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Political hate speech of the far right on Twitter in Latin America

Discurso político de odio de la ultraderecha desde Twitter en Iberoamérica

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to study the spreading of political hate speech by the far right through Twitter. A mixed methodology was employed, combining both quantitative and qualitative tools, within the framework of digital ethnography. Five characteristic cases of campaigns linked to political hate speech were chosen, meeting the four criteria set: Latin American scope with representativeness in terms of breadth and impact, political motivation, more than 100,000 tweets, and massive use of fake accounts. The analysis was performed with T-Hoarder, Gephi and MAXQDA. The conclusions drawn are that these campaigns do not occur spontaneously. Rather, a destabilizing political intention lies behind them, sponsored by organizations with considerable ability to disseminate messages and with extensive funds. The massive presence of false accounts, the repetition of certain spelling errors in identical form and the striking increase in the number of accounts just before campaigns are evidence of the automation of these processes. The constant use of aggressive and disparaging terms associated with hatred triggers extreme polarization and a climate of tension, threatening the building and consolidation of democracy itself. Apart from punitive measures, there is a need to implement educational proposals.

Resumen

La finalidad de esta investigación ha sido estudiar la difusión de los discursos políticos de odio de ultraderecha a través de la red social Twitter. Se ha seguido una metodología mixta, combinando instrumentos cuantitativos y cualitativos, en el marco de la etnografía digital. Se eligieron cinco casos característicos de campañas vinculadas a discursos políticos de odio que cumplieran los cuatro criterios seleccionados mediante técnica Delphi: ámbito iberoamericano con representatividad por amplitud e impacto, motivación política, más de 100.000 tuits y uso masivo de cuentas falsas. El análisis se realizó mediante T-Hoarder, Gephi y MAXQDA. Las conclusiones muestran que estas campañas no surgen espontáneamente, sino que existe una intencionalidad política desestabilizadora detrás de ellas; vertebradas desde organizaciones con pautas de difusión muy marcadas y fuentes de financiación potentes. La presencia masiva de cuentas falsas, la repetición de determinadas erratas de forma idéntica y el llamativo aumento del número de cuentas en los momentos previos a las campañas evidencian la automatización de estos procesos. El uso constante de términos agresivos y despreciativos asociados al odio, consigue generar polarización extrema y un clima de crispación que constituye una amenaza a la construcción y consolidación de la propia democracia. Más allá de las medidas punitivas, se considera necesario implementar propuestas de carácter educativo.

Keywords / Palabras clave

Hate speech, social network analysis, Twitter, critical analysis, freedom of expression, human rights education. Discurso de odio, análisis de redes sociales, Twitter, análisis crítico, libertad de expresión, educación para los derechos humanos.

1. Introduction and state of affairs

It is significant that there is an increasing use of the expression “hate speech” both in the mass media and in academic literature (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021; Paz et al., 2020). The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe defined this term as “all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility towards minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin” in its Recommendation R (97) 20, issued on 30 October 1997. Although there would not appear to be a definitive consensus as to its definition (Grau-Álvarez, 2021), it does seem clear that hate speech is generally seen as referring not so much to an individual factor, but rather as something affecting a given group, encouraging intolerance, stigmatization, or aggression and violence towards it (Amores et al., 2021). It has been stated to be a form of speech attempting to trigger in hearers a deep feeling of rejection towards a group of people, made the scapegoat for the threats, or for the real or imaginary problems from which this audience believes it is suffering (Pérez-Calle et al., 2019: 157).

An analysis of hate speech is worthwhile because of its social, cultural and educational implications, its influence over the creation of a social and political climate, and in particular the link between the growth in online hatred and the perpetration of hate crimes (Müller & Schwarz, 2021). Indeed, Article 510.1 of the Spanish Penal Code defines hate crimes as involving encouragement, promotion or incitation, whether direct or indirect, of hatred, hostility, discrimination or violence against a group, a part thereof, or individuals on the grounds that they belong to that group, for racist, anti-Semitic or other motives relating to ideology, religion or beliefs and the like. It lays down penalties for those spreading such views by any means whatsoever. Of the eleven categories within which the Spanish Ministry of Home Affairs classified hate crimes in 2020, those under the heading of political ideology are the second most common in number, and this category has grown most in recent years, above all in cyberspace.

This makes it crucial to study political hate speech focused on attacks for ideological reasons (Esquivel, 2016). This goes beyond discourse which is merely offensive or unpopular, but is covered by freedom of expression (Martínez-Torrón, 2016), in order to reach a level that can be considered hate crime. Nowadays, speech of this sort is expanding through social networks, since it seems to have found in them a suitable channel for dissemination, having as they do a proven influence over the shaping of public opinion. This is the case for Twitter. Although it has only a moderate volume of use (Newman et al., 2021), its tweets and discussions have a considerable impact, since quite a few mass media concentrate a significant part of their attention on the interactions spread by this means, influencing the social and political agenda (Bane, 2019; Casero-Ripollés, 2020).

