Digital semiotics and political communication. The take-off and rise of Vox[1]

Semiótica digital y comunicación política. El despegue y auge de Vox

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Abstract:

This paper analyses the political party Vox's (Spain) evolution from invisibility to overexposure as a current semiosis phenomenon, thanks to network communication. An inductive methodology is used on the use of Twitter in the campaign that brought about the party's rise in popularity and a content analysis of its messages from a semiotic-communicational perspective. The results show the audacious use of the network to create a persuasive narrative in public opinion. It highlights how the new forms of digital communication are a privileged field for the study of semiotics.

Keywords:

Political Communication; Digital semiotics; Twitter; Vox.

Resumen:

Se analiza la evolución desde la invisibilidad a la sobreexposición del partido Vox (España) como fenómeno de semiosis actual, gracias a la comunicación en red. Se emplea una metodología inductiva sobre el uso de Twitter en la campaña que le consiguió este auge, y un análisis de contenido de sus mensajes desde la perspectiva semiótico-comunicacional. Los resultados muestran el audaz manejo de la red para crear un relato persuasivo en la opinión pública. Se subraya cómo los nuevos modos de comunicación digital son un campo privilegiado para el estudio de la semiótica.

Palabras clave:

Comunicación política; Semiótica digital; Twitter; Vox.

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1. Introduction

After being invisible for years, the Spanish political party Vox, far from the media spotlight and with no institutional presence, which sometimes even endangered the party's very existence, went on to become the centre of political attention in less than six months in Spain in 2018. This led to an exponential increase in its number of supporters and its electoral presence, and a year later, it became the third-largest political party in Spain.

These circumstances have led to a proliferation of studies and informative publications focused on Vox's online communication as the key to success in its campaigns in the last two years. From academia, theses (Gómez-Ciriano, 2019), and scientific papers (Mancera Rueda & Villar-Hernández, 2020; García-Herrero, 2019; Bernal-Triviño & Clares-Gavilán, 2019) have analysed this party's communication skills.

This paper analyses the phenomenon of semiosis that is Vox's party strategy on social networks, particularly on Twitter, during the last election campaign for the 2019 Andalusian Elections; at the time of its rise in popularity. The study of semiotics on social networks is a field that has hardly been addressed**.** In 2007 Warschauer and Grimes published an article analysing the emerging semiotics of the 2.0 Web focusing on the audience, authorship, and devices. Marino's (2015) article employs a semiotic approach to Internet memes. Chauhan, Sutaria, and Doshi (2018) study the impact of semiotics on sentiment analysis on Twitter.

We argue that digital technologies demonstrate new forms of conducting semiotic research, as they facilitate the development of conceptual frameworks and storing multidimensional data at different degrees of description. The connoted image underlining the text, the metaphorical content, and the skillful handling of pragmatics in messages sparked an interest in analysing Vox's network discourse from a semiotic-communicational perspective to delve into communicative codes, cultural context, and symbolism. These parameters impact online consumption behaviour and are a way to advance semiotic research on the digital environment. For this purpose, we will frame the case study in the current global context. We also note the new technologies' role in political communication, specifically Twitter. This network has facilitated Vox's party trajectory from invisibility to overexposure.

1.1. The global context

Since the beginning of the 21st century, we have witnessed significant economic, social, political, and technological changes. On the one hand, an economic recession caused by a major financial crisis has impaired the perception of democracy and hegemony in the West, shaking its institutional foundations. Beyond the terrible economic and social consequences, which resulted in unemployment, financial insecurity, and discontent, the crisis has shifted the global political balance. It has broken down social cohesion, which has taken the form of a growing disaffection towards political institutions (Fernández-Albertos, 2018).

Since the end of World War II, the stability of the party system and the left-right wing dominance has been affected. In this sense, new movements have been emerging in different parts of the world, which intend to defend the rights of those most afflicted by this global crisis. The debate about the sectors most affected by the crisis (immigrants, minorities, women, unemployed, pensioners, etc.) has become a priority on the political agenda worldwide. In addition, the digital revolution and the rise of new technologies facilitate communication and exposure to information while allowing for global interconnection.

The evolution of the Internet and the rise of social media have silently and unstoppably brought about a shift in the traditional cultural paradigm.

1.2. New technologies in political communication. The case of Twitter

The mainstream media has been the most commonly used instrument in the political sphere for the relationship between the message's Sender (the party or candidate) and the receiver (voters). Neither their features nor their structure allows for discussing public affairs actively. Moreover, citizens do not often trust them, as they are perceived as mere conveyors of specific political interests. The digital revolution and the development of ICTs have made a new model of political communication possible, making it two-way, interactive, and accessible. This is known as cyberpolitics, which generates dynamics of participation, control, and opposition- unthinkable until now (Cotarelo, 2013).

