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Online Dialogue and Interaction Disruption. A Latin American Government's Use of Twitter Affordances to Dissolve Online Criticism

Dialogo en línea e interacciones interrumpidas. El uso que un gobierno Latinoamericano hace de las posibilidades tecnológicas de Twitter para disolver críticas en línea

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Abstract: Few academic studies have focused on how Latin American governments operate online. Political communication studies focused on social media interactions have overwhelmingly dedicated efforts to understand how regular citizens interact and behave online. Through the analysis of hashtags and other online strategies that were used during Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto's (EPN) term to critique or manifest unconformity regarding part of the government's performance, this study observes how members of a Latin American democratic regime weaponized a social media platform to dissipate criticism. More specifically, it proposes that the manipulation of social media affordances can debilitate essential democratic attributes like freedom of expression. Using a qualitative approach, consisting of observation, textual analysis, and online ethnography, findings show that some Mexican government's manipulation of inconvenient Twitter conversations could impact or even disrupt potential offline crises. Another objective of the presented research is to set a baseline for future efforts focused on how Latin American democratic regimes behave and generate digital communication on social media platforms.

Keywords: Mexico, citizens, government, social media, disruption, social capital, affordances, weaponization, Twitter, online, criticisms

Resumen: Son pocos los proyectos académicos dirigidos a entender la forma en que gobiernos Latinoamericanos operan en línea/Internet. Parte mayoritaria de los estudios de comunicación política se han concentrado en analizar la interacción y conducta en redes sociales de ciudadanos ordinarios. A partir de la observación y estudio de *hashtags* y otras estrategias utilizadas durante el sexenio de Enrique Peña Nieto (EPN) para criticar o manifestar inconformidad respecto al desempeño de algunos servidores públicos en turno, el presente trabajo observa como miembros de un gobierno democrático en Latinoamérica manipulan un sistema de interacción en línea para disipar críticas. En específico, nuestra investigación propone que la manipulación de las posibilidades tecnológicas que las redes sociales permiten puede debilitar atributos democráticos esenciales como la libertad de expresión. Aplicando un acercamiento cualitativo consiste en observación, análisis de texto y etnografía digital, los resultados muestran que la manipulación que algunos gobernantes mexicanos han hecho de conversaciones incómodas en la red social Twitter pueden afectar e incluso disolver crisis fuera de Internet. Otro objetivo de la presente investigación es servir como punto de partida para estudios canalizados a entender el comportamiento y la comunicación en redes sociales de regímenes democráticos en Latinoamérica.

Palabras clave: México, ciudadanos, gobierno, disrupción, manipulación, criticas, Internet, tecnología, capital social, redes sociales

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Introduction

In Mexico, the power dynamic between government and traditional legacy media is still pervasive and entrenched. Mainstream media outlets, primarily TV and radio, financially rely on the government's advertisement-income (Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013). This relationship affects the media's constitutional role as society's watchdog. Consequently, in 2018 a majority of Mexicans have migrated to the internet to access information, be connected, and generate beacons of collective solidarity. Although there have been examples of Mexican "communal or collective identities trying to organize social action" (Gilroy, 1996, p. 232) through social media, the offline impact is still unclear.

The 2018 study on Mexicans' internet habits provided by AMIPCI, the Mexican Internet Association, reports that 67% of Mexicans are connected to the internet. Only after Brasil, Mexico is the country with the highest internet penetration in Latin America[1]. The same AMPICI report positions Facebook and WhatsApp as the preferred social media platforms in Mexico, concentrating an average of 94.5% Mexican internet users. With a percentage of 49% (17% less than the previous year) Twitter keeps losing attention from Mexican social media users.

