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Spanish talk Radio Stations on Twitter: *Still* reluctant to embrace its potential

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Abstract:

In less than 5 years, Twitter has become one of the most popular services on the so-called Web 2.0, an extraordinary tool with a huge journalistic potential that should not be underrated. However, according to the results of a study carried out in September 2010 (Herrera and Requejo, 2010), the five major Spanish talk radio stations used this 2.0 tool with a mentality that, in many aspects, still remained 1.0. More than 4 months later, we conduct a new content analysis to check if the situation remains the same, or if meaningful changes have been made. In this new analysis, we study the tweets posted by the official accounts of these stations over a 2-week period, January 28 - February 10, 2011. The outcomes show that the stations are still reluctant to embrace Twitter's full potential.

Keywords: Twitter, Spain, radio, uses

Introduction

In less than 5 years, Twitter has become one of the most popular services on the so-called Web 2.0. Its versatility can be explained in part by adding up the advantages of previous forms of communication:

"Twitter shares some similarities with other forms of communication. Like the telephone, it facilitates a real-time exchange of information. Like instant messaging, the information is sent in short bursts. But it extends the affordances of previous modes of communication by combining these features in both a one-to-many and many-to-many framework that is public, archived and searchable. Twitter allows a large number of users to communicate with each other simultaneously in real-time, based on an asymmetrical relationship between friends and followers. The messages from social streams of connected data provide value both individually and in aggregate" (Hermida, 2010a).

Such versatility has been noted by many disciplines wanting to take advantage of this new system of communication. After an initial phase of skepticism and observation, more and more media outlets and journalists are joining Twitter. The aim of this paper is to analyze how major Spanish talk radio stations are making use of this service. Do they use it to provide information or to express opinions? Do they use it to correct misinformation, or to gather opinions from their followers? To what extent do they talk with their audiences? Do they ask for audience participation? Do the stations link to their websites, blogs, or other websites apart from their own? Do they use hashtags? These are some of the questions we attempt to answer in this paper. First, we provide a brief introduction on Twitter as a Web 2.0 application.

Twitter as a 2.0 application

Twitter is a microblogging service that allows users to send and read short texts, called "tweets," with a maximum length of 140 characters. These messages can be sent from the Twitter site, mobile phones, instant messaging programs, or even from third-party applications like TweetDeck, Twidroid, Twiterrific, HootSuite, Tweetie, Twinckle, Tweetboard and Nanvú, or social networks like Facebook, LinkedIn and Google+. Updates are shown on the user profile page, and are also immediately sent to other users who have chosen to receive them. For this reason, Twitter is also a major component of social networking sites.

In 2006, Twitter was created in California by Jack Dorsey, Biz Stone and Evan Williams. Since its inception, its popularity has increased rapidly, due not only to its advanced handling capabilities for reporting what is happening in real time, but also for its utility in sharing interesting material.

Companies and institutions can also use Twitter in diverse ways. Therefore, experts recommend that users take their time to define and understand the objectives of the service in order to develop a successful strategy. This exercise seems essential for choosing what content to tweet and for using the application in an optimal way.

Why Twitter matters for news organizations

For news organizations, several scholars (e.g., Carr, 2010; Dowling, 2011; Wadhwa, 2010) state that Twitter has become an essential tool that must be taken seriously. Among several different proposals, one by Rusbridger (2010), editor in chief of *The Guardian*, seems particularly appropriate because it is complete and concise. In his paper, entitled "Why Twitter matters for media organizations" he points out that Twitter matters because:

- 1) It is an amazing form of distribution;
- 2) It is where things happen first;
- 3) As a search engine, it rivals Google;
- 4) It is a formidable aggregation tool;
- 5) It is a great reporting tool;
- 6) It is a fantastic form of marketing;
- 7) It is a series of common conversations;
- 8) It is more diverse;
- 9) It changes the tone of writing;
- 10) It is a level playing field;
- 11) It has different news values;
- 12) It has a long attention span;
- 13) It creates communities;
- 14) It changes notions of authority; and
- 15) It is an agent of change.

However, the only way media can embrace its true potential is to avoid the same strategies that stations used in the 1.0 world and realize that they are facing a brand new paradigm requiring a new culture with different codes. Despite diverse proposals for media best practices on Twitter (Harbison, 2010; Ingram, 2011; Kanalley, 2009a, 2009b; Orihuela, 2009, 2010, 2011; Posetti, 2009; Sawyer, 2011; Vargas, 2010a, 2010b) the distinction between good *content* practices and those related to *form* are useful for the purposes of this paper.