Social networks have been acquiring increasingly more weight in electoral campaigns as opposed to other traditional media (Congosto, Fernández & Moro Egido, 2011; Gómez-Calderón, Roses & Paniagua, 2017) and are already an essential channel in political actors' communication strategies (López-Meri, Marcos-García and Casero-Ripollés, 2017). Twitter has been incorporated as a critical medium for communicating ideas that facilitate conversation (Moya & Herrera, 2015). A skillful communication strategy in electoral campaigns aided by this type of platform has succeeded in bringing parties or leaders outside the political mainstream to the forefront of the news. One of the ways to maximise and polarise public opinion is to provoke opponents to mobilise, which encourages those who are loyal to the party's ideology to follow this strategy to spread the message further. The more impact a message has, the more viral it becomes and the more likely it is to be spoken about –the aim of this strategy to be on everyone's lips (Garcia-Beaudoux & D'Adamo, 2013).

1.3. The creation of a story: cleavage and storytelling as a resource in digital semiotics.

Since we will analyse the creation of a political narrative disseminated by social networks, it is necessary to describe the theory of cleavage and the use of storytelling. In political science and sociology, cleavage refers to dividing voters into different groups separated by "cleavages." These historical fracture points have been established in politics and partly serve to analyse voting trends. They complement Maurice Duverger's theory (2002) on the origin and development of political parties, connected to the historical period of universalising electoral voting. According to Lipset and Rokkan's (2001) classic model, there are four significant cleavages: Owner-Worker, Church-State, Urban-Rural, and Centre-Periphery. The current political cleavage in recent European and American elections has also reached Spain, and parties such as Vox have handled these dichotomies aggressively.

Since this theory came from historical events and is used in political communication, it can be easily linked to the communicative strategy of storytelling, "the machine for making stories and formatting minds" (Salmon 2008: 5). The human need to tell stories is exploited in marketing as a new way of approaching the consumer. The public's memory and identification with the subject conveying the content are facilitated through emotionally charged stories. Political communication also uses it to communicate persuasive and propaganda strategies. It turns storytelling into an opportunity (Gutiérrez-Rubí, 2008), creating an emotional climate favoring the reception of messages.

As Berlanga and Sanchez (2018) point out, this technique aims not only to inform citizens effectively; a new virtual universe is also created in which metaphors consistent with the political party's ideological message are found. An argumentation and a programme are proposed, and some characters, stories, and a staging of democracy instead of its exercise. "And the winning candidate is the person whose stories connect to the greatest number of voters" (Salmon, 2008:153-154).

Umberto Eco defines semiotics as the "study of all cultural processes– i.e., those involving human agents who come into contact with each other through social conventions- as a process of communication" (Eco, 2000: 53). In this sense, it is understandable how semiotics facilitates the representation and understanding of this narrative. It frames the party's ideological message and makes it coherent for the citizen-spectator.

1.4. Research objectives

We believe that digital culture is hybrid and liquid and blurs the traditional divisions between the disciplines and their referents. The advance in the social and semantic web forces us to reconsider communication, culture, and other traditional sciences such as syntax, pragmatics, rhetoric, and according to Vidales (2019), semiotics. Semiotics and rhetoric have created a solid yet flexible base, allowing us to apply them for an analysis that adapts smoothly to the evolution of time and technology.

In light of this premise, the main objective of this study is to show that Vox's (Spain) evolution from invisibility to overexposure is a phenomenon of current semiosis in the framework of network communication.

We propose the following objectives: 1) To demonstrate that the unexpected rise of Vox is due to networks being managed well in a favourable socio-political context. 2) To analyse the use that Vox and its leaders made of Twitter as a strategic political communication tool during the 2019 Andalusian Elections, and 3) To explain the consequent narrative of Vox's political campaign using semiotic theory.

2. Methodology

A quantitative and qualitative analysis of Vox's discourse on Twitter during the study period was carried out after a preliminary documentary search that has allowed us to gain background knowledge of the subject of study and plan the research. We describe the subject of study in its context below, the sample selected and the methodology and tools chosen.