Through the observation of four different Twitter hashtags related to online criticism directed to some specific events, in this research proposal, we examine how some of the strategies created by government officials in Mexico, the president included, have weaponized Twitter against collective organizing or online criticism for an insufficient government response. By drowning the protest through the creation of fictitious or inconsequent trends, hashtag spamming or poisoning, spreading death threats or slander rumors, or just bombarding with political propaganda, Mexican government officials disseminate and dismantle Twitter-based protests. As a consequence, the diffusion of online dissatisfaction and disapproval helps some Mexican officials easier manage a public crisis. Future studies could channel efforts to understand better how Mexican or other Latin American countries try to manipulate social media affordances to dissipate or dismantle social friction with original data collection.

Following Joshua A. Tucker, by understanding how some governments operationalize social media platforms, the relevance of this work relies on introducing a Latin American democracy utilizing "social-media strategies pioneered by nondemocracies for authoritarian ends" (Tucker et al., 2017, p. 47). In Latin America, where in general, solid democratic institutions are still in a formation process, these social media manipulation tactics could frustrate novel democratic advances. Using similar tactics observed in authoritarian contexts, where governments derail or restrict online expression, the work we present demonstrates a negative effect that social media affordances could have on weak

[1] Demographics & Use. Statista. Consulted December 15th, 2018. https://www.statista.com/statistics/186919/number-of-internet-users-in-latin-american-countries/

democracies. As we see in this work, some Latin American governments diminish the essential right of freedom of expression by difficulting or directly obstructing online interaction or manifestation.

Contrary to what other studies have found (Carr & Hayes, 2015; Papacharissi, 2002), social media's horizontality, Twitter specifically, has backfired against ordinary internet users and citizens (Van Kessel & Castelein, 2016). Some years ago, when the use of social media was still a novelty, political communication studies observed the pro-democratic implications of online organizing against totalitarian regimes. Today, some of the attributes associated with social media have become "tools for outside actors who want to attack democracies" (Tucker et al., 2017, p. 47). In Mexico and Latin America, the situation is not very different, except instead of outside actors against a democratic regime, the Mexican government uses Twitter's affordances to suffocate online public unrest (Flores, 2019; Harlow, 2012).

The first findings of the present research have resonance to what Silvio Waisbord and Adriana Amado found in their 2017 observation of Twitter presidential use in Latin America: "presidents in Latin America have used Twitter just like they have approached legacy media to harass critical journalists and presidents" (Waisbord & Amado, 2017, p. 1134). Nevertheless, this study's focus is not on the Mexican presidential use of Twitter. Mexican presidents rarely use social media to "bolster presidential communication." Instead, this proposal's focus is on the double-edged sword nature of social media, Twitter specifically, which in the case of Mexico, has been counterproductive when it comes to public organizing or government criticism. The platform's flexibility, loose by-laws, and unregulated access or membership process have contributed to the possible abuse some Mexican officials have done of the micro-blogging platform.

This study's findings contribute to the growing body of scholarship dedicated to studying the uses of social media in Latin American communication politics. It also expands the conversation about the effects of digital interactions and online activity between governments and citizens on Latin American democracies. Although there are cases of social empowerment and collective agency that employed social media as central support (Bimber, 2017; Bunce & Wolchik, 2009; Montenegro Mejía & Gutierres, 2015), the porosity of social media's DNA configuration has allowed some Mexican government representatives to torpedo online conversations that directly critique or attack their public performance.

Hence, we ask, how are local and regional governments in Latin American governments using the micro-blogging platform known as Twitter? Using the Twitter platform's affordances, what are common strategies used by the government to stop possible online and offline action?

Succinctly, through the selection of four Twitter hashtags that emerged during the 2012-2018 presidency of Mexican president Enrique Pena Nieto (EPN), this proposal's relevance to the field of Latin American political communication lies on demonstrating how the mitigation of public dissatisfaction by suffocating online conversations that have government responsibility at their epicenter,

has been a central Twitter attribute for some Mexican officials. Finally, this work also sheds light on a blind spot in scholarship focused on social media studies and political communication. By addressing the Mexican governments' activity on social media, by analyzing its strategies to block organizing attempts, and by studying the disruption of Twitter conversations to avoid political duties or delay response, this work proposal also contributes to the scarce number of studies dedicated to understanding Latin American governments' activities on social media. Social media studies should channel efforts to realize (and understand) that the official government's online actions are also facilitated by the same social media affordances (Evans et al., 2016, 39, Ellison & Vitak, 2015) that social protest, collective organizers, or ordinary citizens employ.

