



Media prosumers in political communication: Politainment on YouTube

Prosumidores mediáticos en la comunicación política:

El «politainment» en YouTube

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the role of the political «infotainment» prosumer on Internet. In the second half of the XX century, telecracy was the predominant one-way communication model that not only popularized politics but also transformed politics into entertainment or «politainment». The XXI century began with the conviction that the Internet would lead to a bidirectional communication model in which true dialogue between political power and citizens would emerge. This research explores a new field of study: Web 2.0 «politainment» and prosumers' attitudes and actions within this new communication sphere. The objective of the study is to identify the kind of political content Internet users consume and produce. To achieve this, we made a case study of the political information produced and consumed on YouTube, and in particular of a speech given by Ana Botella, the Mayor of Madrid, before the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in September 2013. The 40 most-watched videos on YouTube during the week of the Mayor's appearance as well as those viewed in the month that followed have been analyzed, in addition to the 3,000 comments on these videos. The conclusion shows that the presumption of «politainment» on Internet is characterized by massive consumption of information but passive reaction with regard to production and participation.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la figura del prosumidor del «infoentretenimiento» político en Internet. Si durante la segunda mitad del siglo XX predomina la «telecracia», un modelo de comunicación unidireccional que supone la popularización de la política pero también su conversión en espectáculo o «politainment», el siglo XXI se inicia con el convencimiento de que Internet conducirá a un modelo comunicacional bidireccional en el que se establezca un diálogo real entre el poder político y la ciudadanía. Esta investigación explora un nuevo campo de estudio, como es el «politainment» en la Web 2.0 y la actuación del prosumidor en esta nueva esfera comunicativa. El interés del estudio es detectar qué contenidos políticos consumen y producen los usuarios en red. Para ello, se realiza un estudio de caso sobre la información política producida y consumida en YouTube sobre la comparecencia de la alcaldesa de Madrid, Ana Botella ante el Comité Olímpico Internacional (COI) en septiembre de 2013. Se analizan los 40 vídeos más vistos en YouTube la semana de su comparecencia y un mes después, así como 3.000 comentarios a estos vídeos. Las conclusiones señalan que el prosumo del «politainment» en Internet se caracteriza por un consumo masivo de información pero un comportamiento muy pasivo en su producción y participación.

KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Political communication, consumer, behavior, humor, quantitative analysis, infotainment, politainment, YouTube.

Comunicación política, comportamiento, consumidor, humor, análisis cuantitativo, infoentretenimiento, politainment, YouTube.

1. Introduction and definition of the issues studied

This research is based on Alvin Toffler's concept of the prosumer (1980) which defines the user as a combination of producer and consumer. The producer in this case is also linked to the «social factory» concept (Hardt & Negri, 2000) and the idea of immaterial production (Lazzarato, 1996) which all communicative activity entails. The proliferation of Internet has updated the notion of «prosumption»: Web 2.0 is a new social factory (Ritzer, Dean & Jurgenson, 2012) where users consume information, produce content and become prosumers via wikis, blogs and social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr o YouTube (Chia, 2012; Shaw & Benkler, 2012). Web 2.0 has enabled the mass mobilization of the immaterial work of producers and consumers of information: the prosumer has become a hegemonic element within this communication setting.

Social networks are clearly a «prosumption» medium in which prosumers are the loudspeakers that broadcast conversations with, and for, a consumer public. In this conversation, the listener not only consumes this content but responds to and reproduces these messages, and creates others almost simultaneously. This means that any activity in the offline world can be transformed into something important within the online sphere, thus creating «an independence space» (Castells, 2012) by means of «the self-communication of the masses» (Castells, 2010). When citizens consume data on the traditional media, they can then take the new media—in particular Web 2.0—to mix the «old information» with «new information», a process some authors have called «transmediation» (Cheong & Lundry, 2012).

