

***From strategy to veracity: the behaviour  
of Spanish political leaders at the beginning  
of the vaccination against COVID-19***

***De la estrategia a la veracidad: actitud de los líderes  
políticos españoles en el inicio de la campaña de vacunación  
contra la COVID-19***

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### **Abstract**

*Twitter has become the most used social network for most political leaders and its use was significant during the hardest months of COVID-19. This paper analyzes the effects of speeches of the main political leaders in Spain on the management of the communication of COVID-19, in order to verify how their speech has influenced transparency and the increase in disinformation in this moment. Likewise, these data will allow us to observe which communication techniques have been used by the most representative figures linked to the management of the pandemic. Based on a triple approach methodological basis, a quantitative, qualitative and discursive content analysis will be carried out, analyzing the data with the SPSS tool, version 25. The results obtained show how institutional sources have propagated opinionated content on Twitter. more than informative. We also verify that the saturation of messages in the network has given rise to a greater use of fallacy mechanisms by the institutional subjects analyzed and, therefore, it has been possible to determine that the way in which communication has been managed about COVID-19 has contributed to the increase in misinformation. Hand in hand with the new emerging narratives, social technology and artificial intelligence to know the citizen opinion of the transparency portals.*

### **Keywords**

*Twitter, COVID-19, political communication, disinformation, politicians, speeches, transparency, Spain.*

### **Resumen**

Twitter se ha convertido en la red social de Internet preferida por la mayoría de los líderes políticos y su utilización durante los meses más duros de la COVID-19 es significativa. Este trabajo analiza los efectos que los discursos de los principales líderes políticos en España han tenido en la gestión de la comunicación de la COVID-19, con el objetivo de comprobar cómo su discurso ha influido en la transparencia y en el aumento de la desinformación en este momento. Asimismo, estos datos permitirán observar cuáles son las técnicas comunicativas utilizadas por los representantes políticos más representativos y vinculados a la gestión de la pandemia en tres comunidades autónomas españolas. A partir de una base metodológica de triple enfoque, se realizará un análisis de contenido de carácter cuantitativo, cualitativo y discursivo, analizando los datos con la herramienta SPSS, versión 24. Los resultados obtenidos muestran cómo las fuentes institucionales han propagado en Twitter un contenido de carácter opinativo más que informativo. Además, se ha comprobado que la saturación de mensajes en la red ha dado lugar a una mayor utilización de mecanismos de falacias por parte de los sujetos institucionales analizados y, por tanto, se ha podido determinar que la forma en la que se ha gestionado la comunicación sobre la COVID-19 ha contribuido al incremento de la desinformación.

### **Palabras clave**

Twitter, COVID-19, comunicación política, desinformación, políticos, discursos, transparencia, España.

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## Introduction

Disinformation in the context of pandemic has become the subject of political debate in several countries. Outside politics, the disinformation crisis is also important to ordinary citizens, who are increasingly exposed to fraudulent messages on social networks (Salaverría *et al.*, 2020). Hence the need for a careful study on how political institutions have influenced transparency and the rise of disinformation.

Access to information and its truth is presented as a fundamental right related to the improvement of democracy (Cabra, 2012, pp. 69-75). The visibility and impact of requests for transparency addressed to public institutions have increased significantly in COVID-19 pandemic. The World Health Organization (2005) in unusual situations such as a health emergency points out that “[...] it is essential to provide information to raise awareness of the risks, to alert the population, but without generating panic and to increase confidence in the authorities managing the epidemic”.

The absence of information and/or malpractice in its use in crisis situations leads to an impoverishment in the behavior of citizens, who are poorly informed and have no possibility of knowing the decisions made by their governments (Naciones Unidas, 2020). Disinformation has been one of the characteristics of the communications from governments during the COVID-19 crisis (Wagner, 2020). During the first months of confinement, and throughout 2020, the interest of society in knowing how the disease behaved, how to prevent its spread and what treatments or vaccines would be used to treat the virus increased (Anis, 2021).

Journalism during the pandemic characterized by the dissemination of a large amount of specialized information, but with the absence of a real specialization of journalists to address such information and by the exponential growth of information sources, many of them obtained from social networks, which was not possible to contrast (Román-San-Miguel *et al.* (2022) and was sensationalist, leading to social disinformation (Masip *et al.*, 2020), and causing alarm, instead of serving as a tool to raise awareness and prevent the advance of the disease (Preso Linera, 2020; Pérez Conchillo, 2020).

Thus, faced with a global crisis scenario such as the one caused by COVID-19, this paper analyzes the discourse of political representatives on Twitter, at a crucial moment for citizens who need and demand easy, fast and truthful access to information. The following research objectives are set out

based on the hypothesis that there was a growing disinformation of the Spanish society on Twitter profiles during COVID-19 of those responsible for the public health institutions, both at national and regional level:

OI1. To identify what types of content have been disseminated on social networks by the heads of the institutions responsible for the country's health policy.

OI2. To analyze the strategies used on Twitter by the representatives of the selected political institutions.

OI3. To identify the mechanisms of fake news used by the selected political leaders when elaborating their speeches.

To respond to these objectives we propose to study the characteristics and projection of the messages posted on Twitter by representatives of the government and the most populated autonomous communities in terms of health from December 26, 2020, when the first doses of vaccines arrived in Spain, to August 31, 2021, when there was 70 % of vaccinated people in the country (Güell *et al.*, 2021).

## **State of the art**

Truthfulness considered true here and now, may not be true in other latitudes or may -appearing true today- be demonstrated in a few years that it was never really true (Serra Cristóbal, 2021). The interpretation of truth as an entelechy reserved to the individual is widely shared; or as a consensus, based on the collective acceptance of minimum common parameters that make reciprocal understanding possible, based on shared norms and values (Galdámez Morales, 2021). However, the concept of truth is in the same proportion to the "real existence of things, it is nothing more than an ontologically reasonable idea" but, "without legal transcendence" (Urías Martínez, 2014, p. 110). Finally, it is also known as the process in which, by obtaining truthful information, citizens can consolidate "a plural and freely formed public opinion, contributing to the consolidation of the social and democratic rule of law" (López de Lerma Galán, 2018).

Based on this definition of truthfulness, when talking about information transparency in the public and political sphere, we understand that all those institutions or companies that are supported by public resources must be

accountable to citizens, offering them clear evidence of all their actions, in this case, being transparent with their publications in the political and institutional sphere (Blanes Climent, 2013). Government transparency establishes two ways, one of them active, linked to public administrations and the duty to make public information available to citizens, and another, passive, in which the citizens request from the administrations the information they think is appropriate by their power (Pérez-Curiel *et al.*, 2021).

Disinformation and information intertwine and intermingle, giving rise to post-truth (Méndez-Majuelos and Pérez-Castañeda, 2021). For this reason, citizens do not use rational tools to discriminate the information obtained but rather the subject bases his or her public opinions on emotions and beliefs. Thus, with the use of social networks during the pandemic, the representatives of communication have the power to select the news they will distribute to their group of followers.

Institutional communication must share quality information (Fraguas, 2019; Lechuga Mallo, 2020; Posetti and Bontcheva, 2020). For this reason, it is considered that a different, more informative, transparent and open approach to the disease would have raised public awareness of the danger of contracting Coronavirus in Spain much earlier (Presno Linera, 2020; Pérez Conchillo, 2020). The sum of errors and contradictory information generated and transmitted in the media and social networks amplified the feeling of misinformation and mistrust in a population that, at the same time, developed a mistaken and even denialist idea of the virus and its consequences (Pauner, 2021; Pérez Conchillo, 2020; Rojo Martínez *et al.*, 2020; Samuel-Azran and Hayat, 2019).

In this regard, we must also consider the influence of political messages on social networks; in fact, political representatives have a great influence on the disinformation generated in the country, especially on social networks (Pérez Curiel and García Gordillo, 2020) and in crisis situations. The amplification capacity of social networks also represents another element to the impact that institutional and political communication can have on society. Thus, the platforms that have had more connectivity and where information has been disseminated more have favored new users to the network, with Twitter increasing by 23 % as a result of COVID-19 (Vives, 2020).

For their part, far-right and populist political parties aim, as previous research has shown, to destabilize democracy in times of global crisis (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). An example of this are the conspiracy theories carried out

by the former president of government Donald Trump where he accused China of the creation of the pandemic and the insertion of drug advertisements, without scientific base (Chadwick and Cereceda, 2020). On the other hand, the use of public communication channels makes them a perfect platform for source journalism and the dissemination of targeted information in times of social or institutional crisis (Gil-Ramírez *et al.*, 2019; Wilcox *et al.*, 2001).

Political leaders use social networks from a non-objective point of view. Thus, the capacity for influence and virality is key to the success of a given politician. In this way, the citizen has access to information that is consciously biased by the political leader of his country. However, the configuration and execution of populist discourses will vary according to the territorial policies of each community (Rivas-de Roca *et al.*, 2022).

## **Materials and methods**

Considering the theoretical approaches collected in this research that seek to determine the communication management of Spanish political leaders before the vaccination campaign against COVID-19, a triple approach methodology is applied, quantitative-qualitative (Silverman, 2016; Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002) and discursive (Nocetti, 1990; Van-Dijk, 2015; Flowerdew and Richardson, 2017). Thus, we opted to conduct a content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; Colle, 2019), with the aim of reviewing the messages of Spanish political leaders on Twitter. This social network is chosen due to its relevance, its volume of users and the capacity for reproduction and viralization of its messages (Pérez-Curiel and García Gordillo, 2020).

The selection of political representatives has been made to compare the management of the pandemic from the Central Government, and from the autonomous communities with the largest population, i.e., Andalucía, Valencia and Madrid (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2022). Cataluña has been excluded to avoid contaminating the sample with discourses with ideological or identity-based nature. Thus, the institutional representatives for healthcare who have been chosen for the content analysis are Pedro Sánchez (President of the Spanish Government), Juan Manuel Moreno (President of Junta de Andalucía), Ximo Puig (President of the Generalitat Valenciana) and Isabel Díaz Ayuso (President of the Comunidad de Madrid). Carolina Darias (Minister of Health) and Jesús Aguirre (Minister of Health and Families of the

Regional Government of Andalucía) have been chosen as specific leaders in the field of health.

As for the time period analyzed, the sampling begins with the arrival of the first doses in Spain (26/12/2020) and extends until there was 70 % of vaccinated people in the country (31/08/2021). Although this time frame does not cover the entire vaccination process, the eight months analyzed allow us to obtain significant results, both in quantity and quality, supporting the conclusions.

The compilation of each of the tweets published by the representatives of the public institutions is done manually according to keywords (Cleary *et al.*, 2014; Silverman, 2016) such as vaccine, vaccines and vaccination, which allows constituting a sample composed of 141 tweets published by these leaders. The statistical program used for processing the data related by categories is IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 24.

A coding manual is designed to conduct the study. It is composed of eight variables and responds to a triangulation of comparative content analysis that is segmented and coded as follows:

1. **Quantitative-qualitative analysis:** includes variables that allow to analyze the explicit content of the tweets published by political representatives. *“Informative content”*: Informative, Interpretive and Opinion/valuative.
  - *“General topics”*: Vaccine administration record, Vaccine sharing among countries/communities, Monetary fund invested in vaccines, Praising vaccine efficacy, and Demand for vaccines from the government.
  - *“Specific strategy”*: Seeking national unity, Confrontation with other political parties, Self-defense, Relationship with the media, Polarization, and Raising awareness of vaccines.
2. **Discourse analysis:** The variables that facilitate the study of the discourse used by political sources in their publications are collected. These are:
  - *“Fake news Mechanisms”*: Appeal to authority, Appeal to emotion. Appeal to force, Appeal to ignorance, False cause, Emphasis and None.
  - *“Discursive function”*: Conative function, Referential function and Poetic and expressive functions.

A random sample of 30 tweets is analyzed for studying the thematic agenda and strategies in order to determine the main categories for each of them. In addition, these methodological tools respond to the research questions.