Literature review

In the opening section, we attempted to generally outline the theoretical assumption derived from the weaponization of Twitter by Mexican officials. The possible contributions to the field of social media and political communications that this work can provide were also part of the previous segment. An intention of this section, then, is to cover relevant scholarship that can serve as support for the possible future findings of this research proposal. One purpose is to relate the goal of this study to other academic attempts that have either observed the advantages of Twitter for its users, whatever these may be, regular citizens or government representatives. Another objective of this section is to briefly review the literature describing the nature of some social uses that Twitter can provide. Final objectives aim to identify literature that focuses on how some regimes have abused Twitter, while also trying to cover possible gaps in previous Twitter analysis related to Latin American governments' online activity.

User advantages provided by Twitter

Some researchers have focused on the political benefits that a social media network like Twitter could offer its users. Researchers in all countries have operationalized the ability to mine big-data to understand how ordinary individuals create ideological networks using Twitter (Barbera et al., 2015). Recent research efforts have focused on how frequent behaviors of "incivility, impoliteness, and deliberative attributes" (Oz et al. 2018) occur in online political contexts. Similarly, how political conduct on "social media might emerge out of every day, non-political use" (Yu, 2016) is another example of recent research that has solely focused on the impact Twitter has on regular citizens.

Comparably, other studies have observed the influence Twitter has on electoral atmospheres (Bruns et al. 2016 [PART III, Political Campaigns]; Halpern et al. 2017; Lopez & Betancourt in Richardson, 2017; McGregor et al., 2017). Some others have reported that the internet and Twitter provide

digital space to constitute social capital and online organizing with real solidarity effects (Phua et al., 2017; Breuer et al., 2015; Murthy, 2012; Zhang & Lin, 2014).

Correspondingly, Philip Howard reported high civic engagement levels in a 2016 study of a Mexican politician using social media to engage with citizens during his campaign. After analyzing more than 750,000 posts, the study found that social media ecologies sustained social media "rhythms of political communication" (Howard et al., 2016) between the politician and his supporters after the election was over. The study demonstrated how numerous civic exchanges between society and the political sphere could prevail after a specific political moment or event. The frequency of contributions detected by Howard's study confirms that there can be positive engagement results when politicians use social media affordances to interact with their voters.

The social organizing, political manifestation, or civil engagement could not be possible without observing how Twitter enables new narrative dynamics or topic/event prioritizations. Twitter applies the organizing logic of data, where the user can constitute a nonlinear narrative by linking small pieces of information (Sadler, 2018). The open-ended nature of these horizontal, narrative structures creates what Neil Sadler defines as narrative constellations: "Groups of tweets loosely bound together through the repetition of keywords and hashtags and connections established through networks of retweeting and favoriting" (Sadler, 2018, p. 3267). Similarly, in micro-blogging environments, Twitter specifically, where metadata has become a new form of social capital at the center of status or class mobility, using "hashtags" has become a new communication practice. According to Michele Zappavigna, hashtags contain a "# symbol and include a word, initialism, concatenated phrase, or an entire clause" (Zappavigna, 2015, p. 2). As we will see, hashtags can be deployed for different purposes. They can enable emotionally charged narratives; they can suffocate legitimate worries through practices like "hashjacking" (Bode et al., 2015) or link posts to existing offline or online incidents. Understanding how narrative and tendency-operation are mechanized in the Twitter atmosphere becomes vital to concatenate further Latin American social media-focused research.