2.1. Subject of study: Vox in the context of the research

Vox is a Spanish political party founded at the end of 2013. Its president Santiago Abascal and secretary-general is Javier Ortega Smith. This party is described as extreme right-wing by some media and analysts; others place it in the broad right-wing political spectrum, but it is defined explicitly as populist, radical, reactionary, and ultraconservative (Pinto-Da Fonseca & Pineda-Nebot, 2020). Vox does not receive any public subsidies; it is funded by membership fees and donations from small business people and professionals. According to its website, its project can be summed up as the defense of Spain, the family, and life, reducing the size of the State, guaranteeing equality among Spaniards, and ousting the government from private life. Santiago Abascal first ran for Presidency in June 2016. The campaign was based around street rallies and attracted few

supporters; its results were meagre, 0.2% of the votes (46,638). In 2016, Vox realised the power of social media and that it could be an effective channel for reaching out to citizens. Through high profile actions such as those described in the article "Vox's new feat: reconquering Gibraltar with the flag" (2016) or its leading role in the public prosecution in the Catalan "*procés catalán*" trial, it gained relevance on social networks and visibility in digital media. It made its way into the mainstream media. In December 2018, Vox became the triumphant party in the Andalusian parliamentary elections by winning seats in a legislative body for the first time and outperforming all the polls and forecasts that indicated its entry into institutions, but to a much lesser extent. In 2019 it obtained 52 national deputies, making it the third-largest political force in Spain.

Vox's trajectory can be described as a journey from invisibility to overexposure in a short time. Membership has grown exponentially from 5,085 at the start of 2018 to 23,843 members at the end of the year. 56,786 citizens paid membership fees in January 2020. The number of supporters on social media has also grown steadily to over 100,000 people. It is not easy to pinpoint an exact date when the mainstream media started to notice their rise in popularity and focus their attention on Vox. Perhaps the start of the media activity surrounding Vox can be traced back to its rally in Vistalegre (Madrid) on 8 October 2018. At that time, Andalusia was not an objective for Vox; its entire strategy was to build a campaign with the May 2019 elections in its sights. The call for early elections by the Regional Government of Andalusia precipitated events and put Vox in the media spotlight.

2.2. Sample

The sample comprises tweets published on Vox's and its prominent leaders' accounts and comparatively the rest of the parties and candidates in the last Andalusian elections. The time variable corresponds to the days on which the election campaign took place, i.e., from 16 to 30 November 2018. In the case of Vox, we analyse its official candidate Francisco Serrano's tweets and Santiago Abascal's and Javier Ortega Smith's, considering their representativeness within the party and because their activity during the period analysed was mainly focused on the Andalusian elections. We must also highlight that Vox lacked a specific profile for Andalusia at the time, as did the rest of the parties. This specificity was taken into account when assessing the results.

Table 1. Accounts analysed

Parties	*Candidates / Leaders*
@vox_es	@Santi_ABASCAL
	@Ortega_Smith
	@FserranoCastro
@psoedeandalucia	@susanadiaz
@ppandaluz	@JuanMa_Moreno
@Cs_Andalucia	@JuanMarin_Cs
@AdelanteAND	@TeresaRodr_

Source: Twitter

2.3. Methodological techniques and tools.

2.3.1. Quantitative analysis. The quantitive analysis focuses on two aspects: the use of Twitter and the subject matter of the messages.

Firstly, a metric analysis is carried out on Vox, its leaders, and its main rivals during the Andalusian campaign. We have used the Metricool tool (https://metricool.com/es/), free software that allows us to analyse, manage and measure digital content.

Secondly, different topics mentioned in Vox's and its leaders' tweets are classified using the model proposed by the Political Agenda Analysis Group. This project gathers and organises data from archived sources to track the results of policies in all countries (https://www.comparativeagendas.net/). This classification presents eighteen media variables identified in the Spanish political agenda in recent years. Table 2 sets out the content analysis protocol used.

Table 2. Classification of themes

Themes		
Macroeconomics	Civil liberties	Fiscal policy
Gender discrimination	Immigration	Employment policy
Environment	Social policy	Housing policy
Banking policy	Stock market	The media
Corruption	Instiutional organisation	Electoral and party system
Government and democracy	Historical memory	Monarchy
Others		

Source: Political Agenda Analysis Group in Spain

2.3.2 Qualitative analysis. After retrieving the tweets and identifying themes, words, and concepts, they were classified and related through a qualitative analysis to frame these profiles' political discourse and analyse them from a semiotic perspective.

