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Political communication and social media: State of art from 2008 to 2018

Comunicación política y medios sociales: análisis del estado de la cuestión de 2008 a 2018

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Abstract

This paper is intended as a State of the art regarding political communication research of a decade (2008 – 2018) in four of the most prestigious scientific journals of the Journal Citation Reports (JCR-WoS). A systematized research was conducted after which 357 articles were selected. In search of clarity, the paper follows the structure of Wolton's triangle and explains the main effects social media had for politicians, media and citizens. Overall, current research is more empirical and is more focused on new technologies, placing them at the very core of the academic debate.

Resumen

El presente artículo ofrece un estado del arte en la investigación en comunicación política sobre medios sociales entre 2008 y 2018. Se analizan 357 artículos publicados en cuatro revistas académicas de comunicación del primer cuartil del Journal Citation Reports (JCR-WoS). En la exposición se sigue la estructura marcada por el triángulo de Wolton, resumiendo las aportaciones de los investigadores sobre la incidencia de los medios sociales en los políticos, los medios de comunicación y los ciudadanos. En general, se constata una evolución en la importancia que la investigación, muy empírica y de escasa perspectiva comparada, concede a las nuevas tecnologías hasta situarlas en el centro del debate académico.

Keywords

Social media; Political communication; Research; Scientific Journals

Palabras clave

Medios sociales; comunicación política; investigación; revistas científicas

1. Introduction

The Internet and social media have upset the balance of the classical division described by Dominique Wolton in 1999, which characterised political communication as a triad consisting of politicians, the media and the public (Wolton, 1999). These changes have been reflected in the academic research of the past decade, making this an ideal moment to offer a review of the literature in order to establish the state of the question in the field of social media and political communication. Based on an analysis of social media research published in four of the journals with the biggest impact factors in political communication (*Journal of Communication*, *New Media & Society*, *Political Communication* and *International Journal of Press/Politics*), this study aims to summarise the main issues explored by researchers in the last decade and to provide a literature review of the directions taken by these studies.

The main objective of this study has been to identify the trends in research on political communication and to assess how it has evolved over the past decade. In addition, as a secondary objective, this study seeks to evaluate how the research explores the effects of the contemporary communication scene on the three dimensions of Wolton's triad (1999): politicians, the public and the media, with a special focus on social media. Phenomena like normalisation, engagement and homophily are identified, analysed and assessed in their context, presenting a comprehensive overview of the transformations that social media have introduced to the nature of political communication as described by Wolton.

2. Methodology

The purpose of this article is to present a systematic literature review (Codina, 2018), intended to present the state of the question in the field of political communication on social media. This research is based on an analysis of 357 articles published in four communication journals ranked in the first quartile of the Journal Citation Reports (JCR) Social Sciences Edition, namely: *Journal of Communication*, *New Media & Society*, *Political Communication* and *International Journal of Press/Politics*. The choice of these journals was based both on their current position among communication journals in the JCR (Table 1), and on their evolution and importance over the last ten years.

Table 1: Ranking of the four journals analysed

	Impact factor	Quartile in communication	Position
Journal of Communication	3,729	Q1	2/84
New Media & Society	3,121	Q1	4/84
Political Communication	2,738	Q1	8/84
International Journal of Press/Politics	2,738	Q1	8/84

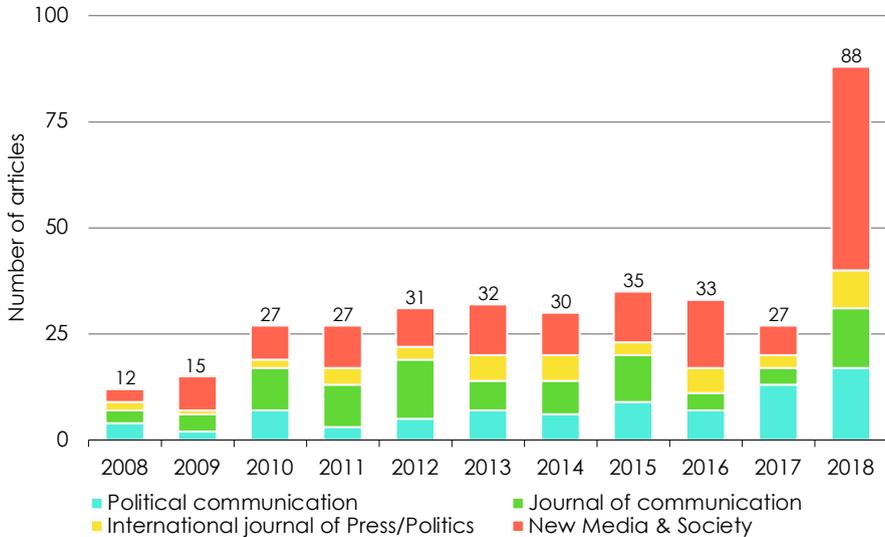
Source: Journal Citation Reports Social Sciences Edition (Clarivate Analytics, 2018)

