



# THE STRUGGLE FOR THE STORY IN POLITICAL DISPUTES. THE CASE OF THE 9N 2014 PARTICIPATION PROCESS

Pugna por el relato en los contenciosos políticos. El caso del proceso participativo del 9N de 2014



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## Abstract

Social networks provide new mechanisms for participating in politics and it has been argued that they favor debate, citizen empowerment, and propel democratic changes. This is crucial at a time when forms of political organization, such as parties or unions, have lost their effectiveness. Beyond the debate about the capacity of social networks to incite change and its influence on the outcome of electoral contests, these platforms have become fundamental in the mediatization of politics by turning users into key players in setting the agenda and building the story around politics. This article analyzes a collection of 2,385,396 tweets from the participatory process in Catalonia on November 9, 2014.

## Keywords

*Twitter*; Political communication; Digital methods; Social platforms; Social networks; Social media.

## Resumen

Las redes sociales proporcionan nuevos mecanismos para participar en la política y se ha argumentado que favorecen el debate, el empoderamiento ciudadano y la profundización democrática. Este hecho resulta crucial en un momento en el que formas de organización política como partidos o sindicatos pierden efectividad. Más allá del debate sobre la capacidad de las redes sociales para provocar el cambio y su influencia en el desenlace de contiendas electorales, estas plataformas son fundamentales en la mediatización de la política y convierten a los usuarios en actores clave a la hora de marcar la agenda pública y construir el relato de los acontecimientos políticos. Este artículo toma como caso de estudio la conversación en *Twitter* alrededor del proceso participativo del 9 de noviembre de 2014 en Cataluña y basa su análisis en una colección de 2,385,396 tweets.

## Palabras clave

*Twitter*; Comunicación política; Métodos digitales; Plataformas sociales; Redes sociales; Medios sociales.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Construction of political reports on social platforms

In the current communications ecosystem, social platforms have certain characteristics that distinguish them significantly from traditional media: the role of the user as a creator and distributor of content. In the context of political communication, the potential of social platforms is particularly significant as they can facilitate the ability of users to become active political subjects opening up processes of citizen empowerment and a profound sense of democracy (Casero-Ripollés, 2017). This becomes especially important when the traditional forms of political organization such as political parties and trade unions lose their effect as elements of cohesion (Bennet; Segerberg, 2012).

In recent years several protest movements have used social platforms to construct reports of events and disseminate them on the local and international level. This is the case of the protests against the electoral results in Iran in 2009 (Bruns; Etham, 2009), the Arab spring demonstrations in Egypt and Tunisia (Lotan *et al.*, 2011; Papacharissi; De-Fatima-Oliveira, 2012), and even the 15M movement in Spain (Bennet; Segerberg, 2012; Borge-Holthoefer *et al.*, 2011; Casero-Ripollés; Feenstra, 2012).

Although users have acquired a much more significant role in framing the media agenda and its interpretation before, during, and after political campaigns, the narrative that exists around politics has emerged from a hybrid system in which traditional and new media sit side by side. In this new scenario, traditional users and actors collaborate in the task of searching for and disseminating the events that are included in a media flow that is highly influenced by conflict, competition, and partisanship (Chadwick, 2011). The report that is propagated through the media is therefore a project in which a multitude of actors participate to reorganize communication flows, share information, and create frames of interpretation. This process has a lot in common with the model of constant negotiation that has been used to describe relations between journalists and politicians (Casero-Ripollés, 2008).

From this process, which may be described as a dialogue, a negotiation or even a fight, interpretative frames used to capture and disseminate the report emerge. Framing involves selecting some aspects of reality and emphasizing them in the message to promote a certain definition, interpretation, assessment, and even a course of action in relation to the subject in question (Entman, 1993). Framing is especially important in the context of political communication since it is a key factor for guiding attention to certain aspects and deviating it from others, fostering different reactions from the public. Social platforms offer other mechanisms to develop and consolidate these interpretative frames such as hashtags and other forms of tagging information. These mechanisms acquire importance as they facilitate collaboration among many different types of actors (activists, members of the public, journalists, politicians, etc.) who intervene independently but are connected through network structures (Meraz; Papacharissi, 2013; Casero-Ripollés, 2015).