For this reason, Twitter was chosen for the present study. Other factors were the ease of extracting data that it permits (Villodre et al., 2021) and the fact that it is one of the social networks allowing hashtags (HTs) or labels to be added to messages, which can thus come to generate trends on the network. It is true that Twitter sometimes functions as an echo chamber (Pariser, 2011), reinforcing the ideological stances of like-minded virtual communities, and leading to less interaction with other communities (Guo et al., 2020). However, what Atilano (2019) calls “fissures” occur, with a greater range in what users read, as opposed to what they say (Shore et al., 2018).

In particular, the work focused on political hate speech linked to far-right ideology, which covers the extreme right and the radical right. It is characterized by three features, quoted by Mudde (2021) in describing the “radical populist right”: authoritarianism, populism and “nativism”, a combination of nationalism and xenophobia (Camargo, 2021; Guerrero-Solé et al., 2022). On these lines, the analysis concentrated on such messages of a political nature, transmitted via Twitter, and showing hate speech. The intention was to learn how they spread over the network, how they influence stances and generate trends in reaction, and what effects they can trigger in reality. Such a study would appear essential, moreover, if their impact is to be headed off or countered, not only through approaches that are legislative and punitive, but also from a preventive angle within the area of education (Chetty & Alathur, 2018).

2. Material and methods

The aim of this research was to investigate hate speech coming from the far right, arising specifically from ideological motives and propagated through Twitter. The methodology chosen was a mixed approach (Bagur Pons et al., 2021; Chaves-Montero, 2018), combining quantitative research tools (T-Hoarder and Gephi), needed to cope with the volume of data to be analysed, with more qualitative instruments (MAXQDA), so as

to achieve a greater understanding and a more in-depth view of the phenomenon under consideration (Rebollo, 2021).

This line of investigation lies within Digital Ethnography (Hine, 2015; McGranahan, 2019), an online research method that takes its inspiration from ethnography, and serves to comprehend social interactions in present-day contexts of digital communication. Digital Ethnography (Pink et al., 2019) is an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on viewpoints and perspectives from communication, anthropology, and computer sciences to study the linkages between social practices and the production of meanings through technological mediation (Bárceñas & Preza, 2019). It has become established as one of the most frequently used research tools in on-line contexts (Airoldi, 2018; McGranahan, 2019).

2.1. Sample

Five campaigns were selected, related to ideologically-motivated political hate speech propagated via Spanish-language Twitter. These matched four criteria selected by using the Delphi technique, which relies on reaching consensus in successive rounds of questionnaires and structured debates, in this instance of a panel drawn from various universities, involving ten academics and experts on communication, social networks, education, and sociology in the Spanish and Latin American sphere addressed by the research. They had to be:

- Representative cases, directed against governments, or public figures within them, that had a progressive or social ideology, considered left-wing.
- Campaigns whose motivation and objective were clearly political, their intention being to cause off-line mobilizations in society against these governments.
- Mass campaigns, defined as having more than 100,000 tweets related to a given hashtag, which would distinguish them from traditional political campaigns on a smaller scale.
- Campaigns making extensive use of false accounts, with an eight-digit reference. This is because, when large numbers of accounts are created, Twitter by default assigns them a user identity ending in eight figures, needing human intervention to change it. Likewise, campaigns using many recently created new accounts, in existence for under one year (Luque et al., 2021).

The five instances chosen were the following. An idiomatic English version of the title of each is given in square brackets, together with a brief explanation.

1) #SánchezVeteYa (Spain) Note spelling error, Sánchez with missing Z.

[Sánchez Must Go – refers to Pedro Sánchez, leader of the PSOE (Socialist party) and Spanish Prime Minister]

2) #IglesiasVeteYa (Spain).

[Iglesias Must Go – refers to Pablo Iglesias, leader of the left-wing Podemos party and Deputy Prime Minister]

3) #AndrésNoMientrasOtraVez (Ecuador) Note spelling error, Mientras for Mientas [lie], with added R.

[Andrés Stop Lying – refers to Andrés Arauz, presidential candidate of the centre-left UNES coalition]

4) #GolpeDeEstadoK (Argentina).

[K's Takeover – refers to Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Vice-President from the left-wing TODOS coalition]

5) #FraundeEnMesa (Peru) Note spelling error, Fraunde for Fraude [fraud], with added N.

[Electoral Fraud – refers to allegations about the election of Pedro Castillo as President by a narrow margin]

Apart from the criteria noted, a further reason to select these campaigns was that they took place between May 2020 and June 2021, coinciding with the Covid pandemic and the ensuing enhanced use of social networks (Cervantes & Chaparro, 2021). Three of them were specifically picked out because of their spelling errors, which were replicated identically by at least 20,000 accounts, this being an indicator of the use of bots or automated accounts (Puyosa, 2017), as employed in deliberate political campaigns. After all, it is out of the question that 30,000 individuals would make the same spelling mistake at the same time (Calvo et al., 2019; Persily, 2017; Vargo et al., 2017). In all, 1,442,781 tweets and retweets (RTs) were collected directly through the Twitter Application Programming Interface over different periods of time.

Table 1. General Data for Cases Analysed

| | #SánchezVeteYa (18/04/2020) | #IglesiasVeteYa (18/04/2020) | #FraudeEnMesa (08/06/2021) | #AndrésNoMientas OtraVez (22/03/2021) | #GolpeDeEstadoK (25/08/2020) |
|--|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| Country | Spain | Spain | Peru | Ecuador | Argentina |
| Tweets with correct hashtag | 414,538 | 249,471 | 125,500 | 216,000 | 326,286 |
| Tweets with erroneous hashtag | 73,761 | -- | 5,425 | 31,800 | -- |
| Total accounts | 55,220 | 44,895 | 20,866 | 23,739 | 48,530 |
| Accounts created over last year | 9,368 (16.9%) | 7,706 (17.1%) | 3,833 (18.3%) | 2,292 (9.6%) | 9,168 (18.9%) |
| Accounts with eight digits | 4,013 (7.2%) | 3,464 (7.7%) | 1,861 (8.9%) | 1,317 (5.5%) | 3,480 (7.2%) |
| Percentage of eight-digit accounts in erroneous hashtags | 7.9% | -- | 12.4% | 6.2% | -- |
| Percentage of Retweets | 74% | 78% | 77% | 75% | 74% |
| Percentage of Replies | 9% | 8% | 7% | 13% | 9% |

2.2. Research tools

T-Hoarder was used to download the tweets linked to the selected hashtags, using the open-code T-hoarder_kit method, which fulfils requirements for objectivity and transparency (Congosto, 2017). Thereafter, T-Hoarder and its algorithm were utilized to classify tweets and their relational metadata, on the basis of activity and impact (Villodre et al., 2021), along thematic lines using three orientations: time, space and relevance (Congosto, 2017). This first phase provided the foundations for using the Gephi program, an open-source interactive tool for visualizing and studying large network graphs and complex systems, looking for patterns and trends (Cherven, 2013). Gephi was employed to analyse the frequency and impact of messages, so as to undertake graphic modelling according to total RTs received, with spatial ordering using the ForceAtlas2 algorithm.

A selection of the most representative data obtained with T-Hoarder was then put through the MAXQDA Analytics Pro program (Release 20.4.1) to achieve a more qualitative approach. A first filtering of the messages picked out those containing terms repeated more than 200 times. Focus was then concentrated on terms related to hate speech (scorn, rejection, humiliation, harassment, disparagement or expressions of hatred towards individuals because they belong to a given group). The "Word Combinations" tool of MAXQDA was employed to determine which words linked to the most frequently repeated terms appeared or contributed to highlighting this hate speech. Finally, the "Keyword-in-Context" tool served to relate the selected terms and the words connected to them in their actual context, allowing localized analysis of the production of the discourse in question. The schematic for this procedure may be consulted through the hyperlink: <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.16649467.v4>.

3. Analysis and outcomes

3.1. Results of scrutiny with T-Hoarder and Gephi

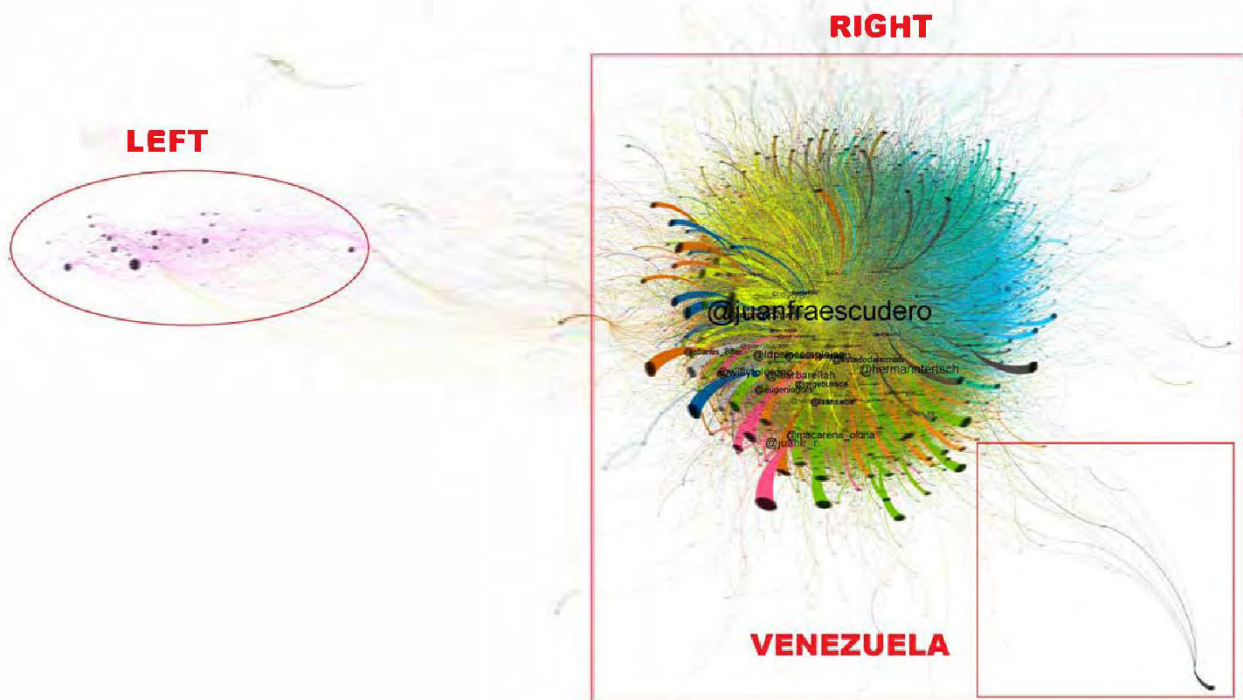
Five graphs produced with Gephi are presented below, one for each of the five campaigns studied. To create and shape each diagram, the following elements were taken into consideration: (a) the number of nodes, that is Twitter accounts looked at; (b) the number of edges, in other words interactions between accounts; and (c) modularity, in that the percentage of interactions is used to establish communities, understood as more cohesive subsections of the graph, or groups of nodes more strongly interconnected one with another, which are shown in the same colour in the graphs.

