



## Agenda-setting and power relations during the 2018 Colombian election campaign on Twitter

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents research data about features of discourses held on Twitter regarding the last presidential campaign in Colombia (2018) based on the agenda-setting theory. This case study had a quantitative research approach. The sample includes 62 Trending Topics and 620 tweets that were selected according to criteria of relevance and influence. A method of systematic content analysis was applied to gather data on sources and contents of messages using SPSS software statistical analysis. Five important findings are highlighted: 1. Traditional mass media were mainly responsible for defining the agenda on Twitter. 2. Within the context of the agenda outlined by the media, it was citizens who monopolised the discussion, thereby playing a key role in topic dissemination, candidates' visibility, framings, and assessments. 3. The main topic of discussion was the campaign debate itself rather than programmatic measures. 4. No correlation between the positioning and visibility of the candidates in Twitter and the electoral results could be observed. 5. Positive/non-aggressive tones prevailed over negative/aggressive ones.

### KEYWORDS

Election campaign; agenda-setting; content analysis; social networks; Twitter; Colombia

## Introduction

The 2018 presidential campaign promised to be historic for being the first of its kind with the participation of the former FARC guerrilla, now converted into a political party as part of the peace agreement. However, the premature resignation of its official candidate, Rodrigo Londoño *Timochenko* and the unfolding of events showed that the political discussion around the campaign went beyond issues related to the peace and the so-called post-agreement processes. Important proposals were made for education, the environment, corruption, and security. Perhaps a sign of historical relevance was the high level of mobilisation of hope led by former M-19 guerrilla member Gustavo Petro (on the left) and Professor Sergio Fajardo (on the centre) for socio-political change on key

issues against Iván Duque (on the right), the traditional candidate chosen by former president Álvaro Uribe. However, the long (three months) and intense electoral campaign came to an end with the victory of Duque over Petro in the second round. In a context of deep economic inequality and social division on the peace agreement and other fundamental issues, an intensification of political polarisation was expected, especially in such a fertile terrain for conflict as social networks.

The research presented here was interested in the role that the social network Twitter played during the electoral campaign, since it has been considered an especially significant space for Colombian political culture (Rincón 2011; Correa and Camargo 2017).

The increasing importance of social networks has been reflected in an exponential growth of academic literature on political communication via Twitter during the last years. For example, research has provided comparative analyses of data obtained on Twitter with data from surveys and opinion polls (Alvarado-Vivas, López-López and Pedro-Carañana 2019; Jungherr, Schoen, and Jürgens 2016; Percastre-Mendizábal, Pont-Sorribes, and Codina 2017; Tumasjan et al. 2010). The platform's versatility is also suitable for replication and methodological innovation, among which one can mention: clusterisation (Jara et al. 2017), framing (García-Perdomo 2018), emotional analysis in discussion threads (Himelboim et al. 2016; Tumasjan et al. 2010), image and photograph use (López-Rabadán, López-Meri, and Doménech 2016), and discourse and content analysis (Percastre-Mendizábal, Pont-Sorribes, and Codina 2017).

In terms of online election strategies and their possibilities for analysis, Barack Obama's first presidential campaign marked a turning point (Alexander 2010; Christakis and Fowler 2010; Gomes et al. 2009; Larsson and Moe 2012; López-Trigo, García, and Femenia 2013; Tumasjan et al. 2010) and Donald Trump's campaign opened up a variety of academic questions (Howard, Woolley, and Calo 2018).

In the Colombian case, the 2010 presidential campaign stands out. Antanas Mockus, a son of Lithuanian immigrants who became Bogota's Mayor in the 1990s, ran for Colombia's presidency and got to the second round of the Presidential election. Mockus, with the support of Vice-President candidate Sergio Fajardo, convened a large number of young people that promoted his candidacy in the streets and in digital social media with a narrative around collaborative renovation of the national agenda (Richard 2011). Even if Mockus did not win the Presidential election, his campaign established a precedent as regards the creative, collaborative, and decentralised use of social media for political and electoral purposes. Thus, what came to be known as the 'Green Wave'<sup>1</sup> ['Ola Verde'] managed to compete against the traditional political machinery that supported Juan Manuel Santos (Rincón 2011).