**Table 1**

*Correspondence between research objectives and methods*

Research Objectives (RO)	Indicators
(OI1) Identify the types of content disseminated on social networks by the people responsible for the country's health policy.	Informative content and general subject matter
(OI2) Analyze the strategies used on Twitter by the representatives of the selected political institutions.	Strategies
(OI3) Identify the mechanisms of fake news used by the selected political leaders when elaborating their speeches.	Fake news mechanisms

## Resultados

Tras la exposición de los contenidos metodológicos que en este proyecto se ha realizado procedemos a la presentación e interpretación de los resultados. En este epígrafe se van a exponer los datos recabados del estudio de los tuits, producto del seguimiento de la actividad que los líderes institucionales españoles han tenido en Twitter durante el periodo de pandemia estudiado. De este modo, los resultados obtenidos del procesamiento de los datos nos muestran una serie de aspectos que, a partir del tipo de análisis realizado, mostramos en dos fases claramente diferenciadas.

## Results

The results obtained from the data processing show aspects that, based on the type of analysis carried out, are shown in two clearly differentiated phases.

### *Phase 1: quantitative-qualitative analysis*

Taking as a reference the total sample of the sample, we analyze, firstly, the type of informative content shown by politicians in the networks, the

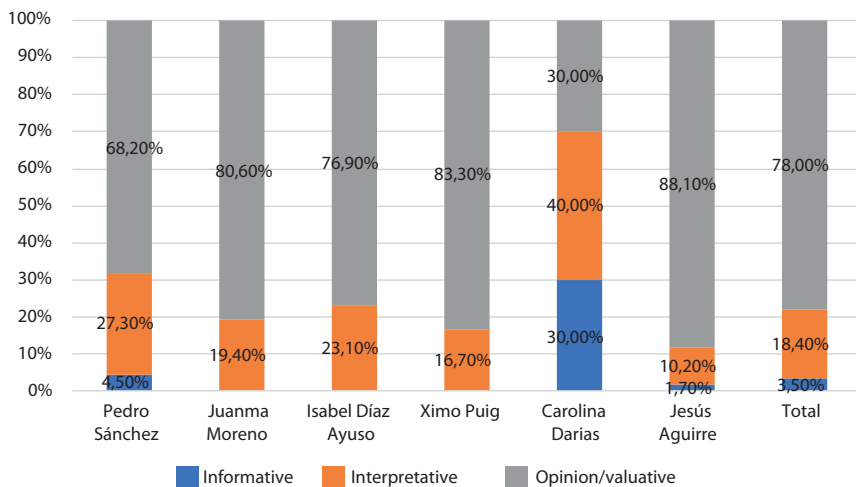


most frequently used topics, as well as the strategies they use when writing information. Within the informative content, a total of three elements will be differentiated: *informative*, *interpretative* and *opinion/valuative*.

Analyzing the *opinion/valuative* variable, the data confirm that it represents 78 % of the total. In this aspect, Jesús Aguirre stands out with a presence of 88.10 % in the analysis of his tweets, followed by Ximo Puig with 83.30 %, Juanma Moreno with 80.60 %, Isabel Díaz with 76.90 % and Pedro Sánchez, with 68.20 %. However, in terms of interpretative content, which has been the next most used category by the protagonists, there is 18.40 % of use among the leaders. Minister Carolina Darias stands out with 40 % of the total analysis of her publications, being the only one that stands out in this category. On the other hand, with respect to informative content, which has been the least used option by the politicians studied, it has received 3.50 % of the total use of the sources of public institutions. Once again, the figure of Carolina Darias (30 %) continues to stand out, followed by Pedro Sánchez (4.50 %) and Jesús Aguirre (1.70 %).

## Graph 1

*Type of information content provided by politicians*

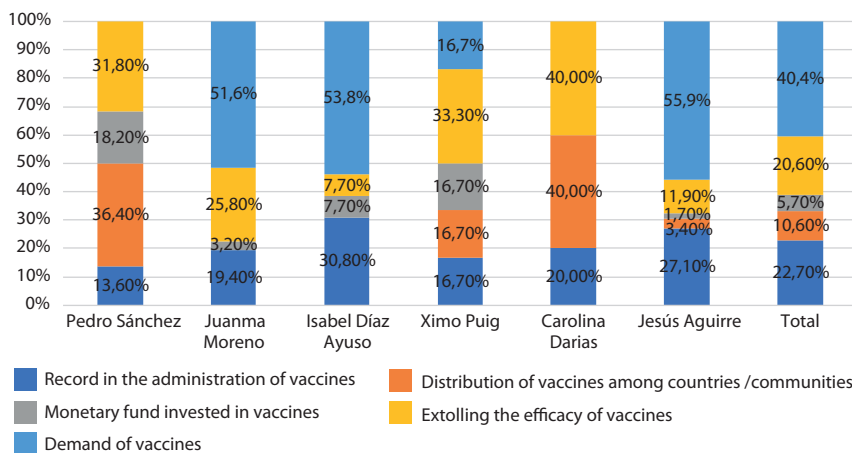


The data show that the topic with the highest use percentage with respect to the total most used by politicians (Figure 2) was *the demand for vaccines*