Our study covers a decade of research in political communication from the first article analysed, by Bennett, Breunig & Givens (2008), through to the last, by Kim (2018). The start date chosen was marked by Barack Obama's presidential campaign in 2008, considered the first election of the twenty-first century in which "Political Communication 2.0" on the Internet, and especially on social networks, played a prominent role in the final outcome. It also covers a period during which the political class adapted the use of social media as a channel for both communication and mobilisation, and which consequently includes studies of major campaigns like the presidential elections of Barack Obama and Donald Trump, the French elections in 2017 and the Brexit referendum. In addition to the articles published in the last decade by the four journals listed above, references are included that fall outside the scope of this study. In view of the relevance of other studies cited by the authors of the articles that comprise the object of study, we decided that the sample should also include certain books and papers published prior to 2008 or in other journals that help to better understand the phenomena analysed.

To collect the sample for analysis, we followed the guidelines established by Codina (2018) for the performance of a systematic literature review, supported by a content analysis of the final sample. The sample collection process thus involved four stages: searching for content; assessing the initial sample; analysing common features; and finally, summarising the findings for their presentation in this article. The

discussion (Graphic 1). While in the earliest issues in the sample digital technology had only a token presence, from 2010 on an increasing number of authors began acknowledging the key role played by social media, in parallel with the increased recognition accorded to them by politicians and the public (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2016). There was also a clear evolution in the view of social networks: a shift from an initial cyber-optimism that argued that digital media would allow greater scrutiny of political leaders and broaden public deliberation (Jenkins, Nikolaev & Porpora, 2012) towards a kind of cyber-pessimism that recognises the potential negative effects of the new technologies.

Graphic 1: Evolution of articles about social media



Source: Compiled by authors.

The most productive authors who have published work in the journals selected over the past ten years are Cristian Vaccari from Loughborough University, followed by Daniel Kreiss from the University of North Carolina and Homero Gil de Zúñiga from the University of Vienna (Table 2).

Table 3: Most prolific authors and universities of origin

Author	University	Repetitions
Cristian Vaccari	Loughborough University	7
Daniel Kreiss	University of North Carolina	5
Homero Gil de Zúñiga	University of Alicante	5
Magdalena Wojcieszak	University of California, Davis	4
Pablo J. Boczkowski	Northwestern University	4
Sanne Kruikemeier	Universiteit van Amsterdam	4
W. Lance Bennett	University of Washington	4
Eun-Ju Lee	Seoul National University	3
Rachel K. Gibson	University of Manchester	3
Shelley Boulianne	MacEwan University	3

Source: Compiled by authors.

The research results are set out below according to a structure based on Wolton's triad, summing up researchers' contributions on the impact of social media on politicians, the media and the public.

3.1. Politics and social media

The political class has progressed from the use of new technologies merely as an extension of traditional media to an awareness of their specific qualities. In this sense, political communication analysts today speak of "netroots", echo chambers, disinformation, virality, incidental exposure, homogenising, polarisation and homophily (Usher, Littman, & Holcomb, 2018). From an academic perspective, research

on social networks and politicians has focused on the analysis of three major phenomena: normalisation, the permanent campaign, and de-ideologisation.

