

Quaderns del CAC

Public opinion and social
transformation

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Introduction

Issue 52 of *Quaderns del CAC* includes three articles in its **monographic section**. Each of them takes public opinion as its central axis, examining it through the lens of our current landscape and contemporary conditions. The way public opinion is formed plays a key role in developing any theory of communication, and with this monograph, we hope to help open up new perspectives and approaches.

Today, public opinion is fuelled by a turbulent global context where multiple crises and interests converge. The rise of new political movements and social struggles has sparked intense information battles, where emotional resonance often supersedes rational discourse. New digital spaces, such as social media platforms, frequently serve as fertile ground for the formation and expansion of currents of (mis)information and interpretations of reality. There is an urgent need to debate the extent to which these spaces constitute part of the *public sphere*, specifically in light of the fact that they are influenced by particular economic and political interests, and by technologies such as artificial intelligence systems, whose operation and impact are not widely understood by the general public.

Research that addresses all the challenges posed by this context requires both studies based on empirical evidence, which enable us to understand the current situation and the constant changes taking place, and critical reviews of theories on the formation of public opinion, especially those formulated in an analogue and exclusively physical face-to-face world. This monograph brings together initiatives that respond to both of these approaches.

The first article, by **Marta Cambronero-Garbajosa** (UOC), delves into theoretical inquiry. In "With Habermas and beyond. The role of the digital and affective aspects in shaping public opinion", Cambronero reflects on Jürgen Habermas's concept of *the public sphere*. As a critical review of one of the most influential intellectuals of our time, a key figure in public opinion studies, this piece is invaluable both for seasoned researchers and for those looking for an introduction to this field.

The following two articles stem from empirical research, tackling two pivotal issues in modern public opinion: gender equality and climate change. **Marta Roqueta-Fernández** (UOC) has written an article entitled "Influence of hybrid feminist activism on gender parity in the opinion sections of Catalan media: the #OnSónLesDones case". The text compiles the results of an analysis of different sources (reports and content available on the blog *On són les dones*, interviews with activists from the group, and dissemination of the hashtag on Twitter). The work also delves into the influence of the #OnSónLesDones (OSLD) group in the media. **Javier Callejo** (UNED), in "Grey's denialism's use of media in Spain: blaming the messenger", introduces us to the idea of the "cascade of doubts". Callejo argues that the trend is no longer to deny climate change outright, but to reinterpret or cast doubt on its specifics. He warns that by "placing it as the backbone of public policies and budgets, it is highlighted its high cost in terms of social welfare and economic growth".

The **miscellaneous section** of this issue comprises three articles, all of which converge on gender issues. Firstly, **Anna Fonoll-Tassier** (URV) has written "Mapping a 'triple periphery': shifts and continuities in contemporary Spanish documentary filmmaking by women", a study exploring the factors behind the recent increase of female filmmakers in Spain's documentary sector. Fonoll addresses the rise of the feminist movement, the digitisation of the audiovisual sector and the consolidation of specialised training programmes as key drivers that promote the presence of women in documentary production and distribution.

Secondly, "Too gay": masculinities and homoeroticism in slash fiction about video game content creators", by **Ona Anglada-Pujol** (UPF), offers a critical analysis on the models of masculinity reflected in fan fiction texts about two fictional pairings of gaming content creators: Rubelangel (Rubius and Mangel) and Septiplier (Jacksepticeye and Markiplier).

Ezequiel Soriano Gómez (USC) closes issue 52 by reflecting on the professionalisation of internet meme makers in "From meme maker to content creator. An ethnographic approach with Marina Listillas". Through an ethnographic study of the person behind the Instagram account @listillas, Soriano examines the evolution of her work within large platforms and the tensions between community logic and commercial interests that drive it.

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With Habermas and beyond. The role of the digital and affective aspects in shaping public opinion

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Abstract

This article offers a theoretical reflection on the validity and limits of Habermas' concept of the public sphere as a tool for analysing public opinion, given the recent transformations in the media system. On one hand, digitalisation has had various impacts on the media where public debates take place. On the other, the affective aspect is considered a key element in the articulation of publics in digital media. Building on the normative value of Habermas' concept of the public sphere, it is argued that such an approach can benefit from descriptive models of public opinion, which are better equipped to characterise the dynamics of public opinion in the current media system. Focusing on the description of opinion dynamics in social media opens a dialogue with complex systems theories and allows for the formulation of new hypotheses for the critical and interdisciplinary study of shaping public opinion in the digital space.

Keywords

Public opinion, public sphere, digitalisation, gatekeeping, framing, affect, affective publics, complex systems, interdisciplinarity.

Resum

Aquest article ofereix una reflexió teòrica sobre la vigència i els límits del concepte d'esfera pública a Habermas, com a eina per analitzar l'opinió pública, ateses les transformacions recents del sistema de mitjans. D'una banda, la digitalització ha tingut diversos impactes sobre els mitjans en què es donen els debats públics. D'altra banda, l'afectiu es considera un element clau en l'articulació de públics en mitjans digitals. Partint del valor normatiu del concepte d'esfera pública a Habermas, s'argumenta que aquest enfocament es pot beneficiar dels models descriptius d'opinió pública, més ben equipats per a la caracterització de les dinàmiques d'opinió dels públics en el sistema de mitjans actual. Posar el focus en la descripció de les dinàmiques d'opinió en els mitjans socials obre un diàleg amb les teories dels sistemes complexos i permet formular noves hipòtesis per a l'estudi crític i interdisciplinari de la formació d'opinió pública en l'espai digital.

Paraules clau

Opinió pública, esfera pública, digitalització, gatekeeping, framing, afectes, públics afectius, sistemes complexos, interdisciplinarietat.

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1. Introduction

Habermas' theoretical work and, in particular, its work *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (1962, trans 1989), has been and still is fundamental to understanding the role of the public sphere in contemporary democracies. However, Habermas's normative approach, crucial to critically locate the function of the public sphere in relation to state and market institutions, can benefit from renewed collaborations with descriptive approaches, more suitable for analysing the shaping of public opinion in a media and communication scenario characterised by digitalisation and the growing weight of the affective aspect in the formation of online publics. This article presents a conceptual clarification of both some of Habermas's main contributions on the sphere and public opinion and the impacts that digitalisation has had on how public opinion is formed today.

With this proposal, the aim is not to "relativise normative standards in favour of the recognition of increasingly proliferating digital publics" (Riescher *et al.*, 2020, p.16), but to recognise the power of normative models for critical theory and differentiate them from descriptive approaches. Descriptive models are better suited to characterising of digital publics in the current media system. To this end, it is proposed to complement the *Habermasian* notion of public opinion with the one used by Noelle-Neumann in her theory of the spiral of silence (1974; 1977) as a tool for the description of opinion dynamics in social and interactive media, which in turn opens up avenues of collaboration with other disciplines interested in the study of public opinion. This differentiation between the normative and the empirical approach to the public sphere and public opinion may be helpful for researchers new to these disciplines. It should be noted that the article is not intended to cover a full critique of the normative approach, but to add one more piece to the process of thinking collectively about how both the normative model and the descriptive model can mutually benefit from collaboration. The first is to gain a more granular understanding of the elements and processes that facilitate or hinder the institutionalisation of public opinion under current media conditions. The second is to incorporate critical analysis into their empirical examinations. The following is a summary of the content to be presented in each section of the article.

In section 2, Habermas' definitions of concepts such as the public sphere, public opinion and publics are introduced. It also explains the two transformations that the public sphere has undergone in democratic societies, according to the same author: a discursive transformation, located in the social processes that brought the bourgeoisie to power in the 19th century; and another, which is mediatic, which has to do with the progressive dominance of centralised,

mass media in the 20th century. Finally, it explains the specific value of Habermas's normative contribution and argues why it is limited when describing the actual conditions under which public opinion is formed today, which are increasingly distant from the normative standard.

Section 3 presents some of the key impacts that digitalisation has had on the media that constitute the arena in which public debates take place. Firstly, the platformisation of social media is addressed. Secondly, the transformations in the functions of regulating the flow of information (of which gatekeeping and framing are notable here), now penetrated by the logics of the platforms themselves and of the new hybrid media system as a whole. Some of the consequences of these transformations have to do with the increase in the number of actors involved in the selection of topics and approaches that enter the media's public agenda, and with the reduction of the time available for the different social and political actors who may have an interest in taking part in the public debates that these topics provoke.

Section 4 introduces the concept of affective publics and proposes to extend attention to the notion of public opinion as pursued by Noelle-Neumann in the research that resulted in her theory of the spiral of silence (1974; 1977). Publics are formed by organising the attention of the publics around the same themes and approaches. They have always been changing, multiple and adaptable to the evolution of the context. What is most novel in public formation today is that they are brought together on the basis of affects, of a shared sensibility, which is transmitted through digital and interactive media. Given the spatial (multiplication of actors) and temporal (reduction of time available to intervene) conditions of the current media system, the idea that public opinion dynamics are based on individuals feeling "pressure" to conform to an opinion in order not to be socially isolated (the basis of the spiral of silence theory) has gained renewed interest as a model for describing the processes of shaping public opinion. This change of focus on the notion of public opinion also opens up new perspectives for interdisciplinary research in dialogue with some theories of complex systems, as will be explained below.

Finally, the article closes with a concluding section proposing lines of future research that can emerge from a greater contagion between the normative-critical and descriptive-empirical models of the public sphere and public opinion outlined throughout the article.

2. The normative model of the public sphere in Habermas

2.1. Public sphere, public opinion and public

The term "public sphere" refers to any "realm of social life in which something approaching 'public opinion' can

be formed" (Habermas, 1964). "Public opinion" refers to "the tasks of criticism and control which a public body of citizens...practises vis-à-vis the ruling structure organised in the form of the state" (Habermas, 1964). This "public body of citizens" is what is popularly known as the 'public'. This set of concepts emerged from Habermas' influential work *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (1962, trans 1989). In it, Habermas analysed the social and political changes that accompanied the transformations of the public sphere (as a sphere distinct from the private or "domestic" sphere) from the Middle Ages up until his own time. In this historical journey, he identified in the transition from the society of the Middle Ages –characterised by the political domination of monarchies and the absence of a strong separation between the public and private spheres– to the early Modern Age (17th and 18th centuries) the emergence of a 'public sphere' in which individuals and social groups formed their opinions through the expression of ideas in newspapers and the discussion of these ideas in gatherings and cafés.

For Habermas (1989), the joint process of, on the one hand, the separation between public and private spheres, and, on the other, the emergence of an opinion that was formed through the public exposition and discussion of ideas, presented a democratic "potential" for the shaping of a public sphere that could be autonomous from the state and the market and that could have its own "political function", namely that of serving the citizens' activity of political "criticism and control". For this potential to have been realised, the public sphere would have to have fulfilled, according to the same author, two fundamental requirements: be accessible to all citizens and provide minimum conditions for the public debate of ideas on political issues. Habermas' theory of the public sphere is to be understood as a normative model that the author derives from the method of "immanent critique", which contrasts the 'ideal' proclaimed by a society with the 'reality' it produces in order to reveal the ideological character of this proclamation (Fuchs, 2014). This method allows the analyst to critique society on the basis of "the norms used by the criticised object itself", rather than on the basis of "independently justified norms" (Stahl, 2013) –which involves assessing the quality of the public sphere on the basis of specific models of democracy, such as liberal representative, participatory or autonomous, to name a few (Dahlberg, 2011; Ferrer et al., 2002).

2.2. The two structural transformations of the public sphere

Specifically, two structural transformations would have put an end to that initial democratising potential of the public sphere, according to Habermas (1989). The first

major transformation has to do with the power struggles between different groups of the bourgeoisie –the new social class on the rise at the time– which resulted in an appropriation of the notion of 'public opinion'. Various groups of the bourgeoisie tried to pass off their 'party' opinion as an opinion arising from public debates and therefore representative of society as a whole. Fraser (1992) interpreted this movement of bourgeois power groups as part of a more general movement in which the bourgeoisie as a whole presented itself as a "universal class" in order to "legitimise an emerging form of domination" over other emerging social sectors, such as the working class or first wave feminism. It could then be said that the bourgeoisie positioned itself as the dominant class in society –against the aristocracy from above and the working class and women from below– partly through the public presentation of its particular interests and opinions as the general interests and opinions of society.

The second major transformation of the public sphere was Habermas' (1989) shift from a media system for the shaping of public opinion based on the publication of ideas in newspapers and their public discussion in gatherings and cafés to a society dominated by a mass media system. In such a society, the media, in addition to being more numerous (newspapers were joined by agencies, radio and television), were strongly centralised and commercialised by a few companies that were in charge of the "institutionalised production" and "generalised dissemination" of public information (Thompson, 1998: p. 46-47). The mass media generally disseminated the ideas that were most favourable to the interests of the ruling class (Habermas, 1989). The potential for the establishment of a public sphere autonomous from economic and political power, if it had already begun its "process of decomposition" with the accession of the bourgeoisie to power, had become "insignificant" by the mid-20th century due to the control exercised by the mass media over information flows and the processes of shaping public opinion (Habermas, 1989: p. 25).

These two major transformations of the public sphere, which according to Habermas prevented it from fulfilling its democratic potential, are, formally, of two types or orders: one is discursive and the other mediatic. While the first transformation has to do with the discursive appropriation of the very notion of public opinion (carried out by the bourgeoisie with the aim of establishing a change in the social structure which was favourable to its class interests), the second is related to the structural change in the media system (from a model dominated by more or less distributed newspapers and talk shows to a model of large centralised media companies controlled by the ruling classes) and, with it, in the processes of shaping of public opinion.

2.3. Contributions and limitations of the normative model for describing the public arena

The importance of shaping public opinion as an "organising principle" of political and social order makes the Habermasian normative model of the public sphere a still valuable tool for "systematic understanding" of society (Habermas, 1989: p. 25-26). In particular, in the issue at hand, to assess whether "civil society, through autonomous public spaces capable of sufficient resonance, develops the vitality and impetus necessary for conflicts that occur on the periphery to be transferred to the political system" (Habermas, 1998: p. 499). To carry out this evaluation requires an in-depth examination of the question of power, specifically the "democratic circulation of power" from the formation of social power to its possible influence on the political system and the interventions that communicative power can introduce into these processes (Habermas, 1998: p. 498). Any study of the public sphere that seeks to engage with theories of democracy should follow this dimension of the concept.

However, if the analyst wishes to examine the dynamics of digital public formation in the current media system empirically, he or she will find that the tools of the normative model are often not fully operational, which is to be expected, as their primary purpose is to critique rather than describe public opinion. See how Habermas, in one of his most recent writings, referred to the dynamics of these publics as "the centrifugal expansion of accelerated communication simultaneously to an arbitrary number of participants at arbitrary distances [that] generates an ambivalent explosive force" (Habermas, 2022). The characterisation of these participants (who they are) and their actions (how they generate this centrifugal and explosive expansion) are tasks for which, it seems, other tools must be used. Pointing out this limit of the normative model should in no way be understood as an attempt to water down its critical contribution in favour of mere empirical descriptions. What is proposed is to recognise its limited scope as a starting point from which to build collaborations with other disciplines, which can be potentially fruitful in reinforcing an updated version of the normative vision of the public sphere.

However, Habermas himself (1994) developed a "discursive" model of democracy that is still useful today for studying the processes of shaping public opinion. In contrast to the "liberal" model, which understands democracy as a "competition of interests" between parts of the social aspect, to which they attribute equal opportunities to defend their private interests, and the "republican" model, which is based on the ideal of a citizenship that should form part of the same "consensus", the discursive model recognises the existence of parts of the social aspect with different political interests and trusts in the possibility that an intersubjectivity can be

formed through communicative action (Habermas, 1994). Intersubjectivity is understood as the "overlapping" that occurs between the different "subjective worlds" of different parts of the social aspect (Jeanes, 2019). Communicative action is understood as the social ability of human beings to understand and coordinate through dialogue and the exchange of ideas and arguments (Habermas, 1984). From this social capacity for mutual "communication, exchange of meaning and understanding" (Jeanes, 2019), the "articulation" of specific fixations of meaning can emerge and, with them, the coordination of political projects that can drive social change (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987: p. 231) of greater or lesser scope.

In order to measure the outcome of this formation of intersubjectivity, for Habermas (1989), two issues were equally important: to observe under what conditions intersubjectivity (and, with it, public opinion) is formed, and to check whether the social agreements that emerge from this understanding manage to find channels for their institutionalisation (Habermas, 1994). Habermas's model of discursive democracy seems, finally, to be designed to maintain the normative idea of the public sphere as an "autonomous" space with its own "political function" –namely, that of incorporating into systems of political and economic action the consensus reached by citizens through the processes of communication and the formation of intersubjectivity. This double level of the public sphere is also found in other authors, such as Rosa (2022), who differentiated the "arena for the abstract exchange of arguments or the negotiation of interests" between parts of the social aspect from the "space of encounter [...] whose quality must be judged by the form, variety and solidity of the relationships it allows and institutionalises" (Rosa, 2022). This difference in levels is merely analytical, since public opinion does not emerge dissociated from previous social structures, but it is precisely in them that it finds the possibility of its stability over time (Habermas, 1998). However, in order to delimit the scope of the theoretical contribution of this article, it is worth clarifying that it focuses on the understanding of some relevant aspects of the first level indicated by Rosa; that is, on the media and political characteristics of the public arena and the communication processes that facilitate –or not– the formation of intersubjectivity today.

3. The digitalisation of the public sphere

3.1. Platformisation of spaces for public debate

A large part of public (and also private) communications is nowadays carried out through the use of interactive media based on information and communication technologies (ICTs), mainly the internet (Jenkins, 2004; Castells, 2009). This infrastructural change has had an impact on the conditions of symbolic and economic production in which

publics form and relate to each other (Benkler, 2008), as well as on the ways in which power is exercised, resisted, and contested (Castells, 2009: p. 78-79). With the rise of interactive media, "the content of communication became partly self-generated, the broadcasting self-directed and the reception self-selected by all those who communicate" (Castells, 2009: p. 108). Audiences, conceived as passive consumers in the dominant mass communication model of the 20th century (Fawkes and Gregory, 2000), came to have a potentially active place in public communication processes (Jenkins, 2004).

During the era of mass media dominance, public communication relied on a "top-down" model in which information was consumed in a "synchronous" manner and was "highly centralised" and "controlled by large corporations or the state", which facilitated the transmission of "the visions of the elites" (Kellner, 1999). With the growing access of the population to the Internet, political communication was opening up to a new "many-to-many" paradigm, based on "decentralisation" and the "asynchronous" participation of people located in different places (Kellner, 1999), which seemed in principle to overcome the centralised communication model. Over time, the initial power of interactive media for the foundation of a new distributed model of public communication seems to have been progressively integrated with the centralised model that preceded it, giving shape to what is now known as a "hybrid media model", in which "old and new media" coexist in a relationship of "interdependence" that has given rise to new ways of "gathering and producing information" (Chadwick, 2013: p. 112).

The new potentially active role of citizens in the public communication system sparked an initial interest in a possible revitalisation of the autonomy of the public sphere (Dahlberg, 1998; Papacharissi, 2002). Among the new interactive media, social networking platforms soon came to the fore, where citizens could "converse with individuals, groups and the general public" through the usability features they offer (boyd *et al.*, 2010). However, the platforms on which the expectation of autonomisation of the public sphere was founded depend on a technological and economic infrastructure that is "embedded in the power structures of capitalism" (Fuchs, 2014: p. 48) and based on a business model that exploits citizen-generated data, using it for monitoring and institutionalised surveillance (Zuboff, 2015), which has an impact on the material conditions in which public discussions take place in the digital space. For Splichal (2022), data mining has replaced the expression of public opinion as a fundamental function of the public sphere.

Without going into as much depth as a critical study of this issue would require, it is worth noting at the very least that, behind the existence of the platforms, there is a financial and IT maintenance effort made by a few large

technology companies that does not come free of charge to citizens (van Dijck *et al.*, 2018; Srnicek, 2016; Fuchs, 2014). Authors such as Srnicek (2016) or Zuboff (2015) suggested that the rapid development of platforms is explained by the needs of financial capital at the end of the 20th century to find new niches for value extraction, which it has partly achieved through the commodification of the consumption and interaction data of platform users.

According to authors such as Fuchs (2014) and van Dijck and Poell (2013), this business-based origin of the platforms is manifested in the forms of sociability that they promote among their users, which reward aspects such as the accumulation of social value and competitiveness, through metrics such as popularity. These dynamics also affect centralised media – now hybridised with interactive media – which have become more economically dependent on the number of visits they manage to capture, which in turn encourages the expansion of marketing techniques such as "clickbait", which consists of writing "catchy headlines on social networks" with the aim of "attracting clicks and shares" (Chandler and Munday, 2016). This dependence of the digital public arena on profit-driven infrastructures and business models makes it difficult for the digital public arena to be considered autonomous, at least from the dynamics of advanced capitalism.

3.2. Regulating the flow of information in the hybrid media system

Digitalisation and the process of hybridisation of centralised and interactive media have also had an impact on some of the fundamental functions of the media in ensuring the flow of information. Bennet and Pfetsch (2018) explored transformations in several of these functions, of which two are of interest here: "gatekeeping" and "framing".

"Gatekeeping" refers to the control function over information flows, which consists of deciding which issues and which actors receive public attention at any given moment, and which was previously carried out through a sophisticated system of "gates" that left out minority opinions with respect to the dominant or hegemonic ones (Bennet and Pfetsch, 2018). With digitalisation, this function came to be performed in a dynamic interaction between a variety of actors such as "politicians, policy practitioners, journalists, citizen activists" (Chadwick, 2013: p. 157), "algorithms" that amplify popular topics (Wallace, 2018) or "rogue" actors (Entman and Usher, 2018) – such as bots, which are automated communication accounts about which it is often unknown how or for whom they work, or producers of fake news.

In the media context, "framing" refers to journalistic efforts to "make a piece of information more newsworthy, meaningful or memorable to audiences" through practices of "selecting and highlighting some aspects of reality while omitting others" (Entman, 1993). The mass media and

journalists now perform this task in an intertwined way with political actors and also with other aforementioned actors (users, algorithms, bots, and fake news producers, among others). From the “negotiations” of meaning that are created about the situations that arise (Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013), a dynamic feedback arises that favours or hinders issues from remaining on the public agenda (Scheufele, 2000). Despite this shift in the functions of controlling news flow and content, the centrality acquired by the mass media as social institutions with influence in the processes of shaping of public opinion still remains high (Mattoni and Treré, 2014).

Another of the transformations, transversal to the others, which is of interest to introduce is that related to the changes in the temporality in which these information flows take place, which has been accelerating with the irruption of each new medium and its subsequent hybridisation with the rest (Poell, 2020). Information, which was renewed on a daily basis when newspapers alone dominated –that is, until the late 19th century– shifted from being renewed two or three times a day with the broadcasting model led by radio and television –dominant from the mid-20th century onwards (Warner, 2002). The actors involved in the generation of political information and public opinion (who were mainly journalists, politicians and public relations professionals) organised their attention, their communication actions and the generation of political-discursive opportunities around news cycles marked by such temporal structures (Downs, 1972; Miller and Riechert, 2001). As a result, audiences routinely received information in a one-way, synchronous manner at specific times.

With social media platforms and 24/7 “connectivity” (van Dijck and Poell, 2013), the possibility was introduced for users to post information at any time and to generate a cycle of “real-time responses” to each other (Klinger and Svensson, 2015). This new temporality of public information forced the centralised media to transform their journalistic routines and adapt to the new temporality in order to maintain their influence on the processes of shaping public opinion.

As a result, the general cycles of collective attention to public information have also been restructured (Bødker and Brügger, 2017). In addition, the number of current affairs topics has increased, due to the multiplication of information and entertainment consumption niches, which are constantly being renewed (van Dijck and Poell, 2013). This has resulted in an “episodic logic” of news flows that makes it “not so easy to generate sustained public attention” over time around “protests about structural issues” (Poell, 2020). This logic could further disadvantage social actors with fewer resources to create the necessary feedback to keep issues of their interest on the political agenda.

4. Affective publics and the pressured shaping of opinion in online settings

4.1. From publics to affective publics

Habermas (1964) named the subject involved in the shaping of public opinion as the “public body of citizens” (hereafter referred to as the “public”). It should be noted that “in the face of many problems, especially the most serious ones, citizens’ opinions, positions and even interests are not always clear from the outset, but often only take shape in the course of public discussion” (Rosa, 2022). Therefore, in order to analyse the processes of forming publics and shaping public opinion, it must be borne in mind that the “private opinions” of each citizen are “the starting point for the shaping of public opinion, not the place of arrival or outcome” (Rosa, 2022). To observe this transition from the initial or private positions of members of each public to their final or public positions, we propose the exploration of three morphological properties that have characterised publics since before their digitalisation –self-reflexivity, contextuality and dynamicity– and one property that has gained relevance with the digitalisation and interactivity of publics: affectivity.

Self-reflexivity, contextuality and dynamicity of publics

Self-reflexivity refers to the “self-organisation of attention through discourse” (Warner, 2002) that occurs in the formation of publics. In the preparation of their public discourses, individuals project themselves to an imagined public and visualise the paths along which their message might circulate (Warner, 2002). In this projection, each member of the public “frames” and negotiates his or her worldview with others (Emirbayer and Sheller, 1998). This framing operation is equivalent to using interpretative schemes, through which problems are described, solutions are offered and policy opportunities are generated. It is also related to the function of information control through “framing”, carried out in the current media system, as explained above, in an intertwined manner by a variety of actors. In this regard, it must be said that not all actors framing situations use the same discursive strategy, nor is any one of them the best option in different circumstances (Desrosiers, 2012).

Contextuality refers to the fact that the public is formed as the discourse keeps encountering recipients. As this encounter evolves, so does the “universe of the discourse” (van Dijk, 1997), which refers to the framework of knowledge, beliefs and social representations that frame the production and interpretation of a discourse. The elements that make up such a universe of discourse (or context) are the participants, their purposes, the temporal and spatial framework in which they find themselves, the type of sphere in which they intervene, the

knowledge and rules they share, as well as their ideologies (van Dijk, 1997). That is, the public is created by the very formation of the context or universe of discourse, whose composition is by default open to "undefined strangers" (Warner, 2002). In these conditions, the framings "can never be perfectly resonant", but rather are adapted to the "specific contexts" that are formed (Desrosiers, 2012) and which depend on the contingency of the situations. Actors succeed in exerting "influence" over audiences only if "perceptions of situations can be convincingly framed for the public" (Knoke, 1990: p. 3). In other words, "the rhetoric of political communication" that is set in motion in these frames is only "effective if citizens can maintain a reasonable level of agreement on the terms and their meanings" of what is being talked about (Knoke, 1990: p. 3). To "achieve their objectives", political actors "resort to strategic communication", both in the face of "heterogeneous publics" and "adversaries who promote their own frames and circumstances" (Desrosiers, 2012).

Dynamicity is related to the variation of the context. Publics are "ever-changing, emergent and multiple", a product of "the expansion, contraction and reaction of publics to new situations" (Emirbayer and Sheller, 1998). Specifically, the elements of the context or universe of discourse maintain "relational positions" (Emirbayer and Sheller, 1998) that are transformed into a "dynamic relationship of mutual listening and responding" among their participants (Rosa, 2022). Observing the evolution of positions and the relationships between them can provide information on which views are favoured in the interactive process. Moreover, it must be borne in mind that the flows of formation and disappearance of publics, while open to the participation of undefined outsiders, are not infinitely open (Warner, 2002). Observing the exclusions that a public practises –that is, the limits of its context– and in particular those that contradict what it proclaims, can also reveal something about its ideological character (Fraser, 1992).

The role of the affective aspect in the formation of online publics

In the context of social and interactive media, these publics are formed from the intertwined interaction of various types of users –journalists, activists, opinion leaders– who become active and act in particular periods of "political instability" (Papacharissi and de Fatima Olivera, 2012) to "articulate community or collective interests" (Lünenborg and Raetzsch, 2017). For authors such as Papacharissi (2016) and Lünenborg (2019), it is "affect" that makes it possible to bring individuals together in online publics. Lünenborg (2022) defined affect as an "evaluative sensitivity that is intensely linked to physical experiences", and that encompasses "the moods, atmospheres and sensations that constantly accompany human existence".

In contrast to normative views of public opinion, which expect to find in the public arena the rational exposition and discussion of ideas and arguments, the theory of "affective publics" posits that publics are formed and transformed in relation to the affects produced in their members by encounters with other people and the media in which this happens (Lünenborg, 2022). This implies that "the media not only generate meaning at the level of utterances and discourses, but also directly –that is, affectively– convey tension, excitement, displeasure or reassurance"; elements that can "vary in intensity and valence" and are "(sometimes) perceived" directly in the communication (Lünenborg, 2022). In other words, the media and the messages that circulate through them would not be "simply channels of information", but rather "emotional conduits" that "condense individual feelings of indignation, anger, pride or a sense of shared victimisation", which are fundamental in "driving the mobilisation process" (Gerbaudo, 2015: p. 14).

