Twitter as a space for interaction in political journalism. Dynamics, consequences and proposal of interactivity scale for social media

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Abstract

This article goes in depth into the key mechanisms that enable a digital interaction between journalists and expert sources in political journalism, developing a scale that articulates these interaction mechanisms on Twitter. On the basis of this analytical proposal, this study tries to reflect the potential professional consequences which are generated by this social network throughout the journalistic work as well as some changes in important professional skills, such as data verification and contact with expert sources. Those are key aspects to determine the opportunities of the journalists in the future of the profession. It also tries to analyse the relationship between journalists and politicians into a digital context by assessing the impact of using different new media tools on the journalistic culture and political discussion.

Keywords

1. Introduction

Since its inception, Twitter has become a highlight in digital journalism tools, being able to connect all types of users to create information and share it virally. Despite its word limitation, this micro–blogging network has generated an increasing and versatile use, both from official media accounts and the personal accounts of journalists (Hermida, 2012; Barnard, 2016). Consequently, there have been significant changes in journalistic work globally (Holton & Lewis, 2011; Revers, 2014). In addition, because of its open and horizontal nature and its ability to debate in real time, Twitter has become a platform with a notorious impact on the process of the construction of public discourse (Lee *et al.*, 2016). However, recent studies also place certain limits on their real influence to determine the most relevant issues in public opinion (Calvo & Campos–Domínguez, 2016).

Initially, Twitter was especially useful for obtaining and disseminating information (Bruns & Burgess, 2012), particularly breaking news or current events (Bruno, 2011; Vis, 2013; Noguera–Vivo, 2013). Then, it also became a useful production tool for searching for and contacting expert sources (Malik & Pfeffer, 2016), as well as a privileged platform for promoting journalistic work and the creation of a journalist's personal brand, largely differentiated from his or her own media (Gulyas, 2013).

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Specifically, Twitter has contributed to creating new forms of news production and consumption (Hermida, 2010; Said Hung *et al.*, 2013), characterized by its customization, instantaneity, fragmentation, plurality of sources and 24/7 mobility (Bruns, 2012; Hermida, 2012; Vis, 2013; Aguado *et al.*, 2013). Within the uses and applications of this network, the synergy between journalism and Twitter is twofold. On one hand, the media have a significant impact on its contents (Malik & Pfeffer, 2016), and on the other hand, it has become a first-order information distribution channel. Between 2012 and 2016, social networks experienced an enormous growth, from 20% to 46% of users. According to a recent Reuters Institute report, Twitter holds a crucial importance as a customized news channel, with 10% of users, but with a significant weight among journalists, politicians and major news consumers (Newman *et al.*, 2016).

In this context, both Twitter and journalism have influenced each other: journalists have attempted to adapt this new communicative space to their professional standards (or to challenge them) while Twitter sociotechnical features have had an impact on the dynamic of different journalistic practices (Hermida, 2013; Lee *et al.*, 2016). So, Twitter and other new technologies have played a decisive role in shaping a new hybrid media system, where the interaction between journalists and non-official sources is common (and sometimes influential) in the elaboration process of political information (Chadwick, 2013; Chadwick & Collister, 2014).

When analysing these influences, it is possible to find two main research streams in the last decade. The first one has focused on studying how the media have adopted Twitter as a unidirectional news platform (Ahmad, 2010; Hermida, 2010; Newman *et al.*, 2012; Noguera-Vivo, 2013). In the case of political journalism, there is even an emergence of hybrid coverage logic, with the prominence of traditional political actors but with a more direct informative style (Jungherr, 2014). The second stream adopts a more concrete perspective on the adoption of social networks by journalists as individuals, its impact on traditional routines (Hermida, 2013; Gulyas, 2013; Canter, 2014; Hedman, 2015) and on the journalist's professional identity (Holton & Lewis, 2011; Lasorsa, 2012; Lasorsa *et al.*, 2012).

Scholars have considered that Twitter could be modifying the professional roles of journalists (Lee *et al.*, 2016) in two ways: adapting its management to the traditional journalistic culture or by exploring the limits of traditional journalistic standards such as objectivity, accountability, etc. (Bruno, 2011; Newman, 2011; Holton & Lewis, 2011; Hermida, 2013; Lawrence *et al.*, 2014; Molyneux, 2015). Recent studies on journalistic roles in news in a multiplatform context (Mellado & Vos, 2017) have included the analysis of social media and thus adapted the operationalization of the different professional roles to this media platform.

After almost a decade of research on Twitter and journalism, this paper delves into a relevant but little discussed issue so far: the interaction and dialogue between the media and journalists with the expert sources (Molyneux, 2015). One of the main reasons for the success of Twitter is its usefulness as a contact and interaction tool with specialized sources (Carr, 2010; Revers, 2014; Tenenboim, 2017). The interaction between journalists and expert sources (a political one, in most cases) has become an economic and effective informative content, which has triggered the interest of politicians for the production of their own "quotable" tweets (Broersma & Graham, 2013; Jungherr, 2014; Paulussen & Harder, 2014). Taking this context into account, this article analyses the main dynamics of interaction between journalists and political sources, developing a scale that can articulate these mechanisms for interaction on Twitter.

Recent research on political communication (Larson & Moe, 2012; Graham *et al.*, 2014) has noticed the importance of these interactions, especially during election periods. Although there has been a progress in the visualization of digital interactions in this field, this research offers a new approach to this issue, addressing specifically to models of interactions between

political journalists and their sources through the different communication tools among the users of this platform. (Hermida, 2013; Lee *et al.*, 2016).

2. The digital interaction

The generalization of the Internet use reactivated the debate on interactivity from disciplines as diverse as communication, sociology, psychology or computer science (Kiousis, 2002). Despite this discussion, there is still a certain imprecision surrounding the concept of interactivity and its relation with digital technology.

In a general sense, interactivity is understood as the ability of communication systems to start swapping messages among participants, as if it was a type of interpersonal communication (Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997). Thus, the existence of a bidirectional or multidirectional feedback is a prerequisite of the interactive experience, which is also characterized by the existence of a mediated channel, interchangeable roles among the participants, and a strong "third-order dependence" (the need to know, and to be consistent with the information previously shared by the interlocutors).

From these features, social media (webs, blogs and social networks) are perceived as platforms of high interactivity compared to traditional media, which are more limited in their feedback ability with the audience, at least in their traditional media platforms. Kiousis (2002) understands interaction as a hybrid phenomenon in which it is necessary to consider media and psychological variables such as the degree to which a communicative technology can create a context in which participants can effectively communicate (multidirectional), synchronously and asynchronously, and participate in a mutual exchange of messages considering prior communication exchanges. An important nuance is the distinction between interactivity as a process, and interactivity as a product (Stromer-Galley, 2004). In the first case, the focus is on the interaction between people and, therefore, on its human side. In the second case, the discussion is oriented towards interaction mediated through technology. This paper follows the second approach.

In spite of the fact that interactivity, along with hypertextuality and multimedia were part of the main features of digital journalism (Salaverría, 2005), their effective application on both newsroom routines and the final news content has found significant impediments (Domingo, 2008). Technical paths of interaction together with the public visibility of users have been increased by the development of social networks, creating a positive effect on journalism: the greater the possibility of interaction is, the greater the interest and communication engagement of the audience becomes (Kim *et al.*, 2015; Lee *et al.*, 2016).

When delving into the different possible levels of interactivity within a social medium such as Twitter, it is also important to differentiate between two key concepts: "reciprocity," which implies a real equality of treatment between individuals, and "responsiveness," which is understood as the not-necessarily materialized possibility of interaction (Kiousis, 2002; Lee *et al.* 2016). Recent authors suggest that the communicative dynamic on Twitter is closely linked to these two concepts (Artwick, 2013; Lewis *et al.*, 2014) since they allow the articulation of direct interactions in a simple and reciprocal manner, without the need to articulate a complete dialogue between its users.

3. Interaction between journalists and politicians on Twitter

Interactions between journalists and politicians are a key factor in today's political communication, specifically in the production of public information, which is the basis for the exercise of citizenship and its participation in the democratic system (Davis, 2009).

In recent decades, the literature has used different metaphors to explain these relations in terms of mutual dependence and attempts of control by both sides. Among them are highlighted the "dance" (Gans, 1979), concretely, the "tango," to explain who tries "to set the pace," and "strange bedfellows" (Rosenstiel, 1993), to describe the rise of cynicism and

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mistrust between political actors. All this has consolidated the idea that they establish a dynamic of "constant negotiation" (Casero-Ripollés, 2008) that can lead to different situations of dependence, collaboration or confrontation. Recent studies have delved into the professional dynamic between journalists and politicians (Casero-Ripollés & López-Rabadán, 2014; 2016), identifying factors that affect the news production process, such as personal affinity or the professionalization of press cabinets.

For almost two decades, the "mediatization" concept (Mazzoleni & Schutz, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008) has been used to explain the interaction between journalists and political actors as well as the growing media influence as a counterpoint to attempt political control. Social networks have introduced significant changes in this relationship between journalists and politicians. These platforms are considered tools of direct communication between politicians, parties and citizens, and as a result, the role of the media has been weakened and the concept of mediatization has mutated (Casero-Ripollés *et al.*, 2016).

In political journalism, Twitter favours openness and conversation with sources in the coverage of events, which is clearly opposed to the more hierarchical and vertical treatment of this coverage made by traditional media. In this sense, empirical studies on the coverage of international crises (Lotan *et al.*, 2011; Hermida *et al.*, 2014; Tenenboim, 2017) show how Twitter opens debate news, favouring the connection and visibility of new civic sources (such as activists, experts, social movements, etc.) that may even have a greater weight than institutional ones. The interaction among these civic sources has generated new roles and professional functions for the journalist, who must now be in charge of verifying and interpreting the information flows presented in social networks.

Regarding professional relationships developed by journalists with political sources, it is possible to find some similarities and differences within social and traditional media (Vermeij, 2012). On the one hand, similar information dependence may be observed, in which both social and traditional media have similar functions (source vs. journalistic collector of news). But, on the other hand, the open structure of Twitter contacts, in which there is no closed elite that controls the information flow, is highlighted. Besides, some changes in the position within the network can occur in a progressive and dynamic manner. Moreover, it is observed that these interactions are more determined by informational interest or spontaneous affinity rather than by the ideological alignment of journalists or the media.

From the precedent of the digital "media catching" interactions between journalists and public relations (Waters *et al.*, 2010), several studies (Lawrence *et al.*, 2014; Lee *et al.*, 2016; Broersma *et al.*, 2016) suggest the existence of spheres of professional interaction, in the form of "virtual lobbies," in which journalists and politicians know each other, exchange data, sometimes discuss in a close manner, and even attempt to influence each other.

When studying the general elections in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom in 2010, Broersma *et al.* (2016) found a high interaction between journalists and politicians, and observed two significant dynamics. First, reporters clearly favoured certain parties and candidates based on professional interests and personal proximity rather than on ideological issues. Additionally, journalists and political sources opted for low-intensity contacts based on tools such as retweets, links, or mentions instead of direct discussions and conversations (Molyneux, 2015; Lawrence *et al.*, 2014; Lee *et al.*, 2016). Although interactions were frequent, this subtle and indirect style was the main one.

Thus, intense Twitter activity from some politicians and the emergence of a tweet as an information source and informative argument could change the balance of power between journalists and politicians for the benefit of the latter (Broersma & Graham, 2013). Since tweets are typically quoted in their entirety and with little journalistic mediation, they can generate a notorious direct impact on the electorate and public opinion.

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4. Interactive keys of journalistic roles and practices of Twitter

Twitter proposes a grammar that favours and potentially simplifies the interaction with the audience (Bruns, 2012). Specifically, it offers different tools that, although simple, are very effective in overcoming the spatial limitation of this microblogging network and interactively provide dynamism to communication with the audience by sharing information and opinions instantly (Lewis *et al.*, 2014).

Recent studies have explored the importance and professional impact of the narrative tools in journalistic professional practices. Lasorsa *et al.* (2012), for example, consider that links and retweets (RT), and to a lesser extent hashtags, #, and mentions, @, articulate the greater presence of journalists' personal opinions observed on Twitter. Noguera-Vivo (2013), on the other hand, identifies an important use of mentions (27%) and RT (23%), typically without commentary, as mechanisms of indirect interaction between journalists and their followers, rather than a direct dialogue (5%). In an international study on the management of Twitter by journalists in five countries (Britain, France, USA, Germany and Italy), Engesser and Humprecht (2015) consider the management of these tools (#, RT, @) to be a basic criterion of greater professional ability on this social network.

Other studies have specifically analysed the professional use of these tools separately, e.g., the importance of RT for expressing opinions in a subtle way (Molyneux, 2015; Barthel *et al.*, 2015; Tenenboim, 2017), or the generalization of the use of the mention (@) by journalists to make professional contacts (Brems *et al.*, 2016). Eventually, a recent study on hashtag management (#) in political journalism shows its importance in the cohesion and dynamism of the debate on Twitter (Bastos *et al.*, 2013), a situation replicated in platforms such as Facebook or Instagram, among others. In this dynamic context, fact checking becomes a cornerstone of the journalistic management of networks to maintain informative reliability and to reinforce the role of the journalist in the information process management (Vis, 2013; Coddington *et al.*, 2014; Zeller & Hermida, 2015).

The qualitative impact of these tools is becoming remarkable. In particular, Twitter has stimulated professional relations between journalists and their political sources, helping to consolidate a more proactive and transparent "journalistic role 2.0" (Lee *et al.*, 2016). In this sense, several studies have proposed possible differences in the professional roles performed by journalists in traditional media and those required by digital platforms and social networks (Mellado *et al.*, 2017).

Since its appearance, journalists have managed Twitter as a communicative space that is more personal and autonomous than their media activity. In particular, they have felt freer to express personal opinions and, to a lesser extent, offer details on their professional day-to-day lives and disseminate content generated by other users (UGC). These new functions challenge traditional norms and dynamics such as the concept of objectivity or the gatekeeper role and are reconfiguring their professional culture (Lasorsa *et al.*, 2012; Hermida, 2013; Lawrence *et al.*, 2014; Mellado *et al.*, 2017). Nowadays, journalistic success in Twitter is more frequently linked to the development of a new-born personal style (García-Perdomo, 2017)

Specifically, the wide use of Twitter by journalists has led to a redefinition of their professional functions in terms of greater transparency and audience participation. As a consequence, the space that it has traditionally occupied must be shared with others at present, under a dynamic of mutual monitoring (Vis, 2013; Zeller & Hermida, 2015). Journalists are aware of the fact that the media ecosystem is larger, more plural and open. In this sense, their new professional role is closer to fact checking and the coordination of the digital debate rather than to the mere presentation of scoops.

From an individual perspective, Twitter represents a very interesting platform for journalists in terms of building a profile that is differentiated from other journalists and even their media. The professional 2.0 context has been producing changes in professional identity

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and ideology for more than a decade (Deuze, 2005), but social networks represent a qualitative leap in this sense since they allow the integration of professional and personal content in a multimedia context as well as strategy and improvisation, reflection and emotionality, in daily and medium-term management (Papacharissi, 2012). In addition, social media are contributing to rebuild the digital identity of journalists, strengthening ties with their followers, and improving their position in public debate (Verweij & Van Noort, 2014).

5. Journalistic interaction on Twitter: a methodological proposal

Given the development of interactivity between journalists and political sources on Twitter, now it is needed to deepen methodologically into the strategies and different levels of interaction that can be formulated in the mediated relationship between journalists and politicians through social media. In this context, it is essential to operationalize interactivity on Twitter (Steensen, 2011), both specifying which mechanisms serve as objective indicators and offering common guidelines for comparative analysis. The following methodological key points must be taken into account to develop a proposal on the analysis of interaction on Twitter:

 - *Interaction conceptualization*. Interaction must be understood as the reciprocal exchange of messages among different users as a compulsory requirement prior to any possible interaction on Twitter (Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997). Interaction is then accepted as a technologically mediated product that attempts to approach the process of interpersonal dialogue (Stromer-Galley, 2004).

 - *Content analysis based on the review of potential interaction mechanisms*. Based on theoretical (Kiousis, 2002; Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997) and empirical references (Lee *et al.*, 2016), the analysis of interaction on Twitter must be established on the measure of specific mechanisms and the possible combinations among them. With this in mind, it may be possible to analyse and measure interactivity using the representation of different interaction elements which are explicit in a tweet. On Twitter, we can identify at least five main interaction mechanisms that are applicable to digital contexts between journalists and specialized political sources: hashtags (#), links, "likes" (♥), retweets (RT) and mentions (@). In this microblogging network, dialogue is defined as an exchange, with at least two messages including direct mentions (@), among users.

 - *Proposal of an interaction scale*. To delve into the interactive dynamic and comparative analyses, a scale capable of measuring different levels of interaction on Twitter must be proposed. Based on previous literature (Larsson & Moe, 2012; Artwick, 2013; Lewis *et al.*, 2014; Lee *et al.*, 2016), we may distinguish three interaction levels (low, medium and high) characterized, in this order, by the central presence of indirect (links and #), direct mechanisms (RT and @), and the mutual exchange of messages with direct mentions (@).

 - *Analysis samples delimited by relevant topics and actors*. We propose a double strategy to limit the samples for empirical analysis, depending on the object of study (Bruns & Burgess, 2012). For the study of topics, we propose to select debates on relevant issues through hashtags (#), while for the study of actors, we propose to develop a specific sample of journalists and relevant political sources (@) in the network, according to their numbers of followers and communication activity.

 - *Introduction of latent categories*. Previous research (Steensen, 2011; Larsson & Moe, 2012) has shown that studying interaction on Twitter entails the introduction of latent categories, let us say, the function of interaction (initial contact, question, criticism, etc.), whose initiative it is (journalist or political actor), the tone of the message (professional, personal, positive, negative, neutral), and how the use of different elements of interaction can be related to different professional roles. They are thought to be required to interpret a particular tweet.

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6. Interaction mechanisms on Twitter

In the following section the identification and quantitative analysis of the presence of main interaction mechanisms on twitter will be developed. This is considered to be the first step in the comprehensive study of interaction on Twitter. A specific presentation of these mechanisms in the field of political journalism and significant examples of their use in the United States 2016 presidential campaign[1] can be seen below.

- Hashtag (#). Written before a keyword, this mechanism makes it possible to index topics and to organize debates in a simple manner. It is especially useful to participate or follow live coverage of a political event because it integrates and classifies the tweet, facilitating its immediate search of all messages tagged with the same #. Although originally launched on Twitter, it has been integrated into other social networks such as Telegram, FriendFeed, Facebook, Google+, and Instagram. If the label is very popular, it becomes a trend. Despite being very similar in meaning to our concept of responsiveness, its interaction capacity is very limited, though it allows the political journalist to approach a topic and to offer information or opinion as an invitation to debate with expert sources and citizens in general.

Figure 1: Example of hashtag (#) use from @CNN (8 November 2016).

- Link. Twitter allows users to link in a short manner (23 characters) any type of digital content: information, opinion, entertainment, etc. This mechanism, also similar to the idea of responsiveness, is really appropriate for the coverage of current political issues, allowing journalists to set a direct connection to both their own or external messages.

In this manner, it is possible to offer complete content (textual and audio-visual), as proof of verification or development of that which is indicated in the body of the tweet, surpassing the traditional space limitation of this microblogging network. The interaction capacity of links is also limited, but especially linked to other mechanisms, such as retweet (RT) or

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[1] Examples of interaction on Twitter selected from the official accounts of candidates (@HillaryClinton; @realDonaldTrump) and international media (@CNN; @nytimes; @ABCpolitics; @TheEconomist) between October 2016 and February 2017.

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mention (@,) it offers the possibility of indirectly approaching content produced by media, parties or political actors.

Figure 2: Example of link use from @HillaryClinton (23 October 2016).

– "Like" (♥). This mechanism makes it possible to positively assess the content of a tweet in a very direct way by merely a click (appreciation, interest, etc.). A small heart represents it, and similarly, it is possible to undo it instantaneously. Different to the hashtag and the link, which can only provide or disseminate information, the "like" has an affective connotation that represents an active journalistic voice –close to the interventionist role– (Mellado & Vos, 2017) in professional practice. Indeed, with this action the journalist gives a sort of endorsement to the political source that gets the "like." In terms of visibility within the network, its value is still limited but it can help interaction when making preliminary contacts with political sources, showing an interest that can later lead to a stronger interaction or a more complete dialogue on Twitter.

Figure 3: Example of "like" (♥) use from @ABCpolitics and @HillaryClinton (6 November 2016).

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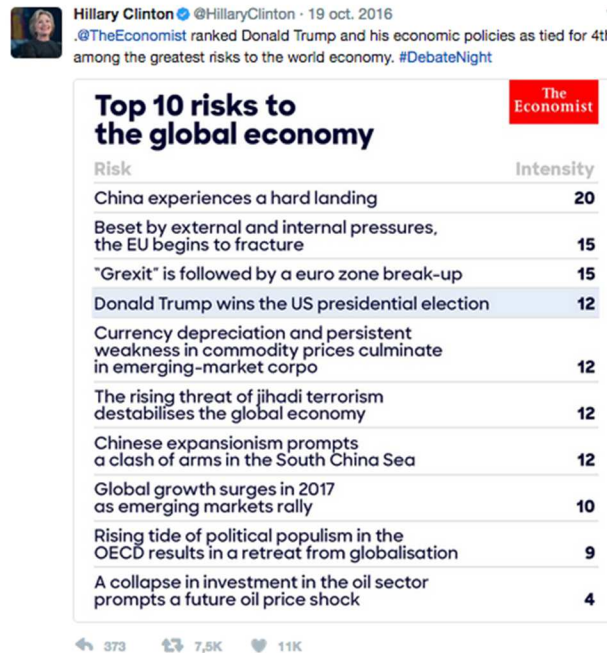proposal of interactivity scale for social media**

– Retweet (RT). This mechanism makes it possible to publish a tweet again (typically from another user, although it can be own) and share it with followers. Formally, it looks similar to any other tweet, but it has a specific icon and indicates the name of the user who retweeted it. In spite of its simplicity, it is a tool with a greater capacity of interaction since it makes it possible to quickly share the contents of other users and to broadcast them throughout our own network of users. Thus, we are showing interest (typically positive, although it can also be ironic or be a complaint) and giving remarkable visibility to the activity of a certain user. In the field of political journalism, the RT can have a great strategic importance for closely and professionally contacting certain expert or institutional sources. Although the "like" mechanism it is not shared with others (only with those who get the "like"), a retweet has only the advantage that is shared with your timeline. This does not necessarily mean any endorsement but at least the journalist makes it clear what her/his point of view in the tweet is.

Figure 4: Examples of retweet (RT) use from @HillaryClinton (5 November 2016).

– Mention (@). This mechanism allows a direct appeal to any user, integrating the user's name (@user) into an own tweet. It can be used as a mechanism for informally initiating a digital conversation with known or unknown users. Different mentions (@1, @2, @3, etc.) can be included in the same tweet. In this regard, it is the most appropriate, direct and complete interaction tool available on Twitter. This mechanism is a public invitation to digital dialogue, with enormous strategic utility for political journalists. Having a flexible use, among its main usefulness we can mention the possibility to include actors in the news and to approach expert political sources to ask them questions, to make public clarifications to all institutional actors, and even to attempt to monitor controversial aspects of its own management.

Figure 5: Example of mention (@) use from @HillaryClinton and @TheEconomist (19 October 2016).

- Dialogue. Finally, as the most dynamic interaction mechanism on Twitter, we find the digital dialogue between different users, which is represented by the exchange of at least two tweets with mentions between media / journalists and political actors. Although empirical studies to date show a very limited development of these types of interactions (Noguera-Vivo, 2013; Lee *et al.* 2016), when they occur they are very significant. If the actors are relevant and the digital dialogue has a certain controversy, there is a high probability that it will become mainstream news. In this interaction, the key factors to analyse are the initiative in the process and the communicative domain in the development of the dialogue. Of course, the use of the other interaction mechanisms (#, @, RT), which make this interaction even more dynamic, can be included in this dialogue.

Figure 6: Example of digital interaction between @realDonaldTrump and different media that generated 68K replies (17 February 2017).

7. Interaction scale

Based on the higher or lower presence of these five mechanisms and the definition of digital dialogue stated above, as exchange of at least two tweets with mentions, it is possible to propose a scale of interaction on Twitter. This scale moves from minor to major in at least

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three main levels (low, medium, and high), according to the ability to articulate interactive
contacts between journalists and political sources (see the details in Table 1).

The operation of this scale is based on the following principles: to be included, the tweet
must present at least one of the mechanisms indicated (level 0 of interaction would fall outside
of the analysis); it is measured in a scale from 1 to 6, sublevels hierarchically continuous which
are divided into three main levels of interaction (low, medium and high; it is possible to
simultaneously detect several interaction mechanisms in the same message (e.g., mention,
link and hashtag so they are not mutually exclusive); the level of interaction within a tweet is
determined by the presence of the mechanism with the greatest interaction capacity (e.g., if a
tweet has a mention, @, and a link, it would be at level 5, corresponding to the mention).

- The *low level of interaction* is distinguished by mechanisms linked to the concept of
responsiveness, such as # or links in which there is no appeal and dialogue between
journalists and politicians. At this level, the journalist just wants to approach to expert and
powerful sources, but tangentially in an open debate (#), or to document the tweet message
with a complementary link. In short, these mechanisms permit a first communication step,
achieving visibility and generating the appropriate context to contact new sources and to
expand the professional network. At this level, a hashtag offers a greater potential capacity of
interaction, since it labels our message opening the possibility of dialogue with other users
who are interested in the same specific topic.

- The *intermediate level of interaction* is indicated by more direct and powerful interaction
mechanisms (♥, RT and @) that offer the possibility of making direct appeals to other users,
which can be known as invitations to a complete digital dialogue. These mechanisms are
related to the concept of responsiveness proposed above since there are interaction
possibilities that do not necessarily take place. Although the "like" (♥) (level 3) is interactively
limited since it only allows journalists to value positively a message from others (giving an
implicit opinion), it does not give the chance of including comments. The "RT" (level 4), on the
other hand, represents a more active interactive resource for journalists because it offers the
possibility of strategically redefining the message of a possible political conversational
partner. Thus, we connect to an interlocutor in a common positive manner in front of our
community of followers. The mention (@) (level 5) is a direct invitation to dialogue that the
journalist makes to some political actors or vice versa so it could be seen closer to reciprocity
only if it gets a response from the other part (see below). Alternatively, it offers the possibility
of including comments, messages or any other interaction mechanisms (links and @). This
intermediate level of interaction is the appropriate platform to strategically contact expert
political sources in a professional accurate manner.

- Finally, the *high level of interaction* is characterized by the presence of a real dialogue
between journalists and political sources on Twitter. This dialogue should be organized
through at least two messages, including direct mentions (@) between two or more
interlocutors. Similarly, it implies equality of treatment between them, a basic characteristic
of reciprocity, as discussed above. In addition, for the dialogue to be truly interactive, it is
imperative that the communication is consistent with what has previously been said between
the parties (third-level dependency). For example, @A responds directly to a question or
comment made previously by @B. It is at this level, which is more extensive and complex,
where it is possible to detect a better articulation of professional roles. Here, a greater
activation of the journalistic voice (Hellmuller & Mellado, 2015) would allow a more active and
interpretive journalism and vice versa. This voice could, in turn, be linked to some of the roles
proposed by Mellado and Vos (2017), as a watchdog, civic, infotainment, loyal, among others.
It is the highest level (6) of interactivity offered by this social network. Although it is not
particularly frequent, it can sometimes have a great communicative richness by (potentially)
making it possible to include, in addition to the message, other interactive mechanisms such
as links or hashtags (#).

Table 1: Interaction scale divided into three main levels of interaction.

