only candidate who distances herself from this strategy, prioritising the retweets she makes to her party or her party colleagues (54%) over her own messages (32%).

These quantitative data in the distribution of the discourse do not correlate with the dissemination of the message, revealing that the number of publications does not imply greater viralization or engagement. In this regard, Ayuso (PP) stands out with the best number of RTs and likes, being, at the same time, the candidate with the lowest number of own messages issued (n=68). This contrasts with the data of Bal (Cs) who also plays a strategy of fewer publications than his adversaries, but does not obtain the same audience. This difference can also be observed among candidates with a higher rate of their own publications, such as Iglesias, García and Gabilondo.

Table 1. Publication and dissemination of political messages issued by the electoral candidates to the Regional Government of Madrid 2021

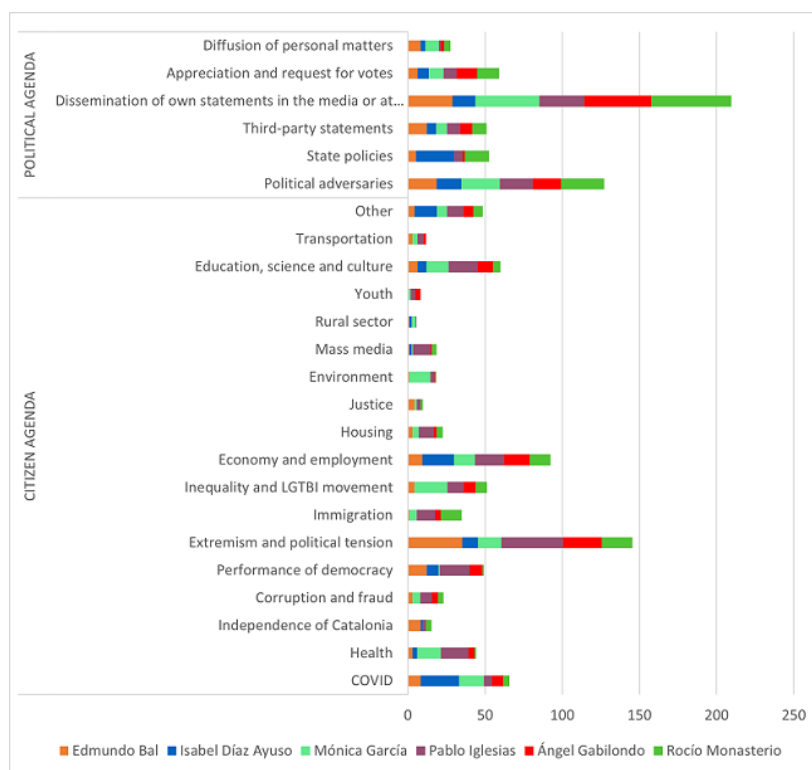
Candidate	Average				
	Tweets	RT	Likes	Answers	Quotes
Cs	97	270.90	678.45	85.66	20.40
PP	68	2,249.75	8,277.60	475.26	118.96
MM	135	385.39	1,762.43	159.01	35.56
UP	162	1,827.24	4,718.52	532.82	148.19
PSOE	179	218.55	478.98	118.08	18.18
VOX	196	981.38	2,568.94	158.51	64.06

Source: own elaboration

3.2. The thematic level of the agenda: effects of polarisation and thematic segmentation

The analysis of the second category, regarding the thematic level of the agenda (C2), tells us what issues the political discourse in the electoral campaign deals with, showing segmented thematic agendas among the candidates (Figure 1), which coincide in highlighting the political ‘meta-issues’ above those that concern citizens according to the polls (CIS, 2021). Thus, the leaders mostly lean towards the dissemination of interviews or statements made to the media or in campaign events, representing approximately half of the content in three of the six profiles (Vox, 52%; PSOE, 44%; MM, 42%). Secondly, appeals against political opponents stand out, showing a discursive strategy differentiated by right-left ideological blocs. Even within the priorities expressed by voters, candidates focus on political issues, such as extremism and increased tension.