3.1.1. Normalisation

The earliest studies dealt with social media from a certain distance, classifying them as amateur endeavours in contrast with the professional traditional media; however, no author today dismisses the impact they have had on contemporary politics. Indeed, academic research has focused on identifying and analysing the real reach that social media have achieved in the political sphere. For some authors, social media decisively influence and even challenge political systems, while other researchers take a more moderate view of their impact on contemporary politics.

Those who argue that the rise of social media has constituted a challenge to contemporary political systems claim that the Internet has facilitated increased exposure and political presence for groups that had previously been marginal in media and social terms (Potter & Dunaway, 2016; Theocharis, Barberá, Fazekas, Adrian Popa & Parnet, 2016). This increased presence would require political parties, traditional media and the general public to pay them more attention. As many of these groups are lean towards ideological extremes, their impact would also be evident on those in power and on public debate, thereby affecting the political system (Potter & Dunaway, 2016).

However, this impact is not the same in every country, and according to Potter & Dunaway (2016), depends on two main factors: the type of electoral system, and the maturity of the political system itself. For the first factor, these authors distinguish between two types of electoral systems: permissive (mainly proportional systems with low electoral thresholds, large districts and a wide distribution of seats) and restrictive (simple majority systems that hinder the entry of new parties). Potter & Dunaway thus argue that the rise of social media has benefited marginal parties more in permissive systems, while in restrictive systems the traditional parties have maintained their advantageous position (Potter & Dunaway, 2016).

The second factor influencing the capacity of social media to undermine political systems is the maturity of those systems. The more consolidated a political system is, the greater the power that traditional institutions and political parties will have to control the rise and radicalisation of new groups (Aalberg, van Aelst, & Curran, 2010; Potter & Dunaway, 2016).

In any case, the increase in the number of extremist parties cannot be attributed exclusively to social media. There are thus authors, like Chadwick (2013) and Wright (2012), who reject the hypothesis that social media challenge or question political systems and take a more nuanced view of the role the Internet has played in the rise of extremist groups. According to these authors, the emergence of social media has shaken up the political and media systems, as occurred previously with radio, cinema and television, but after a few years of adaptation, all the innovations brought by the Internet will have been integrated into the system and thus normalised (Wright, 2012; Chadwick, 2013).

3.1.2. The permanent campaign and increased competition

In 1980, the journalist Sidney Blumenthal suggested that communication by political parties was increasingly focused on the creation of an image, even going as far as describing it as a kind of program of statecraft (Blumenthal, quoted in Canel & Sanders, 2010). If we compare this suggestion with the contemporary subordination of the word to the image on social networks pointed out by some authors (Campus, 2010; Langer, 2010; Hermans & Vergeer, 2013), Blumenthal's definition seems still to be valid.

Communications by politicians on social networks sidestep the controls over election propaganda and the filter of traditional media to give them potentially unlimited access to the public (Campus, 2010; Hermans & Vergeer, 2013; Mancini, 1999). Social media give politicians a larger degree of independence from journalists and greater freedom to disseminate their messages (Potter & Dunaway, 2016; Theocharis et al., 2016). However, this direct communication with the public is based more on image than on substance (Campus, 2010). Social media allow a more emotional connection with users and generate the perception of closeness (Enli, 2015), and it is this objective that largely guides the use that politicians make of social media (Gibson & McAllister, 2015; Theocharis et al., 2016).

This situation represents an added pressure on politicians because they can see their messages responded to on social media by groups or movements that are particularly active and organised in the digital world. Back in 1968, Michael Lipsky observed that when a social movement could not attract media attention, it would generally resort to alternative strategies and media to disseminate its messages (Lipsky, 1968). Social media have served as a refuge for these movements. As a result, when politicians try to place their

messages in the digital environment, they are responded to not only by their traditional adversaries but also by new actors (Stier, Schünemann, & Steiger, 2018). Public debate takes on greater importance on social networks and politicians are forced to submit themselves to the direct public scrutiny of the public, without any intermediation.

However, this proliferation of discourses does not mean that politicians have lost their leading role. Authors like Stier & Schünemann (2018) argue that although competition has increased and the voices taking part in public debate have multiplied, politicians enjoy two advantages over social groups: greater media exposure, with the dissemination and prominence that this gives their ideas; and a more credible image, based on their institutional status.