Content practices are related to message intentions. At this point, several scholars stress that the media should not care as much¹ about providing information and self-promotion. Rather, they should use this new service to foster what Americans call community engagement: "Community engagement = News orgs make top

¹ See Hunt (2011) for a review of general bad practices on Twitter. As for practices that media should avoid on this platform, Vargas (2011) turns out to be very enlightening.

priority to listen, to join, lead and enable conversation to elevate journalism"² (Buttry, 2011). Based on Mayer's (2011) proposal, this journalistic obligation has three modalities: (a) community outreach³, (b) conversation⁴, and (c) collaboration⁵.

From a more concrete perspective, Twitter provides many opportunities for the media to create community, by posing questions to their followers, asking them for information, asking them to submit interview questions, replying to them⁶, retweeting, mentioning users not necessarily linked to the medium to acknowledge their contributions⁷, and doing a "Follow Friday" for the most enthusiastic followers and those who add greater value.

As for best form practices, scholars stress the need to: make use of a human voice⁸, link to external content so that their own contributions can be enriched⁹, provide information in an appealing way, conduct surveys among their followers, use hashtags in an effective and creative way, link to other networks where the medium might have a profile, and add multimedia value to the updates through links to pictures, videos, audio files or graphs.

Methodology

Despite these best practices, sometimes this 2.0 tool is used with a 1.0 mentality. This was one of the main conclusions we drew at the end of 2010, when we conducted a content analysis of the tweets posted by the five main Spanish talk radio stations (Herrera and Requejo, 2010). In our analysis, we coded updates posted by these stations over a 1-week period, September 6 -12, 2010. During this period, the stations Cadena SER, Cadena Cope, Radio 1, Onda Cero and Punto Radio posted a total of 358 tweets through their official Twitter accounts. The results showed that 65.9% of the updates were intended to provide information, 28.2% were for self-promotion and an additional 3.6% were intended to gather opinions from their followers. Tweets were used for almost no other purposes.

² In his proposal, Buttry (2011) describes each of the key concepts of his definition. In his description of conversation, he states: "Lecturing and one-way reporting may have their place, but engagement is a multi-directional conversation, where you listen to people, pass along their knowledge to others, ask thoughtful questions and provide thoughtful answers. Conversation is human and personal (sometimes fun, sometimes sad, sometimes angry, sometimes rejoicing). Conversation requires a friendly voice" (Buttry, 2011, p. x).

³ "Outreach includes efforts to share ourselves, our expertise and our content with our community. It involves: Taking the content to the audience, rather than hoping they'll find us. Identifying information needs, catering our products to meet them and distributing them in a way that makes sense. Being willing to participate in the community as individuals, building connections and personalizing our brand. Inviting the community to get to know our people and our processes. Enriching our community, sharing our own knowledge and supporting other community enrichment efforts" (Mayer, 2011, p. x).

⁴ "Being in conversation with our community means listening as well as talking, and adjusting what we do and cover based on what we hear. It involves: Hosting discussions in person and online on topics that matter to the community. Participating in conversations we're not hosting, both in person and online. Valuing how a continuing dialogue can make us better journalists and improves the journalism. Using web analytics to better understand what people are showing us they value in what we do, and basing at least some of our decisions about content and staff resources based on what we're seeing. Recognizing that journalism is a process, not just a product, and involving more voices in the process means more diverse journalism" (Mayer, 2011, p. x).

⁵ "Collaborating with our communities, the highest form of engagement, means we have a shared investment in and influence over our journalism. It involves: Soliciting and relying on user contributions. Soliciting and using user input about what we should cover and how we should allocate our resources. Valuing the role the users play in reacting to and sharing our content. Recognizing that we can accomplish things with the cooperation of the community that we could not do alone" (Mayer, 2011, p. x).

⁶ "Reply when you are spoken to: "If you don't respond when someone asks you a direct question or makes a point in reference to you, it's like ignoring someone who is standing right beside you and talking to you. That doesn't mean responding to every troll or flame" (Ingram, 2011, p. x).

⁷ "Re-tweet others: "Social media gets very boring if all you do is post links to your own things, or post your own thoughts. Lots of other people have interesting things to say - find some and re-tweet them. Maybe they will return the favour" (Ingram, 2011, p. x).

