Audience Participation and Political Engagement in Europe: EU Elections and the Cases of Scotland and Catalonia in the Catalan Media (2014)

Participació de l'audiència i compromís polític a Europa: eleccions europees i els casos d'Escòcia i Catalunya als mitjans catalans

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The primary goal of this article is to contribute to research on the quality of and practices in the participation of active users of online media, specifically related to important, European-level political issues. Our text deals with trends which were detected surrounding political engagement and interest in politics during the campaign for the European Parliamentary elections held in May 2014. We focus on the questions of the Scottish referendum for independence, which was held in September 2014, and indirectly on the so-called 'Catalan question'. We use those issues not as topics to be analysed per se, but as a starting point to investigate the trends that arise in a country when users decide to participate actively through comments. In this sense, our proposal openly aims to use well-known techniques: content analysis of comments and in-depth semi-structured interviews with the edi-

Aquest article té com a principal objectiu contribuir a la recerca sobre la qualitat i pràctiques de la participació dels usuaris actius dels mitjans digitals, i més concretament pel que fa a temes d'una certa importància política a Europa. El nostre text tracta de les tendències detectades al voltant del compromís i l'interès sobre la política durant la campanya a les eleccions al Parlament Europeu de maig de 2014. Ens centrem, concretament, en qüestions que fan referència al referèndum sobre la independència d'Escòcia, que es va celebrar el setembre de 2014, i indirectament sobre l'anomenada "qüestió catalana". Farem servir aquests temes no tant com a qüestions a ser analitzades per se, sinó més aviat com a punt de partida per interrogar-nos sobre les tendències que encara es manifesten en un país mediterrani quan els usuaris decideixen participar activament a través de comentaris. La nostra proposta es

tors in charge of the comment sections of the media under analysis. Our article builds on previous research on the topic, and our goal is to verify the extent to which the trends identified in previous studies regarding the characteristics and quality of comments posted by users in Catalonia show consistent traits or not. For our purposes, quality is defined as the creation of productive and diverse debate communities as opposed to the entrenchment of homogeneous communities.

Key words: *political participation, comments, online media.*

proposa de manera manifesta fer servir tècniques ben conegudes: anàlisi de continguts dels comentaris i entrevistes en profunditat semiestructurades als responsables de la secció de participació dels mitjans estudiats, i seguir investigacions prèvies similars. I el nostre objectiu és comprovar si, i fins a quin punt, les tendències prèviament definides en estudis anteriors sobre la participació i qualitat dels comentaris publicats pels usuaris a Catalunya presenten trets permanents o no, definint qualitat com la construcció de comunitats productives i plurals de debat, o si, per contra, s'estan reforçant comunitats homogènies.

Paraules clau: *participació política, comentaris, cibermitjans.*

In June 2014, just a few months before the British independence referendum was to be held in Scotland, asking the Scottish people on whether they want to become an independent state or not (Scotland is considered a nation within the United Kingdom after the so-called Union Act which in 1707 unified the kingdoms of England and Scotland under one and only crown), the authors of this article were invited to take part in a seminar organized by the University of Glasgow on *Political Participation, Media and Citizenship. Public media in Spain*. The goal of the invitation was for us to explain which was the position of the Spanish public media (both the Spanish one and the public broadcasting services of the autonomous communities of the country; see Tremblay, 2014) on the independence processes of Scotland and Catalonia, and to which extent were they offering a platform for public participation and opinion sharing (on public media services, see Bardoel and Ferrell Lowe, 2007 and Bardoel and D'Haenens, 2008; on the importance of audiences' voice, see Couldry, 2009).

We agreed with the proposal, and ask to make a comparison of participation of public as well as of private media, at least in some of the main ones. At first, our aim was to concentrate on the comments sent by users to Catalonian and Spanish public media service broadcasting companies' websites —as well as to, when possible, to Basque media—. However, once we came across with the

fact that these media published very few users' comments, in many news items none, we decided to add an analysis of comments published on the main Catalan and Spanish online newspapers', those being *La Vanguardia,* and *El País*. In addition to the content analysis, regarding the methodology interviews was conducted with people in charge of the participation section of both Catalan media to offer a picture on how participation is managed at least in our nearest case, since it was not possible to interview their colleagues of the aforementioned Spanish media.