3.1.3. De-ideologisation

In recent years, the political stage has been transformed by the exponential growth in both information and information sources. However, greater quantity is not synonymous with greater quality. In their efforts to get their ideas to the broadest audience possible, politicians sacrifice content, simplifying the messages to such an extent that they are stripped of their ideological substance (Bowyer, Kahne & Middaugh, 2018; Stier et al., 2018).

Social media have contributed to this process of de-ideologisation, as they foster the personalisation or privatisation of politics (Langer, 2010; Rodríguez-Virgili, Jandura & Rebolledo, 2014; Rebolledo, 2017). In this sense, the possibilities offered by the new media are exploited by campaigns to offer a more intimate image of their candidates (Hermans & Vergeer, 2013). The articles consulted are filled with examples of politicians talking about their families or sending political messages together with their loved ones (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Campus, 2010; Figenschou, Kolltveit, Karlsen, & Thorbjørnsrud, 2017).

The subordination of politicians to media logic (Blumler & Coleman, 2010; Louw, 2005) has been extended in recent years to social media, with political consultants developing new strategies to make their communication on these platforms more efficient (Gottfried, Hardy, Holbert, Winneg, Jamieson, 2017; Kreiss, Lawrence & McGregor, 2018; Kruike-meier & Shehata, 2017).

Paradoxically, various authors point out that this situation has coincided with a rise in the political engagement of citizens who are demonstrating their desire to get involved in different political processes (Kim, Hsu, & Zúñiga, 2013; Vaccari, Chadwick & O'Loughlin, 2015). Louw describes this as a false engagement, because these citizens are not really interested in participating in politics, but in the simplified image they receive of it (Louw, 2005). Authors who support Louw's argument maintain that Gerbner's cultivation theory (Bryant & Zillmann, 1986), which asserts that the ideas that appear in the media end up shaping the social reality in the long term (Potter, 1994), should also be applied to social media. Consequently, if people receive only simple and easily digestible political images and ideas, it seems unlikely that they would be able to comprehend a much more complex and nuanced political reality (Amsalem, Sheaffer, Walgrave, Loewen & Soroka, 2017; Boudreau, 2013; Hartman, 2012; Stroud, Muddiman & Lee, 2014).

According to these authors, this engagement with a simplified version of politics is dangerous because it may result in a kind of "soft activism" ("slacktivism" or "clicktivism"), consisting in taking action in defence of a political cause on social networks, via email or on their mobile phones, with little real effort. This may promote a certain individualism and a false sense of participation that reduces social engagement and results in nothing more than a good (but false) conscience. In short, the de-ideologisation of politics promoted by the use that politicians make of social networks could be another factor behind the public disaffection with political parties and institutions.

3.2. Highly political media

Discussion of the political impact of social media on traditional media outlets can be summed up in terms of two apparently opposing positions. Some authors, like Leung and Lee (2014), suggest that social media have challenged the traditional relationship between media and politics. Others, like Lev-On & Haleva Amir (2018) or Chadwick (2013), take a more nuanced view of the impact.

In general, the articles published in the academic journals analysed on the effect of social media on the media industry address four main issues: hybridisation, civic engagement, polarisation, and disinformation.

3.2.1. Hybridisation

As suggested by Lev-On & Haleva Amir (2018) and Chadwick (2013), we have found that the theoretical frameworks used by most authors engaging in media research are based on classical theories that assign a leading role to traditional media platforms.

Since the rise of social media, traditional media outlets have been forced to adopt innovative ways of reaching and connecting with audiences (Chadwick, 2013). Although this might suggest that social media have taken over, authors like Nisbet & Myers and Ridout note that the traditional media outlets continue to set the agenda (Chakravartty & Roy, 2013; Nisbet & Myers, 2010; Ridout, 2011). Only a very limited amount of information is generated exclusively on social media and the public still views journalists as authoritative sources with credibility and prestige (Freund, 2012), which means they still hold much of the power they did previously.

However, the fact that traditional media publishers have lost their almost exclusive control over information means that the public can now organise and question the narratives offered by the political elite on social networks (Hassanpour, 2014). Journalists are thus no longer the only ones who act as gatekeepers (Margolin, Hannak & Weber 2018).