Figure 1. Thematic agenda of the electoral candidates of the Region of Madrid 2021



Source: own elaboration

Apart from this preference for politics, each profile builds its own agenda, presenting a particular thematic selection. Thus, Ayuso chooses to concentrate on her management of COVID (25%) and the economy and employment (21%). In contrast, Iglesias is the candidate with the most heterogeneous discourse, alluding to every issue, but especially emphasising public health (18%), the economy and employment (19%) and education, science and culture (18%). This relevance is replicated by the candidates of Cs and PSOE, although to a lesser degree.

Monasterio also shows a preference for the economy and employment matters (13%); however, in her case, she differs from her adversaries with an additional focus on immigration (13%) centred on unaccompanied foreign minors. This percentage is related to domestic violence (7%), which, although lower than that of her opponents of PSOE, UP and MM, is focused on the case of the arrest of several foreign men for abusing a young woman in Madrid’s Western Park². It thus complements the immigration issue.

Finally, Mónica García obtains her differentiating discourse with a higher interest than her opponents regarding health matters, with 31% of her references pertaining to COVID and general health. She also does so with gender inequality (22%), which, unlike Vox, she focuses around the feminist movement.

Table 2. Average number of topics mentioned in the electoral speeches on Twitter

Topics		Tweets	Average			
			RT	Likes	Answers	Quotes
Political agenda	Appreciation of and requests for votes	87	742	2,334	189	52
	Political adversaries	180	1,120	2,947	295	79
	Dissemination of own statements in the media or at campaign events	313	522	1,473	140	27
	Diffusion of personal matters	35	609	1,997	209	52
	Third-party statements	70	839	2,255	166	55
	State policies	63	1,395	3,829	294	96
Citizen agenda	Economy and employment	125	1,121	2,982	280	89
	Education, science and culture	84	948	2,399	265	88
	Justice	13	1,131	2,907	228	72
	Youth	13	1,268	3,281	316	95
	Environment	24	649	1,845	211	59
	Mass media	28	2,244	5,578	459	104
	Rural sector	6	412	1,480	96	12
	Others	62	1,229	3,864	337	99
	Transportation	16	880	2,146	332	84
	Housing	34	1,270	3,009	293	96
	COVID	74	1,237	3,384	258	84
	Health	61	1,274	3,184	337	114
	Independence of Catalonia	19	1,414	3,540	274	86
	Corruption and fraud	35	1,095	2,621	258	144
	Performance of democracy	65	1,536	4,216	512	104
	Extremism and political tension	205	1,387	3,751	414	118
	Immigration	58	1,301	3,246	325	108
Gender inequality and LGTBI movement	75	649	1,751	179	37	

Source: own elaboration

Regarding the degree of repercussion of the issues (Table 2), the diffusion of the media stands out. It is necessary to evaluate these data with caution, since they may be items of news that have already gone viral and which the candidates have echoed, relaunching them, and thus explaining this result.

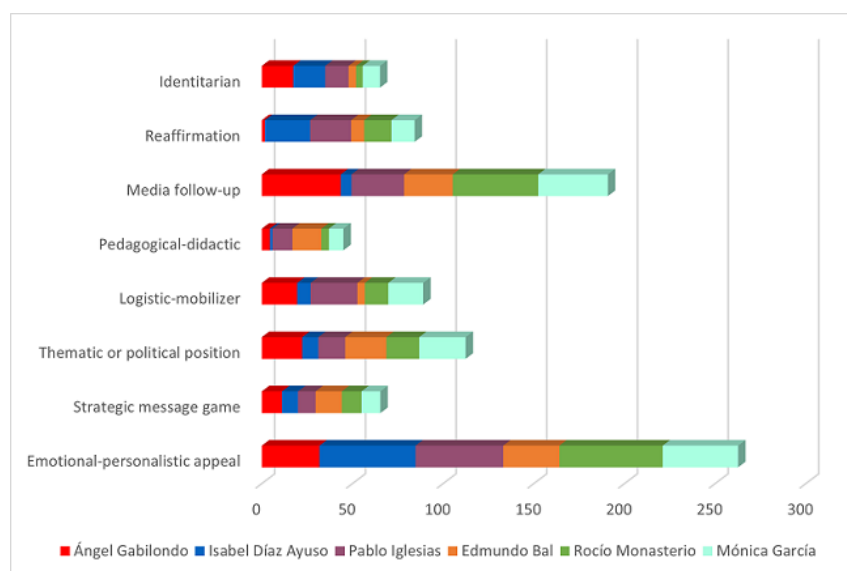
On the contrary, the dissemination of statements by the candidates themselves, one of the most frequent topics, receives a low average dissemination compared to other issues, showing a low success in its propagation despite the interest of politicians in making them public. In this regard, the political agenda in general, despite its reiteration in the discourse, arouses few reactions.

3.3. Analysis of framing: the variation of frames in political discours

The results regarding the framing employed during the electoral campaign give us a picture of how each candidate oriented their discourse in relation to their policies and leadership.

From a general perspective, what stands out from the six profiles analysed is a pronounced use of an emotional-personalistic appeal and the invitation to media monitoring, although each of them shows a specific approach (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Framing of the speeches of the political candidates for the elections of the Region of Madrid 2021



Source: own elaboration

The six leaders coincide in a high use of the emotional-personalistic frame. This is followed, in second place, by the invitation to media monitoring. The only exception to this frame is the case of Ayuso, whose strategy links the emotional frame (53%) with the identity frame (18%). The PP candidate bases her discourse on the idea of being from Madrid as a way of life and on the capacity of the Spanish capital to oppose the policies of the state government, led by an ideologically opposing party. To support this approach, she reaffirms (25%) what was already in progress during her previous administration of the Region of Madrid with the dissemination of reports or statements by third parties.

Gabilondo also uses emotionality (32%) and identity (17%) in his strategy, thus presenting the PSOE as a traditional, democratic and progressive party, emphasising its long political trajectory.

Iglesias' strategy reiterates the predominant tendency of the emotional framework (48%), in an attempt to mobilise (26%) what he sees as a working class, postulating the vote for his party as an anti-fascist force capable of counteracting the forces of the ultra-right.

If Iglesias uses his emotional framework to stop the ultra-right of fascism, Monasterio, like Ayuso, focuses this resource (57%) on "stopping the left". She also follows a strategy of direct attack on the state government. The representative of Vox hardly proposes any measures, but rather states her position (18%), alluding to a general dismantling of the current policies applied by the state government.

As for Bal, the candidate of Cs presents a strategy of distancing himself from the ideological blocs, presenting himself as a figure of moderation. To this end, he links the emotional framing (31%) with the strategic game of the message (14%), presenting his adversaries as part of the polarisation and his own party as an option to "stop the extremes".

Finally, García resorts to this personalisation (42%) by alluding to her profile as a health professional and a mother. Likewise, she links her proposals or political propositions (26%) with the emotional, oriented towards caring and calling for empathy, appealing to the voters' identity (10%) with both these same ideas and those of an environmentally and feminist friendly party.

The diffusion generated by each frame (Table 3) highlights the success of the reaffirmation frame in both retweets and likes. These data should be taken with some caution, since, being statements of third parties, they are sometimes not the candidate's own messages, but a retweet to another profile, so it is possible that the candidate could be relaunching a message that has already gone viral.

Secondly, the success of the emotional or personalistic appeal can be observed in all the areas of dissemination, which would explain its wide use by the leaders. On the other hand, it is worth noting the low propagation of the frame of invitation to media follow-up, despite being the second most used type.

Table 3. Average diffusion of the framing present in the electoral political discourse according to its taxonomy in the elections for the Region of Madrid 2021

Framing	Tweets	Average			
		RT	Likes	Answers	Quotes
Identitarian	86	935	2,710	257	71
Reaffirmation	108	1,456	3,946	251	74
Media follow-up	293	441	1,222	121	22
Logistic-mobilizer	133	1,119	2,996	327	81
Emotional-personalistic appeal	363	1,299	3,902	350	100
Pedagogical-didactic	59	889	2,049	259	64
Thematic or political position	160	814	2,081	230	68
Strategic message game	89	887	2,456	256	55

