Presidential Twitter in the face of COVID-19: Between populism and pop politics

Twitter presidencial ante la COVID-19: Entre el populismo y la política pop

Dr. Juan-Luis Manfredi-Sánchez
Professor, University of Castilla-La Mancha, Toledo (Spain)

Dr. Adriana Amado-Suárez
Professor Argentine University of Enterprise, Buenos Aires (Argentina)

Dr. Silvio Waisbord
Full Professor, George Washington University, Washington DC (USA)

Abstract

This paper analyses the use of Twitter as a presidential communication channel during the first few months of the COVID-19 crisis. The aim is to determine how four recently elected presidents (those of Spain, Argentina, Mexico and Brazil) managed their political communication, and to explore the thesis that they resorted to populist messages during the first months of their terms in office. Using a qualitative methodology and the XL Node tool to capture data, a comparative analysis was performed on the messages posted on their personal Twitter accounts during the first 20 weeks of 2020, classified in six categories: polarization; conspiracy; exaltation and leadership; personalisation and privacy; emotions and feelings; and media publicity. The results indicate that the four presidents share populist traits, but to a different extent. López Obrador and Bolsonaro display a more populist profile, with emotional appeals to the people and to their saving action as regards the implementation of health policies. Conversely, Alberto Fernández and Pedro Sánchez are more akin to the pop politician profile, posting photographs and media messages with a view to receiving press coverage. Both post tweets, based on values and historical events, aimed at their grassroots supporters. The main conclusion is that the pandemic has enhanced the presidential and personalist profiles of the four leaders, although their actions during the COVID-19 crisis were not necessarily in keeping with the populist paradigm. Thus, Sánchez and Bolsonaro implemented a health management communication strategy, while López Obrador and Fernández paid scant attention to health policy.

Resumen

El trabajo analiza el uso de Twitter como canal de comunicación presidencialista en el periodo inicial de la COVID-19. El objetivo es conocer el manejo de cuatro presidentes (España, Argentina, México y Brasil) y analizar la tesis del presidencialismo populista en líderes en su primera mitad de mandato. El método es cualitativo y compara los mensajes de la cuenta personal de Twitter las primeras 20 semanas de 2020. Se analizan en seis categorías: polarización, conspiración, exaltación y liderazgo carismático, personalización y vida privada, emoción y sentimientos, y publicidad en medios. Los cuatro presidentes comparten rasgos populistas, pero en distinto grado o caracterización. López Obrador y Bolsonaro ofrecen un perfil más populista con apelaciones emotivas al pueblo y su acción sanitaria salvífica. En cambio, Alberto Fernández y Pedro Sánchez responden al perfil de política pop, de liderazgo mediatizado para que la prensa amplifique sus logros. Se concluye que la pandemia ha acentuado el perfil presidencialista y personalista, aun cuando no encajen en el paradigma populista. Así, Sánchez y Bolsonaro sí despliegan una estrategia de comunicación de gestión sanitaria, mientras que López Obrador y Fernández apenas prestan atención a la política sanitaria.

Keywords / Palabras clave

Populism, pop politics, pandemic, COVID-19, political communication, Twitter, infotainment, emotions.
Populismo, política pop, pandemia, COVID-19, comunicación política, Twitter, infoentretenimiento, emoción.

1. Introduction

In just 30 days, the viral mutation that appeared in a market in Wuhan (China) on 30 December 2019 became a global health emergency and pandemic. This crisis has promoted a presidential style that leverages social networks to communicate decisions, to interpret developments and to justify policies. Such emergencies drive "politics of impatience": real time, disintermediation and impulsiveness characterise the communication behaviour of political leaders (Bødker & Anderson, 2019). And, accordingly, the reaction to a crisis like the pandemic can involve populist practices (Moffit, 2014; Moffit & Tormey 2016; Mudde, 2007; Bevelander & Wodak, 2019).