Similarly, network communication can explain the way gatekeeping works, with gatekeeping being understood as the process of selecting events to be included in the news flow, thus allow them to appear in a particular medium (McQuail, 1994). While in traditional media gatekeeping is an organic function carried out by a small number of professionals (Villafañe; Bustamante; Prado, 1987), on social platforms this process takes place in a networked way. Items included in the narrative expressed using frames are also selected, filtered, and disseminated by users (Papacharissi, 2015). Networked framing and networked gatekeeping are used to describe the communication processes and media flows which occur in different protests, the establishment of dominant narratives, and the appearance of different opinion leaderships (Papacharissi, 2015).

“The narrative that exists around politics has emerged from a hybrid system in which traditional and new media sit side by side”

### 1.2. Twitter and the mediatization of political affairs

*Twitter* appeared in 2006 and was presented as a service with functions and characteristics that placed it at the crossroads of instant messaging services, blogs, and social networks combined on a single platform (Boyd; Golder; Lotan, 2010; Van-Dijck, 2011). One of its main characteristics is that it does not have a predetermined function in relation to published content and today it is used to publish spontaneous thoughts, take part in conversations with other users, share information and take part in cooperative processes for a wide range of purposes such as political communication, journalism, events monitoring, and interpersonal relations.

Other distinguishing features of *Twitter* are the adoption of different objects and conventions which make publication on the platform more dynamic such as retweets, tags, replies, and hashtags. Of all these we want to focus on hashtags, which have become one of the most used resources for coordinating a conversation on a specific topic or event (Bruns; Stieglitz, 2012; Bruns; Burgess, 2011). As stories of political events unfold, hashtags are especially important as they are an essential tool for articulating the dialogue and even moving it into action (Bruns; Burgess, 2011; Small, 2011; Aragón *et al.*, 2013). This resource is therefore crucial for organizing audiences on a certain political position, since they are the main resource on the platform for grouping tweets thematically. Hashtags also provide the space where framing is decided in relation to controversial issues, as demonstrated by the fact that they often become the object of (counter) propagandistic actions where they are “hijacked” with the intention of promoting the publication of messages that are ideologically opposite to the original (Hadgu; Gari-mella; Weber, 2013).

Beyond those functions, hashtags are also important in the context of *Twitter* research since they are especially useful for identifying and isolating tweets related to a specific

topic, while allowing different qualitative and quantitative methods to be used to analyze the content in more detail as well as to observe how the narrative is articulated in the network (Highfield, 2012).

### 1.3. The participative process of 9N

In recent years, Catalonia has seen how discussion over the need to change its political status has become a central theme for political debate. This demand has obtained considerable success in involving a large part of the public, civil organizations, and political parties, resulting in large public turnouts in the streets and a large participation by the social platforms. This article uses the participative process on the political future of Catalonia, which took place on November 9, 2014, as a study case.

## 2. Research questions

This study is organized around three research questions:

- What are the main traits which distinguish the narrative of the political process of November 9 on *Twitter*?
- What were the central frames in the narrative of the political process of November 9 on *Twitter*?
- Which strategies were used for the construction of the narrative?

## 3. Methodology

The methodology used to answer the research questions is organized into three processes: data extraction, hashtag networks, and hashtag categorization.

### 3.1. Extraction

We chose the *Twitter* search API for the data extraction as it offers a non-intrusive and automatized method of making a collection of tweets. To access our environment we used *DMI-TCAT* software –a tool developed by Erik Borra and Bernhard Rieder designed to store and analyze tweets for the purpose of carrying out research in the social and human sciences (Borra; Rieder, 2014).

To articulate the tweets on which to carry out the analysis we captured those with the keywords “9N” or “9N2014”, between September 11 and 14 November, 2014. The keywords “9N” and “9N2014” were selected because they were widely used as hashtags in tweets related to the consultation and were, a priori, free of any ideological bias.

As a result of the extraction process a collection of data was obtained comprised of 2,385,396 tweets published by 303,366 different users. Because that the extraction process lasted a little over two months, it was decided to observe the publication dynamics over that period. Figure

1 shows the dates and number of tweets published. Publication activity did not take place uniformly and there were different peaks signaling the times when *Twitter* debate was more intense. These peaks coincide with some of the most important events in the participative process of 9N.