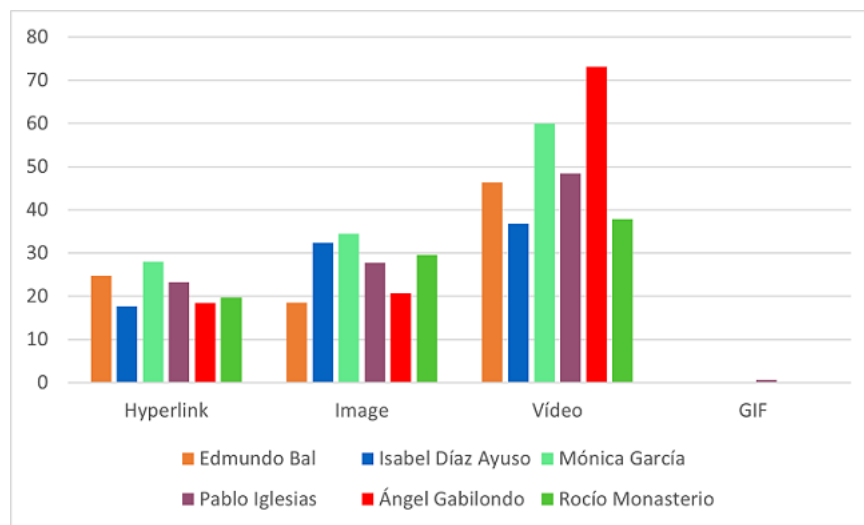
Source: own elaboration

3.4. Multimedia narrative as an engagement strategy

The results of the multimedia narrative (C4) confirm the predominance of audiovisual communication as an engagement strategy (Figure 3). With the exceptions of Ayuso (37%) and Monasterio (38%), the insertion of a resource of this type is close to or exceeds half of the content published by each candidate, reaching a maximum of 73% in the profile of Gabilondo.

Images and hyperlinks are used to a lesser extent than videos, but they accompany publications to announce campaign events, share news or interviews on candidates' profiles. Similarly, information is complemented by the use of hyperlinks to news or events.

Figure 3. The use of multimedia elements in the discourse of the candidates for the Madrid 2021 elections



Source: own elaboration

The dissemination data allow us to discern how the number of tweets is not relevant to becoming viral. In the case of videos (Table 4), it is Ayuso (PP) who obtains the highest number of likes and retweets, despite publishing the lowest number of posts and videos. On the other hand, Iglesias (UP) has more reactions than his adversaries in the form of replies and quotes.

Finally, the visualisations allow an approximate measurement of the reach of the publications. Thus, the PSOE candidate, Ángel Gabilondo, obtains the lowest diffusion in all variables despite having the highest number of publications with video, while Iglesias and Ayuso have much higher data levels than their opponents.

Table 4. The use and diffusion of videos among the political candidates for the elections of the Region of Madrid 2021

Candidate	Tweets	Average diffusion				
		RT	Likes	Answers	Quotes	Visualisations
Bal	39	303.85	745.18	97.05	25.85	24,946.26
Ayuso	24	2,398.50	9,269.12	543.38	144.08	118,312.54
García	54	398.59	1,515.22	169.89	44.76	41,194.76
Iglesias	66	2,244.58	5,134.73	604.55	170.48	128,548.42
Gabilondo	111	237.50	488.11	135.63	19.32	9,612.55
Monasterio	73	770.62	1,887.78	92.67	58.44	38,534.67

Source: own elaboration

The use of images (Table 5) confirms once again the use and predominant success of Ayuso (PP) in terms of retweets, likes and, on this occasion, also replies. The set of these multimedia narrative results indicates different forms of the viralization of a content and the success of this over the format, in which the dissemination is not linked to a larger publication.

Table 5. The use and diffusion of images among the political candidates for the elections of the Region of Madrid 2021

Candidate	Tweets	Images	Average			
			RT	Likes	Answers	Quotes
Bal	17	28	266.07	687.21	60.68	16.89
Ayuso	22	47	2,600.91	9,514.60	532.87	128.77
García	30	64	187.81	855.88	61.59	10.50
Iglesias	42	62	1,644.26	4,193.42	525.16	160.26
Gabilondo	38	73	169.86	455.34	90.16	14.78
Monasterio	53	101	798.29	2,391.18	144.51	66.48

Source: own elaboration

4. Discussion and conclusions

The research confirms how new political communication practices evolve by resorting to social networks as an agenda-setting agent (Palz, 2016) to disseminate a multilevel discourse through these disintermediated platforms. Such platforms allow politicians to dispense with the media as traditional intermediaries to directly convey their messages to potential voters (Parisi & Rega, 2011) in an electoral campaign. Thus, the combination of networks, politicians and agenda is integrated as part of the process of perceiving the relevance and formation of public opinion with the construction of a polarised and

emotional agenda. This strategy is corroborated by the case study of the 2021 election campaign for the Region of Madrid and through the analysis of source, issue, framing and engagement that are used to capture the direct attention of the user-reader-voter in a context of communicative disintermediation.