⁸ "If you remove the personal aspect, all you have is a glorified news release wire or RSS feed. The best way to make social media work is to allow reporters and editors to be themselves, to be human, and to engage with readers through Twitter and Facebook and comments and blogs. Is there a risk that someone might say something wrong? Of course there is. But without that human touch, there is no point in doing it at all" (Ingram, 2010, p. x). And on how journalists should use social media, Ingram advises: "Be human, but not too human: it's okay to show emotion — in fact, it's good, because it shows that you are human, and people relate to other people. It's called social media for a reason. But be the best version of yourself" (Ingram, 2011, p. x).

⁹ "Link to others (...) social media is a tremendous tool for finding interesting content, and you should share it when you find it, not just keep it to yourself. If you do this, others are more likely to share your links when you post them" (Ingram, 2011, p. x).

In this context, the purpose of this paper is to conduct a new content analysis to see if 4 months later, the situation remains the same or if important changes can be observed. Have the five major Spanish talk radio stations modified their use of Twitter in a more creative way? In order to obtain a larger representation, on this occasion we chose 2 weeks, January 28 - February, 10, 2011. During this period, the stations posted a total of 342 tweets, which were not uniformly distributed: Cadena Cope posted 132; Cadena SER posted 116; Radio 1 (RNE) posted 46; Onda Cero posted 41; and Punto Radio posted just 7 tweets, an average of less than one tweet every other day.

Before conducting the analysis, we assumed the following two starting hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. The five main Spanish talk radio stations underutilize the potential of Twitter, since they only use this service to provide information and for self-promotion. However, they hardly interact or engage with their followers.

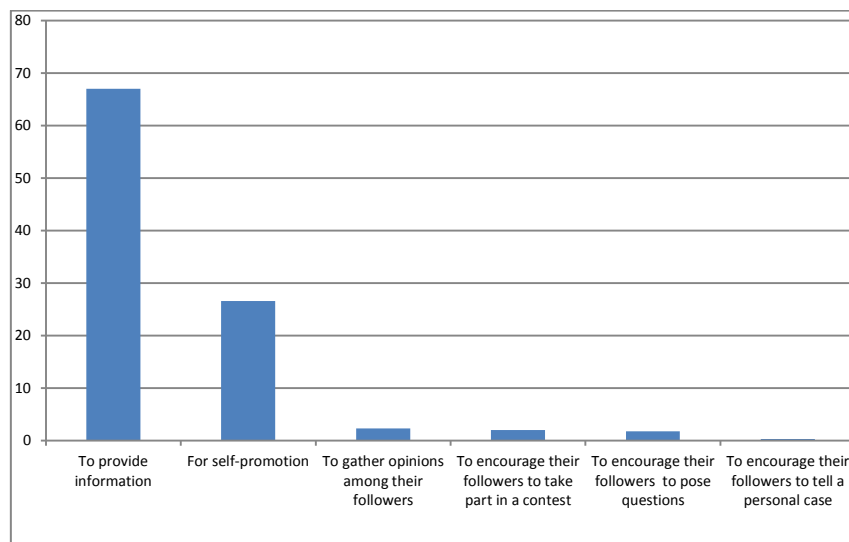
Hypothesis 2. As a result, the formal use of Twitter also remains very basic with little use of retweets, external mentions, links to external content, blogs, audios, videos, multimedia material or hashtags.

After encoding the 342 tweets included in the sample, we exported the data to SPSS (17.0) to obtain frequencies and cross-tabulations. Here are the results.

Results

Providing information: Twitter's main purpose for Spanish talk radio stations

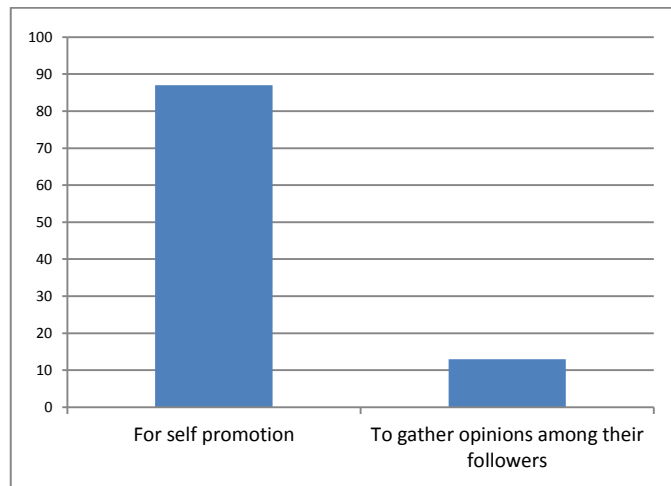
Providing information was the aim of 67% of the updates, while 26.6% had a promotional purpose. Other uses were rather insignificant. Just 2.3% of the messages asked for follower opinions, 2.0% asked followers to take part in a contest, 1.8% asked for interview question submissions, and 0.3% told personal stories. Data are shown in the following histogram:



Histogram 1: Main purpose of the messages

Little creativity in the way Radio 1 used Twitter

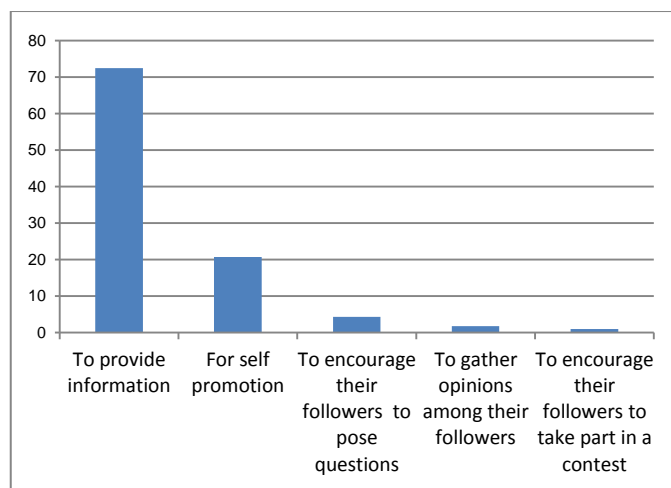
When considering the different uses of Twitter by stations, we observed that Radio 1 exhibited very restricted utilization. Tweets were used mainly for self-promotion (87%) and, to a lesser extent, to gather opinions from followers (13%).



Histogram 2: How Radio 1 used Twitter

Main purpose for Cadena SER: Providing information

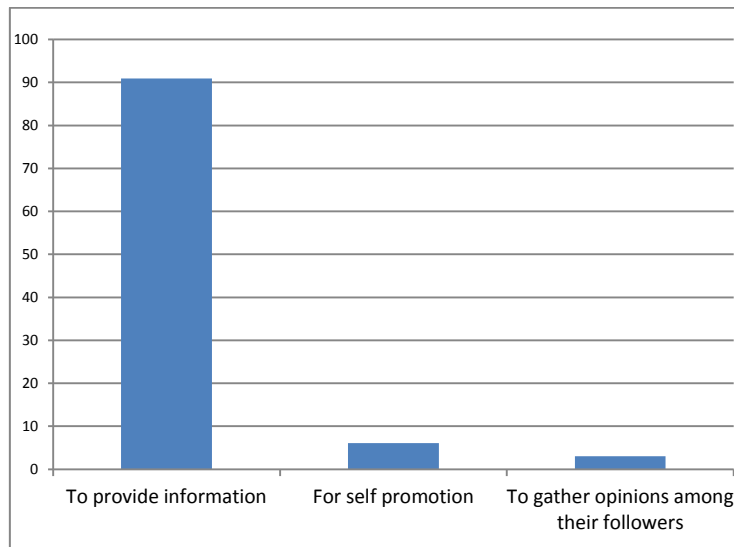
Cadena SER used Twitter to provide information in 72.4% of its updates. Much less commonly, Cadena SER used Twitter for self-promotion (20.7%), to ask followers to submit interview questions (4.3%), to gather opinions (1.7%) and to ask followers to part in a contest (0.9%). We did not register any other use.



