THE GRAMMATIZATION OF EMOTIONS ON *FACEBOOK* IN THE ELECTIONS TO THE *PARLIAMENT OF CATALONIA* 2017

Gramatización de las emociones en *Facebook* en las elecciones al *Parlament de Catalunya* 2017
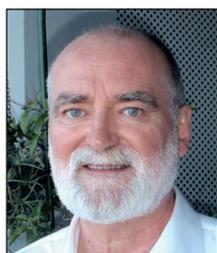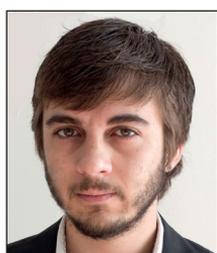
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Abstract

This article proposes the analysis of reactions, *emojis,* and *stickers* of *Facebook* as a method to analyze the way in which the platform grammatizes the actions of the users and also the emotions invoked by the narratives that are deployed in the social network. To do this, we took, as a study case, the electoral campaign of the elections to the *Parliament of Catalonia* held on December 21st, 2017. Our analysis allows us to identify the emotions to which the narratives of the parties appealed, the main formats used during the campaign and their relationship with emotional response, and the possibilities available to users to convey the most visceral feelings.

Keywords

Political communication; *Facebook*; Social media; Elections; Grammatization; Emotions.

Resumen

Este artículo propone el análisis de reacciones, *emojis* y *stickers* de *Facebook* como método para analizar la forma en que la plataforma gramatiza las acciones de los usuarios y también las emociones que invocan las narrativas que se despliegan

en dicha red social. Para ello, toma como caso de estudio la campaña electoral de las elecciones al *Parlament de Catalunya* celebradas el 21 de diciembre del 2017. Este análisis permite identificar las emociones a las que apelan las narrativas de los partidos, los principales formatos utilizados durante la campaña y su relación con las emociones, y las posibilidades de las que disponen los usuarios para vehicular los sentimientos más viscerales.

Palabras clave

Comunicación política; *Facebook*; Medios sociales; Elecciones; Gramatización; Emociones.

1. The politics of emotions in the era of social platforms

In recent years we have lived through several political elections in which emotions seem to have had an impact on the result, or at least on the design and execution of electoral campaigns. This has been pointed out by journalists, political analysts, and political leaders, among others, in the case of:

- elections to the presidency of the United States (**Signer**, 2015);
- referendum on the exit of the European Union held in the United Kingdom (**Norman**, 2017);
- Catalan conflict (**Pérez-Oliva**, 2017).

In all these cases emotional behavior is opposed to rational decision making, which raises an alert about the possible damage that this tendency can have on our society. However, by contrasting emotion and reason there is also the risk of establishing a false dilemma and obviate that among politicians and political scientists the management (and instrumentalization) of emotions has historically been an element of central interest (**Calhoun**, 2001). Although during the first half of the twentieth century dominant paradigms in the investigation of social movements diverted attention to the influence and affects in the development of collective action (**Goodwin**, 2018), today emotions refocus the interest of the academy as they motivate, are part of the rhetoric, shape the speeches, and allow sharing the objectives articulated by social and political movements (**Jasper**, 2011). Emotions also play a very important role in building collective identities. In the construction of these identities affinities have more weight than common interests. Affects favor solidarity among members of social movements creating bonds of trust, loyalty, and feelings (**Goodwin**; **Jasper**; **Polletta**, 2000).

This renewed interest in the role of emotions in politics coincides with the prominence that social platforms have acquired in electoral processes and collective actions. These platforms are especially useful for political organizations and their communication teams, and are used to:

- strengthen the links between political organizations and their electorate (**Ward**; **Gibson**, 2008; **Túñez**; **Sixto-García**, 2011);
- mobilize the bases (**Castells**, 2013);
- connect with the younger sectors of the electorate (**Utz**, 2009).

At the same time, social media platforms facilitate the participation of users in organizational aspects, creation of narratives, and dissemination of collective actions (**Bennett**, 2012). In social platforms the themes and interpretations that make up the stories are chosen, filtered, and disseminated in a process in which users and organizations collaborate, negotiate, or struggle to impose a certain story (**Coromina**, 2017). This process has many similarities with the constant negotiation model that has been used to describe relations between journalists and politicians (**Casero-Ripollés**, 2008). In this process, emotions act as a driving force, both in terms of defining the stories through which the narrative unfolds, and when it comes to forming and uniting the audiences that participate in the story (**Papacharissi**, 2014). In addition, in social networks the affinity between users is a particularly relevant factor in the propagation of the different narratives since there is a tendency to establish connections and share information with people of similar points of view and ideologies. This favors the appearance of personalized information environments that can be characterized as echo chambers or *filter bubbles* (**Bakshy**; **Messing**; **Adamic**, 2015; **Freelon**, 2017; **Pariser**, 2011).

Many of the mechanisms that operate within these practices are hidden from simple observation, but all the actions carried out by users generate metadata that, to a lesser or greater extent, are accessible through the interfaces that regulate the information and the format of what is published on the platforms. In the user interface of *Facebook*, for example, along with the content, the number of *likes*, *comments,* and *shares* stands out and becomes an influential element when generating interaction with content and other users (**Shifman**, 2014). The application interface (API) regulates the exchange of information between *Facebook* and the applications that articulate the economic and social apparatus of the platform (**Gerlitz**; **Helmond**, 2013). Allows the automated, massive, and structured collection of user data. The analysis of the digital traces left by the activity of users has a great utility in many areas including the entertainment industry, marketing, political propaganda, and scientific research. Without going any further, the data used to develop this article have been obtained through the *Facebook* API. Indicators such as the number of *likes*, *comments,* and *shares* helped us to understand the way in which users interact with content and have allowed us to identify the affective bonds that can be established with content, themes, products, brands, political parties, etc. (**Mollen**;

Wilson, 2010). For these reasons, appealing to feelings is a persuasive communication strategy that can generate interesting returns during electoral contests (**Abejón-Mendoza**; **Mayoral-Sánchez**, 2017).

2. *Facebook* and the grammatization of emotions

Facebook is the most popular of social networks, with more than 2 billion users worldwide (*Facebook*, 2018). Due to its characteristics, we can define it as a social network since it fulfills the requirement of being an application that allows its users to establish connections between themselves and to manage a personal profile (**Ellison**; **Boyd**, 2013). Users publish information on their wall, a space in which a biographical narrative is displayed and in which they combine the presentation of impressions, memories, and emotions with self-promotion (**Van-Dijck**, 2013). The wall and the possibility of interacting with content is a feature shared with *Facebook*'s *pages* and *groups*, which are spaces created to promote the generation of communities around companies, brands, public figures, and interests (**Sixto-García**, 2017). These entities –pages and groups- are usually managed by a small group of administrators who create the content, also referred to as posts. In addition, members of these communities also participate in the building and propagation of narratives through reactions, comments, and shares. In addition, comments allow users to extend, complete, debate, or question the published information.

> Emotional reactions demand greater reflection from the user than a simple *like*

We have to consider that these indicators are more than popularity metrics, they all have important consequences in the operation of the platform. *Likes*, *comments,* and *shares* regulate the system of notifications and impressions on the wall. For example, in February 2016 *Facebook* added new possible responses to a post; reproduced in Figure 1, they allowed users to give an emotional response to content, and also offered them the opportunity to be more precise with the type of answer they wanted to give in each situation. In addition to the classic *like*, they added the possibility of showing love (*love*), laughter (*haha*), surprise (*wow*), sadness (*sad*), and anger (*angry*). Along with the implementation of these new elements came an update of the publication algorithm, and although the exact operating parameters of the *Facebook* algorithm are opaque, it was clear that a change to the algorithm gave more visibility to content with emotional reactions. Assuming that emotional reactions require greater reflection from users, in this study greater weight was given to those posts that received the most emotions in response (**Stewart**, 2017).