From the point of view of political and social actors, understanding the mechanisms of activation of public affects can help to generate "opportunities" for political persuasion at key moments (Benford and Snow, 2000; Desrosiers, 2012). From the point of view of those who study the processes of shaping public opinion, the development of methods to capture variations in the intensity and valence of affect can provide clues about the internal processes that lead to the formation, evolution and dissolution of online publics (Hagen *et al.*, 2025) and thus to a better understanding of the public opinion expressed by a society, or by certain social groups, on the issues on the public agenda.

4.2. The pressure for conforming to opinions in online complex settings

Previously, some of the transformations that the public arena has undergone with the digitalisation of the media on which it is based have been presented. In the current conditions –a multitude of actors intervening in the functions of gatekeeping and framing, and an information temporality altered by the 24/7 availability of the public arena and the episodic logic of the platforms, to name some of the most relevant aspects– it seems that the possibilities for public intervention in the processes of shaping public opinion have been "reduced" (Williams, 2020: p. 163) in both time and space. In this section, we propose to investigate the notion of public opinion that Noelle-Neumann (1977) used to develop her theory of the "spiral of silence"¹ with the aim of opening up new perspectives that can enrich the description and analysis of the processes of shaping opinion in the contemporary public arena. Likewise, a bridge is established between the field of shaping public opinion and complex systems, through Williams' (2020) contribution to the study of the

affective dynamics that end up giving rise –or not– to the emergence and sustainability over time of a certain flow of public opinion.

The theory of the spiral of silence, based on opinion studies conducted in German election campaigns in the late 1960s, argues that people tend to avoid sharing their opinions when these are perceived as unpopular for fear of social isolation (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1977). To arrive at this theory, he first explored the two meanings of the concept of “public opinion” in the 17th century. One was based on Enlightenment ideas, according to which public opinion arose from “rational debate between informed and responsible citizens who praise or blame the government” (Noelle-Neumann, 1977). This is the approach Habermas follows in constructing his normative vision of the public sphere. The other concept of public opinion, inherited from before the Enlightenment and pursued by Noelle-Neumann in her empirical studies, is related to the individual’s “pressure to conform” and to “find out what opinion he can express without isolating himself”. She found that minorities were more willing to defend their opinion than the majority “towards the beginning and the end” of a process of public opinion change, while “during the hot phase, when the new opinion starts to take hold”, those who think they are in the majority would be more willing to do so. Such dynamics seemed to gain particular relevance at times of “change of opinion or controversy” (Noelle-Neumann, 1977).

In *Political Hegemony and Social Complexity. Mechanisms of Power after Gramsci*, Williams (2020) argues that the articulation of hegemony –understood as the ability of a social group to establish its perspective of reality as a common sense out of dispersed parts of the social– occurs in a process of interaction between, on the one hand, systems (economic, social, infrastructural etc.) that are composed of human and non-human elements, and, on the other, human actors (people, who in turn are penetrated by different compositions of the economic and the social aspects). This interaction should not be observed in a “layered” or separate way, but rather in the “dynamics” that take place (Williams, 2020: p.166). Observing these dynamics would involve attending to the influences between the elements of systems and actors in social courses of action (Williams, 2020).

This view of hegemony is related to an emergentist view of the social aspect, which differentiates between two analytical levels: that of the disarticulated position that elements and actors have in a “pre-emergence” moment and the articulation that they acquire interactively during the “emergence” or “phase” (Williams, 2020; p. 162-168). According to the concepts and reasoning put forward so far, it could be said that publics –and, with them, their possibility of being affected– are disarticulated in the moments of “pre-emergency” and can be articulated

–and affected– in different ways in the course of the “emergency”. In this regard, observing the processes of emergence of publics provides insight into how members of the public (participants in the public conversation, including non-human elements such as algorithms) and discourse elements (including the information shared by members of the public about each situation as it arises) are dynamically constituted by each other.

This type of approach, called “non-linear” –since it does not assume the order of interaction that must take place between elements and actors to give rise to an articulation– is considered by authors such as Henry and MacKenzie (2023) to be a suitable approach for the study of the potential for the formation of online publics, especially those that present counter-hegemonic or non-dominant approaches in a society. From this perspective, the possibilities for citizen intervention in the “space between society and state” could “materialise” in many different ways (Henry and MacKenzie, 2023), and could –at least in theory– transform the very conditions of shaping public opinion in unpredictable ways –which would happen if they manage to keep a structural issue and proposals for its transformation on the political agenda for a certain period of time, challenging the episodic logic of the media system. Some popular examples are the anti-racist campaign #BlackLivesMatter (Jackson *et al.*, 2020) or the campaigns to denounce harassment and male violence, such as #MeToo (Jackson *et al.*, 2020), both in the United States, or #NiUnaMenos, in the Spanish-speaking world (Rovira, 2023).

This emerging perspective of the social aspect is based on the advances of the third wave of systems theory and has been proposed by several social and communication scientists as suitable for the study of the dynamics of shaping public opinion in the digital realm (Waldherr, 2017; Henry and MacKenzie, 2023; Friemel and Neuberger, 2023). It is useful, for example, to examine the “feedback loops” that occur within online publics during “hypes” or “shitstorms” (Waldherr, 2017). The term “hype” refers to advertising campaigns that generate great expectation, and the term “shitstorm” refers to the barrage of criticism, often insulting, that follows the publication of a piece of information or commentary on social media.

Feedback loops of online publics can be “positive”, when elements and actors articulate and “influence each other in the same direction (more of one leads to more of the other)”, which “leads to change” (Waldherr, 2017), or “negative”, when articulations of elements and actors “influence each other in opposite directions (more of one leads to less of the other)”, which “acts in a balancing and stabilising way” (Waldherr, 2017) for the public arena as a whole. The crucial question for actors seeking to affectively activate online publics would therefore be to understand how to generate the positive feedback necessary for a variety of

non-human elements and human actors to trigger a phase shift that allows their action to be prolonged in time and space, beyond episodic viralisation. For example, applying this reasoning to movements such as those mentioned above (#BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo and #NiUnaMenos), it can be said that there is a positive feedback loop when mobilisation and denunciation lead to more parts of society joining the mobilisation and denunciation. On the other hand, a negative feedback loop would occur when the articulation of the public ends up involving actors and elements that end up slowing down its growth and its potential to influence the political system.

For Williams (2020), there is something key related to the affective aspect that, in his view, political projects striving for dominance should not overlook if they wish to achieve such positive feedback loops. These are the “structures of feeling”, conceptualised by Raymond Williams (1961) as those elements of “lived experience” that are not individual but are part of the social relations and culture of an “era”, and are accessed through the “ways of life”, “meanings” and “values” expressed in art and cultural products (p. 64–66). According to Papacharissi (2016), the concept of structure of feeling was an “anticipation” of affect as an “active ingredient” in the articulation of the collective action of publics. Taking these structures of feeling into account means opening up to the possibility that not so much –or not only– cultural conventions and ideologies intervene in the fixation of meaning, but also other aspects of lived experience through cultural products that, due to their double subjective and collective condition, can shape the articulation of elements and actors in unpredictable ways during emergence by enhancing the “power of agency” of online publics (Papacharissi, 2016). In other words, and according to the above, “phase” changes could “be updated” –in the sense of reproducing themselves– through unforeseen rearticulations related to structures of feeling (Williams, 2020: p. 166).

From this point of view, maintaining attention on issues on the public agenda would not depend primarily on the arguments that the parties can present in a rational debate, but on the degree of affective resonance that is generated between their speeches and the audiences through the activation of structures of feeling. This approach to the shaping of public opinion allows the analyst –and also the political actor– to recognise the “uncontrollability” of the outcome of the communicative exchange between citizens (Rosa, 2022). Being open to the uncontrollability of complex systems does not mean that one cannot intervene politically in the process of emergence. On the contrary, the not entirely closed meaning of what happens makes emergence a kind of approach that is conducive, at least in theory, to the ideation and realisation of collective actions of online publics even under adverse conditions.

5. Conclusions

This section proposes three points of convergence between the normative model and the descriptive model of public opinion, presented throughout the article, from which three lines of research are opened up –or rather, reorganised, because some of them already exist– in which both approaches can mutually benefit from each other. The aim of these crossings is to facilitate analysts’ critical and, at the same time, possibilistic examination of the processes of shaping public opinion and disruption in the current media system.

The first of these consists of identifying the potential for communicative action by civil society expressed in the formation of affective publics, as well as the obstacles to their institutionalisation in the political system. As has been argued throughout the article, the initial potential for communicative action by citizens through digital media has been compromised by the conditions under which publics are formed in digital media (from data extractivism to viral and episodic temporality). In other words, the social capacity of people to understand each other and coordinate their actions through dialogue and the exchange of ideas and arguments (Habermas, 1984) has been progressively “reduced” (Williams, 2020: p. 163) by the multiplication of human and non-human actors, whether legitimate or dishonest, issuing messages in a public arena available 24/7 (van Dijck and Poell, 2013) and subject to the possibility of generating cycles of “real-time responses” (Klinger and Svensson, 2015). All this translates into a saturation of the communicative channel can lead the analyst to observe little more than, as Habermas (2022) put it, a “centrifugal expansion of communication accelerated simultaneously to an arbitrary number of participants at arbitrary distances [that] generates an ambivalent explosive force”.

However, even under these conditions, there remain moments of “emergence” or “phase” (Williams, 2020) in which citizens manage to organise around connected publics, thanks to the transmission of “affects” (Papacharissi, 2016; Lünenborg, 2019) that “articulate community and collective interests” (Lünenborg and Raetzsch, 2017) and can even drive mobilisation processes (Gerbaudo, 2015: p. 14) if there is the necessary resonance and feedback between the different elements involved in its formation. The fact that mainstream media, by their very nature, make it difficult to deploy the arguments necessary for the formation of intersubjectivity under ideal conditions should not prevent us from observing in the affective nature of digital publics an expression of “ways of life”, “meanings” and “values”, even if it is through cultural products (Williams, 1961: p. 64–66). The most interesting aspect of this approach is that it allows us to observe, with a certain degree of systematicity, not only the affects that are activated, but also the

discursive and media interventions carried out by different social actors –from political movements to the media and platforms themselves– to favour the growth of some currents of opinion over others.

A critical examination of connected publics should not only consist of assessing whether these publics are more or less rational or affective, since the public opinion of citizens emerges in them *however it can*, but whether (1) their communicative action finds the necessary channels to be sustained over time and whether, at some point, (2) they manage to penetrate the political system –and, if not, to assess the possible reasons for this. The descriptive tools of public policymaking processes –here grouped around the concepts of self-reflexivity (how issues are framed and their meaning negotiated with others), contextuality (what agreements and disagreements emerge) and dynamicity (what role different interacting elements play in the evolution of the public, including human and non-human actors, whether legitimate or dishonest)– can be helpful in analysing both the potency and the obstacles encountered by citizens' communicative action. One of the fields of study that can most clearly benefit from deepening its studies around this approach is that which points to a crisis of democracy based on so-called "infodemics" (WHO, 2020), referring to the overabundance of information, including the deliberate distribution of fake news with the aim of making it difficult for citizens to access reliable sources of information. In particular, this field can obtain a more granular analysis of the specific actors and processes that hinder the effective articulation of emerging public opinion in different cases and contexts, for example, when situations arise that signal the urgency of addressing the consequences of climate change.

The other two lines of research have perhaps been less explored than the first.

The second line points to the analyst's search for alternative dynamics of intersubjectivity formation in the digital realm, beyond the logics of popularity promoted by commercial platforms and media. If a media system that is penetrated by the business-based logic of the platforms of the large technological companies does not provide citizens with the appropriate conditions for the deployment of ideas and arguments necessary for the articulation of intersubjectivity and public opinion, it is worthwhile to dedicate efforts to identifying other spaces within the digital realm in which these articulations can take place under other initial conditions. This is the case of some spaces designed to expand the public sphere from the perspective of free software and technological sovereignty (Calvo Miguel *et al.*, 2019), such as the non-commercial and distributed social network Mastodon (Xie, 2024) or the digital platform for citizen participation Decidim (Barandiaran *et al.*, 2024), to cite just a few examples. Although the starting conditions offered by

such spaces are *a priori* different from those offered by commercial platforms, there is still room to explore, both in practice and in empirical testing, the potentials –and possible obstacles– for the shaping of intersubjectivity and public opinion in and from these spaces (Brauweiler *et al.*, 2025; Dunbar-Hester, 2024; Borge *et al.*, 2023).

Finally, it is proposed to advance in the analysis of possible hybridisations between the logics of popularity on commercial platforms, in which the affective connection and the pressure of publics to conform to an opinion prevail, and alternative digital spaces, in principle more conducive to the deployment of ideas and arguments. In particular, it may be of interest to explore the field of communication strategies of organisations –be they political or civil society organisations– that integrate citizen articulation and the circulation of messages in their campaigns, and to assess whether these forms of hybrid communicative action are more likely to be sustained over time and to become institutionalised than those that emerge solely under the popularisation logic of the platforms.

Notes

1. Based on, according to Splichal (2022: p. 119), an idea initially noted by Harrison (1940) without including a reference to it.

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Influence of hybrid feminist activism on gender parity in the opinion sections of Catalan media: the #OnSónLesDones case

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Abstract

This article analyses the influence of the #OnSónLesDones (OSLD) [Where Are Women] group in achieving gender parity in the opinion sections of the major Catalan media. It does so with a mixed methodology that combines situational analysis, of a qualitative nature, and social network analysis, of a quantitative nature.

Firstly, results show that through the diffusion of the hashtag #onsónlesdones on Twitter, OSLD has contributed to make the underrepresentation of women in the public sphere visible, although the hashtag has been broadly shared by users with profiles similar to those of the group's activists. Secondly, that when reflecting on parity and opinion, the media take into account the postulates of the group. The conclusions point to the importance of studying the role of feminist activism in the transformation of journalistic routines and in the adoption of activist practices by the citizens.

Keywords

Hybrid activism, feminist activism, cyberfeminism, feminist journalism, opinion journalism, parity, public opinion, communication and gender.

Resum

L'article analitza la influència del grup #OnSónLesDones (OSLD) en l'assoliment de la paritat de gènere als espais d'opinió dels principals mitjans catalans. Ho fa amb una metodologia mixta que combina l'anàlisi situacional (situational analysis), de caràcter qualitatiu, i l'anàlisi de xarxes socials (social network analysis), de caràcter quantitatiu.

Els resultats mostren, primer, que mitjançant la difusió de l'etiqueta #onsónlesdones a Twitter, OSLD ha contribuït a visibilitzar la infrarepresentació de les dones a l'esfera pública, si bé l'etiqueta ha estat compartida, a grans trets, per usuàries amb perfils semblants als de les activistes del grup. Segon, que els mitjans, a l'hora de reflexionar sobre paritat i opinió, tenen en compte els postulats del grup. Les conclusions apunten a la importància d'estudiar el rol de l'activisme feminista en la transformació de rutines periodístiques i en l'adopció de pràctiques activistes per part de la ciutadania.

Paraules clau

Activisme híbrid, activisme feminista, ciberfeminisme, periodisme feminista, periodisme d'opinió, paritat, opinió pública, comunicació i gènere.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, activism has a hybrid nature in much of the world: people carry out protest actions, disseminate communication campaigns or establish forms of organisation that are developed, simultaneously or complementarily, in physical and digital spaces (Ardizzoni, 2017; Clark-Parsons, 2022; Treré, 2019).

Feminist journalists and activists have used hybrid forms of organisation, communication and political actions to reclaim a feminist perspective in news and in labour relations in newsrooms. The Spanish movement Las Periodistas Paramos [We Female Journalists Go On Strike] and its Catalan version, Les Periodistes Parem, are an example of this. Formed by professionals from all over Spain, it was born in 2018 to join the feminist strike on 8th March that year (Bernal-Triviño and Sanz-Martos, 2020; Florés Paredes, 2021; Iranzo-Cabrera, 2020).

Grouped around Telegram channels, they promoted a manifesto to demand job improvements and played a relevant role in disseminating the strike calls and giving public visibility to the demonstrations (Bernal-Triviño and Sanz-Martos, 2020; Florés Paredes, 2021; Ideograma *et al.*, 2019; Iranzo-Cabrera, 2020; Iranzo-Cabrera and Gozávez Pérez, 2022). Les Periodistes Parem contributed to Catalan female professionals joining the strike, organised a protest in Barcelona and denounced the discriminations suffered with the Twitter hashtag #ProuPeriodismeSexista [Enough Of Sexist Journalism] (Florés Paredes, 2021).

Another example of hybrid feminist activism in the field of communication is #OnSónLesDones [Where Are Women] (OSLD, by its Catalan initials). It was born in 2016 after some Twitter users used the hashtag #onsónlesdones to denounce the absence of female participants in a debate panel in TV3 .cat show. Seeing the impact, some of the female users, most of them from journalistic, university and cultural fields, organised themselves online to periodically recount the number of women who published their opinion in the main newspaper, digital, radio and television outlets in the country. The group also used hashtags such as #onsónlesdones or #primeradona [first woman] to highlight the role of women in public spaces and in professional fields that had previously been male-dominated.

Different studies on hybrid activism have asked to what extent this new form of political action helps achieve the goals of social movements (Clark-Parsons, 2022; Sampedro, 2021; Treré, 2019). Treré (2019) points out that it is only effective when there is a combination of social, political and cultural factors that favour it. Sampedro (2021) remarks that digital actions can change social perceptions about certain issues, but to promote institutional transformations it is necessary that it leads to forms of collective organisation sustained over time.

In the case of Las Periodistas Paramos, some effects of the movement were the creation, on the part of the media, of roles such as equality publishers or gender-specialised editors; the formation of new women journalists organisations, or the promotion of self-regulation mechanisms, in the form of manuals to inform on sexist violence, or Twitter accounts to denounce sexist news coverage and praise feminist news coverage (Iranzo-Cabrera, 2020; Iranzo-Cabrera and Gozávez Pérez, 2022).

In this line, the research aims, firstly, to analyse the impact of the hybrid activism of OSLD in achieving gender parity in the opinion sections of Catalan media recounted by the group; and, secondly, to address the Twitter echo of the OSLD content and the hashtag #onsónlesdones.

2. State of the matter

Mattoni and Treré (2014) divide activist practices into four categories. *Participatory practices* aim to involve other people in activist projects. *Organisational practices* serve to plan the actions that will be carried out and the operation of the group. The third category includes the practices that are carried out in the context of *protests*, actions and campaigns, while *symbolic practices* include the development of discourses and the creation of meanings and interpretations on the issues addressed. Thus, this research analyses the protest and symbolic practices of OSLD.

As much of the group's actions have been developed online, it is necessary to review which forms of digital activist practices have been identified in the academic literature. George and Leidner (2019) group them according to the degree of user involvement and the digital skills necessary to do them.

The first level comprises *digital spectator activities*. According to the authors, they represent most actions of digital activism and are those that generate a higher degree of involvement from the rest of online users. It is, for example, *clicktivism* –giving a like to a content, following activists profiles, etc.–, *metavoicing* –sharing content, republishing it, commenting on the content of others– and *assertion* –the creation of content on social media.

The second level comprises *transient activities*, such as the online purchase of goods and objects aligned with the ideals of the individual (*commodity activism*), the signing of petitions to governments and other institutions, the fundraising through online platforms, or the use of bots to promote political action (*botivism*).

The third level described by the authors includes the *gladiatorial activist practices*, which require a higher degree of involvement and computer knowledge: data activism, the dissemination of confidential information or hacking.

In addition to classifying actions according to the digital competencies to carry them out and the degree of involvement required, George and Leidner (2019) divide them according to the impact they seek to generate: *cognitive impact* is the one intended to influence the opinion of individuals; *emotional impact* is intended to generate an emotional response; *financial impact* is seeking either to penalise or reward economically; *reputational impact* is based on recognising or pointing out individuals and organisations; and *power construction* seeks to increase the degree of authority and control exercised by an individual or organisation.

Other researches focused on how online practices are developed. Xu and Saxton (2019) identify two types of tactics to make the message reach as many key users and key actors as possible. *Content-based tactics* consist of defining what will be said, when it will be said and how it will be said, either by sharing links, using images, quoting someone or sharing tags. *Connection-building tactics* seek to involve specific users. The authors conclude that the content-based tactics that works the most are those that disseminate messages accompanied by tags, links, images or videos. Likewise, they suggest that the tactics to weave contacts are focused on users who are outside the sector in which the organisation or activist group operates (Xu and Saxton, 2019).

In this line, hashtags collect messages scattered in the social media and channel them into a single conversation, so that they become a meeting point between users, activists and organisations with common interests (Nacher, 2021; Tynes *et al.*, 2016; Xu and Saxton, 2019). Some research shows that the way in which campaigns around the diffusion of a hashtag are conceived determine what kind of discussion is created around it.

For example, an analysis of Twitter conversations on the #Cuéntalo and #LaManada hashtags concludes that in the discussion generated by the #Cuéntalo hashtag, opinions of both known users with many followers as well as those of anonymous users stood out, something that did not happen with that of #LaManada, where the conversation was led by the most influential users (Robles *et al.*, 2019).

According to Robles, Gómez and Atienza (2019), the difference lies in the fact that #Cuéntalo was an organised campaign and encouraged all types of women to talk about their experiences of abuse. However, the authors explain that the conversations channeled through the hashtag #LaManada emerged spontaneously. This caused, firstly, that the discussion was monopolised by figures of great public relevance; secondly, that the conversation was highly polarised and, finally, that the conversation deviated from the group rape of a girl during the celebration of the Sanfermines of 2016 and went on to discuss other current issues (Robles *et al.*, 2019).

3. Research questions and methodology

The study poses three research questions. The first question is: **"What kind of digital practices does OSLD do, what impact do they seek, and what narrative resources are used to disseminate them?"**. In order to answer it, the study analyses the content of the OSLD blog and the reports they write about the presence of women in the opinion sections of the Catalan media, and fourteen activists of the group are interviewed.

The information is analysed following the qualitative methodology of situational analysis (Clarke *et al.*, 2017). It is a variant of the grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2015) specially designed for studies on social justice issues (feminist, anti-racist, queer, etc.), which aims to x-ray the relationships between human and non-human actors of a specific casuistry (*the situation*), the influence of certain conditioning factors (cultural, time, etc.) on the situation and the main discourses and discussions that define it.

Thus, the semi-structured and with open questions interviews and other documents have been analysed through a codification process that has identified recurring themes, classified in the categories "discursive constructions of the human and non-human actors", "sociocultural conditions that affect the situation where OSLD operates, which is the conflict around parity in opinion sections", "economic conditions", "political conditions", "time and space elements that affect the situation".

The fourteen participants were the ones who responded to the interview request made to the group by email. Their profiles are varied, and include the two founders, the activists that manage online communication and the coordinator of the group's organisation.

In addition, a selection of tweets from the OSLD Twitter account, published between 1st January 2022 and 31st March 2022, is analysed. The activists interviewed identified this corporate social media as the most relevant for their activity, apart from being the space where the group was created. Beyond discourse analysis using situational analysis, and following the methodology of Xu and Saxton (2019) to assess content-based tactics, a quantitative analysis is made of the number of tweets emitted during the period studied and the links, videos, *gifs* and images they contain. To study connection-based tactics, the number of actors targeted by tweets is taken into account and in what way they do so (mentioning, answering, citing, etc.). As Pavan (2017) observes, a frequent use of mentions and answers indicates a willingness to question and talk with other users, the use of hashtags is associated with the intention of contributing to discussions by providing content, while a greater use of retweets denotes a tendency to retransmit messages from others.

The second question is: **"Which is the scope of the group's online activity on Twitter?"**. To answer it, on the one hand, a group ego network is created from the interactions they established with other users from 1st October 2021 to 31st March 2022. Ego networks are formed around a particular actor (Crossley *et al.*, 2015). The central actor is called *ego*, and the *alters* are the users with whom he/she has ties. In the case of Twitter, the ties between *ego* and *alters* can be retweets, *likes*, answers, quotes or mentions made from the *ego* to the *alters* and from the *alters* to the *ego*, without necessarily having correspondence. The *alters* have been classified into the categories "OSLD", "politics", "media", "civil society", "academy" and "feminisms". These are the areas identified by the participants as relevant in their fight. In order to classify the *alters*, the information and images present in their biography on Twitter have been considered.

On the other hand, the *whole network* (Crossley *et al.*, 2015) of the hashtags #OnSónLesDones, #OnSonLesDones, #onsónlesdones and #onsonlesdones is created, in order to show the role of OSLD in its dissemination. The period analysed spans from 1st January 2013, the year when it was created, until 31st March 2022. In this type of network, the nodes are Twitter users and the ties are retweets: there is a tie between node A and B if A retweets B.

Following the methodology of Venturini, Jacomy and Jensen (2021), a first visual analysis of the network is made. Then it is organised using the ForceAtlas2 template in its default Gephi form, with the *non-overlap* function. This algorithm creates a representation of the network in which, among others, the proximity between nodes indicates similarity in terms of connectivity (shared neighbours, density of interactions) and *clusters* of nodes are formed, which allow to distinguish regions of interest in the network. The resulting network contains 26,680 nodes and 48,947 ties. The study only takes into account the *giant component*, formed by those nodes that are connected to the centre of the network. The giant component has 25,259 nodes. In order to make the analysis of clusters in this network easier, a community detection algorithm is used (Louvain method).

The difference between the periods analysed in the Twitter analysis is due to the availability of data, conditioned by the social network API. In triangulating the results of this section with qualitative analysis, it has been considered that the disparity of dates, although it is a limitation, allows to draw relevant conclusions from the case study.

Finally, the third question is: **"What has been the influence of OSLD on the adoption of an equal representation of men and women in the opinion sections of the Catalan media?"**. In order to discover it, between 2022 and 2023, seventeen editors, section heads or directors, nine women and eight men, of the media outlets and programmes recounted by OSLD were interviewed through semi-structured and open questions interviews: *Ara*, *El Periódico*,

El Punt Avui, *La Vanguardia*, *El Món*, *El Nacional*, *Nació Digital*, *Vilaweb*; *El matí de Catalunya Ràdio*, *Catalunya migdia* (Catalunya Ràdio), *El suplement* (Catalunya Ràdio), *El món a RAC1*, *No ho sé* (RAC1), *Els matins* (3cat), *Tot es mou* (3cat), *Més 324* (3cat) and *Bàsics* (betevé). The host of the radio show *Via lliure* (RAC1) could not be interviewed, due to schedule conflicts.

All research participants signed informed consents and their answers have been anonymised so that they cannot be identified (e.g.: *activist1*, *journalist3*). The data to perform the OSLD ego network has been processed with the R programme. Qualitative (situational analysis) and quantitative (network analysis) methods have been combined for triangulation reasons (Wald, 2014): the data obtained from the analysis of online activity has been contextualised and contrasted with the answers of the activists and journalists interviewed, and vice versa.

4. Results

4.1. OSLD Hybrid Practices

The main activity of the group is the periodic counting of the number of women in opinion columns or panels in the main Catalan media. Each volunteer is assigned one media outlet to audit during the counting period, which can last a week, a quarter or a year. Every day, the volunteers, self-named *recouters*, publish the result of the media outlet they have been assigned on the blog, and disseminate it on the group's Twitter account. The data dissemination tweets cite the recounted media, and they are congratulated or reprimanded for the results. Once the recount is finished, the data is collected and a report is prepared, which is sent to the recounted media and uploaded to the blog and social media profiles of the group. These reports are presented in public events, whether in the form of press conferences, performances in public space or debate panels with journalists.

As for the analysis of content-based tactics and connection-building tactics (Xu and Saxton, 2019), between January and March 2022 OSLD posted 54 tweets on its Twitter account. Of these, 18 were created by the group, the rest were retweets. In other words, during that period, OSLD had a tendency to relay messages from others (Pavan, 2017).

Fifteen of the eighteen tweets had to do with the count on the occasion of 8th March that year. However, the tweet with the most reactions, 19 retweets and 51 *likes*, shows a photograph of some members of the group at the Women's Day demonstration held in Barcelona (image 1). In the text accompanying the image, the hashtag #onsónlesdones, which identifies both the group and its objective, and the hashtag #8M2022, one of those used on Twitter to disseminate information about the feminist strikes that year.

Image 1. Most widespread OSLD tweet during the analysed period



Source: @onsónlesdones Twitter account.

The second tweet with the most retweets, eight, refers to the intervention of the group in the Catalan Parliament, and the third echoes the participation of an OSLD member in a radio programme. Thus, the tweets that disseminate the results of the count are the ones that generate the least retweets. In the case of the *likes*, the situation is a bit different: the second tweet that has the most retweets, fourteen, comments on the results of *El món a RAC1*, and the third, with nine, comments on those of *Més 324*.