Histogram 3: How Cadena SER used Twitter

Main purpose for Cadena COPE: Providing information

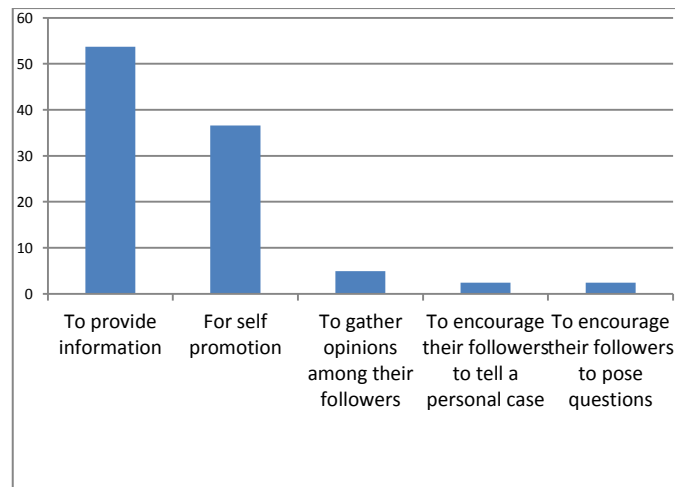
Cadena COPE used Twitter mostly to provide information (90.9%), and for self-promotion (6.1%). Just in 3% of its messages, it gathered opinions from followers.



Histogram 4: How Cadena COPE used Twitter

Main purposes for Onda Cero: Providing information and self-promotion

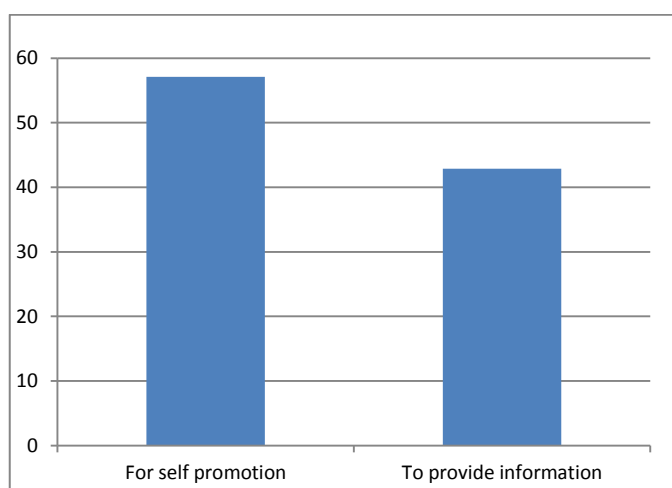
Like SER and COPE, Onda Cero generally used Twitter to provide information (53.7%) and to publicize its content (36.6%). Less often, the station used Twitter to gather opinions from followers (4.9%), to tell personal stories (2.4%) or to ask for interview question submissions (2.4%)



Histogram 5: How Onda Cero used Twitter

Main use for Punto Radio: Self-promotion

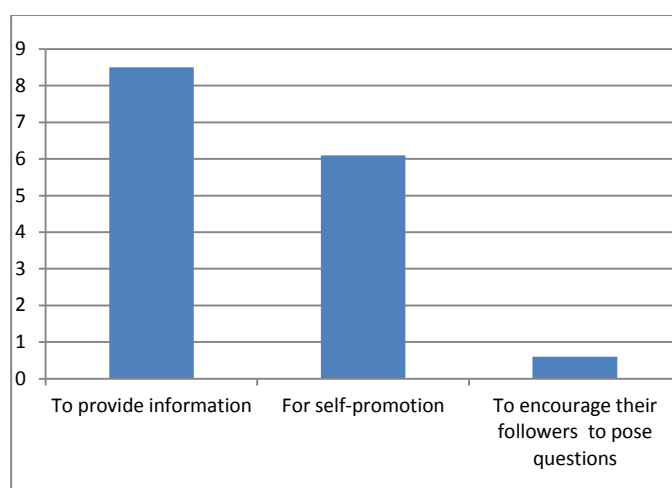
Finally, Punto Radio also used Twitter in a very basic way. As we noted before, during the 15-day study period, it just posted seven tweets, less than one tweet every other day. Furthermore, tweets were used mainly for self-promotion, in 57.1% of its updates, while the other 42.9% were used to provide information.



Histogram 6: How Punto Radio used Twitter

Providing information: Main secondary purpose

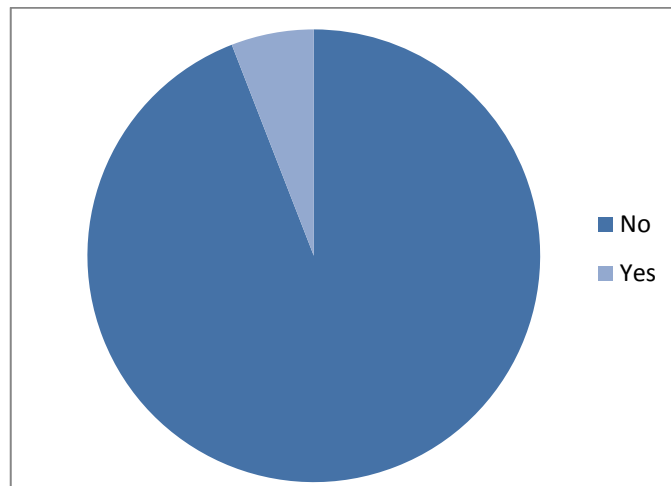
In some cases, stations took advantage of a message for a second purpose. This was observed in 15.2% of the total sample. As with the first purpose, these updates were intended to provide information (8.5% of the total sample), for self-promotion (6.1% of the total sample) and to ask for interview question submissions (0.6%).