At this point it is necessary to introduce the concept of "grammars of action", introduced by **Agre** (1994) to describe how software (then) and social platforms (now) channel communication, publication, and interaction with methods by which different actions are constructed. The grammatization of the action entails two important consequences:

- the interaction of the users is structured from a limited number of formal operations and this formalization allows them to be integrated into a database in a logical and organized manner (**Gerlitz**; **Rieder**, 2018). In the present case, *Facebook* grammatizes the emotional response from the 6 reactions available to users. It is interesting to note that the selection of possible states has the result of making certain emotions visible and relegating others to a second plane;
- this reaction is counted and displayed in the user interface allowing the user to anticipate details about the type of content that has been published. At the same time, these metadata are also accessible through the API.

Although grammatization and grammaticalization are often used as synonyms, here we accept the distinction that considers that the first fixes, refines, normalizes, and stabilizes, while the second is a process of dynamic coding, in continuous readjustment and change (**Girón-Alconchel**, 2005).

3. Case study

This article uses as a case study the elections to the *Generalitat de Catalunya* (*Catalan Government*) on December 21, 2017 to analyze and understand how social networks contributed to the emotionalization of politics from the evolution of the electoral campaign on the social platform *Facebook* by political parties that obtained representation in the *Parliament of Catalonia*. The election transpired under exceptional circumstances: suspended self-government institutions, imprisoned candidates, and candidates who had fled the country—all of which favored the deployment of narratives that appealed to emotions and polarization.

4. Objective and research questions

This research approaches grammatized reactions on the *Facebook* platform to find out how electoral campaign strategies appeal to emotions in the unfolding of their narratives. Likewise, we are interested in understanding how the content format influences the emotional response of users and exploring to what extent the action grammars of *Facebook* leave room for more visceral reactions of criticism and dissension. To achieve these objectives we formulated the following research questions:

- What emotions are invoked from the deployed narratives of the political parties during the campaign?
- What format of content favors interaction in an emotional way?
- What tools does *Facebook* offer for users to channel their most intense emotions?
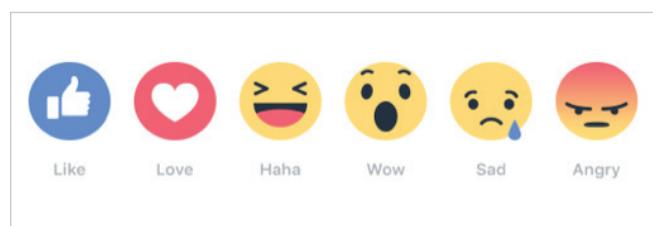

Figure 1. *Facebook* reactions
Source: *Facebook Inc.*

5. Methods

The methods used in this research are aligned with the proposal of **Rogers** (2013) to study social and cultural phenomena by repurposing information, methods,

Table 1. Figures of captured data during the study period

	Publications	Comments	Total reactions	Likes		Emotions	
				Total	%	Total	%
Total	1,302	93,933	461,305	399,872	86.68	61,433	13.32

and processes of digital platforms and other technological applications. For this we have used *Netvizz*, a program specifically designed to investigate with an approach that allows the extraction and analysis of data from *Facebook* pages through an application interface (API) (**Rieder**, 2013). Through this method we have obtained a collection of data constituted by 1,302 posts published in the pages of the 7 political parties that finally obtained representation in the *Parliament of Catalonia*, between October 27th, 2017, the date in which elections were called via article 155, and the day of the vote, December 21st, 2017. Along with the posts, 93,933 comments and 461,305 reactions were captured, as reflected in table 1.