Tweets that spread the results of the count use content-based tactics and connection-building tactics (Xu and Saxton, 2019). One example is the hashtags that identify the count (#8M2022), key concepts such as #paritat [parity] or the nicknames that activists give to the media that have less female opinion-makers (#ElVanguardia). There are also links to blog posts detailing the results of a media outlet; a gif or an image, and what activists call "the traffic light", a succession of circles where the green ones indicate the number of female opinion-makers and the red ones indicate the number of male opinion-makers (image 2). The connection-building tactics consist of citing the media outlet analysed and its director, a fact that, according to Pavan (2017), aims to directly question specific users.

Of the 36 retweets made by OSLD during the months studied, seven are retweets coming from members of the group, two of whom comment on the frustration generated by being a recount of media outlets that usually present low results. Thirteen retweets are to journalists or media outlets, half of which refer to OSLD appearances in the media. One of the retweets is about a recount made by *betevé's* works council on the number of women and non-

Image 2. Dissemination tweet of the results of a media outlet recounted by OSLD



Source: @onsónlesdones Twitter account.

binary people who appear as panelists, contributors or expert sources in the TV network's programmes.

Other retweets are of press articles about the presence of women in different work areas, some of which are titled "On són les dones?" ["Where are women?"] (image 3). As several interviewed activists said, "spreading the vice of recounting" women in management teams, round tables, governments, music festival posters, awards, etc. is one of the group's goals.

All OSLD retweets to political actors, five, are from members of Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya. Three of these tweets comment on the results that OSLD detailed during its speech in the Catalan Parliament's Committee on Equality and Feminisms. The group demands that private media outlets that do not achieve parity in their opinion sections should not receive public subsidies, under the protection of article 25 of the Catalan Law 17/2015 on effective equality of women and men. In order to achieve this, the interviewed activists explained that they had met with representatives of institutions such as the Catalan Audiovisual Council (Consell de l'Audiovisual de Catalunya), the Department of Equality and Feminisms or the Secretariat of Communication and Media of the Catalan government. At the time of ending this research, the demand of the OSLD had not been met.

Image 3. Retweet of an article on women's visibility



Source: @onsonlesdones Twitter account.

Image 4. Retweet to a user that mentions @onsonlesdones



Source: @onsonlesdones Twitter account.

The group retweeted five tweets from Twitter users. Some mention @onsonlesdones. For example, a female user denounces that the Spanish press ignores that Rafael Nadal is not the first tennis player to win twenty-one *Grand Slams*, because three women had achieved it before. Another tweet that mentions @onsonlesdones complains that, in the list of the best sports moments of the year 2021 made by Movistar+, there is no feat with a woman as the protagonist (image 4).

4.2. Scope of OSLD Online Activity

The OSLD ego network on Twitter has 615 *alters*. Of these, 39% belong to the field of civil society (activists, organisations, anonymous individuals); 29% are users linked to journalism (media outlets, professionals); and 14% to feminist activism (individuals or organisations). 6% of *alters* belong to the world of politics. The accounts linked to ERC are majority, seven; followed by those of the CUP (three), En Comú Podem (two), Junts per Catalunya (one) and PSC (one). Thus, the OSLD ego network is mostly left-wing and pro-independence. The rest of *alters* are university profiles (8%) or OSLD activists profiles (4%).

As we can see in Table 1, of the twenty users that mention OSLD most often, only three belong to media-related accounts; two accounts linked to journalism are among the twenty users who most *like* the group's tweets, and no other *alter* from the media world cites OSLD.

Table 2 shows how only five journalists are among the seventeen accounts that have answered the group; no account linked to a media outlet or journalist is among the twenty *alters* that retweet OSLD. By contrast, in both tables we see how the accounts belonging to civil society, and the feminist and university fields are the ones that are most predisposed to interact with the group. We also see the predisposition of OSLD activists to spread the main account content.

Interviews with the activists indicate that contact with universities, women's associations or other civil society entities is rather sporadic, limited to specific campaigns. One example is the presentation, together with migrant women's associations, of a complaint to the Catalan Ombudsman (Síndic de Greuges) regarding the underrepresentation of women, especially racialised women, in media opinion sections. For *activist10*, the Catalan Ombudsman's performance "did not make sense". As this activist explains, the Catalan Ombudsman asked the CAC about its work and asked the Col·legi de Periodistes [College of Journalists] if there was labour discrimination in the opinion sections: "[The Ombudsman] should have turned to the media outlets [...] to know what they were doing to straighten the situation of inequality".

Apart from the activity in the ego network, if we take a look at the network around the #onsonlesdones hashtag we see that, taking into account the composition of the

Table 1. Users who mention, like or cite OSLD the most. Accounts belonging to the media sector are highlighted

Mentions		Likes		Cites	
User	Field	User	Field	User	Field
Minobiscarme	Civil society	laura_laurae	Civil society	JudithU64	Civil society
Lamacarella	OSLD	CluaLeonor	Civil society	carmepovedal	Feminisms
Rosaurajx	Civil society	AlamoAmor	Civil society	Raqini	Universities
annamanso	OSLD	mrosabuxarra	Universities	la_garsi	Civil society
BetCat73	Civil society	Dialmantine	OSLD	laura_laurae	Civil society
deyzaguirre	Civil society	Sherrercat	OSLD	dialmantine	OSLD
sherrercat	OSLD	Rosaurajx	Civil society	belbosCK	Civil society
laura_laurae	Civil society	Laiateruel	Media		
LauraHuergaRV	OSLD	questio982	Civil society		
JudithU64	Civil society	loteruelo	Civil society		
JordiVillaroda	Media	Marinavivo	OSLD		
martaroqueta	OSLD	llambordes	Universities		
Catinformació	Civil society	ester_morante	Civil society		
FlorenScience	Feminisms	msarrias30	Media		
silviamural	Politics	annabelmia	Universities		
Viktorbir	Civil society	nohihamesqueara	Civil society		
maiaviaditque	OSLD	LluísCasanovas3	Civil society		
Trinitro	Politics	lamacarella	OSLD		
Txellbq	Media	MoVallve	Feminisms		
lineamarilla	Media	MariaThorson	Feminisms		

Source: Own elaboration based on Twitter API data.

Table 2. Users who answer or retweet OSLD the most. Accounts belonging to the media sector are highlighted

Answer		Retweet	
User	Field	User	Field
Minobiscarme	Civil society	laura_laurae	Civil society
oscarcatradio	Media	elenafonts	OSLD
annabelmia	Universities	martaroqueta	OSLD
Eliduvina	Feminisms	MartaAymerich	Universities
monserdadenou	Media	annamariasastre	Civil society
lauragrandej	Media	Artal181Artal	Civil society
elisendacarod	Media	susaniye	OSLD
Estacadebares	Feminisms	dialmantine	OSLD
Gracul	Civil society	lamacarella	OSLD
Elenafonts	OSLD	Totaltupper	OSLD
Davidgonrub	Media	Arrosamblet	OSLD
lamacarella	OSLD	marinavivo_	OSLD
Som_dones	Feminisms	sherrercat	OSLD
AlamoAmor	Civil society	nohihamesqueara	Civil society
GougesOlimpia77	Feminisms	vampyCATman	Civil society
lorenaescandell	Feminisms	Adriagm	Universities
dialmantine	OSLD	questio982	Civil society
		holasoclasandra	Feminisms
		Calsojorn	Civil society
		giselaro55	Civil society

Source: Own elaboration based on Twitter API data.

network (figure 1), the resulting conversation does not seem excessively polarised. It is a network similar to that of #Cuéntalo (Robles *et al.*, 2019), except that in it there are female users who lead the conversation.

The giant component of the network of the #onsónlesdones hashtag has 25,259 nodes and contains four main regions (A, B, C and D). The green group (A) is the largest and is located in the centre. Among the most retweeted users are the @onsonlesdones account and some of its members (@BelOlid, @lizcastro, @taniaverge). The composition of the group suggests that this community is the most interconnected and interactive, because it has very short distances between nodes: it means that there is quite a lot of internal cohesion and a strong flow of information.

The orange group (B) is made up of left-wing and pro-independence parties and female politicians. It is a well-connected and dense group, but separated from the green group (A). The most retweeted users of Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya are the former president of the Parliament Carme Forcadell (@ForcadellCarme) and the former minister Dolors Bassa (@dolorsbassac). The most retweeted users who at that time belonged to the

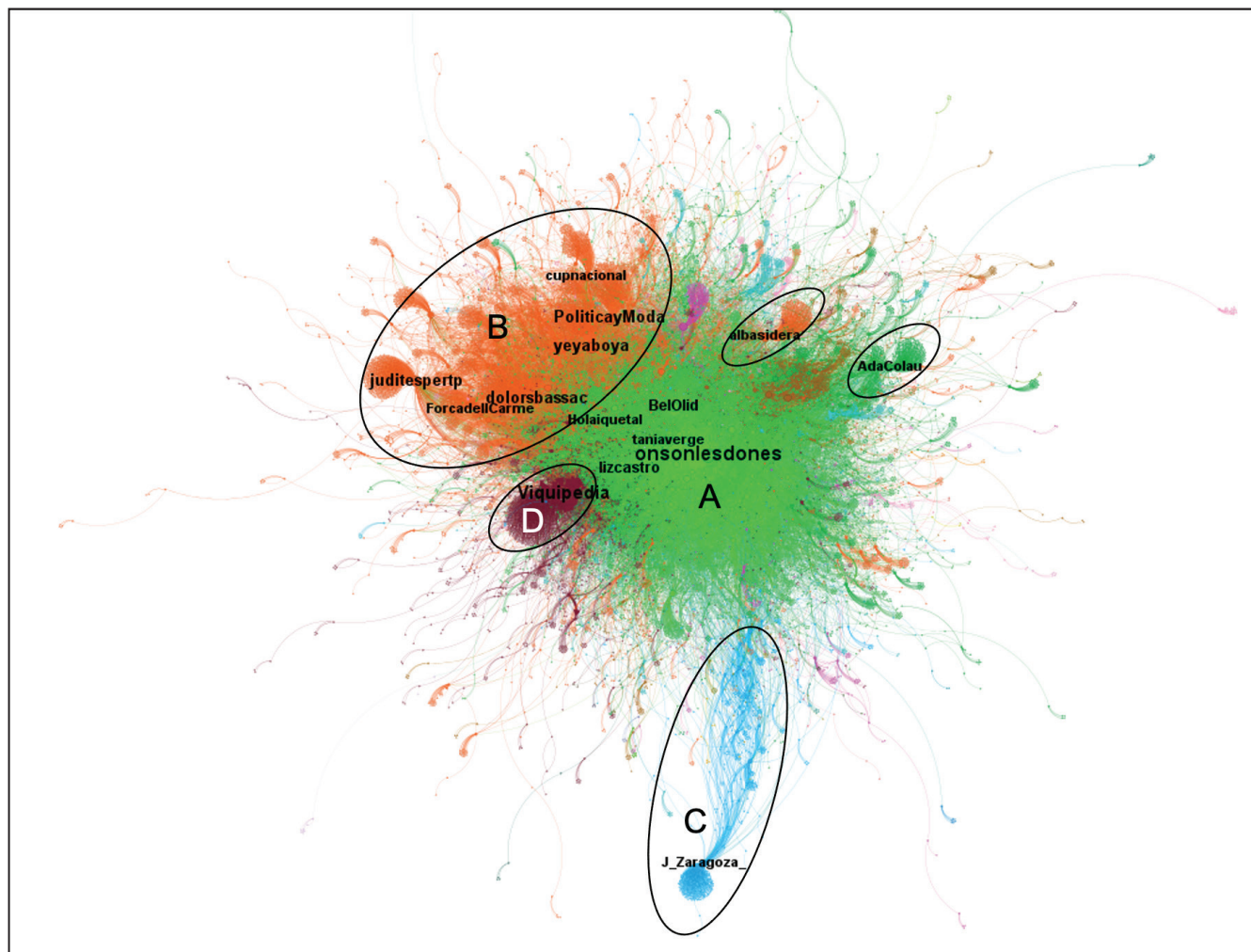
Candidatura d'Unitat Popular were the party account, @cupnacional, and Mireia Boya (@yeyaboya). Another notable user is Patrycia Centeno (@PoliticayModa), a journalist specialising in political communication.

The blue group (C) is separated from the rest of the network and is grouped around José Zaragoza (@J_Zaragoza_), at that time a member of the Spanish Congress (Congreso de los Diputados) for the PSC (Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya). The long queue that leaves the main network in the downward direction could indicate that it is a closely connected community, in which the nodes interact more with each other than with the rest of the network.

The maroon group (D) is articulated around the Viquipèdia account (@Viquipedia). This may indicate that the #onsonlesdones hashtag was based on disseminating data and facts. Smaller and more peripheral nodes also stand out in the network, such as the account of the former Mayor of Barcelona Ada Colau (@AdaColau) or the correspondent in Italy for several media outlets, Alba Sidera (@albasidera).

Finally, it should be noted that the network follows a structure of centre and periphery, in which the OSLD group

Figure 1. The network around the #onsónlesdones hashtag



Source: Own elaboration, with the support of Dr Emanuele Cozzo, based on Twitter API data.

(green, A) dominates the conversation. Group C (blue) does not have many strong connections with the rest of the network, indicating that it is an isolated group. Group B (orange) does interact with the green group (A), but it is different from it.

Answers from participants indicate that the composition of the OSLD ego network and the network around the #onsonlesdones and similar hashtags reflects the ideologies and contacts in the off-line world of the group members: some of them are members of or identify with Catalan left-wing parties, especially the pro-independence parties.

Activists explained that the contacts of some members of the group were used to invite relevant figures to the group's events; collect signatures for the founding manifesto; book spaces for assemblies; request legal advice; request that they disseminate certain content, and organise meetings with key actors. "In the presentation events [of the recounting reports] I have made many phone calls. To political contacts, trade unions, etc. I brought [name of a mayor] because she wanted to meet [name of an OSLD activist]", activist7.

4.3. Relationship of OSLD with the media

Except for one case, all the interviewed journalists knew OSLD. They all answered they would have no problem meeting with them and discussing their claims. Some interviewed people knew some of the activists, either because they worked with them, had spoken with them in private or had been invited to some event of the organisation. For example, *journalist5* explained that she participated in a round table on women with positions of responsibility in the media organised by OSLD:

"I wanted to [participate in this event] because I felt totally questioned. On both sides, because I think they are absolutely right and because I believe that as a person in charge, as people who have some power of decision in the media, the message goes to us too."

At the beginning of OSLD, the digital *El Nacional* published an article responding to the demands of the group. In that article, titled "On són les dones d'El Nacional?" ("Where Are the Women of *El Nacional*?") (Piqué, 2017), the media outlet recognised that OSLD was fighting for a "just cause", but said some of the criticism that the group directed at the media outlet was not entirely so, because they had many women who worked there as journalists and editors, so they decided what was newsworthy or not: "In *El Nacional*, women, in addition to giving opinions, manage the company and elaborate the news".

In this vein, *journalist14* and *journalist17* considered that the fact that OSLD only focused on the number of women in the opinion sections simplified the work that their respective media outlets, a newspaper and a radio

programme, did to introduce a feminist perspective into the content.

"If they only knew how much work is done here so that women are represented at all levels, in dealing with issues that any other newspaper would not deal with [...], we have the most equal number of readers in the country. To ignore all this seems to me to be a simplification that fails to consider that our work is very combative, very conscious, and very hard." *Journalist14*.

Journalist11, from a digital media, and *journalist13*, from a radio programme, disagreed with OSLD's criteria for recounting women in opinion sections. *Journalist13* did not understand why they did not count a woman who had a daily opinion section. *Journalist11* suggested that, instead of counting the number of women on a daily basis, OSLD should look at the total of men and women in the media's opinion sections, because there were men who opined more often than women.

Journalist4, *journalist5*, *journalist9*, *journalist16* and *journalist17* explained that either they or other members of the editorial department were aware of the OSLD count when thinking about parity in their opinion sections. The interviewees described the group as a "lobby" (*journalist17*), an association "with people who are influential in their sectors and of recognised prestige" (*journalist10*) "a critical media observatory" (*journalist9*), a public media audition that acts "as a mirror effect and as a reminder" (*journalist5*) or a group "that keeps us awake" (*journalist1*).

Some interviewees pointed out that, within their media outlet, there were women who insisted on improving female representation in news content. Those working at the Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals [Catalan Audiovisual Media Corporation] placed gender parity within the framework of policies to improve the representation of women adopted by the institution from 2022. Finally, *journalist10* observed that the demands of OSLD had made an impact thanks to the growing social sensitivity around feminist issues.

"Not only within [name of the media outlet] has there been a change, but also at the social level. It is obvious that society is increasingly for parity and for defending the rights of women, and everybody is increasingly aware that many times the media have not been plural enough."

5. Conclusions

The first research question is: "What kind of digital practices does OSLD do, what impact do they seek and what narrative resources are used to disseminate them?". The periodic counting of the number of women in the opinion sections of the main Catalan media is an example of crowdsourcing in the field of data activism,

a belligerent digital practice (George and Leidner, 2019). Following the classification of George and Leidner (2019), we can conclude that, by disseminating the daily results of the count on Twitter and mentioning the media outlet in question in each tweet, OSLD expects to cause an impact on the reputation of the tagged media, and generate an emotional and cognitive response to the rest of the social media users, making them participants in the indignation or joy generated by the results. The ultimate goal of OSLD is operationally impact the media, forcing them to take measures that guarantee gender parity in opinion sections.

Considering the number of retweets and *likes* obtained by the content created by OSLD during the period analysed, we could conclude, unlike Xu and Saxton (2019), that the wealth in connection and content tactics does not guarantee further interactions. The fact that the tweets that generated a higher number of interactions were those that talk about activities such as going to demonstrations or participating in radio shows, suggests that OSLD generates more interest when it does other things that are not recounting. Following Pavan's observations (2017), the use of hashtags such as #8M2022 suggests that the group places its demand in relation to the Catalan feminist movement.

As for retweets, the group spreads messages about the experience of being a recounter. With this, it can seek to generate an emotional impact, of empathy, on Twitter users (George and Leidner, 2019) and, also, to recognise the work of activists.

Thirteen retweets were to journalists or media outlets, half of which referred to OSLD appearances on the media. This can be valued as a way of highlighting the group's notoriety in order to gain *power* (George and Leidner, 2019), in this case power of pressure, underlining that the media, the actor that the group intends to influence, recognise it as a source of authority. Likewise, disseminating the study on the presence of women and non-binary people in *betevé* programmes can be a way of disseminating data, connecting with *betevé* journalists, or highlighting that the work of OSLD is important, since there are journalists who also do it.

As Mattoni and Treré (2014) explain, activists can develop symbolic practices in order to create discourses, meanings and interpretations about the issues addressed. The tweets on the count create a way to represent the discrimination of women in the opinion sections (the traffic light) and to identify in a clear and direct way the problem of the underrepresentation of women (a hashtag, #onsonlesdones, which also gives the group its name). They also try to create an interpretation, using *gifs* and ironic hashtags, such as #ElVanguardio, on the reported problem.

The second research question raises **the scope of the group's activity on Twitter**. In relation to the ego network, we can see that most *alters* belong to the field of civil society, journalism or feminist activism. The predominance

of these three user profiles can be attributed both to the group's objectives –to reprimand or congratulate the media and make the role of women in the public sphere visible– and to its feminist ideology. However, if we analyse the interactions (*likes*, mentions, citations, retweets and responses) established between OSLD and the *alters*, we see that, although the group's strategy is based on questioning the media, there is a clear difference between who the messages are addressed to and who participates in the conversation.

Attending to the cluster composition of the network around #onsonlesdones, it can be concluded that this has been promoted mostly by women who are either activists or identify with the feminist cause; belong to left-wing political parties, preferably pro-independence parties, or are journalists. In addition, the presence of users with a high degree of centrality (in-degree), that is, they are very connected to the rest of the nodes, indicates that the network is governed by a dynamic based on influence, in which a few key users define the conversation. Most of them are women, except for @Viquipedia, @cupnacional and @J_Zaragoza_.

Both the network around the #onsonlesdones hashtag and that of the group's ego reflect the ideological preferences of activists, mostly left-wing, mostly independentist, and with a predominance of users who identify as women. Likewise, the fact that the most influential users within the OSLD group of activists (A) are the non-binary writer Bel Olid, the former Minister of Equality and Feminisms, Tània Verge, or the digital and pro-Catalan activist Liz Castro, indicates that having influence both online and off-line can be an important element to disseminate a hashtag.

Finally, the third question referred to **the influence of OSLD on the adoption of an equal representation of men and women in opinion sections**. With the strategy of appealing to the reputation of the media, with online communication, events in the physical sphere or personal exchanges between activists and media in private spaces, OSLD has become a "lobby", "a public media observatory" or an auditing agent, in the words of the interviewed journalists. The analysis of the interviews shows that the editors of the recounted media know the group (except for one case), that some have felt challenged by their claims, others have taken them into account, others have disagreed with the OSLD counting criteria, and one media outlet has answered them, publicly, in writing.

According to data from the last OSLD recount, corresponding to the first half of March 2025 (#OnSónLesDones, 2025), of the nineteen opinion sections audited, thirteen had reached parity –in 2016, only two of the sections studied had reached parity. All the recounted sections of the CCMA, those of *betevé* and of TVE Catalunya, two of the three of RAC1, and the media outlets *El Nacional*, *Vilaweb* and *El Punt Avui*, had reached it. The audited opinion sections that remain to

achieve parity are from private companies (*La Vanguardia*, *Ara*, *El Periódico*, *Nació Digital*, *El Món* and *El món a RAC1*) and the vast majority are either newspapers on paper or digital media.

Some of the interviewed journalists pointed out that the demands of OSLD had found a place in a Catalan society that, at least until the reactionary onslaught, was sensitive to feminist issues. Others explained that within their media there had been initiatives, either at individual level or at corporate level, to increase the presence of women in content.

Thus, the data in the report and the observations of journalists suggest, in line with the observation of Treré (2019), that the effectiveness of hybrid activism is marked by its social and political context, since the strategy of OSLD, especially in the beginning, converged with a rise of the feminist movement and with the efforts within the newsrooms to make the role of women visible.

6. Discussion

The case analysis of OSLD draws two interesting conclusions for the debate on the impact of feminist activism on journalistic routines and the generation of public conversation on feminist issues.

The first is the importance of studying feminist activism considering the interrelation between the digital and physical spheres in the development of their actions and the evaluation of their impact. This requires the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, in order to triangulate the results.

For example, quantitative analysis of the interactions that OSLD establishes with Twitter users, as well as the number of retweets in the publications of the results of the count, could lead us to conclude that the media do not feel challenged by the demands of the group, since they tend to interact little with it, and that parity on the media does not interest much at general level.

However, interviews with the editors of the media outlets recounted by the group show that most of them know it, some have spoken with activists in the organisation, and others have even participated in the events organised by the group. On the other hand, while interviews with activists have revealed that contacts with agents from the fields of academia, civil society or feminisms are not a priority, these audiences are the ones who most interact with the online content published by the group.

The centrality of OSLD in the dissemination of #onsónlesdones hashtag shows that the group is also perceived as an agent that fights to make women visible beyond opinion sections. However, the data show that this visibility is limited, largely confined to communities with characteristics similar to those of the group's activists.

On the other hand, the fact that there are users who have

joined the initiative to count women suggests that the group has encouraged the adoption of activist practices. That is, there are activist and protest practices that can generate a participatory effect (Mattoni and Treré, 2014) and that can contribute to changing social perceptions on certain issues (Sampedro, 2021). This suggests a possible line of research: to what extent the digital practices of feminist activism contribute to the media literacy of citizens.

The second conclusion is that feminist activism cannot be read only as a relationship of pressure towards certain actors isolated from any political, economic or social context, easily reduced to online and other off-line strategies: in this case, of direct pointing on Twitter and using the prestige acquired at the activist and organisation level to exert pressure in events or meetings, either public or private.

This is where the main limitation of the study should be mentioned. The media recounted by OSLD represent a small sample of the Catalan media system: most of them are based in Barcelona and are of Catalan scope. A future line of research could analyse the impact of certain feminist initiatives on regional or local media. This would provide very relevant knowledge, because the results of this study suggest the need to place feminist activism in the journalistic field in relation to the dynamics and relationships within journalistic newsrooms, attending to their business policies; to identify which professionals in each editorial board can be allies to promote changes, and to detect possible alliances with actors outside the media –in universities, in civil society, with other feminisms.

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Grey Denialism's Use of Media in Spain: Blaming the Messenger

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Abstract

Although climate denialism in Spain is a minority view, there is an important core group that resists the idea of the need to act urgently against this phenomenon. This article presents the findings of an empirical study based on a mixed research strategy involving a standardised questionnaire survey and a specific group method that we have termed interpellative groups. The study examines the presence of climate denialism from three perspectives: a) formation of distant opinions on climate change; b) differential relationships with the media among those who exhibit some degree of distance; c) the role of the media as a reference in substantiating expressions of distance.

Keywords

Denialism, information cascade, interpellative groups, media, climate change.

Resum

El negacionisme climàtic a Espanya és minoritari, tot i que s'hi aprecia un nucli important que es resisteix a admetre, si més no, la urgència d'actuar davant el fenomen. L'article mostra els resultats d'un estudi empíric -a partir d'una estratègia de recerca mixta que fa servir enquesta amb qüestionari estandarditzat i un mètode grupal concret que hem denominat grups interpel·latius- de les empremtes del negacionisme climàtic des de tres aspectes: a) la fixació de les opinions distants amb el canvi climàtic; b) la relació diferencial amb els mitjans de comunicació entre els qui mostren algun grau de distància, i c) el paper dels mitjans de comunicació com a referència per fonamentar les expressions de distància.

Paraules clau

Negacionisme, cascada informativa, grups interpel·latius, mitjans de comunicació, canvi climàtic.

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Introduction

If we start from the basis that denialism is the rejection of what is generally accepted, be it an event, a phenomenon or a process, then all denialism represents a minority perspective within public opinion. This original minority stance, which reveals what others naively believe (Francescutti, 2024), can nevertheless sparks doubts among those with less well-defined social positions on the subject (event, phenomenon, process). These doubts tend to differ from the original or ontological denialism, which is limited to denying the existence of the fact. Instead, they diffuse into a plurality of positions and expressions, especially focused on denying part of its essential characteristics. What was once limited to a few militant anti-consensus activists now spreads as paralysing doubt among the majority consensus. While the number of denialists in the strict or ontological sense may not increase, depending on the phenomenon, the group of partial denialists may grow.

In relation to climate change, which is the central focus of this paper, the doubt that is generated may strike us all, as Washington and Cook (2011:3) suggest. However, the fact that feelings of doubt are already present in the initial environmental conflicts, despite fairly consolidated affirmations by the scientific community, the multiplication of actors in the communication system—with social networks and specific blogs playing a particularly prominent role—and the demand for concrete measures to tackle the problem seem to perpetuate this state of doubt in the face of the empirical evidence.

As such, this article aims to analyse the relationship between the media and these positions that are becoming more distant with respect to climate change. Through findings based on empirical research¹ that combines quantitative and qualitative methods, we focus on this relationship between the two. Firstly, by trying to identify the differential use of media between denialist positions. Secondly, with a focus on those social positions that express doubt about climate change, by examining the role played by the reference to the media.

These empirical observations have revealed traces of the process of selective attention to and interpretation of media content in relation to climate change. It can thus be said that there is an echo taking place that serves to distance oneself from the phenomenon of climate change and the measures required to tackle it, without necessarily needing to identify oneself as a denialist or simply to be a denialist. Part of the sample surveyed echoes the doubt and lack of urgency in action on climate change, using the media as a reference point. However, rather than echoing the media content itself, it seems that it is the reference to the media that serves to echo these doubts. To partially draw on Sunstein's proposals (2003, 2009), especially the concept of cascade, this is how the echo chamber

works, as the process takes on the form of a cascade of doubt. Doubts regarding climate change have fostered polarisation in society regarding the phenomenon (Dunlap et al., 2016; Hochschild, 2018:33). In the United States, where the majority of research on the social basis of denialism has been conducted, opinion poll results estimate its prevalence at between 20–30% of the population.

In Spain, it is worth noting that although climate denialism constitutes a minority view, it is present among a not insignificant proportion of the population, and that it has not decreased over time. Results from FECYT (2023 and 2025) and CIS surveys show striking trends towards social distancing from this issue: the percentage of those least concerned about climate change exceeded 28% in October 2024 (CIS survey 3478) and averaged 24% that year.

There has been an increase in positions that can be considered critical of the way in which most experts present climate change and its consequences. Taking into account the degree of concern about climate change as a very indirect indication (Ramos and Callejo, 2022), it is observed that around a quarter of the Spanish population over 18 years of age exhibits distance from the phenomenon. This is a trend that does not seem to be transitional (García, 2024:332). This is why it is important to examine this section of Spanish public opinion from a sociological point of view, particularly in relation to the media, as is done in this paper.