Several characteristics define populism: "A charismatic leader, anti-intellectualism, the use of an emotional communication register and the identification with an idealised nation, as well as a repertoire of action based on provocation, polarisation and protest" (Arias-Maldonado, 2016: 154). Such leaders respect formal principles, but promote anti-pluralist practices (De-la-Torre, 2010) and manipulate public emotions (Beckett & Deuze, 2016), feigning proximity to and interactivity with their audiences (Waisbord & Amado, 2017; Baldwin-Philippi, 2019). In their communication, they identify constituents as fans, with a language that fosters a "time of hyperbole" (Gallardo-Paúls, 2018), posting critical messages and disparaging tweets (Ott, 2017) and resorting to other hostile practices against minorities, immigrants, dissidents, etc. They also undervalue expert opinions because they do not represent the "people" (Waisbord, 2018), and they disdain the press, treating them as adversaries (Waisbord & Amado, 2017), thus eroding independent journalism and democratic values (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Crilley & Gillespie, 2019), while paradoxically doing their utmost to receive international coverage (Roselle et al., 2014).

Pop politics has found its niche in governmental communication. It is a style of political communication based on personalism and spectacle whose aim is to construct the celebrity politician (Amado, 2016). To this end, celebrity politicians resort to apps (Gómez-García et al., 2019), memes, prime-time TV and mixing with celebrities, or imitating them in a pop spectacle in which they become TV stars, according to the logic of infotainment (Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009). All this has paved the way for post-truth politics (Crilley, 2018). It is the ontology of political emotion that explains the collective identity-building of a nation (Canovan, 1999) and its dissatisfaction with existing political institutions (Laclau, 1977). Populist communication is a leadership style that surmounts the division between the Left and the Right to occupy the entire political spectrum.

With the use of emoji, memes, slogans and personal messages, populist leaders seek to imitate the social media behaviour of their followers in order to create an illusory symmetry of communication with them. Presidentialism overexposes opinions and politicises any public communication gesture or initiative. Signalling virtues with emotions or hashtags is an aesthetic commitment. Political emotions leverage feelings and abuse on social media (Arias-Maldonado, 2019; Gerbaudo, 2018; Valera-Ordaz, 2019). They form the backbone of presidential communication, blurring the status of citizen for the benefit of the collective (nation or people). Public affairs are addressed by constructing resonant and binary narratives that exacerbate the divide between "us" and "them", a sort of "emotional polarisation" (Tucker et al., 2018, p. 19). Information is less relevant than the narrative, above all in matters pertaining to historical memory (Ociepka, 2018).

This model disintermediates messages and gives an institutional sheen to any occurrence or comment expressed by executive power, without the usual counterweights (the press, political parties and institutions). Twitter, the most popular channel (Bracciale & Martella, 2017; Van-Kessel & Castelein, 2016; Campos-Domínguez, 2017), circumvents the intermediation of the traditional media, which allows for redefining the frames of foreign policy to adapt them to local and international audiences in a tweet (Golan et al., 2019).

The aim of this study is to gain further insights into the narratives of four presidents with a different ideological bent and stances towards the pandemic, with the main focus on Latin America. Both Manuel López Obrador (LO, Mexico, 2018) and Jair Bolsonaro (JB, Brazil, 2019) have underrated the impact of the pandemic and downplayed its scientific aspects. Whereas Pedro Sánchez (PS, Spain, 2019) and Alberto Fernández (AF, Argentina, 2019) have constructed a discourse more in favour of science and medicine. These four were chosen because they are all in the middle of their terms of office, have very strong media profiles and are currently governing countries in which the COVID-19 infection has been particularly virulent.

Pandemics can help to broaden our knowledge of the uses of political communication on Twitter in these four countries. To date few comparative studies have been performed on the international debate in Latin America; whereby it is necessary to conduct new research that allows for honing the debate on the relationship between political leadership and Twitter. The hypothesis is that the personalist use of Twitter focuses governmental communication on the figure of the president, which fits with the populist style of political communication. Notwithstanding the differences in government styles, these four leaders use the same communication

practices on Twitter, in the context of a new wave of presidentialism. They resort to devices inherent to populism, although these include pop politics techniques. Information on the pandemic is transferred from official channels to their personal accounts, according to their own political agenda, thus constructing and reinforcing a populist leadership style (Block & Negrine, 2017; Enli, 2017; Hallin, 2019; DelaTorre, 2017; Waisbord, 2003). In turn, the search for coverage of their Twitter activity in the traditional media, employing emotional and personal resources, is indicative of pop politics.