After the 2010 campaign, a considerable number of studies have dealt with the phenomenon of #OlaVerde. Some focused their attention on understanding how

hope and change embodied by Mockus's candidature became viral, first among the urban youth and then in other sectors of Colombian society (Duque and Zúñiga-Reyes 2012; García-Dussán 2011; Richard 2011; Rincón 2011). Other studies, such as those conducted by Said-Hung and Arcila (2011) and by Segado-Boj, Díaz-Campo, and Lloves-Sobrado (2015), investigated visibility and image construction by political leaders on their Twitter accounts. In both cases, the conclusion was drawn that digital social networks were an important resource to consolidate political positions and even to influence undecided voters.

The aim of the research presented in this paper was to examine the power relations (dominance and subordination) (Freedman 2014) between the different senders, topics, candidates and tones during the 2018 Presidential election campaign in Colombia. It involved answering the question of what were the dominant and the subordinate factors in Twitter's agenda. This question has also been addressed by previous research on the applicability of the agenda-setting theory (Carroll and McCombs 2003; McCombs and Shaw 1972) to online social media (Vargo et al. 2014).

A literature review on intermedia agenda-setting shows that elite media tend to dominate the agenda in social networks (Aruguete 2017). According to this review, this influence is not so much achieved through direct influence but rather through a two-step flow of information in which users re-tweet information received from a combination of sources. This means that while the number of sources has expanded on Twitter due to citizen participation, elite sources continue to be the most influential actors.

A study by An et al. (2011) found that Twitter users were indirectly exposed to contents from six to ten more sources than by direct exposure, in which case, diversity would increase. However, the vast amount of the original contents was produced by mainstream journalism. In addition to the hegemony of mainstream journalism as the central agenda-setter, research has also shown that there is a substantial agreement on what the major issues are across multiple Twitter sources (Vargo et al. 2014).

According to Harder, Sevenans, and Van Aelst (2017), a variety of studies on agenda-setting in election times have found a strong correlation between mainstream media agendas and the agenda on Twitter and other social networks. More specifically, research has shown that both media and political actors have much more influence on Twitter than citizens (and often more influence on Twitter than vice versa). For example, Harder, Sevenans, and Van Aelst (2017) found that media and political accounts on Twitter were dominant during the 2014 Belgium election campaign. Research has also shown that Twitter feeds significantly increased the parties' agenda-building power during the 2017 Austrian national election campaign (Seethaler and Melischek 2019). Research on Dutch policy reform debates found that the influence of traditional

news media on Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and forums was larger than the other way around (Van den Heijkant et al. 2019).

While online attention is concentrated on mainstream contents and topics, this does not mean that Twitter is monolithic. Citizens do have a substantial impact. For example, Ceron, Curini, and Iacus (2016) found that traditional news websites kept their first-level agenda-setting power on Twitter during policy debates in Italy, but that there was a marked difference between the slant of online news and the Twitter sentiment. This suggests that while the media had the capacity to establish the issues of debate, a plurality of users questioned mainstream frames (third-level agenda-setting). Another study found Norwegian Twitter and mainstream media agendas were consistent on the salience of many issues, but also that Twitter gave attention to issues that were overlooked by mainstream media (Rogstad 2016). It should also be noted that non-elite actors are expected to play a more important role during unexpected and obtrusive events than during planned, ritualised events such as election campaigns (Harder, Sevenans, and Van Aelst 2017).

Taking into account the Latin American context, there are classic agenda-setting studies, such as the research conducted on Ecuadorian politics, with the then President Rafael Correa at the centre of the discussion (Posso Espinosa 2018; Chavero and Ramos 2019). The findings evidenced both the journalistic autonomy of private newspapers and the media polarisation vis-à-vis the Ecuadorian public media and against the political agenda of President Correa.

Latin American researchers have focused on the expansion of the media ecosystem (such as blogs, vlogs, and social networks) and its effect on how these media might generate new logics that challenge and question the traditional mechanisms of analysis from the perspective of the Agenda Setting (Cabrera and Camardo 2019). These trends point to the growth of alternative media sectors with increasingly consolidated communities that may also impact public opinion and diversify the demand for information (Aruguete 2017).

This paper understands Twitter as a hybrid media system (Chadwick 2017) of conflicting forces oriented toward specific purposes – in this case, electoral victory. The study looks into the sources that construct the agenda on Twitter, as well as the characteristics of the messages (candidates, topics, and tones). Most agenda-setting studies reviewed here have focused on the correlations between different agendas. This study is different because it observes the direct influence of media, political and public agendas on Twitter by identifying the actors that have directly established TTs and posted tweets (this approach was also followed by Harder, Sevenans, and Van Aelst 2017).