An expressive broadening of the climate change denialist strategy

The introduction of doubt about climate change has gradually broadened the scope of denialism. This takes the form of a variety of statements that do not identify with the original, or ontological, denialism, which simply rejects the existence of the phenomenon. By analysing the media and public policy proposals, Lamb et al. (2020) identify up to twelve types of discourse that constitute something more than denialism. They refer to this as obstructionism or, above all, *delayism*, underlining its connection to the aim of delaying policies to combat climate change. While these developments expand the original concept of denialism by highlighting certain defining characteristics, this paper will continue to refer to it as denialism and, for the sake of nuance, as grey denialism.

These different strands of climate denialism reinterpret the original denialism. They no longer deny its existence, the crux of denialism, but reinterpret or directly question some of its characteristics. Thus, instead of: (a) taking it as a devastating threat, it is reinterpreted as a potentially beneficial phenomenon, from which advantages can be derived (Washington and Cook, 2011); (b) or admitting that it is an effect of human action, it is reinterpreted as an autonomous or natural phenomenon (Rahmsfort, 2004); (c)

or perceiving it as a problem that societies urgently need to tackle, it is reinterpreted as a problem that is not urgent or cannot be tackled, and which, at most, we can only adapt to (Dryzek et al, 2013; Capstick and Pidgeon, 2014; Mann, 2021); or (d) placing it as the backbone of public policies and budgets, it is highlighted its high cost in terms of social welfare and economic growth.

Faced with the accumulation of evidence, both experiential and scientific, which makes denial of the existence of climate change unsustainable, denialism leads to other expressions that fuel doubt and, above all, the potential public resistance to action. Expressive variations of denialism tend to be attributed to the action of interested parties (energy corporations, *think tanks*, etc. (Dunlap and Jacques, 2013)) or political positions (Lamb et al., 2020), which use the media as an instrument for their own gain.

This paper draws on research that examines how denialism enters the public agenda, breaking the previous consensus (Skocpol, 2013; Antonio and Brulle, 2011; De Pryck and Germmenne, 2017). The media's role in the dissemination of climate denialism primarily involves supporting the claims of non-experts in the field, who portray themselves as real scientists (Klein, 2015; Lahsen, 2008 and 2013; Oreskes and Conway, 2018; Young and Fitz, 2020), which includes: publishers who publish their books and journals (Dunlap and Jacques 2013); mainstream media that echo their proposals and give them a stamp of respectability (Boykoff, 2013; Boykoff and Boykoff, 2004; Elsasser and Dunlap, 2013; Mayer 2012) and social networks (Jacques and Knox, 2016) where active denialist blogs are gaining prominence (Coan et al, 2021; Sharman, 2014).

This research is of great interest because it addresses the forms of denialism through the discourses or content of the media. In Spain, where the issue of climate change is gaining greater prominence in the media (Rodrigo-Cano and Fernández-Muerza, 2024), few publications have addressed the relationship between denialism and the media itself (Martín-Sosa and Jiménez Gómez, 2021). Consequently, the focus shifts from the media to the positions that can be defined as denialist, or at least skeptical, about climate change. These positions are manifested in what we have termed the expressive economy of climate change denialism.

The aim of this research is to establish the relationship between the different denialist positions, going beyond the initial denial of the phenomenon, by ascertaining which media outlets are used by those who hold any of these denialist positions, or who express doubt or uncertainty about some of the current features surrounding the phenomenon of climate change which are accepted by the vast majority of the scientific community, such as: anthropogenesis, the negative effects of which are considered to be of high and serious importance, and

the urgent need for measures to combat its advance, regardless of the cost.

Methodology

The empirical material is drawn from a study combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Here, the qualitative perspective takes the form of nine group experiences that we have called *interpellative groups*, which are characterised by the following:²

1: Employed men/women (40-50 years old), middle-middle class, living in the metropolitan area of Madrid and with children between 8 and 15 years old.

2: Male/female university students (19-23 years old), in non-environmental-related disciplines and living in Madrid (city).

3: Men/women working in large or medium-sized companies (30-40 years old), who have been looking to move for at least 2 months. Half of them live in the city of Madrid, while the other half live in the metropolitan area.

4: Unemployed working-class women (35-45 years old) living in the city of Madrid.

5: Retired men/women from the urban middle classes (68-75 years old) and residents of Madrid (city).

6: Male/female undergraduate science and engineering students (19-22 years old) and residents of Valencia.

7: Men, medium-sized businessmen (30-40 years old) and residents of Valencia.

8: Women, housewives, middle class (40-50 years old) and residents of Valencia.

9: Men/women representing business people, active members of the environmental movement and residents of Valencia.

10: Teenage girls who have taken part in Extinction Rebellion demonstrations, Fridays for Future or climate strikes (15-17 years old) and who live in Valencia.

All the group meetings took place in rooms set up for this purpose. In the case of Madrid, we rented a room at the Centro de Reuniones Institute. In Valencia, a room designed for this type of experience was set up at the University of Valencia. The fact that all the meetings were held in these two cities was, in part, due to budgetary reasons, as the team was made up of professors from different universities in Madrid and the University of Valencia, and in part to cover the polar criteria of climate (continental/Mediterranean), proximity to the sea (far away/close by) or experiences of climatic disasters. The verbal material produced during the meetings was transcribed by professional transcribers, with the research team reviewing the verbatim transcripts and cross-checking them with the audio recordings.

In terms of the design of the dynamics proposed to these groups, they exhibited characteristics that differed significantly from the better-known group methods of

social research, such as discussion groups and focus groups. The dynamics were designed as experiences in which manifestations regarding climate change, the future, and doubts about climate change were expected to arise from direct questioning among the participants. After an initial open phase, the participants were questioned directly by the moderator about their level of involvement in their statements and potential measures or public policies to tackle climate change. Once the dynamics had entered into the logic of interpellations, each participant was invited to question the other participants. This change in dynamics entailed, on the one hand, a certain shift in the focus of the group's work from the object –in this case, climate change– to the involvement of participants' actions with respect to the object, with questions such as: To what extent would you do what you said you would? Would any of you do what they said? As they said this, what would you ask them? etc. To speed up this interpellative dynamic, instead of the consensual (discussion groups) or objectual (focus groups) dynamic, the number of participants was reduced to four or five. These participants had relatively homogeneous social positions, and some had opposing characteristics that could potentially cause divergence within the groups, such as residence in a city versus residence in a metropolitan area; small businesspeople and ecologists; vegetarians and omnivores. It should be borne in mind that the main objectives of the exercises were the differential nuances in the representation of climate change, the doubts or uncertainties regarding the characteristics of climate change, and the approximation of the degree of involvement or debate surrounding different types of measures to combat climate change.

Assuming that grey denialism has less social legitimacy to manifest itself publicly than mainstream science's recognition of all the characteristics of climate change, abstract identification with concern about the phenomenon, and the need for action to address it, the interactive dynamics generate an appropriate situational context for it to emerge. This gives rise to arguments that justify a lesser degree of identification with the phenomenon, its different characteristics, and potential measures.

The group experiences were developed before the standardised questionnaire survey, as one of the purposes of the methodological articulation was that the analysis of the verbal material produced by the groups, and even part of this material (phrases, expressions) could be used to prepare the questionnaire. The fieldwork took place between the fourth quarter of 2019 and the first quarter of 2020.

A sample of 2,005 Spanish adults was surveyed by telephone using proportional stratification by province. Assuming simple random sampling, the sampling error is $\pm 2.19\%$ for the sample as a whole at a 95% confidence level. Sample members were randomly selected according to age, gender and activity quotas. Table 1 below shows the final distribution of the sample.

The questionnaire consisted of 24 questions, with an average length of 29.5 minutes. The fieldwork took place between May and June 2020. The results of the questionnaire have mainly helped us to establish relatively distant positions with regard to climate change and their use of media, through which the subjects obtain information on climate change.

Question 16 serves as a *proxy* to appraise distance to climate change: *"Countries have responded with states of alarm or emergency to the coronavirus. Do you think the same should be done with regard to climate change?"* This question aims to present necessity as a virtue and is set in the context of the current Coronavirus crisis. However, 15.6% said no, and 5.1% said that climate change did not require urgent action. Together, this represents 20.7% of the total sample, which is reflected in the distribution of responses to other questions in the questionnaire. In fact, in the first approach to the issue of climate change made in question 8, which asks respondents, after being questioned about different attitudes towards the future, to state their: *"degree of concern (between 10, very concerned, and 0, not at all concerned or have no idea about this), with respect to the following aspects"*³. Among the 20.7% who express distance from the urgency of climate change measures, the proportion of those who show a level of concern above 7 with regard to climate change is 68.3%, compared to 85.3% of those who consider action on climate change to be urgent. Considering the distribution of the sample's responses to these two questions, 6.6% are relatively unconcerned about climate change and do not consider action to be urgent. This percentage is, of course, in the minority. According to the CIS, it ranges from 2.4%, who maintain that climate change is not a consequence of human action (survey No. 3398, March 2023), to 8.2%, who believe that climate change does not exist (survey No. 3362, April 2022).

Table 1. Distribution of the sample by socio-demographic variables (percentages within each variable)

SEX	Man	47.1%
	Woman	52.9%
AGE	18-24 years old	11.0%
	25-34 years old	13.9%
	35-44 years old	19.4%
	45-54 years old	19.1%
	55-70 years old	19.2%
	More than 70 years old	17.6%
HABITAT	Less than 50,000 inhab.	44.7%
	Between 50,001 and 100,000 inhab.	14.0%
	Between 100,001 and 500,000 inhab.	24.2%
	More than 500,000 inhab.	17.0%
ACADEMIC FORMATION	No education (Unfinished primary education)	6.2%
	First level (School certificate, EGB 1st stage, approx. 10 years)	15.2%
	Second level 1st cycle (Elementary Baccalaureate (16 years), 1st and 2nd ESO, VET 1)	14.6%
	Second level 2nd cycle (VET 2nd cycle, Baccalaureate, BUP, 3rd and 4th ESO, COU, 1st and 2nd Baccalaureate)	30.1%
	Third level 1st cycle (technical engineer, university schools, technical architects, surveyors, teachers, nurses, etc.)	11.6%
	Third level 2nd cycle (university students, advanced degree, faculties, technical colleges, doctorates, etc.)	22.1%
ACTIVITY	Employed	53.0%
	Unemployed, having previously been employed	14.5%
	Unemployed, looking for a first job	0.2%
	Studying	2.7%
	Domestic work	3.4%
	Pensioner/retired	26.2%
SUBJECTIVE SOCIAL CLASS	Upper Class	1.1%
	Upper-middle class	12.3%
	Middle-middle class	40.6%
	Lower-middle class	20.0%
	Lower Class	25.9%

Source: INCERCLIMA Project.

Findings

1. The difference in the use of media

After switching up the categories in the variables of the questionnaire used, two profiles were obtained that can be considered opposing. On the one hand, those who perceive climate change with a certain lack of concern and do not consider it an issue on which urgent action is needed: 6.6% of the total sample. On the other hand, those who perceive climate change with concern and as a matter of urgency: 51.3% of the population. The relationship these two new categories have with the media is observed from two perspectives: the channels referred to for receiving information on climate change and the trust in different media as transmitters of this same type of information.

The first approach assumes as a hypothesis that the

sources of information used may be at the basis of the construction of the respective positions. It is based on the analysis of the response to question 10 of the questionnaire, which asks each respondent: *"Have you received information about climate change and its consequences through..."* (different media are presented in rotation)". The results are shown in Table 2.

In most of the potential sources of information mentioned, those who perceive climate change with concern and urgency tend to use them more. Those unconcerned and expressing little urgency for action report less use of sources for receiving information on climate change. The difference is particularly striking for documentaries in cinemas or on television, with more than 16 percentage points, and for more common sources, such as television news and newspapers, with 8 percentage points.

Table 2. Channels through which information on climate change and its consequences has been received, according to position on climate change (percentage who received information through that channel)

	Unconcerned and without urgency	Concerned and urgent
News on TV	81.8%	89.8%
Newspapers (print or online)	68.2%	76.2%
Radio	59.1%	66.5%
Facebook	45.5%	49.1%
Twitter	27.3%	28.4%
Telegram	24.2%	17.0%
WhatsApp	34.1%	38.9%
YouTube	40.9%	46.0%
Other social networks (other than the above)	31.1%	31.6%
Documentaries (on film or television)	64.4%	80.6%
Popular science magazines (<i>Muy Interesante, Investigación y Ciencia, Quo, ...</i>)	43.2%	51.2%
Scientific journals/Scientific books	45.5%	49.6%
Lectures, public talks by experts	34.1%	40.0%

Source: INCERCLIMA Project.

Table 3. Degree of trust in different channels for receiving climate change information, according to position on climate change (mean, between 0 and 10)

	Unconcerned and without urgency	Concerned and urgent
News on TV	5.11	6.51
Newspapers (print or online)	5.48	6.50
Radio	5.79	6.56
Facebook	3.66	3.94
Twitter	3.47	3.62
Telegram	3.10	3.16
WhatsApp	3.67	3.72
YouTube	3.91	4.40
Other social networks (other than the above)	3.49	3.78
Documentaries (in cinemas or television)	6.00	7.26
Popular science magazines (<i>Muy Interesante, Investigación y Ciencia, Quo, ...</i>)	6.02	7.02
Scientific journals/Scientific books	6.63	7.20
Lectures, public talks by experts	6.40	7.26

Source: INCERCLIMA Project.

In view of the above, the inverse differences become relevant: the sources referred to in greater proportion by those distant from climate change. This is the case of the social network Telegram, with a difference of more than 7 percentage points. Used as a source of information on climate change by 17% of those concerned, it amounts to 24.2% of those expressing distance from climate change. From this observation, it could be said that it is not so much the use of online social networks in general that can be connected to distance positions on climate change, but specific online social networks, such as Telegram.

That said, Telegram is also the online social network from which, among those named in the questionnaire, the least amount of information on climate change is received. However, it should be borne in mind that the reference to other media (television, newspapers, radio) is made without branding (channel or headline), so that the analysis is only a rough approximation of the difference in the reception of information of two different profiles with regard to climate change.

The degree of trust in the different channels through which information on climate change is received also

makes a difference between the two profiles. As Table 3 shows, those distant from climate change report lower trust in these channels. Even with regard to Telegram. Despite having a higher proportion of users among those who are distant, trust in this online social network has a similar average to that reported by those most concerned about climate change, with only 6 hundredths of a point separating them.

For the distant and involved, the most trusted channel is public lectures or talks by experts. However, those who are most concerned place the most trust in documentaries (in cinemas or on television). A source that had already proven to be relevant in the qualitative part of the research, having been spontaneously referred to by the group of retirees in Madrid.

Online social networks have the lowest levels of trust between the two profiles. YouTube has the highest average trust between the two profiles. Telegram is the least trusted. It should be noted that the entire sample was asked whether they trust these sources of information on climate change, regardless of whether they use them. When only taking into account the respective users of these sources of information, the average trust score rises to 4.81 among those expressing distance to climate change and 5.05 among those who are actively involved in tackling it. However, it should be noted here that, among the former –unconcerned, with no urgency for action and users of Telegram to learn about climate change– this score is higher than that given to TV news (4.75), Facebook (4.69), Twitter (4.69), WhatsApp (4.56), YouTube (4.59) or other social networks (4.56).

Generally speaking, both profiles present a similar relationship with the various media sources: a) sources with low usage but high levels of trust, such as expert conferences, popular magazines and scientific journals; b) sources with low usage –below 40%– and relatively low overall trust, such as Telegram, Twitter and WhatsApp; c) sources with somewhat more usage and trust, such as YouTube and Facebook; and d) more widely used sources, albeit with equal or lower trust than type a, such as TV news, newspapers, radio and documentaries, with the latter category presenting the biggest difference between the distant and the concerned profiles, with documentaries being more prevalent and more trusted among the second group.

2. The reception of climate change news

The reference to sources of information on climate change has been very present in the group dynamics carried out. Particularly in the more open and less directive phase, which is especially relevant. It should be noted that this analysis highlights the common perceptions among the distant – and not so distant– positions present in the groups, rather

than the differences between some positions and social categories and others.

At first glance, the different groups' evaluation of the available information on climate change may seem somewhat paradoxical, since even the groups who are most informed and closest to the issue, such as the Valencian adolescents, feel that they lack information on climate change: *"I am not sufficiently informed either"* (group 10). It seems that there can never be enough information, as demonstrated by this group, who, despite considering themselves fairly well-informed, begin their statement by warning the listener that *"nor am I sufficiently informed"*.

There is an ample supply of information on climate change and, conversely, a lack of information on climate change, according to the participants in the meetings. A lack of information that, according to the less distant positions with regard to climate change, is a state that the more distant positions willfully choose to be in. The information is out there. It is another matter whether one wants to receive it: *"...but nowadays, if you don't know something, despite it happening in front of you... Then it's more a question of not wanting to... We have all the tools at our disposal to know and be informed about what is happening"* (group 6)

The link with climate change information is complex, for while its availability is acknowledged, even characterised as substantial, it is portrayed as information that is difficult to internalise. As stated in the following excerpt, this information does not reach us. Does it not reach us? It does not reach our inner awareness. A lack of reach for which both the media and the recipients are held responsible: *"There is a lot of information, but people don't really internalise it. I mean, no... because, sometimes, you start to analyse it but only very superficially. They don't delve deeper"* (group 8). It doesn't seem to reach our conscience. It is information that fails to raise awareness, a term used by group participants themselves. They show themselves to be lacking in this awareness, for which they hold information and education at least partly responsible, thus justifying their distance from climate change. However, as information is generally accessible, most responsibility is attributed to the education received, differentiating between young people/children, who receive awareness-education:

On the other hand, in my case, I see that young people, in my circle of friends and so on, we are a little more aware, yet despite this, we still lack awareness, and will continue to live our lives in a way that... Will continue to harm the planet. I think one of the most important measures is education, especially for children, who are now the next generation, and who can and are the ones who will really see the change, because as she says, hey, we are here, but we are not going to see the change in the short term, but rather in the long term, although

we are already seeing some things, for example...
The images we saw now on Instagram of the polar bears that no longer have ice, but... (group 2)

The above discursive fragment is striking not only because of the reference to the status and sources of awareness of the climate change problem, but also because it expresses another of the arguments that, as we shall see, is used to a greater extent with regard to climate change information, namely that of the timing of the climate change event. This is a long-term perspective and, therefore, reduces the urgency of the issue. What is most striking about the statement of group 2 is that its members are between 19 and 23 years old. This is a dominant argument shared by the groups: a) it is an event that has not yet happened; b) it will happen in the long-term future, and c) what the media show us now –Instagram, in the fragment– is something out of its time, as the adversative conjunction “but...” reveals.

While there is a certain conflictive stance between the younger and more educated (and informed) groups, the information is there and, at the same time, does not seem to be there, the tension tends to disappear as the age increases and the educational capital of the participants decreases, as the following statement from the oldest group attests to, which attributes all the responsibility to the media:

There is a lack of information; people lack information. We are not... I am going to jump in too...
We are not sufficiently informed about all these things. Why? Because it is not in the interest of the others to inform the people (group 5)

If the seemingly paradoxical relationship with climate change information can be considered widespread, one argument is especially prevalent among those with more distant positions at the meetings. This argument also presents contradictions and mixes the perception of climate change, as an event outside the present and set in the distant future, with the representation of media information linked to the present. The groups that hold this view strongly argue that media reporting does not point to the urgency of climate change, leading to it being conceived more as an event fixed to a specific time, to a date, than as a process. A distant date, of course. As can be derived from the following statement, if there is no urgency, there is no move towards action:

I don't know, if there really was a global movement, I'd be the first to sign up. And saying things like “Look, if it means that my children can, I don't know, live in a happy world fifty years from now”, if that were really the case, I would be the first one to sign up, seriously. But since it's all... It's all reports that are posted on the internet, which nobody places any importance on, I mean, I don't know, I haven't seen any news programmes starting the show with: “urgent”, “urgent” climate change. In ten years, everything's

going to go to shit, in fifty years, I mean... Really, how many news programmes open like this? None, it is news in passing (group 1)

It is clear from the media's portrayal of this information content that references to climate change in the media are far removed from the present, from current affairs, from the forms of urgency:

Woman 1: Because it's not something... I think, I don't know.

Man 2: Because we are not aware.

Woman 1: But it's not something that will take place in fifty years, or a hundred years, it's something...

Woman 2: More long-term.

Man 1: And on the TV news, they put it there at the end, before the sports, they put “a report by scientists from I don't know where they say that in a hundred years I don't know what”. People don't even see it...

Woman 1: You listen to it, but you don't register what they're saying. (group 1)

Climate change is represented as something removed from the urgency of present-day events. It lacks the urgency of current affairs, which is why it is particularly absent from those media most closely linked to the urgency of current affairs, from where current affairs have to emerge, such as social networks:

Man 2: Well, on Twitter I haven't seen people making use of the hashtag “Climate change will kill us”

Woman 1: In ten years...

Man 2: I'm serious, and Twitter, although I don't really like social networks. The news you see on Twitter comes out after three seconds, it keeps you informed. (group 1)

The distance from the issue of climate change is multiplied by the distance from the channels and media. On the one hand, social networks, which often report on the very latest news (“comes out after three seconds”), are viewed with suspicion since they tend to exaggerate to attract an audience. Other media, such as television, do not appear to be better placed to provide confidence on the subject and to inform:

I don't know, the extent, for example, to which the hole in the ozone layer is growing, but what is real, not what one person is interested in saying and another in denying. Because they are not clear, some say it is closing and others say it is opening up more. They should tell us the truth about it, for example. About the ice caps melting, as she said, because there are things that are not true. They have carried out studies that have shown that it isn't melting as quickly as they say, while others defend that it is, making it hard to know what to believe. Because in truth, I think most things on television are a lie. (group 3)

Information in the media, especially in general-interest media, is expected to perform a function that it cannot fulfil: to become news. When they turn it into a news story, they are suspected of going beyond what counts as newsworthy material. Considered by those distant from climate change as falling outside the category of newsworthy content, traces can be found of the practical difficulty for its potential inscription as debatable material for media discussion to achieve social reception. This is because audience practices are recognised as being poorly disposed to the reception of arguments that run counter to their own positions. References are made to the duty to cross-check and compare news...

and then there's the sources of information in newspapers, people specialised in x subject... But it's still important to compare news, to contrast them and so on... but whenever it has something to do with the environment, politics or whatever, certain tweets always go viral and often these are people saying something crazy, but often they are experts... So, since a lot of people are interacting with these tweets, I've also discovered new people, because I can go into their profiles and see their bio, see the tweets they publish, and if they are of interest to me, then I'll start following them. And that's a... that's like adding a source of information on that subject. I follow a lot of people from politics, also related to climate change... And then there's feminism as well... So... by following these types of people, I've discovered so many more. And all this makes up an information network. But of course, you have to be *careful* and always cross-check things. (group 6)

Nevertheless, it seems to remain an ideal –with the distance between the practice and the warning already established: “...be careful and always cross-check things”, which ends up having little practical implications. For, in the end, as the following statement declares, “*Well, people just mind their own business*”:

because people look out for themselves. And, in the end, well: “Who am I? A white woman with... Feminism and Climate Change. It doesn't worry me. I'll worry about my own stuff” [...] Well, people just mind their own business (group 6)

Discussion

The respective selections of those most and least concerned about climate change and the urgency to intervene, as shown in the standardised questionnaire survey, mark some differences between the two groups in terms of the channels through which they have been informed about climate change and its consequences. However, these differences can be interpreted independently of the specificity of climate change information. That is, they

point to the distinctive ways in which the media system is used to access different kinds of information. The structure of the information channels should be taken into account. Of course, this includes information on climate change.

Expressions of distance from climate change take on greater significance in an experimental context that can be perceived as unfavourable to them. In the observational context of climate change research, participants are inclined to express concern about a phenomenon that concerns the scientific community to such an extent that researchers are required to work on it. However, they still express distance and acknowledge a lack of awareness (Ramos and Callejo, 2023), as well as relatively little concern (Ramos and Callejo, 2022) regarding the phenomenon. This acknowledgement, especially when used as a form of justification, highlights the media as a key argument. The media are accused of not emphasising the urgency of climate change, and when they do, they are deemed to have little credibility.

The participants doubt the urgency of climate change, which makes them doubt the presence of climate change in information content. There is an absence of perceived urgency as they perceive themselves as removed from this change. Change, including climate change, is seen as something which will affect future generations.

Ideally, the relationship with the media should be informative and diverse. However, this practice appears to be filter-driven (Sunstein, 2003:19), both in terms of the selection of sources and in the selection of what is considered information, as has been observed here. This information is constantly perceived as deficient by the various groups: those who feel they have plenty of information consider it insufficient, while those who are less involved point to its lack of appeal and the fact that it is broadcast at the end of the news reports. When the news reports talk about climate change, it is not seen as “proper news”, but as “news in passing”. It is considered second-order information content, largely because it is not relevant in the present.

Some also argue that climate change is not a news event: it is not newsworthy because it is not urgent. This puts the media in a kind of double bind (Bateson, 2000). When the media reports on climate change, they do not present it as urgent. However, if it is presented as urgent, as noted in the previous reference to Instagram and pointed out in the following statement, it is perceived as false, leading to a lack of trust in the media. Based on the participants' statements in the meetings, especially those who are most distant from climate change, the cascade of doubt appears to take on a different meaning than the one Sunstein attributes to his cascade concept. What seems to cascade are doubts. Doubts about climate change circulate through the media.

Sunstein's informational cascades of rumours range from

a small number of people shaping the rumour to a larger number accepting the rumour because they lack grounds to believe it is false (Sunstein, 2009:21). In our observation, it can be said that recipients have doubts about climate change, which they justify by alluding to doubts about the media. As Sunstein notes, they rationalise this doubt, as the cascade is embedded in a process of rationalising one's own belief (Sunstein, 2009:18). With the cascade underway, it is very difficult to stop among those who believe it. Even attempts to stop it can backfire, such as the media's attempts to portray action on climate change as urgent, when the distance to the issue is not perceived as urgent.

To draw very succinctly on Sunstein, receivers take on board ideas from transmitters they recognise and trust, not listening to other transmitters who may have different ideas, thereby polarising debates and entrenching positions. However, among those who are distant from climate change, it was found that they are more distrustful of all sources of information. On the other hand, the media consumption patterns of those concerned and involved with climate change and those less concerned and distant cannot be considered radically different.

The echo produced among the distant participants does not appear to be based on the repetition or reinforcement of concepts or assumptions. Rather, it seems to be more in keeping with what can be considered the crux of denialism. More diffuse and less expert denialism is expressed in a sparse and short-range manner, targeting some of the characteristics of climate change recognised by mainstream science. This takes the form of a denial of its anthropogenic nature and an emphasis on the lack of scientific consensus. There is little mention of any positive aspects of climate change or its advantageous qualities, nor of the economic or social ineptitude of societies to cope with it, in the qualitative materials collected. In practice, grey denialism manifests as arguments that are projected onto the messengers, the media. The media emerge as an instrument that helps manifest distance from climate change.

Ultimately, those distant from climate change may be perceived as passive, unwitting victims of the confusion created by self-interested outlets (Brulle, 2013; Bonds, 2016; Oreskes and Conway, 2018). However, their statements tend to expose them as regressive subjects who refuse to acknowledge the basis of their privileged lives (Norgaard, 2011), justifying themselves by referring to the role of the media: they do not inform us enough, they do not draw our attention to climate change, they treat it as second-rate information, they exaggerate, and so on.

Conclusions

Over time, as scientific evidence mounts and freak weather events become more frequent, climate change denialism is being expressed in a more diverse range of ways. Greyer denialist positions can be explained by differential exposure to the media system. The materials presented here suggest that the relationship with the media is somewhat more complex, seemingly due not so much to the relationship with different sources of information, although this has been documented, but rather to how recipients interpret such sources, particularly when information is conveyed through non-specialised media such as television news programmes and so on. Regarding trust in different media sources for climate change information, a greater difference in trust is observed among those who are more distant from climate change, particularly in relation to traditional media, than in relation to social networks.

The groups' reference to the media seems to reinforce their practical position on climate change, which is doubtful. However, the media form the basis of their arguments. They refer to them as a source of doubt regarding climate change, particularly about the urgency of public measures or policies to address climate change and its effects. These doubts are attributed to how potential action to tackle climate change and the role of the media are portrayed. Thus, reference to media reporting on climate change is part of the argument used by those who are most distant from climate change, particularly with regard to the need for urgent action.

By attributing an unalarming or unrealistic character to media reports on climate change, they seem to justify their lack of concern for the phenomenon. This is also seen as a justification for not paying attention to such information and even ignoring it. However, the threat of climate change seems difficult to ignore. It is out there, as are other relevant threats. As such, *"one cannot ignore the transformations generated by modernity concerning the consequences of at least some of the mechanisms of disengagement, like the global risks of nuclear war or ecological catastrophe"* (Giddens, 1995:35). These risks are very present, and it seems that referencing the media can be used to present oneself as both concerned and attentive to the phenomenon, as well as unconcerned and inattentive, as if the media were the source of this indifference.