Given the high number of tweets published during the extraction period we opted to limit the research to the period of November 4-14. As well as limiting and simplifying the process of analysis, this choice also meant that we could identify different periods in the participative process:

- November 4 to 8. Days before the participative process marked by the second suspension of the Constitutional Court (November 4).
- November 9. Day of the participative process.
- November 10 to 14. Days following the participative process.

### 3.2. Hashtag networks

For each of the three periods we generated networks in which, out of all the messages’ content, we only used the hashtags. These corresponded to the nodes of the network and the edges connecting the hashtags represented the number of hashtags in the same tweet. The name of this type of network and its conceptualization follow the discipline of *Actor-Network Theory* and, more specifically *co-word analysis*, which is an analytical method designed to identify and visualize the actors and themes related to a particular controversial matter from the co-occurrence in the text of different words that synthesize, signal, and connect the theme defining the problems analyzed (Callon et al., 1983). *Co-word analysis* is therefore a technique for analyzing content which, rather than being based on the assignment of categories to the elements, captures the relationships between the words that represent the links between the concepts, the ideas, and the physical objects that they describe (Danowski, 2009).

Methodologically, the operation of analyzing the hashtags using networks has significant consequences. On the one

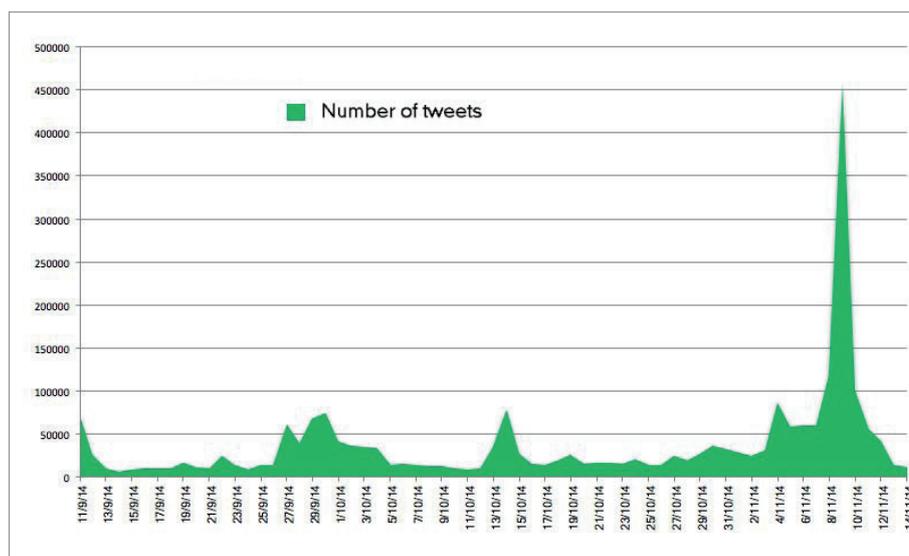


Figure 1. Tweets related to 9N by date

hand it allows the visualization of those networks and on the other it opens the door to using different indicators and metrics used to describe the structural properties of the networks.

To carry out both, we used the *Gephi* software (Bastian; Heymann; Jacomy, 2009). The spatial distribution of the nodes was done using the *Force Atlas 2* algorithm whose function is to distribute the different nodes so that the edges act as forces of attraction and the nodes as forces of repulsion (Jacomy *et al.*, 2011). This means that the hashtags that occurred recurrently in a tweet are positioned closer and those which do not share links occupy positions further away.

Hashtags provide the space where framing is decided in relation to controversial issues

As far as the possibility of calculating metrics and statistics referring to the structural characteristics of the network was concerned, we used *betweenness centrality* because of its capacity to reflect the centrality of a node in the network. That way themes, events and most central positionings can be reflected in the narrative of 9N on *Twitter*, understanding centrality not as an intermediate point between two ideologically opposed positions but as the terms that the debate and conversation revolves around. A total of 25 hashtags were identified with a higher value of *betweenness centrality* for each of the time segments analyzed.

