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# The 2018 Andalusian parliament elections on Instagram: political parties, professional journalism and memes

Las elecciones al parlamento andaluz de 2018 en Instagram: partidos políticos, periodismo profesional y memes

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# Abstract

At a time when social networks have a fundamental importance in communication in all contexts and in which the possibilities of dissemination of information are no longer in the hands of media companies in a concentrated way, through a quantitative methodology this research analyzes the communication strategies of the political parties during the 2018 elections to the Parliament of Andalusia on Instagram as well as the role of journalists and the media regarding the engagement obtained, demonstrating that only the VOX party developed a nationally planned strategy, and that individual journalists achieved greater dissemination and generated engagement than informational more companies. On the other hand, any message in meme format achieves more diffusion than any other type of message. This investigation presents a time frame limit since it focuses on a single electoral campaign. It is hoped that future papers will analyze future electoral campaigns so that the conclusions presented here can be confirmed.

# Keywords clave

Elections; Instagram; journalists; memes; mass media; political parties; engagement

#### Resumen

En un momento en el que las redes sociales tienen un importancia fundamental en la comunicación en todos los contextos y en el que las posibilidades de difusión de información ya no se encuentran en manos de las empresas informativas de forma concentrada, a través de una metodología cuantitativa la investigación analiza las estrategias de comunicación de los partidos políticos concurrentes a las elecciones de 2018 al Parlamento de Andalucía en Instagram así como el papel de los periodistas y de los medios de información en cuanto al engagement obtenido, demostrando que tan sólo el partido VOX desarrolló una estrategia planificada a nivel nacional y que los periodistas individuales logran mayor difusión y generan más engagement que las empresas informativas. Por otro lado, cualquier mensaje en formato meme obtiene más difusión que cualquier otro tipo de mensaje. La investigación presenta como limitación el marco temporal, ya que se centra en una única campaña electoral. Se espera que futuros trabajos analicen nuevas campañas electorales de forma que se puedan refrendar las conclusiones aquí presentadas.

#### Palabras clave

Elecciones; Instagram; periodistas; memes; empresas informativas; partidos políticos; engagement

#### 1. Introduction

Social media has been increasing its undisputable presence since 2011. The increase in the consumption of these networks is associated with the growing presence of Smartphones, the device with the highest penetration in Spain after television (Escoda, 2018). Among the networks, Instagram has grown the most in both users and in time of use to the detriment of others, as for example, in 2016, Instagram managed to knock Twitter from first place to second (The Cocktail Analysis, 2016). In 2018 it had more than one billion users worldwide and more than 13 million in Spain according to the report "Digital in 2019", which was prepared by We Are Social in collaboration with Hootsuite.

This inevitably affects news consumption. According to the 2018 Digital News Report, "48% of adult users use Facebook to read, view, find, share, and comment on news throughout the week." And, 16% use Instagram for informational purposes (Digital News Report, 2018).

Social media space is used by all sectors, including media and politics, and has also introduced major changes in social movements (Casero-Ripollés, 2015). Political parties and politicians have discovered a way to reach citizens directly and authentically. As Marcos García (2018) states, "political actors consider them an essential channel to launch their messages and relate more easily to their voters." Everything seems to point to a new strategy in the humanization of politics as Selva-Ruiz states (2017). In Spain, social networks in the field of politics stood out from the general election of 2011, according to Semova, Rey and Castillo (2017) and have since been used as political advertising and communication tools with the electorate (Carrasco Polaino, Villar Cirujano, & Tejedor Fuentes, 2018; Lopez-García, 2016; Congosto, 2015; Abejón-Mendoza & Mayoral-Sánchez, 2017; Campos-Domínguez, 2017).

The media also uses these social networks to reach a greater number of recipients than those who would otherwise not access their content. The media relies on them to reach those scattered audiences. In fact, many people come to digital media this way (Perez-Soler, 2017; Guallar, Suau, Ruiz-Caballero, Sáez, & Masip, 2016; Campos-Freire, Rúas-Araújo, López-García, & Martínez-Fernández, 2016; Masip, Guallar, Suau, Ruiz-Caballero, & Peralta, 2015; I Casas, 2019 and Rodríguez, 2018). As such, the revolution of digital networks is evident with the new uses made by people and organizations within traditional media (Campos-Freire, et al., 2016). As Enguix, S. (2017) states, "the great contribution of social media to digital and analog media is the undeniable increase in the dissemination of its publications".