Endnotes

- 1 INCERCLIMA project, funded by the *State Programme for Research, Development and Innovation Oriented to the Challenges of Society* 2017 (CSO2017-84007-R). Developed by the team formed by: Yolanda Agudo (UNED), Javier Callejo (UNED, IP), Pablo Francescutti (U. Rey Juan Carlos), Emilio Luque (UNED), Ernest García (U. Valencia), Ramón Ramos (U. Complutense), Marina Requena (U. Valencia) and Manuel Rodríguez (U. Valencia).
- 2 The numbering of the groups will be used later to identify the group statements.
- 3 In addition to climate change, other issues include: 'the economy', 'employment', 'poverty', 'democratic participation', 'international terrorism', 'nuclear weapons proliferation', 'the environment', 'crime and delinquency', 'pensions', 'new diseases' and 'housing'. The order in which these questions are asked is rotated.

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Mapping a "triple periphery": shifts and continuities in contemporary Spanish documentary filmmaking by women

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Abstract

The documentary macro-genre is one of the areas of cinema where the participation of women professionals has seen significant growth, both globally and locally. This article explores the material, institutional and educational factors that have contributed to the increased presence of women filmmakers in contemporary Spanish documentary, with particular focus on the last decade –a period marked by the revitalisation of the feminist movement in the audiovisual sector. The analysis is organised around three key themes: the impact of digitalisation; the expansion of visibility through cultural spaces, festivals and feminist collectives; and the consolidation of specialised training opportunities. These factors have promoted greater accessibility, autonomy, diversity and recognition within a practice that, paradoxically, has often been regarded as peripheral. Eschewing exceptionalist approaches, this article provides a review of specialised literature, with a specific focus on production, circulation and training conditions that remain relatively underexplored.

Keywords

Cinema, documentary, women, feminism, Spain, crowdfunding, streaming, festivals, collective organising, master's programmes

Resum

El macrogènere documental és un dels espais cinematogràfics on la participació de dones professionals ha experimentat un creixement notable, tant a escala global com local. Aquest article analitza un conjunt de condicions materials, institucionals i educatives que han afavorit l'increment de la presència de cineastes en el documental contemporani a l'Estat espanyol, amb especial atenció als darrers deu anys, marcats per la revitalització del moviment feminista en el sector audiovisual. L'anàlisi s'articula en tres eixos: l'impacte de la digitalització; l'expansió dels circuits de visibilització a través d'espais culturals, festivals i col·lectius feministes, i la consolidació d'una oferta formativa especialitzada. Aquests factors han contribuït a un increment d'accessibilitat, autonomia, diversitat i reconeixement en el si d'una pràctica que, paradoxalment, ha estat sovint considerada perifèrica. Defugint enfocaments excepcionalistes, s'hi proposa un estat de la qüestió basat en la revisió de literatura especialitzada, amb un enfocament específic en les condicions de producció, circulació i formació, encara poc explorades.

Paraules clau

Cinema, documental, dones, feminisme, Estat espanyol, micromecenatge, streaming, festivals, associacionisme, màster

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Introduction: The so-called (misnamed) *eternal pioneers*

Until well into the 1990s, the documentary macro-genre experienced a prolonged "desert crossing" (Cerdán, 2008: 10) in terms of recognition and visibility, often relegated to a subordinate position within Spanish cinema. Yet, by the early years of the 21st century, non-fiction had begun to overcome this barren terrain, experiencing a period of flourishing, gaining international recognition and achieving releases in commercial cinemas (Araüna Baró and Quílez Esteve, 2017). However, this flourishing was sharply curtailed by the 2008 economic crisis, which drastically reduced public subsidies for the audiovisual sector, placing Spain among the Eurozone countries most affected (Kourelou, Liz and Vidal, 2014). As a result, despite the notable achievements of this cinema at the turn of the century, some authors argue that non-fiction remained a practice that was both marginal and "gloriously peripheral" (Cerdán and Torreiro, 2005: 9): marginal in relation to fiction cinema, and peripheral within an industry often marked by economic precariousness (De Pedro and Oroz, 2010). At the same time, academic research on documentary began to gain ground alongside these transformations (Weinrichter, 2004; Torreiro and Cerdán, 2005). Yet this initial body of work paid little attention to the intersection of documentary and gender, despite the long-established links between documentary and feminism in other academic contexts (Walker and Waldman, 1999; Smail, 2019). Although early studies provided a tentative insight into this flourishing, publications in Spain often omitted the work of women filmmakers or confined it to specific chapters,¹ perpetuating a noticeably skewed historiography of cinema. This androcentric silence has resulted in the under-documentation and under-recognition of many women filmmakers, eclipsing the contributions of pioneering figures who paved the way (for us) (Selva and Solà, 2002; Zecchi, 2014).

Indeed, it would be inaccurate to suggest that women have only recently participated in documentary filmmaking in Spain. Documentaries can be found in the filmographies of pioneering women filmmakers from as early as the 1950s, such as Margarita Alexandre, Ana Mariscal (Selva and Solà, 2023) and Rosina Prado (Cánovas Belchí and Castro Muñoz, 2006; Camí-Vela, 2015; García López and Cavalcanti Tedesco, 2025); and from the 1960s, such as Nadia Werba (Cerdán and Rodríguez García de Herreros, 2024). These figures –brought back into scholarly attention to varying degrees in more recent studies– are part of a broader historiographical recovery movement, which also includes María Forteza, director of *Mallorca* (1932–1934), considered the first sound film made by a woman in Spain, thanks to efforts initiated by the Filmoteca Española (2020). In addition, several studies have moved beyond a sole focus on authorship to examine the forms of cinematic agency

exercised by women during the Franco dictatorship, incorporating multiple perspectives on their active participation within a repressive context. Research has addressed documentary productions by the self-styled *Nationalist* side in the early years of the regime (Oroz, 2014), as well as the use of documentary as a form of resistance against "the re-signification of the feminine imposed by the Regime" (Selva and Solà, 2023: 295). Notable figures in this politically and socially dissident use of documentary include Cecilia Bartolomé, Josefina Molina, Helena Lumberras, Mercè Conesa and Mirentxu Loyarte, who explored themes such as gender-based violence, divorce, contraception, abortion, lesbianism and labour and anti-Franco activism, while also founding and actively participating in various leftist film collectives (García López, 2021). Following in the footsteps of these predecessors, the 1990s saw a significant increase in female directors engaging in documentary filmmaking, with directors such as Eugènia Balcells, Isabel Coixet, Iciar Bollain, Chus Gutiérrez, Ana Díez, Helena Taberna, Patricia Ferreira, Silvia Munt and Cecilia Barriga (Ortega and Pousa, 2017). Until the end of the 20th century, women's presence in Spanish film direction was still widely regarded as an anomaly. The invisibility of many women filmmakers prior to the 1990s can be partly explained by the fact that they did not direct feature-length fiction films, which contributed to their exclusion from dominant historiographical narratives of Spanish cinema (Cerdán and Rodríguez García de Herreros, 2024). Thus, while documentary filmmaking has previously been considered doubly peripheral, female directors occupy a "triply peripheral" position: by their place within the audiovisual ecosystem, by the structural precarity affecting the sector and –most prominently– by their gender. Nevertheless, by the early 2000s, an emerging trend became apparent: the increasing number of female filmmakers, particularly in the documentary sector, which had previously been difficult to quantify (Camí-Vela, 2014; García Fernández and García Alonso, 2015). Historical recovery work shows that women's involvement in documentary cinema extends back to earlier, often invisible periods, while research focused on the early 2000s identifies an initial phase of growth in female participation. More recent studies confirm that, unlike in fiction cinema, the documentary sector in the last decade has a significant proportion of female directors and screenwriters, with sustained growth in their integration into the field (Ortega and Pousa, 2017: 293; Cuenca, 2023). Consequently, as documentary filmmaking has often been linked with periods of social agitation or commitment² (Cerdán, 2003; Guàrdia, 2022), it is important to ask to what extent a specific context has emerged in the last decade that has allowed women filmmakers to find in non-fiction a space for creative expression and social impact.

Indeed, the consolidation of women directors in Spain's public sphere coincides with the revitalisation of the

feminist movement internationally from 2008 onwards (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Watkins, 2018) and, more strikingly, with the surge it experienced in Spain from 2018 following the mass mobilisation of the 8M [8 March] labour and care strike (Campillo, 2019). In this context, the gender gap in the film sector “becomes a recurring topic in the press, is seen as demanding urgent attention and seems omnipresent at film festivals across Spain” (Scholz, 2018: 46). At the same time, various collective initiatives have emerged within the industry, directly challenging gender inequalities (Oroz *et al.*, 2021). As a result, over the past decade the number of women³ leading documentary projects has grown substantially. Building on the groundwork laid by the early pioneers discussed earlier, contemporary women filmmakers have developed their documentaries in a climate shaped by a reinvigorated feminist movement – nationally and internationally – and by advances in rights, support networks and funding mechanisms (White, 2015). This expansion, far from incidental, has been duly recorded and analysed in recent studies. In this regard, it is important to highlight the efforts of numerous researchers in the field of non-fiction cinema who, particularly over the past decade, have contributed to broadening reference points, identifying omissions and revising the canon established by dominant historiographies. Taken together, these studies show that analysing documentary production is crucial for recovering the contributions of women filmmakers, and that incorporating a gender perspective, alongside other intersectional approaches, makes women's documentary a particularly fertile site for research⁴ (Oroz, 2013, 2023; Feenstra, Gimeno Ugalde and Sartingen, 2014; Zurian, 2015, 2017; Araña Baró and Quílez Esteve, 2017; Scholz and Álvarez, 2018; García López, 2021; Quílez Esteve and Araña Baró, 2021, 2024; Selva and Solà, 2022; Fonoll-Tassier, Quílez Esteve and Araña Baró, 2022; Guàrdia, 2022; Ledo, 2022; Rams, 2023).

While categorising women's work can be problematic, gender still operates as a structuring force shaping both access to and continuity within professions such as filmmaking (Oroz *et al.*, 2021). From this standpoint, the aim of this article is to examine the material and contextual factors that have facilitated the growing presence of women –understood here in a plural and self-determined sense– in contemporary Spanish documentary. Moving beyond individualistic readings or narratives of exceptionality, it provides a mapping of the key factors that have driven this rise over the past two decades, with particular attention to the last ten years, during which feminism has had a significant impact on the audiovisual sector. The methodology combines a review of specialised literature on documentary and feminist film theory –with priority given to sources published in Spain– with quantitative data drawn from these publications, from independent sector reports and from direct requests to training institutions. While

representation studies and textual analysis have long been central to gender-based research, this article undertakes a selective exploration of production and circulation – areas still relatively underexamined – with the aim of encouraging further research in this direction (Arranz, 2010; Binimelis-Adell and Espasa Borràs, 2018; Oroz and Binimelis, 2020). Accordingly, the following pages are organised into three interconnected sections. First, they consider the impact of digitalisation on the environments and processes associated with documentary practice –seen as a factor that has, albeit unevenly, facilitated women filmmakers' access to the field. Second, they examine the expansion and diversification of distribution and exhibition circuits, highlighting the role of festivals, specialist screenings and associations in increasing the visibility and circulation of non-fiction works directed by women. Finally, the third section addresses the consolidation of documentary-film training, with particular emphasis on master's degrees and specialist programmes that have helped professionalise new generations of filmmakers –not exclusively women, though their presence in these programmes has been especially significant.

Digital and extraradial technologies

It is widely acknowledged that the digitalisation of recording and editing processes –coinciding with the gradual abandonment of analogue formats– has played a transformative role within documentary filmmaking. Together with the popularisation of the Internet, it has marked a new turning point for the genre (Russell, 1999). Access to more affordable, manageable and lightweight technologies has been a key factor in increasing the participation of women filmmakers –and other minoritised groups– in documentary film. The digital transition, characterised by the reduced cost and democratisation of equipment and editing software, has enabled the proliferation of non-fiction projects with a high degree of autonomy, often driven by one person or by very small teams. This revival of documentary practice has been led by a new generation of filmmakers who, thanks to these new tools, have produced –or self-produced– a large number of films with very limited funding. Indeed, some women documentary filmmakers have established their own production structures⁵ to develop their own work, or that of their colleagues, in order to secure greater control over both the creative and production processes (Oroz *et al.*, 2021). Within this more accessible landscape and supported by technological improvements over recent decades, works have emerged with a strong subjective dimension and an expressive freedom that, in earlier periods, would have been far more difficult to achieve (Quílez Esteve and Araña Baró, 2019). The growth of non-fiction directed by women has therefore brought about a

renewal both in formats and modes of production, and in the discursive strategies of contemporary Spanish cinema. On the one hand, many of these films have explored hybrid languages, experimental formats and collective processes that challenge the formal conventions of traditional documentary (Fonoll-Tassier, 2024). On the other hand, a significant number of these filmmakers have incorporated central issues from the feminist agenda into documentary practice (Fonoll-Tassier, Quílez Esteve and Araña Baró, 2022). This heterogeneity has also been accompanied by the support of various publications and independent online media outlets, which have helped promote interest in, and stimulate debate on, documentary filmmaking by women. Looking back, a key example is the pioneering work of the now-defunct magazine *Blocs&Docs* –active from 2006 to 2016– which was characterised by its firm commitment to "making visible both international audiovisual feminism and the work of women filmmakers within our borders" (Ortega and Pousa, 2017: 303). More recently, *Filmtopia* has emerged as the first website in Spain specialising in cinema made by women which, with the aim of encompassing different fields and professions, "informs, promotes and celebrates the work of women filmmakers of the past, present and future" (Filmtopia, n.d.).

Closely linked to the impact of digital technology and the Internet on the contemporary media landscape, various digital platforms have also expanded the possibilities for producing this type of work. According to Binimelis-Adell and Espasa Borràs, in a study of Spanish women filmmakers' participation on the crowdfunding platform Verkami, digitalisation has enabled the emergence of professional spaces that are more accessible than those offered by the traditional film industry, facilitating the viability of projects that would have struggled to succeed through institutional or commercial channels (2018). Furthermore, with the arrival of online video-sharing services, documentary filmmakers have benefited from new digital circulation spaces that "have revitalised the potential once represented by the video format in filmmaking" (Mayer, 2011: 21). Today, multiple video-on-demand platforms⁶ coexist, ranging from open, participatory services to curated, auteur-focused programming. At an international level, Vimeo, Docsville, Tènk and Mubi are particularly notable; within Spain, platforms such as Filmin, Movistar Plus+, HAMACA and PLAT stand out; and regarding initiatives specifically aimed at promoting women's cinema, Mujeres de Cine VOD is especially prominent, seeking to enhance access and visibility both nationally and internationally. Thus, while digitalisation has made it possible to realise projects that previously had little chance of production and opened alternatives to screening in cinemas (Kourelou, Liz and Vidal, 2014), crowdfunding cannot be considered a genuine alternative to the film industry (Binimelis-Adell and Espasa Borràs, 2018). Likewise, the hegemonies established within streaming platforms

have not necessarily led to transformations oriented towards gender equality (Izquierdo-Castillo and Latorre-Lázaro, 2021). As a result, longstanding asymmetries within the industry persist, and Spanish non-fiction remains a male-dominated sector, in which women manage budgets around 6% lower than those of documentaries directed by their male counterparts (Cuenca, 2023) –a reality that, according to Quílez Esteve and Araña Baró (2024), must be problematised, as it directly links women's work to precarity and lack of recognition. Nevertheless, with more accessible technologies and the emergence of certain independent media and online platforms, women filmmakers have claimed a space for expression that, until relatively recently, was far more restricted, contributing to the discursive and formal revitalisation of the documentary genre.

Deterritorialising dissemination: hybrids between old and new channels

Faced with the growth in production brought about by the democratisation of digital media, one of the main challenges facing contemporary documentary female filmmakers is the need to sustain existing dissemination channels while also identifying new ones –beyond the digital platforms already mentioned. In this context, a significant number of female creators have contributed to the deterritorialisation of documentary practice through mobility expressed in the multiple circulation of their works (Ortega and Pousa, 2017). This process has involved a range of agents –including museum spaces, film festivals and associations– which have expanded the "channels of dissemination and encounter with increasingly segmented audiences" (Araña Baró and Quílez Esteve, 2018: 430).

Perhaps because video was accepted earlier in artistic contexts than within cinema institutions, women filmmakers have found alternative distribution and exhibition circuits in museum spaces and environments aligned with contemporary art. Across Spain, museums, film archives, cultural centres, distributors and independent associations of diverse kinds⁷ have hosted and supported emerging documentary female filmmakers –including, though not limited to, some of those discussed here– through their processes of experimentation, creation and dissemination of their works. This support has taken the form of curated programmes, artistic residencies and even forums for critical reflection. Illustrative examples include the trajectories of filmmakers such as Sally Gutiérrez Dewar, Virginia García del Pino and María Ruido, whose practices move between essay film and contemporary art and whose work is regularly shown in venues of this kind; the laboratory for new audiovisual formats *Soy Cámara*, produced by the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona and coordinated by Íngrid Guardiola between 2015 and 2020; and the recent *Residencias Joaquim Jordà*, promoted by

the Museo Reina Sofia in collaboration with the Marseille and Lisbon film festivals, to name just a few. As Oroz points out, contemporary independent documentary with feminist affiliations has found refuge and broader dissemination in what she terms “hybrid” channels (2018: 108). By blurring the boundaries between cinema, art and critique, these channels have become key agents in projecting the careers of these female filmmakers while also fostering synergies and networks of collaboration among them.

Likewise, over the past two decades, documentary film festivals –as well as festivals devoted to genres traditionally considered minor, such as animation, short films and experimental cinema, and those focusing on themes related to diverse identities such as gender or nationality– have “experienced unprecedented growth” (Vallejo, 2020: 77) across Spain. For example, the long-established Zinebi in Bilbao and the Punto de Vista Festival in Pamplona, active since 2005, have rekindled interest in and programming for this practice from the Basque Country. Indeed, at its seventh edition, Punto de Vista organised a retrospective on feminist documentary cinema, which later became a landmark book on the intersections between gender and non-fiction, edited by Mayer and Oroz (2011). Similarly, DocumentaMadrid and the Alcances Documentary Film Festival in Cádiz have this year celebrated their 27th and 19th editions respectively, while DocsBarcelona has reached adulthood, despite having existed as a professional market since 1997. In parallel, since the early 2000s, the Málaga Film Festival has promoted a series of encounters through its Málaga DOCS section “in which academics, filmmakers, programmers and students have come together to debate the state of cinema of the real from different perspectives” (Torreiro and Alvarado, 2023: 14). It is no coincidence that many publications devoted to Spanish or Ibero-American documentary cinema have emerged from this context (Viveiros and Català, 2010). At the same time, women’s film festivals have played a key promotional role, incorporating non-fiction, experimental cinema and short formats into their programmes, while also highlighting the work of women filmmakers in these fields. This is the case of the *Mostra de Cine y Mujeres* in Pamplona and the *Mostra Internacional de Films de Dones* in Barcelona, founded in 1987 and 1993 respectively, as well as more recent initiatives such as the Madrid International Films by Women Festival, launched in 2018; alongside other competitions, festivals and showcases that are part of TRAMA, the Coordinating Network of Film, Video and Multimedia Festivals Made by Women, created in 2002 (Oroz *et al.*, 2021: 13). Although some authors have argued that creating parallel circuits –such as festivals specialising in films made by women or with a gender perspective– could generate a potentially harmful divide (García Fernández and García Alonso, 2015), their existence cannot be interpreted as a setback

or an exclusionary measure. On the contrary, far from representing regression, or suggesting that specialised film festivals should be the only destination for films directed by women, these platforms have been –and continue to be– beneficial not only for female filmmakers, but also for the film industry, which values the discovery of new talent, and for audiences seeking alternative narratives and perspectives (Paris, 2015). Although one might argue that there is no direct causal link between this growth of visibility platforms and the sustained increase of the presence of women in the documentary field, the consolidation and expansion of exhibition opportunities across the country has inevitably opened up new avenues for a diverse range of participants, including emerging women creators. However, for these channels to genuinely foster equity and professional development, coherent, long-term policies need to be established within the broader cinematic ecosystem (Verde, 2022).

In this context, the role of women filmmakers’ associations is crucial for understanding the logic and circumstances behind the numerical growth and increased visibility of women in the sector. In 2006, the association CIMA⁸ – *Asociación de Mujeres Cineastas y de Medios Audiovisuales* [Association of Women Filmmakers and Audiovisual Media]– was established in Spain, creating a platform of advocacy to address the need for equal representation of women within the industry (Paris, 2010). Since then, CIMA and other associations that have emerged more recently across the Iberian Peninsula⁹ have put forward a range of demands and become main points of contact with national and regional film institutions (Oroz *et al.*, 2021). The work of these associations, while encompassing far more than documentary practice alone –through the preparation of reports or codes of good practice, the creation of professional directories, the organisation of industry events and the establishment of laboratories and mentorship programmes– has been vital in addressing the quantitative imbalances outlined earlier in this article. In this regard, associations such as CIMA have acted as lobbyists to ensure that Law 55/2007 on Cinema¹⁰ regulates matters relating to gender inequality, overseeing women’s participation and promoting parity in teams when applying for ICAA (*Instituto de la Cinematografía y de las Artes Visuales* [Institute of Cinematography and Audiovisual Arts]) grants. Nevertheless, some sectors consider these legislative measures to be of limited effectiveness (Binimelis-Adell and Espasa Borràs, 2018). Indeed, as Jara Fernández Meneses points out in her analysis of public cinema policies in Spain from a gender perspective, the increase in women’s presence within the film sector cannot be attributed solely to recent legislative actions, but largely reflects internal dynamics within the industry itself (2025). Consistent with this, all evidence suggests that the formation of a hybrid network –comprising cultural and/or museum spaces, film

festivals and associative collectives— has had a positive, and perhaps even more decisive, impact than legislation in promoting and advancing the careers of contemporary women documentary filmmakers within the Spanish film circuit.

Teaching the reality of gender parity

Non-fiction cinema would not have gained momentum without the development and implementation of higher education programmes at certain universities. In the early 1990s in Galicia, the first significant initiative emerged, led by film theorist and documentary maker Margarita Ledo, who was responsible for “carrying out the first documentary film programmes at the University of Santiago” (García Puente and K. Hogan, 2022: 130). Later, in Barcelona, similar paths were followed through the documentary classrooms and master’s programmes at the Pompeu Fabra University (UPF) and the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB). Studies indicate that these programmes have been a driving force for many contemporary women filmmakers, helping to establish Barcelona as a distinctive hub for learning, knowledge transmission, production and reflection on non-fiction cinema (Torreiro, 2010). This environment has also nurtured and facilitated the emergence of women in documentary production in Catalonia (Merino, 2023). Over the past decade, training programmes in documentary cinema¹¹ have grown exponentially across a variety of formal and informal settings. They have innovated in format —on-site, online, intensive or long-term— and in access conditions, ranging from free courses to master’s programmes with high tuition fees. Nevertheless, while acknowledging the existence of these new opportunities —and the access they provide to documentary practice for individuals from non-specialised backgrounds or without formal training— this text focuses on the two master’s programmes with the longest-standing trajectory nationally, due to their sustained educational impact and the availability of comparable data over time.

Several nationwide studies have highlighted a significant imbalance between the composition of the audiovisual sector and the gender distribution among students at leading film schools, as well as in university-level Audiovisual Communication programmes (Scholz, 2018; Izquierdo-Castillo and Latorre-Lázaro, 2021; Jirari Kouaihi *et al.*, 2025). According to empirical data collected for this article, female participation in the Master’s in Creative Documentary at UPF has been both significant and sustained over the past fourteen editions,¹² resulting in an overall average of approximately 50.4% —a figure that indicates gender parity in access to training. The UPF programme has produced notable non-fiction female professionals, including: director Mercedes Álvarez, whose documentary *El cielo gira* (*The Sky Turns*, 2004) won the Tiger

Award at the Rotterdam Film Festival and the top prize at Cinéma du Réel in Paris, among other accolades; Ariadna Pujol, awarded the Audience Award for Best Documentary at the Málaga Festival for *Aguaviva* (2006); sound designer Amanda Villavieja, with an extensive filmography from 2001 to the present; producer Marta Andreu, who produced *108 cuchillo de palo* (2010), directed by Paraguayan filmmaker Renate Costa —also trained in the master’s programme— which premiered at the Berlinale; and screenwriter Laia Manresa, who made her directorial debut with *Morir de día* (2010) alongside editor Sergi Dies, and whose most recent work is *Casa Reynal* (2023). In the second decade of the 2000s, a new generation of women filmmakers emerged from the programme, including former students Neus Ballús, who won four Gaudí Awards for *La plaga* (2010); Eva Vila and Laura Herrero, whose films *Bajari* (*Bajari: Gypsy Barcelona*, 2013) and *La mami* (2019) were screened at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), one of the world’s leading documentary festivals; Pilar Monsell, who premiered *Africa 815* (2014) at DocLisboa and won an award at Festival Márgenes; Sofia Esteve, Isa Luengo and Marina Freixa Roca, whose short film *Els buits* (2024) received the Silver Biznaga for Best Short Film at both the Málaga Festival and Alcances in Cádiz; and Celia Viada and Elena Molina, who premiered *Volver a casa tan tarde* (2025), produced by the Punto de Vista Festival, and *Flores para Antonio* (2025), co-directed with Isaki Lacuesta, respectively.

The pattern observed in the UPF master’s programme is mirrored in the Master’s in Theory and Practice of Creative Documentary at the UAB, which also shows a significant and consistent female presence over the first two decades of the 2000s,¹³ with student numbers ranging from 50% to 65%. This indicates a gender balance, and in many cohorts even a female majority. Among the female professionals trained in the early years of the UAB programme are filmmakers such as Virginia García del Pino, who began with the short film *Lo que tú dices que soy* (2007) and premiered her first feature, *Basilio Martín Patino. La décima carta* (2014), at the San Sebastián International Film Festival; Alejandra Molina, who won Best Documentary at the Alcances Festival in Cádiz for *No tiene sentido... estar haciendo así todo el rato sin sentido* (2007); and Carolina Astudillo, whose *De monstruos y faldas* (2009) screened at festivals worldwide —from France to Taiwan, including Chile— and ultimately won Best Experimental Documentary at the Female Eye Film Festival in Toronto. In the more recent cohorts of the UAB Master’s, notable graduates include María Zafra, director of *Memorias, norias y fábricas de lejía* (2011) and current director of the Mostra Internacional de Films de Dones in Barcelona; Núria Araña Baró, now a leading researcher in feminist non-fiction and related fields; documentary filmmaker and editor Nila Núñez, whose debut feature from the programme, *Lo que dirán* (2017), was selected for the

International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) and won Best Film at the Gijón International Film Festival; and Ulrika Andersson, Marta Codesido, Núria Ubach and Dubi Cano, whose *Les més grans* (2023) won the Silver Biznaga Audience Award for Best Short Documentary at the Málaga Film Festival.

The data and cases presented here show that, at least in the educational sphere, women's participation in documentary filmmaking is far from marginal. It forms part of a sustained dynamic of interest and engagement, highlighted by the generational continuity of women filmmakers trained in these programmes. At the same time, they reveal a persistent gap between education and professional practice –a phenomenon already noted at other levels of study or specialisation. This disconnect is often due to systemic or structural biases, and to the challenges women face in sustaining professional careers, which are unrelated to training, vocation or even recognition (Scholz, 2018). Indeed, as Ortega and Pousa note, some films directed by women who have been, or are, students of these programmes “have significantly contributed to shaping new languages and consolidating the field of non-fiction through the circulation and recognition of their works in national and international festivals” (2017: 297). In summary, while the impact of these specific educational programmes has yet to produce a full structural transformation in the documentary sector, their consolidation and outcomes can be seen as a catalyst for the evolution of the field. These programmes have created gender-balanced learning environments that promote access and critical reflection, encourage the emergence of new voices and career trajectories in documentary filmmaking, and, importantly, provide a record for current and future research.

Conclusions: a cinema par excellence

In the current phase of maturity in Spanish documentary cinema, following the boom almost two decades ago (Torreiro and Alvarado, 2023), the role of women filmmakers has been –and remains– essential. Although most of these documentaries do not generate substantial economic returns, sell out or attract major media recognition, their contributions –which range from formal to discursive matters– constitute an intangible value for Spanish cinema. The “triple peripheral” position of both pioneering and contemporary women documentary filmmakers is, however, the source of their paradoxical strength: compelled to challenge the margins, they have simultaneously helped to redefine them and created alternatives. As this article has sought to map, non-fiction cinema directed by women over the past two decades –particularly in the most recent years– revolves around three interconnected currents: the evolution and gradual expansion of digital cinema, a

deterritorialised rhizomatic circuit and the consolidation of multiple educational pathways. With varying degrees of intensity, concerns and opportunities –yet all moving in the same direction and producing tangible outcomes– these factors and drivers have contributed to supporting and advancing documentary filmmaking by women. As Selva and Solà argued more than twenty years ago, this is not merely a loose collection of categories, but cinema par excellence (2002). Ultimately, the study of this phenomenon cannot be confined to bibliographic reviews or quantitative indicators. It requires sustained qualitative research over time, enabling a more precise understanding of the material and symbolic factors that facilitate –or impede– the participation of women and other underrepresented groups in the cinema of the real.