to the government with 40.40 %. The protagonists who have used it the most have been political representatives in the Autonomous Communities, such as, for example, the Minister of Health of Junta de Andalucía (55.90 %), the President of the Community of Madrid (53.80 %) and the President of Junta de Andalucía (51.60 %). On the other hand, the category that has also received a high use percentage has been *record administration of vaccines* with 22.70 % and those using it the most have been Isabel Díaz Ayuso with 30.80 % and Jesús Aguirre with 27.10 %. As for the option *extolling the efficacy of vaccines*, it should be noted that it received 20.60 % of the total data analyzed. In this category, the role of Carolina Darias stands out as the political leader who has used it the most, followed by Pedro Sánchez with 31.80 %. However, the remaining variables *monetary fund invested in vaccines and distribution of vaccines among countries / communities* have been the least used by public institutions. The first mentioned has received only 5.70 % and the second 10.60 % of the total analyzed with the tool.

## Graph 2

*Themes used by public institutions*

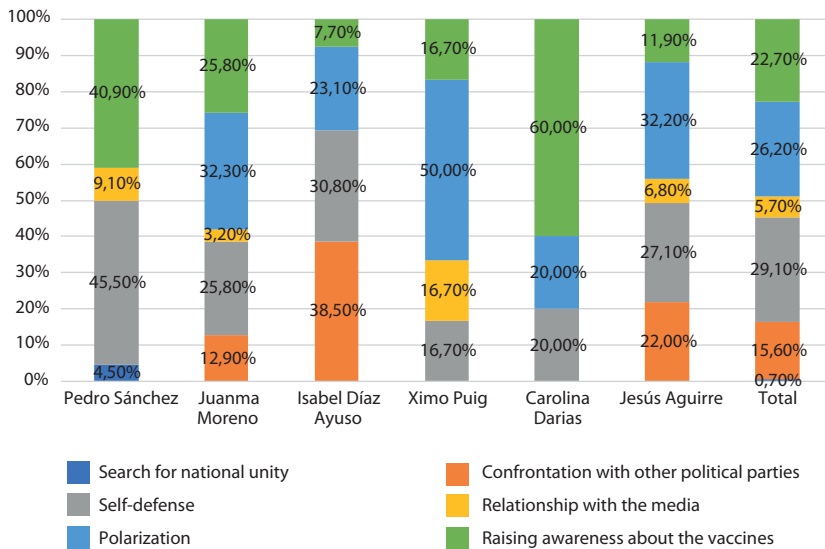


Regarding the disinformation strategies, one of the categories with more presence in the political speeches analyzed was *polarization* (26.20 %). It is striking that the only protagonist who did not use this strategy was the President of the Government, Pedro Sánchez, with 0 % of the data extracted from

his tweets. It can also be observed that the most used strategy by all government leaders during the development of the Coronavirus has been *self-defense* with 29.10 % of the total number of tweets investigated (141). It is worth mentioning the presence of the item *raising awareness about the effectiveness of vaccines*, in which Carolina Darias stands out as the person who has used it the most (60 %) compared to Pedro Sánchez (40.90 %), showing that the prevention policy has been led by the managers of health policies. As for the variable *confrontation with other political parties*, the leader who has used it the most has been with 38.50 % along with the rest of the regional leaders of Partido Popular, while the discourse oriented towards the *search for national unity* is only used by the President of the Government Pedro Sánchez (4.50 %). Finally, regarding the *relationship with the media*, it should be noted that all of them use it to a greater or lesser extent, standing out the Valencian regional leader Ximo Puig.