Journalism has also adapted to the new possibilities of creation and dissemination with the participation of the public (García y López, 2016; Renó & Flores, 2018; López-García, 2018 and García & Castro, 2018) which is confirmed by Marcos García's statement, "Citizens use these platforms to participate and discuss issues of public interest." According to the aforementioned report, internet users in Spain are among the most involved in the news: in particular, 34% share some news through their social networks. Everything seems to indicate that the growth of social networks positively influences political participation (Navia, P., 2017), although it is true that "four out of ten users say that they are cautious when they have a policy view because of the risk of having to account for it to authorities" (Digital News Report, 2018). García and Castro (2018) claim that through networks, the media interacts with citizens and in return receive opinions almost instantly. This has its positive side, of course, but it also worries communication professionals because, as Umberto Eco put it, "social media gives the right of free expression to legions of imbeciles" (2015).

Either way, networks, and in particular Instagram, offers the media and journalists a new way to target the public, especially the younger, with a more audiovisual format. Journalists, in particular, are using social networks to strengthen their personal brand because, in communicative processes, it promotes trust and a personal touch, which in turn, allows them to know the journalist (and his opinions) better. This makes their posts as individuals and professionals stronger than simply as a means of communication. Through the different networks, journalists make themselves known while creating a loyal audience and following while developing their own identity with their own personal characteristics and style, achieving prestige independent of the environment from which they work (Masip, Guallar, Suau, Ruiz-Caballero, & Peralta, 2015; Pons & González, 2015, and Barrera, 2018).

Of all social networks, in this research we focus on Instagram because it is the fastest growing of all global networks. Created in October of 2010, it is a platform whose principle activity is to share one-minute videos as well as images that can also be improved with various filters (Sheldon and Bryant, 2016). A simple Instagram photo "is worth a thousand words" (Silva et al., 2013). Again, Giovanni Sartori's prediction (2012) seems to be verified: "The word is dethroned by the image; everything ends up being visualized," (op. cit. by Martínez Gómez, G, 2017). The Italian author dared even more when he claimed that the image had impoverished our capacity for knowledge. On Instagram, "images have greater relevance than the text itself and, in many cases, the image converts into the main vehicle of political communication" (Ruiz del Olmo, 2016).

One of the most widespread forms of visual expression through social networks are "memes", which often goes viral. A brief approach to the term and without an in-depth description of its origin, the meme, a term coined by Dawkins in 1976 in his book "The Selfish Gene", is "a unit of cultural transmission". Obviously, the definition of "meme", according to Dawkins, is not related to the one we currently know, but the basis of its definition can help us understand the concept of meme as we use it today. Not only is the idea of meme maintained as a humorous or critical concept with a character or a situation, but it represents social knowledge, or a more-or-less widespread feeling, through an easy and quick visual element. To the usuallypresent humor, the ability to articulate arguments and convey ideas is usually added (Martínez, 2018). As Castaño (2013) states, the theme of memes is highly varied and can be about both issues without any significance as well as issues of social change fundamental to a society at a given time. Because they are so easily spread throughout social networks (Danung, J., & Attaway, L.H., 2008), have such great expressive capacity, humor, and because of the possibilities of reinterpretation, internet memes have so much social success and provoke much academic interest. As Delia Rodríguez states, "achieving viral success is today the only way to raise your voice in global news noise" (Rodríguez, 2013). The extension of the practice of viralizing memes and the subsequent spread of contagious ideas is what the author has called, "memecrity".

The phenomenon of the viralization of memes according to various studies is achieved because, in addition to enjoying information or a meme, in this case, the consumer thinks almost instantly of who might like it and to whom it might be forwarded (Lieberman, 2012, cit. Rodriguez, 2013).

In the context of the election campaign and the elections held for the Andalusia Assembly in November-December 2018, and linking this event with the realities of the journalistic profession and the development of memes on social media, we attempted to answer the following research questions:

- How is the Instagram network used in terms of frequency and intensity by the political parties and their leaders in the context of the 2018 election campaign for the Andalusia Assembly?
- In a political context, does the media, or do journalists as individual professionals, generate greater engagement on Instagram?
- Do information professionals produce more engagement than other users?
- Is the meme a form of content with greater impact and dissemination than the other forms of communication (photographs, infographics or videos) on Instagram and in the political sphere?