Histogram 7: Second purpose of the messages

Retweeting: An uncommon practice

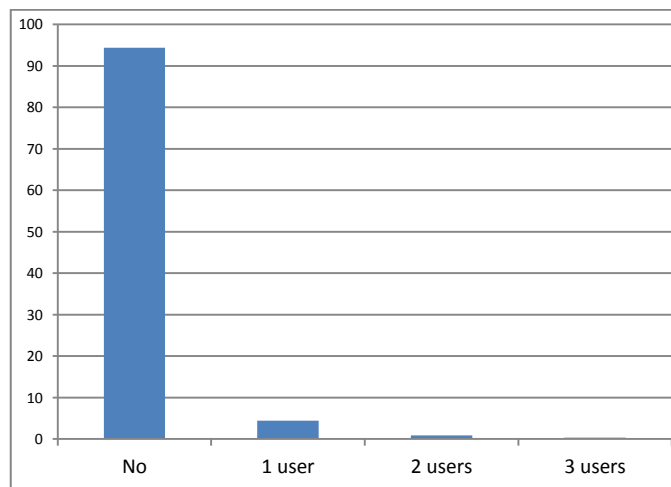
In our sample, only 5.9% of messages were retweets. All of them originally came from users that were linked to the medium, which cannot be interpreted as a sign of openness. Moreover, none of these retweets were enriched.



Histogram 8: Use of retweets

Other users mentioned in just 5.6% of tweets

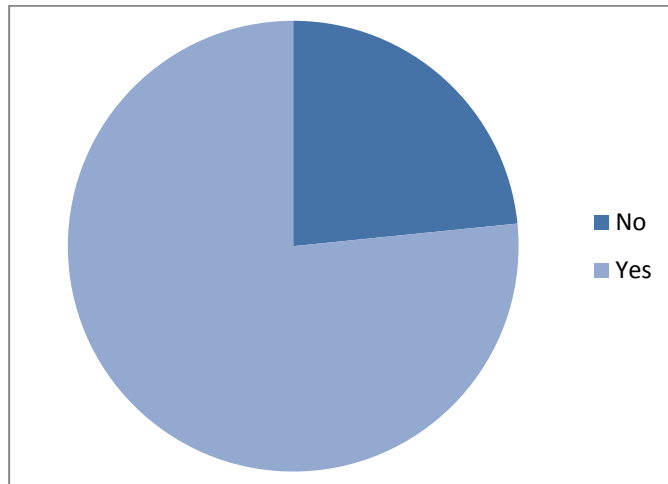
Stations rarely sent traffic to other users by mentioning them. When others were mentioned, the most common practice was to mention a person linked to the station (4.4%), which is more a sign of self-promotion rather than openness. Of the tweets, 0.9% mentioned two unrelated persons and 0.3% mentioned a person with no apparent connection to the station.



Histogram 9: Mentions of other users

Stations linked mostly to their websites

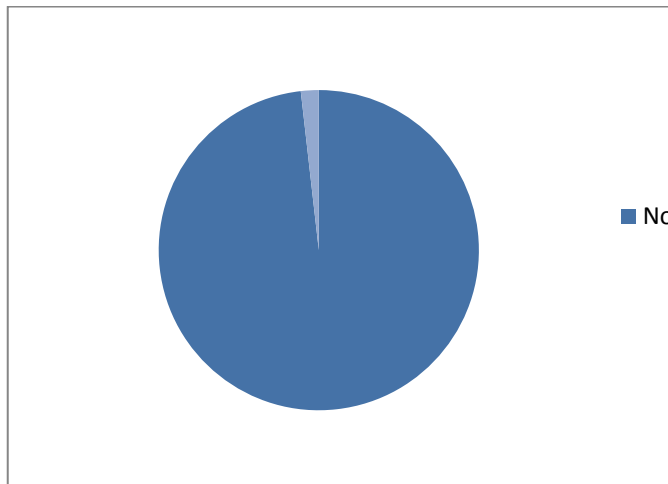
We found that stations linked to their own websites on 76.6% of the messages. It seems that the stations used their Twitter accounts to drive traffic to their online editions, with the same self-promotional approach observed in other aspects of the research.