### Graph 3

*Disinformation strategies of political leaders*



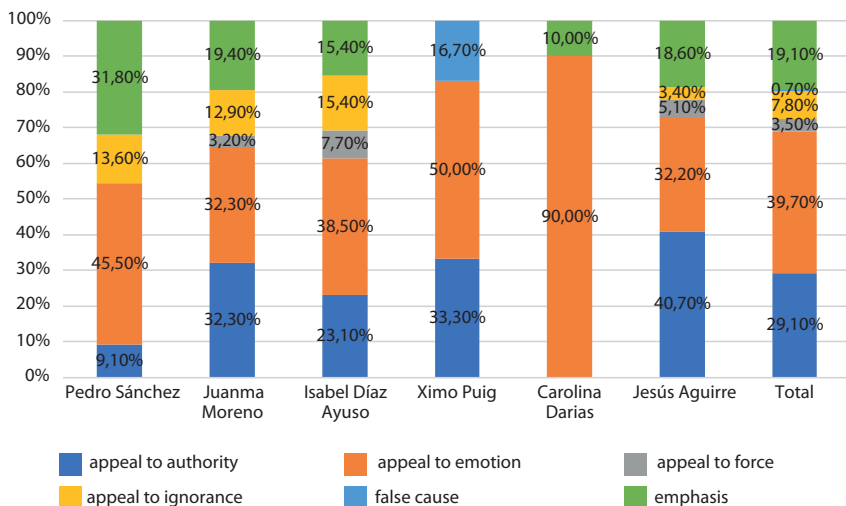
### Phase 2: discourse analysis

Finally, the discourse analysis has been oriented to the mechanisms of *fake news and the discourse function* carried out. In this case, two complementary graphs h elaborated to visually represent the results of the analysis, showing the weighting from the highest to the lowest percentage of the total analyzed. They also evidence which mechanisms have been used consistently by each politician, indicating the percentage of each variable and its use.

In this sense, it is observed that the most used mechanism in the publication of tweets has been the *appeal to emotion* with 39.70 %, followed by the *appeal to authority* with 29.10 %; *emphasis* with 19.10 %; *appeal to ignorance* with 7.80 %; *appeal to force* with 3.50 %; and *false cause* with 0.70 % of the total sample of analyzed tweets (141).

#### Graph 4

*Mechanisms of fake news most used by politicians*

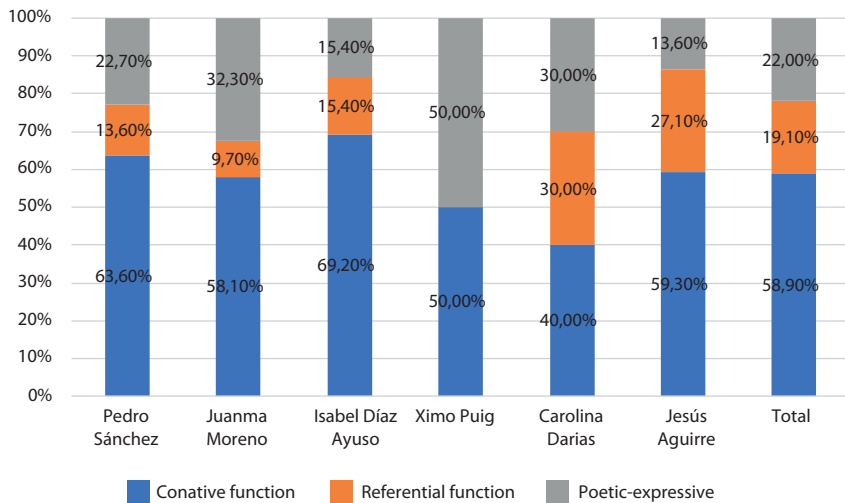


Regarding the main category which is the *appeal to emotion*, the person who uses the most is Carolina Darias with 90 %, while regarding the variable *appeal to authority* the person who uses it the most is Jesús Aguirre with 40.70 %. It is also noteworthy that Pedro Sánchez relies on *emphasis* with 31.80 % to disseminate information. As for the protagonist who makes most

use of the *appeal to ignorance*, the president of the community of Madrid, Isabel Díaz, stands out with 15.40 %. However, the last two variables used less frequently were the *appeal to force* and the *false cause*. In relation to the first one, Isabel Díaz is the one who has used it the most with 7.70 % and, in the second one, Ximo Puig stands out with 16.70 %, being the only one to use it.