2. Research design

The value of the qualitative comparative analysis performed here on four countries, grounded in detailed knowledge (Elman, 2008), has served to determine if the object of study can be broadened (Gerring, 2004). Specifically, the study focused on the personal Twitter accounts of the four presidents because the intention was to examine their discourses, and on their tweets because it is the social network on which official announcements are made and which serves as a reference for the press. It is basically an exploratory study of current affairs, which allows for paving the way for a more exhaustive content analysis. The selection of the study time frame was based on a review of the critical moments of the COVID-19 crisis from 31 December to 20 May 2020, employing the XL Node tool (Hansen et al., 2011). Supplementary data was also captured from the website socialblade.com. The universe comprised a total of 3,079 tweets posted during the study time frame (see Table 1), while the total number of tweets on the four accounts were also compared with media interactions. Open application programming interfaces (APIs) facilitated data collection and the research design.

The sample of each one of the four subjects focused on content relating to the pandemic. To this end, the tool's hashtag search engine was employed to retrieve the hashtags from the database. The hashtags corresponded to the natural language of the subjects, rather than depending on the criteria of the researchers. For this reason, and given that the tweets could contain typos, a manual search was performed on the key days and on the following ones (see Table 1), so as not to depend solely on the tool. After data collection, the explicit content of the tweets was examined. This focused chiefly on detecting references to COVID-19, the pandemic and the measures expressly relating to the crisis (those tweets that only included links to other publications broaching the subject were excluded). Additionally, each tweet was tentatively classified in terms of the prevalence of indicators with a view to establishing an account profile that allowed for putting forward hypotheses on populist leadership (a, b and c) and pop communication (d, e and f). They are not exclusive categories: a) polarisation: the adversary, faction, that they oppose or which distinguishes them; b) conspiracy: suspicions; c) exaltation: nation, ideology, people; d) personalisation: private life, personal achievements; e) emotions: expressing feelings, emoji; and f) media publicity and coverage. These categories inherent to populism have been employed previously (Waisbord & Amado, 2017).

3. Analysis and results

The leaders' Twitter use during the pandemic was compared with their regular activity since opening their accounts (see Table 1). In this respect, there were differences among those leaders who managed to consolidate their accession to power using this social network and those whose position was eroded by the pandemic. JB was the leader who addressed COVID-19 most frequently, not only in quantitative terms but also in proportion to the total number of tweets posted on his account, albeit generating on average the same number of interactions as his other tweets. AF was the leader who managed to consolidate his account most during the crisis, generating a higher number of interactions and doubling his number of followers, while the tweets posted by LO and PS were below their historical average.
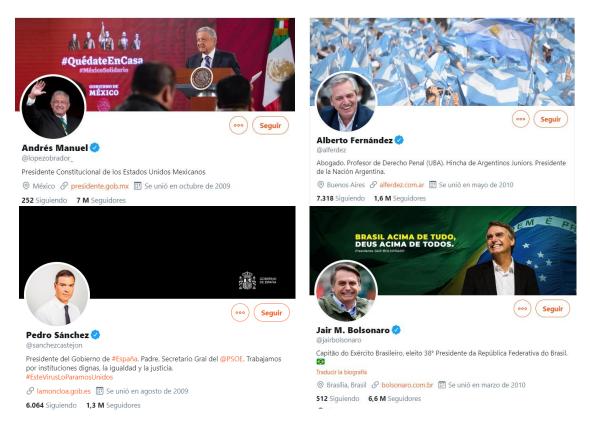
Table 1. Twitter profiles of the leaders with comparative data on their activity during the pandemic								
Account (date when opened)	Total no. of tweets on the account	Retweets (overall average)	Favourites (overall average)	Sample tweets (% of the total)	Sample tweets (daily average)	Retweets pandemic (average)	Favourites pandemic (average)	Tweets on COVID-19 (% during pandemic)
@lopezobrador_ (13/10/2009)	4,864	5,720	17,143	258 (5%)	1.82	3,294	11,460	67 (26%)

@jairbolsonaro (31/3/2010)	9,413	5,344	24,086	1,226 (13%)	8.63	4,722	25,444	1,118 (91%)
@sanchezcastejon (25/8/2009)	27,459	639	1573	841 (3%)	5.92	572	1316	405 (48%)
@alferdez (30/5/2010)	26,140	374	652	754 (3%)	5.31	1835	8581	209 (28%)
Total	**67876**			**3,079 (5%)**				**1,799 (58%)**

There were two leaders who posted tweets explicitly mentioning the pandemic: LO with the habitual press conference photo and the hashtag "quédatencasa" appearing in the background; and PS with a black strip as a mark of respect for the 10-day period of mourning decreed at the end of May. PS was the only leader who appeared without a smile on his profile, while JB and AF chose their countries' flags as a backdrop.

Figure 1. Twitter profiles of the four presidents at the beginning of the third month of the COVID-19 pandemic

PS' reaction to the virus was very swift, with an official message being posted on the Ministry of Health's profile (using the account @SaludPublicaEs) on the day that the first infection was detected in Spain (31 January). Afterwards, the issue disappeared from the agenda, which was devoted to governmental affairs (the economy, euthanasia, the European Union, gender violence, etc.) and to buttressing the governing coalition, for which reason many of the messages highlighted a political polarisation that had nothing to do with the pandemic. On 25 February and as of 9 March, COVID-19 became a relevant issue with an almost daily posting of tweets containing the word "COVID", accounting for half of those posted during the 20-week study time frame. This overactivity is totally understandable in a country heavily impacted by the pandemic. Of the 841 tweets included in the sample 55 per cent used hashtags, three of which were directly related to the pandemic: #COVID19, plus variations (13 per cent); #EsteVirusLoParamosUnidos (10 per cent); and #coronavirus (1 per cent). The

hashtag #CMin was also repeated (26), in reference to the decisions of the cabinet and weekly political developments. In sum, PS used his account chiefly to announce press conferences and his speeches to the nation, both daily activities.

In the same vein, LO used his account to comment on his "morning" press conferences without paying special attention to COVID-19, a topic that appeared in 26 per cent of the tweets included in the sample. In his use of Twitter, he seemed to give priority to the press, with which he personally provided his interventions. Each day, he posted a message early in the morning in which he announced his agenda and intentions. More than 111 tweets were posted with Twitter's Periscope live-streaming app, to which should be added 14 tweets with direct links to videos on YouTube, of which 18 of the 20 most retweeted messages using Periscope had to do with his morning press conferences.

During the study time frame, the Mexican president posted 258 tweets, the majority of which (222) did not include hashtags. The most used hashtag was #COVID-19 (15 tweets), followed by #Quedateencasa (14) and #Coronavirus (7). Between January and February, the references to public health were generic, dealing with the right to healthcare, the healthcare system and prevention, without any connection to the pandemic. Indeed, the president was tardy in showing interest in the pandemic, a topic that was not mentioned at all until 11 March with a tweet about its economic impact, followed by the first mention, "Coronavirus COVID 19", although under the title of the morning press conference: 'Specialists are working to prevent scenarios; let's not jump to conclusions and let's act adequately." Twelve days passed between the first infection in Mexico, on 28 February, and LO's public statement.

The quantitative content analysis revealed that the recognition of the impact of COVID-19 on the country's public health was late in coming. The words "coronavirus" (16), "Covid" (16) and "pandemic" (3) appeared 19 days after it had been declared on 30 March, when it was possible to observe a change in the president's routine. He posted 27 tweets with 27 references to public health and five to its economic consequences. The audience followed the same pattern, showing little interest in COVID-19: of the 10 tweets most identified as favourites and retweeted, three addressed the crisis and the president's role in the G-20.

AF's account struck a more personal tone. Even though he had abandoned his controversies on Twitter, insults included, since the 2019 presidential campaign, he still used the platform more for promoting a public dialogue than for disseminating institutional information. He talked about himself in the third person, either to defend his stance or to cite himself in statements made to the conventional press. He mentioned the domains of seven media outlets which he acknowledged to some extent. His account also included many governmental publications. In an average of six tweets a day he used 49 different hashtags, although the majority of his tweets (705) were not tagged. He mentioned "Cuidarteescuidarnos" (4), "argentinaunida" (7) and "yomequedoencasa" (1), but without any specific pattern. Even though AF was the first of the four leaders to mention coronavirus (28 January 2020), he did so to praise the country's capacity to react to a pandemic that, at the time, seemed far off, given that he and his Minister of Health believed that the virus would not affect Argentina. Indeed, the issue was not mentioned again on his account until 10 March, a week after the first case in the country had been confirmed (3 March 2020). Thenceforth, he posted 209 tweets with information on the pandemic and its consequences, with messages aimed at publicising the actions of the Government, at the citizenry and at producing an international impact. A tally reveals the relevance of health issues, with references to coronavirus (50) and Covid (48). Although the audience showed their support (eight of the 10 tweets most identified as favourites and nine of the 10 most retweeted messages had to do with COVID-19), the most popular tweets were AF's personal greetings, which coincided with spikes in his follower growth rate.

The first infection in Brazil was registered on 25 February. On the 29th, JB posted a tweet on his account about the availability of a Ministry of Health app for preventing and combating COVID-19, which obtained the highest interaction rate as the first tweet on the subject: 7,231 retweets and 39,680 favourites by 20 May 2020, the last day of the study time frame. JB was the most active among the four presidents, with an average of eight tweets per day. He was also the leader who devoted most tweets to the subject, specifically 91 per cent of the sample. This intensive activity allowed him to build an identity on social media based more on actions than on political or institutional communication. Every day, JB tweeted his agenda and a selection of relevant developments, while presenting measures, the press conferences of his cabinet and his interactions with governors, parliament, and international authorities. He often opposed the measures taken by the country's state governors and their press statements, portraying them as adversaries of the Brazilian people, who he referred to presidential decisions. Although he did not use hashtags, he did mention COVID-19 (87) and coronavirus (27).

Figure 2. JB's positioning on Twitter

Follower trends are an indicator that should be taken into account so as to understand the four presidents' activity on Twitter during the pandemic. The spike in new followers on LO's account coincided with a 10-minute personal message of his recorded in the gardens of the National Palace, in which he presented himself as an example to be followed for staying at home on a Sunday, as Minister López-Gattel had recommended, two days after his meeting with Donald Trump. He also offered a number of personal recommendations and thanked Trump and the president of China.

The spike in new followers on AF's account can also be explained by the fact that it coincided with his personal use of it. The day on which he gained the largest number of new followers was 23 March (three days after the start of mandatory lockdown), when between 0.50 and 8.28 am he posted 70 tweets with informal replies to the comments of his followers. Following this, he did not post any further tweets until 7.47 pm when he announced a live update of the Ministers of Economy and Labour with the hashtag #COVID19. These tweets of a personal nature accounted for more than half of those posted during the study time frame.

Unlike the other two leaders, JB put his account to a more institutional use. He started the day coinciding with a spike in new followers with a reply to the opposition Workers' Party (PT), which had called for his resignation, including a photo of his election victory (see Figure 2). Shortly before, he had posted a patriotic appeal: "01/04/2020 02:02 am With courage, composure, and patriotism, together we shall win the battle against this epidemic and its effects! We shall fight with all our strength to protect our nation! NO BRAZILIAN SHALL BE LEFT BEHIND! ʙʀ" (original uppercase) (https://twitter.com/jairbolsonaro/status/1245139430693896193). That same day, he reported that he was going to meet with Trump. As can be seen in his profile, he often resorts to his military background, because the armed forces have been, after the Church, the most reliable institution in Latin America since the end of the last century (Latinobarómetro, 2015).

PS was the leader who lost followers on Twitter during the first three months of 2020. The most interesting day was 16 March on which he posted eight tweets on his account with the hashtag #EsteVirusLoParamosUnidos, referring to the emergency measures that had been announced in two press conferences, one with the technicians in charge in the morning and another with the Minister of Home Affairs in the afternoon.