And while the personalization and individualization of information is reinforced, prosumers contribute as a community to the production of a meaning that envelops the content and the product, thus sharing a meaning, developing a social relationship and participating in a way that was non-existent before. As a result, a communal ethical surplus is generated in the content and message (Arvidsson, 2005). This is to say, an informative model a la carte (Sunstein, 2001), or pro-am (Leadbeater & Miller, 2004), is established, while prosumers join together in a collective drive to develop these messages. An important player within these prosumption environments, according to Bruns (2008), the produser, who produces and consumes information collaboratively. He bases his production of content on the philosophy of collaboration, by working with other users within the Web 2.0 networks.

The idea of the prosumer of political communica-

tion on Web 2.0 also includes the notion of «political prosumption» (Hershkovitz, 2012). One of the main lines of study of the prosumer and political communication is the focus on the type of content produced and consumed by users on Internet, namely, news-based or entertainment. In our research, the setting we investigate is the new phenomenon of «politainment» (Nieland; 2008; Sayre & King, 2010; Schultz, 2012), a term coined relatively recently that unites the two media-related functions of information on politics and entertainment. The «infotainment» trend that emerged in the 90s was linked to the intense competition unleashed in the audiovisual market at that time, which encompassed all types of themes, including politics; yet as far back as 1967, Debord had foreseen the slippage of social life from reality into the show business format; Postman (1985) suggested that public discourse in the USA would transform itself into entertainment, and Bratlinger (1985) referred to the type of spectacle offered by the media as akin to a Roman circus.

In Spain, the study of political «infotainment» on television began to emerge at the end of the 90s (Berrocal, Abad, Cebrián & Pedreira, 2001; Dader, 2003; Carpio, 2009; Arroyo, 2008; Ferré & Gayá, 2009; García Avilés, 2007; Valhondo, 2011; Ortells, 2009) in line with significant international research on the subject: in Europe (Brants, 1998; Brants & Neijen, 1998), Asia (Shirk, 2007), the Middle East (Bahry, 2001; Lynch, 2004a, 2004b) and in the USA (Patterson, 2000; Baum, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2005; Hollander, 2005; Moy, Xenos & Hess, 2006). Although most studies on «politainment» were TV-based, the term refers to a journalistic trend towards representing reality as performance or a show that could be produced in any type of media. The coming of Internet provided a new platform for studying this phenomenon, yet research on «politainment» both nationally and internationally is scarce (Tryon, 2008; Towner & Dulio, 2011; Berrocal, Campos & Redondo, 2012).

Academia has striven to understand the type of content that citizens produce and consume when it is they and not the media who choose the news and information they wish to receive, and opinion is divided on the subject: authors such as Gibson & McCallister (2011) argue that the most politically active Internet users, by their interventions in political life, learn to acquire greater knowledge and competence in terms of their rights and capabilities, while others, like Santori (1997), believe that the subjects are just as drugged and passive on the Net as they are when sat in front of the TV screen.

When talking about the possible effects of «poli-

tainment», most researchers assume that «infotainment» degrades political information and so prevents citizens from measuring reality with the necessary rigour to enable them to take fundamental decisions (Blumler, 1992; Prior, 2005; Moy, Xenos & Hess; 2006), while others, such as Grabe, Zhou, Lang & Bolls (2000) state that a news item offered via «infotainment» formats grabs the audience's attention far more than if it were presented in traditional media forms. Brants (1998), Baum (2002, 2003a, 2003 b, 2005), Stockwell (2004) and Taniguchi (2007) consider that the risks of exposure to political questions on televised info-show programs are not so great, and have the distinct advantage of popularizing items of political information among social groups who would normally show no interest in the subject.

So far, studies on «politainment» on Internet have focused on video content on YouTube (Berrocal, Campos & Redondo, 2012a; Berrocal, Campos & Redondo, 2012b) but a few have examined the prosumer's role in dealing with political «infotainment» on the Net, hence an analysis of prosumer behaviour regarding «political infotainment» on Internet is clearly needed.

2. Material and methods

This work is based on a case study that analyses one particular news item, the presentation of the Madrid candidacy by the Mayor of Madrid, Ana Botella, before the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in September 2013, at a meeting to decide which city would host the 2020 Olympic Games.

On 7 September 2013, Madrid was eliminated in the first round of IOC voting following a tie with Istanbul, and Tokyo ended up the winner. The presentation of the Madrid candidacy before IOC members lasted 45 minutes during which there were nine speakers, including Prince Felipe of Spain, Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, President of the Autonomous Community of Madrid Ignacio González and Mayor of Madrid Ana Botella, among others. The speeches were written by North American speech writer, Terrence Burns¹. Analyzing the defeat and its political fallout, neither of Spain's two leading national dailies,

«El País» and «El Mundo»², pointed to the quality of the presentation as justifying the failed candidacy, although both commented on the level of English spoken by some of the presenters.

But the social networks interpreted the defeat differently, and many users were quick to point the finger at Ana Botella for a specific phrase in her intervention in which she invited IOC members to come to Madrid to enjoy a «relaxing cup of café con leche en Plaza Mayor». In no time at all, users had set up a Twitter account called @Relaxingcup³ which soon started trending on this particular social network, not to men-

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tion groups that sprung up on Facebook, and the songs composed and all kinds of humorous material posted on Web 2.0 that fuelled interest in the subject. There rapidly appeared videos on YouTube in which users broadcasted Botella's⁴ performance accompanied by subtitles and songs, and mixes of music and the speech. Only a few hours after her intervention, the most-viewed Ana Botella⁵ video on YouTube had been seen 2.4 million times. We can get an idea of the popularity of this video by analysing the most recent data supplied by EGM which shows that YouTube, Spain's most-visited website, registered 17,958,000 unique visitors from April to May.

To examine Internet users' interest in this news item and the role of prosumers in its propagation, we carried out an initial analysis of YouTube's 20 most-viewed videos on the subject between the day of its initial broadcast, on 7 September, to 14 September 2013. And to see whether interest in the subject lasted

or flagged we made a second study, again of the 20 videos most viewed, on October 7, exactly one month after Botella's speech. We also analysed the content and authorship of the comments on each video, which totalled around 3,000.

It is significant that of the 20 videos most viewed on October 7, only four had not featured in that list a month before. This indicates that those videos uploaded to YouTube immediately after the speech were the ones that got most hits, and that it was hard to shift them from the top spots or for new videos to break into the top 20.

To analyze the video content and commentaries, we designed an ad hoc analysis datasheet structured in three categories that combined open and closed responses. The analysis took into account the four levels of «prosumption» based on Arnstein's (1969) scale of participation:

On the first level, the prosumer is just a consumer of information, selecting the type of video he or she wants to watch but taking no further action with regard to the content. The items in the first category of the analysis datasheet are placed in a particular order to detect which political information videos on Ana Botella the user chose to watch in his or her role as an information consumer to determine if they saw a «politainment» type of video or one which was must straight news.

On the second level, the prosumer is just a fan or message follower. This idea is based on the first level of «fandom» as described by Jenkins (1992), in which the user interacts with other users on the social network by creating meanings, shared as «Like», «Dislike» or «Share» in terms of the content, however, they do not add any comment or content of their own to the message. The items in this second category are chosen in order to explore the extent of prosumer «fandom» involvement in the videos analyzed.

On the third level, the prosumer starts off from the main message –the video– and produces content based on that message along with the rest of

the community. We analyze the comments made by users on each video taking into account Sunstein (2010) and his views on information cascades and on how falsehoods are spread: the information and conformity cascade, group polarization. We examined some 3,000 comments and categorized them as information, conformity and group polarization.

On the fourth level, the prosumer is the producer of the message. The prosumer is seen as the sole or partial creator of the video –in the latter case, he or she takes the content generated by another author and modifies it with sound, video or text.