In short, as Chadwick suggests, the new communication environment created by the Internet is a hybrid between two logics: digital media logic on the one hand, and traditional media logic on the other. Sometimes they coexist harmoniously and generate synergies and productive cooperation, but on other occasions they clash, giving rise to conflicts and tensions (Chadwick, 2013).

One example of positive synergy is the case of election debates, which tend to be better understood if viewers connect to social media while watching them on television (Gottfried et al. 2017). These authors suggest that social networks enhance viewers' knowledge of the politicians, as they help them contextualise the information provided in the debates (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011; Fridkin, Kenney, Gershon, & Serignese Woodall, 2008; Garrett, 2009; Hahn, Jang, Lee, Lee & Ha, 2018). At the same time, they also reduce the persuasive effect that the debate would have if viewed without social media.

3.2.2. Civic engagement

The disappearance of local media outlets as a consequence of the rise of social media and the advertising crisis has had significant effects on civic engagement, due to the role they used to play in creating social communities (Habermas & Jiménez Redondo, 1987; Shaker, 2014; Tocqueville & Viejo Viñas, 2005). Various authors highlight the positive relationship between media consumption and trust in politics (Hanitzsch, Steindl, & Van Dalen, 2018; Rodríguez-Virgili, López Escobar & Tolsá, 2011; Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre & Shehata, 2016). The weakening of the links between institutions, the media and the public may be behind the drop in civic engagement. The weakness of one of these components undermines the whole.

There are authors who argue, in line with the "normalisation" hypothesis discussed above, that this decrease in public engagement is only temporary. In other words, as the weaker newspapers are replaced by social media, the links between community members break down, and although some will stop engaging with politics, others will become politically engaged for the first time (Shaker, 2014).

3.2.3. Polarisation

Another major issue explored in the academic literature in recent years is political polarisation. For some authors, responsibility for such polarisation is shared in equal parts between politicians and the media: politicians for offering overly simplistic and polarising messages; and the media for disseminating those messages in their quest for bigger audiences and fatter profits (Borah, 2013; Gervais, 2014; Rittenberg, 2011; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011).

For the media, polarisation may constitute a strategy for identifying defined niches and building audience loyalty. In this way, publishers choose to disseminate simplistic, shocking content lacking in nuance in order to secure an audience and a level of traffic for their advertisers that will ensure their financial success (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). Such behaviour would thus be completely voluntary. In this same sense, Rittenberg suggests that politicians, aware of the media situation, decide to modulate their discourse in order to ensure their messages are disseminated. But this wider dissemination goes hand in hand with a lower level of political discussion, resulting from the division of the population into friends and enemies (Rittenberg, 2011). In short, the combination of politicians looking for easy votes and journalists seeking easy audiences impoverishes public debate and polarises society.

Within the context of polarisation, several researchers have focused on partisan media outlets, which are characterised by openly taking sides on a political issue, and for presenting a negative, one-dimensional view of the opposing side. Although such positioning by a media outlet is not new, it has become increasingly common in the digital age (Levendusky, 2013).

Many of the news programs or stories broadcast by partisan media outlets present information with a marked bias and give special attention to more extreme discourses. The news stories are inserted into a particular political narrative that contributes to a homogeneous and simplistic depiction of political adversaries, who are branded as enemies in a friend/enemy binary typical of populist ideologies.

Viewers, who tend to seek reaffirmations of their own beliefs, accept this type of information because it facilitates an understanding of a complex reality by means of simple ideas (Gervais, 2014; Levendusky, 2013; Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016; Wojcieszak, Bimber, Feldman & Stroud, 2016).

These media outlets, which have been remarkably successful on the Internet, exploit the principle of identification: because they are perceived by viewers as belonging to their community, they are classified as credible and the information they present is rarely questioned (Ignatieff, 2015; Levendusky, 2013). This principle, which supports the cohesion of small, homogeneous groups, has proven divisive for large contemporary societies (Wessler, 2008), and may even have a negative impact on democracy itself, according to Levendusky, because partisan media outlets undermine the bipartisanship necessary for different sides to come to an understanding (Levendusky, 2013).