*Betweenness centrality* is also the indicator used to produce the network visualizations. It was used to color the nodes in a graduated range from blue to red with yellow in the middle, with blue the color of the hashtags with the lowest level of *betweenness centrality* and red the color of the most central elements. The size of the circumferences, representing the nodes, also correspond to this indicator and the labels, the content of the hashtag.

To facilitate the decoding and interpretation of the visualizations in network form (figures 2, 3, and 4) only the 25 hashtags with the highest indices of centrality are shown and the rest are represented as a circle to show the size and structure of the network. The exception to this rule is figure 5 which shows a zoom of one of the networks to display the content of a group of hashtags.

The analysis was completed with the scrutiny of the data base with the aim of contextualizing the use of certain hashtags and tracing their origin. For that reason the sections of this block of analysis reproduce the textual content of some tweets.

### 3.3. Categorization of the hashtags

In addition to the analysis of the networks, we classified the 25 most central hashtags for each of the periods into three categories that identify the main function performed in the tweets.

- Thematic: Includes those hashtags whose main function was the topical demarcation of the content of the tweets, but where we were unable to deduce the “political”

use of the hashtag from its message.

- Campaign: Hashtags which have been identified as part of a campaign supporting one of the options represented in the political debate.
- Media: Groups together the hashtags created *ad hoc* by TV or radio channels and programs with the aim of opening up a channel of participation by their audiences while simultaneously giving visibility to the content.

## 4. Results

The calculation of the *betweenness centrality* in the network of hashtags allows us to distinguish 47 different expressions in the set of the top 25 for each of the time segments analyzed. This means that several hashtags appear in different ‘top 25s’ and denote a more regular and prolonged use over time.

Table 1 shows the number of hashtags in each category and the frequency with which they appear in the tweets. It can be seen that most of the hashtags are related to the campaign activity in terms of the number of different hashtags used and, especially, in terms of the frequency with which they appear in the tweets. This is a good indicator of the tone and the terms in which the mediation of 9N took place, and is clearly marked by intense campaign activity. The hashtags related to media spaces are fewer in terms of variety but greater than those whose function was a topical demarcation. This may be attributed to the fact that the dissemination of media hashtags is more centralized and organized.

### 4.1. From November 4th to November 8th

As can be seen in Table 2, many of the tags referred to different campaigns to promote participation and the most intensive come from civil entities in favor of independence (17 out of 25). This is the case of #votarepertu, #votarepeltu, and #catalansreadytovote. The first two hashtags correspond to motivate *Twitter* users publically announce the name of a person to whom they intended to dedicate their vote. Analysis of these tweets shows that 3,145 different users put #votarepeltu and 2,696 #votarepertu, from November 4-8. This campaign began weeks before the period represented in the hashtags network. The persistence of these hashtags over more than 10 days, the volume of tweets published, and the high index of centrality demonstrate the great success of the initiative.

Similarly, #catalansreadytovote corresponds to a campaign driven by the same entities to broadcast the Catalan case outside the borders of Spain, as seen in the first tweet of the collection of tweets using this hashtag which was published by the user @araeslhora on November 3 6:36 PM

Table 1. Hashtags by category

Category	Hashtags	Frequency
Campaign	23	239,585
Thematic	19	43,718
Media	5	60,339
Total	47	343,702

Alerta: Ensenyem el nostre vot al món! Fes-te una foto amb la papereta del 9N i comparteix-la a #CatalansReadyToVote!

<http://t.co/0a6WIL7wXa>

(Alert: Let's show the world our vote! Take a selfie with the 9N ballot slip and share it to #CatalansReadyToVote!)

As the tweet makes clear, the objective of the initiative is to involve *Twitter* users in the dissemination of the 9N cause on an international level. In that sense, a good indicator of the capacity of these hashtags for propagating ideas is that they reach the category of trending topic —a guarantee of greater visibility. One tweet published by the user @assembleasmxi on November 4, 1:07 PM, illustrates the achievement of that challenge:

#CatalansReadyToVote ja és trending topic mundial un altre cop. La quantitat de periodistes internacionals acreditats el #9N2014, en augment.

(#CatalansReadyToVote is a world trending topic again. The number of accredited international journalists using #9N2014 on the increase.)