The spatial ordering of these nodes was achieved by means of the ForceAtlas2 algorithm, which takes into consideration a range of functions in performing this spatial distribution. Two of particular note were: (a)

closeness, which sees a node as nearer to another the higher the number of interactions there are between them, and (b) intermediation, putting a node between two others when it has interacted with them, so that, for example, if a node A has interactions with two nodes, B and C, it is placed on the graph in the space between them.

Figure 1 shows two large clusters. The right-hand grouping has many more nodes, edges and communities, and a greater degree of concentration, implying that there is a considerable percentage of interactions between the accounts. In contrast, the left-hand grouping is much more diffuse and is located at a distance from the right-hand community because of its eccentricity, in other words its lack of interactions with this other cluster, as its percentage of interaction is much lower. Because of its diffuseness, the left-hand cluster is of quite some spatial extent, even though the number of accounts in it is much smaller. This indicates that there is no great co-ordination among them, unlike in the right-hand cluster.

Figure 1. Chart for #SánchezVeteYa (Spain)



The distance between the two communities clearly demonstrates polarization, as the left and the right have virtually no interactions. In the right-hand cluster a contrast may be observed between the upper half, comprising the communities coloured yellow, orange, blue, and greenish blue, where there are no nodes with any significant degree of retweeting, and the centre and lower half, where there are concentrations of accounts with a major number of RTs.

The accounts seeming largest in size can thus be interpreted as an opinion matrix, the structure for political communication creating opinions and receiving many RTs¹, as distinguished from the dissemination matrix, which is the set of accounts spreading messages, often false, automated or trolling centres, their names not appearing on the graph, signifying that they send RTs but do not receive them.

Finally, an appendix to the cluster may be observed to the lower right, separated by reason of its limited interactions. This represents a community of Venezuelan accounts not interacting with the others, and goes to show the international reverberation of this campaign.

Of the visually largest accounts, the matrix of opinion in the right-hand cluster, several stand out, particularly that of the tweeter with greatest impact in this campaign, @juanfraescudero, Juan Francisco Escudero, a person close to the far-right political party Vox. Similarly, there are Hermann Tertsch (a Member of the European Parliament for Vox, and an associate of the Floridablanca Network, a foundation belonging to the Atlas Network), Macarena Olona of Vox, Luis del Pino (a member of the Hazte Oír association and writer for

the Libertad Digital online newspaper, both organizations linked to right-wing, extreme right-wing and ultra-Catholic sectors) or the anonymous tweetstar using Willy Tolerdo as an account name.

Figure 2. Chart for #FraudeEnMesa (Peru)