## Methodology

This case study about the presidential campaign in Colombia 2018 had a quantitative research approach based on the application of a method of content

analysis and the processing of the sample through SPSS software. Then, the data were interpreted from a qualitative approach. The units of analysis were Trending Topics and Tweets, using as variables: Senders, Actors, Tones, and Topics. In this section, the procedure for sample collection and the method applied for content analysis are explained.

### **Sample**

The research used a sample of 62 Trending Topics and 620 tweets, obtained on daily access to Twitter for more than three months. The information obtained was subjected to content analysis and was organised for discussion in contingency tables. The time framework for the gathering of the sample ranged from March 12 2018 when the campaign started to June 18, the day after the second electoral round.

As regards information gathering, the first step was to identify daily the ten most influential Trending Topics on Twitter-Colombia and to select those that dealt with the Presidential competition. For that purpose, the platform Trendinalia was used, as it records daily TTs and allows organising them according to popularity and source country.

After selecting the TTs, tweets were organised and chosen. To this end, each TT was sought on the Twitter web and a list of tweets was arranged according to the function 'Top'. The first ten tweets of each TT in order of appearance were thus arranged. To avoid bias in the list of Top tweets based on our Twitter profile, the search and subsequent drawing were carried out without logging in and after erasing browsing history and cookies. It should be pointed out that 'Top' considers interactions (*Retweets, Replies*) and *keywords* included in tweets to weigh their popularity and influence (Twitter n.d.). The algorithmic biases that any social network has are of social and academic interest and affect the gathering of any sample as well as the contents users see.

### **Content analysis**

Once the sample had been collected, a method of content analysis (Krippendorff 1989, 2004) was applied to the Trending Topics and tweets in order to obtain data systematically on the main features of the agenda-setting process.

This paper understands that Twitter's agenda, the mainstream media's agenda, the policy/political agenda and the public agenda are all interrelated (for a similar approach, see Rogers and Dearing 1988).<sup>2</sup> The specific focus of the study presented here is to explain the role of the mainstream media, political actors and citizens in the construction of the agenda on Twitter, and thereby understand the power relations between the different agenda-setting actors. In addition to exploring who sets Twitter's agenda, the protocol of content analysis has been designed to identify other relevant variables of analysis. Overall, four

key variables were contemplated: Senders, Actors, Tones and Topics. This protocol of content analysis has two parts. Part A was applied to TTs and Part B to tweets. The protocol allowed the gathering of the following information:

(1) Senders: Part A of the protocol was employed to investigate the origin of the TTs and, thus, to identify the senders/sources that set the debate agenda and to evaluate their ability to position topics on Twitter. Part B of the content analysis was applied to the study of tweets and allowed to identify the senders/sources that dominated the discussions that took place within the TTs (and, therefore, are receivers of TTs). In both cases, the senders can be Citizens (introducing a public agenda in Twitter), Political actors (introducing a policy/political agenda), Mainstream Media (introducing a media agenda, i.e., intermedia agenda-setting), and other possible agents that might create TTs or send tweets (Alternative Media, Leaders of Opinion ...). This approach allows identifying the senders that are dominant and those that are subordinate in establishing the TTs and in the dissemination of tweets.

For the analysis of tweets, the protocol is also designed to codify specific attributes of the senders: Ideology and Country. The ideology of the sender is determined both by the profile of the sender and the content of the message in accordance with the procedure developed by Vargo et al. (2014). In this research,

**Table 1.** Protocol of content analysis. Variables and categories<sup>a</sup>.

(A) Analysis of Trending Topics	
(1) Type of Sender that creates TT (who sets the agenda):	Citizen, Politician, Party, Social Organization, Mainstream Medium, Alternative Medium, Opinion Leader, Other, ND. Name:
(2) Presidential candidate related to TT (who are the main Actors):	Iván Duque, Gustavo Petro, Sergio Fajardo, Humberto De la Calle, Germán Vargas, Other, ND.
(3) The Tone used in the TT:	Conciliatory, Humorous, Disqualifying, Insulting, Threatening, Informative, Protest, Complimentary, Other, ND.
(4) Key Topic/Issue:	Education, Security, Corruption, Health, Economy, Peace, Environment, Other, ND.
(B) Analysis of tweets:	
(1) Type of Sender of the tweet:	Citizen, Politician, Party, Social organisation, Mainstream Medium, Alternative Medium, Opinion Leader, Other, ND. Name:
(1.1) Ideological orientation of sender:	Left-wing, Centrist, Right-wing, ND.
(1.2) Country from where the tweet is sent (geographical location):	Colombia, Other, ND.
(2) Message's main Actor:	Iván Duque, Gustavo Petro, Sergio Fajardo, Humberto De la Calle, Germán Vargas, Other, ND.
(3) The Tone used in the tweet:	Conciliatory, Humorous, Disqualifying, Insulting, Threatening, Informative, Protest, Complimentary, Other, ND.
(4) Key Topic/Issue:	Education, Security, Corruption, Health, Economy, Peace, Environment, Other, ND.
(4.1) The Geographical scale referred to in the message:	Local, Regional, National, International, ND.
(5) Qualitative contextual comments:	