> *Like* is the preferred reaction when interacting with content

One of the candidacies analyzed -*Junts per Catalunya*- created their page on November 22nd, 2017, because the group was formed after the elections were called. We approached this peculiarity as a consequence of the exceptional circumstances that surrounded the celebration of the elections, and for this reason we renounce comparisons between this party and the others in terms of success and effectiveness. In addition, the engagement indicators are directly related to the number of followers of the *Facebook* pages and limiting the dates to a common rank among all the parties would not have solved the problem: *Junts per Catalunya* had less time to articulate their presence in *Facebook* and win a sufficient number of followers. Instead we look at the type of reactions to characterize the narratives of each party and analyze them from percentages. Additionally, data mining techniques are used to analyze the presence of *stickers* and *emojis* in the comments.

6. Reactions to publications

In a first approximation to the extracted data, we observe that *like* was the preferred reaction by the users to interact with content. As shown in Graph 1, in all the analyzed cases, they exceeded 80% of the total of the registered reactions. *Likes* made up most of the reactions to the posts of the parties. *Like* should be interpreted as an option to show adhesion and acceptance of content that does not necessarily entail an emotional component and, therefore, is more difficult to analyze in emotional terms. We also observed significant differences in relation to the weight of emotional reactions in each of the political parties. This data suggests that some parties carried out communication strategies more oriented to generate emotional responses than others.
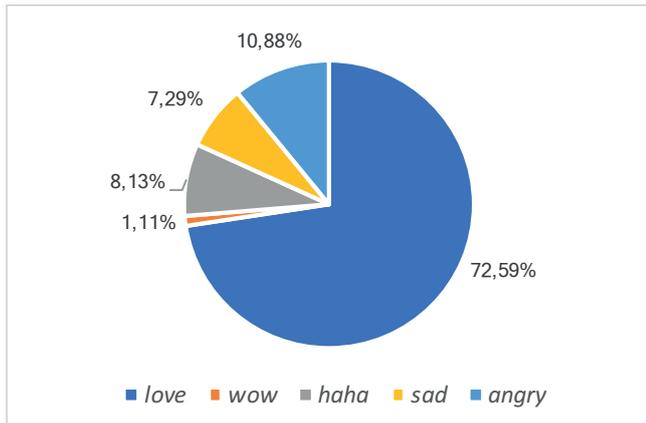
> Video and images are the dominant formats, what corroborates the audiovisualization of *Facebook*

We gave the emotional reactions (*love*, *wow*, *haha*, *sad* and *angry*) on *Facebook* a greater significance value, because the action of choosing one requires the user to perform a reflection exercise. Their choice reveals more precision in the state of mind. As a consequence, we eliminated *likes* from the analyzed set, and counted those which were the most used reactions. Figure 2 shows the distribution of reactions across all the posts analyzed. We observe the *love* reaction was the most used reaction in the global calculation, exceeding 70% over the total of recorded reactions. This data suggests a high degree of concordance between the followers of the parties on *Facebook*, which delves into the significance of unconditional adhesion that is already expressed in the predominance of *likes*.

The detailed analysis of the reactions by party shows a very unequal distribution of the feelings aroused by the publications of each political formation. As shown in Table 2, *PP* and *PSC* were well below the average in reactions such as *love*, while *Ciudadanos* and *Junts per Catalunya* capitalized on this feeling, reaching more than 90% of the total reactions. On the opposite side, *PP* and *PSC* are the ones that

Graphic 1. Share of *likes* and emotional reactions by party

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Graph 2. Percentage of reactions use

Table 2. Distribution of reactions per party (%)

Party*	Love	Wow	Haha	Sad	Angry
Cs	91.19	0.91	3.72	1.55	2.64
CUP	82.73	0.88	7.25	3.38	5.76
ERC	68.44	0.84	4.62	14.27	11.83
JxC	94.48	0.22	1.08	3.74	0.47
CECP	85.23	2.93	5.75	3.15	2.93
PP	45.65	1.76	17.91	2.47	32.21
PSC	48.80	1.64	23.92	3.54	22.09
Total	72.59	1.11	8.13	7.29	10.88

* Cs: *Ciudadanos*, CUP: *Candidatura d'Unitat Popular*, ERC: *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*, JxC: *Junts per Catalunya*, CECP: *Catalunya en Comú-Podem*, PP: *Partido Popular*, PSC: *Partit Socialista de Catalunya*.

exceeded the average of reactions considered negative, such as *angry*, where they reach 32% and 22% respectively, on an average that is just over 10%, if we consider the data of all the parties. Likewise, *ERC* shows a particularly high percentage of *sad* and *angry* that we can relate to the imprisonment of independentist political leaders in their narrative.