The analysis and codifying was carried out by four codifiers, members of the University of Valladolid's «New Trends in Communication» research group. They applied the content analysis datasheet to the 40 videos and 3,000 comments –75 per video– in a pairs system. Alongside this quantitative analysis we also ran a qualitative examination via open-ended response analysis datasheets which the codifiers –following a review and discussion of international scientific contributions that enabled us to establish the state of the question– used to complement the quantitative analysis. After pair codification, the codifiers unified the results. The data –total number of plays and «Like», «Dislike» or «Share» options– had been extracted from YouTube, hence the quality of this analysis is dependent on the credibility of the data provided by that video platform⁶.

3. Analysis and results

3.1. The prosumer as consumer

The prosumer mainly watches political entertainment videos on YouTube: the subject of the majority

Table 1. Proposal for a scale analysis of prosumer participation in «politainment»

Level of involvement	Definition	Items
Level 1	Consumer	- Number of plays - Subject
Level 2	Fan or Follower	- Number of «Like» options - Number of «Dislike» options - Number of «Share» options
Level 3	Commentator	1. Number of comments per video 2. Discourse of the comments 2.1. Information cascade 2.2. Conformity cascade 2.3. Group polarization
Level 4	Producer	1. Authorship of the main message (video) 2. User who posts the message 3. Message production a. Sole creator b. Partial creator i. Sound ii. Visuals iii. Text

Author-designed table based on Arnstein (1969), Jenkins (1992) and Sunstein (2010).

of the videos played was parodies of the Mayor of Madrid Ana Botella's speech in English before the COI –this theme accounted for 81% of the videos analyzed–. In barely a few hours, the most widely viewed video had been played 2.4 million times. Put in context by comparing⁷ this figure to the TV viewing ratings in Spain in September, the Botella video would have ranked 25th in the list of most-watched TV programmes in the week of its broadcast, ranking it alongside the Champions League football match between Galatasaray and Real Madrid, which attracted 2.5 million viewers, and ahead of «El pelicolón de Antena 3», a film that captured 2.38 million viewers, or the comedy chat show «El Hormiguero» with 2,169,000. The difference is even more significant when compared to viewing figures for TV news programmes: the most popular was «Antena 3 Noticias 1» with 1.956.000 viewers followed by «Telediario 1 de La 1» with 1.891.000 and «Informativos Tele 5, 21:00» with 1.812.000. It is also interesting to measure the effect of the Botella video by Internet user data: in September, there were 22.640.000 registered Internet users, of whom 7.920.000 visited news websites while 10.144.000 checked out entertainment websites: the news websites were consulted, on average, 13.9 minutes per day, while TV entertainment content on the Web was viewed an average of 226 minutes⁸. These indicators reveal the importance of entertainment and, in our case in particular, the supremacy of political «infotainment» on YouTube. Just as 81% of Ana Botella videos were political parody and satire in content, it was also interesting to note that the subject matter of the remaining 19% consisted of related, previously posted material but updated as a result of the Mayor's speech –such as her husband José María Aznar talking Texas English to George Bush Jnr, or of Botella-related videos produced before her IOC speech and taken from TV, like a piece on Ana Botella on La Sexta channel's «El Intermedio», or a conversation between Botella and Spanish author Fernando Sánchez Dragó before a TV interview.

In most of the videos analyzed it is the Mayor of Madrid who is the protagonist –in 90.5% of cases–, something which, given that YouTube searches are based on her name as key word, also constitutes a particular feature of «politainment».

The prosumer converts a political anecdote into something politically novel in a matter of hours, and even shifts a past event into the present: the majority of the Ana Botella videos played on YouTube were posted in 2013 (77.3%) and half the videos analysed were sent in on the same day of her intervention before the COI or in the five days that followed. At the same time, comments on Botella's speech in English succeeded in updating earlier videos posted on YouTube in 2013 (from March to September, and before the day of her speech on 7 September) as well as seven videos posted between 2006 and 2012 (T2).

3.2. The prosumer as fan or message follower

Prosumers' activity on the political «fandom» level is virtually non-existent. A paltry 0.4% of plays carried

Table 2 (T2). Values relating to the political «fandom» options and comments on the videos analysed

			«Like »		«Dislike»		«Share»		Comments	
N	Year	Number of plays	T	%	T	%	T	%	T	%
1	2013	3,242,581	14,553	0.4	912	0.0	6,657	0.0	2,466	0.1
2	2013	2,868,989	8,542	0.3	1,397	0.0		0.1		0.0
3	2013	2,328,925		0.0		0.0	2,738	0.0	8,295	0.4
4	2013	2,275,161	4,055	0.2	4,688	0.2		0.1		0.0
5	2013	2,228,171	14,119	0.6	2,392	0.1	2,335	0.1	3,520	0.2
6	2013	2,221,396		0.0		0.0	1,204	0.1	8,295	0.4
7	2013	918,446	3,114	0.3	525	0.1	1,329	0.0	1,117	0.1
8	2013	810,472	1,160	0.1	373	0.0		0.0	994	0.1
9	2013	705,280	477	0.1	904	0.1		0.1	1,262	0.2
10	2013	604,074		0.0		0.0	615	0.1		0.0
11	2013	549,944	1,383	0.3	690	0.1	720	0.0	2,124	0.4
12	2013	502,867	1,386	0.3	279	0.1		0.4	542	0.1
13	2013	491,702	6,127	1.2	145	0.0	1,878	0.1	1,478	0.3
14	2013	483,510	731	0.2	1,012	0.2	564	0.0	1,452	0.3
15	2013	437,295	542	0.1	91	0.0		0.0	509	0.1
16	2013	314,212	850	0.3	85	0.0		0.0	314	0.1
17	2013	222,445	101	0.0	362	0.2		0.0	357	0.2
18	2012	152,518	219	0.1	38	0.0	42	0.0	195	0.1
19	2010	460,012	995	0.2	157	0.0		0.0	25	0.0
20	2008	233,798	422	0.2	12	0.0		0.0	59	0.0
21	2007	154,525	319	0.2	372	0.2	42	0.0	195	0.1
22	2006	477,663	334	0.1	67	0.0		0.2	771	0.2
	Mean	1,031,090	3,128	0.3	763	0.1	1,648	0	1,788	0.2

Legend: data for the most-played videos featuring Ana Botella dated 14 September 2013. N only corresponds to the unit of analysis (the video) by weighing the first and second wave data in the case of repeated videos. The highest values for each category are shaded. Empty cells correspond to instances where YouTube did not provide the necessary information.

user tags of «Like», «Dislike» or «Share». Neither is there a clear relationship between the high number of plays a video receives and a greater number of actions in terms of these three options. In this study, although the most widely seen video is the one that gets the most «Like» or «Share» votes, there is no similar link observed in the rest of the videos analyzed (T2). In general terms, prosumer decision-taking in terms of one or other of the options is volatile in relation to the number of plays.

3.3. The prosumer as commentator

Neither did the prosumers generate a significant number of comments in relation to the number of videos seen (T2): there is no correlation between the most widely viewed videos and the videos with comments attached. Another important variable is the date of the comments: the majority trend was the relation between the number of comments received and the year when the video was posted. All the videos posted in 2013 got the highest percentage of comments, from 7 September 2013 to the same date a month later, and those posted a year earlier got more comments than those from the previous year, and so on. So, although it is true to say that prosumers set about updating a video prior to that date by raising its number of plays, new comments on that particular video were not numerically significantly.

What deserves special mention is the comments' form and content. Most of the opinions aired by the prosumers on these videos relate to what Sunstein (2010) calls the «conformity cascade», in that these messages are very short and merely reinforce the majority message. None of the messages analysed are truly informative –as in, providing information that does not feature in the video or which take a well-argued stance–, only two videos attract significant differences of opinion in which two groups of prosumers argue among themselves –trading insults and opinions not backed by any solid arguments–, and the rest are merely opinions that follow the majority lead.