In figure 2, which represents the network of hashtags for the period, it can be clearly seen how the center of the graph is occupied by a network of different expressions and slogans of support for the independentist agenda, with no tags in the top 25 displaying the counter ideology. It can also be observed that #tc occupies an important position and this can be related to the second suspension of the Constitutional Court (*Tribunal Constitucional*) in the consultation process. Tags denoting calls for mobilization and disobedience: #9Ndesobeïm and #cassolada.

Table 2. Top 25 hashtags (04/11 - 08/11)

Hashtag	Frequency	Users	Betweenness centrality	Category
catalansreadytovote	20,345	10,167	1,554,559	Campaign
sisi	10,097	6,061	1,293,189	Campaign
araeshora	9,702	6,084	1,166,960	Campaign
catalunya	4,018	3,055	1,023,075	Thematic
sísí	10,896	6,481	1,012,647	Campaign
cassolada	13,102	6,789	826,672	Campaign
votarem	8,501	5,347	758,642	Campaign
votarepertu	3,959	2,696	467,324	Campaign
omplimlesurnes	7,522	4,145	432,302	Campaign
volem votar	3,677	2,765	424,495	Campaign
barcelona	2,184	1,734	378,796	Thematic
araéshora	5,728	3,813	297,585	Campaign
debat9Ntv3	4,899	2,581	291,852	Media
todosavotar	8,126	4,590	260,216	Campaign
españa	1,382	1,005	236,088	Thematic
catalonia	2,005	1,435	218,498	Thematic
cataluña	1,791	1,551	209,027	Thematic
9Ndesobeïm	3,094	2,181	182,428	Campaign
tc	1,139	918	179,906	Thematic
independencia	1,384	806	169,435	Campaign
votarepertu	3,992	3,145	167,096	Campaign
catalansvote9N	1,866	1,327	165,877	Campaign
independència	2,036	1,455	162,591	Campaign
dretadecidir	1,317	1,024	150,945	Campaign
pp	384	327	145,509	Thematic

Source: Produced using DMI-TCAT data

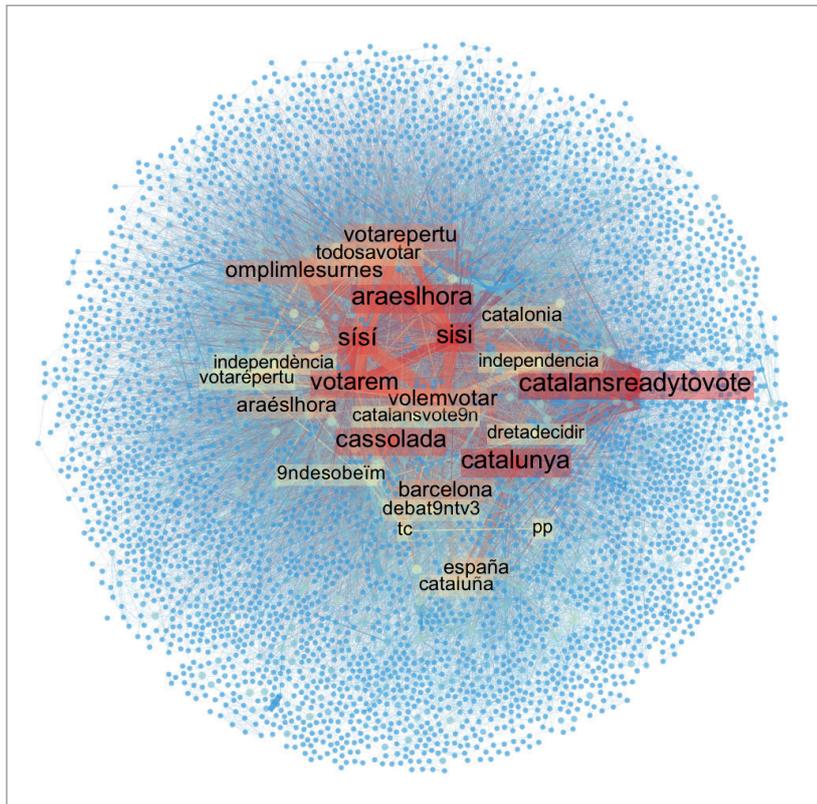


Figure 2. Network of hashtags (04/11-08/11)

#### 4.2. November 9th

Table 3, which contains the frequencies and users of the most central hashtags, clearly reflects that voting day was the day of highest publication activity. Following the trend that we saw for the other top 25s, the ‘campaign’ hashtags are dominant (14 out of 25), but there is also an increase in the tags used by TV programs as a result of the media interest created by the participative process. #Omplimlesurnes, which also appeared in the previous period has the highest register of use, with almost 47,000 tweets published by a little over 24,000 different users.