The above research questions therefore had the following objectives:

- Measure the volume and frequency of the main political parties' and their candidates' publications to chair the Andalusia Assembly in order to determine the relevance of Instagram as an advertising tool.
- Compare the quantity of content posted on Instagram by information companies and
  information professionals on the one hand, and by all other users on the other, under the hashtag
  #eleccionesandaluzas, in order to measure the importance that the professional information
  sector provides to Instagram within the context under study.
- Analyze the engagement generated by information companies, information professionals and other users in said context to reveal whether users in the journalism sector have more influence on Instagram than all others.
- Check the presence of the meme phenomenon with respect to the total posts to determine the importance of this form of content in the study context.
- Measure the engagement generated by posts that contain memes compared to those that do not contain them, and see if the differences in this variable are significant.

#### 2. Methodology

Through the Instagram Hashtag Collector web application (Phantombuster, 2019), the 1,530 Instagram posts that included the hashtag #eleccionesandaluzas between November 15, 2018, the day before the start of the election campaign, and December 3, 2018, the day after the elections, were downloaded. From the total, the posts that generated some kind of error that prevented access to its content (unrecognizable author or content-deleted posts) were filtered out. Once complete, the total number of analyzable posts was 1,472.

In order to be able to analyze the frequency of political parties' and their leaders' publications, the total posts identified had as their author any of the main political parties concurrent to the elections (autonomous community, province or locality) were from Partido Popular (PP), Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), Ciudadanos, Podemos and VOX, and those that had as their author as one of the candidates for the presidency of the Andalusia Assembly from these same parties, these being: Juanma Moreno Bonilla, Susana Díaz, Juan Marín Lozano, Teresa Rodríguez and Francisco Serrano. Party identification was achieved through a search for their usernames with the terms: "pp", "psoe", "ciudadanos", "podemos" or "vox". For the political parties, Ciudadanos and Podemos, the search was done on a character-by-character basis in case the account had only portion of the party name in its user's ID.

Through content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002; For studies with similar methodology see Berganza, María Rosa & del Hoyo Hurtado, 2006 and Muñiz, Igartua, & Otero, 2006) of each post, the type of author and format or type of message that included the post was identified. To perform this analysis, a chart was prepared that included the following categories:

- Author of the post: in this section the author of the post is identified in one of the following three
  categories: Journalist; if the author was an information professional for his individual account, the
  Media; if the author was the official corporate source for the published information, or Other; if
  the author of the post had no position in either of the other two categories above.
- Type of Post: This section indicated whether the content of the post was a meme as defined by Rodriguez (2013) or if it was any other type of content. Of all the types of memes that appear on the Internet, those in this investigation were classified as were those that Pérez Salazar, Aguilar Edwards and Guillermo Archilla (2014) collected from Shifman (2001), specifically "those in which there is greater chance of carrying reinterpretation processes, based on a format that has a general meaning and is adapted by each user, according to a specific intention, and which Shifman (2011) calls 'memetics'."

Subsequently, and to identify possible relationships between the type of author of the post and its engagement on the one hand, and the type of content of the post and its engagement on the other, an analysis of the variance (ANOVA) was performed (Spiegel & Stephens, 2009) using the SPSS Statistics - Ver. 24 application. To calculate the engagement of each post, the formula (number favorites + number comments)/ number -followers)\*100 (Laurence, 2017) was used.

## 3. Analysis of Results

## 3.1. Analysis of the frequency and intensity of publication

The search for the accounts of each party and its leaders allowed identification of the following:

Table 1: Political Party Instagram Accounts and Number of Followers

Political Party	Username / Identifier	No. of followers
VOX	canasporespana	12.600
	fans_vox_	63
	vox_priego	1.333
	vox_somosespana	485
	vox_vizcaya	1.137
	voxgranada	2.481
	voxjovenes	39.900
	voxmostoles	866
	voxnoticias	51.900
	voxsanlucar	475
	voxsantacolomagramenet	503
	voxtorrox	465
	Total	112.208
PP	pp_cadiz	1.308
	ppandaluz	5.181
	ppbenalmadena	518
	ppcaratunas	785
	ppcartama	113
	pplospalacios	221
	pplosvillares	300

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	ppmalaga	1.323
	ppmijas	283
	pppanzijosema	845
	juanmamorenobonilla	11.400
	Total	22.277
PSOE	psoealbolote	252
	psoecambil	97
	psoelinares	572
	psoemojacar	147
	psoeubrique	198
	Total	1.266
Podemos	podemospuertoreal	300
	Total	300

The party with the most accounts was VOX (12), followed by PP (11). PSOE presented five user accounts, Podemos with 1, and Ciudadanos with none.