				Table 2. Popularity during the pandemic		

Account	Followers on 31/12/2020	Followers on 20/5/2020	Growth during the pandemic	Daily average of followers	Spike in followers during pandemic	Followers gained during spike
@lopezobrador_	6,350,000	7,043,015	11%	5,232	19/4/2020	39,030
@jairbolsonaro	5,590,000	6,587,972	18%	3,359	1/4/2020	86,050
@sanchezcastejon	1,391,911	1,130,000	-19%	1,869	16/3/2020	8,710
@alferdez	808,630	1,647,678	104%	5,790	23/3/2020	30,230

3.1. Polarisation

It should be noted that in populist discourses there is a greater tendency to attack or demonise rivals rather than towards agonism or conflict, which is a central aspect of politics. On none of the Twitter accounts were there any extreme examples, which leads to the conclusion that the outbursts of the leaders receiving so many comments on social media did not come from their own networks, on which they were moderate. The most controversial case, according to the international press, was that of JB, but on his account there were just generic references to what he considered as the opposition, chiefly left wing, or a generically ideological group: "12/1/2020 14:03 The textbook of the Jair Bolsonaro government: cheaper and without gender politics or ideology" (https://t.co/hSBXIgfCGR); "1/4/20 17:04 The two great woes of the world: communism and coronavirus!"

For his part, LO's antagonistic discourse was directed against previous governments. "20/1/2020 05:00 It's impossible to visit the towns of Oaxaca or other states without coming across the unfinished building works of previous governments" (https://t.co/NXKSTk2VcG). As of 13 March, his account focused exclusively on the COVID-19 crisis and the measures being taken by his government.

PS' tweets focused most on the country's political polarisation, linked to social issues, between the opposition and the governing coalition: "4/1/2020 10:45 We defend freedom. A full freedom from male chauvinism, homophobia, xenophobia, and racism. We shall continue to defend it for as long as it's necessary until condemning intolerance and fanaticism to oblivion: #UnSíParaAvanzar #SesiónDeInvestidura" (https://t.co/BhPQrHcCJm).

For AF, the polarisation emerging during the pandemic was between himself and his Brazilian counterpart, either by retweeting each other's comments or by citing each other in interviews (see Figure 3).

3.2. Conspiracy

The conspiratorial attitudes inherent in populism were mainly found in JB's (28) and AF's (24) tweets. For the former, his enemies were the press that were telling lies and the country's governors who were hindering his work. As none of these attitudes went so far as to include insults or harassment, most of them were classified as conspiratorial, rather than polarising.

JB leveraged the crisis to position himself as a world leader who was on speaking terms with Trump (eight tweets), participated in the G-20 and had ordered the closure of the country's borders. As with his US counterpart, he defended the use of "hydroxychloroquine", mentioning it 21 times. Although this could be understood as a lack of scientific knowledge, he used it to praise Brazilian scientists who were running tests on the drug at the time (see Figure 2), for which reason it was more an attempt to discredit international bodies than anything else. Nonetheless, his references to the press (over 20) were aimed at contrasting his version with that published by some or other media outlet or the freedom of the Internet with the biased information published in the press. During the pandemic, this controversy focused on JB's measures versus those of the

country's governors. For AF, the conspiracy had to do above all with disinformation, to the point that one of his measures was to create a platform, under the aegis of the state news agency, for verifying fake news. He also retweeted the messages of other journalists or people whom he accused of falsehood or disinformation, thus supporting that version on his official account.

3.3. Exaltation

The exaltation of ideas, albeit dealing with different topics, was present on all the accounts. Appeals to patriotic feelings, the greatness of Brazil and growth were the central issues on JB's account, sometimes including comparisons with the past to underscore the idea of progress. JB placed the accent on the advances in Brazilian science and on the army's participation in the emergency, on the approval that world leaders had given his measures and on the support that the country had received in the shape of medicines and raw materials. He repeated the word "people" (27 times), so as to appeal to the nation to make a united stand against the virus, and the "armed forces" (6), so as to stress their contribution to combating it, in coherence with the presentation including his military rank on his profile: "23/3/20 0:07 Our armed forces, always remembered in difficult times, they're available to give all possible support to the country's states and municipalities in the war against the coronavirus, with logistics, the transport of health professionals and materials, screening posts, etc. Together we shall prevail!"