<sup>a</sup>All tables have been elaborated by the authors.

the ideology can be Left, Centre and Right, following the candidates self-positioning. The information on the country is included when available (Table 1).

(2)Main actors: The method of content analysis was used to identify the presidential candidates who have been appealed in the TTs as well as those who have been mentioned in the tweets, so that the digital presence of the candidates and the strength of their campaigns to affect the debate on Twitter could be assessed.

(3)Tones: Tones are important affective factors. The analysis is based on a gradation which ranges from the most positive to the most negative: Complimentary, Conciliatory, Informative, Humorous, Protest, Disqualifying, Insulting, Threatening, Other.

(4)Topics/Issues: This study identifies the topics that are raised in the TTs and the tweets so as to determine their relative weight during the campaign on Twitter. The topics were construed through lists of keywords related to each of them (Vargo et al. 2014). These key topics are Education, Security, Corruption, Health, Economy, Peace, Environment, Electoral Campaign, Unity, Other. Related to the topics is the geographical scale the Tweets refer to (local, regional, national, international).

## Results

First, data related to Trending Topics and then data related to the sample of tweets were analysed. The results were reviewed comparatively to make inferences about senders dominating the debate, the presence of candidates, and the characteristics of messages.

### *Trending topics*

#### *Senders*

As regards the authorship of TTs, most were created by mainstream media (41%). Radio stations from the transnational corporation Grupo Prisa stand out: W Radio and Caracol Radio, which represent 17.7% of the total of hashtags collected in the campaign. Next, there appear media belonging to other large media corporations: Organización Ardila Lülle (RCN Radio and TV) with 9.7% and Caracol Televisión from the Grupo Julio Mario Santo Domingo with 4.8%.

The second and third places in the creation of TTs correspond to politicians and their campaigns (30%), and citizens (19%). It should be noted that 8% of the TTs correspond to Daniel Samper Ospina, a mainstream journalist that used such media as YouTube, video games for mobile phones such as 'My fucking

game', and his op-eds published in magazine *Semana* to generate debate on the political competition. Another highlight of the results is the absence of alternative media.

In the case of TTs promoted by politicians and their campaigns, centrist candidate Sergio Fajardo stands out. With 14.5% of the total TTs, his campaign obtained the second place in best-positioned tagging on Twitter during the election campaign (Top-10 of exposure via Twitter during the Presidential campaign), exceeded by a narrow margin by the media conglomerate Grupo Prisa. Thus, among the three most voted candidates in the election, the third one prevailed in the TTs competition. Right-wing candidate Iván Duque, the winner of the election, was the second candidate with the highest number of TT positioned (9.7%), and left-wing candidate Gustavo Petro recorded 4.6%.

### **Actors**

Despite the scarce presence of TTs positioned by Petro's campaign, his candidature achieved the highest visibility (46.8%), followed closely by Fajardo (43.5%) and from a farther distance by Duque (33.9%), from the viewpoint of quantification of the actors present in the collected Trending Topics. This is the result of Petro's strong presence (as well as that of his vice-presidential running mate, Ángela Robledo) in most broadcast debates on national and regional media, which, in turn, initiated hashtags with the names of participating candidates.

Petro was also favoured by the fact that seven TTs created by citizens (11.3% of the total TTs and 38.9% of TTs created by citizens) fostered visibility of his presidential candidacy (Table 2). Be it for praising, defending or attacking him, Gustavo Petro was part, directly or indirectly, of a significant number of debates promoted by citizens.