Figure 1. Semiotic square
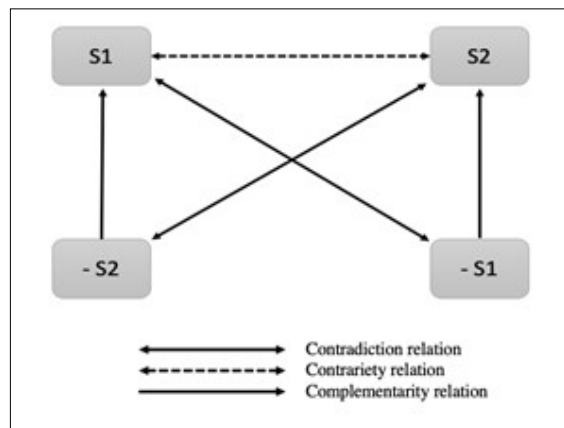
Source: created by the authors

We took Greimas' actantial model as a reference for the semiotic analysis and applied it to Vox's discourse. The actantial model was proposed by this semiotician as an abbreviated reference to the roles of Vladamir Propp (1987) in his analysis of the Russian fairy tale and can help analyse any story or narrative, whether real or fictional. The model is structured by simplifying characters' roles in a story (Greimas and Courtés, 1979). Thus, we find a Subject who desires an object, i.e., a value: to be loved, happiness, or power. S/he is helped by a Helper and confronted negatively by an Opponent. The Sender is a guiding and motivating force for the benefit of a Recipient. These last two roles usually take on social or moral nature. Roles are not set in stone; they can be dynamic. The subject is the main character of the schema, but any other character in the narrative can become a subject and be analysed with the model. This schema arouses interest in the narrative. According to values and aspirations, the main and antagonistic characters are outlined. The critical roles of this model are gathered in the so-called semiotic square (Greimas and Courtés, 1979: 96-99), graph representation of the logical articulation of any semantic category, which is based on an opposition between two terms a typology of relationships**.** This analytical tool guides our semiotic-communicational analysis of Vox's discourse.

For the triangulation of the methodologies, we use the qualitative analysis programme MAXQDA 2020. Corresponding codes are assigned with the Subjects of Greimas' semiotic square, and they are related to the discourse of the tweets. The results are discussed, commented on, and substantiated with references to specific tweets and related bibliographies. With this communicational-semiotic analysis, we can determine Vox's narrative in its electoral campaign.

3. Analysis and Results

3.1. The thematic agenda put forward by Vox and its leaders

The analysis of the tweets using the Metricool tool allows us to recover the frequency and thematic axes in Vox's and their leader's campaigns.

Table 3. The candidates' metric data

Candidate	Santiago Abascal	Francisco Serrano	Javier O. Smith	Susana Díaz	Juanma Moreno	Juan Marín	Teresa Rodríguez
Period of account (years)	8	6	6	6	8	7	7
Frequency of tweets (average/day)	8.49	3.52	11.32	0.91	3.2	4.18	7.62
No. of followers (as of March 2019)	193,342	29,421	53,552	174,757	65,054	19,710	312,768
Interactions during the campaign:							
Tweets	88	84	55	73	199	62	155
Likes	183K	30K	23K	24K	29K	20K	87K
Retweets	92K	16K	11K	15K	22K	13K	52K

Source: Metricool (as of March 2019)

As shown in table 1, Santiago Abascal is the Vox politician who has been on the network the longest and has by far the highest number of followers. The only one to outperform him is a councillor in Unidas Podemos, who has been a member of the network for the same amount of time but has twice as many followers. However, Abascal has received 183K likes compared to Teresa Rodriguez's 87K.

The thematic analysis of Vox's tweets with the Comparative Agendas Projects tool shows that the issues raised coincide with the central axes of its policy. The thematic agenda of Vox's three leaders is very similar, but each of them attributes greater or less relevance to specific issues. Santiago Abascal is the person who speaks the most about illegal immigration, relating it to Islam in many tweets. Immigration is also associated with illegal trade and the "*top manta*" (immigrant street vendors). In this section, Javier Ortega is the one who is the most concerned about this issue. The status of Gibraltar is the only international issue that is mentioned. This issue is exploited in two ways: on the one hand, as an electioneering nod to the inhabitants of the municipalities near Gibraltar, and on the other hand, as a wake-up call to national patriotism that claims its sovereignty. Javier Ortega Smith most appeals to this by taking advantage of the media coverage of his past actions. He also appeals the most to the State Security Forces and equal pay for all of them.

On the other hand, Francisco Serrano most often mentions gender discrimination (gender ideology in his speech). Javier Ortega, the Vox candidate for the Regional Government of Andalusia, was known for his criticism of gender equality policies before joining the party. The Vox candidate is also the only one to allude to historical memory.

The criticism of the media and the corruption in the Regional Government of Andalusia are common in all profiles. Employment policy and fiscal policy are mentioned, but not housing policy. Regarding the relationship with the environment, only three subthemes were mentioned: hunting, bullfighting, the national hydrological plan: no references to other environmental themes were found. There is no reference to the stock market, banking policy, or macroeconomics in general. Finally, only Santiago Abascal refers to the monarchy. Unlike other Twitter profiles, none of those analysed featured more personal tweets or more pleasant, non-political topics in their posts.