The network of hashtags on November 9 is evidence of the clamorous and festive mood of the day, as emitted by the centrality of hashtags such as #cataloniawins, #jojahevotat, #todosavotar, #omplimlesurnes, #hemvotathemguanyat, #todosavotar, #araeshora, #araéshora, and #catalansreadytovote which to an extent can be related to the campaign in favor of the

Table 3. Top 25 hashtags (09/11)

Hashtag	Frequency	Users	Betweenness centrality	Category
omplimlesurnes	46,873	24,120	3,297,147	Campaign
catalunya	7,221	5,522	2,070,730	Thematic
hemvotathemguanyat	26,411	15,835	2,000,202	Campaign
sisi	11,726	8,729	1,668,845	Campaign
9Ntv3	29,201	16,504	1,651,016	Media
jojahevotat	17,151	12,957	1,400,186	Campaign
cataloniawins	14,910	9,701	1,016,362	Campaign
todosavotar	21,301	15,498	977,799	Campaign
9Nrac1	14,855	9,494	933,488	Media
araeslhora	7,638	5,844	887,842	Campaign
sísí	7,925	6,120	876,937	Campaign
catalonia	3,375	2,683	374,636	Thematic
cataluña	2,329	1,967	372,236	Thematic
catalansreadytovote	3,752	3,056	333,451	Campaign
democracia	1,137	1,072	265,686	Campaign
araéslhora	2,634	2,134	260,098	Campaign
independència	1,239	1,088	258,817	Campaign
independencia	1,540	1,076	253,934	Campaign
españa	801	609	230,438	Thematic
barcelona	1,305	1,077	221,118	Thematic
berlin	269	227	220,278	Thematic
volem votar	1,329	1,047	219,497	Campaign
salvados9N	4,051	3,058	212,672	Media
9Nenxarxa	951	480	192,535	Thematic
votar	629	572	187,821	Thematic

what we could call a type of trending topic activism in which users, coordinated and with relatively little effort, can contribute significantly to increasing the visibility of a certain topic. We found several tweets which referred to the different trending topics of the moment:

#OmplimLesUrnes # 9Nrac1 #HemVotatHemGuanyat #9NTV3 Trending Topic watch out

Top 5 of TrendingTopic Spain are from 9N: #OmplimLesUrnes #TodosAVotar, #9Nrac1 #HemVotatHemGuanyat #9NTV3

We continue to occupy trending topic sites: 1. #OmplimLesUrnes 2. #TodosAVotar 3. #9Nrac1 4. #HemVotatHemGuanyat 5. #9NTV3

“ The tone and the terms in which the mediation of 9N took place are clearly marked by an intense propaganda campaign ”

### 4.3. From November 10th to November 14th

In the top 25 central hashtags for the period in table 4, there is a smaller number of campaign hashtags, which is logical given that the objective of getting people to vote (which most of the campaign activity centred on) had already been achieved. In first position is #cataloniawins, a tag passed on from voting day whose original purpose was to become a trending topic worldwide. More than an inertial movement, this hashtag also reflects a moment when the story to carry the results of the consultation was being negotiated. This comment also applies to #hemvotathemguanyat.

public consultation and seems to have been created *ad hoc* for the day itself.

