Deliberation 2.0 or radicalized partisan discourse? An analysis of political discussions conducted on the Facebook pages of Spanish political candidates

Lidia Valera Ordaz
University of Valencia
[lidia.valera@uv.es]

Abstract

Given the increasing relevance of social networks as a means of political expression, the conversations taking place on these platforms have sparked the interest of researchers. This study sets out to analyse the characteristics of political discussions that took place on the Facebook walls of three presidential candidates during the 2011 Spanish general elections. Using a dual methodological approach, we sought to evaluate the concurrence of a range of normative conditions of deliberative democracy and to identify the ideological coincidence between the discursive strategies employed by citizens in the comments they posted and the ideological positions of candidates and their political parties. Our findings suggest that citizen comments posted on the candidates' walls take place in a context of strong ideological consensus, and tend to reiterate and even radicalise a candidate's or party's positions on issues rather than constituting a rational debate between divergent opinions.

Keywords: deliberative democracy, social networks, online political discussion, Web 2.0, new public sphere

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1. Introduction

Information and communications technology (ICT) can empower citizens in a number of ways. First, it contributes to a democratic expansion that can bring citizens and the political class closer together. Second, it opens a realm traditionally monopolized by mass media to the general public. Finally, it can also spark higher levels of political mobilisation, as has been repeatedly postulated over the

last few decades in theories regarding the impact of Web 2.0 on political communication.

It is therefore natural that researchers' initial interest in Internet tools such as websites and blogs, which was strong from the end of the 1990s through the first few years of the twenty-first century, has recently shifted to an exploration of social media as an ideal space for debate among citizens on issues of public interest. Part of the scientific interest in these new spaces revolves around the equal means of expression it offers to all users, a necessary condition for creating a digital public square.

However, despite the widespread adoption of social networks by political parties and candidates (mainly beginning with the 2008 Obama campaign), there have been few empirical studies that analyse the characteristics of the communicative interaction that takes place in these new spaces. The lack of empirical data in this area is particularly obvious in Spain, insofar as most studies on citizen participation have focused on other platforms (such as digital periodicals and blogs[1]), or simply used data compiled in other countries. The dearth of information on the national level highlights the need to analyse the type of public communication that takes place in these forums in Spain.

To fill in this gap, this study was designed to evaluate the type of citizen interaction that took place on the Facebook pages of three presidential candidates (Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, Mariano Rajoy and Rosa Díez) during the most recent Spanish general elections. Our research specifically focuses on online citizen discourse and debate in response to material posted by candidates during the 24 hours following the October 20, 2011 declaration by the Basque terrorist organisation ETA that it would cease all armed activity.

In undertaking this exploration of the types of political communication that take place in social networks, we have used a dual-methodology approach designed to shed light on some of the key dynamics of this new means of communicative discourse.

We will begin this paper with a description of the qualitative analysis of the online conversations contained in our sample from the viewpoint of the key normative principles of deliberative democracy: diversity, discursive liberty, rationality of comments offered, reciprocity and coherence. The purpose of this analysis was to determine whether or not the interactions under study could be considered deliberative processes, as is often postulated by 'cyberoptimists'.

We will then move on to our analysis of the principle discursive strategies employed by citizens on candidates' Facebook pages in regard to ETA's assertion that it was ready to abandon its strategy of violence, for the purposes of observing to what extent the opinions expressed on these sites reproduced the arguments of the political parties and candidates that created them and/or constituted a radicalisation of their discourse. To this end, we made use of other findings regarding media frames on terrorism, relying principally on the work of Castromil (2006, 2008, 2011).

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[1]   For more on this topic, see: Richardson & Stanyer (2011) and Xiang *et al.* (2008); regarding Spain see: Ruiz *et al.* (2010)

Thus, the goal of this study has been to determine whether the public conversations held on political candidates' Facebook pages demonstrated the characteristics of a deliberative democracy that seeks consensus, or, to the contrary, were rooted in partisan positions that were subsequently replicated by the country's main ideologically driven media outlets and therefore actually tend to radicalise the discourses of the candidates and their parties.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. The debate on the Internet's impact on political communication: Towards a democratic expansion or a shrinking of the public sphere?

The front and centre role of digital platforms in the formation of opinion and social or political activism, together with the persistence of the elitist model of media communication, has led to a debate regarding the impact of digital communication on the form and practice of politics in Western democracies. In fact, there exists a certain level of consensus among academics that the emergence of Web 2.0 technology is responsible for the proliferation of the bottom-up channels of communication now employed in political communication (Gibson & Römmele, 2007). This is especially apparent in electoral cycles, the greatest example being the spectacular use of Internet technology for political ends by the 2008 Obama campaign, which relied heavily on grassroots politics and the creation of offline communities (Montero, 2009; Turiera-Puigbò, 2009).

Signs of growing political disaffection, such as a notable drop in political activism, (Ion *et al.*, 2005), a wavering belief in the effectiveness of politics and a general lack of faith in political parties (which is deemed to be Spain's third most serious problem according to public opinion surveys conducted by the country's Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas)[2] are all seen as so overwhelming that some authors have even suggested that the present model of representative democracy has entered into a state of crisis; it is therefore not surprising that many are turning to ICT as a means of promoting political activism and dialogue between politicians and citizens and, above all, of setting a democratic revitalization in motion. Those who defend what is often referred to as cyberoptimism (Lévy, 2004; Jenkins, 2008) have put forth, with different levels of insistence, a series of perspectives that coalesce around the concept of cyberdemocracy, a notion that respects the basic framework of representative democracy and its free representational mandate but also 'confers channels of participation and deliberation upon voters, the general public and politicians' (Sampedro, 2011: 16). From this perspective, ICT allows citizens to assume an active role in crafting political proposals, participate in the debates, decisions and implementation of public policy, and contribute discursive-deliberative elements to what constitute fundamentally aggregative democracies.

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2   Center for Sociological Research. See 2011 CIS surveys: January, April, July and October.

According to this paradigm, the use of ICT leads to a broadening of public participation in a debate formerly monopolized and stratified by conventional media by offering new digital spheres in which public deliberation, the formation of rational and critical public opinion, and reciprocal, informed dialogue between participants who stand on equal footing naturally ensue, following the Habermasian model of deliberative democracy (Freelon, 2010).

In the face of such faith in the positive effects new media can have on political participation, other authors have completely rejected the de facto ability of the Internet to produce substantial changes in Western political systems or to improve the relationship between political actors and citizens (Davis, 2001). They question the credibility of the underlying technological determinism that is present in the more naïve theories on cyberoptimism and argue that 'people are not going to feel a sudden urge to engage in politics and follow the previously established horizon, merely because certain technological innovations have come into being' (Davis, 2001: 16). Likewise, the impact of ICT on politics has been conceptualized from more prudent positions that posit it as a symbolic revolution (Mazzoleni, 2001) that will not engender any truly relevant transformation of political goals or practices, but rather merely change the most symbolic and persuasive aspects of politics.

Furthermore, empirical research on the political use of the Internet reveals a broad consensus that there is a positive correlation between online political activity and the level of political participation and general public interest in politics that coincides with the effect of several other sociodemographic variables, most notably education and income, and to a lesser extent, age (Davis, 2001; Anduiza *et al.* 2010; Hay *et al.*, 2011). Thus, the Internet is employed as a political tool mainly by previously mobilised and active segments of the population that share very specific sociodemographic characteristics, a fact that leads some to speak of a 'democratic divide' regarding this form of political activism (Norris, 2001).

Castells views the Internet as a propitious space for the new, prevailing forms of socialisation in present-day societies. 'It's not that the Internet creates a form of online individualism, but rather that the development of the Internet provides the necessary material support for the diffusion of online individualism as a dominant form of sociability' (Castells, 2001: 170-171). Accordingly, the need for individual self-expression also extends to the political realm and can be satisfied through the Internet by means of the creation of weak social connections that require no effort or direct physical interaction (Castells, 2001: 170-171). This 'connected individualism' (Flichy, 2008) also translates into new forms of political activism through which individuals choose their modes of engagement in coordination with other potential participants.