Table 4. Thematic analysis of analysed tweets

Themes	Santiago Abascal	Francisco Serrano	Javier O. Smith	VOX
Macroeconomics				
Gender discrimation	1	9		6
Environment	3	6	1	8
Banking policy				
Corruption	5	4	2	15
Government and democracy	11	6	6	12
Civil liberties	1	4	5	9
Immigration	10	8	6	6
Social policy	3	3		3
Stock market				
Institutional organisation	8	3	1	7
Historical memory		3		2
Fiscal policy	1	3	2	2
Employment policy		2	4	7
Housing policy				
The media	6	2	1	9
Electoral and party system	12	11	5	16
Monarchy	1			
Campaign activity	25	20	21	30
Other	1		1	
Total tweets	88	84	55	132

Source: created by the authors

3.2. The development of Vox's communicative strategy on Twitter

We can summarise this party's communicative strategy from this data; Hashtags help to frame the message. Vox uses hashtags to ensure that its discourse has a greater impact and reach: thus, gaining network users' participation and making its message go viral.

Table 5. Tags in the communicative strategy

Most Popular Hashtags		
#EspañaViva	#VotaVOX	#AndalucíaPorEspaña
#AndalucíaVotaVOX	#EspañaQueMadruga	#ComercioLegal
#FakeNews	#EquiparacionYa	#GibraltarEspañol
#VotoÜtil	#GuardiaCivil	#SánchezLargate1D
#NoALaImpunidad	#VoxVotoUtil	#EspañaViva5
#CatedralDeCórdoba	#MezquitaCatedral	#AraSanJuan

Source: created by authors

Vox's most popular messages are related to democratic regeneration and patriotism. In most of the tweets and hashtags analysed, there is a constant appeal to citizens. This appeal is the key to the party's identity: the appeal to emotions and what the listener supposedly wants to hear.

Another recurring aspect in the analysed tweets is the problem/cause relationship. Thus, the words corruption-socialism, immigration-crime, communism-Chavista, leftist-podemite (a supporter of the left-wing political party Podemos), etc., are linked and related. The reiteration of two words in a short sentence makes the message penetrate more easily. On the one hand, confrontation is sought through rhetorical devices without resorting to insults. Appeals such as "Right-wing coward" or referring to Susana Diaz's government as a "sultanate" are in contrast to a way of doing politics that has been more common in the Spanish political scene up to now, and this encourages the receiver to take a stance. Santiago Abascal's tweet with the most likes and retweets corresponds to a dialectical confrontation between himself and Susana Diaz.

Figure 2. The photo of Abascal's most retweeted tweet

Source: Twitter

Also noteworthy is the confrontation with the mainstream media, a recurring theme in the campaign media agenda, and the hashtag #FakeNews.

The absence of more personal, friendly, or sympathetic tweets shows their eagerness to appear serious, emphatic, strong, and concerned or alarmed about the problems they constantly denounce.

In conclusion, it can be said that hashtags and tweets frame and reinforce Vox's message and discourse, where the appeal to emotions, the use of symbols, relating the rest of the parties with current problems, and the need for a radical change are a common resource.

Figure 3. The photo of tweets about the end of the campaign in Seville

Source: Twitter

3.3 Digital semiotics in Vox's discourse

We recognise Greima's actantial structure in Vox's discourse as a model applicable to any narrative text: the protagonist Subject- the Vox candidate- desires an Object, which in our case study is voted, which will give him political presence and power. As a Helper, he counts on the skillful management of his social networks, and as an Opponent, on the means employed by other parties, especially those on the left or those who intend to neutralise the message. With the crisis in values, the political and social situation acts as a Sender and helps the message reach its Target, the citizens.