Social uses provided by Twitter

The literature on the social uses of Twitter has also yielded many studies. In 2010, the Chilean scholarship analyzed how the Twitter platform helped alleviate urban zones directly impacted by the 2010 earthquake. In Chile, civil society emerged through Twitter, managing a crisis generated by a natural disaster that overwhelmed the local government (Mendoza et al., 2010). Similar studies have also dealt with how Twitter affordances can help citizens organize to relieve emergency zones (Earle et al., 2010; Hughes & Palen, 2009; Potts, 2014; Vieweg et al., 2010). Another social use that Twitter affordances provide relate to how "Twitter is conductive to protest behavior by effectively communicating weak-tie networks" (Bondes & Schucher, 2014; Gerbaudo, 2012; Hassanpour, 2014; Huang &

Sun, 2013; Masías et al., 2018; Sullivan, 2013; Valenzuela et al., 2018). Several studies have focused on the connections that the Twitter platform can provide. The interactivity allowed by the platform overcomes the instability that big physical spaces or regions generate, therefore positioning weak-social-ties at the center of the platform's strengths.

Finally, in 2017 Paolo Gerbaudo conceptualized social media as "digital vanguards" (Gerbaudo, 2017, p.197), which are collective organizing citizen frames that guide community action using digital communication tools. Although many academic efforts have been directed to analyze the relationship between Twitter and its users or to identify how Twitter's affordances can have a social application, minimal attention has been directed to understand how governments operate online using the same affordances available to citizens. Even less scholarly attention if the focus is on Latin American countries and governments.

Social media as a state-control tool

Although scarce, seminal research has helped identify how some governments use social media to limit social action by censoring dialogues that imply social mobilization or citizen organizing (Engesser et al., 2017; Ernst et al., 2017; Hyun & Kim, 2015; King et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2013). Other research has contributed to the growing interest in “domestic and international automation, combined with opinion manipulation” (Bolsover & Howard, 2019). While others, pioneering in analyzing social media use for state-sponsored oppression, have discovered how new communication online environments provided by social media could promote total state control (Gunitsky, 2015). For example, some research done in ex-soviet countries, where non-democratic governments hassle opposition while “evading direct association” (Pearce, 2015, p. 1158), has parallel interest with the present proposal.

Although the social and political contexts are not similar, the last study done by Katy E. Pearce, focusing on Azerbaijan's state-sponsored harassment techniques, shares analog interests with the present work. Future research can demonstrate that governments can also use social media platforms to inflict influence, exercise control, and deploy anti-democratic strategies (Han, 2015; Kavanaugh et al., 2012).

Dhiraj Murthy’s 2013 book: Twitter: Social Communication in the Twitter Age, also deserves to be mentioned. The central thesis proposes that “Twitter does not signal the death of meaningful communication” (p. X). Using the context of a transnational interconnected world to support his arguments, Murthy concludes that the counter-effect of a global network such as Twitter is that “communication can become superficial” (Ibid.). Twitter can, at the same time, advocate for free transit of information and democracy, but, because of its vastness, it also generates much insignificant content.

Concluding sections will describe outcomes with detail, yet possible findings of this proposed work extend previous research by providing opposite evidence regarding positive Twitter findings. Results confirm a reduction of Twitter's presence in Mexican social and political online landscapes. Mexican online activists' evidence signal abuse of Twitter by Mexican government representatives, therefore diminishing Twitter use among Mexican citizens. The observation of how the deployment of Twitter-bots dissolves Mexican social online Twitter interaction has contributed information to confirm that Twitter's presence has also been negative at least in Mexico.

Statement of expectations

Online political communication in Mexico is still considered new. It was only until 2012 that Enrique Pena Nieto became Mexico's president, that online political interaction became ordinary in Mexico (Lopez & Betancourt in Richardson, 2017, p.168). For both internet users and all government levels, the possibilities of online social media sites are just emerging.

A type of digital censorship, which constitutes the central topic of this article, has already been detected by Mexican online activists.

