Citizen reactions to extreme right-wing on Twitter during the Ceuta "border crisis" (2021)

Respuestas ciudadanas a la extrema derecha en Twitter durante la "crisis fronteriza" de Ceuta (2021)

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Abstract

This article analyses the logics of how racist discourse and anti-racist discourse function on Twitter, based on statements made by the leader of the extreme right-wing Vox party on border security. With a "migration crisis" as a backdrop, which took place on the border between Spain and Morocco in May 2021, and through the systematic observation of the conversations produced on the network, we delve into the analysis of the discursive strategies of support for the racist-politician, on the one hand, and of confrontation and rejection of the same, on the other. The work, a case study carried out on a sample of 766 publications, concludes with a diagnosis of the different forms of citizen reaction in this respect, as examples of social/civil participation, while at the same time highlighting the worrying normalisation of racist discourse on social networks in the context studied.

Keywords: racism, anti-racism, Twitter, extreme right-wing.

Resumen

En el artículo se analizan las lógicas de funcionamiento del discurso racista y del discurso antirracista en Twitter, a colación de unas declaraciones del líder del partido de extrema derecha Vox ante la seguridad fronteriza. Con una "crisis migratoria" como telón de fondo, acontecida en la frontera entre España y Marruecos en mayo de 2021, y a través de la observación sistemática de las conversaciones producidas en la citada red, por un lado, se profundiza en el análisis de las estrategias discursivas de apoyo al político racista y, por otro, de confrontación y rechazo al mismo. El trabajo, un estudio de caso realizado sobre una muestra de 766 publicaciones, concluye con un diagnóstico sobre las diferentes formas de reacción de la ciudadanía al respecto,

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como muestra de participación social/civil, al tiempo que destaca la preocupante normalización del discurso racista en redes sociales en el contexto estudiado.

Palabras clave: racismo, antirracismo, Twitter, extrema derecha.

Introduction

On May 17 and 18, 2021, more than 8 000 migrants from Morocco entered Spain by swimming across the border into Tarajal Beach in the autonomous city of Ceuta. Although on previous occasions there has been reference to a "migratory crisis" in Spain, the situation on May 17 and 18, 2021, was an unprecedented, due to the form of entry and the number of people in such a short time, due to the characteristics of many of the migrants (most were unaccompanied minors), and due to the actions (inaction) of the Moroccan security forces.

Most importantly, "the crisis" had a very clear diplomatic and political confrontational component between Spain and Morocco that was nonexistent on previous occasions (Fernández-Molina, 2021; Garcés Mascareñas, 2021; Pasetti, 2021). This event served as an example of the instrumentalization of migration as a political weapon, possibly because of the externalization policies of migration control of the European Union (De Lucas, 2017; Jiménez-Álvarez, 2015; Santi, 2022); that is, a large part of the management of migration matters is left in the hands of neighboring countries (Garcés Mascareñas, 2021; Pasetti, 2021).

Throughout the subsequent weeks, a "theatricalization of chaos" was witnessed in Spain (Garcés Mascareñas, 2021, p. 2) in terms of presenting the coercive power of the states owing to the dehumanization of migrants. This was especially visible on social networks, where politicians of all ideological orientations contributed to defining the situation in very different ways (Olmos Alcaraz, 2023).

In the present investigation[1], we analyze how Vox, a party of the extreme right[2] with a recent and growing presence in Spanish institutions, used the crisis to unleash

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[1] The research is framed within the following projects: *1*) "Agenciamientos políticos, interculturalismos y (anti)racismos en Andalucía-APIARA. B-SEJ-440-UGR20", funded by the Ministry of University, Research and Innovation of the Junta de Andalucía (ERDF "Una manera de hacer Europa"). *2*). "Discursos políticos, racialización y racismo en espacios digitales: netnografía de la contestación ciudadana y nuevas formas de participación social" (Leonardo Grant for Researchers and Cultural Creators 2021, BBVA Foundation. The BBVA Foundation is not responsible for the opinions, comments and content included in the project, which are the sole and absolute responsibility of the author).