### **Tones**

Most of the TTs had a neutral tone. The hegemony of the Informative tone (65%) reflects the capacity of the mainstream media to set the agenda over the TTs promoted by politicians and their campaigns that were created at the same time during broadcast debates and interviews. It is probably also a reflection of the limited length of hashtags. The content analysis also allowed identifying the relative importance of positive/non-aggressive tones versus negative/aggressive tones. Conciliatory (18%) and Complimentary (8%) tones stand out in the TTs promoted by politicians and their campaigns and, in few cases, by citizens. Hashtags like #MiMamáVotaPetro, #ConFajardoEnLaPrimera or #UnPresidenteProfesor showed a disposition to support a specific candidate without an initial intention of criticising other candidates. Protest (5%), Disqualifying (3%) and Humorous (2%) tones had a low presence.

**Table 2.** TTs that are related to Gustavo Petro's candidature are underlined.

TTs created by citizens	<u>#NosUnimosONosHundimos</u>	<u>#NosFaltaUno</u>	<u>#AntanasTeEscuchamos</u>
Call for a left-wing and centrist coalition	<u>#NoALasCurulesParaFairc</u>	<u>#PetroEsSantos</u>	
Attack on the right	<u>#MujeresMejorSinVargasLleras</u>	<u>#QueExcusaTanChimba</u>	
Against Vargas	<u>#GraciasProfe</u>		
In favour of Fajardo	<u>#UnaValerianaParaClaudia</u>	<u>#ColombianosNoHeterosexuales</u>	<u>#DuqueDISIADebate</u>
Attack on the left	<u>#VotoChallenge</u>		
Evidence of vote			

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### **Topics/Issues**

The electoral competition led with 75.8%, which means that the agenda was almost reduced to the discussion on who was heading the electoral race and who was winning the debates rather than focusing on specific issues and social problems.

The most recurrent topic in the TTs after the electoral competition was the call for Unity (9.7%), which signals the fear of losing against the adversaries and attempts to attract doubtful voters. The remaining topics appear timidly with quite low percentages (around 3%), evidencing an important apathy to tweet with solid arguments about the specific policies proposed by the candidates.

### **Tweets**

#### **Senders**

The analysis of 620 tweets contained in 62 TTs allowed identifying specific and relevant characteristics of the debate formation about the presidential campaign on Twitter. The statistical information makes clear the majoritarian participation of Citizens (51%) and a relative balance between the different ideological orientations of those generating the analysed tweets.

The order of influence of the senders in relation to the generation of TTs is here reversed. While traditional mainstream media were the main force in generating conversation topics (TTs through hashtags), citizens were the decisive actors when it came to developing debates. In other words, once a TT had been generated, the media lost control over what was said on Twitter and citizens assumed a key role in framing the topics, their assessment, and dissemination. Politicians (17%) maintained certain influence but much less than citizens. It should also be noted that in spite of the interactive possibilities of social networks, mainstream media and political sources did not respond to citizens and engage in conversation. Their role was limited to setting the TTs. Thus, the mainstream media and political agendas expressed on Twitter were not modified by the feedback of the public.

As regards the prevailing ideological orientations of the tweets, the difference between Left (30.2%) and Right (27.5%) was small, as well as the difference between the latter in relation to the Centre (21%).

When the country origin of the tweets included in the sample is traced back, Colombia stands out with 81.1%, which makes clear the scarce influence from abroad on citizen debates despite 3 million Colombian immigrants living in different parts of the world. 17.6% of tweets had no known origin, while 1% referred to a few tweets coming from such countries as Germany, Argentina, Canada, the US, and Chile.

### Actors

On a par with the data from actors related to TT, the main actors mentioned in the tweets were Gustavo Petro (15.3%), followed by Sergio Fajardo (13.3%) and Iván Duque (8.8%). The distribution of tweets according to the popularity of specific actors contrasts with the ideological orientation of tweets, where the right, as previously mentioned, turned out to be the prevailing ideological orientation. This is mainly due to the fact that a substantial number of tweets sent, especially by the right, focused on criticising political opponents, above all Petro.

### Tones

The study found that positive/non-aggressive tones prevailed. As shown in Table 3, the Complimentary (24.2%) and Conciliatory (19%) tones were the most frequent, followed by the Disqualifying (18%), and the Informative (17%) tones. Due to greater citizen participation and the possibility of longer texts, the Informative tone has less influence than in the TTs dominated by the mainstream media. Still, positive tones were hegemonic in both cases.