Empirical research has demonstrated that, at least until now, the use of ICT by Spanish politicians for partisan purposes has fundamentally conformed to campaign strategies conceived to portray a given party or candidate as an early adopter of cutting edge technology —a politician or party 2.0— (Sampedro, 2011; Dader *et al.* 2011; Campos, 2011) and has not served to foster citizen mobilization, self-initiative or interaction. Due to the priority political parties

have placed on the informative and symbolic-persuasive aspects of their websites during political campaign periods, they have failed to take advantage of the participatory and interactive channels of communication such sites offer (Dader *et al.* 2011). The abandonment of blogs created by campaigning politicians once an election has been won or lost is further evidence of this tendency.

2.2. Deliberation or an illusion of democracy?

The belief that new media can generate renewed political participation, arouse greater civic interest in issues of general interest to the public and create a space for citizen deliberation that might enrich representative democracies nevertheless collides with limitations and risks inherent to digital communications and the new public sphere.

One of the now classic studies on the dangers of communication endogamy within the emerging model of digital communication is Cass R. Sunstein's *Republic.com*. In this book, Sunstein (2003, 2007) warns of the dangers of social isolation, ideological polarisation and the decrease in the diversity of what an individual is daily exposed to that underlie the heightened ability users of digital media now have to personalise the content they consume. The absolute sovereignty of the Internet consumer/user could entail serious risks to democracy. Sunstein questions the existence of deliberation on the Internet inasmuch as this medium abets the tendency of users to primarily tune into 'louder echoes of their own voices' (Sunstein, 2003: 65) and systematically contributes to the reinforcement of the individual's worldview through a radically selective exposure to like-minded opinions. For example, many studies have shown that the political blogosphere tends to structure itself around rigid ideological affinities: the majority of blogs tend to link mostly to other ideologically compatible sites (Foulleitou, 2011; López & Lara, 2009; Adamic & Glance, 2005), and the links to blogs that offer divergent political opinions are normally provided in the context of disdain and contempt for the opponent (Hargittai *et al.*, 2008).

It therefore appears that the encounter with 'the other' and debate among citizens and those that assume dissident postures in the public sphere could be replaced by a balkanisation of cyberspace into ideologically homogeneous, cut-off niches and isolated public microspheres (Dahlgren, 2000). In this scenario, arguments between radically opposed points of view, free of any call to mutual understanding or consensus, would exist only to vanquish the opinion of the other —in the words of Mannheim, a dialogue conceived only to 'demolish the foundations of the adversary's social and intellectual existence' (1985: 38).

'In conventional media and ICT, we're seeing processes of antagonistic radicalisation, in which prefabricated discourses offer a reaffirmation of the public's preconceived ideas. This is clearly seen in the Manichaeism that so dominates certain subscription-based news channels, radio stations and websites' (Sampedro, 2008: 111-112)

Similarly, some authors point out the online proliferation of an especially worrisome phenomenon: the group polarisation that occurs through the radicalisation of opinion via communicative interaction sustained in an environment of strong consensus and ideological homogeneity. In such a context, the limited 'argument pools' created by the lack of exposure to fundamentally divergent opinions and the presence of a strong group identity reaffirm and sharpen previous convictions and contribute to the consolidation of sectarianism and communication endogamy (Sunstein, 2007: 60-77; Precht, 2010). The same idea has been put forward by social psychology researchers who have studied the polarisation of opinions that occurs as a result of arguments during group decision-making processes (Moscovici & Doise, 1992).

According to this reading, the new realms of Web 2.0, which are championed by normative theorists and cyberoptimists as places for the revitalization of democracy, political participation and activism, evolve into platforms for the propagation of sectarianism (Ruiz et al., 2010), the balkanization of the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2000, 2005) or the development of 'interactive monologues' (Dumoulin, 2002). In line with this theory, many websites are experiencing firsthand what happened to Hyde Park's famous Speakers' Corner, a forum originally designed to harbour free expression that eventually became a space where 'the right to the unpunished propagation of nonsense'[3] (Precht, 2010: 473) now reigns supreme.

2.3. Working Hypothesis

In line with the theoretical questions outlined above, the general goal of this study is two-fold: a) to analyze the level of 'proximity' to the normative ideal of deliberation demonstrated by the Facebook discussions included in our sample and b) to empirically test the hypothesis regarding ideological polarization and radicalisation of the digital public sphere (Sunstein, 2003, 2007; Precht, 2010). Our own hypotheses are as follows:

H1: The thematic dispersal and the fragmentation of the public's arguments posted on Facebook, along with the absence of pluralism and the posters' lack of argumentative intention, prevent these conversations from being considered deliberative processes.

H2: The majority of those who post comments on politicians' social media sites will demonstrate a considerable level of ideological affiliation with the party or politician that maintains the account, and consequently, the communicative exchange will tend to reproduce and radicalise the discourse of political elites.

H3: The majority of the arguments used by individuals who post comments will echo those of the media outlets generally aligned with the political party represented by the social media site, a factor that would make it plausible to attribute them to the party activists.

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[3]   Author's translation from original in German.

3. Sample and time frame

The sample used in this study included a total of 250 comments taken from the Facebook profile pages of three presidential candidates during the Spanish general elections of 2012: Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party or PSOE), Mariano Rajoy (People's Party or PP) and Rosa Díez (Union, Progress and Democracy or UPD). The comments studied were taken from these candidate's profile pages during the 24 hours immediately following the Basque terrorist group ETA's declaration of a permanent ceasefire, which was made public at 19:00 on Thursday, October 20, 2011, exactly one month prior to the November 20 general elections. During the 24-hour period following the announcement, a total of 17 profile status updates were posted, which generated a total of 250 comments. Of these updates, five posts were published by Rubalcaba (75 comments), four by Rajoy (60 comments) and eight by Rosa Díez (the leader with 115 comments). In each case, 15 comments per status update were collected, with the exception of one post on the Díez profile page for which only 10 comments had been posted at the time of data collection.

The sample initially included posts from four profile pages: the three mentioned above and that of the leader and presidential candidate of the United Left (Izquierda Unida or IU), Cayo Lara. These four profiles were chosen because they belong to four national parties that appeared on the majority of electoral ballots throughout the country and constituted a representative sample of the ideological spectrum of Spanish politics. However, as Mr. Lara's profile was not updated during the 24 hours immediately preceding ETA's declaration of a permanent ceasefire, it was impossible to collect relevant comments from his social network site.

That fact that the leader of the United Left —a party that has been the third largest political force in Spain throughout the greater part of the country's history since its transition to democracy— maintained a Facebook profile but not did update it even once during the weeks leading up to the general election (other than posting a few photos in October) or following a political incident as important as ETA's declaration of a permanent ceasefire is quite remarkable. It is further evidence that Spanish political parties' use of new political communication tools more strongly reflects their desire to be perceived as cutting edge organisations than a will to explore new ways of improving their communication with the public (Dader, 2011: 195) or at least to foster mutual interaction via platforms such as Facebook. We therefore find ourselves faced once again by the stolid logic that underpins Spanish political parties' approach to ICT and leads them to disregard its potential for interaction, which is that such technology is primarily useful for marketing and the dissemination of propaganda and information (Campos, 2011: 117).

In an effort to capture the gist of all of the online conversations that took place on the candidates' profile pages during the time frame to be studied (the 24 hours following ETA's ceasefire announcement) and to ensure that the sample would be manageable, 15 comments per post were collected. It should be noted that some posts, especially those of the PSOE and the PP (the two main political parties in Spain) generated hundreds of comments. As our goal was to carry out a quali-

tative analysis of the public debate conducted via social networks in response to ETA's ceasefire declaration, the criteria for defining the diversity of conversations was more important than the total number of comments posted. Likewise, this methodological decision is in line with observations made during the initial collection of the corpus, which overwhelmingly indicated that the first few comments tended to respond directly to the issue addressed by the owner of the profile page, whereas comments posted later demonstrated the posters' tendency to deviate substantially from the original topic, which created 'conversation threads' that were often random and incoherent, as might be expected in informal deliberative situations that lack institutional regulation (Martí, 2006). Therefore, working from an assumption that the first comments posted would be more likely to fulfil the various normative conditions of the deliberative democracy model, the sample used in this study has been limited to the first 15 comments registered for each post.