The slogan that PS repeated most was "gender (or male) violence", which appeared in 31 tweets. In this regard, the decision to go ahead with the multitudinous march to celebrate Women's Day, on 8 March, when people had already been infected in Spain, was highly criticised later on, which shows that slogans prevailed over the health emergency. The other most important issues included the ecological transition (12 tweets), feminist policies (13 tweets) and historical memory (10 tweets), all reinforcing the distinction between his ideological position and that of the opposition. For his part, LO habitually resorted to the words "people" (48 times) and "indigenous", and to leaders like President Benito Juárez (3). The identity and local folklore markers reflect his emotional use of the digital channel.

In the case of AF, the empty words inherent to this type of discourse – "people" (16 times), "history" (13), "memory" (14) and "democracy" (9) – had populist undertones. He even appealed to the commemoration of the last military coup in Argentina, using the classic slogan alluding to that period, "Never again", to recommend that the citizenry observe lockdown the day after it had been decreed: "24/3/20 11:38 The preventive and mandatory isolation has prevented us from marching today so as to take care of ourselves. But it doesn't prevent us from remembering. On this 24 March, we raise our handkerchiefs at home for memory, truth, and justice. Never again" (https://t.co/nwZIe5P1EB).

3.4. Personalisation

The characteristics of personalisation appeal to emotions, and the focus of the mass media forms the basis of pop politics, which borrows narratives from celebrities. The leader who used Twitter in the most personal fashion was AF. Of the total number of tweets 253 (34 per cent) were greetings (see Figure 2), namely, more than those (209) specifically addressing the pandemic. The majority of these tweets were replies to users or retweets to greet them or to congratulate them on their exemplary behaviour during lockdown, thus relaxing the rules of institutionalised communication to adopt a paternalistic role in which he issued orders to the citizenry while looking out for them.

From an institutional perspective, he not only exhibited his international profile with personal references to the ministers or presidents of Canada, France, Spain, Israel and Bolivia, as well as to Pope Francis, but also underscored his familiarity with them by sharing personal messages or encounters with these personalities. In contrast, PS greeted his peers in foreign languages (16 in English, two in German and one in French, Dutch and Portuguese apiece), playing the role of a world leader. AF also tended to use Twitter during the pandemic to share his musical tastes and artistic talents with his followers from the privacy of his home. For example, on the 45th day of lockdown, he sent an attentive message with a picture of himself playing the guitar in his official residence (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Pop narrative and personalism on AF's account

AF was followed by LO, 12 per cent of whose posts (32 tweets) contained personal messages, albeit with a lot less familiarity and interaction than AF. On JB's account, the expression of his personality was evidenced by the inclusion of some or other evangelical event, biblical quotes, and informal strolls in the streets during which he greeted passers-by. Additionally, he posted replies to the tweets of other world leaders (Rudy Guiliani, Xi Jin Ping and Trump), so as to underscore his close relationship with them, while also expressing his gratitude for interviews to his liking and celebrating his growth on social media. Lastly, he mentioned the evolution of his medical analysis of the virus, while referring to religion with biblical quotes and direct references to "God" (19), including his slogan "God above all" (six times): "19/3/20 0:42 I shall never abandon the Brazilian people to whom I owe absolute loyalty! Good night to all!" (https://twitter.com/jairbolsonaro/status/1240438417005129728).