The content analysis also showed that a considerable number of tweets had composite tones (for instance: informing was used in order to finally praise, or humour was used to disqualify). In these cases, a tendency towards positive/non-aggressive tones also prevailed, as shown by the frequency of presence of Informative/Complimentary (26), Conciliatory/Complimentary (19) and Conciliatory/Informative (11) tones.

### Topics/Issues

In line with the findings on the TTs, the most recurrent topic was the Electoral Competition itself (33.3%). Thus, the most prominent was the meta-discussion, with reference to opinion polls about voting intention, the identification of winners and losers on televised debates and triumphalist discourses on a coming victory.

The next most frequent topics were Education (9.9%), Economy (9.8%), and Peace (9.3%). Security, which was a strategic topic for the right, was also relevant

**Table 3.** Simple and composite tones via Tweets according to percentages and frequencies of appearance.

Simple tones on tweets (percentages)	Complimentary	24%
	Conciliatory	19%
	Disqualifying	18%
	Informative	17%
Composite tones via tweets (frequency)	Informative/complimentary	26
	Conciliatory/complimentary	19
	Conciliatory/informative	11
	Informative/denunciation	8
	Humorous/disqualifying	7
	Disqualifying/denunciation	7
	Insulting/informative	7
	Denunciation/disqualifying	6

(7%), as well as the call for Unity (especially of centre and left forces) and against polarisation (6.4%). Finally, discussions about an endemic problem such as Corruption (5.6%) were relevant, and references were also made to Populism, manipulation of information, and fake news, with special emphasis on allusions to Venezuela and Castro-Chavismo (5.4%). This was a fundamental accusation of the campaign established by the right, which forced the left to move tactically within this negative frame.

The geographical scale of the contents referred to on the tweets make evident the preponderance of a National focus with 74.2%, whereas other scales such as Local (5.6%) Regional (3.5%) and International (2.9%) fell behind or were almost inexistent, which indicates that Twitter users were not focusing on local or regional topics in the context of a Presidential election. The focus on the nation-state was also reflected in the fact that there were only three Trending Topics related to regions: #DebateCaribe, #DebatePacífico, and #FajardoEnUnivalle.

## Discussion

### ***Senders***

We understand that the creators of TTs are the main agenda-setters since the hashtags they contain are more influential in sparking discussions through tweets (which are included within the hashtags of the TTs). The senders of tweets are considered secondary agenda-setters since they have the capacity to introduce topics, mention actors and grant meaning to the TTs that have previously established the main agenda.

With regards to the establishment of TTs, the data show the outstanding influence of powerful oligopolistic media groups in Twitter during the election campaign. Political actors run second in the creation of TTs, which confirms the ability that mass media and political parties have to influence the agenda on Twitter, even if citizens had some impact on the establishment of TTs. In the case of TTs promoted by politicians and their campaigns, results show that no positive correlation can be established between the creation of TTs and electoral results.

However, the order of influence of the senders is reversed in the Tweets. The possibility of citizens becoming communication producers, together with the interactive nature of social networks, facilitates these transformations as compared to the functioning of traditional media: citizens become the protagonists of the online discussion. Even as there are limitations to citizen impact, the capacity of ordinary citizens to influence discussions on Twitter was clearly observed. As regards as to the ideological orientations of the tweets, the results indicate a relative balance of forces and a plurality of positions. The

geographical origin of the Tweets shows that the discussion took place mainly within the nation-State boundaries.

### **Actors**

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Both in the TTs and the Tweets the order of the main actors mentioned were Gustavo Petro, Sergio Fajardo and Iván Duque, which means that no positive correlation can be established between the visibility of actors and electoral results.

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A noteworthy finding is that, despite not having a digital campaign via Tweeter as strong as that of his opponents and the scarce presence of TTs positioned by his campaign, Petro's candidature achieved the highest visibility by appearing in mainstream media. This case allows confirming that the ability of politicians to establish TTs has depended more on the participation of traditional media than on direct intervention via Twitter by creating hashtags (Q9 even though no candidate should abandon the online sphere). Thus, the significant role played by traditional media and the participation of candidates therein to gain visibility and set the political agenda both in traditional media and in the social network Twitter was also confirmed.

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The distribution of tweets according to the popularity of specific actors contrasts with the ideological orientation of tweets, where the right, as previously mentioned, turned out to be the prevailing ideological orientation. This is mainly due to the fact that a substantial number of tweets sent, especially by the right, focused on criticising political opponents, above all Petro.