The main results achieved by means of a content and discourse analysis also confirm the reliability of a self-developed software that, on an experimental basis, has been used for the coding of social networks. The following main conclusions can be drawn from its application.

The number and source of the messages indicate that the discursive strategy of the candidates on Twitter follows the process of communicative disintermediation, directly informing users-voters outside the scope of the traditional media. The data reflect that users' attention is not attracted by a constant or abundant publication, but by the characteristics of the message itself. Likewise, the origin of the tweets indicates a personalist strategy of the candidates, based on their own discourse (Ballesteros-Herencia & Gómez-García, 2020), rather than that of their political party as an entity (López-Meri *et al.*, 2020), with the exception of Rocío Monasterio (Vox).

This metadiscourse is corroborated by the frameworks surrounding the topics discussed by the candidates, focusing on the emotional or personalistic, on the media follow-up and on a political position that does not propose measures but puts the spotlight on opposing the adversary. In such cases as that of Isabel Díaz Ayuso or Pablo Iglesias, these strategies frequently rely on the reaffirmation of related third parties; or, as with Rocío Monasterio, the promise to "dismantle" the current policies is sufficient, but without elaborating a set of political measures. This lack of any mention of the electoral programme, once again, highlights the differences with respect to previous campaigns (López-Meri, *et al.*, 2017; Gómez-Calderón *et al.*, 2017). At the same time, emotional framing demonstrates its ability to reach users through its wide dissemination in the social networks.

On the other hand, the presence and propagation of reaffirmation, as well as of allusions to the identity of the people of Madrid under specific features by each representative, not only shows the importance of appealing to the lifestyles and sense of belonging of potential voters in their discourse (Oliva *et al.*, 2015; Rowling *et al.*, 2013), but also validates both types of framing, encouraging their use in further research, expanding the taxonomy originally proposed (Ballesteros-Herencia, 2020; Capella & Jamieson, 1997; De Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Dimitrova & Kostadinova, 2013; Muñiz, 2015).

Finally, it is worth noting the extensive use of the multimedia narrative inserted in messages as an engagement strategy, resorting to Multilanguage narratives to capture voters' attention, with video taking priority over image. The success of content over form is evident: a 'bombardment' of publications is not enough to attract either voters or visibility.

Finally, the results point to a common conclusion on the Twitter strategy as a microtarget: the discourse is about politics but not about policies. This argument adds to the field of study of Political Communication, pointing towards the continuity of personalism (López-Meri *et al.*, 2020; Rodríguez-Virgili *et al.*, 2014), the increase of spectacularization in politics (Berrocal *et al.*, 2017; Gil-Ramírez *et al.*, 2019) and a change with respect to previous discursive strategies. These are aspects present in both offline and online politics that encourage us to look to overcoming the limitations of this study, as it is a case analysis with a limited sample and directed to a specific target, through future comparative or longitudinal research to deepen the scope of polarisation, disintermediated emotional discourse and its reception.

Authors' contribution

Alba Diez-Gracia: Conceptualization; Methodology; Validation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Writing- original draft; Writing- review and editing; Visualization; Supervision; Project Administration. **Pilar Sánchez-García:** Conceptualization; Methodology; Validation; Investigation; Writing- original draft; Writing- review and editing; Supervision; Funding acquisition. **Javier Martín-Román:** Methodology; Software; Validation; Formal analysis; Resources; Data curation. All authors have read and accepted the published version of the manuscript. Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Notes

- 1 The analysis excludes live-streaming (N=33).
- 2 “La policía detiene en el parque del Oeste a 13 hombres, cuatro de ellos menores, por abusar de una joven de 16 años” (ElPaís.es) <https://bit.ly/3hyC7OS>