Figure 4. Vox's discourse according to Greima's actantial model
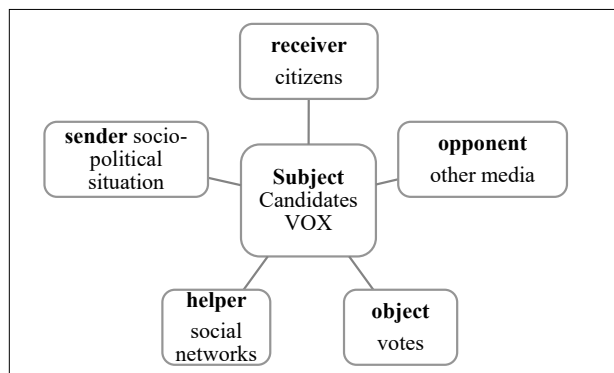
Source: created by the authors

In this analysis, we have omitted the object of desire –the votes– since it would result from this narrative; and the receiver. It is true that the citizenry, as prosumer actors, receives and constructs a message, interacts with the protagonist, and can determine and redirect the communicative strategy to a certain extent. However, a rigorous study of this relationship requires

complementing it with another type of analysis that would go beyond the framework of this research. Therefore, we focus on these four aspects, which comprise Greima's so-called semiotic square: S1= Subject; -S1= Receiver; S2=Opponent; S2= Helper.

3.3.1 Acting Subject: The candidate's human factor

The human factor is one of the variables in politics that exerts the most influence on citizens, which is closely linked to the power of the image (Guerrero & Manzano, 2013). The effort to build a relationship of trust with the electorate implies that they feel cared for by the candidate and identify with them.

Although the human image of Vox is mainly represented by its leader and president, Santiago Abascal, we cannot disregard the strength that many of his closest collaborators show: Javier Ortega Smith-Molina, lawyer and ex legionnaire, leader of various actions in Gibraltar; Ortega Lara, cofounder of the party, who suffered the most important kidnapping in the history of ETA; Ignacio Garriga, a Catalan born to Guinean parents; Morante de la Puebla, bullfighter, etc. Many of Vox's claims and political ideology concretise the empathy that voters have for these politicians. By claiming political incorrectness and being the victims of progressive censorship, they want to represent the Spanish worker who rises honestly to work early every morning and who, regardless of whether they are a wage earner or a business person, is threatened by an immigrant who comes to steal their job, or the hunter or bullfighter that the animal rights movement censures, or the men who, because they are men, are singled out by supposedly radical feminism, and so on. The voters' decision will always be influenced by emotional frames or filters (Entman, 1993) that relate the political argument to this human factor. Moreover, this empathic confluence, based on the acting subjects' ethos, integrates according to Talens, Romera, Tordera, and Hernández (1978: 47), "within the pragmatic level, the author/work and work/reader relationship," in this case, the Sender of the tweets and the citizenry.

3.3.2. Target audience: cleavage and rhetorical power of the image

We focus on Vox's image as a projection of the values and beliefs that the party and its candidates want to promote beyond the technical elements of the corporate image, slogans, and symbology. We find the following dichotomies used by the current political cleavage in Vox's message,

Rural vs. urban. The image of the rural environment with its connotations (religion, customs, etc.) in detriment to the urban (cosmopolitan, progressivism, etc.) has been a constant in Vox's message during the last year. It appears repeatedly in the tweets analysed. Vox's support for hunting, bullfighting, and certain traditions (both cultural and religious) is clear. Vox's measures included in its programmes in numbers 66 and 67, which refer to the protection of bullfighting, or number 68 on hunting (Vox, 2018), demonstrate this.

Figure 5. A photo of a tweet on hunting advocacy

Source: Twitter

Defense of values and the traditional family. The defense of the family and life is of particular importance in its ideology. Vox argues that the traditional values that have held the country together are at risk and must be safeguarded. The feminist movement and the LGBTI movement is seen as a serious threat to it. It accuses them of brainwashing students in the classroom and through the media, which they consider to be hegemonised by identity politics.

Masculinity. The sociologist Micheal Kimmel in his book *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era,* speaks about a possible male "malaise" that affects the political behaviour of many men. The situation of social, political, and cultural breakdown leads to less certainty. In a context of strengthening feminism and a fracturing of the traditional values of masculinity, this situation creates a crisis of values (Kimmel, 2013). Vox and especially Santiago Abascal seek to position themselves as defenders of masculine values instead of what they call gender ideology. A masculine aesthetic is reinforced through videos of Santiago Abascal riding a horse, carrying weapons, or viral messages with politically incorrect language. This stance coincides with that held by other world leaders (Putin, Trump, etc.)

Nationalist epic. As a defender of the idea of Spain, Vox resorts to Hispanidad and the period of the reconquest as a metaphor for the struggle to change the current establishment. Moreover, the concept of national defense is reinforced by the search for an internal enemy (the Catalan process, autonomous regions, "cultural Marxism," etc.) and an external enemy (EU bureaucracy, immigration, Islam, etc.)