The total number of followers in the chart shows how VOX totals 112,208 followers, PP with 22,277, those of PSOE with 1,266 and those of Podemos, 300. When assessing this Instagram data, it should be noted that any single user can follow all or any of the accounts he/she wants.

While the VOX party presents accounts responsible for centrally managing communications, the rest of the parties with a presence on Instagram delegate the dissemination and management of its content to provincial or local accounts. Similarly, while VOX creates thematic accounts such as "voxnoticias" for informational advertising, "voxtorrox" as a general account, and "canasporespaña" together with "voxjovenes" for younger followers, the rest of the parties do not have similarly differentiated accounts.

The total number of posts published by the different accounts of each of the parties, and by the accounts of the candidates to the Andalusia Assembly from the same parties, produced the following results:

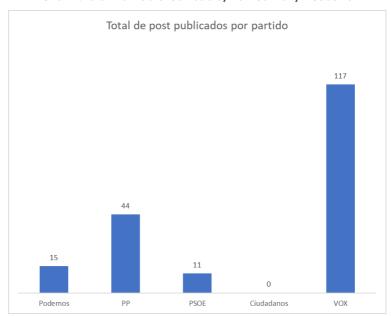


Chart 1: Total # of Published Posts by Political Party Accounts

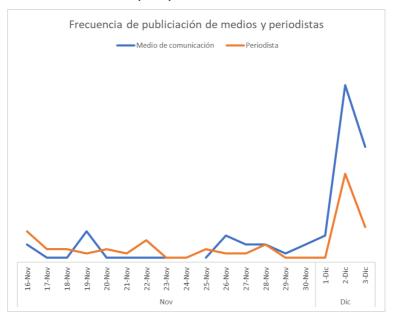
While VOX followers' accounts published a total of 117 posts, PP accounts published less than half, 44, with Podemos totaling 15, less than half of PP's, and following closely was PSOE with 11 posts. No posts appeared from any account belonging to Ciudadanos. VOX published 41% more posts than did the sum of all other parties (117 posts vs. 70).

Chart 2: Publication Frequency from Political Parties



As for the frequency of publication, all parties had a downward trend as the end of the election campaign approaches, even though parties such as PP or Podemos, even PSOE, show peaks of publications at specific times not matching neither the start nor end of the campaign.

Chart 3: Publication Frequency from Journalists and Information Media



During the election campaign, professionals in both corporate and individual the information sector maintained a steady pace of publication, until which they increased as the elections approached. While the media published 44 posts throughout the election campaign (2.75 post/day), on December 2, the Election Day and the next, they published 66 (33 post/day) or 66% more. On the other hand, journalists published 41 posts in their accounts during the election campaign (2.56 posts/day) and 28 on Election Day and the day after (14 posts/day).

Chart 4: Publication Frequency of Memes



The publication of memes increased in frequency at the beginning of the election campaign and, above all, on Election Day and after. Memes were used to express joy at victory or defeat of the opponent or, on the other hand, to express sadness at defeat and bad wishes to the victor.

Chart 5: Publication Frequency of Memes by Information Media



When the volume and frequency of the memes were analyzed by information professionals, it was discovered that no journalist from their individual public account contained any in this format. However, from their corporate Instagram accounts, the media did post memes, especially on Election Day (7). This increase in the number of published memes corresponds to the overall increase in the number of publications on Election Day, as mentioned above.

#### 3.2. Engagement analysis

The count of posts published by journalists and information companies is presented in the following frequency table:

Table 2: Post Frequency by Author Type

	Frequency	Percentage
Media	110	7.5
Other	1,293	87.8
Journalist	69	4.7
Total	1,472	100.0

Of the total number of publications (N=1,472), 110 (7.5%) were published by information companies and 69 (4.7%) by journalists from their individual Instagram accounts. The remaining 1,293 (87.8%) were published by other types of users.

As for the identification of the post as meme or not, the publication count is listed in the following table:

Table 3: Post Frequency by Content Type

	Frequency	Percentage
Other	1,141	77.5
Meme	331	22.5
Total	1,472	100.0

Of all publications (1,472), 331 (22.5%) were identified as memes while the remainder were posts 1,141 (77.5%) that contained any other content type or message format.

The analysis of the relationship between the authors' posts and their engagement showed significant differences (F(2)-25.05; p<0.001). Journalists are the type of user who generate the most engagement (m-9.92%; ds-6.44%) and are followed by other users (m-9.39%; ds-11.67%) and the media who generate much lower engagement (m-1.68%; ds-2.02%).