End note

This research has received the award in the open category of the 36th CAC Awards for research in audiovisual communication.

Notes

1. For example, in his book *Desvío de lo real. El cine de no ficción* (2004), Weinrichter lists numerous Spanish filmmakers, yet the work of an individual woman filmmaker is not mentioned until the very last page, in this case the Basque director Helena Taberna. Similarly, in *Documental y vanguardia* (2005) and *Al otro lado de la ficción: Trece documentalistas españoles contemporáneos* (2007), both edited by Torreiro and Cerdán, either only a single –and pioneering– chapter considers documentary cinema from a feminist perspective (Selva, 2005), or just two of the thirteen included texts engage with the work of filmmakers Mercedes Álvarez and Margarita Ledo.
2. Particularly during the Second Republic and the final years of the Transition, as well as in response to various environmental and colonial conflicts stemming from the globalising tendencies of the contemporary era (Fonoll-Tassier, 2024).
3. While it would be appropriate to mention many more women filmmakers, space constraints in this article require us to focus on a representative and concise selection: María Ruido, Carolina Astudillo, Virginia García del Pino, Carla Subirana, Mercedes Álvarez, Ariadna Pujol, Alba Sotorra, María Cañas, Neus Ballús, Anna Giral, Nila Núñez, Diana Toucedo, Laia Manresa, Pilar Monsell, Núria Giménez Lorang, Marta Romero, Maddi Barber, Raquel Marques and Patricia Franquesa, some of whom are discussed as case studies throughout the text.
4. Although the broader landscape is far more extensive, the length of this article does not permit a detailed examination of all initiatives, so only a limited sample is included.
5. This applies to female filmmakers and producers such as Neus Ballús, Isa Campo, Tania Balló and Alba Sotorra, among others.
6. While platforms such as Netflix, HBO and Amazon Prime have played a major role in popularising documentaries and docuseries –such as the true crime boom or celebrity-focused titles– they are not discussed in the main text, given the significant differences from the type of non-fiction content analysed here.
7. In Spain, many of these venues are concentrated in the Basque Country, Galicia, Madrid and Barcelona. Examples include the Centro-Museo Vasco de Arte Contemporáneo in Vitoria-Gasteiz (Artium); the Centro Internacional de Cultura Contemporánea Tabakalera in San Sebastián; the worker cooperative Numax in Santiago de Compostela; La Casa Encendida, the Museo Reina Sofía and the Centro de Creación Contemporánea Matadero in Madrid; and in Barcelona, the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (CCCB), the Centre de Producció i Recerca Artística Hamaca and the Centre de Cultura de Dones Francesca Bonnemaison (LaBonne), to name just a few.
8. CIMA was founded in 2006 and, since 2015, has produced an annual report which, according to its founders, aims to tackle gender inequality in the film industry and in Spanish public funding (CIMA, undated).
9. In recent years, several associations have been established to promote the visibility and equality of women professionals in the film sector across Catalonia, Andalusia, Murcia, the Valencian Community and the Basque Country, including Dones Visuals, Asociación Andaluza de Mujeres de los Medios Audiovisuales, Asociación de Mujeres Audiovisuales de Murcia, Dona i Cinema, Hemen and Mujeres en la Industria de la Animación (MIA). CIMA also maintains seven regional branches in Andalusia, the Balearic Islands, the Canary Islands, Catalonia, Galicia, Navarra and Valencia.
10. At present, Law 55/2007 of 28 December is still in effect, although a new legislative proposal –the Cinema and Visual Culture Act– is under review, intended to align with evolving audiovisual production and consumption habits (Castellví, 2025: 157).
11. Examples include the master’s programmes at the Escola Superior de Cinema i Audiovisuals de Catalunya (ESCAC) in Barcelona, or the Diploma in Documentary Film at ECAM and the master’s programmes offered by Universidad Carlos III in Madrid. There are also specialised courses and workshops at the Escola Libre Date Cuenta and the Centre de Cultura de Dones Francesca Bonnemaison. The latter recently launched “9 mesos” [9 Months], a feminist writing lab for documentary projects led by screenwriter and director Laia Manresa. This lab aims to support work-life balance in the profession and is notable for being free, while also providing a care space for participants with dependents.
12. The data were kindly compiled and shared by Eva Vila, filmmaker and director of the Master’s in Creative Documentary at the Pompeu Fabra University, and we are grateful for her collaboration.
13. The figures were generously provided by Virginia Luzón, director of the Master’s in Theory and Practice of Creative Documentary, and Jorge Tur, filmmaker and coordinator of the same programme, and we sincerely thank them for their cooperation.

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"Too gay": masculinities and homoeroticism in slash fiction about video game content creators

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Abstract

This article analyses discourses on masculinity in slash fiction featuring two fictional pairings of content creators linked to the world of video games: Rubelangel (Rubius and Mangel) and Septiplier (Jacksepticeye and Markiplier). Slash fiction is a fan-produced genre that imagines romantic and sexual relationships between male characters or celebrities who are heterosexual. The aim of this research is to examine how masculinity is represented and the way in which it is transformed due to the protagonists' falling in love with one another. Through a critical discourse analysis applied to 22 texts about Septiplier and Rubelangel, the article analyses models of masculinity, the constraints and discomforts they impose on the characters, and the ways masculinity is reconfigured to make their romantic relationship possible. The findings show how slash fiction can function as a space for negotiating and reinterpreting masculinity within the highly masculinised and heteronormative realm of video games.

Keywords

Masculinity, fan fiction, video games, critical discourse analysis, homoeroticism, content creators.

Resum

Aquest article analitza els discursos sobre la masculinitat a l'slash fiction protagonitzat per dues parelles fictícies de creadors de contingut vinculats al món dels videojocs: Rubelangel (Rubius i Mangel) i Septiplier (Jacksepticeye i Markiplier). L'slash fiction és un gènere produït per fans que imagina relacions romàntiques i sexuals entre personatges o celebritats masculines heterosexuales. L'objectiu d'aquesta recerca és examinar com es representa la masculinitat i de quina manera es transforma a partir de l'enamorament dels protagonistes. Mitjançant una anàlisi crítica del discurs aplicada a 22 textos sobre Septiplier i Rubelangel, l'article analitza els models de masculinitat, les limitacions i els malestars que imposen als personatges i com la masculinitat es reconfigura per possibilitar la relació de parella. Els resultats mostren com l'slash fiction pot constituir un espai de negociació i relectura de la masculinitat en l'àmbit dels videojocs, altament masculinitzat i heteronormatiu.

Paraules clau

Masculinitat, fan fiction, videojocs, anàlisi crítica del discurs, homoerotisme, creadors de contingut.

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1. Introduction

Masculinity is not a fixed, universal or natural essence: the way it is expressed, the forms it takes and the values associated with it are always social constructions (Enguix Grau 2025). It is therefore a social process of production and reproduction in which communicative and media processes play a highly significant role (Blanco Ruiz 2024). Much research on media representations of identities and communities has focused on minoritised or non-normative groups, but examining how masculinities are represented and negotiated also allows us to understand how hegemonic identities function, as well as identify fissures or alternative discourses (Pichel-Vázquez, Gómez Puertas & Medina-Bravo 2019).

In this sense, slash fiction constitutes a space where masculinities are put into play, narrated and problematised. Slash fiction is a genre of fan fiction –fiction written by fans– that explores romantic and sexual relationships between two male characters who are heterosexual in the original text (a series, film, book, or celebrity) (Mackey & McClay 2008). Slash fiction emerged in the late 1970s within fan communities of the TV series *Star Trek*, when many fans –mainly women– began writing about romantic and sexual relationships between Kirk and Spock (Bacon-Smith 1992). Over time, the practice expanded to other popular culture texts, as well as celebrities and public figures.

Another particularity of slash fiction is that it is generally written by women and queer people, which allows us to understand slash as a “female queer space” (Lothian, Busse & Reid 2007). One of the earliest academic texts analysing slash fiction, by Joanna Russ, described it as “pornography [made] by women, for women” (Russ 1985). Thus, slash fiction has often been conceptualised as a site of resistance to patriarchy (Massey 2019), where women can transgress expectations surrounding their sexual desire and fantasies by writing and reading sexually explicit stories starring two men (Neville 2018b), while constructing narratives free of inequalities or power abuse (Kustritz 2003). These optimistic portrayals of slash fiction as an inherently transgressive space have been nuanced over time, shifting the focus toward its complexity and the normative or conservative messages it may contain regarding gender and sexuality (Åström 2010; Hunting 2012; Spacey 2018).

Still, by imagining two men in an intimate relationship, slash fiction destabilises many assumptions surrounding masculinity since –implicitly or explicitly– it calls into question hegemonic discourses about what it means to “be a man”. Slash fiction challenges the assumption of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 2003; Wittig 2016) and hegemonic masculinity models (Connell 2005), which are linked to the rejection of any indication of desire between men (Hoad 2017). More broadly, slash

fiction explores what happens when a man falls in love with another man, and how this forces (or not) a reconfiguration of his masculinity.

This article analyses two fictional slash pairings: Rubelangel (the pairing of YouTubers Rubius and Mangel) and Septiplier (the pairing of YouTubers Jacksepticeye and Markiplier). Rubius, Mangel, Jacksepticeye and Markiplier are creators known for their work in the video game domain. The first pair produces content in Spanish and the second in English. In both cases, the creators are close friends with an affectionate and intimate bond. It is precisely within this homosocial bond that many fans read a homoerotic potential, which they later develop in their texts (Roach 2018).

These pairings are especially rich case studies because their videos and social media posts often showcase visible affection and closeness. They are also relevant due to the type of masculinity they embody and their placement in the world of video games –an environment highly masculinised and exclusionary toward non-normative identities (Salter 2018). Their masculinity approximates “geek masculinity”, constructed around an interest in video games, technology and popular media such as science fiction or animation (Salter 2018:250), and distanced from some aspects of hegemonic masculinity such as athletic or physical prowess (Taylor 2012:111) as we will see below in greater detail.

For these reasons, this article examines how slash texts about Rubelangel and Septiplier read and (re)construct the masculinities of these content creators in order to identify potential cracks in hegemonic constructions of masculinity, the mechanisms involved and the alternative models or discourses they suggest.

2. Masculinities, Homoeroticism and Popular Culture

Masculinity is a social construction and therefore cannot be understood as a stable and universal concept; hence the use of “masculinities” in the plural (Mercer 2017:41). Masculinities shift over time and depend on cultural, social, geographic and historical contexts, even though they may become naturalised –that is, understood as natural or inherent attributes (Reeser 2011).

When studying masculinities, it is crucial to consider the traits associated with being a man in a given context (Lee 2020) and understand their social construction, relational dimension and performativity –how masculinity is constantly enacted and formed in contrast to other models of masculinity or to femininity (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Sexuality is also a central axis: traditional hegemonic masculinity, besides being constructed in opposition to femininity, is based on heterosexuality and the expression of homophobia or “homohysteria”, defined as the fear of being perceived as homosexual (Anderson 2016:180).

Homophobia works as a mechanism for regulating gender expression, limiting displays of affection between men –physical, verbal or otherwise.

Although men have historically been the default subjects of study, the field of masculinity studies –conceiving men as gendered subjects– emerged in the late 1970s under feminist influence (Lee 2020), aiming to understand the relationship between masculinity, power, domination and the patriarchal order (Reeser 2011:7). Raewyn Connell (2005) is one of the most influential researchers in the field, proposing a relational model of four types of masculinity: hegemonic, subordinate, complicit and marginalised, a framework which allows Connell to identify how different masculinities relate to each other.

Hegemonic masculinity is the dominant and most desirable form at a given historical moment, and therefore its characteristics change depending on the social and cultural context. It generally includes traits such as strength, control, dominance and aggressiveness. Brannon and David (1976) identify four core traits of dominant masculinity: avoidance of femininity; social importance and relevance of power, competition and success; emotional and physical toughness; and the capacity for aggression or violence when necessary.

Although hegemonic masculinity is constructed as the desirable and dominant form, only a small number of individuals can embody it; therefore, most men either aspire to reach it or uphold it through complicity. Consequently, subordinated, complicit and marginalised masculinities also help us understand the hierarchies and interactions among different types of masculinity.

Subordinated masculinity is the one that contains elements traditionally attributed to femininity and is therefore deemed inappropriate. Gay men are generally placed within this model, since homosexuality has traditionally been associated with feminine gender expression. Complicit masculinity refers to men who, although unable to fully embody hegemonic masculinity, still benefit from it or gain some advantage from its existence. In other words, these are men who do not hold the highest level of power or privilege, yet neither question nor challenge that privilege. Finally, marginalised masculinity relates to the intersection with other axis of identity, such as class or race –men in situations of social exclusion or with limited access to power, such as working-class men or racialised men. These four categories have been highly influential in the study of masculinity, although they have also been critiqued and questioned. For example, it has been pointed out that the concept of hegemonic masculinity is too ambiguous, making it difficult to determine which men embody it and which do not (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005:838).

Another paradigm used to understand masculinities is "inclusive masculinity", proposed by Eric Anderson (2008) as a response to Connell's model. According to Anderson,

levels of homophobia and homophobia have decreased in recent years, meaning that many characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity are no longer relevant. As a result, inclusive masculinity has softened gender codes and allows for greater space and visibility for emotions, physical contact between men and intimate male friendship (Anderson & McCormack 2018).

For this research, we are also interested in gay masculinities and geek masculinities. Regarding gay masculinities, we have already seen that masculinity is constructed on the basis of heterosexuality and homophobia. Therefore, gay masculinity tends to fall at the bottom of the "masculinity hierarchy" (Barret 2019:244). However, this does not mean that gay men cannot exercise power or domination over others by using resources associated with hegemonic masculinity.

On the other hand, geek masculinity is constructed around technological skills and specialised knowledge in areas such as video games or popular culture, and it rejects certain traits of hegemonic masculinity such as virility or physical prowess (Morgan 2014; Salter 2018; Taylor 2012). If we narrow this down to the figure of video-game content creators, gamer masculinity is closely linked to geek masculinity, although with its own specificities and differences. According to some authors, this form of masculinity aligns more closely with inclusive masculinity, as it shows a rejection of hypermasculinity, allows displays of affection between friends, exhibits little homophobia and permits jokes or ambiguities about one's sexuality (Maloney, Roberts & Caruso 2018; Welch 2022).

These displays of affection between friends, physical intimacy or ambiguities about sexuality can be understood within homoeroticism or bromance narratives. As we have seen, slash fiction mainly consists of taking relationships between two heterosexual men and transforming them into homosexual ones. The relationships between the two men –usually friends or colleagues– tend to be intimate, and therefore we can situate them within the "continuum of homosocial desire", a term proposed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985). Drawing on her analysis of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English literature, Sedgwick identifies how thin the boundary is between what falls under friendship and what falls under desire.

Sedgwick therefore speaks of "homosocial desire" because she sees a continuity between friendship, desire and eroticism. She uses contemporary examples to illustrate how bonds between men can be interpreted through this lens: football matches, locker rooms or U.S. college fraternities are full of moments that can be read through the dynamics of masculine homosocial desire (Sedgwick 1985:89). However, whereas this continuum is far more visible and recognisable in the case of women, its visibility among men is fractured and far less apparent.

Although it is not always highly visible, popular culture has paid considerable attention to these intimate, close

relationships between men. "Bromance" is a clear example. The term refers to intense emotional bonds between two heterosexual men who display an openness to a kind of "intimacy that neither of them sees, acknowledges, affirms, or expresses sexually" (DeAngelis 2014:1). While the word is often used colloquially to describe close male friendships, it also refers to a film genre –generally comedies– that explores these intense, intimate relationships between men, often highlighting homoerotic desire (Alberti 2013; Benson 2017; Brook 2015; Robinson, White & Anderson 2019), such as *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005), *The Hangover* (2009), *Wedding Crashers* (2005) and *Superbad* (2007).

In slash fiction, there is also a strong interest in these masculine homoerotic narratives, but unlike bromances –which never cross the boundary into love or sex– these texts do explore romantic and sexual terrain while still attending to the protagonists' intimacy and friendship. In fact, according to Lucy Neville, slash fiction primarily involves observing this homosociality and "framing it as homosexual" (2018a:91). As Henry Jenkins notes, it "uncovers the erotics of male friendship, confronting the fears that prevent intimacy between men" (1992:210).

One genre within slash fiction that focuses on exploring these boundaries and relationships is "intimatopia" (Woledge 2006), defined as texts with romantic narratives that, rather than centring on identity or sexuality, emphasise homosociality, emotional and romantic intimacy and sexual acts. These are texts that inevitably play with models of masculinity (Riseman 2020).

Thus, masculinity –though often constructed as a series of natural attributes– is a contested terrain where multiple models and forms coexist, constantly strained and renegotiated within popular media culture, including slash fiction.

3. Methodology

As previously mentioned, the main objective of this research was to understand how Rubelangel and Septiplier slash fiction interprets and negotiates the masculinities of its protagonists. The specific research questions that guided this analysis are the following:

1. How is the protagonists' masculinity constructed in the slash fiction texts?
2. In what ways does falling in love with another man impact or modify their masculinity?

To answer these questions, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was used, a qualitative methodology for discourse analysis. Specifically, Norman Fairclough's approach (1992, 1995, 2003) was applied. CDA allows us to delve into textual and discursive mechanisms and identify the values present in the text. We understand discursive practices as having strong ideological effects since discourse can be used to

sustain the social status quo yet can also serve to transform it. According to Gee (2014), discourse is a way of seeing the world –systems of thought and belief, patterns and assumptions within a given context. CDA makes it possible to bring these beliefs and values to the surface, in this case those related to discourses on masculinity.

CDA has rarely been used in narrative or fictional texts. Therefore, in this research it is complemented with other methodological approaches– specifically, Van Leeuwen's social semiotics (1996) and Lubomír Doležel's possible-worlds theory (1999)– which allow us to address two fundamental aspects: the representation of social actors and narrative constraints, respectively.

Drawing on these three methodological approaches, an analytical grid was developed through an inductive and deductive process. The final grid, created as part of a broader research project on discourses of desire, love and masculinity in these texts, consists of five main categories (narrative genre; interdiscursivity; social actors and groups; metaphors; narrative modalities and presuppositions) with their corresponding subcategories and operators. For the purposes of this study, we are mainly interested in the operators related to masculinity, desire and love.

This analysis was applied to a total of 22 slash fiction texts –11 Rubelangel and 11 Septiplier. The sample was closed according to a saturation criterion (Saunders et al. 2018). The texts were collected from Wattpad and Archive of Our Own, two of the main online fan fiction platforms. The inclusion and exclusion criteria defined were the following: works had to be completed; they had to contain a minimum of 3,000 words to ensure continuity, narrative length and character development; they had to have at least 1,000 views or reads; the Septiplier or Rubelangel romantic pairing had to be central and protagonistic in the text; and narrative genres such as science fiction, fantasy or one-shots (short narrative pieces) were excluded to ensure sample homogeneity and include only texts focused on the protagonists' romantic and/or sexual relationships. The texts were in both Spanish and English and no time limits were set regarding their publication date.

Finally, regarding the ethical considerations of collecting and handling these data, it is important to take into account that although these texts are public and anyone can read them –and although they are written under a pseudonym– the individuals who authored these fan fictions may have different expectations or perceptions of privacy (Franzke et al. 2020:22). However, it is very difficult to contact the authors of these texts (as they are no longer active on the platforms), which makes obtaining informed consent challenging.

To protect the authors' identities, any information that could lead back to the original text was removed, anonymised or paraphrased, a common practice in digital research and fan studies (Deller 2019; Dym & Fiesler 2020).

Additionally, the texts (originally published in English or Spanish) were translated into Catalan, ensuring an additional layer of anonymisation for the slash fiction. In this way, when texts are referenced in the analysis of the results, an "S" will be used for Septiplier texts and an "R" for Rubelangel texts, followed by a number (1–11) to identify them, for example "S10" or "R3".

4. Results

Below, we present the main findings of this research, divided into two sections: first, how masculinity is understood and what it means to be a man; and second, the implications of falling in love with another man and how love or desire for another man allows the protagonists to modify or transform certain elements of their masculinity, in line with the research questions outlined in the previous section.

Before examining these two aspects in detail, we briefly describe the most common narrative pattern found in these slash fiction texts. The storyline is as follows: two heterosexual friends (Rubius and Mangel, or Jack and Mark), who share a close, affectionate and intimate relationship, realise that they feel attraction toward each other or that they have romantic feelings. Then, one of them confesses to the other, or they engage in sexual relations –an event that reveals their mutual love– and finally, they become a couple. This type of narrative fits within the genre of intimatopias (Woledge 2006) and is very common in slash fiction (Salmon & Symons 2003), as such stories typically seek male characters in contexts and situations that foster intimacy and bonding between them.

4.1. Being a man

We have already seen how the main patterns of masculinity (hegemonic, gay, inclusive, etc.) have been defined and configured, as well as the specificities of geek and gamer masculinity. Through the analysis of epistemic constraints related to masculinity, we can identify how these paradigms –or their main characteristics– are known, unknown or assumed by the characters in Rubelangel's slash fiction.

First, it is important to highlight that the characters assume that the predominant models of masculinity (associated with virility, strength or emotional restraint) are natural and inherent traits of being a man, rather than social constructions. This pattern appears in most texts, except in those where one or both protagonists are portrayed as gay or bisexual, since positioning themselves outside the hegemonic mandates of masculinity provides them with a more open understanding of what being a man can mean and makes them less fearful of showing vulnerability or sensitivity. However, in the remaining texts, the protagonists do not question whether these traits are natural or constructed. For example, in a passage from

R11, Rubius tells Mangel that he has missed him, but is surprised to have said it aloud and wonders the following:

"What was wrong with me? Even though I missed him, I felt embarrassed to say these kinds of things to Mangel. I'm not usually honest. When we say things like that, it's always as a joke. We never say them seriously, even if we really feel that way."

Although Rubius is able to recognise the longing he feels, he finds sharing it strange and notes that if he expresses any emotion, he does so through joking or ironic distance –something that aligns with gamer masculinities, where displays of affection and fondness are allowed, but always within a playful and humorous frame (Maloney *et al.* 2018; Potts 2014; Welch 2022).

We also identified a fear of embodying traits associated with subordinated or gay masculinity, and this fear shapes how the characters define themselves as men –or at least how they wish to be perceived as such. In a Septiplier text (S7), Jack and Mark, who are already publicly a couple, are recording a video discussing what name to give a dog they have adopted. Jack suggests "Biscuit", and Mark replies, "What a cute name, just like you!" Mark calling him cute makes Jack nervous; he asks him to stop because it embarrasses him and quickly turns off the camera.

In another Septiplier text (S9), Mark jokes that he is "the man of the relationship" because he carried Jack in his arms, adding, "I have muscles" and that Jack is "my lovely wife". Even though Mark says this to tease him, we can see how both characters associate certain behaviours or traits with hegemonic masculinity (in this case, Mark being physically stronger and carrying Jack) and others with traditional femininity –a division neither of them questions.

In most cases, this reinforcement of gender roles and masculine attributes is done jokingly or teasingly. Typically, it happens when one character does not behave "like a man". In R1, Rubius helps Mangel put on his pyjamas because he is very tired and tidies the whole room before going to sleep. In response, Mangel laughs and says he looks "like a housewife". In R2, Rubius gets a small cut that bleeds a lot, and seeing the blood makes him dizzy and faint. When he wakes up, Mangel tells him he fainted "like a damsel from the last century". In neither case does Rubius get angry or offended; this kind of teasing is simply part of their habitual way of interacting. Thus, we see how the characters' jokes point to behaviours linked to care work –traditionally feminised (Araña, Tortajada & Willem 2018)– or to supposed weakness and lack of virility. These kinds of jokes are very common in environments shaped by hegemonic or even inclusive masculinity, where constant teasing is used to reaffirm one's own masculinity and highlight the other's perceived shortcomings.

However, it is important to note that although the characters assume certain traits of hegemonic masculinity to be natural and desirable, these same

traits also generate discomfort, even if they cannot identify its source or recognise that it relates to the limits imposed by masculinity. In many cases, the characters feel frustrated because they are unable to express their feelings or show affection toward their friend or partner. For example, in R6, Mangel thinks that "it was about time to stop being an idiot who ran away instead of expressing my feelings." Even so, Mangel frames it as him "being an idiot", an individual flaw, rather than a consequence of masculine norms.

In some cases, however, the protagonists do recognise that this discomfort may be connected to masculinity. In S10, Jack and Mark have to share a bed as friends, and this worries Mark. Jack quickly tells him: "Is your masculinity so fragile that you're afraid cuddling will destroy it?" Here we see an ambivalence between their desire (to sleep together) and the mandate of masculinity, which considers this level of intimacy dangerous because it could be read as homosexual. And indeed, the teasing and mockery are aimed precisely at highlighting how this model of masculinity is limiting him.

4.2. *Falling in love with another man and transforming masculinity through love*

Masculinity is also constructed through heterosexuality and the fear of being perceived as homosexual. In the Rubelangel and Septiplier slash fiction, homosexuality is one of the elements that creates the greatest tension in how the protagonists understand and embody masculinity. With the exception of two out of the twenty-two texts analysed, the protagonists consider themselves heterosexual and have never felt attracted to another man. Therefore, feeling drawn to another man is a shock for them and forces them to reconcile their masculinity with this discovery.

A large part of the texts revolves around narrating how the protagonists come to realise this attraction. Very often, it is through the characters' gazes that they detect the desire they feel –something that echoes what Woledge (2005) observed in Star Trek slash fiction featuring Kirk and Spock. According to Woledge, the exchanged glances between male characters often function as signs of desire, a subtle language that fan-fiction writers pick up on and amplify in their stories.

In the case of Rubelangel and Septiplier, analysing the mental and material processes of the social actors shows that these gazes play an important role because they allow us to see, in detail, how the protagonists observe their friend and become aware of the desire and attraction they feel. But above all, they allow us to see how quickly this transforms into confusion or doubt: the characters struggle to understand what they are feeling, because they cannot conceive of the possibility that they might be attracted to their friend. The following passage

perfectly illustrates this gaze of attraction and budding love, immediately followed by uncertainty:

"I never got tired of looking at him [...] Looking at him was the moment when I felt no fear, when I wasn't afraid as long as Mangel was with me [...] But the fear came afterward, when I returned to reality and realised the problem. How can you be with the person your heart tells you is the right one, when society tells you the opposite?" (R4)

In a passage from a Septiplier slash fiction text, we can also see Jack's difficulty in identifying what he feels for his friend. In this case, Jack –who has a girlfriend– realises that he feels something special for Mark:

«Here was the doubt: "I love my girlfriend, I'm sure of it, but Mark..." What he felt for his friend was... a new category, something he had never experienced with anyone else before.» (S7)

Therefore, although they are able to identify that they have strong feelings for their friend, they struggle greatly to accept that these feelings could be love or sexual desire, because this does not align with their self-conception – not only as heterosexuals, but as men, two ideas that are tightly intertwined.

When the protagonists finally realise they feel attracted to their friend, they continue to experience difficulties –especially when it comes to forming a couple and expressing the love or affection they feel for one another, as if doing so might call their masculinity into question and make them seem too effeminate. Thus, although they have accepted their romantic and/or sexual feelings towards their friend, and even after becoming a couple, they still fear being perceived as insufficiently masculine.

For this reason, the characters worry about using terms of endearment such as "love", "teddy bear", or "king", which they often consider "too gay". They constantly appeal to the idea of not wanting to be "too" gay when expressing affection, even though they are in love and, in many cases, already in a relationship with another man. In a Septiplier text (S4), Mark tells Jack over a video call that he can't sleep without him because he has got used to sharing a bed. Jack's response is to say: "that's the gayest thing you've ever said to me." However, unlike earlier examples, he doesn't say this teasingly or mockingly, but as recognition and appreciation of the declaration Mark has just made. Although the framework of homophobia is still present, as the protagonists become a couple, they increasingly allow space for affectionate expressions, even if these might be read as "too gay".

Unlike the previous section, where the characters teased each other by accusing the other of being too effeminate, here the word "gay" is not necessarily used with negative connotations. For them, describing something as very "gay" becomes a way of saying that it is affectionate or sweet—that it is something beautiful. Even so, this points to

a certain tension and difficulty in reconciling their models of masculinity (tough, inexpressive, invulnerable) with the affection and attraction they feel for one another, which lead them toward emotional warmth and tenderness.