Another motive for this decision was the asynchronous nature of communication on Facebook walls, which allow users to post comments in response to a given post for several days (in reality, at any point in time following its publication). This structure fosters never-ending conversations and universes of comments that are very problematic for statistical research, which is bound to specific time frames, in the case of this study, the 24 hours following ETA's declaration of a permanent ceasefire.[4]

The issue of the relationship between the sample and the universe of reference is problematic in conducting statistical analyses. Nevertheless, the goal of the present study has been to carry out a qualitative and exploratory analysis of the informal public discussion held in the digital public realm in the aftermath of a significant political event without trying to determine statistical representativeness. In light of this objective, the first 15 comments registered for each post can be considered sufficient to elucidate whether they, on one hand, demonstrate a certain proximity to the normative ideal of democratic deliberation or if, on the other hand, they reveal an absence of diversity and argumentation that rules out the possibility of their being part of a deliberative process.

4. Methodology

4.1. Qualitative analysis of the presence of deliberation

To study the characteristics of conversations generated by posts published on political profile pages, we opted for a qualitative, exploratory methodology suitable for the analysis of a range of conditions that are requisite for communication

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[4]   Although we cannot offer any systematic, empirical corroboration to this effect, we have observed that the more posts a profile owner publishes, the fewer responses to each individual post registers, which indicates that under these circumstances, participants tend to space their comments over a number of posts. Of the profiles studied, Mariano Rajoy's registered the highest number of comments (several hundred per post) as compared to Rosa Diez's, which registered only several dozen responses per post.

from the perspective of deliberative democracy. By conversation, we mean the totality of comments that are posted by more than one user in response to each post published on the owner's Facebook page.

Generally speaking, we expect public dialogue conducted via the Internet (just as with other modes of communication) to conform to a set of characteristics that make it democratically desirable, which includes mutual respect between participants, acceptance of divergent opinions, argumentative debate, etc. More specifically, it should be noted that these proposed requisites stem from the normative tradition of deliberative democracy, which establishes a series of inevitable, structuring principles for democratic deliberation (Nino, 1997; Elster, 2001; Fearon, 2001; Johnson, 2001; Cohen, 2001; Martí, 2006) that mesh with the Habermas' discursive ethic and his view of communicative action as part of a search for consensus.[5]

The methodology proposed for this study was adapted from methodologies used in previous research that attempted to operationalise deliberative democracy in order to analyse online political discussion (Camaj *et al.*, 2009) (Freelon, 2010) (Ruiz *et al.*, 2010) by Victor Sampedro and José Manuel Sánchez Duarte's within the context of the R&D project 'Cybercampaign, Cyberdemocracy and Cyberparticipation of the Electorate'.

In concrete terms, the normative conditions for the existence of deliberation that support and justify this methodological design are the following: a) discursive diversity, b) the presence of argumentation, c) reciprocity, d) coherence and e) discursive freedom. Thus, we assume that all of these dimensions must be present in a conversation in order to consider it deliberative.

Diversity is a central trait of Habermas' normative theory on deliberative democracy, insofar as a cooperative search for consensus in complex societies inevitably requires an agreement among the different voices that come together in the public sphere. In other words, dialogue in democracies can only take place in a context of reasonable pluralism, which is to say, in scenarios in which participants take into consideration 'the fact that there are distinct, incompatible philosophies of life to which reasonable people are drawn under favourable conditions for the exercise of practical reason' (Cohen, 2001: 237). Moreover, diversity is advantageous, in that it guarantees legitimacy, given that when a discussion is open to all potential participants, every one of which enjoys an equal opportunity to intervene and express their preferences, the final choice made in any public decision draws legitimacy from the participants' ability to make their voices heard, a factor that also increases the likelihood of general support for the conclusions that have been reached (Fearon, 2001: 79). In the case of this study, diversity is viewed from two perspectives. On one hand, the plurality of opinions has been operationalised on the basis of ideological agreement expressed in comments offered in response to an opinion posted by an author on his or her profile page, which may be distributed into the following categories: a) favourable com-

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5   On the overlap between the normative model of deliberative democracy and the Habermasian concept of *the ideal speech situation* and his notion of procedural rationality, see: Martí, 2006, pp. 105-108.

ments (regarding the author's opinion), b) contrary comments (in disagreement) and c) neutral or indifferent comments (which do not fall into either category). On the other hand, diversity also refers to the number of individuals posting comments on each conversation, which allows for an examination of the intensity of each conversational thread based on the number of participants involved.

Secondly, debate among parties holding reasoned postures represents the essence of the model of deliberative democracy. Argumentation is thus constructed through a mechanism by which opinions are logically defended and debated in the heart of the public sphere, with the power of the best argument guaranteeing the triumph of well-reasoned opinions over poorly reasoned opinions (Martí, 2006; Graham, 2009). To this end, we will analyse the degree of argumentation present in the comments that make up our sample, placing them in one of three categories: a) mere comments (those that do not demonstrate any intent to make an argument), b) argumentative comments (those that demonstrate reasoning), and c) argumentative comments with substantiation (their reasoning being complemented by links to sources of information: reports, polls, articles, etc.).

Reasoned debate is also linked to reciprocity, another essential element of the deliberative tradition, given that it involves mutual discovery and exploration of arguments (rather than relying on information gathered by one person), which confers normative superiority upon a reasoned, collective argument (Johnson, 2001). Reciprocity can therefore be conceived as the incorporation of the others' arguments into one's own reasoning, either to support to or refute them. Our variable of reciprocity takes two factors into consideration: the incorporation of opinions previously stated by others (reciprocity between participants) and the level of response by the author of the profile page (reciprocity between author and participants).

Coherence is yet another fundamental aspect of the ability to determine to what extent online public discussions assume the characteristics of a deliberative process, insofar that a direct relationship between a comment and the original content posted by the profile's author is a condition sine qua non of the deliberative process. Coherence within a conversation is thus measured based on how closely the various comments offered relate to the topic of the original post (Ruiz *et al.*, 2010).

Of course, we must also take into account the final essential element of any deliberative process: discursive freedom. The debate must be open to all potential participants; it is therefore necessary not only to guarantee access to the deliberative forum, but also to maintain the conditions required for free expression throughout the conversation in order to ensure that speakers are able to express themselves without fear of hostile behaviour on the part of other participants. In light of this issue, insults, threats and personal belittlement are construed as attacks on discursive freedom that create serious barriers to the participants' free expression. Only in the total absence of aggression can speakers exchange information, opinions, processes of reasoning, etc. (Graham, 2009). Consequently, we have operationalised discursive freedom by applying a 'level of aggression' variable that allows for classifying comments into four categories: a) neutral and respectful language, b) harsh language (insults and belittlement) c) harsh language directed at concrete individuals and d) threatening language.

Research on the possible existence of a reciprocal, public dialogue on the Internet has been conducted by means of an analysis which included the following variables: 1) discursive diversity (plurality of participants and disparity of opinions), 2) reciprocity (between the owner of the page and the participants and among those posting comments), 3) level of argumentation (mere comments, argumentative comments and argumentative comments with substantiation), 4) respect or lack of aggression (neutral, harsh, threatening language or harsh language direct at specific individuals) and 5) coherence (relevance to the post's topic).[6] All of these variables were measured and recorded in a database in order to quantify the presence of each one.

Lastly, it should be mentioned that conversation constitutes both the unit of analysis and the unit of observation, given that this research focuses on the various characteristics of public discussion that emerge from the political candidates' posts.[7]

4.2. Analysis of Discursive Strategies

This study will also consist of an analysis of the discursive strategies present in user comments that revolve around the dominant subject addressed during the time frame under study: ETA's permanent ceasefire declaration. We have limited the analysis of the present discursive strategies to this topic for several reasons.

First of all, because the majority of the candidates' updates deal specifically with their initial reactions to ETA's declaration, and therefore, this issue constitutes the *leitmotiv* of the conversations that take place on the social network during the time frame studied.

Second, because terrorism is not only a major issue on Spanish political, media and civic agendas, but also a topic that has given rise to face-offs between political parties and has intensely polarized public debate regarding the so-called 'peace process' and the illegalization of the *Abertzale left* after negotiations failed in 2006.[8]

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[6]   Please note that the coherence variable is implicit in the diversity of opinions (inasmuch as being for or against the author's opinion does necessarily involve responding to the post's topic and comments that express indifference entail incoherence), and that, therefore, we are not dealing with two independent variables. The two dimensions have been separated in the interest of analytical simplification and clarity.