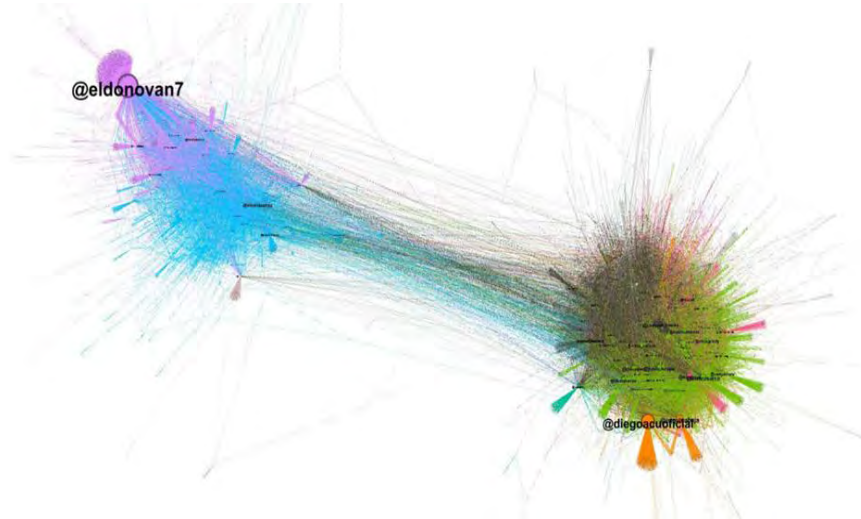


Figure 2 looks at the campaign launched by the losing candidate for the presidency of Peru, Keiko Fujimori, during one of her press conferences. It is possible to observe two large clusters, clearly polarized. On the left there is a single community complaining about the campaign, or mocking it, because there was no proof of any electoral fraud. On the other side, two main communities can be seen, with the accounts receiving most retweets lying at the bottom of the chart, the most prominent owned by a presenter by Willax TV, Diego Acuña (@diegoacuoficial). This is at one end of the graph, since many accounts interact only with this account, plus a few accounts in its community. Willax TV spread fake news about supposed electoral fraud in Peru (Quesada and Fowks, 2021). During the campaign, it made the claim that Pablo Iglesias had travelled from Spain to Peru to help Pedro Castillo. This hoax was also put around by right-leaning Spanish mass media, like esRadio, and led to demonstrations in front of the hotel where Iglesias was alleged to be staying (Newtral, 2021).

Figure 3. Chart for #AndrésNoMientasOtraVez (Ecuador)



Figure 3 shows a single cluster without polarization, in which the accounts receiving most retweets are in a central position, indicating that these come from various communities, on the basis of the centrality of intermediation. This is the opposite case from the previous instance. Although there are various different communities, as indicated by the colours, they form one group and the same action front for spreading messages favourable to the man who, at that time, was a candidate for the presidency of Ecuador, Guillermo Lasso (@lassoguillermo), and against Andrés Arauz, the rival candidate. One prominent account is that of Carlos Andrés Vera (@polificcion), a member of the Ecuador Libre foundation, part of the Atlas Network, headed by Guillermo Lasso himself. Other noteworthy accounts belonged to Fernando Villavicencio, the director of the Periodismo de Investigación news service that, together with Carlo Andrés Vera, spread videos, later shown to be doctored, of the candidate Andrés Arauz during the electoral campaign that went viral.

Figure 4. Chart for #GolpeDeEstadoK (Argentina)

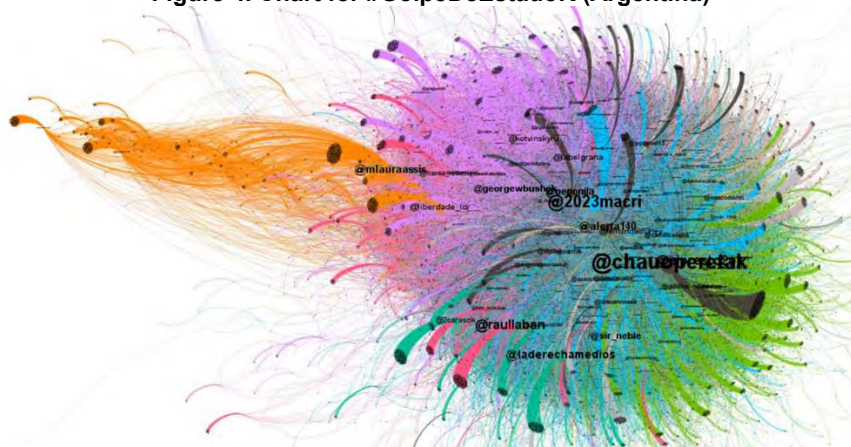


Figure 4 is the graph covering the campaign relating to a claimed “Kirchnerist” putsch, the adjective being based on the married surname of the Vice-President of Argentina, Cristina Fernández [de Kirchner]. It is feasible to identify a large cluster made up of various communities and an outlier community polarized against it. The accounts with the most RTs are fairly central, receiving interactions from the range of communities forming a common front against the Argentine government. Almost all the more prominent accounts are anonymous, like @2023macri or @chauoperetak, or they are of digital media spreading fake news and hate messages, like @laderechamedios or the account of the digital journalist Eduardo Prestofelippo “El Presto” (@elpresto2ok), who was arrested for online threats to kill the Vice-President. All of these are in the media ambit of the foundations, supported by Atlas Network, promoting Javier Milei and José-Luis Espert, right-wing libertarian political candidates, in Argentina, and politicians and groupings like Bolsonaro, Trump and Vox elsewhere.

Figure 5. Chart for #IglesiasVeteYa (Spain)