[2] Prior to its entry into Spanish institutions, there was some resistance within the party itself to openly identify itself as a far-right political force, something that was also visible in how the hegemonic media reported on it. Currently, on their website, they describe themselves as a party of "dire need", making a play on words that evokes more meaning than it conceals. However, it is increasingly common to see that party members do not deny this label, as in the episode that occurred in the Congress of Deputies on July 29, 2020, when the president of the government openly referred to Vox as "ultra-right". See https://www.abc.es/espana/abci-sanchez-agradece-reconozcan-ultraderecha-202007291048_video.html

its openly racist anti-immigrant populist discourse, but –fundamentally– how citizens reacted to it, expressing support or rejection of racist political rhetoric.[3]

That is, the objective of the work is to analyze the logic of operation of racist and anti-racist discourses[4] in social networks, based on a case study that starts from the statements of a politician (Santiago Abascal, president of Vox) on Twitter and the confrontation of these statements by citizens. The questions that guided this research are as follows: *1*). How do citizens react in the networks to an extreme statement of racism made by a high-ranking political official? *2*). Does this type of speech generate rejection, or is it supported and/or replicated on social networks? To answer these questions and thereby achieve the objective of the work, we first present a brief outline of the state of the art and the theoretical references that have guided the research. Second, the methodological design employed in the case study is described. The results for and analysis of support for and confrontation with racist messages are then presented. The work concludes with a discussion of the main findings, when reflecting—from the positionality provided by a particular and localized case study—on the normalization and radicalization of racist political discourse (Wodak, 2020) in social networks and the effects that this may be having on citizens in terms of social participation in the context of the topic considered.

Referential framework: racism, anti-racism, discursive practices and citizen participation in digital spaces

Previous studies have reflected on the problem of racism at a conceptual level (Olmos Alcaraz, 2009, 2020; Olmos Alcaraz & Martín Godoy, 2020). Racism is as a network of processes of racialization that function in an intersectional way—and in different spheres of reality—through contextually diverse and changing logics of dehumanization. To study these postulates in depth, see Fanon (1953), Grosfoguel (2012), Santos (2009) and Wieviorka (2006). Likewise, as has been shown by Olmos Alcaraz (2022a)—according to Gilroy (1990), Bonnett (2000), Grosfoguel et al. (2015), Gil-Flores (2019) and Van Dijk (2021)—, anti-racism is defined as positions that openly confront, denounce and actively combat situations of discrimination and racism, not only on the moral

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[3] The author has some publications that have addressed the border crisis analyzed in this paper, although with different approaches and objectives. With regard to the topic addressed in this article, the work by Román-San-Miguel et al. (2022) stands out, which also analyzes hate speech on Twitter during the crisis, although in a more generic and macro way. That study, in contrast to this one, which focuses on analyzing a single digital conversation generated from a racist publication, concludes that only a minority of the publications analyzed (20%) refer to racism or immigration. In a previous work of my own (Olmos Alcaraz, 2022b), Vox's discourse on Twitter during this crisis is examined in detail, and a predominance of populist discursive strategies that supported an anti-immigration state and institutional racism was found.

[4] Discourse is understood as praxis (Fairclough, 2001; Foucault, 1970, 2002; Van Dijk, 1997), as a discursive practice, so as not to fall into the reductionism of affirming that racist/anti-racist discourse (in this case, in digital spaces) is not situated on a factual plane of reality.

level but also on the political-institutional level. Gilroy (1990) invites us to consider the notion of "anti-racism" and affirms that the plurality of this term is essential because a single and uniform strategy against racism cannot be conceived. It is, therefore, a phenomenon that never presents itself in a homogeneous way and is intrinsically changeable and variable. Bonnett (2000) proposes that anti-racism cannot simply be considered the antithesis of racism. This idea, in addition, coincides with the notion of "anti-racist racisms" outlined by Grosfoguel et al. (2015, p. 645), referring to some forms of resistance and fight against racism that contain identifiable culturalist logic such as "new racism" or "cultural racism". Gil-Flores also echoes the intrinsic diversity of anti-racism but, in this case, speaks of the "anti-racism field" as a way of understanding and addressing anti-racism in a broad sense, considering anti-racism both the "movements that claim anti-racists—from his own definition of racism—(…) of migrants or racialized people as well as organizations and entities that work for interculturality, against discrimination and for integration" (Gil-Flores, 2019, p. 215). Van Dijk (2021) states that anti-racism is as diverse and complex as racism as a system of domination but with the great difference that anti-racism as resistance presupposes the system of racism, and not vice versa. Anti-racism is nurtured both by anti-racist social practices and by an anti-racist system of social cognition (Van Dijk, 2021).