This paper, modest in scope and intended just to do our bit to help on a research interest on active audiences' comments and on, in this case, political participation through online media (see Deuze, 2006; Carpentier, Schroder and Hallett, 2004 and Carpentier and Dahlgren, 2011; Domingo *et al.*, 2008), offers the main findings and conclusions we were able to explain in that event, explaining first of all a comprehensive vision of which is participation in online media in Spain, especially referring to the quality of comments – using as a representative example the characteristics of participation processes around transcendental political items (see Serra, Camilo and Gonçalves, 2014), such as the vision of the independence processes in Scotland, with a legal referendum campaign, and Catalonia, claiming precisely to the Spanish government and institutions for such a legal consultation to be permitted, an objective not achieved to this point. As explained in the following sections, we used two techniques to verify our assumptions and fulfil our goals: content analysis of comments and in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews to participation editors.

This is neither the place nor our intention to explain the political roots and consequences of the aforementioned self-determination processes, but to focus, using them as a starting point, on the characteristics of the current situation of citizen participation (not to be identified with "citizen journalism", see Allan and Thorsen, 2014) through media in Spain, and more concretely in Catalonia (a research study on the image of the Catalan independence process to that date in Micó and Masip, 2014). Due to the necessarily short extension of this paper, we just can mention some characteristics of both independence processes, the Scottish and the Catalan ones. The most obvious is that in the Scottish case the British government and parliament agreed that a binding self-determination referendum could be organized, and it was done, in September 2014 —the voters decided that Scotland should continue to be part of the United Kingdom—. The Spanish government denied the possibility of organizing such a referendum in Catalonia, allegedly because the Spanish constitution states that only the Spanish population, as a whole, is entitled to participate in it. Comments in the Catalan and Spanish media may reflect this difference.

As a first limitation, it is obvious that a more crowded sampling would be needed in order to achieve more categorical conclusions, first of all including more media in this study and extending our data gathering through time. In order to conduct a right comparison, we did not focus on comments on the Scottish independence campaign poured on the online editions of some Spanish media, since there was not possible to gather such a bunch of comments in occasion of a similar Catalan independence legal campaign, nor was it possible to be coin-

cident in time, so we rather focused on the European Union campaign of May, 2014, thus coetaneous to the immediately previous moment of the seminar. We did concentrate of those issues as appearing in the news items on the EU parliamentary election campaign.

The request of concentrating most especially in public media was due to the fact that Spain is quite a singular case in Europe. Whilst in the United Kingdom the main and only public media is the BBC, which covers with its different sections the singularities of the different linguistic, cultural, political and, at the end, national characteristics (United Kingdom is considered a plurinational state organization) through BBC Alba (Scotland) or BBC Wales, and it is supposed that, although the editorial guidelines of the public broadcasting system prevents it from delivering any editorial content, that influential medium is the voice of the official position on British politics, whilst in Spain the regional (autonomous, just to follow the legal terminology in vogue in the constitutional order of Spain) media are in charge of taking care of the linguistic, cultural, and even political and national particularities of every place. The Spanish state is made up of 17 autonomous communities, of which Catalonia and the Basque Country are two that have a remarkable history of self-government vindication, since, for instance, both of them were the first ones that received a status of autonomous communities during the Spanish Second Republic in the decade of 1930, and later on when democracy was reinforced in Spain after Francisco Franco's death. Both are considered "historical nationalities" of the Spanish territory and have their own languages (Catalan and the Basque language, *euskara*).

GOALS

Our goal is to analyze, at least to some extent and modestly confining ourselves to the proposed topic, which is the quality of audience participation in and through media, using Nico Carpentier's words (Carpentier and Dahlgren, 2011) and aligning to the general research question proposed by Jaume Suau and Pere Masip, on whether participation tools provided by media are "a renewed opportunity to achieve the goals supported by public journalism" and whether active audiences are to be considered "secondary gatekeepers" (Suau and Masip, 2013). At least, there are some data which help us confirm the importance (qualitatively, at least) of comments in the Spanish news landscape. According to the *Digital News Report* corresponding to 2013, thus published during 2014, at the time we conducted our research, Spain was the second country of the ones analyzed, just after Brazil, which paid more importance to news comments. The figures provided by that report affirmed that 27% of the Spaniards who answered the survey conducted by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford University, participated weekly in such an activity. This can be partly due to the fact that Spain is part of which Hallin and Mancini would define as the "polarized pluralistic model" of political communication, in which public opinion tends to be perceived as split into

black-or-white expressions. To some extent, we will be able to find out, that, according to the figures provided by our specific research study, this is true when dealing with sensitive topics such as the hypothetical segregation of a territory leading to the reconfiguration of the political unity of a state.