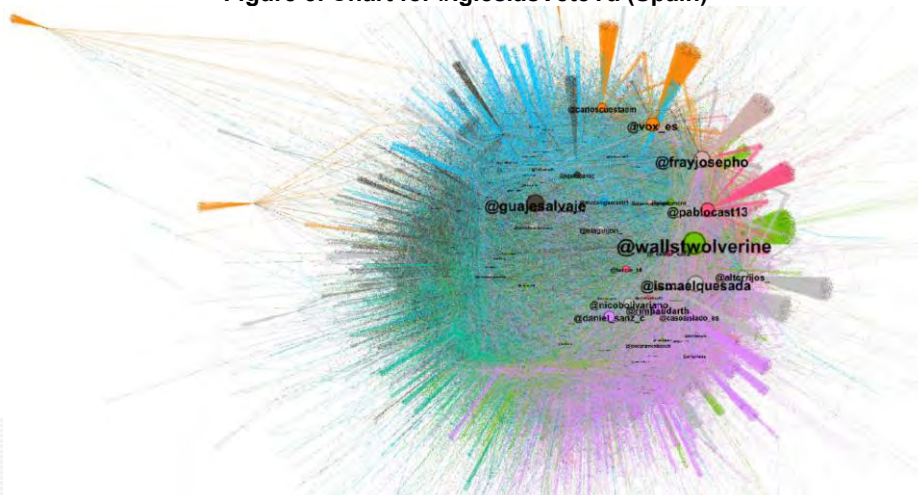


Figure 5 shows a single cluster of several communities with scarcely any polarization, where the vast majority of accounts that stand out are on the right-hand edge and quite close to one another. The campaign was directed against the man who, at that moment, was Deputy Prime Minister in the Spanish Government. This was a campaign by right-leaning parties against the Government, but focused principally on the most radical part of the coalition, rather similarly to what happened in the Argentinian case. In this attack, certain anonymous accounts stand out, for instance @frayjosepho, @nicobolivariano or @guajesalvaje, as do the accounts of the far-right Vox and right-wing Partido Popular parties, such as the latter's online communications director Ismael Quesada, as well as @pablocast13, a member of the same party's youth movement. Likewise, there were journalists or media of the same tendency, such as Carlos Cuesta Arce (who has worked for the online OkDiario) or the Caso Aislado news website, both known to have published false news.

3.2. Results of scrutiny with MAXQDA

The next sections lay out the results of an analysis of the tweets selected on the basis of the frequency of words most often repeated (used more than 200 times). A visual representation was produced in the shape of a word cloud, as a function of frequency of use (Ballestar et al., 2020). Word clouds are a widely-used method because of their efficiency in summing up large quantities of data and giving an impression of the ideological views that lie behind a textual discourse. Finally, the results from the keywords in context study are presented.

3.2.1. Results for frequency of words most often repeated in the campaigns

In the word cloud generated for the campaign #SánchezVeteYa, it may be observed that the words most often repeated involve expressions associated with the misspelt HT lacking the Z. The highest frequency figures relate to the following: #iglesiasveteya [Iglesias must go], #gobiernocriminal [government of crooks], #sanchezaprisión [jail for Sánchez], #iglesiasaprisión [jail for Iglesias], #gobiernodimisión [government must resign], #socialcomunista [Social-Communist], #nichobolivariano [nest of reds], #golpedeestado [putsch] and #dictadura [dictatorship]. The most central expressions involve clear references to demands for the resignation of the government led by Sánchez, and there are abundant aggressive and insulting expressions. There were also expressions relating to the crisis and pandemic. The full word cloud may be consulted at the website: <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.16649260.v1>

In the word cloud for the campaign #IglesiasVeteYa, a number of the most common expressions in the previous campaign may be seen to recur, for instance #iglesiasveteya [Iglesias must go], #sanchezveteya [Sánchez must go], #iglesiasaprisión [jail for Iglesias], and #golpedeestado [putsch]. There are some new appearances related to the management of the pandemic by the government, one of them equating the measures adopted with lies, #gobiernodelbulo [hoax government], and another referring to health measures taken, #mascarillas [facemasks]. There is a high frequency of expressions that are not merely negative or critical of the government, but actually hostile, such as #gobiernocriminal [government of crooks], #gobiernodeinútiles [government of incompetents]. The word cloud in question is available for consultation at the web address: <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.16649296.v1>

The word cloud generated for the campaign #AndresNoMientasOtraVez shows a similar pattern to the two previous campaigns. The HT with the spelling mistake of the added R, is repeated. Expressions re-appear that involve accusations, or are insulting and alarmist in nature, instances being #miente [lies], #renuncia [resign], #corrupcion [corruption] or #escándalo [scandal]. There are often also insults #borregodatecuenta [wake up idiot]. Similarly to the other campaigns considered, there are allusions to the Covid pandemic (<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.16677760.v1>).

As for the Argentinian instance, expressions and HTs are spread that denounce a supposed takeover #golpedeestadoenargentina [coup d'état in Argentina], #democracia [democracy], #golpista [putschist], #dictadurak [K dictatorship], among others. It is possible to note high-frequency use of words constituting very serious accusations against a democratically elected government, described as #traidor [traitorous], #golpista [putschist], #ilegal [illegal] and #totalitario [totalitarian], as observed, indeed, in all the campaigns, although not with such virulence. References to the pandemic are also present here, as may be seen at the web address: <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.16654786.v1>

Finally, the word cloud generated in the campaign #FraudeEnMesa can be seen to have as its most common expression the misspelt HT, with added N, itself. There is an attempt to spread suspicions about the democratically held elections through expressions like #impugnadas [challenged] or #robar [theft], and

accusations like #criminal [criminal]. Similarly, insults even at a personal level are repeated once again, such as #tunohascambiadopelon [you've not changed, baldy] (<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.16654864.v1>). It is true that neither the campaigns studied, nor the specific messages spread by them, constitute an actual hate crime in themselves, so that no legal complaints were filed about encouraging them. However, it is obvious that in many of the messages transmitted in tweets, the language used may be seen to be hostile and intolerant towards a given group merely because it holds a different ideology.