[7]   Due to limited resources, all encoding has been carried out by the author. However, in the framework of the cited R&D project, intercoder reliability tests are being conducted for a study with a much larger sample of public conversations on multiple digital platforms during the 2011 electoral campaign, in which several researchers will be taking part.

[8]   It is worth remembering that during the first socialist legislature (2004-2008), the government undertook negotiation with the terrorist group, which it referred to a 'peace process'. These negotiations would eventually fail in the wake of an ETA attack on the T4 terminal of Barajas airport in Madrid in 2000. The PP vehemently decried the negotiations, especially through a trio of conservative media outlets: the COPE radio network, the news website *Libertad Digital* and the national newspaper *El Mundo*. For a detailed review of this legislature and a more detailed analysis of this issue, please consult Bordería, 2011. Ultimately, terrorism in general and the negotiation process in particular led to a

This has created distinct partisan positions and well-defined media frames regarding the issue (Castromil & Rodríguez, 2011).

So it is that we will conduct an analysis of the discursive strategies present in user comments in order to determine if the opinions expressed regarding the end of ETA terrorism generally agreed with the parties' dominant lines of argumentation. This will allow us to infer if it is reasonable to attribute a large portion of the comments posted to party activists with clearly defined positions regarding the object of debate or, on the contrary, if they represented a wide spectrum of interpretations.

Finally, we will use the findings of other studies that analysed the principal paradigms espoused by the ideologically polarised written press regarding the negotiation process with ETA (Castromil & Rodríguez, 2011) as a reference on the dominant political and media discourse of the range of positions adopted throughout the ideological spectrum on this issue. Accordingly, we maintain the basic premise that the Spanish written press is involved in the ideological struggles of the country's political parties as indicated by the media model of polarised pluralism prevalent in Spain (Hallin and Mancini, 2007), and that newspapers consequently tend to reproduce partisan rhetoric, frame content that is politically advantageous to their respective political spheres in a positive manner and discredit political rivals by means of sustained negative framing of their actions and positions.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Deliberation

A. Diversity

In this study of political discussion via Facebook profile pages, we have focused on two notions of diversity that together shed light on the type of public debate facilitated by the technological tools used by political candidates and political parties: the diversity of the participants and the diversity of opinions expressed.

Figure 1 shows that comments posted on the profile page of Mariano Rajoy demonstrated an extremely high level of diversity: 224 users with distinct nicks (user names) posted a total of 250 comments. Nonetheless, it is worth pointing out that users were counted based on their participation in each conversation, meaning that their possible repeated participation in different posts is not reflected in these figures, a factor not relevant to the purpose of this phase of the analysis, which was carried out to determine the diversity of the participants in each conversation. Of the 224 individuals who posted comments, 88% published just one, while only 12% published more than one in the same conversa-

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dramatic polarisation of public debate, with both the political forces and the media outlets that supported their respective ideologies (Hallin and Mancini, 2007) providing the lines of argumentation necessary to legitimise or discredit the government's negotiations with the group (Castromil & Rodríguez, 2011).

tion. Regarding the different levels of participant diversity based on each candidate's profile, Rosa Díez's account showed the highest level of diversity: 96% of the individuals who posted comments on her page were unique, compared to 94% of the users who posted comments on Rubalcaba's profile and 73% of the users who posted comments on Marian Rajoy's profile, which showed a notably inferior level of diversity, an indication that users of this site were more likely to post more than one comment related to a single conversation.

Figure 1. Participant diversity in percentages
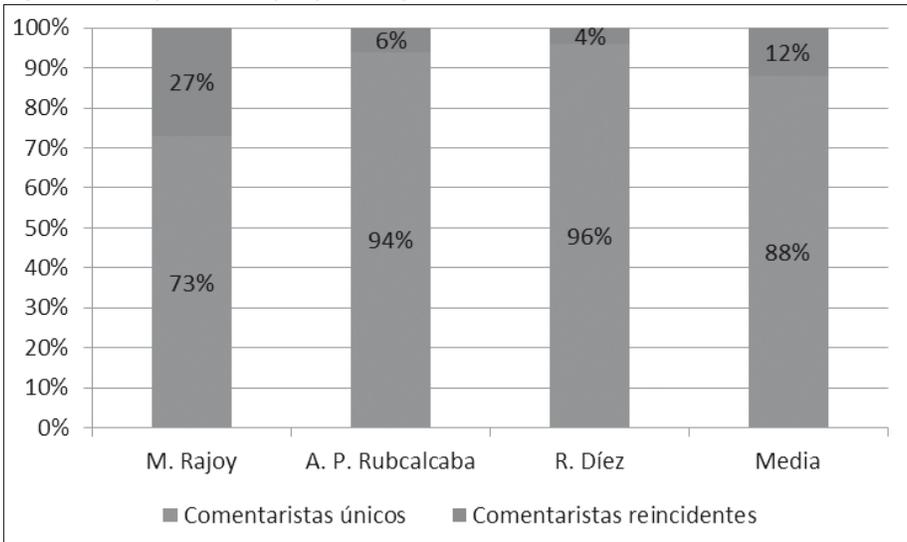
Participant diversity has been expressed synthetically using the variable D= #authors / #comments, which ranges in value from 0 to 1. Values closer to zero represent conversations of lesser diversity (in which a small number of participants were responsible for a large share of the comments) and values closer to one indicate threads with greater diversity (in which many individuals who posted comments participated in the same conversation). In the body of data analysed, this variable had a value of D= 0.896, a figure that reflects a rather high level of diversity; with such high levels of unique contributors, the development of a true exchange of ideas and points of view is compromised, and we can therefore speak of a significant fragmentation of the conversation, the exception being the case of activity registered on Mariano Rajoy's profile page.

These results suggest that the online public discussions studied displayed characteristics of the individualist liberal tradition, which places individual self-expression and the pursuit of one's particular interests in discussion forums above collective deliberation (Dahlberg, 2001); this is confirmed by the findings on levels of coherence and reciprocity, which we will now discuss.

Regarding the diversity of opinions, the results obtained support the thesis of a fragmentation and polarisation of the digital sphere (Precht, 2010; Sunstein,

Figure 2. Diversity of opinions per conversation in percentages according to profile
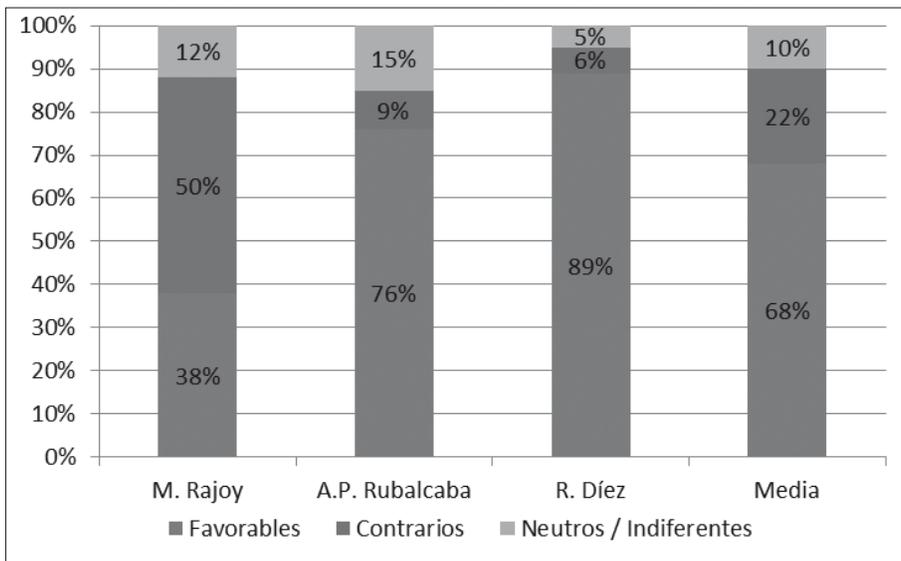
2003, 2007): an average of 68% of the comments related to the opinion expressed in the post by the page's owner are positive, while only 22% contain an opposing point of view, and 10% are indifferent.[9]

   One can observe that the differences among the profiles were quite pronounced. Compared to the overwhelming 89% level of positive comments on Rosa Díez's page or the also significant 76% on Rubalcaba's page, Mariano Rajoy's profile is the only one that contained fewer favourable comments (38%) than unfavourable comments (50%). This data points to a strong ideological homogeneity among the comments posted on Díez's and Rubalcaba's profile pages.