Alongside with that general research objective, to insist in the interpretation of the quality of comments and participation in and through media, using previously checked techniques (Ruiz *et al.*, 2011) and complementing content analysis with qualitative interviews, our aim was also to determine which is the nature of that participation, related to one of the main characteristics of digital communication, and probably one of the most fuzzily defined ones, interactivity. Otherwise said, our following research question is whether it happens to be a *selective, participatory* or *productive* interactivity, and we advance that we align with previous research studies (see Díaz-Noci, 2011; Suau and Masip, 2013) in considering that users' participation through comments is selective and participatory interactivity, as stated by Suau and Masip, 2014.

Our research question was, thus, to verify whether and to which extent the characteristics of users' participation in Spain and Catalonia, as previously stated by other studies (Díaz-Noci *et al.*, 2010, and Ruiz *et al.*, 2010 and 2011), are persistent in time or not. For this reason, we will refer to previous research studies, whose concrete techniques we have replicated in order to produce longitudinally comparable findings. We assume, as a hypothesis, that little advance is to be found in the period of time covered from those studies to the point of the one we presented here, so to this point we should be in front of quite permanent trends in the quality of comments in Spain and Catalonia, with few particularities we would try to remark in the following pages.

METHODS USED

The methods used in this study are two: content analysis of comments and qualitative in-depth, semi-structured interviews to the people in charge of the participation sections of the studied media corporations. Regarding to the first method, content analysis, as we will explain in the section devoted to it we used the tool developed by Díaz-Noci *et al.*, 2010, and improved by Ruiz *et al.*, 2010 and 2011. A database was designed, and apart from identification fields (medium, news item's date, title, country and URL), content analysis fields, grouped by subjects, were included:

1. Logic and coherence, or whether the commenter focuses his/her intervention in the specific topic mentioned in the news item, and whether he or she adds arguments to the topic.
2. Cooperative search for truth, or whether commenters respect the others, measuring the presence of linguistic expressions related to contemptuous behavior, such as insults and derogatory references; whether they add any kind of nuance to others' opinions; whether they ask the others to clarify

their positions; and whether they tend to enforce the medium's position and ideology or not.

3. Do commenters seek to get an agreement based on best arguments, measuring whether and to which extent do they accept and include in their comments opinions and arguments expressed in other people's comments, do they mention reliable information sources, and whether those sources enforce the commenter's position.

Regarding to the second method used, semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews to users' participation media editors, we focused in some few relevant issues. Those interviews were specifically planned to study participatory journalism on digital newsrooms. We asked them to explain which is the goal of comments related to audience participation, and how could the possibly define this core concept. We focused in moderation and filtering strategies as a way to enhance a community of readers, so to define which type of community were they creating or enforcing. Secondly, we asked them about the ways of encouraging readers' participation, and on the strategies and tools they use to keep and promote quality in comments, as defined in the items used in content analysis. We did insist in the balance between quantity and quality of comments. Finally, we asked on the influence of comments on journalists and newsrooms.

These semi-structured interviews were divided into five main topics, such as: basic information about the Journalist, Participatory Channels, Management, Attitudes and Motivation. These were the questions:

1. Basic Information about the Journalist
1.1 Job
1.2 Common tasks. Responsabilities in the Digital Newsroom.
1.3 Career (Just to determine if it influences their attitudes towards Participatory Journalism)

2. Participatory Channels
2.1 When did you start offering share/Participation options to users?
2.2 How have these options evolved?
2.3 If there is more than one: Which is the most popular?
2.4 Do you have plans to introduce more options?

3. Management
3.1 Who is responsible for managing the participation of the audience? Are these new jobs?
3.2 Which is the management strategy of this input (moderation, standards, criteria)?
3.3 Are users involved in the moderation of comments? (If you say no, have you thought about it?)
3.4 Has it grown the times in the dedication you have to manage participation?

4. Attitudes

4.1 Do you use material sent by users to make the news? For instance?

4.2 How do you value the contributions made by users in their comments?

4.3 How do journalists react to digital media comments? And the paper's journalists??

4.4 How do you rate this growing audience participation in digital media in general? Do you think it is positive or negative for the medium?