3.2.4. Disinformation

Since 2016, following the Brexit referendum and the US presidential elections, many researchers have turned their attention towards the phenomenon of disinformation. Some authors blame the dissemination of "fake news" on journalists for their failure to detect it, contain it and combat it (Vargo, Guo & Amazeen, 2018). The reason for this failure is associated with the nature of fake news itself, as it is disinformation aimed at a very specific audience that already has a firmly established mindset. As that mindset is so deeply intertwined with the personal identity of those who hold it, any attempt to refute the disinformation merely serves to legitimise it and increase its dissemination.

In an attempt to make sense of the spread of disinformation, some authors have returned to McCombs & Shaw's agenda-setting theory. To the classical version of this theory, originally developed in 1972, researchers now add concepts like "intermedia agenda setting" and "network agenda setting" (Vargo, Guo, McCombs & Shaw, 2014). The first of these refers to the effect that some media outlets have on setting the agenda of other outlets; this occurs because journalists tend to validate their work based on what their colleagues are doing on other news services, especially the most prestigious (Vargo et al., 2014). Consequently, when a media outlet broadcasts a piece of disinformation, it is hardly surprising that its behaviour should be replicated by others.

On the other hand, "network agenda setting" refers to the links established between certain news stories. Two facts that frequently appear together over a period of time will end up being linked in the minds of viewers, who when they think of one will at once recall the other (Vargo et al., 2014). It is an implicit effect that may lead to manipulation by juxtaposition. This is precisely what websites like *InfoWars*, *Occupy Democrats* and *The Daily Beast* do: identifying two apparently unrelated issues and connecting them. This relationship is then repeated over and over as if it were natural so that the audience ends up seeing the two issues as inherently linked. Once the link has been established it is difficult to break, even when serious media outlets become involved.

The importance of fake news in the contemporary media ecosystem lies in the speed of transmission, its potential reach and its increased popularity, which has been exacerbated since the rise of social media and partisan news services (Levendusky, 2013). In addition, disinformation also benefits from the anonymity fostered by the digital environment and social networks. The consequences of this disinformation in society goes further than spreading untruths. Hoaxes presented in the form of news undermine the implicit pact established between audience and journalists. When they receive it, many people see it as confirmation of what they want to see, and as it is broadcast by media outlets that they trust, they assign it a high level of credibility (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016).

At the same time, as people are faced with an over-abundance of information in an age of fast, almost instantaneous news, they don't always know how to choose correctly. The authors distinguish between two types of audience: the sophisticated voter and the unsophisticated voter. Sophisticated voters have some knowledge of political issues and when faced with too much information they are able to filter out the content that does not interest them. Unsophisticated voters, when flooded with political information that

they don't know how to classify, end up feeling overwhelmed (Vraga, Edgerly, Wang & Shah, 2011). This results in inequalities in the consumption of digital political information, which in turn have costs for democracy. Journalists, who for many years were the main gatekeepers, need to take this into account.

The changes to the media environment represent a challenge for the work of the newsrooms. At a time when disinformation and partisan media are on the rise, it is vital to society for the public to have access to the necessary information, and this will only be possible if journalists perform their role effectively. Aalberg et al. suggest that people need to have access to good information in order to be able to make sound decisions (Aalberg et al., 2010). Now that the Internet provides access to a wide variety of media, we need to ask whether this diversity also constitutes quality, as otherwise it could have effects on the functioning of democracy itself (Aalberg et al., 2010).

3.3. Public counterpower

In the current digital media context, there is a much greater capacity for public response and organisation to challenge the media and the political class (Ekstrom & Shehata, 2018; Isin & Ruppert, 2015; Theocharis et al., 2016). Social media enable individuals to organise more easily and effectively (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2011; Leung & Lee, 2014; Stohl, 2014; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009).

Academics have taken different positions on the new means of organising public opinion that has emerged in the last decade. Following the rise of social media, some authors expressed optimism about the new possibilities offered by these platforms (Jenkins, Nikolaev & Porpora, 2012), highlighting their future role in holding political power to account (Armstrong & Zúñiga, in Baum & Groeling, 2008).