Using the categorization of formats established by *Facebook* itself, table 3 shows the way users distributed these reactions according to the format of the content published by the parties. The data has been normalized to percentages to make it easier to read. The format that provoked the most reactions was video, accumulating more than 74% of the emotional reactions of the users, followed by photos, with 21%.

Regarding the type of publication, video and images are also confirmed as dominant formats, what corroborates the audiovisualization of *Facebook*, a trend whose birth was previously detected by **Coromina** and **Prado** (2013). If we compare the two columns on the right (Total reactions and Total publications) we observe how video format was the most used by the parties to publish (54%), and the one that proportionally generated more emotional reactions in the users. Results show that the communication teams of the parties clearly tried spreading their messages in the form of videos and photographs and that this practice obtained the prize of greater emotional interaction.

7. Emojis and stickers

The use of standardized graphic elements, such as *emojis* and *stickers* to comment on party publications, was much less frequent than interaction in the form of reaction, as shown

Table 3. Distribution of publications by format and type of reaction (%)

	Love	Wow	Haha	Sad	Angry	Total reactions	Total publications
Event	0.36	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.01	0.38	1.08
Link	1.60	0.57	0.15	0.18	0.25	2.76	5.40
Music	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.07
Photo	17.90	0.54	1.81	1.05	0.52	21.83	37.87
State	0.15	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.15	0.72
Video	54.61	2.87	3.56	5.48	8.36	74.87	54.86

in Table 4, especially when compared to the more than 460,000 reactions recorded in the same period. To interpret these numbers, it is necessary to bear in mind that writing a comment is an action that involves more effort than clicking on the buttons of the reactions that are much more visible.

Table 4. Use of graphic elements in response

Type	Total
Emojis	27,913
Stickers	1,996

Table 5. Top 5 *emojis* and *stickers*

Emoji	😂	👏	💛	🎗️	💪
n	5,290	5,264	2,204	1,994	937
%	18.95	18.85	7.89	7.14	3.35
Sticker	🤮	😍	😹	😆	🧣
n	587	116	111	23	17
%	29.40	5.81	5.56	1.15	0.85

In the same way, we must bear in mind that the use of *emojis* is linked to certain practices. For example, it is common for users to paste the same icon several times in the same comment to emphasize their reaction.

Table 5 shows the 5 *emojis* and the 5 *stickers* most recurrent in the comments to the publications of the political parties. It is interesting to note that the use of *emojis* was concentrated in a smaller number of options since the 5 ideograms of the top 5 represent more than 50% of the total, while the use of *stickers* was much more atomized. If we look at the meaning of the icons, we can distinguish that the *emojis* of the top 5 can be associated with positive reactions. In the case of *stickers*, the most dominant visceral rejection was expressed with the vomit icon, which represented almost 30% of the *stickers* published.

In a more detailed analysis of the most used *emojis* in each of the party walls (Table 6), we can see how the expression of positive feelings remained dominant. However, *emojis* were also used to show rejection as clearly demonstrated by the presence of the poop emoji in the case of the *Partido Popular* and the *Partit Socialista de Catalunya* or the middle finger in the *CUP*. Another noteworthy aspect is the fact that the use of *emojis* to express emotions coexisted with an ideogrammatic use in which they served to express concepts or simple messages; this practice served to reinforce and reaffirm aspects related to the identity of the parties. Such would be the case of the use of the orange in the page of *Ciudadanos*, the fist in those of the *CUP* and *CECP*, the ties in *ERC* and *JxC*, the parking P in the *PP* or the rose in the *PSC*. We must also make special mention of the presence of the ribbon on the page of *Cs* that was associated with a protest action by users related to the independence movement.