The same as in the previous period, the use of a varied repertoire of slogans indicates that some of them had the objective of achieving the trending topic position. This is the case for #cataloniawins, as is clear from the first tweet to use the tag, published by user @araeslhora at 7:14 PM:

Ara és l’hora d’enviar el missatge del 9N al món! Catalunya ha votat, ha decidit, ha guanyat! Fem TT #CataloniaWins! <http://t.co/1UWqFoGmdD>

(Now is the time to send the message of 9N to the world! Catalonia has voted, has decided, has won! Let’s make #CataloniaWins! a TT

This intense activity to achieve trending topics seems to be the trait that best characterizes the network on voting day. It is a phenomenon that indicates an improved version of the low commitment and low intensity activism known as “slacktivism”. In this case we are interested in

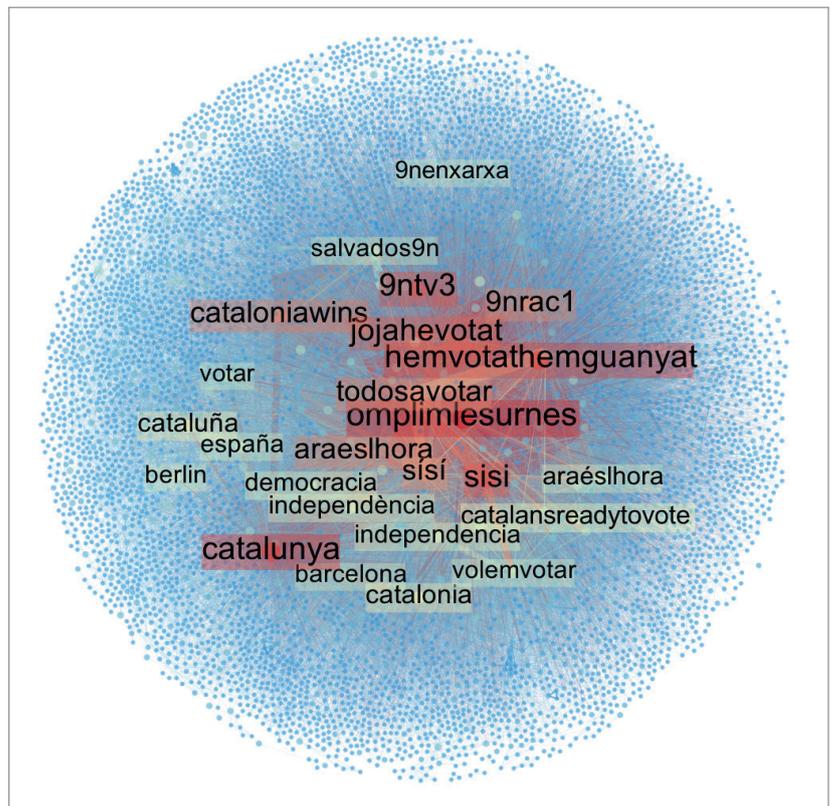


Figure 3. Network of hashtags (09/11)

Figure 4 shows that, together with #cataloniawins, there were also several hashtags which were central during most of the periods analyzed, such as: #sisi, #sísí, and #araeslhora, as well as others inherited from voting day. (#omplimlesurnes, #hemvotathemguanyat y #omplimlesurnas). What this shows is an inertial use of these tags to keep the pro-independence campaign alive.

There is a “trending topic” activism in which users can contribute significantly to increasing the visibility of a certain topic

In that sense it is interesting to point out that the appearance of #autoinculpacions9N (#weareallguity9N) was a response to the announcement by the public prosecutor to bring a case against Artur Mas and other members of his government. On the other hand a campaign appeared against the consultation, as seen by the presence of the hashtag #9Nfrau (#9Nfraud), which brought together accusations of fraud and other criticism of the consultation. Figure 5 shows in detail the network built up around this hashtag and shows that it was used in conjunction with #butifarrendum, #9ncirco, #9nfail. In this figure, the fact that these hashtags coexisted with others in favour of the consultation and the independence of Catalonia is attributable to the practice described in the theoretical framework and hashtag “hijacking”.

Another feature that distinguishes this network is the centrality of tags that referred to TV programs (#9Ntv3 and #rajoypost9Narv), which showed the news coverage that the participative process received in the days following November 9.

Table 4. Top 25 hashtags (10/11 - 14/11)

Hashtag	Frequency	Users	Betweenness centrality	Category
cataloniawins	13,135	8,652	1,002,010	Campaign
catalunya	2,565	2,098	693,593	Thematic
autoinculpacions9N	8,427	4,754	415,550	Campaign
sisi	2,529	1,637	242,363	Campaign
sísí	2,294	1,730	224,274	Campaign
hemvotathemguanyat	2,199	1,759	221,167	Campaign
9Ntv3	5,537	4,231	214,412	Media
cataluña	3,591	3,206	195,287	Thematic
catalonia	1,952	1,395	185,731	Thematic
rajoy	1,351	1,090	178,146	Thematic
araeslhora	819	645	169,165	Campaign
omplimlesurnes	1,973	1,679	167,957	Campaign
pp	392	335	122,291	Thematic
españa	664	449	113,233	Thematic
presidentmas	2,837	1,669	112,071	Campaign
arturmas	556	417	99,471	Thematic
barcelona	347	270	85,993	Thematic
cuba	31	15	84,627	Thematic
10n	626	577	76,472	Thematic
9Nfrau	2,555	1,863	64,724	Campaign
fiesta	3	3	60,105	Thematic
consulta	236	196	57,591	Thematic
noticias	280	117	55,300	Thematic
mas	357d	295	52,904	Thematic
rajoypost9Narv	1,856	1,503	51,168	Media

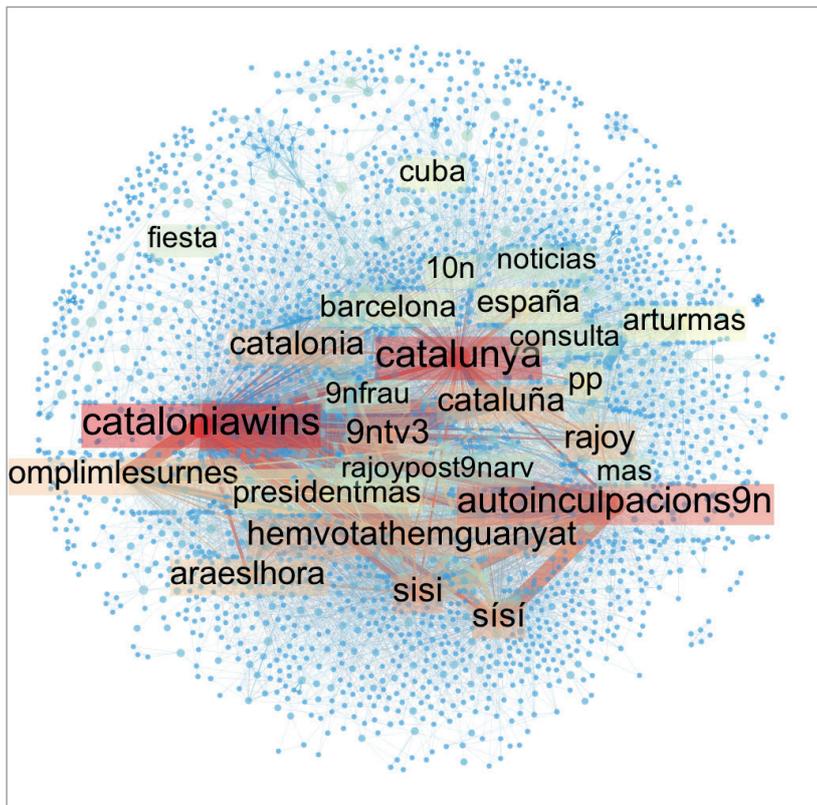


Figure 4. Network of hashtags (10/11-14/11)

### 5. Conclusions

The conclusions of this research are organized in response to the original questions posed:

#### What are the main traits which distinguish the narrative of the political process of November 9 on Twitter?

The analysis of the results, and more specifically the categorization of the hashtags, offers the conclusion that the trait that most clearly distinguishes the narrative of the participative process of 9N was the intensive campaign activity by those in favor of the right to decide and the independence of Catalonia. As seen in most of the periods analyzed, the hashtags fitting into the campaign category were the most prominent, and occupied more than 60% of the top positions for betweenness centrality.

The dynamic changed in the days after the voting, when a narrative rivalry can be observed between the opposing ideological opinions to set the story which will



se. This story is later incorporated in the traditional media flows and, indirectly, ends of reaching citizens who do not form part of the digital platforms. The weight of each of the different actors in this process is a question that cannot be elucidated using the methods employed for this article, but it is a particularly important aspect that should be addressed in future research.

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