However, even in the earliest articles analysed in this research, several authors expressed scepticism about new and unfamiliar media platforms (Baum & Groeling, 2008), referring to them using quotation marks and highlighting their amateur nature (Baum & Groeling, 2008). Perhaps because they were specifically studying polarisation, these authors noted that social media exacerbated the predisposition of the public towards news that reinforced their view of reality (Baum & Groeling, 2008).

In recent years, these disruptive views of social media have been nuanced and there now seems to be a degree of consensus that social media act as catalysts for mobilisations that already existed previously in the offline world (Fernandez-Planells, Figueras-Maz, & Pàmols, 2014), but that cannot be created natively online.

As noted above, new political movements have made use of social media for communication and organisation (Barbas & Postill, 2017). At first, as suggested by Aalberg et al. (2010), these new movements enjoyed an advantage in the digital environment due to the slow reaction of traditional parties to the new technology; however, Potter & Dunaway (2016) and Wright (2012) argue that once the traditional parties integrated social media into their structures and began to promote them organically, that initial advantage disappeared.

The concepts that have been the focus of research on the relationship between the public and social movements have been homophily and selective exposure, as well as the notion of the filter bubble or echo chamber.

3.3.1. Homophily and selective exposure

Described as early as 1954 by Lazarsfeld and Merton, homophily is based on the affinity that all humans feel for others who think similarly to them (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001). This affinity affects the information to which many individuals choose to be exposed because, as Garret has previously noted, many people prefer to turn exclusively to news sources that reaffirm their ideas (Garrett, 2009). If we add to this the proliferation of new media like podcasts, it is hardly surprising that homophily has come to shape the news consumption of many people in recent years (Levendusky, 2013).

Social media have facilitated new ways of consuming political information. Access to information is brief and uninterrupted, individual and personalised, and can take place anytime from anywhere, thanks mainly to mobile technology (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein & Matassi, 2018). The digital environment also favours a new way of accessing political information: incidental exposure (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). People who access the Internet for entertainment or social reasons are sometimes incidentally exposed to political news. This consumption of political information thus becomes a by-product of online activities, with news reaching the user mixed in with social and entertainment content, often lacking any context or indication of its relative importance. This is due to the growing perception among users that "the information is out there"

and if the news is important enough it will reach them without the need for them to look for it (Serrano-Puche, Fernández & Rodríguez-Virgili, 2018).

Goldman & Mutz (2011) highlight the consequences that this segmentation of news consumption has on social cohesion. According to these authors, the more people are exposed to news stories that reaffirm pre-existing beliefs, the lower their tolerance will be of differing perspectives, thereby undermining the ideal of bipartisanship referred to by Levendusky (2013). These authors believe that people avoid viewing news content that contradicts their ideas due to the psychological stress and strain it causes; in other words, they avoid cognitive dissonance (Baum & Groeling, 2008; Mutz & Young, 2011; Valera-Ordaz, 2018).

Goldman & Mutz argue that selective exposure is easier for individuals when information sources clearly reveal their political alignment (Goldman & Mutz, 2011). This facility for selecting sources is influenced by the political awareness of the individuals themselves. In this sense, Iyengar & Hahn (2009) point out that politically active individuals are more inclined to select news or networks for information based on what they know about the alignment of the network in question (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). All of this increases the polarisation of the public because some users rely almost exclusively on partisan media.

Bolsen & Leeper (2013) suggest that exposure to partisan content generates "issue publics". The premise on which these authors base their assertion is clear: people pay more attention to issues that interest them and follow those issues more closely. In addition to an increase in the attention given to what is published by the media, there is also an increase in the exposure that this public has to politics (Bolsen & Leeper, 2013).

3.3.2. Filter bubbles or echo chambers

One of the main effects of selective exposure is the creation of filter bubbles or echo chambers, which in turn result in a higher degree of polarisation between different groups (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). According to the literature published, the internal consistency of filter bubbles depends on their size: the smaller they are, the lower the possibility of encountering dissonant voices and the greater the chance of finding redundant information (Eveland, Hutchens & Morey, 2013).