4.5 Do you know what does the audience think of these possibilities of participation that you are offering them?

4.6 Do you think the audience now has more influence on your work (the news agenda, decisions) than before?

5. Motivation

5.1. Who proposed to open news to readers' comments? What arguments do you use?

5.2 Which are the specific benefits of the participation of the audience for your media?

5.3 What problems does audience participation involve? Specifically: legal, ethical?

5.4 Do you think participation means that the medium is / seems more democratic?

For the reasons previously explained, we decided to focus on Radio Televisión Española (RTVE), the state official broadcasting service; and on Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals (Catalan Audiovisual Media Corporation), the official broadcasting service in Catalonia. In this respect, equal access to participation is somehow guaranteed due to the plurality of media, as well as, theoretically at least, pluralism of opinions, since in those media comments are accepted whenever they are respectfully written, as it is stated in every term of use of those media. Specific questions are developed in the section of this paper devoted to explain the findings.

The period of our study was composed by the days of the European Parliament campaign, fifteen days from May 7 to 31, 2014. RTVE did not place any news item in its website directly related to Scotland (or Catalonia) and the European campaign, so we couldn't gather no significant data in this occasion, and we had to discard them —and this is another limitation of our study to be considered in further research—.

Due to several reasons we will refer to later on in this paper, especially tight moderation, comments are usually few when comparing with the amount of users' opinions published by private media, so that is the reason why we decided to include an analysis of the comments published on the topic by the aforementioned online editions of the main newspapers in Spain and Catalonia. It seems, we advance, as if Spanish (including Catalan and, when possible, Basque) users found easier and preferable to deliver their comments to private media with lower moderation threshold standards, so public media were not able to, and not fully convinced of being really interested in, attract a poorly structured bunch of

comments. That is the reasons why we decided not to carry on a content analysis on the very few comments to be found in 324.cat (online version of the Catalan broadcasting corporation), which was impossible in the case of the Basque public television, whose five news in both Spanish and Basque languages which fulfilled the characteristics required in our research design, to be about Scotland or mentioning Catalonia and the European campaign, contained not one single comment. This is the same case we found in RTVE.es: a remarkable scarcity of comments, generally speaking, and concretely regarding to the topic we analyze. This, we advance as well, confirms the description of the work by Díaz-Noci *et al.*, 2010, for the Catalan media system, whose main online newspaper is plenty of lowly moderated comments whilst the public one is scant of them —a situation perfectly transferable to the rest of the Spanish media— and to that point as well that the preferred and more successful model in Spain, in terms of amount of comments and, so to say, popularity, is the one described in Ruiz *et al.*, 2011.

FINDINGS

Quality of Comments

The first thing we analyzed was the quality of comments, employing exactly the methods and tools used by Ruiz *et al.*, 2011, improving the ones used by the same team in Díaz-Noci *et al.*, 2010. In that occasion, authors used a sample of randomly chosen news, using a constructed week, so topics covered by those news items were diverse too. In our research design, and at the request of the organizers of the aforementioned event, we had to design a more centered sample, so we just chose the news produced during the European parliament election campaign in May 2014, and those containing comments referring to Scotland and Catalonia in the public media of Catalonia and Spain, and in the main newspapers of both communities, in both cases taking the samples from the corresponding websites (324.cat in the case of the Catalonian public broadcast corporation). The Catalan public broadcasting (and Internet) service produced eight news items, and *La Vanguardia* and *El País*, 21 items each. Instead, the only news items containing a relevant number of comments by users were those of the private newspapers, and not one was to be recovered from the public services, due principally to the moderation strategy mainly.

The Catalan newspaper produced a high amount of comments. Several news items were commented by more than 700 individuals, 55% about Scotland and 43% about Catalonia. We decided then to analyze the first 50 comments of each news item, since deviation from the initial topic was almost constant beyond this moment (a decision which follows Díaz-Noci, 2012). Comments gathered by *El País* were much more, but in this case Catalonia was the main topic of those comments —not necessarily of the news item they were attached at—, since 146 out of 181 those comments mentioned the Catalan problem and just two dealt with Scotland, and the rest occurred to be off-topic. By the way, 33 comments made some reference to the Basque situation as well, although the Basque Au-

tonomous Community, in which traditionally the conservative, right-winged Basque National Party has presided the local government, was not immersed at that moment in any kind on pro-independence process. As a result, it seems that at that moment readers of *El País* perceived that they needed to carefully separate the Scottish and the Catalan cases —even though if the Scottish one was a narrative hook and a model of agreed referendum continuously used by Catalan pro-independence politicians—.