3.5. Emotions

Emotions were explicitly expressed, mainly in the form of gratitude, sorrow, or hope. The use of emoji says a lot about the emotions characterising each account. In the case of JB, the most used emoji was the thumbs-up, an affirmative gesture very popular in Brazil, as well as the handshake emoji to express closed agreements. Albeit to a lesser extent, LO used them explicitly: "21/3/2020 03:27 I wanted to cover her with kisses, but I couldn't so as to keep a safe distance. She's a gem" (https://t.co/rmlfj9XA1e).
PS also resorted to emoji, which he included in a large variety of resources and references, such as arrows and emoticons characteristic of certain events, a red dot indicating the broadcasting of a press conference and the rose emoji (the logo of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party). For his part, AF also used emoji and even a sticker representing him, created with an iPhone, with which he posted the majority of his tweets. Emotions were also present in the personalisation variable, given that most of his messages aimed at his followers were affectionate, expressing a closeness, whether real (he sometimes employed expressions indicating familiarity) or feigned, since it was not always that clear.

Figure 4. LO and PS with a focus on information for the press

3.6. Publicity and press

The pop politician yearns for media coverage through press releases and traditional publicity announcements. Since he was the leader with the tensest relations with the press, JB resorted less to sharing press conferences on Twitter. As with AF, he was accustomed to posting extracts with his statements or interviews that were to his liking, but only a few press conferences with a Q&A round for journalists. In this respect, they both contrasted with PS and LO who devoted Twitter mostly to the press. In view of the number of posts referring to press conferences in the sample, PS was the leader who posted most tweets in this regard (150, accounting for 37 per cent of the sample). For his part, LO posted 36 tweets mentioning press conferences (54 per cent). One of the tactics of pop politicians is to greet or refer to popular entertainers, something that all four of the leaders did, thus allowing them to engage the followers of these celebrities. AF was the leader who resorted to the greatest number of celebrities, although JB, in his support for a singer who had been insulted, was the one who generated the highest number of interactions in the sample.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Although, theoretically speaking, the leaders analysed here do not only fall in the populist category, they do indeed share a narrative with characteristics that have been identified as populist in previous studies, albeit with variations and to a greater or lesser degree. The analysis of their Twitter accounts demonstrates that these differences correspond to their personal communication style, something that was already evident in their respective election campaigns. This supports our research hypothesis that their way of conveying messages and their presidential style are personalist. LO and JB offer a populist narrative based on the exaltation of values like the nation, history, and memory, plus the armed forces. Both offer a repertoire of national aggrandisement and pride. JB exemplifies the polarised and conspiratorial discourse, expressing his doubts about certain medical decisions (hydroxychloroquine). LO embodies a personalist style, making all governmental action revolve around his presidency, in which each action is self-classified as a historical event. In contrast, AF, and PS distance themselves from the populist model and are more in line with pop politics, in the manner of cultural celebrities. AF's personality rests on values like national exaltation, honouring the country's historical memory, its science, and the legacy of Kirchner. PS opts for communication tailored to the press: each tweet is a journalistic piece, a headline, a press photo. With this strategy, he aspires to use the press as a sound box for his messages. And both aim messages at their militants, linked to the party, with a combination of governmental initiatives and actions.

The four leaders implement a personalisation strategy (it is they who inform, guide, and suffer), as well as constantly appealing to political emotions (affliction, gender violence, unity, etc.). There are neither hate

speeches nor ultra-radical attitudes on their accounts, which contrasts with the hostility shown towards them on other accounts, irrespective of whether they are official or unofficial. There are also differences in their handling of governmental communication. PS and JB report on management decisions, medical initiatives, and new developments in the pandemic. While LO and AF hardly post any tweets on the administration or health-related decisions. JB and AF comment frequently on disinformation and the direct need to give priority to official sources over the news media.

JB and AF aim their messages at their grassroots supporters, with an eye to reinforcing their political identity and projects. Conversely, PS and LO employ Twitter as a press channel, namely, to promote their canned messages and slogans for reproduction by the media. Their tweets are press headlines. All four presidents reply to other accounts, which suggests levels of direct interaction that were conspicuous by their absence on the accounts of their predecessors (Waisbord & Amado, 2017). A network analysis would help to distinguish between those messages promoting hate and those that provoke the anger of the citizenry, a key aspect in current international political communication (Zaharna, 2018). Another possibility would be the study of semantic networks which would make it possible to expressly substantiate the interpretation of their presidential political communication and the conceptual frames of their presidencies.

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