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### **Tones**

The hegemony of positive/non-aggressive tones in both TTs and Tweets turns out to be the most surprising finding due to two main reasons. First, the strength of the hypothesis about polarisation in the Colombian political scenario after the 2016 referendum led to the assumption that the 2018 Presidential election would be marked by aggressiveness and disqualifications. Second, the emphasis with which academic literature pointed to the increasing use of negative messages<sup>3</sup> in the context of political campaigns<sup>4</sup> suggested that these discourses would be activated in such an important campaign.

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The unexpected results of this study falsify to some extent the assumption of polarisation, at least as regards debates on Twitter. Furthermore, they indicate the need to formulate new hypotheses. The most likely is that citizens, media, and campaigns deliberately avoided negativism because they did not intend to radicalise or frustrate the electorate, but rather to gain confidence from an important percentage of undecided voters or voters tired of aggression, manipulation of information, and controversies that occurred in previous campaigns (referendum on the 2016 Peace Agreements, and 2018 Legislative elections).

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Moreover, the leading presence of non-aggressive tones, especially the informative tone, seems to reflect the capacity of the mainstream media to set the agenda over the TTs promoted by politicians and their campaigns that were created at the same time during broadcast debates and interviews.

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### **Topics/Issues**

Both TTs and Tweets reflect general characteristics of electoral campaigns that are represented as a sports competition. The preponderance of the electoral competition indicates a predilection to deal with elections from the viewpoint of horse-race reporting (Mutz 1995), by identifying those candidates that are supposedly winning and those who are losing in order to orient voting more than paying attention to public policy issues and programmatic topics proper.

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The results confirm the validity of the intermedia agenda-setting approach regarding the ability to transfer salience in topics and actors from traditional media to social networks. These results also show the notorious influence of political actors and that citizen proactivity did have an impact in giving visibility to less powerful candidatures. The TTs established the framework for the discussion in the tweets, which was carried out especially by citizens.

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### **Conclusion**

Twitter stands out among other social networks for the study of political communication. Its open, textual, and interactive nature renders it a magnificent vantage-point for studying political phenomena from a multidimensional perspective because, besides the volume of data that can be obtained, citizens, mainstream and alternative media, politicians, and activists interact on its platform.

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In the case of the 2018 Presidential election, findings confirm the important conclusion of agenda-setting literature that powerful actors and, particularly, elite media tend to dominate the agenda in social networks (Aruguete 2017). As shown in the Results, a considerable influence of mainstream media, and even individual mainstream journalists, can be noted in the establishment of discussion topics (Trending Topics). It is important to note that this conclusion based on empirical studies falsifies the most optimistic positions about the communicative revolution that implied the web 2.0 (Loader and Mercea 2012), since little by little traditional media and politicians have managed to colonise places and replicate their agenda in areas traditionally considered the space of citizens and independent media. As shown by An et al. (2011), the number of sources users access is expanded on Twitter, but it is important to emphasise that those sources are mainly mainstream media. This is the reason for the strong correlation found between mainstream media agendas and the agenda on Twitter and other social networks (Harder, Sevenans, and Van Aelst 2017; Van den Heijkant et al. 2019). Moreover, it is not a common practice of

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mainstream media and political actors to respond to citizens in spite of the interactive possibilities of Twitter (Tromble 2018). Thus, Twitter would be more of a dissemination channel for elite forces than a platform that necessarily fosters  
565 **Q10** alternative and horizontal communication (Fuchs 2018a). Furthermore, it should be noted that the prevalence of the topic of the electoral campaign (meta-debate) indicates a transposition of basic journalistic dynamics from traditional media to discussion on Twitter.