The deviation rate of those comments was also measured. The following figure shows the differences between both media. The first column shows the number of comments directly related to the topic of the item they are attached to (Scotland or Catalonia). The second column shows the number of comments that refer to that specific topic in some way, but not necessarily as the axis of the comment. The third column shows the number of comments absolutely off-topic.

Figure 1. Deviation rate of comments

Medium	Scotland			Catalonia			Basque Country		
	Fully related	Partially related	Off topic	Fully related	Partially related	Off topic	Fully related	Partially related	Off topic
La Vanguardia	15	35	5	0	38	5	-	-	-
El País	1	0	1	48	80	18	22	9	2
Total	16	35	6	48	118	23	22	9	2

Source: elaborated by the authors.

A first interpretation of those data show how Catalan readers of *La Vanguardia* refer to Catalonia as a related topic, but it is not the primary topic of the commented news, so they introduce the Catalan question using news about Scotland. *El País'* readers do not need to do so, since the medium offers much more news directly dealing with Catalonia. Readers of this Spanish newspaper behaved as if they needed to refer indirectly to the issues they were really interested in, the domestic ones (Catalonia or the Basque Country) instead of international ones (Scotland). This is a trend that was observed in previous studies for the Mediterranean countries (Spain, Italy and, in a lower measure, France as well; see Díaz-Noci, 2012). As a comparison, we have included similar figures on comments related to the Basque Country. In this case, readers are closer to the medium's interest. More than double-fold the comments delivered on the Catalan question are hooked to news items whose topic is the Basque Country itself. In this case, readers do not need an excuse (Scotland) to deal on domestic concerns (Catalonia).

Totally speaking, and referring to the quality of news comments, in terms of tightening the opinions to the proposed topic, an impressive 61% of the comments are related to the topic of the news item but not aligned with it; only one third of the comments follow specifically the topic proposed by the newspaper. 9% of the comments are off-topic. The figures improve the Madrilenian newspaper, since 52% of the comments are related, and 37% are centered on the topic, but it is equally important to remark that 11% of the comments are off-topic,

whilst in its Catalan counterpart only 5% of the comments are no related in any way to the topic, but 79% of them refers to the news item's topic only partially or incidentally. An overwhelming majority of comments never support ideas or arguments with further evidence: 97% are exclusively based on opinionated comments. Let us insist in the fact that public media offer very few comments on the topic, so this conclusion is mainly referring to comments on private media, which show a great difference in quantity in comparison with public media in Spain (including Catalan and Basque public media).

Despite the nearness of the topic, most comments are not reasonably argued: in 70% of them we have not been able to detect the use of any intellectually developed argument. Things are even worse in *El País*, since 75% of all comments are poorly argued, and better in *La Vanguardia*, where almost 40% of the comments show some elaboration. Nuances are scarce: only 8% of all comments considered in this study introduce any, whilst an overwhelming 92% do not. Meaningfully, there is no significant variation between the two: nuanced comments are always below 10%. At least, contemptuous language is also low-rated, since only 9% of the comments have managed to avoid the filters and introduce insults or, at least and more frequently, disqualifications. Only one third of the comment makers consider or mention the others and include some reference to them in their contributions, but it is equally true that the rates are worse for *El País*, since only 10% of the comments include some reference to the others. Comment makers prefer to monologue, according to these data. Even when considering the other people's ideas and arguments, very few people —figures are similarly low in both cases— attend to them and show any sort of agreement: 96% of the comments disagree with the others, and consensus is only gained in a poor 4% of the contributions.

Another interesting question is to which extent comments do agree with the medium's ideology, thus they support it or not. In general terms, 59% of the comments share the same ideology, less in the case of the Spanish newspaper (54%) and more in the case of the Catalan one (69%), so alongside with the previous figures, it depicts a portrait of a more *fidelized* reader in the case of *La Vanguardia*, which is not considered to be partisan, but rather a quite conservative newspaper (owned by the same Godó family, from its origin in 1881) adaptative and respectful of the institutional order, whatever it is. We put into relation the fact that comments do agree with the medium's ideology with Hallin and Mancini statement: this is typical of the Mediterranean polarized model, as these authors explain that in this model readers usually confirm their opinions in the media they (we) use, instead of confronting opinions to another media. This idea belongs to the *political parallelism*, one of the dimensions stated by the authors to study Media Systems (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 26-33).