Using various techniques, like hashtag poisoning or the creation of inconsequent trending-topics, the weaponization of Twitter by some Mexican government officials has pushed Mexican Twitter users away. Furthermore, as we asked above, has this Twitter manipulation reduced online dissatisfaction manifested on Twitter by disarticulating or silencing dissent? Do Mexican government officials easily diffuse disapproval sentiments using social media?

Methodology

The digital age has pushed researchers to design new forms of studying the realities of our trans mediated societies. Susan Robinson, a journalism scholar with experience dissecting media networks, has provided a mixed-method approach called network ethnography applied to observe media ecologies. In her study of regional newsrooms and information flows, "the mix of locational sampling, formal network analysis, and triangulated news community ethnographies allow for multiple levels of investigation at the micro-meso-macro tiers of local community" (Robinson, 2020).

For this project, we deployed the essential network strategies at the core of Robinson's methodology. By utilizing discursive analysis on the selected hashtags, the results provided by this study will test the hypothesized conjecture regarding Latin American local governments' weaponization of Twitter's affordances. Textual analysis will help identify social media decisions regarding language, events, actions, incidents, and the broader political context and messages behind the unconformities

of citizens and the government's responses. And by engaging in social media ethnographic observation, we will examine whether characters in these social media environments show a positive or negative democratic behavior.

To explore these hypothesized constructs, we will use the qualitative approach to analyze how directed online governmental action, observed through the operation and manipulation of Twitter hashtags, has diminished Mexican internet user's activity on Twitter. A review of how government accounts on Twitter, or their employment of "hashtag poisoning" practices, over the six years of Enrique Pena Nieto's presidency, will permit observation of how some government representatives dismantle specific Twitter conversations. Additionally, as a secondary source of analysis, Alberto Escorcia, a veteran internet activist based in Mexico City, has documented the use of bots in the Mexican political sphere. Through a blog called LoQueSigue (WhatIsNext), Escorcia has analyzed "hashtag and trends on Twitter and mapped the tweets' source. He also shares information about social media strategies for activists" (Knoll Soloff, 2017).

The methodological strategy employed in the present work will combine discourse and text analysis with social media observation. We can only generate a general categorization on the content found on the selected hashtags. Through online ethnographic observation of four hashtags (#LoBuenoQueTieneMexico, #YaMeCanse, #RompeElMiedo, and #sobrinaEPN), we try to understand how government accounts employ army-bot services to either bounce critical hashtags out of the trending list or drown a Twitter conversation by spamming the correspondent hashtags with inconsequent postings.

Results. The use of Twitter-bots in Mexico

Mexican presidential terms are six years long and there is no re-election. The analysis of hashtags for this research proposal focuses on President Enrique Peña Nieto's (EPN) presidential term, which finished in December 2018. The velocity with which EPN rose to social media popularity, in 2012, even before winning the presidential election, raised questions about the use he and his team were doing of internet provided affordances. The sudden operation of social media platforms, trying to emulate other political campaigns, Barack Obama's specifically, attracted the attention of specialists. Mexican journalists, activists, and specialized scholars, quickly detected the utilization of fake Twitter accounts to boost EPN's approval ratings. These pirate Twitter accounts were known as Peñabots.

For the last six years, the Peñabot term has changed considerably. Nevertheless, there are two basic meanings associated with it: they are either automated accounts operating independently, or old-fashioned low-wage employees paid to manipulate many social media accounts associated to the government. Future research projects related to the use of Twitter by democratic regimes, like the Mexican, should focus on the ethical implications of these strategies.