Histogram 10: Links to station websites

Less openness when linking to other sites

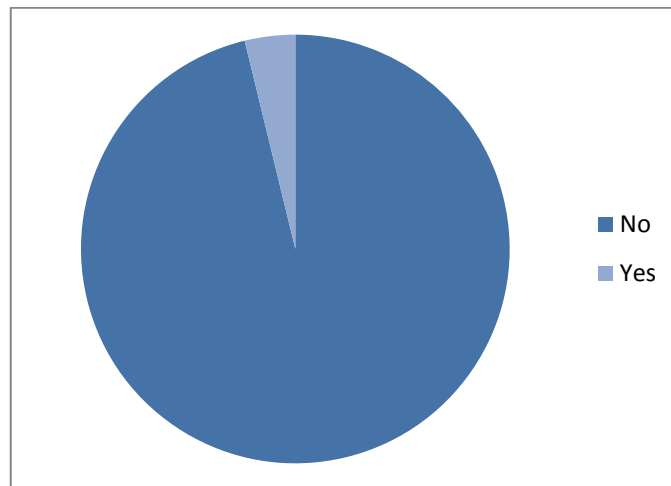
Linking to other websites was, however, quite rare. We observed this practice in just 1.8% of the messages. Apparently, stations were not open to driving traffic to external sites.



Histogram 11: Links to external websites

Few links to blogs

In our sample, only 3.8% of tweets linked to blogs.

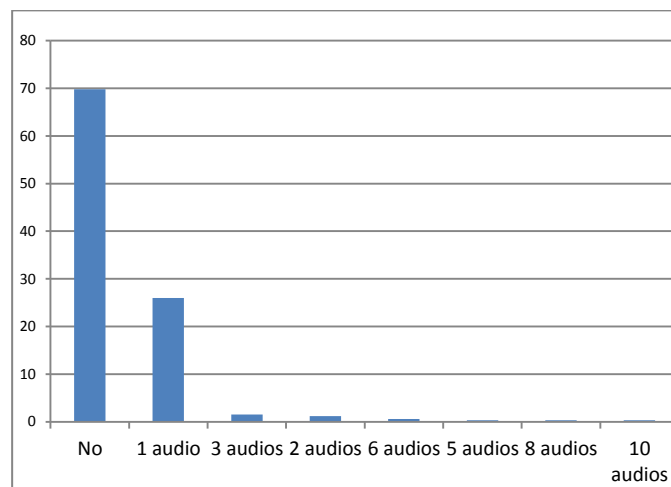


Histogram 12: Links to blogs

Only Onda Cero and Cadena SER linked to blogs. Onda Cero did so in six out of its 41 messages, 14.6% of its total. Cadena SER linked to blogs in seven of its 116 messages, 6% of its total. It is important to note that all blogs belonged to the stations themselves.

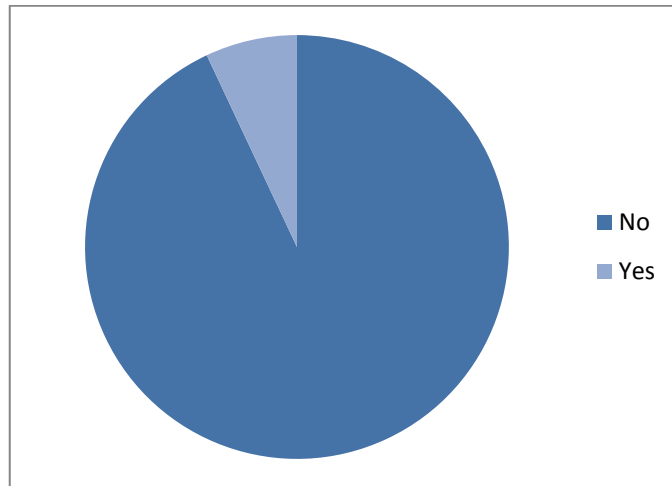
Limited inclusion of audio and video files

Despite the fact that we studied radio stations, we found links to audio files in just 30.2% of messages, with 26% linking to one audio file. Linking to more than one file was less common.