   The strong ideological consensus among individuals who posted comments on Díez's profile (89%) is related to the fact that her party is a minority party created in 2008. As the UPyD won only one seat in the 2008 general elections, it has very limited access to state funding earmarked for the financing of political parties, and due to its recent founding, it lacks a deeply rooted party structure (resources, activists, etc.). Therefore, it is quite plausible that its com-

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[9]   Given that our interest is centred on observing the diversity of opinions *within the frame of each conversation*, the figures displayed as results of each candidate's profile make up an average of the percentages obtained in each category (for, against, and neutral/indifferent) per conversation. Thus, no reference is made to absolute numbers when dealing with the normative conditions, the presence of which only makes sense in the frame of each conversation, as doing so would obscure their interpretation. However, the results are presented in absolute terms when dealing with the level of argumentation and discursive freedom, given that the absolute figures do provide valuable information on the overall presence of these two conditions.

Figure 3. Level of argumentation in percentages and absolute numbers for each profile
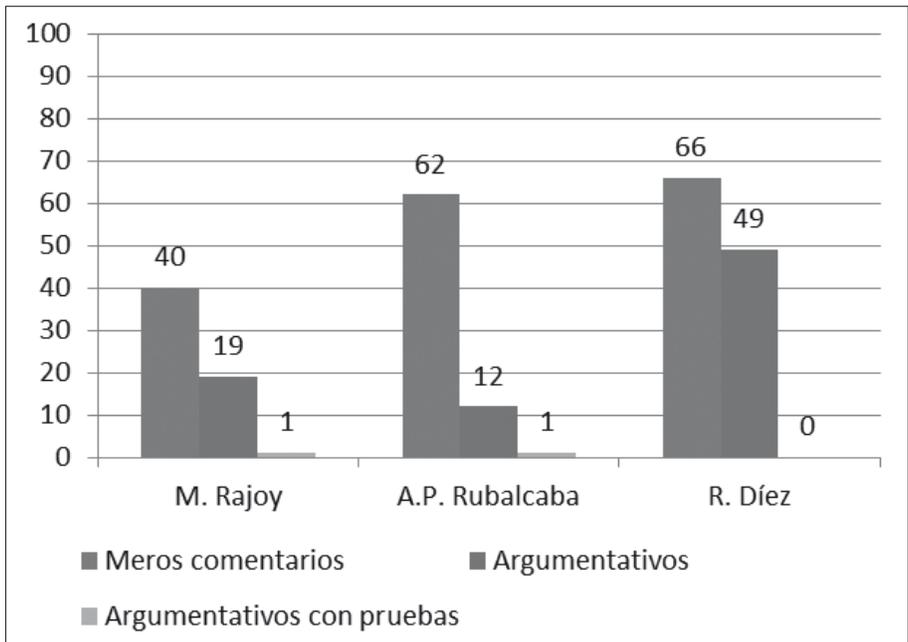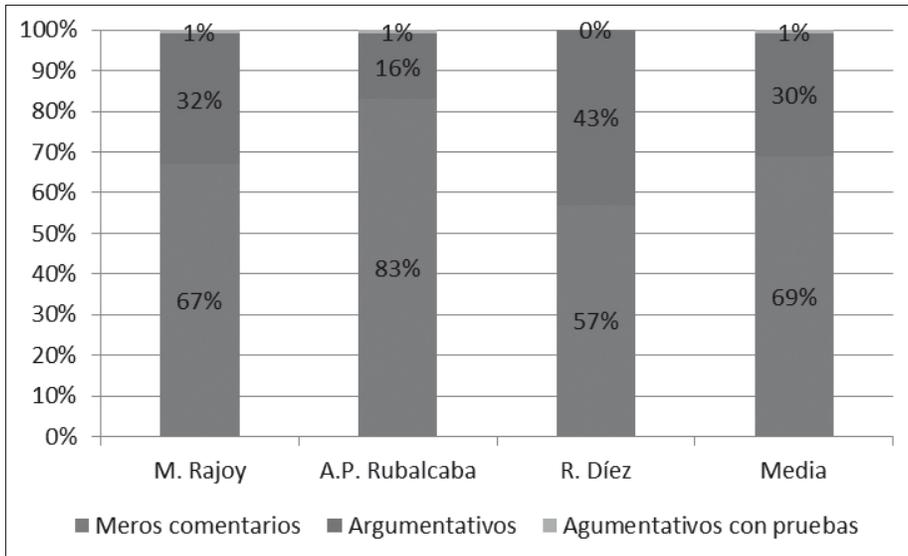
munity of sympathizers and activists is mostly organized around the party's digital spaces (or those of its leader). This would partially explain why its levels of ideological homogeneity are so much greater than the average.

In the case of the comments posted on Rajoy's profile page, it is noteworthy that only 38% of the comments express agreement with his opinions. Regarding this point, our analysis of discursive strategies has revealed that the elevated level of negative comments is misleading: as we will see later on, half of these comments (50%) come from users who share the party's ideology.

B. Level of argumentation

In terms of the level of argumentation in the conversations analyzed, 69% of the comments did not contain any argumentative intent whatsoever, consisting in expressions of personal preferences without any hint of justification or argumentation. Occasionally, they simply expressed support for the candidate or constituted manifestations of imprecise, general ideological agreement. Nonetheless, the variability among the profiles was quite pronounced. Rubalcaba's profile logged the highest number of mere comments with a notable 83%, much higher than the proportion registered on Mariano Rajoy's site (67%) or Rosa Diez's site (57%).

Despite the overwhelming majority of mere comments, 30% of the analyzed sample consisted of argumentative comments. It is worth pointing out here that our classification of comments in this category is in line with the guidelines set by the creators of this methodology (Camaj *et al.*, 2009). Argumentative comments are those whose authors display an argumentative intention, which is not necessarily systematic or totally rational and, as such, might display fallacies or contradictions. However, they must employ causal adverbs ('given that,' 'because,' 'considering that') that indicate that the speaker aspires to support his point of view with a specific line of argument. Also included in this category are comments that, although they may not explicitly contain such adverbial clauses, do demonstrate a tacit argumentative sequence that can be reconstructed. The following is an example of the latter case:

> 1. *Mr Rajoy, your statement has left me unconvinced; ETA has not disbanded, much less given up their weapons; in fact, they haven't returned any of them and they're not going to until they get Everything they want, they haven't asked the victims for forgiveness, and on top of that, they've sung the praises of the prisoners that are in jail* [Retrieved from Mariano Rajoy's wall and published on October 21, at 13:18].

The differences between the numbers of argumentative comments contained on the various profiles were also quite significant. Compared to a 43% level of argumentative comments on the UPyD candidate's profile page, Rajoy's displayed a level of 32%, which doubled that of Rubalcaba's (16%), the lowest of the three. It is worth noting that the extraordinarily low level of rationality expressed in the comments posted on Rubalcaba's profile can be partially explained by the fact that a large number of individuals who posted comments did so simply to congratulate the candidate for his work as Minister of the Interior during the Zapatero administration.

Finally, just 1% of the entire sample is made up of argumentative comments that were substantiated, which indicates a lack of desire to maintain a rational dialogue backed up by verifiable or 'sufficient' information, namely, that which can be evaluated in terms of its truthfulness, falsity, credibility and precision (Sartori, 2003).