To conclude this phase, the type of discursive function used by politicians when disseminating their information on Twitter has been measured from three variables: *conative function*, *referential function* and *poetic-expressive functions*. The *conative function* refers to those messages where there are constant recommendations on social, personal or economic behavior. In this case, one of the facts that has been most present in political leaders has been about the awareness of vaccines, since they have been considered essential to stop the spread of the virus. Therefore, the *referential function*, refers to those messages where a quantification is shown. These could be the number of people affected, the number of tests performed, or the total number of vaccines administered. On the other hand, the *poetic/expressive function* refers to those messages that have literary connotations, rhetorical figures or that use an unusual language with respect to the previous ones, for example, “a mortal enemy”, “masks are our protection”...

**Graph 5**  
*Discursive functions of political leaders*



Out of the three specified variables observed in graph 5, the conative function predominates in this analysis with 58.90 %. While the poetic-expressive function follows with 22 % and the referential with 19.10 %. Thus, the protagonists who have reached the highest percentages within each variable have been Isabel Díaz (69.20 %) in the conative function, Carolina Darias (30 %) in the referential function and Ximo Puig (50 %) in the poetic-expressive function.

## Conclusions and discussion

According to the OI1, it has been possible to determine that the type of content published in their tweets by the most influential political leaders in the management of the pandemic has been basically *opinion/valuative*. This aspect shows that institutional leaders try to guide social opinion according to their political interests, prioritizing opinion over information, emotion over knowledge, aspects already mentioned by Darós (2001) as a manifestation of subjectivity, sacrificing objectivity and valuable knowledge for the citizen.

Another aspect that stand out in the analysis of the data collected on Twitter and that lead us to OI2 as a priority strategy used by political representatives has been *disinformation*, and among the most used topics in their tweets are the *demand for vaccines to the government*, used by all the representatives of the institutions responsible for health policy, but those who have most profusely reflected have been the regional governments, prioritizing this demand over other domestic problems, implying that their voters are more concerned about national politics than regional politics, which undoubtedly, and coinciding with Vara Miguel (2021), has meant one of the erroneous states of opinion and with more polarization of the population that have helped to promote the media and social networks during the pandemic.

Regarding the polarization resource, the results of this research lead us to OI3, since it has been observed that the most used mechanism has been polarization, from which the political leaders analyzed have tried to lead users to an ideological debate, as opposed to a health debate. Undoubtedly, this leads to the radicalization of the political discourse, confirming the conclusions obtained by Miller (2020), when stating that political representatives can sometimes generate social problems, instead of facilitate solutions to community problems.

On the other hand, we also identified that self-defense has been a strategic option, prioritized over information about the circumstances of the pandemic, showing how the level of emotions has prevailed over facts. Thus, as for the mechanisms of fake news, the use of the appeal to emotion from public institutions stands out, denoting the prioritization of pseudo reasoning to modify both the opinion and the state of mind of citizens, which would be identified with an irrational behavior of acceptance of a message that, supported by an apparent truth, originates more disinformation (Gordo Puertas, n. d.).

Finally, the discourse analysis also shows that the discursive function used by politicians has been the *conative function*, basing their arguments on continuous recommendations and advice to society about the social, personal or economic behavior that citizens should have during the development of COVID-19, a reflection of a paternalistic model through which many of them address the population, facilitating misinformation and distorting reality.

The limitations in carrying out this study have been those related to the territory and the period analyzed, marked by the call for elections in Cataluña, one of the most populated autonomous communities and with great consequences in the political life of the country, as well as the scarce reference to the object of study in the Twitter profiles of the health councilors of two of the autonomous communities analyzed, specifically Valencia and Madrid, but which have been compensated by the messages generated by their presidents.

In the face of a health emergency crisis such as COVID-19, this research points to the fact that political institutional sources have not disseminated information based on transparency and truthfulness, so it is advisable to design future research that, hand in hand with new emerging narratives, social technology and artificial intelligence, help to identify the citizen opinion of transparency sites, as well as the laws that support them, as a guarantee of quality information typical of a democratic state.

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