Peñabots operate using different tactics. They can create trending topics to simulate overwhelming support for EPN. They can also drown out oppositional opinions or critiques. To illustrate this strategy for example, during the presidential campaign, in the south-east Mexican state of Tabasco, after having the hashtag #MarchaAntiEPN (March Against EPN) briefly trending, bots pushed the hashtag out and replaced it with an opposite message: #TodoTabascoConEPN (All of Tabasco With EPN). Peñabots can also spread slander rumors, like it happened with journalist turned activist Lydia Cacho, or scholar Rossana Reguillo. Both revealed conspiracies inside the Mexican government and were directly attacked using online defamation actions. For supporting the Ayotzinapa protests during 2014 and 2015, Professor Rossana Reguillo from the ITESO research center in Jalisco received several death dreads via Twitter. This is an example:

Figure 1

In this case, the user @Dona_Guess is a bot. Also, bombarding with political propaganda or generating meaningless trends to populate the tendency topic list with inconsequent themes is yet another strategy to dissipate critical online opinions.

#sobrinaEPN

In the summer of 2015, EPN and his niece were involved in a nepotism scandal. Reports informed that despite having no experience or professional formation for the position, EPN's niece was going to assume functions as a high-ranking position at PEMEX, the Mexican para-estatal oil company. #SobrinaEPN (EPN niece) trended. It briefly became the digital space where Mexicans could share their discomfort and express their disagreement. Quickly though, bots were sent into action, and the hashtag was swamped with empty postings. The hashtag #sobrinaEPN was not knocked out of the trending list. The strategy was to send hundreds of irrelevant tweets using the #sobrinaEPN hashtag. The following two images illustrate inconsequent Twitter posts with the hashtag #sobrinaEPN. Using

this strategy, the hashtag itself (EPN niece) is not negative, it just dilutes any criticism regarding the, in this case, nepotism incident.

Figure 2

Figure 3

#YaMeCanse

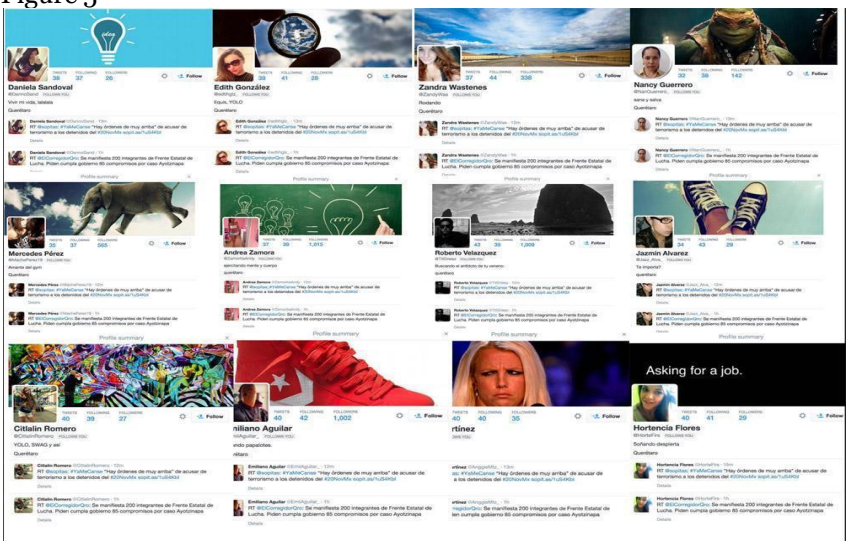
In November 2014, the hashtag #YaMeCanse (I'm tired), maybe one of the strongest, most retweeted hashtags in Mexico's history, was used to protest the disappearance of 43 students near the city of Ayotzinapa, in the western state of Guerrero. After trending for more than a month and generating more than 4 million tweets, the bots pushed the hashtag out of the trending list. By spamming the trending topic with posts with links to entertainment events, pornography or violent images, Twitter filters the proliferation of prohibited images or information and automatically neutralizes the hashtag, arguing those behaviors or postings are not tolerated.

Figure 4

Figure 4.1

The following image exemplifies how a trending topic with possible damaging effects is silenced. Like in the previous case, this tactic makes the hashtag disappear from the trending list.