The way the characters overcome this difficulty is through love. These slash fiction texts portray love and romantic partnership as positive, desirable and even necessary aspects of a happy life. Therefore, any effort or sacrifice made in order to become a couple is considered worthwhile –even modulating their masculinity. Thus, even if something feels “too gay” to them, enduring that discomfort is worthwhile if it means being with the person they love most. The protagonists mainly identify two aspects that make being in a relationship difficult or could jeopardise it: their limited emotional openness and vulnerability, and the practice of caring for the other.

Regarding emotional openness, in a Rubelangel text (R3), Rubius and Mangel have gone a long time without speaking due to a misunderstanding about their relationship. When they reconnect years later, Rubius acknowledges that this hurt him and distanced him from his friend –now partner– and he expresses this to Mangel: “Mangel, I need you [...] I know I’ve made many mistakes and I regret them... but you’re right, mistakes are meant to help us learn [...] I’m willing to correct my past actions” (R3). As we can see, the desire to be with Mangel has led him to reconsider how he behaves, and although he does not explicitly frame this in the codes of masculinity, we can see that it involves questioning how he manages emotions and allowing himself to be vulnerable before another person.

In relation to care, the protagonists also reflect on how they should take care of their friend. They are used to taking the relationship for granted or avoiding getting too involved when the other is going through a difficult time. However, upon becoming a couple, the characters are compelled to take a more active role and care for their friend –even if this risks being perceived as effeminate. In this passage from Septiplier (S5), Mark verbalises to his friend how he wants to care for him, something he had not been fully capable of doing until then: “Jack, I will take very good care of you, I’ll give you everything you need and everything you deserve. I want to show you that, okay? I’ll take care of you, I promise.”

5. Conclusions

This research has allowed us to see how Septiplier and Rubelangel slash fiction discursively constructs masculinity and interprets and reconstructs it in the texts, especially through the love or sexual relationships between the protagonists. The analysis shows that the characters are not situated within a single model of masculinity; rather, they constantly move between different paradigms – hegemonic masculinity, inclusive masculinity and geek

masculinity. However, they never fully inhabit one fixed model. Instead, they combine elements from different paradigms, shifting according to their personal situation. This hybridity reveals the fluid nature of masculinity which, far from being a set of natural or inherent attributes, is an ever-changing and tension-filled field, especially when sexuality comes into play.

It is important to highlight that even though the texts treat traits associated with hegemonic masculinity as natural (strength, emotional detachment), these are precisely the traits that generate discomfort for the protagonists. And although they often cannot attribute this discomfort to the rigidity of masculine norms, they do recognise that certain attributes are harmful to them, particularly in relation to love or their romantic partner. In this sense, hegemonic masculinity continues to function both as an aspirational reference point and as a normative model –but also as a constraint or limit the characters wish to transform. It is no coincidence, then, that this tension forms the central narrative conflict: the two protagonists like each other, are mutually attracted, but struggle to realise and accept it because it directly clashes with their conception of masculinity, which is heterosexual.

The influence of hegemonic masculinity –built upon homophobia– also affects how they express affection, as they fear appearing too effeminate. These dynamics are embedded in male–male relationships, often characterised by teasing and constant mockery, calling out traits seen as “not masculine enough” or potentially readable as homosexual. In the Rubelangel and Septiplier slash fiction, we detect these dynamics functioning as mechanisms that regulate gender expression and, once again, limit both their friendship and their romantic relationship.

However, the protagonists are able to modulate this homophobia and gradually open up more, eventually appreciating traits considered feminine (care, verbal affection) because these allow for closeness and intimacy within the relationship. What once functioned as teasing (“that’s so gay”) becomes a genuine expression of affection. Thus, we see how the texts reclaim some of the most typical features of relationships between heterosexual men and transform them into signs of affection within a homosexual couple. In this way, the texts play with elements constitutive of hegemonic and heterosexual masculinity and destabilise them by relocating them within a context of homosexual male intimacy and affection.

It is important to note, however, that the break with hegemonic masculinity and its limitations takes place through romantic love, along with all the myths and connotations associated with it (Ferrer-Pérez, Bosc & Navarro Guzmán 2010; Flegel & Roth 2010; Herrera Gómez 2010). Where hegemonic masculinity imposes its restrictions –such as emotional distance or silence– love operates as the force that pushes the protagonists to articulate

feelings or acknowledge mistakes. This is possible because the transformation happens under the umbrella of the idea that "love conquers all", and since love is always worthwhile, the protagonists are able to change some of the traits that caused them discomfort. In this sense, we can see –consistent with what other authors have argued– that romantic relationships are spaces where gendered and patriarchal dynamics become most visible (Capdevila, Tortajada & Araña 2011), but also spaces in which men's roles can be questioned and transformed through the management of romantic feelings (Aran-Ramspott *et al.* 2014). The texts challenge the limitations of masculinity, but can only do so through romantic narratives which can also be painful or restrictive for the protagonists.

In sum, this research shows that Rubelangel and Septiplier slash fiction functions as a space for negotiating masculinity. The texts reproduce many dominant codes surrounding masculinity, but at the same time they question and even transform them. It is through the desire and attraction between two men –emerging from homosocial contexts and relationships– that certain discourses on masculinity can be shifted. This transformation is neither clean nor linear; rather, the protagonists oscillate between the desire or intention to embody traits of hegemonic masculinity while simultaneously breaking away from those same traits. This reveals that texts like slash fiction offer an ideal space for thinking about masculinities, about desire and about possible paths for expanding the range of what it means to be a man –or at least, a man in the world of video games.

It is important to keep in mind that, as a qualitative study, the results cannot –and do not aim to– be representative or generalisable, especially given the focus on two specific case studies. Likewise, this research analyses the texts published by fans, but does not investigate the practices, motivations or discourses of the fans themselves when writing or reading these stories. For future lines of research, it would be valuable to include these readers and/or writers in the study and learn firsthand about their discourses and practices through interviews or digital ethnography.

The fact that these narratives emerge within fan communities in the realm of video games –spaces that are highly masculinised and heteronormative– reinforces their significance and potential for transformation. Slash fiction not only reshapes the masculinities of its protagonists, but can also serve as a crack in communities and spaces that tend to reinforce masculinity norms and exclude many non-normative identities.

Endnote

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From meme maker to content creator. An ethnographic approach with Marina Listillas

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Abstract

This article examines how meme makers become established professionals, based on an ethnographic case study focusing on Marina, who runs the Instagram account @listillas. The study focuses on the transition from meme maker, a position tied to vernacular and community-based creative practices, to the more professional role of content creator. This case study is part of an ethnography project carried out between April 2021 and April 2023 that combines participant observation, ethnographic interviews, and online life stories.

The analysis reveals that professionalisation does not imply a linear substitution of community logics by commercial ones, but a tensioned coexistence between gift economies and platform capitalism. Through strategic campaigns, Marina reaches out to the community and to the wider public. Within this setting, she assumes the role of mediator of a constantly reconfiguring symbolic laboratory, generating new forms of subjectivity and cultural value.

Keywords

Digital culture, social media, creative industries, digital work, digital folklore

Resum

Aquest article examina el procés de professionalització de les creadores de mems a partir d'un estudi de cas etnogràfic centrat en Marina, administradora del compte d'Instagram @listillas. L'objecte d'estudi és la transició de memera, una posició vinculada a pràctiques creatives vernacles i comunitàries, a creadora de contingut, una disposició orientada al que és professional. Aquest cas forma part d'una etnografia desenvolupada entre abril del 2021 i abril del 2023 que combina observació participant, entrevistes etnogràfiques i història de vida online.

L'anàlisi revela que la professionalització no implica una substitució lineal de les lògiques comunitàries per les comercials, sinó una coexistència tensionada entre economies del do i capitalisme de plataformes. Mitjançant accions tàctiques, Marina articula una orientació a la comunitat i una cap a un públic massiu. En aquest escenari, actua com a medidora d'un laboratori simbòlic en reconfiguració constant i produeix noves formes de subjectivitat i valor cultural.

Paraules clau

Cultura digital, mitjans socials, indústries creatives, treball digital, folklore digital

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1. Introduction

Digital memetic culture has forged a space for symbolic production where creative practices, social interactions, and value systems specific to online platforms intersect. Against this backdrop, the “meme-maker” emerges as a cultural agent who embodies a situational, relationship-based, vernacular creativity linked to the dynamics of orality (Ong, 1996; Venturini, 2022; Cutler, Ahmar and Bahti, 2022) and digital folklore (Lialina and Spenschied, 2009; Blank, 2009; de Seta, 2020; Peck and Blank, 2020; Galip, 2021). Rather than being marginal contributors, meme makers actively take part in shaping meaning within online communities, playing a central role in creating their *lore*, i.e., the traditions, stories, and memories that bring these communities together (Dingsun and Marss, 2021).

Recently, these meme makers have become more professional or semi-professional, revealing a significant change in their careers. The shift from “meme maker” to “content creator” implies an overhaul of their role, marked by the addition of monetisation, visibility, and institutional legitimation. These changes not only alter the material conditions of production, but also alter the symbolic status of digital creativity, pushing the boundaries between folk-community and commercial-industrial forms of creativity.

This article sets out to analyse this transition through an ethnographic lens, drawing on the narratives, practices and strategies employed by meme makers in their professionalisation processes. Through Marina’s case study, who runs the Instagram account @listillas, we attempt to understand how the cultural value of memes is negotiated in a context shaped by platformisation and the attention economy. This discussion reveals the friction between authenticity and commercialisation, along with the methods used to reorganise creativity within contemporary digital culture.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Memes, vernacular creativity and digital orality

Online vernacular creativity is expressed as a form of situational and relationship-based symbolic production that breaks away from the institutional norms of art and the cultural industry. For Burgess (2006), this concept emerges as a way of attending to particular, non-elitist (niche) creative practices with a commitment to empathy. Coleman (2010) refers to a set of ethnographic approaches to digital media as “vernacular cultures of digital media”, “evinced by discrepant phenomena, digital genres, and groups –hackers, blogging, Internet memes, and migrant programmers– whose logic is organized significantly around, although not necessarily determined by, selected properties of digital media” (Coleman 2010, p. 488). In academic studies on digital culture, the definition of

“meme” has been heavily influenced by Limor Shifman’s (2014, p. 41) concept, who defines it as a set of digital items –images, videos, phrases– that share characteristics regarding content, form or stance, which are created with mutual knowledge and disseminated, imitated and/or transformed via the Internet by many users. Shifman (2014) distinguishes memes from viral content (the latter being singular units and memes being “collections of texts”); however, memetic content is associated with viral and mass circulation. From this perspective, a meme is not reduced to an isolated macro image, but exists as a relational phenomenon, recognisable only insofar as it is inscribed in a series of shared iterations.

This definition has been instrumental in shifting the understanding of the meme from the individual object to processes of collective circulation, imitation and transformation. However, throughout my ethnographic research, the notion of memes linked to going viral has proven problematic and insufficient. As discussed later, an ethnographic approach to niche meme makers, specific audiences, and communities within the digital underground reveals that memes evolve through a dialectic between their viral nature and specific, contextual community ties. A view from the creators shifts the meme back from mass expansion to communication between like-minded audiences and specific communities.

From an anthropological perspective, memes are not understood as viral images or multimedia constructions, but as digital oral phenomena (Soriano, 2024). Memes operate as speech acts, ephemeral events and digital rituals that generate cohesion and shared meaning. Its mutable, context-dependent and ever-changing nature is shaped by dynamics of secondary orality –to borrow Ong’s (1996) notion– or digital orality (Cutler, Ahmar and Bahti, 2022), embedding them in a digital folklore that is perpetually updated based on interactions between users, platforms and algorithms.

Hybrid and vernacular forms of writing have emerged in digital ecosystems, eroding the oral versus written dichotomy and disrupting the “rigid era of modern printing” (Cutler, Ahmar, and Bahti, 2022: 4). Memes are a prime example of these forms of digital orality, serving as mnemonics to create *lore*, or forms of collective memory and self-mythification that bind digital communities (Dingsun and Marrs, 2021). From the perspective developed here, by conceptualising memes as digital speech acts rather than texts, the idea of “intertextuality” (the relationship between texts as discrete, finished units) is set aside in favour of the vernacular concept of “lore”. Therefore, a meme is not, by definition, a separate text that goes viral, but rather a communicative event that takes on meaning in specific contexts of use, in relation to shared lore and timescales typical of everyday interaction. This approach does not negate the relationship-based nature of memes identified

by Shifman (2014), but rather suggests that memetic status does not depend on mass replicability, but rather on shared intelligibility and community-oriented values. Similarly, this concept leads to a more open approach to the question of authorship in memes. While much of the literature has emphasised the anonymous nature of memes –understood as collective and depersonalised creations– ethnographic research shows that hybrid forms of authorship are emerging in certain platform-based environments, with recognisable accounts operating as stable hubs of production, without this implying full appropriation of the meme as an individual work.

By taking an ethnographic and holistic approach, where *emic* uses and concepts (used by the social agents themselves to understand their experience) take precedence over formal definitions, the expanded and multimodal nature of memes is revealed. This goes beyond their definition as viral content and allows them to be understood as means of creating memory in different communities and subcultures. The use of these terms reveals a highly reflexive field in which the participants create and discuss the terms that give meaning to their experience. *Emic* concepts such as *meme maker* or *lore* are preferred to other academic concepts as an analytical and methodological choice that recognises research participants as *epistemic partners* (Sánchez Criado and Estalella, 2023) in the research, rather than passive subjects.

In this sense, I use the term *meme maker* to refer to a specific way of interacting online. A meme maker creates and/or curates memes through one or several accounts on a digital platform. As explained later, this term does not refer to a professional role, but rather a place in a media ecosystem, an activity, and a type of online behaviour.

2.2. Creativity organisation methods and production chains

This study of creative practices in meme making considers the contexts and media that shape that experience. Memes circulate across multiple environments, resulting in a constant transformation of their meaning. To analyse how they are produced, disseminated and consumed, three types of creative organisation can be identified: folkloric, artistic-cultural and commercial-industrial. This classification responds to the need for analytical tools to understand the different factors that influence the creative experience, namely:

1. Practice contexts: Spaces where creative dynamics unfold, such as interactions between friends or a community of gamers, a work environment at a digital marketing agency, or an artistic institution.
2. Production models: Specific ways of creating and sharing memes, influenced by expectations, objectives, sensitivities, and delivery styles. They can be more spontaneous, ironic, reflective, scripted, etc.
3. Evaluation systems: Criteria used to judge creativity. These may include notions such as *originality*, *innovation*, *tradition*, *depth*, *scope*, *complexity*, etc.
4. Socio-technical networks: Media and technologies that mediate creativity. Special emphasis is placed on the difference between those that generate secondary orality and those that record creative results, such as writing or archiving.

This approach is inspired by the distinction between popular culture, cultural industry, and high culture, as explored in cultural studies. Rather than establishing strict boundaries between these spheres, the aim is to understand them as variations in context, production methods, evaluation criteria, and technological networks. Following Goody's (2008) line of reasoning regarding the distinction between the wild and the domesticated, this paper aims not simply to describe these differences, but to explain how creative practices shift between these systems by referring to another set of circumstances.

Sociologist Simon Frith's (2014) notion of "value networks" provides the basis for this classification. In his analysis of pop music, Frith identifies three overlapping –and sometimes contradictory–discourses that structure the musical experience. These are the artistic discourse, centred on academic training; the folk discourse, which values the social function of art in everyday life; and the pop discourse, linked to the cultural industry and entertainment.

For Frith, value judgements are inherent in popular culture and function as "rites of interpretation", which are more closely linked to ways of being and listening than to simple preferences. This perspective connecting value creation with the experience of creativity is outlined by research on orality that shows how technologies of speech –such as writing or printing– mediate the understanding of creativity and the categories of valuation (Ong, 1996; Goody, 2008; Cutler, Ahmar and Bahri, 2022; Venturini, 2022).

Thus, in order to understand how memes engage in folkloric dynamics (marked by digital orality) and in artistic logic (where they are treated as visual works) or in commercial processes (where they are used as communication tools), it is necessary to observe how these practices are organised in different fields. Rather than claiming that memes blur the line between high and low culture, this paper presents a model that describes the processes by which they move between these categories and how these transitions affect the creative experience.

In general:

- The folkloric system is linked to community practice and digital oral tradition, where creativity manifests itself as speech, ephemeral events, and daily rituals. Cultural value arises from participation, emotional connection, and ritual.

- The commercial-industrial system responds to market logic, professionalisation, and media visibility. Creativity is organised according to its profitability, capacity to attract audiences and compliance with standards defined by the industry.
- The artistic-cultural system is related to art and culture institutions, where criteria such as originality, significance, authorship or *oeuvre*, and technologies such as archiving operate.

This holistic view, treating memes as phenomena that simultaneously traverse and occupy different systems of classification, makes it possible to identify both processes of professionalisation, geared towards monetising creativity, and folklorisation tactics, through which meme makers and other users reinsert memes into everyday ritual practices, resisting attempts to commodify their productions. These tactics reveal a vernacular dimension of creativity in contexts marked by platformisation and the attention economy.

3. Methodology

Digital anthropology (Pink *et al.*, 2016; Ardévol and Lanzeni, 2014; Coleman, 2010; Postill & Pink, 2012) and post-digital anthropology (de Seta, 2020) refer to a methodology that revisits the tradition of Internet ethnography in the light of new epistemological approaches. This implies understanding the digital as a continuum embedded in everyday life, overcoming the dichotomy between the virtual and the physical, and approaching the Internet as part of a broader set of interconnected practices. This paper uses the term *post-digital* to create a bridge with the notion of *post-internet art* (Martín-Prada, 2017), based on the same desire to break down the dichotomies of virtual/real and online/offline.

An ethnography of vernacular creativity on the Internet poses the challenge of defining a field that is not bounded physically or by a specific community. This approach proposes thinking of the field as a network of relations mediated by cultural technologies and techniques, breaking with the territory-culture binomial (Burrell, 2009; Amit, 2000). The field is constructed through acts of inclusion and exclusion that define which phenomena, partners and relationships will be addressed. The study of a "distributed phenomenon" such as vernacular Internet creativity does not necessarily imply "the detailed and local study of each manifestation" but has to be transferred to cases, collaborators and concrete relationships (Kelty, 2019, p.84).

This article presents an ethnographic case study framed within a broader digital ethnography. This ethnography investigates the creative practices of meme makers, focusing on how value, authorship, and meaning are negotiated and constructed in these digital communities.

This case study is part of a larger project that examined how professionalisation dynamics influence the emergence of certain forms of authorship, intellectual property, and transformations in the creative dispositions of the creators.

The case study for this article is Marina, who runs the Instagram account @listillas, which has been active for over six years and has more than 20,000 followers. The relevance of this case lies in its intermediate position between community-based memetic practices and sustained processes of professionalisation: @listillas did not emerge as a business project or as an account designed for mass viralisation, but over time it has participated in collaborations with brands, cultural institutions and artistic events. This trajectory makes it a particularly relevant case for analysing the tensions between digital folklore, content creation and cultural work on platforms.

For the past six years, Marina has been managing an Instagram account where she shares memes in a very specific format. She uses stock images with semi-anonymous models and a caption underneath. "when will there be a Men's Day?", "don't give money to beggars because they'll just spend it on drugs", "society isn't ready yet" or "i'm a self-made man" are phrases from @listillas. This compilation of clichéd phrases used by blathering bigots, featuring stock models, has made @listillas one of the most famous accounts in the Spanish meme sphere.

Fieldwork for the ethnography comprising this case study was conducted between April 2021 and April 2023, and combined various digital anthropology techniques. Participant observation constituted the central axis of the research and included the daily monitoring of @listillas' activity on Instagram, regular interaction with the creator and joint participation in artistic and cultural events in Barcelona linked to memes and digital folklore. This observation was supported by recursive techniques typical of the digital field, such as systematic scrolling, content capture and archiving, and the creation of a multimedia field diary.

In terms of data production, five in-depth interviews were conducted with Marina, conceived as an online life story aimed at reconstructing her trajectory on Instagram, her professionalisation processes and her conceptions of community, authorship and creative work. In them, we map the Spanish memesphere, jointly analyse its dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, and delve into the forms of professionalisation and profitability of meme making business. These interviews were conducted in person and accompanied by informal conversations held throughout the years of fieldwork.

Although this case study does not mention them, it is important to note that several ethnographic interviews were conducted during the research with other female meme makers in the Spanish memesphere. These interviews did not aim to systematically compare cases, but they

did allow for the identification of shared discourses, divergences and common interpretative frameworks around meme maker creativity (see Soriano, 2024, pp. 87–89). These interviews, which were part of the participant observation, served as relational and performative devices, whether for exploratory or verification purposes (Guber, 2001).

4. Analysis

4.1. From meme maker to content creator

The shift from a folkloric category such as meme-maker, which defines certain users based on their online presence, to a professional category such as content creator reflects a changing approach to organising creative memetic practices. Through partnerships with corporate communications teams, political parties, and cultural institutions, many meme makers have tried to professionalise their practice. These lopsided negotiations between communications and marketing teams –with a strategic mindset that involves audience building– and meme makers –usually precarious workers who deploy tactics to monetise their online activity– give rise to a field in which meme making is organised in multiple ways.

This analysis begins by examining Marina's career as the administrator of the Instagram account @listillas, which serves as a prime example of how a meme maker can become a content creator. Marina began her activity without any professional intention or explicit awareness of the concept of *meme*. Her work emerged spontaneously, linked to emotional and community dynamics, and gradually built up a community of followers that eventually reached 20,000.

In 2018, Marina –along with other iconic accounts in the Spanish memesphere such as @derribosydeconstrucciones, @pro.del.kastineo and @flourazepam– received a request for collaboration from the communications team at Amazon Prime Spain. The assignment was to create promotional memes for a new series, marking the beginning of an incipient professionalisation. For Marina, this first paid work was lived as a collective experience, shared with other account managers, in which the community dimension remained central:

«Things were better back then, because I remember there were only like four of us, and it was really exciting when the day came to publish our Amazon Prime collaboration. We all posted it, everyone gave each other *likes*, and it was like doing *memecovers* but with funding, like, "Let's see the shit we've created". And everyone was like "Ah look at this, I hadn't thought of that, how cool is that". It was a bit like seeing what they've published and each one had its own personality, its own people, and it was really cool because of that.»

Marina compared the collaboration with Amazon to "memecovers", a vernacular practice within the memesphere that consisted of imitating styles between friendly accounts. This analogy reveals how in contexts of monetisation, creative practices can maintain a logic of playfulness, affection and mutual recognition. Although Marina and other meme makers began negotiating with companies that imposed aesthetic and discursive restrictions –limiting experimentation or demanding that they "do what they always do"– this *commodification* did not feel like a radical break, but rather an extension and redefinition of existing collaborative dynamics.

Over time, Marina identified a change in the memetic ecosystem: the emergence of accounts with thousands of followers that were not part of the original community. These accounts, created explicitly for monetary gain, did not participate in the ritual dynamics or collaborative ethos of the memesphere. For Marina and other meme makers such as DaneliciousTM, this shift marked a break between community-based creativity and content production focused exclusively on going viral and monetisation.

During interviews and conversations with Marina, DaneliciousTM often came up, specifically an Instagram post they shared in August 2019. This post provides a vernacular analysis that organises Marina's and their own opinions and reflections on the shift from meme maker to content creator. Broadly speaking, DaneliciousTM describes a series of characteristics of a *new account* designed to go viral and generate revenue, which is described as a "perfect content creation machine": a) a successful formula halfway between sarcasm and self-help, b) an extractive use of the community, c) a recognisable and shareable aesthetic (DaneliciousTM, 2019).

DaneliciousTM presents three examples of what could be described as "salvage accumulation" (Tsing, 2021) of meme creativity for use as "content" intended to go viral and make money. The formulas, templates and symbols that act as mnemonics in memetic folklore contexts for the creation of *lore*, or community oral memory, become "recognisable and shareable aesthetics" in content creation, designed to reach a wide audience. Similarly, the agonistic content –ranging from the grotesque to the pathetic (Galip, 2021), the sarcastic or the heart-wrenching– characteristic of oral tradition, which functions folklorically as a form of communion, is rearranged as a formula "halfway between sarcasm and self-help" with a "tremendously broad range of effects" (DaneliciousTM, 2019). Finally, the relationship with the community, which in meme folklore circles serves as the main focus of *being online* and of relationship building, becomes an extractive relationship whereby *people* become *followers*.

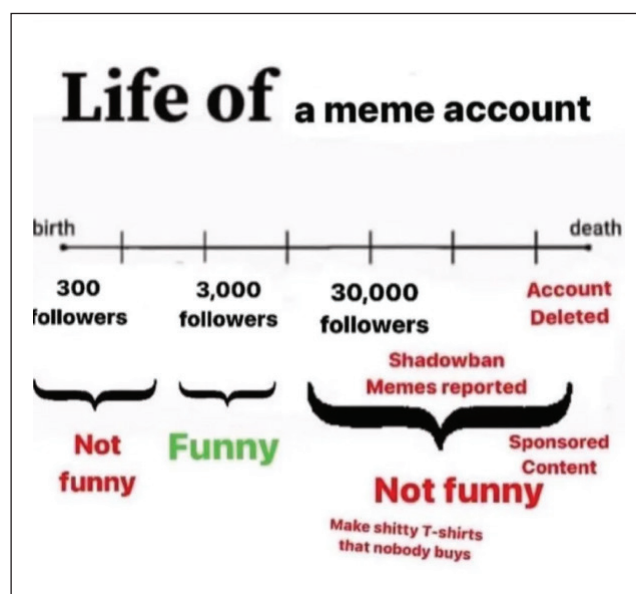
DaneliciousTM's post (2019) summarises the tensions expressed by Marina regarding the commercial-industrial organisation of meme making. The post narrates a

transition from a communal to a commercial approach, but it is important to stress that this communal approach was not always disconnected from practices that made meme making profitable. As we have seen with Marina, or as we can also see with Danelicious, which for the moment was collaborating with GenPlayz (Playz, 2020), community is not the opposite of profitability or the desire to professionalise. DaneliciousTM criticisms are not about making money or collaborating with companies, but about changing the ways of being online, making memes and engaging with the community. In this sense, the notion of *salvage accumulation* proposed by Tsing (2021) is appropriate for distinguishing this from other analyses that describe a process of total absorption that neutralises the disruptive potential of countercultural practices. Tsing's (2021) concept accounts for the production of market value based on dynamics that are not originally governed by capitalist logic, as is the case with the folkloric practices of the memesphere. This is not a complete appropriation of counterculture by the dominant culture, but rather a partial and incomplete process through which capital is generated by translating and exploiting forms of socialisation, creativity and affectivity that arise outside the realm of business.

It is not the opposition between monetising content or making it for free, but the tension between community and audience that is central to the process of meme maker professionalisation. Meme makers constantly negotiate between expanding their reach and preserving the affinity, in political, aesthetic or community terms, of their followers. A good example of this is the map of the Spanish memesphere that was created by Marina and the author during an interview. The arrangement of the accounts on this map does not respond to criteria of fame or style, but to relationships of affection, ideological affinity and personal ties. Her friends were in the centre, close to them were the people she liked the most, and outside were both the professional accounts of influencers or public figures, at one end, and the people she disliked or were politically opposed to, at the other end. While making the map, she explained how she and other meme-makers friends' accounts would periodically go through their followers and remove any associated with the far-right. These purges sought to strike a balance between gaining followers and being in a like-minded environment. In this meme account life chart uploaded by p0rr0chimar (figure 1), the trade-off between having no community base (and no humour), having one (and being funny), and moving from a community to an unviable audience, producing sponsored content and, therefore, *dying* in meme terms, can be seen.

As the transition from meme maker to content creator takes place, practices are transformed to generate more formal and generalist content, which breaks away from *lore*

Figure 1. Life of a meme account



Source: p0rr0chimar (2023) Instagram account.

to focus on *going viral*. Marina shared a specific example to illustrate this expectation of viral growth. She explained angrily how an acquaintance had been contacted by a museum to display a selection of TikTok memes, but instead of posting unusual, obscure and interesting TikToks for those familiar with meme logic, she had decided to post viral TikToks.

"It's like you're translating something that's totally generation Z from TikTok to Instagram, which is millennial. Do not put them here [*in the museum*] if they are viral; you have not done any kind of *digging*. I mean, if there's *digging* going on, hey, I'm totally up for it, but this is just completely absurd. It works so well because they're boomers. [...]

The ones that go viral, the ones that make it to Instagram are not the good ones. Maybe they were good two months ago, but now this isn't the done thing anymore. The memes shared in WhatsApp groups are the same tactic used on TikTok and Instagram. They might be good, but you've already seen them, or the joke has lost its punch, or... they're already past their prime... because they've gone viral and are now part of the boomer generation, which you don't identify with anymore."

Marina believes that these memes that aren't *the done thing* show that people are not focusing inwardly, but outwardly. There is an attempt at externalisation and formalisation in this *translation*; you are translating your own language (for Marina, expressed in terms of generation) into a foreign language. Using viral memes means orienting oneself towards other people, outside those who are inside the meme logic, instead of doing something that

is interesting and meaningful to those who are inside. This anecdote also shows that transferring memes to a museum space is not, per se, problematic for reasons of authenticity or commercialisation, but rather that it is the orientation towards *others* (towards other languages and forms of valuation) that provokes a negative response in this transition towards a mode of artistic and cultural organisation.