C. Reciprocity

Figure 4. Level of reference to other users arguments for each profile in percentages
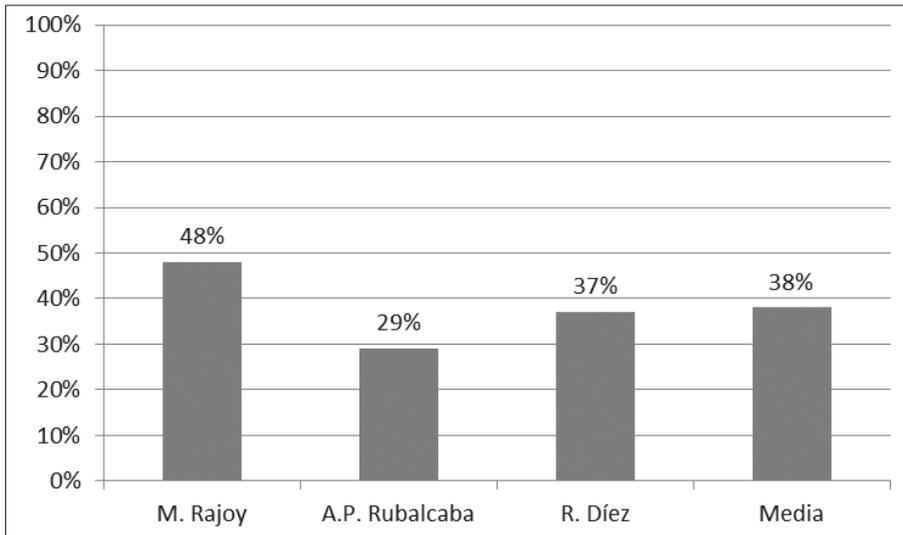
Reciprocity has been operationalised by means of two indicators: a) the level of response by the owner of the account (author-participant reciprocity) and b) the incorporation of arguments made by other individuals who posted comments (reciprocity among participants).

Regarding the first dimension, the level of response by account owners was a meagre 1.3%. All in all, of the 250 comments that made up the sample, only three were posts by the account owners (one comment on each profile), a demonstration of these candidates' fundamental lack of interest in pursuing direct interaction with the public. These results confirm that Spanish political parties have no real commitment to establishing direct channels of communication between themselves and the people they represent using Web 2.0, especially by means of the interactive features of the Internet sites they have invested in (Dader, 2011; Campos, 2011).

The second dimension does demonstrate a more significant level of interaction: an average of 38% of the people who posted comments made reference to the arguments of other participants. Thus, the authors of slightly more than a third of the analyzed comments considered the opinions of other participants and incorporated them in their own discourse, be it in refutation or agreement. Ordered

on a scale running from the highest to the lowest levels of discursive interaction, Rajoy's profile page stands out with 48% of the comments posted incorporating opinions first expressed in other comments, followed Rosa Díez's profile with 37% and Rubalcaba's with 29%.

We must call attention to the fact that 62% of the total comments in the sample did not make any reference to opinions expressed by other speakers involved in the same conversation, which makes it difficult to characterise these communicative interactions as deliberative processes. In effect, previous works have shown that online discussions are indeed characterised by a lack of willingness to listen, low receptivity and minimal dialogue (Jensen, 2003; Willhelm, 1999), and that monologues tend to be the rule in public debates on the Web (Freelon, 2010).

D. Coherence

Figure 5. Comment coherence per profile in percentages
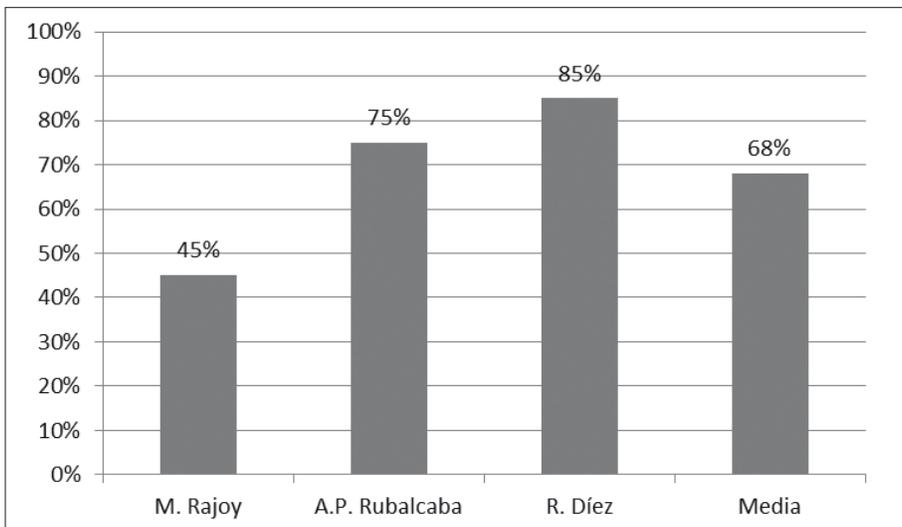
In the sample analyzed, an ample majority (68% of comments) responded directly to the content of the original post published by the candidate or his/her campaign team. However, we must point out that adherence to the original topic has been evaluated using quite broad and flexible standards. For example, when a candidate published a post about ETA's declaration of a permanent ceasefire, some users posted comments about acts of ETA terrorism that had occurred at different points of Spanish history since the Transition or about the role of victims of terrorism in the political arena, and others offered assessments of political parties' postures on this issue and evaluations of the effect the group's announcement would have on the November campaign. All of these responses were consid-

ered coherent, given that they were tangentially related to the background topic: the declaration of a permanent ceasefire.

There were also notable differences between the levels of coherence of the comments contained on these three profiles. The posts made on Rajoy's wall showed a low level of coherence (45%), compared to the much more focused dialogues that took place on Rubalcaba and Diez's walls, which registered coherence levels of 75% and 85% respectively. In fact, Rajoy's wall stands out for displaying the greatest deviance from the original topic: two of the four conversations ended in discussions of topics that had nothing to do with the original posts.

So it is that 32% of the comments had absolutely nothing to do with the original post's topic, a very significant figure, insofar as a third of the public's participation dealt with subjects completely unrelated to the topic of debate and consequently prevented a centred and coherent public dialogue on questions of political relevance from taking place. This again raises the issue that Facebook serves some users as a platform for self-expression.

E. Discursive Freedom

Discursive freedom was operationalised by means of a variable that divided the type of language employed by Internet users into four possible categories: neutral language, harsh language (insults, belittlement), harsh language directed at specific individuals and threatening language.

The results show that an overwhelming majority of comments employed neutral, respectful and considerate language (85%), while insults and belittling remarks were present in only 5%. However, 9% of comments did contain insults directed at specific individuals (fundamentally directed towards people external to the conversation and not at other participants), although no direct threats were detected in the comments posted on any of the profiles.

In terms of this dimension, the profiles showed a more even distribution: individuals who posted comments on Rubalcaba's profile page were the most respectful (91%), followed by those who posted comments on the pages of Rosa Díez (80%) and Mariano Rajoy (80%). Regarding levels of aggression, comments posted by followers of the leader of the PP were more likely to contain insults (8%) or personally belittle others (12%) than comments posted by followers of the leader of the UP&D, which registered equal levels of harsh language (7%) and personal insults (7%). The authors of comments posted on the socialist candidate's wall were the least likely of all three groups to employ aggression: only 1% of the comments posted on this site contained harsh language although 8% contained insults.