3.2.2. Analysis of keywords in context

On the basis of the most often repeated combinations of words and those selected for keyword in context analysis, the following results emerge. Aggressive language is used in all the campaigns considered, with insults and expressions suggesting lack of legitimacy and accusations forming part of the tweet texts, given here as idiomatic translations in italics.

- Adolf Hitler was born 131 years ago. Remember that National SOCIALIST dictator came to power in a crisis, taking advantage of a State of Emergency! We need autopsies NOW to understand what is going on. Meanwhile Iglesias and Sánchez must go [campaign @iglesiasveteya].
- Shitty idiots. It's been seen what he's made of, this puppet worked with the same government he's so critical of until he was out on his ear, just because ... [campaign @andresnomientrasotravez].
- Always remember that not all idiots are Communists, but all Communists are idiots [campaign @golpedeestadok].

The government, even though democratically elected, is depicted as criminal and very serious accusations are levelled against it (fraud, criminality, plotting takeovers), which appeal to emotions and confrontation.

- The only solution for all this chaos, this huge betrayal, is military action, of course. Sánchez's bunch of crooks need to be brought to trial [campaign @sancheveteya].
- These are very SERIOUS facts! The far left and Communists are rigging an INSTITUTIONAL takeover and we need to speak up and protest! [campaign @iglesiasveteya].
- On 19 DEC there was an institutional coup d'état smashing our National Constitution and we're under a totalitarian regime. Let's act! We're covered by Article 36 [campaign @golpedeestadok].
- Accounts are used to spread accusatory messages (corruption, fraud, lies) without any proof, and often without even the slightest evidence
- This is for sure. We're under a full-blown dictatorship. Critics of this Social-Communist Government's management of affairs will be put on trial. The police spokesperson said so in a press conference [campaign @sancheveteya].
- Sergio Massa promised to get rid of corrupt politicians and ended up joining them to ruin the country [campaign @golpedeestadok].
- The great "criminal organization" might have the election stolen from it. Something's amiss, isn't it? Or is it that the real criminal organization used your loathing so you wouldn't look where you needed to? [campaign @fraudenemesa].

Hostile language is used against groups with an ideology defending equality or fairness. Very often they are singled out and called criminals, with governments who share this progressive ideology being accused of being murderous regimes, terrorists, usurers, frauds, Communists, Chavistas, Fascists.

- Guests of killer regimes, sponsors of terrorists, housing profiteers, grant tricksters, and tax cheats, trying to give lessons about morality [campaign @iglesiasveteya].
- These Communists are just like ticks that sink their fangs into victims and kill them slowly! FUERZA ARGENTINA AGAINST COMMUNISTS [campaign @golpedeestadok]. Note: Fuerza Argentina is a right-wing organization claiming to be trying to save the country from the clutches of corruption.
- #AndresNoMientrasOtraVez you're like every other idle, useless, lickspittle, lying Communist [campaign @andresnomientrasotravez].

References to COVID-19 are present in all the campaigns analysed. Governments are blamed for the crisis and how it is managed, and even accused of premeditated murder of the victims of coronavirus.

- Sánchez is right about one thing, we must unite, but united against the crooked, putschist, totalitarian government we have in Spain [campaign @sancheveteya].
- The chaotic handling of temporary layoffs has put 50,000 firms on the verge of bankruptcy #SancheVeteYa #GobiernoSanchezDimision #GobiernoDimisionYa» [campaign @sancheveteya].

It can be seen that this speech is attempting to cause a deep feeling of rejection towards a specific group, dehumanizing it simply because it has a different ideology (Pérez Calle et al., 2019). In this way, social networks, rather than acting as a space for freedom of expression, are converted by certain sectors into a tool for encouraging political hate speech.

4. Discussion and conclusions

It does not seem that political hate speech emerges spontaneously and in a random way. Rather, it shows a clear political intention, stirred up by certain groupings with the aim of destabilizing democratic governments or public figures representing them. Such discourse comes from, and is encouraged by, groups that are in the minority but very powerful (Atlas Network, Hazte Oír, and similar), strongly linked one with another and having very deep pockets to fund their plans (Albin, 2021). The campaigns analysed here follow a highly noticeable configuration of diffusion of messages, acting like a sort of digital militia, which even attempts to pick out and pursue on line anybody who questions the ideas being spread (Busón, 2020). In this way those involved become what are known as haters (Recuero, 2017).

In all these cases, a common pattern can be detected. Groups linked to the far right organize campaigns through a number of authentic accounts, which are immediately followed by the action of a large number of fake accounts intended to convert certain given hashtags into trends on Twitter and thus to influence the state of public opinion. Among the evidence that was found of the automation of these processes, it is possible to quote the repetition of certain spelling mistakes identically as hashtags are disseminated, or the considerable presence of false accounts. All of the campaigns analysed had between 6% and 10% of automated accounts, the main function of which is to send RTs to the opinion matrix, when the normal figure lies between 1% and 3%. Moreover, there was a significant increase in the percentage of this type of account in hashtags with errors. A third factor is the striking growth in the number of accounts created just prior to campaigns and also used to spread them, an increase in excess of 20%. A noteworthy example may be seen on the following hyperlink: <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.16695127.v1>.