The hashtag #eleccionesandaluzas generated well-above average engagement within the social network (m-8.84%; ds-11.22%). However, when analyzing the data by type of user, journalists and other users maintain very high average at 6%, while the information companies are within the division with what can be considered average. Their average engagement is between 1% and 3.5% (Mee, 2016).

The relationship between the post type and engagement also showed significant differences (F(1)-31.37; p<0.001). Memes generated greater engagement (m-11.85%; ds-18.04%) than those with other content (m-7.97%; ds-8.06%).

# 4. Conclusions

After analyzing the use made by political parties of the social network Instagram during the electoral process in Andalusia, the data showed significantly that only VOX actually used Instagram as a political advertising tool by showing higher and more planned activity than the other political parties. Considering that Instagram is the most used network by users between the ages of 16 and 30 (according to the latest Annual Social Media Study of IAB Spain, 2018), their strategy turned to this network with the intent to attract the attention of young voters, especially through the "canasporespana" and "voxjovenes" accounts. In addition, the marked visual component of the network facilitated some of the more specific traits that organization wanted to give to its campaign (i.e., simplicity of messages, symbolism, emotionality), and, as such, there was the remarkable presence of memes among their posts. Although it is difficult to study the role that this strategy had in attracting votes (something that exceeds the intent and scope of this study), the favorable and surprising results achieved by VOX in these elections could well be an indication of its effectiveness.

Despite the interest that this type of activity could have when it comes to accessing young voters (Selva-Ruiz, 2017 and Marcos García, 2018), the other entities made only sporadic use of the Instagram network during the election campaign and, at least in appearance, unplanned. None of the political parties, except VOX, followed the recommendation to publish at a constant rate, even if at only a daily post (Barud,

2016). While VOX didn't maintain a consistent pace either, they were at least concerned enough to keep their accounts up-to-date, while the rest of the parties didn't.

Regarding the use of Instagram by journalists and the media, how journalism tries to take advantage of the features of this new means of information distribution was analyzed first (García y López, 2016 and García & Castro, 2018), although it is still in its early stages. In analyzing this process in the context of an electoral campaign of undoubtable informational interest (Guallar, Suau, Ruiz-Caballero, Sáez, & Masip, 2016), the most valuable conclusions come from engagement analysis. In view of this data, journalists have more impact on Instagram compared to other users, which somehow makes them a reference and helps them in their attempt to distinguish themselves from spontaneous users to their right of information and who multiply in networks. In addition, their ability for engagement is greater than that reflected by information companies: the media certainly has many followers, but the data show that they are passive and generates little interaction. Followers do not react to news companies' publications, but do to the individual journalist. It is thus confirmed that the individual journalist is an important media asset of when transmitting confidence and proximity to their audience (Masip, Guallar, Suau, Ruiz-Caballero, & Peralta, 2015; Pons & González, 2015 or Barrera, 2018).

The posts published by journalists attract more activity between users. Such data seems to support the idea that journalists' use of the Instagram network can be a useful tool for generating personal branding. Different audiences' ease of access, consumption, and interaction with other users seem to show that it can effectively serve journalists to create community and retain followers through engagement (García y Castro, 2018).

Another clear finding of this study is that memes generate much more engagement than other types of content (Rodríguez, 2013). This is the answer to one of the research questions posed at the beginning of the investigation: memes are effectively a form of content that, at least on Instagram and in the political sphere, provokes greater impact and dissemination than other forms of communication.

This evidence can be valuable to journalists as content generators on the Instagram network. The study of data tells us that journalists from their accounts do not use memes, although the media do, especially on Election Day, which is when they publish most in general. The success of memes is only one more manifestation of the transition from typographical to audiovisual hegemony in the consumption of information (Caballero, 2006), which has been being verified for years. It seems to us that it is certainly a valuable recommendation for those who seek to increase their relevance and the number of followers in society. Further analysis is needed on the content creation process and how the characteristics in those messages can be more effective on Instagram (Carrasco-Polaino et al, 2018).

A final conclusion derived from the analysis of the data of our study is that the hashtag #eleccionesandaluzas generates very high engagement in the posts published by journalists, being above 6%. These levels are similar to those reached by posts published by other non-journalist users, but are lower than posts published by information companies which received an average engagement considered normal. Why these differences exist between journalists and the media escape this investigation. However, it is significant to understand the relevance of journalists' Instagram presence, both for increasing the number followers and improving their brand.

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