Figure 5

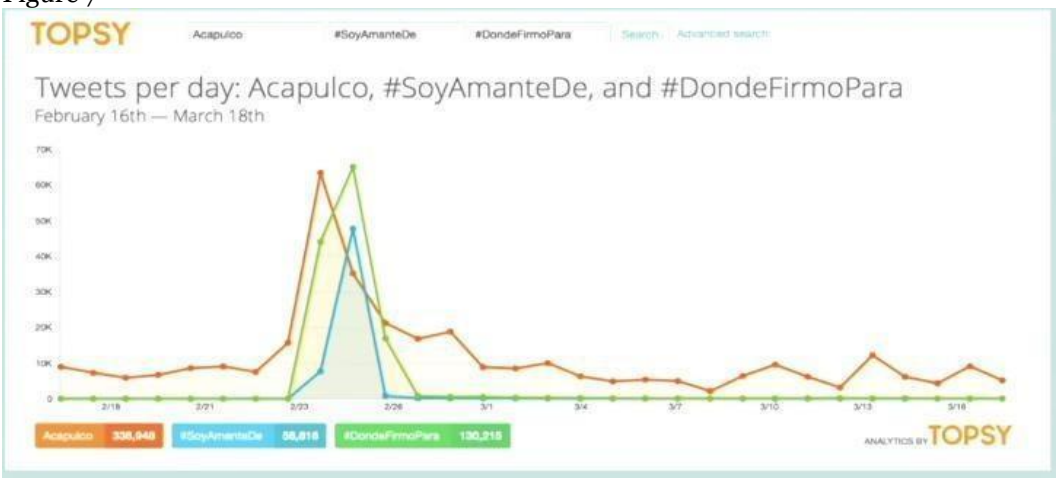


Fake Trends

Another strategy used by Mexican twitter bots consists in creating inconsequent trends. This strategy happens on a daily basis. An example of this strategy is the hashtags #EnDondeFirmoPara (Where do I sign for) and #SoyAmanteDe (I am a lover of). Using the hashtag #Acapulco, in February 2015, also in the state of Guerrero, rural teachers were protesting the disappearance of their Ayotzinapa colleagues, as well as the teaching conditions provided by the state. Local police corporations repressed the protest, and journalists later reported the trivial trends during those days. These fake trends overpower real trends. Bots push both trends #SoyAmanteDe and #DondeFirmoPara into the trending topic list, moving #Acapulco, the hashtag fostering the protesters' conversation, out of the top ten list.

Figure 6

Figure 7



Political propaganda bombarding

Finally, bots also use social media and Twitter to spread political propaganda. This activity is the least damaging of all. Campaign teams usually deploy this tactic during political races to position trending topics that directly relate to the interested party or politician. The strategy consists in generating dynamic conversations around the topics that are part of the campaign's agenda. Different from the other strategies, this tactic only utilizes Twitter's affordances to overwhelm users. By generating hundreds of Twitter posts advocating for a particular campaign or candidate, armies of hired bots trigger clouds of information that overshadow other candidates or campaigns.

These are only some of the Twitter strategies used by the Mexican government to alter the nature of free speech on social media. However, further studies should focus on how counter-strategies designed by local internet activists or regular citizens can help expose these information-warfares taking place in the Mexican cyberspace.

Alberto Escorcia is a Mexican activist who generates digital maps to understand how these bot-attacks operate. Through open-source software like Gephi, Topsy, or ClusterHQ Flocker, Escorcia reported all the online activity that is sponsored by the Mexican government. Also, through a blog called "Lo Que Sigue" (What is Next), Escorcia unmasked the strategies used by the Mexican government to disseminate citizen protests or social organizing, while also detecting the agencies that offer bot services throughout Latin America.

Conclusion

The present article has explored some Mexican government's representatives' capacity to torpedo and disseminate online exchange of ideas, collective dissatisfaction, and, in general, online conversations criticizing the government. Elected officials' public development could benefit from the discussions that Mexican constituents have on social media platforms. Nevertheless, the specific Twitter cases analyzed inside the Mexican government sphere offer opposite conclusions regarding other results in the field of new political communication, which generally only focus on the citizens' perspective of Twitter's social and political uses. Findings provided by this research proposal have detected how Twitter's easy access and loose regulations have contributed to the manipulation and abuse that some Mexican government officials have done of the platform.