However, these tensions expressed by DaneliciousTM and Marina, which until now have been directed towards other ways of operating, are also felt in their own working practices. Marina and DaneliciousTM are keen to make their activity profitable and are therefore professionalising their methods, negotiating these tensions between different ways of organising creativity. In Marina's words:

«Now you're no longer a meme maker, now you're a "content creator", because they don't care about your memes anymore, they just want to see you on screen doing stuff. This is down to TikTok. I mean, down to or thanks to TikTok. Now what they're looking for is "the artist", the person, the human face behind what you're doing to get the message across. Memes don't matter anymore. What matters is that you record a... not even a *reel*, because Instagram *reels* don't reach that far either. You just record a story telling something and you just be yourself, like, you are that character and that's it.»

Marina points to a crucial tension between being a meme maker and a content creator, which involves authorship, the *artist*, and *face culture* versus anonymity, collective creation and *mask culture*. Pressure to show the presence of an artist behind the creations, linked to the figure of the *influencer*, points to a key difference between a folk-based approach and an artistic-cultural or commercial-industrial one. In a folkloric sense, since memes are not understood as *works* but as acts of speech, they are not subject to the same questions about authorship. When it becomes a commodity (the product of an employment relationship or an artistic work) authorship arises in various forms (from the assignment of royalties to the pressure to show the artist behind the work). This change is a shift in ways of doing things brought about by the emergence of technologies such as contracts, copyright, and the artist as a figure.

Similarly, for meme makers like Marina, who worked semi-anonymously, pressure to create a public persona, a virtual character who appears on camera and shows a correlation between her *irl* (in real-life) self and her social media self, has been a significant source of stress in the professionalisation process. Marta Ceccarelli (2024) discusses this pressure for *authenticity* in more general terms, linking it to a correspondence between your *irl self* and your *online self*, to show who you are and what you do. In discussing the *platformisation* of the Internet, that is, the co-optation and organisation of online sociability

through large platform social media, both Lovink (2019) and Ceccarelli (2024) talk about the tension between *face culture* and *mask culture*.

«Authenticity and real-name policies as prerequisites for online participation were proposed as solutions [to problems such as spamming, trolling, phishing, scamming, *child pornography* or *online violence*]. Platforms, in particular, promised to transform the problematic Internet into a consumer- and business-friendly environment by connecting users' real identities with well-defined *data doubles*. In 2009, Zuckerberg publicly criticised online anonymity: "You have an identity... The days when your image was different for your work friends or colleagues and for the rest of the people you know are probably coming to an end very quickly... Having two identities for oneself is an example of a lack of integrity". The public debate, dubbed *nymwars* [name wars], saw authenticity as a prerequisite for being online on the one hand, and a prismatic view of digital identity that reflected the multifaceted nature of the offline self on the other. Chris Poole and his 4chan website offered an alternative approach by creating a space for unrestricted, temporary, and anonymous interaction. If Zuckerberg and Facebook represent the epitome of *face culture*, Poole and 4chan encapsulate the essence of *mask culture*» (Ceccarelli, 2024, pp. 10–11).

The requirement to be authentic, to record a story telling something, is a pressure to professionalise as a content creator, which clashes head-on with an ethos and practices shared by meme makers. The *mask culture* that Ceccarelli refers to is not exclusive to platforms such as 4chan, but exists to a greater or lesser extent on all platforms. Meme accounts participate in this *masked* anonymity or semi-anonymity, which allows users to interpret their identity through discursive practices (Ceccarelli, 2024: 11). Anonymity, in relation to irony and layers of meaning in memes, acts as a mask for the online carnival, allowing people to play with identity, sincerity, or jokes, experimenting with extreme positions or allowing them to speak about controversial topics. The *mask* on Instagram accounts is not like the one on 4chan, as you can build a more stable *persona*, which is an essential requirement for many meme makers, enabling them to generate the socialisation necessary for their online presence.

4.2. Strategies for navigating the tensions of professionalisation

In response to these changing trends in how memes are created as part of their professionalisation process, meme makers are acting more strategically, attempting to navigate both systems to maximise their profits without neglecting their community ties. One of the tactical moves

related to this tension between the *mask* and the *face* can be seen in the meme that Marina uploaded on 13 June 2022, which has been her profile picture ever since.

This meme, featuring a photograph of Marina instead of the *stock models* typically used in her format, illustrates the tactic of *showing herself* while maintaining the logic of *meme making*, including the same format, the familiar *snarky*[*listilla*]phrase, and the carnivalesque meme laughter that mocks everything, herself included. The expectation of *content creator* (required by Marina's participation in the #soymeme festival) to appear on screen is met through her *memeification*, adding layers of meaning and turning the very act of showing herself into a meme. By appearing as one of her *models*, she becomes part of her account's *lore*, and her public appearance is not only as a creator but also as a meme.

Faced with this demand, Marina employs these tactical manoeuvres to resolve other tensions arising from professionalisation. The Madrid-based food delivery company Wetaca collaborated for a time with several content creators in the meme sphere to promote its services. The company sent its dishes to creators or influencers so that they could promote them through Instagram stories, sharing a personalised discount code. Marina agreed to collaborate with the company and for a few months she posted promotional stories about Wetaca's food delivery service.

This collaboration implies a salvage accumulation (Tsing, 2021) of Marina's meme making activity by the company.

Similar to advertising platforms such as Google or Meta, which translate non-commercial interactions into raw material used to create advertising services that they sell to advertisers (Zuboff, 2020), the company collaborates on a non-contractual basis, taking advantage of a community generated without commercial objectives around the @listillas account, turning it into an audience or niche market. This collaboration is a source of *income* that Marina does not want to turn down, but it does mean that the community is becoming more of an audience. Marina takes a specific approach to this tension between monetising her activity and maintaining the game. After the promotional *stories*, she uploads other *stories* restricted to her best friends, commenting on the first ones. These comments point to a gentle boycott and turn the promotional *story* into a meme.

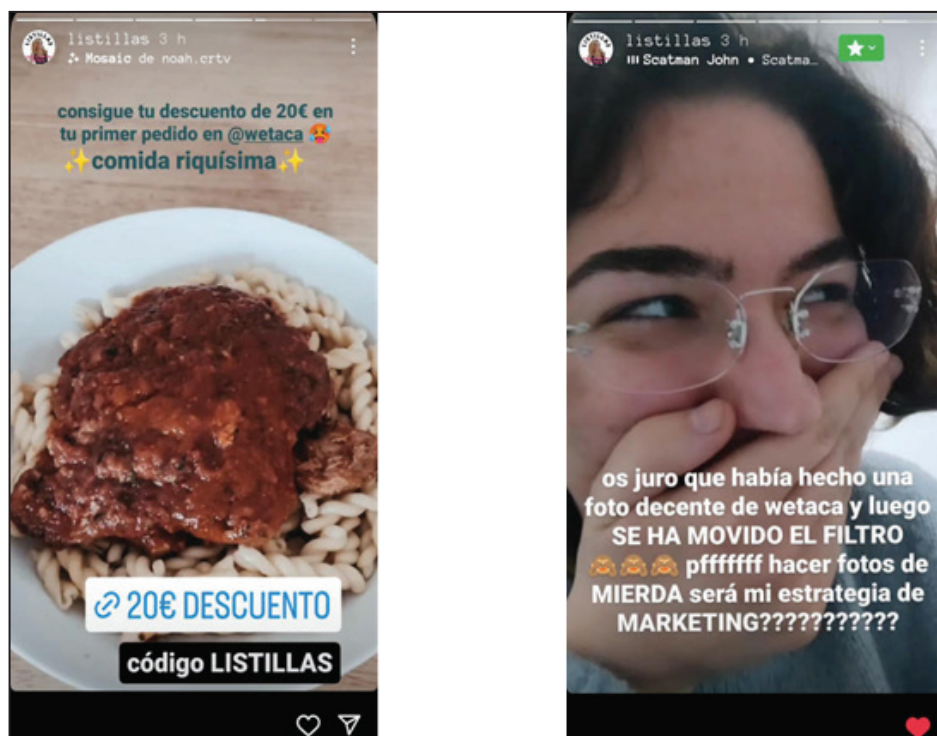
These strategic attempts to preserve folklore seek to maintain collaboration without losing community spirit, to make a profit without giving up playfulness. Marina does not outright oppose marketing and advertising campaigns but rather preserves the folkloric enjoyment of doing things for her people, for the people who will understand, maintaining the ritualistic reasons without abandoning professionalism. In general, she meets the company's demands and, among her best friends, she plays at destroying them, ironising them and turning them around. Through these *nods* to her *best friends*, to the community, she adds memetic layers to professional *stories* that are only accessible to a few.

Figure 2. Es que soy yo literal (It's literally me)



Source: Marina Listillas on Instagram (2022).

Figure 3. Two stories from Marina's Wetaca collaboration



Source: Marina Listillas on Instagram.

These strategic memes are not exclusively a tool Marina uses to manage the tensions arising from professionalisation, but rather embody what creating memes means to her. Marina believes that the reasons for making memes have to do with a tactical and political desire that she expresses as "the wink in the mainstream", which refers to the introduction of coded references in mass circulation formats, a strategy that allows her to maintain complicity with her community without sacrificing visibility.

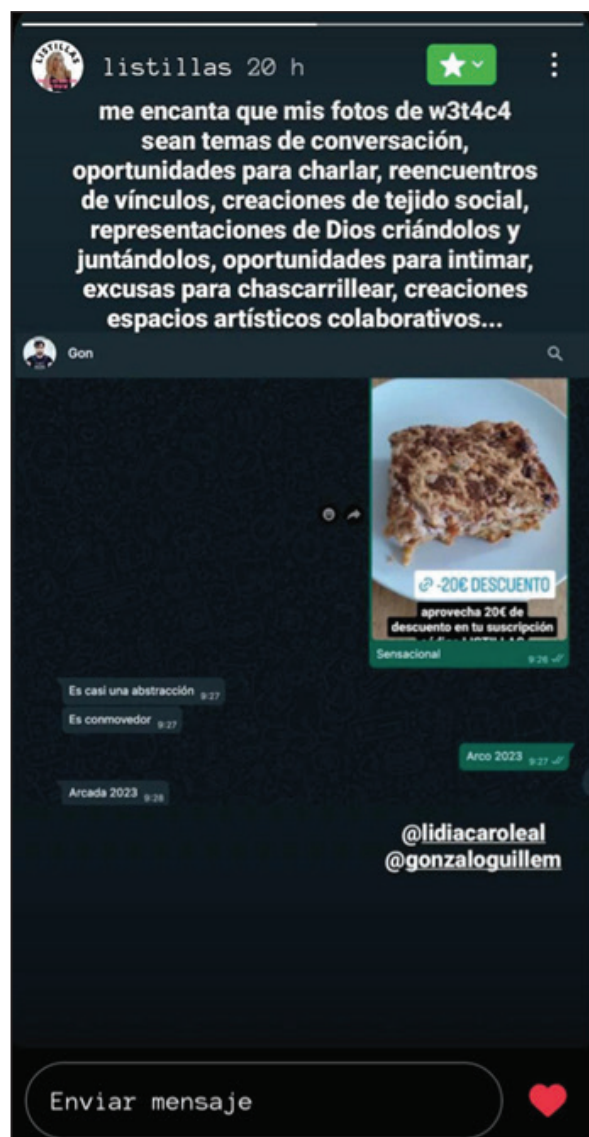
«I really like mainstream memes with a wink. It's so interesting to me how you can reach the pure mainstream and insert subtle references that only a select few can understand. It's like when you wink and you understand it in a different way, but only those who understand get it. [...] People buy it. People buy it and don't think twice about it. I mean, brands don't really care. If you advertise something and include a subtle wink, most people won't notice it. Only those who get it, understand it. They're going to share it because of the wink, not because of anything else. So, the brand wins because they're going to share it, and the message you want to share with your people wins. [...] I'm not talking about, say, having a medium that everyone listens to and getting in there. I'm not talking about bringing a *certain something* to La Resistencia. That's cool, and X said it the other day:

"I got involved in this in order to send a message to audiences who would never have listened to me otherwise". But that's not my point. My point is that they don't find out what I'm really saying. That only certain people know about it, and it's spread by word of mouth, like a language.»

Marina believes that memes operate on the border between those who share the code and those who are left out. She plays with what goes viral so that her content carries another, deeper virus, made just for certain people. Marina sees having influence, thousands of followers, and a large community as the perfect situation for spreading *niche* content and introducing messages aimed at specific audiences within widely circulated circles. This ties in with the *hacker* mentality of breaking in without permission, circumventing security, bypassing filters, and leaving their mark just for the sake of it. It also links to an activist mindset, filtering feminist and left-wing messages into mainstream content, like a Trojan horse. Marina has a soft spot for horoscope memes, a format in which you can categorise different things as elements of the zodiac –what ice cream you are according to your horoscope sign, what 'thing that falls' you are according to your horoscope sign (Marina Listillas, 2023)–. Marina believes it is the perfect format for slipping in political messages or making indirect references to people you know.

"The horoscope is kind of neutral. No, no, it's terrible. I've even posted what defendant in the Panama

Figure 4. Story about w3taca and the community



Source: Marina Listillas on Instagram.

Papers scandal you are based on your horoscope. Hahaha Of course, it's like I'm messing with everyone in a super commercial format that is read by the average person [...] always with a slight twist to destroy the mainstream. Taking the mainstream and tweaking it a little, you don't have to turn it completely upside down or no one will get it."

This attitude of *the wink in the mainstream* makes it possible to manage (not entirely resolve, but negotiate) the tension between going viral and maintaining the community's boundaries, codes, and dynamics. Winking in the mainstream, as Marina said in the interview, is not a political discourse aimed at a different audience; it is not a call-to-action seeking followers elsewhere or intended to convince. The little wink in the mainstream is discreet, low-key, without laughter, but with a restrained smile.

5. Conclusion

The shift from meme maker to content creator reflects a profound transformation in digital folklore practices and exemplifies the precarious nature of work on these platforms. Some companies and creators' commitment to monetising memetic production is based on extracting value from practices that originally operated outside capitalist logic (such as the folkloric creation of memes). This salvage accumulation implies a transformation – neither definitive nor irreversible – at different levels:

- Communities built around meme sharing are transformed into audiences or niche markets.
- Meme strategies that functioned as mnemonics for collective memory (*lore*) in online subcultures are geared towards going viral on a massive scale.
- The grotesque and sarcastic aesthetic of memes, linked to the digital carnival, becomes a tool for connecting with specific audiences.
- The semi-anonymity characteristic of online subcultures gives way to the exposure of *influencers* or content creators.

These translations between the folkloric and commercial-industrial modes generate constant tensions that meme makers must navigate in their professionalisation processes. These tensions are not tied to economic exchange or the profit-making of their creativity, but rather to changes in their creative dispositions and in their being online (changes in the ways they relate to their community and in the ways they approach meme making). Their everyday tactics reveal a creativity that constantly oscillates between the logic of play and that of work.

This intersection sees meme makers display an ambivalence akin to hacker culture, including encrypted messages for insiders in promotional content or staging small boycotts of their sponsors. These manoeuvres create forms of value and new languages that reinforce the folkloric sense within the meme maker community. The "winks" become an identity trait that mediates commodification. As a result, dichotomies such as authentic/commercialised, professional/amateur, insider/outsider, and public/private become blurred, revealing how creativity is always shaped through dialogue and negotiation.

Marina Listillas' ethnographic analysis provides a detailed look at these new creative arrangements and their effects on digital culture. By describing how the affective and communal become strategic requirements for capitalist practices based on salvage accumulation on digital platforms, the need to rethink the status of cultural work becomes clear. In addition, memetic production prompts a revision of classical analytical frameworks (high/low culture, popular/industrial) towards dynamic models able to capture constant shifts and the coexistence of different value systems in creative practice.

Endnote

This research has received a special mention in the specific category of the 36th CAC Awards for research in audiovisual communication.

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#MeToo. La ola de las multitudes conectadas feministas

Guiomar Rovira Sancho
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#MeToo: breaking the silence to build a collective narrative of resistance

Guiomar Rovira Sancho, with a PhD in Sociology and renowned for her research into social movements, feminism and digital communication, in *#MeToo. La ola de las multitudes conectadas feministas* (*#MeToo: The wave of connected feminist crowds*) presents us with a much-needed analysis of the disruptive impact of the #MeToo campaign. Continuing a career marked by the study of new forms of activism in the digital age, Rovira Sancho offers an in-depth look at this global phenomenon that transcended social media to irreversibly impact the political and social spheres. Her experience as an activist and her immersion in the feminist movement endow her analysis with a committed perspective.

The book explores the #MeToo phenomenon as an unexpected and radical political event. Rovira Sancho argues that this campaign not only marked a shift in the way we report and combat sexual violence, but also subverted the intended use of corporate digital platforms, which were traditionally oriented toward consumption and profit. By becoming a space for the mass aggregation of testimonies of sexual violence, #MeToo exposed a widespread and invisibilized reality, achieving a force that traditional means (institutional statements, commissions of inquiry and legal frameworks) had failed to achieve.

In the first chapter of the book, she argues for friendship as a political act: "The error in the system is the friendship between women. It is among friends that one takes

notice" (p.20), the author points out. Social media acts as a mirror that allows us to recognise the attacks we have suffered. In the second and third chapters, she discusses the mobilisations of women at a transnational level and their mass entry into the digital world, and reviews what she calls "femitags", a term used to describe feminist collective action. In the following chapters, she analyses the rise of #MeToo in the United States and its spread to different parts of the world, taking an in-depth look at the campaigns in Mexico and France. Regarding the Mexican movement, which the author knows very well, she highlights the emotional activism, support and care networks that have emerged around this campaign. In France, #MeToo has its own peculiarities: it begins with the hashtag #BalanceTonPorc and, later, allegations of incest (#MeTooInceste) gained prominence. The author also reviews the careers of some of the women who started the hashtag campaigns on social media and, finally, reflects on the transformative power of this movement, the criticisms it has received and the misogynistic reaction it has triggered.

One of the most notable aspects of Rovira Sancho's analysis is her emphasis on the nature of "direct action" and "hacking" typical of the digital culture that #MeToo also used. By bypassing the formal institutions responsible for addressing sexual violence (courts, NGOs, care centres), the campaign burst onto the digital public scene with unprecedented force. The accumulation of personal accounts, in which the alleged attackers were exposed, generated unprecedented collective awareness and social pressure. This process, as the author points out,

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occurred in parallel with the street protests denouncing femicide with chants of “They’re killing us” and “I do believe you”, demonstrating a synergy between virtual and in-person protests.

The book’s central thesis revolves around the idea that #MeToo, while emerging as a wave of connected individual testimonies, transcended its digital origins to promote specific changes in the real world and contribute to a collective discourse on gender-based violence, which has partially altered society’s collective imagination. This wave involved a mass breaking of the silence around the pain and harm, which previously had been experienced in hushed tones or in solitude. The density of the silence in which this violence tends to settle in patriarchal logic is correlated to its magnitude. In this case, however, as the author says, the “aggregative effect of harm” revealed a massive diversity of violence, weaving a powerful plural narrative that expresses the harm, but also the rage. This plural form modified the emotional grammar: it allowed the expression of anger, and gave new meaning to the sense of shame and fear. Furthermore, it focused on where the responsibility for the violence lay, shifting the blame away from those who suffer it. #MeToo “turns the spotlight around” and specifically exposes the violence perpetrated by powerful men or by men who, using their naturalised privileges, are aggressors in the family environment, a form of violence that is even more heavily silenced.

Rovira Sancho explores how this digital mobilisation generated pressure that forced a review of laws and public policies, demanding more effective responses to gender-based violence. However, the author also emphasises that #MeToo demands responses that go beyond existing legal frameworks, requiring a profound cultural transformation and a sustained commitment to combating impunity.

In her analysis, the author examines in detail the power dynamics at play during the campaign, the way social media facilitated the breaking of the silence, and the construction of a collective narrative of resistance. She also explores the challenges and complexities of #MeToo, including debates about justice in the digital space, the risk of media lynching and the need to ensure fair and equitable trials.

The work is based on a solid theoretical foundation and a rigorous analysis of contemporary social and digital dynamics. Although Rovira Sancho does not take an in-depth look at quantitative data, the strength of her argument lies in her qualitative interpretation of the phenomenon and her ability to connect #MeToo with broader debates about feminism, technology and politics. The bibliography she used reflects a deep understanding of gender studies, social movements and digital communication.

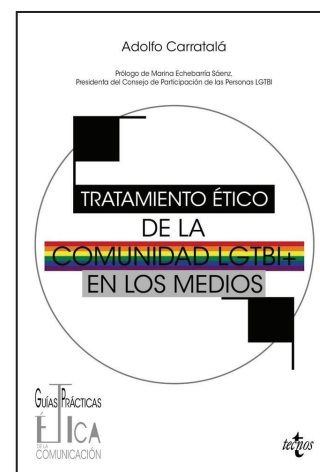
In conclusion, *#MeToo. La ola de las multitudes conectadas feministas* (*#MeToo: The wave of connected feminist crowds*), by Guiomar Rovira Sancho, comes as

an essential work when it comes to understanding the magnitude and implications of this global movement. The author’s research is particularly valuable, offering a rich and detailed account of digital feminist activism, both in the context of #MeToo and in the periods before and after it. In a fast-paced system like the one we currently have, where “turbocapitalism” tends to erode the feminist memory, this book stands as a much-needed exercise in reflection and perspective. Her lucid and well-argued analysis offers valuable insights into how digital technologies can be reappropriated by social movements in order to challenge power structures and thus generate meaningful change. Rovira Sancho highlights #MeToo as a disruptive and massive political event, which erupted unexpectedly and brought women’s voices into the public eye. The book documents how this movement broke the silence about the pain and harm experienced in solitude, revealing the magnitude of the violence and helplessness generated by a patriarchal justice system. Furthermore, it highlights the way #MeToo, by turning the spotlight on the perpetrators, managed to transform the traditional equation that blamed the victims. The clarity of its narrative and the relevance of its subject matter make it a highly recommended read for academics, activists, media professionals and indeed anyone interested in understanding the dynamics of contemporary feminism and the impact of social media in the fight against gender-based violence.

Tratamiento ético de la comunidad LGTBI en los medios

Adolfo Carratalá Simón
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Towards an ethical and situated treatment of LGTBI realities in the media

The book *Tratamiento ético de la comunidad LGTBI en los medios* (*Ethical Treatment of the LGTBI Community in the Media*), by Adolfo Carratalá (2025), is presented as a tool for communication professionals in the Spanish-speaking world interested in improving news coverage of LGTBI realities. From the outset, the book has a dual purpose: on the one hand, to offer deontological criteria and recommendations applicable to journalistic practice; on the other, to situate these criteria within a critical framework that takes into account the persistence of cisheteropatriarchal structures and a socio-political context marked by tensions, setbacks and dynamics of polarisation. This two-fold dimension reinforces its relevance at a time when media coverage of LGTBI people runs alongside the resurgence of exclusionary discourses.

The book opens with a foreword by Marina Echebarria Sáenz, president of the Consejo de Participación de las Personas LGTBI [Council for the Participation of LGBTI People], which stresses the urgency of establishing clear ethical parameters in the treatment of these realities in the news media. Her intervention not only legitimises the author's work, but also underlines the need for the media to take an active role in preventing misinformation and the reproduction of prejudices. This approach aligns with the criteria promoted by regulatory bodies, which emphasise the media's social responsibility as agents that shape collective imaginaries.

One of the main pillars of the work is the defence of a situated reading of information, understood as a contextual understanding that considers the impact of socio-political frameworks and professional routines on the representation of sexual and gender minorities. Carratalá recovers theoretical perspectives that explain the media construction of "otherness" and analyses how discourses on identities that challenge the norm are normalised or delegitimised through audiovisual and journalistic narratives. His approach combines references to cultural studies, the sociology of language and the theory of representation, offering a solid and accessible framework for non-specialist readers.

The author uses the metaphors of the media as "mirrors" and "windows" to illustrate the dual function of public communication. As mirrors, the media reflect certain social realities, often selectively; as windows, they determine which worlds are shown and which remain invisible (Carratalá, 2025). This distinction, typical of communication studies, but here applied to the LGTBI reality, allows us to understand the relevance of editorial decisions in the reproduction of stereotypes, silences and hierarchies of visibility.

The book offers a careful analysis of historical and contemporary representations of marginalised groups, avoiding simplistic readings and emphasising the relationship between representation, stigmatisation and inequality. Carratalá stresses that representation is not a neutral phenomenon, but rather a process with concrete effects on social perception and on the guarantee of rights.

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In this sense, the work engages directly with legislative frameworks, codes, and professional documents that seek to establish minimum standards for respectful and rigorous treatment of LGBTBI people. The review of the activity of observatories, regulatory bodies and style manuals is particularly useful for professionals operating in newsrooms, communication offices or audiovisual environments.

Another of the book's relevant contributions is the analysis of the dynamics of disinformation that affect LGBTBI people. Carratalá points to the way in which these identities have been used as scapegoats in coordinated campaigns, in a news ecosystem characterised by the speed of circulation of content and the fragmentation of audiences.

The text highlights the media's responsibility to avoid the uncritical amplification of LGBTBIphobic narratives and to contextualise discourses that are presented as artificially constructed "controversies". The concept of "liberal homophobia", clearly incorporated into the argument, highlights the conditional acceptance that tolerates sexual diversity only when it remains in the private sphere, which contravenes the journalistic principles of clarity, accuracy and social responsibility.

The book also looks at the stereotypes that consolidate a restrictive and reductionist collective imaginary. The author explains how these discursive devices simplify and depersonalise LGBTBI experiences, making it difficult to understand the internal diversity of the collective and reinforcing prejudices that have discriminatory effects.

From this approach, the work identifies a hierarchy of visibility in which gay, white and normative identities predominate, while other realities such as trans, bisexual, intersex or racialised identities remain underrepresented. This analysis connects with current debates on intersectionality and representational justice, as well as offering arguments for promoting a more pluralistic view of LGBTBI experiences.

Beyond its conceptual analysis, the book is noteworthy for its practical applications. Carratalá reviews media cases in which sensationalist, pathologising or paternalistic approaches have been used and from these he proposes concrete recommendations that can be integrated into professional practice. This case study approach makes it possible to illustrate structural patterns beyond isolated anecdotes. This pragmatic perspective is a valuable contribution for those working in journalism, as it helps to identify recurring errors and to adopt ethical alternatives without compromising newsworthiness.

One of the most important elements is the Decalogue for ethical coverage of LGBTBI realities. Conceived as a quick reference tool, it summarises basic principles that guide professionals towards more rigorous and respectful treatment. The Decalogue incorporates an explicit emphasis on intersectionality, highlighting the fact that discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation is

intertwined with economic, racial or territorial inequalities. It also calls for the diversification of sources, with a focus on the direct participation of those affected, and for collaboration with specialised organisations.

The book pays special attention to the use of language, a central aspect of any journalistic style guide. The author clearly details the distinction between *gender identity*, *sexual orientation* and *gender expression*, and analyses the relevance of certain terms in the Spanish-speaking context. He warns against the pathologising or inaccurate formulas that persist in some media and advocates for terms that recognise the self-determination of individuals and respect the internal diversity of the collective.

In relation to the coverage of LGBTBIphobic aggressions or crimes, the book devotes a section to deontological criteria aimed at avoiding sensationalism and contextualising these events as manifestations of structural violence. Recommendations include: diversifying sources, incorporating academic and associative voices, focusing responsibility on perpetrators of violence and providing information on support resources. This section is particularly relevant in a context where certain media tend to present these episodes as isolated incidents or as decontextualised media controversies.

Finally, the book is intended as a tool for professional self-assessment. Carratalá proposes a series of questions that allow journalists and media teams to identify whether their reporting procedures are in line with basic ethical principles. In the same vein, he underlines the relevance of rectification as a responsible professional practice, not only in the event of occasional errors, but also as a mechanism for improving internal processes and updating style manuals. The text explicitly dialogues with existing ethical codes and provides specific criteria linked to sexual and gender diversity.

The book is set in a complex political and media landscape, characterised by the resurgence of reactionary discourse questioning advances in LGBTBI rights in Spain and other Spanish-speaking countries. In this context, Carratalá's work offers a clear, well-founded and practical approach. Its main strength lies in combining critical analysis, conceptual tools and applicable proposals without losing clarity or precision, making it a relevant and timely reference for those who wish to review, question and improve the ethical treatment of LGBTBI realities in the media.

List of reviewers of *Quaderns del CAC* Period 2021-2025

The journal would like to thank the invaluable contribution of the people who have collaborated with us as reviewers assessing the originals received during this period. Their participation has been essential to improving the quality of the publication.

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