To highlight the influence of mainstream mass media in the creation of trending discussion topics on social media does not necessarily imply that citizens have no agency ability. The results obtained in this respect support research showing that citizens and community and independent media have an impact on social networks by creating their own contents, introducing alternative topics and questioning mainstream discourse (Aruguete 2017; Cabrera and Camardo 2019; Ceron, Curini, and Iacus 2016; Higgins 2018; Rogstad 2016).  
570 The results show that citizens dominated the discussions within the Trending Topics created mainly by mainstream media, which suggests that there is a relatively active citizen use. Even if citizens do not set nor decide directly most of the TTs that establish the debate agenda, they do provide it with meaning and orientation. In addition, the relative balance between ideological positions that was found indicates that the digital debate had an open, dynamic, and pluralist approach, which shows the importance of analysing digital communication from a dialectical perspective that looks at the different forces and counter-forces operating in a context of power relations (Freedman 2014; Fuchs 2018b).  
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The prevalence of a positive/non-aggressive tone in the sample of messages analysed is very likely one of the most significant findings, especially if the initial assumptions about the national political climate for the campaign period are considered. A possible explanation may be that the candidates preferred to maintain a one-way relationship with their followers as a strategy to avoid polarisation and not distort their image by making mistakes that would benefit their adversaries (Prada and Romero 2019). In this sense, it would be worthwhile to review either the empirical basis that supports the polarisation hypothesis in Colombia or its validity as an interpretative framework for Colombian politics on Twitter. Moreover, as regards the assessments about the recourse to political and media negativism, it would be worth carrying out further research on their long-term effects, specifically in relation to creating loyalty among the electorate and the volatility of the electoral capital.  
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Findings on the appearance of candidates show that it is necessary to distinguish analytically between positioning and visibility as success indicators in a campaign. Even though Sergio Fajardo's supporters won the battle for positioning his candidature as regards Trending Topics, Gustavo Petro and his campaign obtained great visibility on account of the rebroadcast of radio and television contents in digital contexts and the references, support, and attacks by users. This ratifies the findings of Manfredi and González-Sánchez (2019)  
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showing that the candidates Fajardo and De la Calle set an agenda through a flagship issue (education and peace respectively). In the meanwhile, Petro was more active on Twitter (measured in the number of tweets) and the most visible candidate, but did not focus on a clear and defined topic.

605 Iván Duque's campaign, which ranked second in positioning and third in visibility, turned out to be triumphant in the election. This lack of correspondence between the Twittersphere and the electoral behaviour stems very likely from the fact that the most active Twitter users are more highly politicised, educated and urban, younger and wealthier than non-users (Fenton 2016, 14). In this case  
610 study, Twitter failed to provide a reliable prediction of electoral results, which is coherent with research showing the important limitations of the studies that have attempted to predict election results based on politics-related Twitter activity: Even as Twitter can provide insights into temporal public attention and discussion, Twitter users do not represent a valid sample of the voting  
615 population and more interest in candidates does not necessarily lead to more political support (Jungherr et al. 2017).

It is yet to be seen if the 2018 presidential election was historical in some way. Its uniqueness may lie in the fact that the long process of polarisation and violent conflict was responded, at least temporarily and partially, with a demand for  
620 more consensual and less aggressive ways of doing politics. This demand was reflected in the discussion on Twitter as well as in many offline spaces. However, the electoral results can surely be interpreted as a continuation of traditional politics after two years of government. Only time will tell if the relatively plural and gentle discussion analysed here was an historical exception that found  
625 its space on Twitter or a positive sign of a future decrease of conflict and development of a non-violent socio-political order.

## Notes

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1. Political and citizen movement that supported Antanas Mockus's candidature (President) and Sergio Fajardo (Vice-president). It was thus named because it was the Green Party's political platform that supported the candidature, and also due to the viral, emotional, and decentralised nature provided by their supporters.
  2. The processes to construct media agendas as well as the mutual influences between different agendas have also been called agenda-building (Cobb and Elder 1971; Lang and Lang 1983, 1991; Rogers and Dearing 1988). Because most agenda-setting studies have focused on the influence of the media on the public agenda (Rogers and Dearing 1988), several scholars have used the term 'reverse agenda-setting' to refer to the fourth phase of agenda-setting scholarship (Kim and Lee 2006, McCombs 2004). According to McCombs (Trigueros and Lacasa-Mas 2018, 58), the core idea of the agenda-setting perspective is the study of the transfer of salience from any agenda to any other. Thus, both agenda-building and agenda-setting are  
635 valid terms to investigate who and how is Twitter's agenda constructed. In addition, the concept agenda-melding has been used to study how publics meld different agendas using different mixes of media sources (Vargo et al. 2014). This concept  
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may also be applied to the study of how Twitter's agenda is created by a combination of sources.

3. According to Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1997) negativism is understood as recourse to controversy and scandal as a form of attacking a political adversary. Furthermore, negativism is oriented to promoting abstentionism among undecided voters, to aligning loyal voters, and polarising the electorate.
4. For an assessment of media and political negativism, see research by Moy and Scheufele (2000), Djupe and Peterson (2002), Sampredo and Pérez (2009), Rodríguez Díaz, López-López, Alvarado-Vivas and Martínez (2012), Geer (2012), and Craig (2018).

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## Data availability statement

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