In the Spanish and European context, the *Raxen Reports* periodically carried out by the Movement against Intolerance (Movimiento contra la Intolerancia) speak of an increase in extremist and hate speech in digital spaces:

> Europe faces, once again, the shocking reality of racist, anti-Semitic, xenophobic, anti-Muslim incidents and hate crimes, as well as an expanding climate of intolerance. Atrocious acts, preceded and precipitated by hate speech that spreads through the internet and social networks, accompanied by misinformation practices, hoaxes, fanaticism and other elements that, even in contexts of pandemics and confinements, predict serious problems. The spread of the toxic rhetoric of extremism results in violent behavior. Threats against democracy and totalitarian perspectives loom over horizons that are not far away. (Ibarra, 2021, p. 3)

These reports have long confirmed the existence of numerous electronic sites and/or digital spaces—Facebook fanpages and profiles, Twitter accounts, YouTube channels and blogs—that spread hatred and incite racist violence (Movimiento contra la Intolerancia, 2019). Almost all of them are linked to far-right organizations (Sánchez Duarte & Rodríguez Esperanza, 2013) without representation in institutions, which leaves out of suspicion—in this regard and for the moment—spaces related to the groups and political parties of the traditional right in the country or other political parties. However, since Vox entered institutions, Spain has been witnessing a process of the unprecedented normalization of racist discourse (Olmos Alcaraz, 2022b). Some important studies have analyzed the communication strategy of this party and confirmed its populist and racist/xenophobic features, especially in social networks. In this sense, Cervi et al. (2023) point out how the discursive logic of polarization between *ourselves* and *others,* a

characteristic of populism, can be observed in the Vox publications on Twitter with respect to *the left*, the *pro-independence parties* and *immigrants*. All are presented by the party as the "enemies of the people". Forti includes Vox within what he calls the "great global family" of the "extreme right 2.0" (Forti, 2023, p. 56), with a style of communicating that constantly resorts to post-truth, relying on a propaganda and populist usage of social media. In this regard, for example, Carmargo's work on Vox's discourse on Twitter regarding immigration shows how the party manages to dehumanize migrants through constant recourse to hoaxes and other discursive strategies:

> The repetition of not only text but also of images is another constant of Vox's digital discourse (…) through the constant repetition of the same signifiers placed in the same order (…) they resort to generalization as a way of generating imaginaries of fear and hatred toward migrants. (Camargo Fernández, 2021, p. 74)

The aforementioned studies and many other works show that we are facing an increasingly visible reality and warn about the spread of hate speech in networks. It is necessary to deepen the study of the logics of the behavior of racism—of racist discourse—in a systematic and profound way from an interpretive research approach to determine and recognize its particularities in digital spaces (Martín Godoy, 2018; Olmos Alcaraz et al., 2020).

Research on new forms of sociopolitical participation, concomitant with the expansion and generalization of the use of digital media and social networks, has been increasing since 2011 and is a field of study that continues to expand. In this sense, research is being carried out within the sociology and communication sciences, in particular interested in how citizens participate in political debates in electoral periods (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2018); on the citizen movements that have occurred around the world from the mobilizations of 2011—15 M, Occupy Wall Street, 20F, YoSoy132, etcetera—and their link with digital social networks (Castells, 2012); and, in particular, on how feminism/cyberfeminism (Sádaba & Barranquero, 2019) or—incipiently—the Black Lives Matters movement (Tillery, 2019) function, act and spread through networks.

This work assumes these processes as new forms of social contestation, but also includes those communication interactions that do not define themselves as "activists" and that do not fall under the umbrella of a predefined social movement; such interactions are another more form of social/civil participation and digital democracy (Dader, 2001; Hague & