8 The public debate on Twitter in the Iberian sphere

Comparative analysis of the characteristics in Portugal and Spain

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Introduction

The growth of social networks as a means of accessing political information has been accompanied by an increased concern about phenomena such as echo chambers (Sunstein, 2017), "filter bubbles" (Pariser, 2011), accelerated diffusion of fake news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), spread of hate speech (Ben-David & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Eddington, 2018), and radicalization of public debate (Valera, 2012). In this scenario, several studies argue that the social media conversation seems to be characterized by the strengthening of hostile messages against ideological adversaries and the increase in polarized positions (Hernández-Santaolalla & Sola-Morales, 2019).

The dissemination of the debate towards extremes is often associated with the fact that digitalization has multiplied the possibilities of selective exposure to information consumers, who tend to interact mostly with users and messages that match their views (Gvirsman, 2014). In this sense, Pariser (2011) pointed out that the positions of citizens were also reinforced by the automatic and personalized selection of content which Internet algorithms offer based on the previous preferences of individuals.

On the contrary, the results of other works reject the hypothesis that links polarization with the predominance of ideological bubbles or resonance chambers in the digital ecosystem of contemporary societies (Cardenal et al., 2019; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). After reviewing the literature on studies conducted in Europe, Fletcher and Jenkins (2019) concluded that there was not enough scientific support for these theories; furthermore, part of the research even suggested that users had more contact with views different to their own inclinations. In fact, although it has been shown that personal interactions between members of groups with dissimilar visions can have depolarizing effects – by moderating antagonistic positions (Grönlund, Herne & Setälä, 2015) – it is still unknown whether virtual deliberation with opposing ideological minds through social networks

tends to increase or decrease polarization. In this sense, an experimental study by Bail et al. (2018) indicated that prolonged exposure to messages from Twitter accounts with a contrary ideology helped to radicalize the judgements.

In any case, political polarization can be considered as a "global pandemic", in the words of Moisés Naím (2019). It is a phenomenon spread across many democratic countries which hinders governance and public debate. For example, a survey published by the Pew Research Center (2019) showed that 85% of US citizens claimed that the tone of the political discussion had become more negative and less tolerant. The enlargement of polarization has been related not only to the phenomenon of anti-politics, but also with the predominance of "post-truth communication" (Waisbord, 2018), in which reality is often distorted and "emotion prevails over reason as a way of arguing" (Hernández-Santaolalla & Sola-Morales, 2019, p. 116).

Above the rational debate of ideas and the search for consensus, emotional rhetoric usually stands out in the messages transmitted by political actors in social networks, which has been linked to the extension of the Manichaean style characteristic of populism (Arroyas & Fernández-Ilundain, 2019; Waisbord, 2018). According to Engesser et al. (2017), social media facilitates the notion of "the people" and "gives the populists more freedom for the use of strong language when attacking the elites and ostracizing others" (p. 1123).

Nevertheless, when analysing the behaviour of different actors in social media, it is important to take into account national contexts (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). For example, Barberá, Vaccari and Valeriani (2017) detected that the degree of political parallelism which characterizes traditional media systems tends to reflect the use of journalists' and news outlets' Twitter accounts. Therefore, professionals who work in countries with higher partisan alignment – as is the Spanish case – are more likely to use this social network "to provide commentary on the news" (pp. 27–28). Similarly, regarding the polarization levels of online news consumers, research has found that differences between countries have not changed significantly with digitalization. Thus, a study carried out in 22 countries by Newman et al. (2017) underlined that the degree of audience political parallelism in digital environments usually kept in line with Hallin and Mancini's (2004) models, where the partisanship of the citizens' news sources of reference was greater in southern Europe countries (polarized pluralism model) than those of the North (democratic corporatist). Along the lines indicated by more recent studies (Brüggemann et al., 2014; Büchel et al., 2016), Portugal continues to distance itself from the characteristics of the model in which it has traditionally been classified and, in fact, presents the lower levels of audience polarization among the countries analysed (2017).

On a global level, the hostility of certain social network users towards opposing positions appears as a factor that can influence polarization and contribute to increasing tension in public conversation. This behaviour on

the Internet tends to hinder the exchange of ideas and intimidates journalists or other actors who participate in the public discussion (Wolfe, 2019). Specifically, as explained by Hernández-Santaolalla and Sola-Morales (2019), Twitter is one of the channels where these aggressive behaviours may turn the debate into "a forum of attacks, obloquies and insults based on emotionality" (p. 117). Neither should one ignore the still unknown effect that alternative digital-born news outlets which spread hyper-partisan nor can populist messages produce on polarization, since its contents can reinforce the extremist positions of certain citizens and influence the political discourse (Fletcher & Jenkins, 2019). In summary, in this environment where false news travels faster (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018), automated accounts with inflammatory contents proliferate (Stella, Ferrara & De Domenico, 2018), the sentimental rhetoric of actors participating in the public conversation prevails, alternative news sources emerge, and digital media compete to monetize clicks, it is convenient to pay attention to polarizing frames and hate speech in social networks that may contribute to public sphere fragmentation and strengthen the visions of intolerant and extremist minorities.

In the context of a widespread increase in political radicalism, how is this phenomenon visible in the Portuguese and Spanish Twitter scenario? Being two neighbouring countries with cultural proximity, it was the aim of this research to compare the polarization in public speeches and to observe the degree of hostility of journalists, party leaders, and users' comments. Is the Portuguese reality, in this domain, similar to the Spanish? The results have shown that there are some relevant similarities and differences between the two countries' Twitter discourses.

Portuguese and Spanish context

There are important commonalities in the evolution of the political systems of Spain and Portugal (Lisa & Molina, 2018). Both countries acceded to parliamentary democracy in the mid-1970s and integrated simultaneously into the European communities in 1986. Furthermore, the global recession of 2008 had a profound impact on these states; in return for different types of financial bailouts, they have had to submit some of their economic policies to the supervision of the European *Troika* (Commission, the European Central Bank [ECB] and the International Monetary Fund [IMF])). Likewise, during most of their democratic period, two centre-left and centre-right parties (*PSOE* and *PP* in Spain; *PS* and *PSD* in Portugal) have alternated in government and concentrated a large majority of votes. Nevertheless, the electoral results in recent years have produced a more fragmented party system.

Despite these similitudes, their political regimes are different in the form of government and territorial structure. In Spain, after the death of General Francisco Franco, the democratic transition process meant the acceptance

of a constitutional monarchy. In Portugal, the revolution that dismantled the so-called *Estado Novo* brought with it the establishment of a semi-presidential republic in which the head of state, who emerges from elections, has greater decision-making functions in the political life. Regarding the territorial model, the Spanish autonomic state and the continuous nationalist claims in the Basque Country and Catalonia contrast with the centralism of the Portuguese state and the absence of regional parties in its Parliament (Lisa & Molina, 2018).

Before the elections held in 2015, Spanish democracy had presented a bipartisan dynamic only broken by the power of nationalist parties in some communities. Thus, the successive electoral growth of new political groups such as *Ciudadanos* (Citizens), *Podemos,* and *Vox* has increased the pluralism of options that can be decisive in governance.

The origin of the gap that has strengthened new parties has been linked to the increase in disaffection that emerged in the context of the economic crisis and the proliferation of scandals during the last decade; these have even affected the Crown. Since its birth in 2014, *Podemos* has identified with left-wing populist narratives and been characterized by criticism of the corrupt elite, to which they attribute the fault of all social problems (Arroyas & Pérez, 2016).

Unlike most European countries, Spain and Portugal did not have far-right parties in their parliaments until recently. The turning point in this aspect occurred in Spain with the Andalusian regional elections of 2018 and the successive electoral calls of the following year, which made *Vox* a relevant actor as the third largest party in Congress. This group offers a nationalist discourse focused on the defence of cultural traditionalism and challenging gender policies. Its rise has coincided with the worsening of the Catalan problem, which this party proposes to solve through measures such as the illegalization of pro-independence forces.

Similarly, Portugal saw a far-right party – *Chega!* (Enough!) – gain a seat in Parliament for the first time in 2019. Its leader, André Ventura, is the author of a populist discourse that asserts itself against the "current political system" and advocates for restrictive immigration measures. Two other small parties – *Livre* (Free) and Liberal Initiative – also elected one deputy each for the first time in the most diverse parliamentary composition of Portugal's recent history. These results have been produced in a context in which both renewed racist tendencies and new anti-racist movements are emerging.

Despite the growth of the extreme right and the radical tone of new parties, groups with a moderate discourse maintain dominance in the Portuguese political scene. Thus, in the last general elections, the Socialist Party (*PS*) won with around 37% of the vote, followed by the centre-right Social Democrats (*PSD*) with 28%. In the previous four years, *PS* of Antonio Costa governed with the support of two hard-left parties: Left Bloc and the Portuguese Communist Party.

In Spain, the greater parliamentary fragmentation has accentuated ideological blocs and complicated governance, holding up to four general elections between 2015 and 2019. After the last elections, the Socialist Party (*PSOE*) led by Pedro Sánchez and *Podemos* formed the first coalition government in the current democratic period.

The media ecosystem of the two Iberian countries also offers similarities and differences. In both there is a low circulation of newspapers; this contrasts television consumption, which reaches large audiences and, until the growth of the Internet, was the main form of media used by citizens for news. In addition, most of the TV and radio channels pay special attention to political issues, and many former politicians and current deputies make comments on talk shows. The state intervenes in the audio-visual sector through public broadcasters and with the granting of media licenses. Various communication groups dominate the market in Spain and Portugal, although the system has become more fragmented in recent years and native digital media linked to independent projects has proliferated.

Among the differences, we can highlight the popularity in Portugal of the tabloid *Correio da Manhã*, which is the audience leader in the country. In contrast, this type of printed daily newspaper does not currently have a significant presence in Spain.

Likewise, despite the loss of influence of the major headlines of the national press (*Público*, *Jornal de Notícias*, *Diário de Notícias*, *Expresso*, etc.) and the economic difficulties these newspapers face, they still maintain high levels of trust and attempt to preserve their independence from the parties. In this sense, research shows that Portuguese journalists have achieved greater autonomy and "professionalism than is found in other Southern European countries" (Hallin & Mancini, 2017, p. 161; see also Brüggemann et al., 2014; Büchel et al., 2016).

However, the distancing of political positions towards extremes are reflected in the Spanish media environment. Unlike the Portuguese system, it continues to show the same elements of the polarized pluralism model that Hallin and Mancini (2004) identified in the countries of Mediterranean Europe. The continuity of this system is characterized by high political parallelism of media, ideological biases in audiences, constant attacks on the rival, and scarce criticism of related politicians. Thus, although there have been specific cases of disagreement with the leaderships of the parties ideologically close to their editorial positions (Teruel, 2016), the content of the main newspapers (*El País*, *El Mundo*, *La Vanguardia*, *ABC*, etc.) and native digital media (*El Confidencial*, *ElDiario.es*, *El Español*, *Okdiario*, etc.) are still characterized by large doses of partisanship.

Moreover, the low trust of the Spanish citizens in media adds to these elements. The Digital News Report 2020 indicated that only 36% regularly relied on news, which placed Spain 23rd in the list of 40 countries included in the analysis. The same study showed that, between 2015 and 2020, Portuguese confidence in news fell by 9.1% (65.6%–56.5%). However,

among the countries analysed, Portugal – along with Finland – produced news that was most trusted by its citizens (Newman et al., 2020).

Although the Internet has become the main source of information – and despite the fact that more than half the population in both countries use social networks for news consumption – there is an increasing concern about the danger of the online dissemination of hoaxes and fake news contributing to the reinforcement of hate speech and polarization.

Hate speech and polarizing language

So-called "cyber utopianism" (Morozov, 2012) is not leading the citizenship to a better level of democracy. Actually, social media provides the prime setting for hate speech and the messages that incite violence to take place nowadays. "A great proliferation of extremist messages is taking place all over Europe", as Cabo-Isasi and García-Juanatey (2016, p. 4) stated, underlining the reports of UNESCO and European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance, as well as denouncing and showing concern for the problem.

The Online Civil Courage Initiative (OCCI) research report about "Hate speech and radicalism online" edited by Baldauf, Ebner and Guhl (2019) analysed the problem in detail. Given the gravity and complexity of a phenomenon that exists on a global scale, that study proposed an uprising by decent people in order to fight the radicalism and hate speech in social media.

Despite the diversity of situations in which the term hate speech may be used, we understand it as an expression that incites any types of intolerance, violence, and prejudice (Gagliardone et al., 2015). This phenomenon is visible and notorious in Spain, where the broad study made by Ben-David and Matamoros-Fernandéz (2016) showed evidence of the prevalence of groups who used social media as a tool to spread ideas of hate, discrimination, and political extremism.

In Portugal, the presence of radical political forces – especially within the right wing – is a reality that the country has known since October 2019's legislative elections. This new political scenario has contributed to the growth of a more aggressive public discourse, although social media have long been used by citizens to attack other citizens or groups. The phenomenon is known, but still requires further research. This chapter is a contribution to this area.

Both political polarization and hate speech are mainly manifested through language that activates certain frames (Demszky et al., 2019). Therefore, extremism and the different forms of discrimination or hostility towards individuals and groups are detected by analysing the use of terms and symbolic devices that express stereotypes, offenses, and social divisions.

As Van Dijk (2003) showed, this type of discourse describes an antagonism between the own reference group that is identified only with positive

aspects and others that are stigmatized with negative words and images. Moreover, among the discursive practices associated with radicalism on the Internet, the dissemination of hoaxes and rumours that seek to reinforce prejudices or discredit political rivals is of increasing importance. According to Fernández-Smith (2017, p. 117), the line that distinguishes hate speech of the rational debate from different points of view lies in the presence of features such as "the use of insult, hurtful irony, argumentative fallacy, more or less veiled threat, etc.". Consequently, the behaviours of media, citizens, and elites in the digital environment of each country play an important role in contributing to the extension of extremist and inflammatory discourses.

Objectives, hypotheses, and methodology

From a comparative perspective, the main objective of this chapter is to offer an analysis of the political, media, and citizen discourse within Twitter in Spain and Portugal. As noted in the theoretical framework, the two countries have differences in their most recent political and media culture. This would therefore be reproduced in the behaviour of the actors on a social network like Twitter. Taking this premise as a reference, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1. Personal twitter accounts of Spanish journalists tend to include more political opinions and partisan alignment than those of Portuguese professionals.

H2. The critical message towards political rivals and polarizing frames prevails most among leaders of the Spanish parties in this social network. Moreover, these kinds of tweets experience higher dissemination by users.

H3. User replies in media tweets that contain political information are usually less offensive, hostile, and discriminatory in Portugal than in Spain.

The methodology has combined the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the three sets of samples examined. The first was formed by the tweets of 12 Spanish and Portuguese journalists who were selected for their number of followers, their links with digital media, and their dedication to commenting on political news. As a unifying criterion, professionals who published almost all their messages in Catalan were discarded in Spain. The second collected the messages of leaders or spokespersons from six Spanish parties with the greatest parliamentary representation, while in Portugal – to cover a more similar ideological diversity, from radical left-wing to far-right and new tendencies – the accounts chosen were leaders of the three parties with the most seats, as well as of the three new forces that have a deputy in Parliament.[1] The third sample included publications of the accounts in

the social network of the main generalist printed newspapers (*El País* and *Público*) and of the most-read digital native media (*El Confidencial* and *Observador*) in each country (see Table 8.1).

The tool used to collect tweets was the *Twlets* extension connected to *Google Chrome* browser. Specifically, messages from journalists and politicians prior to 15 January 2020 were downloaded. As the frequency of publications of Portuguese politicians on this social network is usually much lower, the last 35 tweets that appeared on the account were analysed for each leader. In this way, a sample of 420 messages was obtained to be examined. Simple retweets without comments were discarded. At the same time criteria and number of messages (420) were used to configure the sample related to the accounts of journalists. However, in this case the selection

Table 8.1 Actors Analysed

Name of the actor		Followers
Journalists (Spain)	Ignacio Escolar (@*iescolar*)	1050.424
	Pedro J. Ramírez (@*pedroj_ramirez*)	540.322
	Antonio Maestre (@*AntonioMaestre*)	414.319
	Jesús Maraña (@*jesusmarana*)	389.117
	Carlos Cuesta (@*carloscuestaEM*)	209.694
	Fernando Berlín (@*radiocable*)	197.166
Journalists (Portugal)	José Manuel Fernandes (@*JMF1957*)	89.772
	Daniel Oliveira (@*danielolivalx*)	83.554
	Henrique Monteiro (@*HenriquMonteiro*)	43.912
	Fernanda Cancio (@*fcancio*)	42.542
	Paulo Ferreira (@*pauloferreira1*)	27.765
	Helena Garrido (@*helenag*)	23.582
Political leaders (Spain)	Pedro Sánchez (@*sanchezcastejon*)	1468.432
	Pablo Casado (@*pablocasado_*)	496.362
	Santiago Abascal (@*Santi_ABASCAL*)	515.909
	Pablo Iglesias (@*PabloIglesias*)	2605.444
	Inés Arrimadas (@*InesArrimadas*)	681.527
	Gabriel Rufián (@*gabrielrufian*)	790.495
Political leaders (Portugal)	Antonio Costa (@*antoniocostaps* – PS account –)	7.006
	Rui Rio (@*RuiRioPSD*)	28.676
	Catarina Martins (@*catarina_mart*)	87.630
	André Ventura (@*AndreCVentura*)	36.375
	João Cotrim Figueiredo (@*jcf_liberal*)	17.465
	Rui Tavares (@*ruitavares*)	64.991
News outlet (Spain)	El País (@*el_pais*)	7747.420
	El Confidencial (@*elconfidencial*)	888.859
News outlet (Portugal)	Público (@*Publico*)	737.908
	Observador (@*observadorpt*)	153.686

Source: Author's own.

was made using only those most recent publications that referred to the national political issues of the respective country.

As for the analysis of news outlet accounts, a total of 7,191 tweets were downloaded. Due to the disparate frequency of publication, we decided to collect 2,300 from *@el_pais* (05–15 January 2020), 2000 from *@El-confidencial* (27–12–2019 to 15–01–2020), 1,591 from *@Publico* (01–15 January 2020), and 1,300 from *@observadorpt* (01–15 January 2020). To explore users' interest in political issues, the 25 messages with the most retweets for each account were listed and the issues addressed within were identified. The messages related to political issues were used as a reference to obtain the sample for analysing users' responses, selecting a maximum of eight responses from each tweet, in the order of appearance. The small number of comments that are usually produced in many tweets of the Portuguese media meant that the list was extended to the 100 most retweeted of their accounts in this country. Despite this, the sample of comments was higher in Spain (N = 336) than in Portugal (N = 223).

In addition to recording general data, the codebook of the journalists' accounts classifies whether the type of tweet is informative or an opinion (it also includes a mixture of information and opinion) and whether or not the opinion is partisan. Qualitatively, criticisms and defences of members of certain political parties by journalists were also recorded.

To analyse the tweets of political leaders, the orientation of their messages was measured with four different categories: (1) Defence of proposals, measures, or actions (own, or third-party actors); (2) criticism, insults, or attacks on political rivals; (3) mixed (presents both mixed orientations); (4) not applicable (cannot be classified into the previous). As qualitative analysis, the most repeated keywords were extracted with the *Wordle* program, distinguishing the number of repetitions by political leader and country. Interpretatively, the most frequent words were subsequently associated with the presence of certain polarizing frames and discourses. Based on Calvo et al. (2017), the most retweeted messages and tweets with the highest number of favourites of each political leader were identified.

Regarding user replies, the tone of the messages was examined as well as the presence of offensive language or discriminatory speech. This category included all those tweets that contained attacks on the honour of other people, mockeries, insults, scurrilities, or promote some kind of prejudice, violence, or intolerance (Miró, 2016).

Results

Journalistic polarization

Contrary to one of the statements included in our first hypothesis, the analysis of tweets written by selected journalists and political commentators indicates that, in general, Spanish professionals do not tend to

editorialize or issue opinions on national political news in their personal Twitter accounts (59.5%) to a greater extent than their Portuguese colleagues (61.4%). Although opinionative tweets prevail in both countries, there is a contrast of uses between the accounts of the journalists analysed. In Spain, except in the messages of *@iescolar* (5.7%) and *@jesusmarana* (37.1%), the predominance of opinion is far superior to information (with percentages located mostly in a range between 62.9% and 97.1% for tweets examined). In Portugal, *@danielolivalx* (94.3%), *@HenriquMonteiro* (91.4%), and *@fcancio* (82.9%) usually post opinionative comments, while others such as *@pauloferreira1* (with 51.4% of informative tweets), *@JMF1957* (with 57.1% of informative tweets), and, above all, *@helenag* (with 80% of informative tweets) often issue more information or link to news or political analysis.

However, the second part of the hypothesis is fulfilled. According to the high political parallelism that has traditionally characterized Spanish media systems and in the same line indicated by previous research mentioned in this chapter (Barberá, Vaccari & Valeriani, 2017), the data show that partisan bias is also reproduced in the behaviour of journalists on Twitter. Thus, 52.4% of the messages scrutinized in Spain contain opinions that defend and/or criticize certain politicians or parties, representing 88% of total opinion tweets. Hence, almost all Spanish journalists frequently show partisan opinions in their comments (most of the percentages range from 90.9% to 100%). As for the level of ideological polarization, in Spain two clearly differentiated blocks can be found. On the one hand, a group of the accounts of journalists analysed (*@AntonioMaestre; @iescolar; @jesusmarana; @radiocable*) is characterized, to a greater or lesser extent, by presenting tweets that project a defence of the leftist parties (*PSOE-Podemos*) and attack the actions and measures of the right opposition (*PP-C's-Vox*):

> I do not know if Sanchez limits the power of *Podemos* but what it does seem, as Juliana says, is that the criticism of the right to the "kidnapped government" by the "social-communists" is limited. (*@radiocable*, 2020, January 10)

Meanwhile, others have been detected (*@carloscuestaEM*; *@pedroj_ramirez*) in which most of the messages are aimed at transmitting a deeply negative image of the "progressive" coalition government and of Catalan and Basque independence formations:

> *PSOE* and *ERC* close the "fringes" of the investiture. They intend to dress as normal a Government formed by criminals, coup plotters, seditious and embezzling. Negotiated with *proetarras*. And driven by those of the ERE case. And to top it off they give moral lessons. (*@carloscuestaEM*, 2019, December 24)

Portuguese professionals tend to express fewer partisan opinions (30.9% of the messages scrutinized) on their Twitter accounts than their Spanish colleagues; the general use of a less aggressive tone and language is observed in this country.

When these individuals do editorialize on political issues, tweets focused on the defence of certain politicians or partisan criticism also prevails (50.4% of their total opinion tweets). However, the predominant type of opinion and the ideological alignment of the comments vary significantly depending on the account analysed.

The visibility of partisan criticism is the highest in *@fcancio* (72.4%), *@danielolivalx* (63%), and *@JMF1957* (60%), but it has less presence in the tweets with opinions of the other accounts, which tend to offer their analyses of the political and economic situation or focus more on the generalized behaviours of the parties and the institutional system. Despite the fact that certain ideological slants are detected in the tweets of all the Portuguese journalists examined, the polarization is especially manifested, on the one hand, in the numerous attacks by *@danielolivalx* and *@fcancio* on right-wing groups and *Chega*'s leader. On the other hand, it appears clearly in the strong criticisms of *@JMF1957* on the ruling Socialist Party.

Politicians frames

The message orientation transmitted in the tweets of Spanish leaders is considerably more critical than that of the Portuguese politicians. As Table 8.2 sets out, the percentage of tweets that essentially collect criticism, insults, or attacks on political rivals is almost double in Spain (39%) than in Portugal (20.5%). This can be related to the fact that Portuguese representatives often use this social network in order to defend proposals, measures, or actions of their own or other actors (48.1%), compared to the low presence shown by this speech in the messages of the Spanish leaders (21.3%). As for the number of tweets that mix the two types of guidelines – critical and propositional – this is slightly higher in Spain, although this mixed approach appears in a minority in both countries (17.6% and 10%).

