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ANALYSIS OF CITIZEN INTERACTIONS ON TWITTER ABOUT SOCIAL SERVICES AND COVID-19

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Introduction

Social Work Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic

Covid-19 mobilises digital transformations and is proving to be a “total social fact”, a concept of the French sociologist and anthropologist Marcel Mauss, to refer to those phenomena that bring into play the totality of the dimensions of the social (Santorro 2020). The case of this pandemic has become a social fact that has filled and affected the whole of society, changing our daily lives. The philosopher Adela Cortina states that our current society is going to change radically after the health crisis, becoming a social crisis, and in order to get out of this crisis we will need all the moral capacity and all the ethical capital of each person (Vallejo 2020). The focus of this chapter is to demonstrate how analysis of communications on social media can help understand the responses of social work to the Covid pandemic.



Context of the Research Study

In light of the situation in which social services professionals found themselves during the pandemic, social intervention projects were suspended and home help for older and dependent persons was restricted. For this reason, it was necessary to implement a comprehensive plan for the care of this group during the Covid-19 pandemic. It also had the consequence of discontinuing assistance that provided a minimum of welfare to the most vulnerable families, although the Spanish government soon after approved the Minimum Vital Income to address the needs of these groups. When the authorities realised the impact of limiting or curtailing Social Services, they declared Social Services as essential services on 26 March 2020,

through the order SND/295/2020. Social Services professionals then continued to provide their services under the state of emergency limitations.

With the framework described above, the Social Services have been able to continue the delivery of their services, under exceptional conditions, and under the security and hygiene measures applying to all essential professional services. One of the first measures taken was to guarantee the provision of home help, reconfiguring the service to the new situation: including the adoption of tele-assistance, in some cases. All administrative management and service provider companies were adapted to teleworking, all with the aim of complying with social distancing measures and taking care of the health of professionals and users. These measures have also affected vulnerable groups, as mentioned above. These arrangements were put in place to try to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 in segregated settings and highly vulnerable neighbourhoods. The measures and recommendations adopted by the Social Services have been extended to programmes for the protection of children and adolescents, the actions of volunteers and intervention in primary care Social Services.

During the months of confinement and the duration of the health crisis, many parishes, associations, communities, and non-governmental agencies mobilised their material and human resources to help the most vulnerable families (González García 2020).

As mentioned above, social networks and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), especially Twitter, which is the social network we are analysing, are no strangers to this social fact, namely Covid-19 (Pérez-Dasilva, Meso-Ayerdi, and Mendiguren-Galdospin 2020). In the first month of 2020, there have been more than 15 million tweets related to the topic of Covid-19 on the social network Twitter and on the day that the World Health Organisation (WHO) designated the virus a pandemic, almost ten million contents were published on this social network, according to the data offered on the social media analysis blog Tweet Binder. Social networks have expanded exponentially during this health crisis, as well as in our lives and in the way we communicate and relate to each other, with the social network Twitter playing a fundamental role in the increasing influence of social media in our social communication (Lazer et al. 2018). The discourse on Twitter transcends beyond the screen with great visibility and notoriety; an example of this is fake news, and just as other digital communication platforms, it can be a source of disinformation. In the words of Pulido-Rodríguez et al. (2020), communication on social networks can represent certain negative conspiracies that are related to disinformation and fake news. It is important to assess when such disinformation and fake news related to aspects of people's health are received or broadcast on social networks, as in the case of Covid-19 (Scheufele and Krause 2019).

This research focuses on the months of March and April 2020 when the state of emergency and the hardest months of confinement in Spain occurred. In mid-April 2020, there were already more than 417 million tweets about Covid-19 worldwide. This study found that in Spain, at that time, there were 558 tweets on the topic of Social Services.

As Gollust et al. (2020, 1) point out, “the public health crisis of the coronavirus is also a political and health communication crisis”. In this chapter, we will analyse the perceptions as communicated on Twitter regarding how Social Services in Spain responded to the impact of Covid-19 and the state of emergency as it affected the living conditions of people living in Spain during this period of time. We will present results relating to the generalised discourse on Twitter with messages of denunciations, advertising of activities, improvements in assistance, information, etc.