Figure 6. Discursive freedom in percentages and absolute numbers per profile
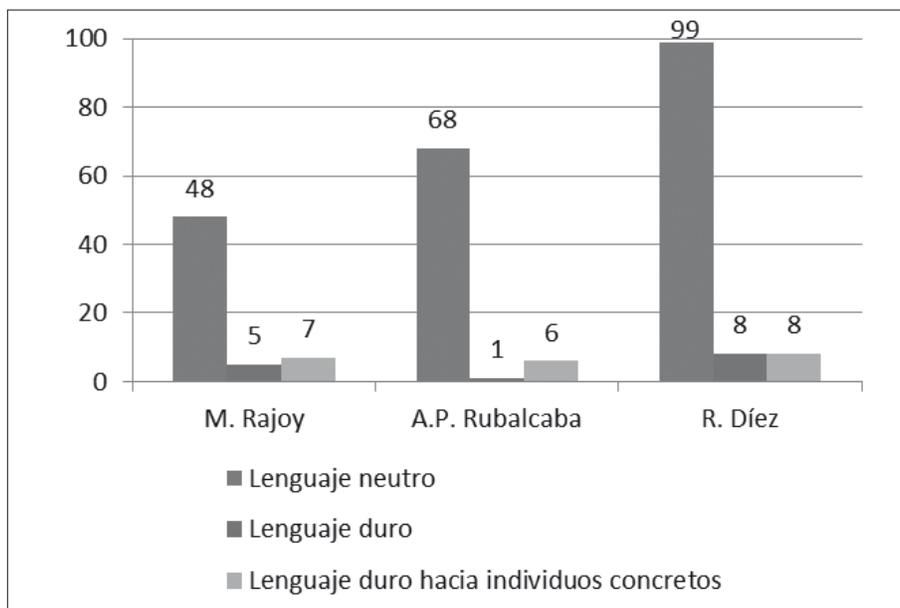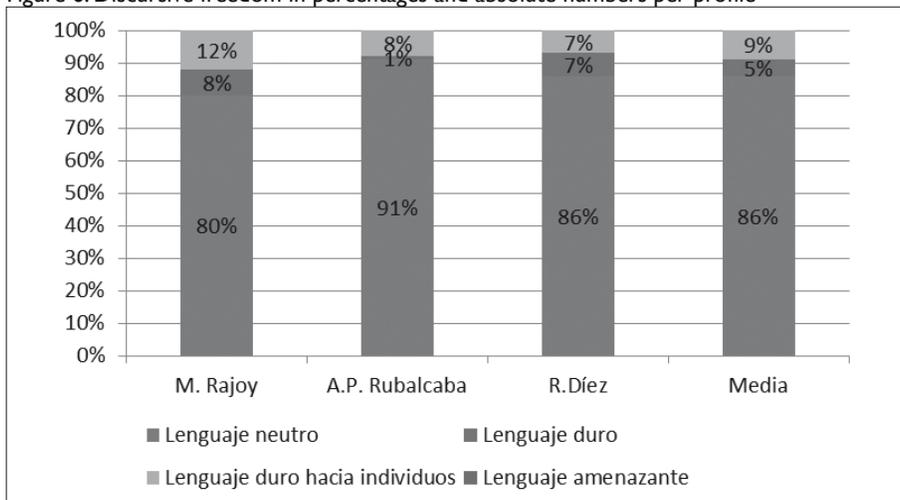
5.2. Discursive Strategies

The previous analysis has shown that conversations conducted via candidates' walls were not in keeping with a deliberative model, as demonstrated by their high level of ideological homogeneity (except in the case of conversations maintained on the Rajoy site), the diversity of users who participated in them, the fragmentation of the conversations and the low level of argumentation present in the majority of posts.

In order to better understand the communicative interaction that takes place on this social network, we undertook an analysis of the discursive strategies employed by participants. Our goal was to determine if the opinions expressed were related to the party's line of argumentation, in which case it would be plausible to infer that they could be attributed in large part to party activists. This kind of qualitative analysis was carried out to shed light on the conversational dynamics that were established on the candidates' walls.

The methodological approach employed revealed that the lowest level of ideological homogeneity observed (38% positive comments compared to 50% negative comments on Rajoy's profile page), was somewhat misleading, as 50% of the opposing points of view were reproaches posted by members of the party rank and file demanding that the leader of the PP take a more radical stand on various issues. So, while some of the conversations dealt with issues such as the party's opposition to same-sex marriage, others directly rejected Rajoy's 'soft' and moderate discourse regarding the permanent ceasefire. In other words, not all the comments that expressed dissent were authored by individuals who sympathised with other parties within the political spectrum. On the contrary: half of the negative comments posted on the leader of the PP's wall constituted radicalised expressions of the conservative, ideological lines frequently expounded in the narratives of the most ideologically extremist press.[10]

Table 1: Discursive strategies in Facebook conversations revolving around ETA's declaration of a permanent ceasefire on each candidate's profile

Mariano Rajoy Brey	Rosa Díez	Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba
—Rajoy seems soft when it comes to the group's announcement and ignores political concessions made in exchange for surrender.	—The non-negotiable conditions for ETA's dissolution are: the decommissioning of arms, a formal plea to the victims for forgiveness and prison sentences.	—The permanent ceasefire is one of Rubalcaba's personal triumphs as Minister of the Interior. (Dramatisation)
—The announcement is a PSOE electoral strategy in coordination with ETA conceived to sway voters.	—The permanent ceasefire is a means for ETA to receive recognition of its political ends.	—Speculation on the use of the end of ETA for electoral purposes during the campaign.
—ETA's ceasefire is false, a strategy for rearmament and for accessing public institutions. (radical scepticism)	—Radical scepticism: concern over political consequences, insinuation of a PSOE-ETA pact.	—The cessation of violence is a triumph of Zapatero's policy of negotiation.

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[10]   In response to the surprising figure of negative comments on Rajoy's wall, we conducted a second analysis of the comments in question in order to establish how many were based on other ideological viewpoints and how many conformed to the ideology represented by the candidate.

Regarding this point, our qualitative analysis suggests that conversations on Facebook walls not only reproduce the key elements of partisan elite discourses but also tend to surpass them in terms of radicalism, which leads us to think that they can be largely attributed to party activists, given that in the absence of other direct channels of contact with the party elites, party supporters utilise social media to express their discontent with the party's dominant programmatic line.

This phenomenon was particularly observable in comments posted on Mariano Rajoy's profile page, a logical phenomenon given that the leader of the PP moderated his discourse regarding ETA terrorism substantially towards the end of the legislative year after having previously maintained a hardline position against Zapatero's policy that entailed using every available opportunity to discredit the Zapatero administration and accuse it of betraying the victims of terrorism (Bordería, 2011: 30). However, Rajoy's wall was not the only one that registered a discourse that was more extremist than that of the profile's owner and author. A healthy number of individuals who posted comments on Rubalcaba's profile page stubbornly insisted that he could legitimately claim credit for the cessation of ETA violence on the basis of his own personal merit, just as Zapatero could well take credit for the successful negotiations. Nevertheless, the majority of the PSOE elite exercised greater moderation in statements related to these issues and initially rejected any electoral exploitation of this issue.

Individuals who posted comments on Rosa Díez's profile page demonstrated a very deep scepticism regarding the possible disbanding of ETA that was clearly aligned with the candidate's statements, and they totally and unanimously rejected any recognition of its political aspirations, insisted on conditions for its genuine dissolution and called for the victims to have a decisive role in the new political scenario.

What stands out most among the comments posted on Rajoy's Facebook page is the considerable prestige posters conferred on conspiracy theories concerning a possible agreement between Rubalcaba and ETA, according to which the latter was to declare a cessation of violence before the presidential campaign so that Rubalcaba win the election and subsequently grant the organisation a number of concessions in exchange for its cooperation. The authors of these comments also accused the PP's presidential candidate of being too conciliatory towards ETA and ignoring the danger that the announcement might just be strategy for gaining time the band needed to rearm.

The following comments illustrate these points:

1. '*No, Mariano, no, not like this. If the Etarras want us to believe that they're going to turn in their weapons and that's it, but don't just go around saying that it's good news because it's just a game played by the number 1 terrorist Rubalcaba and that's it and you know it, so you're not getting my vote*' [Retrieved from Mariano Rajoy's wall and published on October 20 at 21:23]

2. '*Dear Don Alfredo, for me always President Rubalcaba, I understand that you've received little and wept an awful lot, you've spent your whole life fighting for what it seems now has finally been achieved, no matter how hard it is for some to accept and how they might try to downplay your efforts, you fought more than*

anyone to achieve this victory. *Thank You*' [Retrieved from Rubalcaba's wall and published on October 21, 13:35].

3. '*I don't know if we live in a country of gullible idiots or crazy people. ETA hasn't said anything different. They've said that they're not going to kill anyone as long as their conditions are met. Nothing more, nothing less. They're not in any way defeated. They have the necessary infrastructure to attack, they have an entire province, they have tax information on all of us, have we gone nuts? Even the PP is celebrating the fact that ETA hasn't said anything. It seems, Rosa, that you are the only politician who has her wits about her along with Mayor Oreja and Esperanza Aguirre.*' [Retrieved from Rosa Díez's wall and published on October 21 at 14:41].

The results appear to confirm that there is a strong similarity between the discursive strategies of polarised media outlets and opinions expressed on new digital forums. We have reached this conclusion on the basis of our analysis, which shows that the majority of arguments employed in comments posted on candidates' Facebook profiles echoed clearly identifiable partisan frames that tend to be disseminated by a polarised pluralist media system conceived to use communications platforms as tools of political action (Hallin and Mancini, 2007, pp. 105-106). Furthermore, this tends to be carried out by means of hostile and indiscriminate attacks on ideological opponents (Castromil, 2006, 2008). We are therefore facing yet another example of the 'antagonistic bi-polarization' that characterises the political and media debate in Spain (Sampedro *et al.*, 2008), which is propagated through these new Internet platforms by means of the echoing of partisan discursive strategies.