Table 8.2 Message Orientation of Political Leaders by Country

	Spain	*Portugal*	*Total (N = 420)*
Proposals, measures, or actions	21.9 (46)	48.1 (101)	35 (147)
Criticism, insults, or attacks on rivals	39 (82)	20.5 (43)	29.8 (125)
Mixed	17.6 (37)	10 (21)	13.8 (58)
Not applicable	21.4 (45)	21.4 (45)	21.4 (90)

Source: Author's own.

However, the hardness in the tone of the politicians' speech varies significantly within each country, so that those leaders of parties who are in the Government, and even their parliamentary allies, tend to show a more positive approach and focus less on offering hostile or attacking messages against their opponents. This is the case of Prime Minister Antonio Costa in Portugal, or the president Pedro Sánchez in Spain. In this regard, it should also be noted that the results of the tweets' analysis for his coalition government partner – the leader of *Podemos*, Pablo Iglesias – contrast with the negative tone that had been detected in his speeches from earlier times (Arroyas & Fernández-Ilundain, 2019; Arroyas & Pérez, 2016). Specifically, most of his messages on the social network during the specific period under review are comments on cultural products or that announce his interventions in media; when talking about political issues, Iglesias often does so with a more propositional and mixed orientation than critical.

In both countries, the analysis highlights the negative and critical tone that prevails in tweets of politicians identified with the radical right, such as Santiago Abascal (*Vox*) and André Ventura (*Chega*). In the case of Spain, it is also linked to the discourse of the independentist Gabriel Rufián (*ERC*). Thus, the most polarizing messages that delve into ideological divisions and stigmatization of the antagonists have been found in these leaders' tweets.

The count of repeated keywords, which was carried out with the tool *Wordle*, also reflects the presence of different frames and discourses' tones within each country. Thus, in Spain the name of the state is widely used by all leaders except the *ERC* spokesperson. Moreover, words such as "government", "Sánchez", "*PP*", "*PSOE*", "Torra", "*Vox*", "against", or "in opposition to" dominate and are mainly related to the prevailing antagonism between political forces. In addition, the frequent appearance of terms such as "state", "separatists", "allies", "ETA" (Basque terrorist group that ceased its activity in 2011), "betrayal", or "sovereignty" are connected with criticism or hostility on the part of *PP*, *Vox,* and *C's* representatives against the president of Government and nationalist and leftist parties that allowed his investiture. In contrast, in the socialist leader's sample of tweets there is the recurrent use of hashtags like "#YesToMoveForward", "#Investiture-Session", and "#GovernmentOfSpain" to defend his appointment and legislature plan, as well as words such as "rights", "society", and "people" related to a social discourse that also dominates in the messages of Iglesias.

Regarding the Catalan problem, two opposing frames are distinguished in the analysis of frequent terms: On the one hand, one may observe a high use of words linked to a perspective focused on legality and courts' actions as a way to resolve the issue ("convicted", "justice", "court", etc.), especially in tweets of the centre and right opposition. On the other hand, with a lower frequency, a framework of "negotiation" or "dialogue" on this matter can be seen in some messages from the leaders of *PSOE* and *ERC*.

If we look at the number of retweets and favourites in the publications of Spanish politicians examined, it is also verified that the messages containing polarizing speeches (in which the adversary is strongly attacked) are those that generate a greater diffusion by users. As an exception, a tweet of Iglesias was detected as humorous in code and the message of Sánchez, in which he affirms the attributes with which he seeks to identify his "Government of the Progressive Coalition", which was also detected with a positive tone.

In Portugal, the word "stability" appears among the repeated expressions and the general tone is less hostile. In addition, if we pay attention to the messages with the highest number of retweets and likes, we have not verified a visible amount of polarized speech in which the opponent is severely attacked. The toughest positions are found in a tweet by André Ventura, in which he accuses the president of the Assembly of trying to "silence" him, as well as a post by João Cotrim de Figueiredo (Liberal Initiative) in which he criticizes "the socialist incompetence".