Figure 6. Vox tweet referring to the Spanish reconquest

Source: Twitter

War rhetoric. "Politics is war." Santiago Abascal stated in the interview with *El Mundo* written by Leyre Iglesias in October 2018. The military and everything related to it (martiality, discipline, pride, etc.) have positive connotations for Vox, so he uses them in his discourse. In this warmongering rhetoric, the political adversary becomes the "enemy," just as those on the opposing side of its ideology are also enemies. The exaltation of war and the glorification of the strongest, ideas closely linked to masculinity, are in line with other world leaders.

Political correctness. Something that defines Vox and the rest of the parties in this global reactionary wave is the fight against political correctness (Gómez, 2018), the source of many of the ills affecting today's society, according to this party's discourse. An image of unease and anger is related to the seriousness of the situation and the need to confront it. If this is accompanied by a direct message, the message gains more strength without euphemisms that are politically incorrect. Epithets are added, which the population tends to connote negatively (Bolivarian, Red, Marxist, Jihadist, Feminazi, etc.), to other parties, beliefs, policies, or ideas; in this way, the message is forceful, and although it may border on being insulting and is not accompanied by a credible argument, the emotional effect is achieved. This strategy could be reminiscent of Doležel's (1998) concept of possible fictional worlds, which describes the process of combining or anchoring the fictional story in historical events: the creator of a fictional world has various ways of drawing inspiration from the real world, for example, by borrowing discursive, cultural features, i.e., raw facts which s/he subtly and appropriately transforms.

3.3.3 Opponent: negative campaigning in Vox

Negative campaigning is a common practice in different parties and by candidates in electoral periods and aims to undermine the opponent, damage their reputation, or sow distrust among the electorate (Valdez-Zepeda, 2013). In the case of Vox, this practice has resulted in overstating its space, making its message more viral and self-proclaiming victimhood as targets of the mainstream media. By emphasising the negative aspects of Vox, the rest of the parties' media and analysts have given the party the prominence it had previously lacked.

From the beginning, Vox has skillfully managed this resource, which is why one of the pillars in their communication strategy has been to provoke. This tool has been used to achieve greater visibility. Provocation or direct appeal to deep-rooted beliefs or feelings leads to a knee-jerk reaction either for or against the argument put forward, which results in a more impactful response. The etymology of the word "reactionary" supports this. In other words, responding one way or another to an argument that may seem extremist, demagogic, or simply false is more effective than a flatter argument. If this reaction occurs on Twitter, Facebook, or other social networks, the interactions multiply, and the algorithm gives greater visibility to all of them. In the specific case of Twitter, replying is very advantageous for the Sender as it gets more retweets. Whatsapp is also a powerful means of spreading tweets. Going viral is the ability to apply content as if it were a contagious virus, and conflictive topics always are. Advertising agents and the designers of the political campaigns of the different parties know this well.

The most controversial points made during the Vistalegre rally quickly went viral. This may be one reason why the event is seen as their mass baptism. On the one hand, it provoked outrage and rejection among its rivals, and in general, agitated the digital audience. 9000 people attended Vistalegre. Subsequently, a total of 288,000 spoke out on Twitter about the event, amassing a total of 942 000 tweets about Vox (Caballero, 2018). Anger and excitement are the two emotions that most invite action, so whether negative or positive comments, one million people talked about an event of an unrepresented party during the following days. Santiago Abascal's tweet included an illustration by José María Nieto, which eloquently confirms that Vox knows that negative campaigns favour its success.

Figure 7. The photo of a tweet about negative references to Vox

Source: Twitter

After the Andalusian elections in which Vox won twelve decisive seats for the change of government in Andalusia, different messages were spread to isolate this party politically. However, both the "anti-fascist alert" initiated by the leader of Podemos, as indicated in the article "Pablo Iglesias decrees an anti-fascist alert and calls for mobilisation against the postfrancoists of Vox" (2018) and the call for a "cordon sanitaire" called for by Ciudadanos against Abascal's party (García, 2019), as well as the numerous acts of boycott or aggression, led to an increase in the number of party members. As Vox announced in a statement, this growth allowed the party's structure to be extended throughout Spain with parties in all provinces.

3.3.4. Vox's Social Media Strategy: the Effective Helper

Undoubtedly, one of the keys to Vox's success is its effective use of new technologies and social networks in particular. Thanks to this domain, it connects with its potential voters and can convey its message to all citizens in general. In January 2019, Vox became the party with the most followers on Instagram, most followed by young people, reaching 177,000 followers. On YouTube, it was in second place, after Podemos with 75,278 subscribers. And on Facebook, with 256,560 followers, it was far ahead of both the PP and the PSOE, the two major parties. Manuel Mariscal, the party's Deputy Secretary of Communication

and press officer, is the architect of Vox's growth on social networks. This journalist, who also collaborated with the Popular Party, is the party's community manager and founder of the Politizen portal.