LOW LEVEL	INTERMEDIATE LEVEL	HIGH LEVEL
Approach strategy	Invitation to dialogue	Dialogue
Lasorsa *et al.* (2012) Noguera-Vivo (2013) Bastos *et al.* (2013)	Lawrence *et al.* (2014) Moulyneux (2015)	Lee *et al.* (2016) Broersma *et al.* (2016)
MAIN MECHANISMS		
Level 1 / Hashtag (#)	**Level 3 / Like (♥)**	**Level 6 / Dialogue** (Exchange @)
Linking to a tagged public debate	*Positive evaluation of someone else's message*	*Development of a coherent dialogue connected through mentions*
+ Comment		+ Comment + Link + Hashtag (#)
Level 2 / Link	**Level 4 / Retweet (RT)**	
Strategic extension of the message with documentary material	*Diffusion and showing interest in someone else's message*	
No comment + Comment	No comment + Comment	
	Level 5 / Mention (@)	
	Direct appeal, invitation to dialogue	
	+ Comment + Link + Hashtag (#)	

Source: Own elaboration.

8. Interaction on Twitter and new professional practices in political journalism

Twitter has a great capacity to generate interaction among journalists, citizens and their sources by means of different mechanisms. The public nature of this social network promotes the dissemination of information in different ways (Holton & Lewis, 2011) and a high level of transparency as regards to journalistic work (Revers, 2014). In the case of the relationships between journalists and politicians, it arises as an ideal space which contributes to work in professional relations between these elite professionals to generate different levels of interaction.

Our study analyses conceptually and methodologically the interaction between journalists and political sources on Twitter, proposing an analytical tool to review the new digital dynamics of political journalism. On the one hand, it identifies the main mechanisms of interaction in Twitter. On the other hand, it proposes a scale to measure the level of interactivity between politicians and journalists on this social network. Based on these

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measures, our work establishes a link between the concept of interaction and new key journalistic functions in a digital era, such as data check and contact with expert sources in social networks (Barnard, 2016).

We believe that this analysis permits a review of the status of data verification and contact with experts, important skills and key aspects to determine the opportunities of journalists in the future of the profession. At the same time, it can also allow us to observe changes in journalistic roles when covering political sources (Hellmuller & Mellado, 2015; Mellado & Vos, 2017). Similarly, this proposal contributes to the debate concerning the professional consequences that new media can have both in the journalistic narrative and in the evolution of the journalistic culture (Lowrey, 2017).

Transformations such as transparency in journalistic routines, the monitoring of political power, the promotion of social debate, and opening the media to more diversified information sources has a link with traditional roles. However, some of them challenge traditional rules and journalistic roles (Hermida, 2013). Among them, three stand out: a greater presence of the journalistic voice on Twitter questions the classic concept of neutrality in news; the novel processes of building a personal brand, which entails a clear difference in terms of professional profile between the journalists and their media. Finally, the personal proximity between journalists and their sources offered by Twitter, which can affect the classic idea of independence (Noguera-Vivo, 2013; Molyneux, 2015). Particularly, these changes may blur the traditional distinctions among journalists, experts and news consumers (Hermida, 2013; Van Leuven *et al.*, 2014; Chadwick & Collister, 2014). It would be interesting to observe whether the concept of monitoring is changing and whether politicians and activists are the ones who control the activity of media and journalists nowadays.

These professional dynamics are creating a growing gap, which should be analysed by future empirical studies, between young digital elite journalists and older local or regional media workers. According to Hedman (2015), only the new wave of digital journalists is using Twitter as an effective interactive professional platform. Since today and within digital reconversion, Twitter can be understood as part of a complex information ecosystem in which journalism takes place and dialogues with the audience and with sources, these studies are not just an academic exercise, but they can show us how rules, values and ethics are put into practice when performing journalism in news media platforms.

The use of Twitter in the journalistic field is at a key moment. Firstly, we can find not only an intermediate development of its potential in terms of interaction (Hermida, 2010) but also a much higher significant implementation of its interaction possibilities (Barnard, 2016) than those achieved by blogs (Singer, 2005). Thus, this analysis offers a starting point on which to make improvements and extensions to the study of a phenomenon as complex and dynamic as the interaction of journalists and political sources in social networks. In this regard, we are trying to open a debate so that empirical studies can test the dynamic of interactions as well as the interactivity scale on Twitter proposed here, granting the development of longitudinal and comparative studies at national and international levels. It would also be relevant to expand this study to other active social media in journalism like Facebook, which use similar elements for potential interactions between journalists and politicians.

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