Social Media and the Pandemic

Chen, Lerman, and Ferrara (2020) note the change in personal relationships brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, in which interpersonal communication has been replaced by social distancing. Social networks play a fundamental role in alleviating isolation and are an effective alternative way to be connected with the world and to engage in dialogue about the pandemic that we are encountering on a global level and its repercussions on the social fabric. Social work professionals, like other essential groups during this health crisis, have used social networks to adapt to the transition from face-to-face work to teleworking in order to attend to vulnerable groups. The social network Twitter is very popular across all social strata for expressing messages of complaints, dissemination, requests for assistance and information. Ponce (2012) highlights the usefulness of social media such as Twitter for sharing messages and providing a forum for social interaction and sharing information. Their use can be divided into three main areas: social use, informational use and professional use (Ponce 2012).

In terms of social use, there is a preference for Facebook and Twitter, although there are distinctive features in terms of how they are used. Korhan and Ersoy (2016) studied the usage preferences of these two social networks from the point of view of personality dimensions. They found a positive correlation between Facebook use and people who scored higher on neuroticism, extraversion, openness and sociability, whereas in their analysis, Twitter users were more highly correlated with cognition, responsibility, openness and sociability.

Pentina, Basmanova, and Zhang (2014) point out that Twitter is mainly used as a means of social interaction and information. Facebook, on the other hand, is a social network more focused on interaction and interpersonal communication with other users (Kircaburun et al. 2018).

Studies by Phua, Jin, and Kim (2017) indicate that Twitter is the social network that is used to obtain sources of information and is least used to satisfy social networking needs. Korhan and Ersoy (2016), in their studies, show that the most important personality traits of Twitter users are a sense of responsibility and a need for recognition. With regard to Facebook, although to a lesser extent, it is also used to obtain and exchange information by users, although interpersonal information prevails in the information exchanged, with Twitter being reserved as the predominant channel for institutional information (Kircaburun et al. 2018).

With regard to social work, Castillo De Mesa (2017) comments that the use of Facebook is used more by social work professionals, who have a presence and

connectivity on this social network. However, it should be borne in mind that Facebook is mainly used to maintain or reinforce existing offline relationships, rather than to meet new people. Thus, the contacts established in this social network correspond mostly to contacts established in the personal network, which is not the case in Twitter (Bayer et al. 2018).

As the emergency situation eases, the opportunity now arises to study the experiences of Spanish citizens during the confinement. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, since the beginning of the epidemic, the use of ICTs and social networks such as Twitter has increased including the expression of opinions, information seeking and information sharing related to Covid-19 through messages, and in this research, these messages also refer to Social Services (Galera and Juste 2020; Thelwall and Levitt 2020). Twitter is a relevant social network for this study because it is widely used, and among its 152 million daily users, many users consider this social network to be a source of information and an important source of scientific content and health-related news (Hitlin and Olmstead 2018; Wilford, Osann, and Wenzel 2018).

The role of Social Service workers during the pandemic Social Services professionals at the beginning of this health crisis was not considered essential personnel such as workers in the agricultural and fishing sectors; supermarket workers involved in supply and sales; home food delivery staff; as well as staff in social and healthcare centres; domestic workers and carers; emergency services and law enforcement agencies; manufacturers of work clothes and pharmaceuticals; newsagents and the media; law enforcement agencies; the armed forces; customs; banking, insurance and agency services; funeral services; and sanitation workers such as refuse collectors.

The Social Services, and the actions carried out by them during the pandemic, have been reflected in the messages and speeches broadcast on Twitter. Debates on social media have arisen about the fundamental role played by social work professionals during the social and health crisis. Social media communications are important to better understand the activity of social workers because through social networks and during the confinement, such media have been tools for social intervention and communication between professionals and users, and without these social media and ICTs, it would have been impossible to carry out the work of social work during the pandemic.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the research were as follows:

- To find out the perceptions about Social Services of the different social agents participating in Twitter during the Covid-19 crisis.
- To analyse the messages on Twitter, in order to define the priority topics covered by the ideology on Social Services of the profiles that actively participate in this social network.

Methodology

The methodological process followed was based on a qualitative analysis of the data collected complemented with a descriptive analysis of frequencies (García Suárez, Trigueros Cervantes, and Rivera García 2015).