As has been demonstrated in previous research (Luque et al., 2021; Stanley, 2019), such campaigns are disguised as supposedly real news, though not offering trustworthy sources (Molina & Magallón, 2019). One of their aims is to create an illusion around imaginary enemies or dangers, so that the public at large will come to see as threats the political and ideological proposals associated with groups, governments, and parties that are politically and socially progressive, left-wing or pro human rights. To that end, so-called “political term dictionaries” are drawn up to impose a given highly-biased political viewpoint, with constant repetition of aggressive, insulting phrasing such as “criminal”, “Fascists”, “shit of a Communist”, and the like (Busón, 2020), as may be seen in the campaign #IglesiasVeteYa.

This form of political speech tends to focus interest on emotional matters (Molina & Magallón, 2019; Richards, 2010), appealing to irrationality, so that news is swallowed uncritically and shared rapidly, hence gaining visibility and going viral, thanks to matrices of diffusion that act as transmitters. The bellicose language and attacks, going down even to a personal level, contribute to emotional polarization (Magallón & Campos, 2021) against the “other”, generating a climate of confrontation, fear, exasperation and permanent conflict. The hope is that the matrix for the contrary opinion will react to these political hate messages, in order for their content to go viral through interaction with opponents, as seen in the campaigns #FraudeEnMesa and #SánchezVeteYa.

The campaigns considered attempted to create a social climate questioning democracy (Revenga, 2015) through discrediting politics as a mechanism for participation and representation, by calling democratically elected governments “putschists”. They spread the message that elections are not to be trusted because electoral fraud has become a part of the system itself, whenever the leaders they favour are not successful. The strategy from the far right is gradually being adopted and shared by conservative sectors, retweeting and disseminating its messages. What is most serious is the possibility of these becoming performative in nature, since in the cases analysed the political hate speech spread through Twitter seems to have had some capability to trigger a climate of political hatred in offline social reality. This leads to a situation in which it becomes increasingly difficult to construct bridges of understanding in real life, or to seek agreements between those who differ, on the basis of the common good, tolerance and social justice.

Spanish law, indeed Article 20 of the Constitution itself, guarantees a right to freedom of expression of ideas or opinions. However, this is not an absolute and unlimited privilege, but must be exercised in such a way as not to infringe the rights of others, in particular their rights to honour, dignity, equality and non-discrimination (Grau-Álvarez, 2021), as recommended in the “Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online”

signed by the European Union with Twitter and other social networks. Hence, the route forward is not just legal punitive measures against political hate speech, but also education (Glucksmann, 2005) that will prevent it and give future generations the tools needed to analyse and respond to it.

Messages, news and campaigns arriving via social networks are nowadays the prime source of reading material and content for a large number of people, especially younger folk (Andrade-Vargas et al., 2021). One of the tools that has been implemented in this context in formal education in Spain, was the subject "Education for Citizenship and Human Rights" instituted by the Basic Law on Education (LOE) of 2006. It is true that in 2013 the Basic Law on Enhancing the Quality of Education (LOMCE) eliminated this subject, but the new Basic Law Amending the Basic Law on Education enacted in 2020 (LOMLOE) reinstates a subject entitled "Education on Civic and Ethical Values". According to Article 121 of the law, the subject is intended to make pupils into future citizens committed to the values of democracy, and to develop in them digital skills and a critical media literacy that teaches them to read and interpret the world around them. This may be a key opportunity to provide them with tools for analysing and responding to political hate speech on networks. All the same, it must be admitted that such tools do not always show significant effectiveness (Guan et al., 2021).

Finally, it must be noted that among the limitations of this piece of work are both the restricted number of campaigns analysed, not permitting any greater generalization of results, and the current limited impact of the Twitter network itself, as indicated. Finally, there are the limitations of the MAXQDA software in respect of the quantities of data it allows to be input and analysed. In future investigations it would be of interest to bring in further analytical tools to allow an enhanced analysis of the impacts of political hate speech on social networks, as well as its effects on the general public and the process of political decision-making.

Notes

¹The expression "matrix of opinion" is used here in the sense described, somewhat different from normal usage, which considers it a structure transmitting an idea in the form of speech or contents. This is in order to distinguish these accounts, creators of opinions, from those merely passing them on (the "matrix of dissemination").

Authors' Contribution

Idea, E.D.G.; Literature Review (State of Affairs), E.D.G., L.B., J.S.; Methodology, J.M., M.V.; Data Analysis, J.M., M.V.; Results, J.M., M.V.; Discussion and Conclusions, E.D.G., M.V., L.B., J.S.; Initial Draft, E.D.G., L.B., J.S.; Final Revisions, L.B., M.V., J.S., E.D.G.; Design of Project and Sponsorship, E.D.G., M.V., L.B.

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