Table 7 shows the use of *stickers* on each page of the parties. We observe that puke was a recurring sticker to show rejection, leading in practically all usage rankings. *Stickers* associated with membership also had a presence on all pages and, to a lesser extent, those related to laughter. In order to identify possible relationships between the use of these two formats with certain emotional reactions over others we calculated the correlation between the 6 reaction modes and the use of *stickers* and *emojis* on the pages of political parties. As shown in table 8, there was a strong correlation between the use of *stickers* and the angry reaction and between the use of emoji and the *like* reaction. Moderate correlations were also detected between the use of *stickers* and the haha and sad reactions and between the use of *emojis* and the love and sad reactions.

> The use of *emojis* is linked to positive reactions, while *stickers* channel the negative ones

Table 6. The 5 *emojis* most used by parties

Table 7. Top 3 most used *stickers* per party

8. Conclusions

The analysis of the reactions to the posts in the pages of the political parties that relate to the elections to the *Parliament of Catalonia* has made it possible to verify how the campaign strategies opt for narratives that appeal primarily to positive feelings and adhesion. In addition, we have observed that some parties are more effective than others in achieving this goal and also that the exceptional circumstances surrounding the holding of these elections (imprisoned candidates and suspension of self-government of the autonomous community) led, in the case of *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (*ERC*), the display of stories that invoke emotions of anger and sadness. Likewise, we have detected situations in which there was a divergence between the

Table 8. Correlation between reactions, *stickers,* and *emojis*

	Like	Love	Wow	Haha	Sad	Angry
Stickers	0.26	0.24	0.28	0.59	0.54	0.83
Emojis	0.84	0.59	0.04	-0.24	0.56	0.13

emotions to which the posts appealed and those that ultimately provoked them. The most obvious cases concern the *PSC* and the *PP*, but it was a circumstance that, to a lesser extent, was reproduced by the rest of the parties. This discrepancy is an aspect that we consider of special relevance and we believe that future research should be conducted to see to what extent it can be a useful indicator to evaluate the success of communication strategies in electoral campaigns. Beyond helping us analyze our case study, the analysis of reactions is an effective method to analyze the emotions that are invoked in the narratives that are deployed on *Facebook*.

> The format that provoked the most reactions was video, accumulating more than 74% of the emotional reactions of users

The results also make it clear that video was the content format that most effectively generated emotional reactions, followed by photography. In this sense, we consider particularly revealing the fact that the political parties bet decisively on the audiovisual content when it came to disseminating their messages, especially when considering the production requires greater planning and resources. Everything seems to indicate that the use of video can be related to the promise of a greater prize in the form of emotional interaction. To what extent *Facebook*'s algorithms intervene in this equation is an aspect that we cannot respond with the methodology used, but it seems prudent to take it into consideration.

The introduction of reactions by *Facebook* has followed a process of grammatization of emotions within the landscape of political correctness. However, the analysis of *emojis* and *stickers* has allowed us to show that these resources are used to manifest rejection, criticism, and boycott in a more visceral way, following a grammaticalization process at the service of free emotional interaction. Actually –as we said before-, although grammatization and grammaticalization are often used synonymously, here we recognize a distinction that considers the first, grammatization, as fix, debug, normalize, and stabilize; while the second is a dynamic coding process, in continuous readjustment and change (**Girón-Alconchel**, 2005). In the case of *stickers*, it is particularly evident. As shown on the one hand by the recurrence of the puke illustration and on the other the strong correlation between the number of anger reactions and the use of *stickers*. With regards to *emojis*, it is worth noting that in addition to expressing dissension, in their ideogrammatic use they play a very significant role in the representation of the identity of the parties. In this sense, the strong correlation between the use of *emojis* and the number of *likes* –and the moderate correlation with the number of *loves*- suggests that ideograms constitute a more complex form of expressing adhesion.

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