The first methodological phase, aimed at data collection, involved capturing tweets using the advanced search tool of the social network Twitter for the terms “Social Services” and “Covid-19” in the territorial context of Spain. The time frame chosen comprises the months of March and April 2020. During these two months, a state of emergency was in force and these were the most challenging months of confinement in Spain, culminating in total confinement at home for everyone at the beginning of April. The second phase is defined by the qualitative analysis of the tweets extracted from the first phase of the methodological process. The method of qualitative analysis followed is grounded theory using the Constant Comparative Method approached through Computer-Assisted/Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software, in our case the Atlas.Ti 8 software. It is a tool for the qualitative analysis of large corpora of text, audio, image or video data. It facilitates the systematic organisation and management of this type of data. Atlas.Ti supported the objectives set out in this research through the qualitative analysis of the messages because it provided a means for coding the information contained in the messages and for mapping out different semantic networks on the relationship between the codes. It should also be noted that the research carried out did not require the ethical approval of the University of Huelva, as the data used are freely available and in the public domain.

Results and Discussion

As a result of the application of the methodological model described above, a total of 845 tweets that included the terms “Social Services” and “Covid-19” were extracted from Twitter. These tweets formed the basis of the analysis carried out in Atlas.Ti 8. Of these, 292 were posted in March and 553 in April 2020, coinciding with the national quarantine period.

The analysis process was carried out with Atlas.Ti resulted in a total of 97 codes or minimum units of information connected through 3,566 direct relations through which the discourse of the analysed tweets was structured.

As can be seen in Figure 10.1, although there are differences in volume during this period with continuous rises and falls, the posting of tweets about Social Services and Covid-19 followed an upward trend, reaching a total of 30 in the central days of the confinement. We can also observe a periodicity, with Fridays and Thursdays, respectively, being the days with the lowest number of Twitter posts on the subject under study, while Mondays and Tuesdays are the days with the highest volume of tweets.

Fig 10.1

In addition to the positive trend in the volume of tweets, it is important to highlight the diversity of the sources that have posted them. Thus, according to profiles, a total of 16 types of sources have been distinguished that have posted

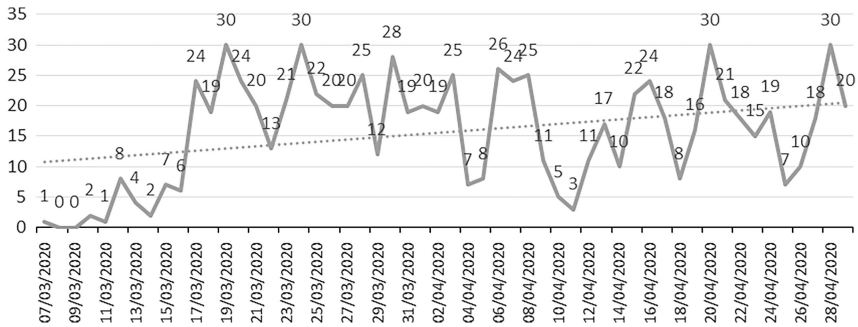


Figure 10.1 Evolution of the volume of tweets during confinement in Spain

Source: Analysis of data extracted from Twitter.

tweets about Social Services and Covid-19 on the social network. As detailed in the following table, the most active source on the social network is the one from individuals, with a total of 193 tweets, followed by town councils and local governments with 131 tweets.

These data show an important mobilisation of citizens in the information, denunciation and demand for Social Services, highlighting their importance in the pandemic.

At a territorial level, a total of 230 tweets on “Social Services” and “Covid-19” from 7 March to 28 April 2020 were registered in the Community of Madrid, the region which, together with Cataluña, was the epicentre of the pandemic in Spain during the national confinement, representing 33% of the total number of tweets analysed. A more in-depth analysis by region shows a direct relationship between the number of tweets and the number of infections, with the most active regions on Twitter being those that have had a higher level of coronavirus infection, with the exception of Andalusia, which is in second position with 111 tweets and which, nevertheless, had a relatively low incidence of infections compared to the rest of the regions. This may be due to the fact that Andalusia is the region with the largest population in the country, with 8,476,718 inhabitants, which represents 17.91% of the total Spanish population.

With regard to the objectives pursued in the publication of the tweets, a distinction is made between the dissemination of information regarding services or measures implemented during the confinement, complaints to public institutions about the lack of resources and demands for an increase in resources or services.

The demands and complaints had a lesser presence, with the most cited point being the need for coordination and reinforcement of Social Services in the face of a pandemic. This has served to highlight the lack of economic and human resources to deal with the emergencies that have arisen as a result of the pandemic.