We do not find many expressions of strong hostility among the most mentioned keywords in this period. The words "Portuguese" and "to do" are nearly at the top of the most referenced words in tweets. "State", "parliament", "work", and "support" are other words that we can frequently find. The prime minister usually maintains a soft tone; the same goes for the leader of the main opposition party, who toughens his speech less often than his Spanish counterpart, Pablo Casado. The most critical and attacking tone is reflected in the accounts of the leaders of Liberal Initiative and, above all, of *Chega*.

Political interest and hostile speech

In the accounts of the Spanish newspapers, the news on political issues reached the highest number of user retweets. In the Portuguese media which were analysed, political information also gained considerable attention on Twitter, although it was lower in favour of sports, crimes, scientific, cultural issues, etc., in this country.

If we extract the 25 most retweeted publications in each of the selected accounts, it can be observed that 19 are tweets about politics for *@el_pais*. For the account *@Elconfidencial*, this trend increases even further and there are only two publications not related to political issues (the 4th and 25th). However, it must be taken into account that the investiture session of the president of the Government took place in Spain during the period analysed. Thus, this could increase the spread of political matters.

For *@observadorpt*, seven of the most retweeted publications are about Portuguese parties or prominent political figures in the country. However, nearly half of the tweets (12) were related to other topics; the most retweeted post was about an alleged medical malpractice. In *@Publico*, international affairs were most retweeted by users. Middle East and topics

related with the United States and Spain stand out among the topics discussed. Additionally, one can see international issues at the top of the ranking (13 tweets). Surprisingly, Portuguese political topics are almost absent.

The analysis of tweet replies on political issues published by the news outlets' accounts shows that the tone of the comments is predominantly negative for both countries (65.8% in Spain and 62.3% in Portugal). Thus, the criticism of other people, actions, or measures prevails against the positive or neutral tone.

Regarding the presence of offensive language or discriminatory speech, 30.2% (169) of the responses that made up the total sample ($N = 559$) were characterized by attacks on the honour of other people, mockeries, insults, or encouraging some kind of prejudice. In addition, it should be noted that the frequency of occurrence for this type of discourse does not differ greatly between Spain (31.5%) and Portugal (28.3%). Thus, unlike the divergences that occur in the different levels of polarization shown by politicians, a greater similarity between both countries is detected in the case of the behaviour of Twitter users.

Conclusion

The main objective of this chapter was to compare the public debate on Twitter in Spain and Portugal. This research adopted the premise that the different characteristics of the political and media ecosystems between the two countries are also reflected in the social media conversation. This study has confirmed that, in general, the discourse is still more polarized in Spain than in the other Iberian country in this scenario. However, it has also revealed that the behaviour of some types of actors presents important similarities.

The results demonstrate that criticisms or attacks on political rivals predominate the discourse of Spanish leaders; this is also shown in the repetition of words related to the polarization of parties and in the messages with most retweets. In Portugal, in spite of the recent growth of radical forces, a more proactive general tone still prevails than in its neighbouring state.

Despite the high professional autonomy and low politicization with which journalism is traditionally identified in Portugal, we found a relevant presence of partisan opinions in the comments on Twitter in this country. Although the results show that the polarization and the hostile tone of journalistic discourse are lower than in Spain, the ideological alignment and high doses of criticism focused on certain parties are also observed in the accounts of Portuguese journalists.

Notwithstanding the differences in journalistic and political speeches, a negative tone and offensive language or messages that contain accusations and promote prejudice and intolerance appear with a similar frequency in the interventions of citizens in both countries. Although this behaviour is

not representative of the majority among users, it offers a sample of the significative hostility against dissenting positions in this environment. This convergent trend between the citizen speeches reveals that the radicalism of public debate on Twitter seems to be homogeneous and independent of the political and media cultures of each country.

Funding information

Note

1 It is also relevant to specify that the leader of the Communist Party (the fourth most voted political force in the 2019 elections) does not have Twitter account, while the spokesperson of PAN (the sixth most voted), André Silva (@ *louren- coesilva1*), has not been used it since 2016, where only four messages appear.

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