Castromil and Rodríguez (2011) explored how the discursive strategies of these media frames overlapped in their study on press coverage of the launch of Zapatero's peace negotiations in 2006 and their eventual failure in 2007.

Table 2. Media frames on terrorism according to Castromil and Rodríguez, 2011.[11]

Tabla 3. Los encuadres sobre errorismo (1ª Ola: 22 y 27 de niviembre de 2006)	Tabla 3. Los encuadres sobre errorismo (1ª Ola: 22 y 27 de niviembre de 2006)
1. El alto al fuego de ETA representa una oportunidad para la pacificación del País Vasco que el gobierno debe aprovechar. 2. El alto al fuego de ETA representa una oportunidad de ETA para fortalecerse y conseguir así su objetivo: la autodeterminación del País Vasco. 3. Con ETA no puede haber negociación política, pero la política puede ayudar a la negociación. 4. Con ETA no puede haber negociación política, sino solo rendición y entrega de las armas.	1. El uso electoral del terrorismo que hace el PP es un obstáculo para conseguir el final de la violencia en el País Vasco. 2. El problema para acabar con ETA es la debilidad del gobierno y las cesiones de Zapatero. 3. Prohibir todas las listas de ANV no ayuda a acabar con la violencia del País Vasco. 4. Todas las listas de ANV deberían prohibirse por ser un disfraz de ETA..

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[11]   Table 2 originally in Spanish, translation in English following the original.

Table 3: Media frames on terrorism (1st wave: November 22 and 27, 2006)

1. ETA's ceasefire represents an opportunity to pacify the Basque Country that the government should take advantage of.
2. ETA's ceasefire represents an opportunity for the group to strengthen and obtain their objective: auto-determination for the Basque Country.
3. There cannot be political negotiation with ETA, but politics can help the negotiation.
4. There cannot be political negotiation with ETA, only surrender and decommissioning of arms.

Table 4: Frames on terrorism (1st Wave: November 22 and 27, 2006)

1. The PP's electoral use of terrorism is an obstacle on the path to the end of ETA violence.
2. The difficulty in finishing off ETA is the government's weakness and Zapatero's concessions.
3. Prohibiting all demonstrations by Acción Nacional Vasca (Basque Nationalist Action) does not help put an end to violence in the Basque Country.
4. All of ANV's electoral lists should be prohibited as they are but an ETA disguise.
Source: Castromil and Rodríguez, 2011.

Note: Media frames on terrorism according to Castromil and Rodríguez. Adapted from 'Terrorismo con y sin tregua. Políticos, ciudadanos y medios de comunicación', by A. Castromil and R. Rodríguez, 2011, *Telos*, 87

As these researchers point out, the first and third sentences in each table coincide, respectively, with the socialist government's frame on negotiations with ETA and its views on the illegalisation of *Acción Nacionalista Vasca* (ANV). These narratives arose in the context of the 2007 regional elections and were disseminated by the newspaper *El País*, while the second and fourth sentences in each table summarize the Popular Party's frame on both issues and were disseminated by outlets such as *El Mundo* and *Abc* (Castromil & Rodríguez, 2011).

The greatest overlaps revolved around the radical scepticism that ETA's announcement provoked among various individuals who posted comments on the Facebook pages of Mariano Rajoy and Rosa Díez that replicated the Popular Party's framing of the 2006 ceasefire, arguing that the ceasefire was no more than a ploy by ETA to gain the time they needed to rearm and establish non-negotiable conditions for a true surrender. Mistrust and steadfast postures against any political concessions were also manifested on both candidates' walls. However, the possible existence of a pact through which the PSOE might guarantee a series of concessions for ETA in exchange for a declaration of cessation of violence just a month away from elections only surfaces in comments posted on Rajoy's wall, where the theory enjoyed a high level of credibility. Such assertions appear to echo conspiracy theories related to the March 11, 2004 terrorist attacks on Spanish commuter trains in Madrid that were spread by some media outlets during Zapatero's first legislature (Bordería, 2011).

In the same way, although perhaps with much less intensity, those who posted comments on Rubalcaba's Facebook page proudly mentioned the importance of Zapatero's policy of negotiation with ETA and gave more credit for these negotiations to Rubalcaba in his capacity as Minister of the Interior during that period.

These individuals also discussed online the legitimacy of capitalising on this success during the election campaign.

Ultimately, our analysis of the various discursive strategies employed in the posts contained in our sample has demonstrated that the opinions expressed by posters on the candidates' Facebook walls reproduce the principal political and media frames of their respective ideological, partisan spheres and consequently express a high degree of ideological agreement often consisting of a radicalised, extremist version of the dominant discourses of party elites. It is therefore logical to infer that the authors of the majority of comments published on these platforms were insider political activists who had assimilated the political and media frames defended by their parties through ideologically aligned media outlets.

6. Conclusions

It is important to structure the principal conclusions of this qualitative exploratory study on the conversations that took place on the Facebook walls of Spanish political candidates, but not without first warning that the limitation of the sample size (250 comments), the restriction of the scope of the analysis to only the first 15 comments made for each post, and the short time frame (24 hours) under study together constitute an obstacle to establishing statistically significant generalisations. This does not impede us, however, from gaining a further understanding of the conversation 2.0 phenomenon and revealing behavioural tendencies observed in the context of an event of such singular political and media transcendence as ETA's declaration of a permanent ceasefire.

The extremely high fragmentation of the conversations studied (88% were comments by unique users), the poor level of argumentation expressed in the majority of comments (69% were mere comments), the practically inexistent level of response from the owners of the profiles (1.3%), together with a modest levels of reference to opinions expressed in comments posted by others (38%), all of which mostly took place in a context of overwhelming ideological consensus (68% of comments were favourable to the author's opinion), compromise any notion of a public deliberation 2.0 as theorized by cyberoptimists. The results confer credibility upon theses that assert there is a fragmentation and polarization of the digital public sphere into ideologically homogeneous niches (Sunstein, 2003, 2007; Precht, 2010) and that have been supported by other empirical studies (Ruiz *et al.*, 2010). The only necessary condition for deliberation that is evident in the sample used in this study is the level of discursive freedom; 86% of comments employed neutral language and did not belittle, insult or threaten others (a phenomenon possibly related to the fact that the majority of Facebook use their real names rather than ad hoc nicks).

Furthermore, the fact that a third of the comments had nothing to do with the topic of the original post (32%) suggests that a substantial group of users posted comments on these candidates' social network profiles with the sole intention of expressing their individual preferences and had no desire to listen to or debate the opinions of other individuals. In this sense, our findings support the exist-

ence of a wide spectrum of online discussions, the preponderance of which are monologues (Freelon, 2010; Jensen, 2003), whose authors have little interest in listening, being receptive to others' opinions or participating in dialogues (Wilhelm, 1999).

Lastly, our analysis of these discursive strategies has corroborated findings related to the existence of a discursive framework on Facebook walls characterised by heightened ideological homogeneity, inasmuch that as we have seen, individuals who posted comments tended to reproduce partisan frames on a given topic of debate that are circulated throughout the traditional media in collusion with the system that controls those media (Hallin and Mancini, 2007; Castromil, 2006, 2008, 2011).

Even in the case of the comments posted on Mariano Rajoy's wall, the second level of analysis has revealed that half of the comments expressing rejection of Rajoy's position were actually authored by individuals who represented an internal opposition that supported the party's general ideology but were dissatisfied with the position taken by the leader of the Popular Party regarding ETA's cease-fire declaration, which suggests that social networks serve as outlets for expressing divergent extremist lines within the party itself. All of this leads us to attribute the authorship of the larger part of the comments posted to party activists, or at the very least, to sympathizers heavily influenced by the media frames circulating through the party's main ideological spheres of dissemination.

In conclusion, the results of this study confirm hypotheses H1 and H3, and, to a lesser extent, H2. In the latter case, they suggest that the reproduction of partisan discourse and the radicalisation of party ideology is only evident in comments posted on Rajoy's wall, which, until further studies prove otherwise, provides empirical corroboration for theses on communicative endogamy and ideological polarisation.

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