Histogram 13: Links to audio files

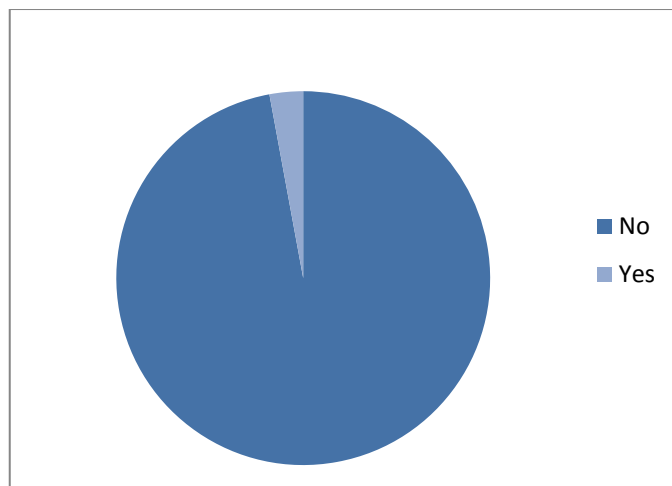
Links to video files were rare as well; we found them in just 7% of messages. The distribution was also irregular, and Onda Cero and Punto Radio did not include any video links.



Histogram 14: Links to video files

Minimal links to other networks

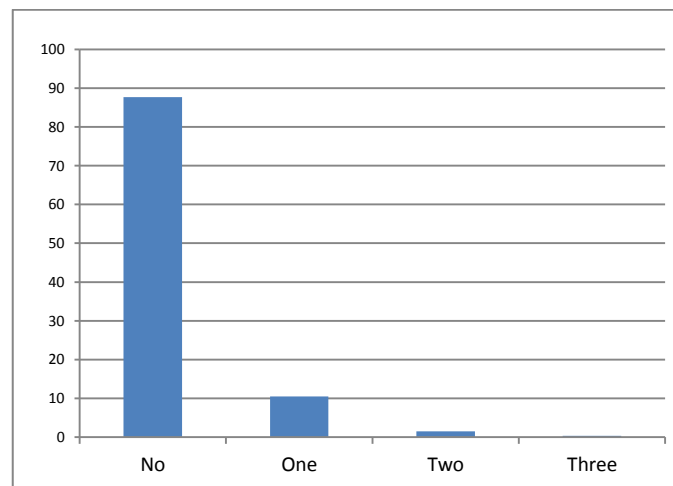
Linking to other networks was another very uncommon practice; we only observed it in 2.9% of the sample, despite the fact that synchronizing profiles reinforces brand image and is a very effective strategy for fostering and increasing social media productivity.



Histogram 15: Links to other social networks

Poor use of hashtags

Finally, despite the potential utility of hashtags for retrieving information about an event and expanding its visibility, only 12.3% of the updates included them. More specifically, 10.5% of the messages added one hashtag, 1.5% added two hashtags, and 0.3% added three hashtags.



Histogram 16: Use of hashtags

Conclusions

The five major Spanish talk radio stations *still* use Twitter mostly to provide information (67%) and for self-promotion (26.6%). The stations neither interact nor engage with their followers, and other creative uses are also very uncommon. This leads us to confirm our first hypothesis, that the potential utility of this service is underestimated, despite its importance for news organizations and the existence of collections of best practices.

In terms of form, the main Spanish talk radio stations still have not mastered Twitter codes, and little creativity is used to create messages. Indeed, links to audio files, videos, blogs, and external websites rarely appeared in messages, and multimedia files and hashtags were similarly underutilized. In addition, rare mentions of external users were motivated by self-promotion, confirming our second hypothesis.

Considering both content and form, we can conclude that, as predicted, major Spanish talk radio stations are still reluctant to embrace Twitter's full potential. Most administrators seem to have mechanically transferred their own roles in mass media to Twitter, as if the famous microblogging network was just another online newspaper or radio outlet. They do not see it as a tool for horizontal conversation, let alone as a forum for information exchange. Finally, it ends up being a space where they broadcast to a passive audience that simply reads and never responds (Marticorena, 2010). When facing unknown scenarios, stations prefer to be cautious and conservative, simply reproducing what they have always done. Perhaps this is due to a lack of knowledge, or to a lack of support from station management. Regardless, the underutilization of Twitter observed in this study is likely to change soon.

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