Based on the descriptive analysis of the tweets published, we can affirm that Twitter has been the main digital communication tool during the period of confinement, being used by individuals, private organisations and public entities to publicise news, changes, improvements and disseminate the activities carried out

throughout the period analysed. With regard to “Social Services” and “Covid-19”, the network has been used predominantly by public services and entities to disseminate the increase in investment in human, material and service resources, reaching 179 tweets at the national level in just under two months. The care provided by the Social Services has also been central to the dissemination campaigns through the social network, publicising the increase in funding for these Services and recognising the work of the professionals who, from the Social Services, have responded to the increase in demands arising from the social and health crisis generated by the SARS-COV-2 coronavirus.

However, despite the dissemination carried out and the increase in resources in the Social Services, the discontent in the care and the visibility of the fragility of the budget and resources in Social Services has been highlighted in many tweets that have been very critical of the capacity of the services to respond adequately to the pandemic. The study shows how many people who comment on Twitter believe that the services were inadequately prepared or funded to meet the demands brought by the pandemic. The denunciation of the situation of saturation of the Social Services has come from practically all the sources identified, and combined with the increase in the demand for services, together with an underfunding of services, this has given rise to many highly critical tweets regarding the ability of the services to adequately, if at all, respond to the consequences of the pandemic. The urgency of the new realities of social vulnerability that emerged during the confinement has meant a delay in responding to the most basic needs, having to resort to private donations, voluntary work and non-formal support structures for Social Services to try to respond to the avalanche of requests for attention.

The difficulties encountered by the Social Services in meeting social demands have been clearly exposed and repeatedly denounced by different sources in all parts of the country, highlighting the lack of resources and funding of the network of social resources, which have been clearly under pressure to deal with the volume of demands (García Aller 2020). Together with the lack of human resources and underfunding, the ineffectiveness of the coordination protocols, in many cases non-existent, has been revealed, which has resulted in a delay in the response to social needs and the abandonment of certain groups whose vulnerability has been multiplied as a result of the crisis.

Conclusions

The scientific literature frequently analyses the role of Twitter in confirming social interest in certain issues or emerging social realities (Aguilar-Gallegos et al. 2020; Jiménez-Sotomayor, Gómez-Moreno, and Soto-Pérez-de-Celis 2020; Wang et al. 2020) because the social network contains the views of individuals, organisations and decision makers. Predictably, the analysis of Twitter in the pandemic has been widely used by researchers around the world to understand the public’s perception of the barrage of cuts, measures and regulations that have had to be implemented to curb the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Social Services system has been one of the most neglected in recent years in Spain, in terms of public services, both in terms of investment and in terms of social and public care. The pandemic has highlighted the lack of adequate Covid-19 protection measures and, at the same time, the worsening of conditions in an already precarious sector (Calzada Gutiérrez 2020).

The increased visibility of the Social Services during the national confinement in Spain has led to a considerable and unprecedented increase in the attention paid to these services on Twitter, with messages of information and dissemination but also complaints and demands about the lack of coordination and scarcity of resources coming mainly from the population itself and the media, while politicians have preferred to use the social network to disseminate the additional re-sourcing of services that they have put in place and the steps taken to try to tackle the social and health crisis.

This crisis has highlighted the importance of adequate funding of Social Services in terms of budget, human resources and protocols for prevention and coordination of the different social and healthcare services. When these resources are not sufficient, this can lead to delays in attending to the basic needs of the population in a situation of maximum social vulnerability and the saturation of services unable to absorb the increase in demands generated by the situation of socio-economic paralysis and confinement such as that which occurred in Spain during the months of March and April 2020.

Social networks are important to reinforce the identity of their members and contribute to greater social integration or in a somewhat ambitious effort to reduce marginalisation and exclusion during the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the denser and more articulated the social networks are, the better prepared society will be to respect differences, develop solidarity and stabilise coexistence in a more democratic environment. Thus, it can be concluded that any social intervention aimed at their consolidation and construction should be conceptualised only as a means to enable social participation; beyond this, and at a more general level, it should contribute to the strengthening of identity and to freedom, solidarity and justice. The global outbreak of Covid-19 places us in a new reality that requires us to act with care and attention. Twitter is a platform that has played an important role in terms of communications in times of crisis such as the one in evidence, and has been an effective tool that has provided a response to social intervention within social work in the toughest months of the pandemic. It has allowed social work professionals to communicate with their users at times like this and has provided a community network and support between the entire social system and the services provided by the Social Services centres in Spain.

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