There is no reason why these phenomena should necessarily be negative. In digital communities and especially in filter bubbles, Gresham's law, as described by Boudreau (2013), plays a pivotal role. This law is based on the idea that if a credible source suggests an option that would have a positive impact on the welfare of individuals, while at the same time a less credible source offers an option that conflicts with the first, individuals will make worse decisions than they would if they were only given the first option (Boudreau, 2013). In other words, if Gresham's law applies, a greater plurality of information or a wider variety of sources will not always help individuals to make better decisions.

However, there are academics who question the notion of bubbles or echo chambers and argue that social media in fact permit access to a greater diversity of sources. This is enriching because voters who are exposed to narratives that contradict their point of view tend to be more tolerant of differing opinions (Mutz & Young, 2011). With greater exposure to narratives both for and against their own positions, individuals can make better informed decisions (Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009).

In short, academic debate about the effects of social media is ongoing: while some authors highlight polarisation (Gastil, Black & Moscovitz, 2008; Nivola & Brady, 2006; Taylor, 2017), others stress the positive impact they have had on public discussion (Borah, 2013; Gervais, 2014). A majority of authors seem to agree that they have contributed to revitalising political engagement among the general public (Kim, Hsu & de Zúñiga, 2013). This contribution, along with the theory of normalisation (Chadwick, 2013), seems to explain the positive image of social media conveyed in the academic literature.

4. Conclusions

Based on this analysis of the research published on social media in the journals *Political Communication*, *Journal of Communication*, *International Journal of Press/Politics* and *New Media & Society*, a number of conclusions and suggestions for future research can be offered.

First of all, most of the articles in the sample present empirical studies. Without doubt, this analytical approach lends the articles credibility and soundness, as their arguments are founded on measurable and verifiable data. From this perspective, it could be said that research on this phenomenon is at a high point, as social media have become a major source of data on human behaviour. The fact that the use of much of these new media has become fully normalised throughout a large sector of society, together with the

access to data permitted by some social media platforms, greatly facilitates empirical research. However, this situation also has its risks. The studies focus on quantitative data and the number of articles dedicated to analysis seems to be quite low. Most authors choose to conduct or replicate experiments supported by a list of limitations of their study rather than a reflection on the phenomena observed. More comprehensive approaches and findings are needed. The research should not just describe but explain and interpret, contributing consistent theoretical models that can enhance our understanding of the reality. Some authors, like Nielsen (2018), have recognised this need and called on authors to delve further into the reality and into the big political debates.

Secondly, although the rise of social media has challenged the balance between the media, politicians and the public and has brought profound changes to the production, dissemination and consumption of political information, researchers in the field continue to fall back on the same major media theories. Over the course of the decade, authors have used agenda setting, agenda building, framing and priming as theoretical frameworks for their studies. While it is undeniable that new phenomena like homophily, digital civic engagement, flaming, incidental exposure and echo chambers are being studied more actively, they invariably end up being framed within one of the major traditional theories. Perhaps the biggest advances can be seen in updates to these theories, as in the case of Vargo et al. (2014; 2018) with agenda setting. The continued application of twentieth-century theories suggests that Chadwick may have a point when he argues that social media will ultimately be assimilated into the existing media system.

Thirdly, research on social media has grown richer and more detailed. While in the earliest issues in our sample digital technology had only a token presence, from 2010 on an increasing number of authors began acknowledging the key role being played by social media (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2016). In the last few years, there have been numerous articles focusing on the effects of specific phenomena of social media such as incidental exposure (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018) or disinformation (Vargo et al., 2018).

Finally, in what could be taken as a challenge for future research, it is worth noting that research in the field has primarily been limited to single-country studies. Of the 357 articles in the corpus, only 15 analyse social media from a comparative perspective, making it difficult to make any generalisations about the effects of a phenomenon which is global by nature. This points to a need in the future for comparative studies between countries in order to better explain the factors and effects of social media in the political sphere.

A comparative approach should also be adopted in relation to the different social media platforms. Most of the articles analysed focus on a single platform, with Twitter being particularly prevalent, so that the innovations that other platforms bring to political communication are overlooked. The focus of research could even be broadened to include instant messaging platforms like WhatsApp or Telegram.

In any case, there is far more research on social media being conducted today than there was a decade ago. In the coming years, our understanding of social media will increase and give rise to research that will help better explain their effect on society, and particularly on the political ecosystem.

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