Vox's speeches and rallies started to be recorded and edited to be circulated on the networks to reach the general public during 2018. At the same time, powerful and controversial memes went viral via profiles with similar ideologies or thanks to volunteers who dedicated themselves to this task or to creating discussion threads. Similarly, great care was taken regarding the physical contact of potential voters with leaders and candidates, and selfies or videos were taken so that each user could share this content with their different contacts. The tactic of physical contact was carried out in rural areas due to the low penetration rate of social networks. Vox quickly included issues related to this world, such as hunting, bullfighting, etc., in its agenda.

On a practical level, Vox's electoral programme is easier to find than other parties' and is very clear and straightforward. Moreover, it has created a mailing list to be able to inform all its supporters directly. As Mariscal stated, "Vox reconquered the social networks on the left" (Müller-González, 2019). Santiago Abascal acknowledged that his party had invested 150,000 euros in the Andalusian campaign on the Internet.

This data reflects that Vox and its leaders have internalised the power of a correct digital communication strategy and have managed to employ social networks-mainly Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram- and digital messaging channels- Whatsapp and Telegram- as influential allies. The Vox leader's current partner is a famous Spanish influencer, blogger, and Instagrammer: Lidia Bedman (Bustamente, 2018).

4. Discussion and conclusions

Globalisation in the 21st century has brought about significant economic, social, and technological changes that have rapidly upended the global paradigm. The response to these changes has been polarised in the form of culture wars between the left and right, whose values have diverged sharply from each other. This political phenomenon has grown thanks to the impetus of new technologies, which have openly confronted traditional media and accentuated identity and cultural debates in all societies. Spain is no exception. As has been shown through multiple reactions to the new national scenarios, the rise of Vox is a response to the territorial debate, migratory pressure, and the feminist and environmental movements to a lesser extent. The party has been able to detect a latent demand from sectors of the electorate that feel aggrieved and unrepresented and has set itself up as the political means to satisfy these demands. Its skillful use of social networks has enabled it to emerge from anonymity and do away with its status as a residual and minority party in less than a year.

As the science of signs, traditional semiotics describes communications processes beyond the mere exchange of messages. It details the production of meanings, cultural processes, and symbolic exchanges that make it an interdisciplinary science helpful in analysing and understanding any discourse in greater depth. In this research, some concepts and theories of semiotics have been applied to political communication through social networks. Even though digital semiotics and their use as a tool to analyse network communication is an emerging field, we consider that the benefits of the semiotic-communicational synergy are important for understanding our society and culture. The semiotic elements in Twitter's communication enhance its communicative power and bring politics closer to the average citizen, who sometimes does not have specialised knowledge,

e.g., about politics or economics- needed to understand a given message. Therefore, it can be seen as a didactic resource that makes the issues of public life understandable.

In the case of political communication, semiosis, as a metaphor, manages to frame the ideological message of the party or candidate and gives it an accessible and coherent language register. Its high semantic load turns the set of signs into an authentic frame through which the spectator sees the world and the political situation. The messages contain a multiplicity of emotional elements. Sometimes these emotions are the guiding thread of the entire discourse. These emotional elements make it easier for the public and voters to remember and identify with the Sender of the content, the party, or the candidate in question. Semiosis is used profusely by all political parties and, in our case, the creators of tweets as a powerful, persuasive resource that reformulates communicative schema.

Returning to the subject of study, we believe we have shown that the party studied has used these strategies to disseminate its narrative. In this way, the general objective of this article has been achieved: to show that the evolution from invisibility to overexposure of Vox is a current semiosis phenomenon in the framework of network communication. In fact, and having centred on the 2018 Andalusian Parliamentary Elections, during the campaign, they were not perceived as rivals by the rest of the political opponents, nor did the most generous polls predict such success. Subsequently, their media presence has skyrocketed and sometimes been disproportionate. We can conclude that digital semiotics incorporate some concept or theory of traditional semiotics but permeates the communicative act thanks to the new technologies and becomes an essential part of network culture. This study on political communication has been an example of this.

The research has been limited because it is a recent subject of study and methodological design, with few years of experience and little literature on the subject. It should also be noted that the analysis of political content in the media, even if it follows an academic methodology, always runs the risk of being influenced by the daily media reality. Finally, a question arises: Can this model of Vox's growth be extrapolated to other parties in a similar socio-political context? It would undoubtedly be interesting to undertake future research into the communicative strategy of new political parties in similar contexts and carry out comparative studies. We leave this line of work open.

5. Acknowledgements

6. Bibliographical references

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