What Media Editors Say

In a parallel way, as previously explained, the authors held several semi-structured interviews to people in charge of participation of two of the analyzed media, one of them public (Televisió de Catalunya, belonging to CCRTV, and, as we

have seen, containing no comments) and the other one, private (*La Vanguardia*). Both interviews were done during the period of our study (the election campaign for the European Parliament in May 2014). The main objectives of these semi-structured interviews were to understand the management of participation and to comprehend to which extent these media are interested in audience participation, so, even if probably important to some extent, we did not refer specifically to the political comments. Anyway, the topic of our research was mentioned to the interviewees, so they had in mind the context in which the questions were addressed. The people in charge of the participation channels of *El País* and RTVE could not participate in those interviews so access to them was not feasible at that time. We are aware that this can bias, to some extent and out of our intention, the findings in this section, which are exclusively provided from the Catalan point of view. Further research is needed to complete it in subsequent studies.

Televisió de Catalunya (TVC–Television of Catalonia) is the most important TV corporation in Catalonia. It was, with the Basque broadcasting corporation EITB, one of the pioneer in Spain as autonomous networks, as they were the first to receive broadcasting licenses, in 1983 and 1982 respectively. The Catalan public TV includes the channels TV3, Canal 33, 3/24, Esport 3, Canal Súper 3), and broadcasts integrally in Catalan. In this occasion, we managed to interview Eva Varas, News Editor of the 3/24 website, since she was the person in charge the corporation indicated us as the most appropriate as an interlocutor.

La Vanguardia is one of the most important newspapers in Catalonia, and one of the main ones in Spain. In a research conducted to study how Twitter and NREs were redefining agenda setting in Spain, *La Vanguardia* was one of the media analyzed, together with *El País*, *El Mundo*, *La Razón* and *ABC*. Amongst the main conclusions, in this research we found that the Catalan newspaper *La Vanguardia* "holds a preeminent place amongst the media analyzed with its strategy of promoting social networks and attending to its active audience" (Tous-Rovirosa *et al.*, 2015: 1). Toni Rubies, responsible of participation of *La Vanguardia*, answered our questions.

Related to the results, there are some specific issues we would like to remark because of their interest related to this research' objectives:

- Both media started opening comments related to news in 2007.
- The differences between a public and a private media, as opposite models. Regarding to Participatory Journalism, the typology of the medium had a huge influence on the attitudes and decisions taken towards this topic. In the case of TVC, Eva Varas explained that they started offering the opportunity to send comments "to reinforce citizen journalism", and that they had "agreement in the newsroom". On the other hand, Toni Rubies explained *La Vanguardia* started opening commentaries in order to compete with other digital media, such as www.elpais.es and www.elmundo.es, "being leaders in audience participation". Meanwhile Rubies states they "encourage audience to participate, as we are interested in audience's point of views", Varas explains they are thinking about "the possibility that comment news at the webpage has a near ending". And: "As a public broadcasting, we do not appraise reader's entries".

In this sense, there have been some changes, specially adapting the possibility of comments and Social Media to the typology of the news, without "closing comments". Varas was very critique towards Audience's commentaries because they received "a lot of insults and few interesting comments". Rubies acknowledged there are problems related to insults in the commentaries: "Sometimes there are comments published with insults or injuries, because is really difficult to manage the amount of comments that we do have each day". And, even more: "Insults are as usual in the internet as pollution in our cities". Related to insults and injuries and Ethical rules, Rubies explains that they try "to conversations keep on the issue. Some *trolls* must be blocked; we have some users identified as problematic". There are fewer problems with trolls in TVC: "Sometimes we must block some trolls, but in few occasions". Probably this is the main difference between *La Vanguardia* and TVC: "We do not publish opinion, just news and analysis".

Insults, contemptuous language and trolls are the most important problems, and they occur in *La Vanguardia* despite using a computer software program "that filters comments and also a moderation team that controls the comments published". *La Vanguardia* has expanded the possibilities of participation: "At the beginning we had more restrictions (submitting/registering users), but nowadays is much more easy". TVC has got previous moderation since the beginning (2007). At the beginning, they did not use submitting, *nowadays* they do. They have got a unique registration for users of TVC' websites, asking for real contact if they need it.