The contribution of this research proposal lies in specifically detecting how official government Twitter accounts silenced some events that were gaining social attention from Mexican internet users. Different Twitter dissemination techniques like the generation of inconsequent trends, hashtag spamming or poisoning, spreading of slander rumors or death threats, or just hiring services to flood social media platforms with political propaganda, have been enough to generate apathy among Mexican Twitter users. Instead of developing horizontal avenues of communication with constituents, some Mexican government officials have preferred to replicate oppressive offline attitudes in the online Twitter environment. Results show how the asymmetrical power dynamic that usually defines the offline interaction between government and citizens is replicated in social media ecologies like Twitter. Although disapproval or dissatisfaction with government development still exists, social media has not been, like in other countries, a critical requisite for social organization or offline resistance.

In this new millennium, democratic regimes are also using the same digital tools that regular citizens use to engage, communicate, and be informed. Similar to what is happening in Azerbaijan

(Pearce, 2015) and other totalitarian regimes like China (Hampton et al., 2017; Huang, 2014; Mackinnon, 2012; Tai, 2014), the case of Mexico shows how new digital technologies are also enabling democratic regimes, regardless of their ideological or political positions, to suppress or directly harass opposition, diffuse dissident comments, and try to control possible offline protests.

Then, the case of Mexico, different from totalitarian regimes like North Korea, Azerbaijan, or China, provides an example of internet manipulation in Latin American democratic regimes that trumps freedom of expression. Affordances provided by Twitter provide benefits to whoever is using them. At least in Mexico, one likely conclusion is the improbability of having internet regulation soon. Preliminary research indicates that using Twitter to suffocate digital citizen unrest works in Mexico. Thus, despite the enthusiasm previously demonstrated by other regimes or even other academic studies, this case research proposal indicates that even for democratic regimes, social media affordances allow social control.

The finding of this case study directly challenges the idea that online, digital interaction and information dissemination help solidify democracies. For future research, how can regular citizens resist online social media manipulation from governments? Are other Latin American democracies using social media affordances to mitigate social unrest? If so, how do different dissipation techniques differ from one Latin American country to the next? Are any Latin American countries using internet platforms to engage with their citizens? If so, how are these governments taking advantage of these affordances? How should social media platforms like Twitter or Facebook encounter shady state-government activity? How can transparency be a central attribute of social media? Is Twitter, then, as secure as having a face-to-face conversation about politics? This proposal's findings suggest that, at least in the Mexican democracy paradigm, offline and online political conversations are different and are influenced by distinct factors.

It is also important for future research to observe how internet digital tools can be employed to generate a change in determined political regimes or even to overthrow political elites ruling specific countries. A significant number of scholars recognize that rich, organic, and informed oppositional efforts to generate civic change (Donno, 2013; Vanderhill, 2014; Way, 2008) are essential for a healthy, balanced regime where citizens can exercise some form of free speech. In general, the study of affordances is still in its preliminary stages. Other future research efforts should focus their attention on understanding how oppositional parties or ideologies have social media affordances at the center of their political strategies.

Finally, what kind of citizen action can Mexicans engage with to prevent future government social media weaponization?

The emergence of digital platforms and their affordances implies new forms of responsibility. What is the relationship between free-speech offline and free-speech online? Should state governments regulate this? Should it be an international agency, possibly attached to the UN, the one in

charge of generating internet-user by-laws? Similarly, how can harmful use of internet affordances be punished? Should digital media programmers, governments, independent institutions, or international agencies be involved in the generation of pro-democracy algorithms?

These questions imply challenges that are new to society, academia, or governments. Through the information presented in this essay, we hope that foundations can be established for future Latin American scholarship dedicated to understanding the relationship between regional democratic regimes and the uses of digital, online platforms like Twitter.

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