3.4. The prosumer as producer

And neither is there much prosumer activity in terms of video authorship. We only saw one video produced entirely by a single user and posted by him on YouTube –a music rap–. Production activity comes mainly in the form of the prosumer taking a fragment of a TV program –usually from the La Sexta's «El Intermedio»– which features Ana Botella and then posting it on YouTube, without editing the video content and merely adding a title, description or, in this

case, a subtitle. Most of the videos (71%) were posted without any alteration to the sound, visual or textual content. This corresponds to the same number of videos produced by a media outlet or the institutional images of Botella's speech provided by the IOC, although in only 9.5% of cases were these videos, produced by established media, posted on YouTube by the media company or program themselves.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Internet «politainment» consumption is characterized by its being consumed in large quantities by users who show very few tendencies to create content of their own. Prosumer consumption and production is based on collaborative actions but prosumers are not the hegemonic producers of that content. Although it is true that each video receives a significant number of comments, the number is not proportional to the amount of plays: as we have observed, only a small percentage of plays generate substantial number of comments. Also, the video content does not add anything new and merely toes the majority line of conversation, without any sustained arguments and in the form of brief messages, hence Sunstein's (2010) «conformity cascade». Even more absent is prosumer action in self-produced videos; here there is a clear trend towards «transmediation», taking messages from «old media» like television and transforming the message with a slight alteration –text, visuals, sound– to adapt it to the «new media», YouTube, by adding a new title, a subtitle or a description.

This definition of the media prosumer of «politainment» opens up a new line of study in Spain which could investigate prosumer passivity in the face of political entertainment on Internet in order to verify if users really become less knowledgeable and competent in terms of their rights and democratic capabilities by intervention in politics with the development of a majority (passive) consumption of political «infotainment» (Gibson & McCallister, 2011). If the trend described here is confirmed in Spain, the media prosumer of «politainment» can be described as exercising a prosumption that is highly limited in terms of message creation in the majority of cases, but one that is also highly polarized and restricted in its variety of topics and which tends to replay the same message over and over again –the same content but in different versions and formats–, with scarcely any evidence of participative actions as prosumer.

Notes

¹ Contracted as speech writer for the Madrid candidacy. Burns, pre-

sident of Helios Partners, an international consultancy group that specializes in sporting events, had previously advised other candidate cities for the Olympic Games in Beijing 2008, the Winter Games in Vancouver 2010 and Sochi 2014, and now for Pyeongchang 2018.

² From 8 September (the day after the IOC vote) to 14 September, «El País» published 15 news items on this subject as well as two editorials and two opinion pieces; the news made the front page four times. «El Mundo» had 13 items on the speech, five opinion pieces and two editorials, and it featured on the front page three times. The two newspapers agreed that the failed candidacy was due to Spain's diminished standing in the world and the deterioration of its international image, the economic crisis, pressure and interest groups within the IOC and the impression that doping is not treated seriously in Spanish sport.

³ Information available on: <http://goo.gl/U8HiEA> (22-11-2013).

⁴ Information available on: <http://goo.gl/Ip6Uo> (22-11-2013).

⁵ Video entitled «Ana Botella y su inglés haciendo el ridículo en Buenos Aires (subtitled in English, Russian)*», or «Ana Botella and her English making a fool of herself in Buenos Aires». (<http://goo.gl/SxpZ6T>) (20-11-2013).

⁶ In the course of this investigation, the authors contacted YouTube via email to obtain complementary data on the segregation of these data by country but according to YouTube spokespersons this platform did not differentiate such data by country.

⁷ It must be remembered that the comparative data are merely contextual since the methodology applied to each case is different, and on YouTube only the number of plays are counted and not the number of unique users, data which we could not obtain for his investigation.

⁸ Data provided by Barlovento Comunicación in relation to September 2013. The information has been obtained in collaboration with this communication company as observer and promoter of the research program of which this study forms a part.

Financial Support

This project is part of the CSO2012-34698 Research Project «El infoentrenamiento político en televisión e Internet. Formatos, audiencias y consecuencias en la comunicación política española» (INFOPOLNET), financed by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness.

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