Rubies is strongly in favor of participation:

> In some occasions, we publish news with the reader's opinion (i.e., about the debate created because of Jorge Fernández Díaz statements, minister of Interior, about the Twitter). There was also an interesting (and single) case: in the section Temas de Debate (Debate Issues) the reader's participation was so interesting that we are editing a book with the comments (about human/ post-human).

Eva Varas also explains some cases of news making with readers' comments, for instance when the famous actor Pepe Rubianes died.

Related to the different attitude towards participation, the public TV shows a clear preference towards Social Media instead of active audience's comments: "There is a better response in the Social Media. We cannot impose our ethical rules and we must live with it but we manage to engage audience with punctual actions". For instance, they work on initiatives like creating a whatsapp group and promoting the exchange of videos or photos meanwhile a soccer match, in order to use those videos in the webpage or in TV. TVC is more interested in the information that the audience can provide them than in the comments. (In fact, one of the most important channel of participation of this public media is photos that audience sends the weatherman, as it happens at the abovementioned Basque public media, EITB). In some specific cases citizens become source of information- such as snowfalls, that are very rare in Barcelona. Besides, Eva

Varas comments that response in Social Media is usually faster than in the website.

Related to Social Media, Varas explains TVC developed a Social Networking strategy. They use to promote hashtags with TV news.

At the webpage, during the UE elections campaign we were even more careful than usually, because we have the "elections bloc" restriction. We cannot have hundreds of readers arguing for their party (ERC, for instance). We can promote some hashtags in twitter, but if audience promotes their parties we cannot take part as we do at www.324.cat.

She also affirms the need of changing or adapting strategies in a such fast environment:

> There was an interesting situation during the electoral night. We had 3 "free" hours, from 8 to 11, and we must inform but we were also following twitter and social media. There was a hashtag, "mesa electoral" (polling table) in which several Catalan city councils were publishing their electoral recounts. We did know there would be a change of the main party (ERC instead of CIU), but we decided, after some debate, not to inform about it. Toni Cruañes, the TV3 anchorman, did mention this fact but without explaining what was happening- we wanted to wait until the official final recounts. Later on we talked about this kind of situations-maybe we could have used it for the TV debate.

Related to the most successful topics, related to comments, Rubies explains that these are "People and Politics. We maintain a journalistic hierarchy of information but we do try to prioritize the news that readers consider important. In TVC, the most commented and "retwitted" news during the UE campaign were Pere Navarro's and Arias Cañete's statements. "The most successful topics use to be the polemic ones at the web and Social Media", according to Varas.

DEBATE AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The results of our study insist in the trends already explained in other previous studies: in Spain, there is a breach between the conception of participation of public and private media. Whilst the plurality of opinions in guaranteed in both cases, due to the abundance of public media in Spain, and needless to say of private media, the quality of participation is far from being accurate and cleansed of imperfections in building a real conversation, thus a full participatory tool or platform. Out of our results we can state that, first of all, deviation and off-topics are high, so that users do not really focus on the topic of the news item they comment. More than a half (61%) are partially related but not tightened to the topic. More relevant is the fact that more than 70% of the comments do not use any fact-based support, so they are exclusively built on personal opinions. Nuances are scarce, and references to the other participants are very few. The picture we obtain applying the content analyse is more of a monologue than of a real dialogue or debate.

In this respect, the only shy movements announced by Spanish media are two: 1) a concern towards the lack of quality of comments and the failure in the public strategy, with unequal results since private media combine a double strategy of 'premium' comments mandatorily signed with real name by their authors and regular comments in which some kind of registration is needed, but in which identifying the authors with real identities can be easily avoided —and thus leading to semi-anonymous through nicknames—, and 2) some movements towards promoting collaborative environments in which user-generated contents could be used. An example of the movements towards a more accurately moderated community of debate, promoted by one of the media we study, *El País* is the space it launched in November 9, 2013 a news online space devoted to signed comments, expecting for higher quality than in the usually anonymous, nicknamed comments in which conversation, defined as an information and ideas intercourse among people, is usually missed. The data we have obtained, even if limited to a short period of time and to a concrete, though sensitive, topic, are disappointing. On the other side, public media in Catalonia (and in the rest of Spain) are suspicious on the possibility that commenting news at the webpage has a near ending —not materialized as far as the end of 2016, when we are writing these lines—, instead they consider to incorporate to their routines a more elaborated, collaborative news writing process with users (user-generated content), via social media online networks. All media are aware of the necessity of adapting their structures "in such a fast environment". This is a way to be followed in further research.

In the case of those media with a high amount of comments, like the two private online newspapers considered in this study, it vividly contrasts with the fact that the Spanish public media, in principle designed to be depositaries of a wider range of public opinions, almost have no comment. As an explanation, we advance that people seem to prefer going to media platforms with more relaxed rules on participation.

The situation depicted by this study, aligned with the one described in previous studies on Catalonia and Spain, shows similar trends: deviation from the initial topic is almost constant, to the extent that, despite the huge number of comments attached to many news items (hundreds or even thousands) deviation from the initial debate is evident from the beginning. Even though we have dealt with the initial set of comments in any case, the ones initially dealing with the topic proposed by the news item they are related to, deviation rate is very high: off-topic comments are a majority from one determined moment onwards (to analyze more than the first 50 comments on an item leads us to this conclusions; the worse characteristic of an unstructured conversation are evident), but even though if we concentrate in the very first moments when the argumentation line refers to the topic, a majority of comments uses it (e.g., Scotland) to refer to the general topic (e.g. the domestic concerns to which the main axis of the news is a hook to talk on them again), and becomes increasingly lazy and fuzzy. In our study, deliberately focused on a concrete period of time, on a specific topic in a specific environment, only one third of the comments follow specifically the topic proposed by the newspaper. Readers of the Spanish newspaper, *El País*, considered in this study behave as if they needed to refer indirectly to the issues they were really interested in, the domestic ones (Cata-

lonia or the Basque Country) instead of international ones. This was a reality which appeared on Díaz-Noci's article of 2012, and in that occasion he dealt with an even more distant reality, the Arab Spring in Egypt.

Argumentation on comments is still poor, and shows no significant improvement when comparing to the results of previous studies on Spain and Catalonia: 97% of users' contributions are exclusively based on opinionated comments, not reasonably argued: nuanced comments are always below 10%. Instead of real conversations, comment makers prefer to monologue, at least in the studied Spanish private media and in this concrete situation.

This makes differences between a public and a private media, as opposite models, very evident. Attitudes and decisions are also practically opposite. Competition explains why private media in Spain fight for larger amount of comments, regardless of their quality in conversational or democratic standards, while concerns of public media, with lesser pressure on competition, are on the quality of all the contents they offer, including user generated comments.

Subsequently, there is the question on whether media (Spanish media in this study) are creating *spaces for debate* (following the classification proposed by Ruiz *et al.,* 2011) between citizens and journalists, and the tentative answer is that, for the time being, this is far from being a full reality. Two models, identified by Ruiz *et al.*, are in our study equally considered, as the authors find that these are practically valid today: a) communities of debate, in which discussion is held attending to the previous comments by other users, which are usually mentioned and even quoted in subsequent ones, respecting other points of view, nuanced responses and usually moderated, or at least centered in topic and score by the journalistic organization which provides the forum (*New York Times*' 'Room for Debate' section would be a clear example of this issue) ; and b) simply homogeneous communities, in which users do not necessarily tend to create well supported opinions and weave rich and complex conversations —and in which moderation is non-existent or, at least, non-evident or reduced to remove inappropriate comments—. In the first model, participants tend to focus on the topic of the news story, for instance, in the campaign for the Scottish referendum, whilst focus is far more vague in the second model (e.g., Spanish commenters use the Scottish referendum campaign as an excuse to finally pour an opinion on the Catalan case, closer to their interests). Participants, who usually are expected to sign comments under their own real name and not under one or several nicknames tend to argue, most carefully in many occasions, in debate online communities, but are reluctant to support their arguments with elaborated rationales in homogeneous communities. It is not unusual, in the latest types of online communities, to find, if not insults, some derogatory treatment references, and participants often offer very few points of views and rarely ask each other for clarifications. This was still in 2014 one of the main characteristics of the Spanish online media comments.

Finally, this leads us to the conclusion that, even though the Spanish and Catalan media, public or private, are trying to engage the readers' participation, the model is far from a real debate or an influence on the media itself (with no feedback from the journalists either), far from what we call "communities of debate" whose model could be the already mentioned *Room for debate* (*The New York Times*) or of

The Economist (for instance, this one: <http://www.economist.com/debate/debates/overview/208>). Moreover, Spanish and Catalan media strategies regarding users' comments or *rooms for debate* are closer to a catch-all strategy rather than to addressed to configure real user communities, more evidently in the case of private media, whilst collaboration networks were not a real issue at the time of conducting our research.

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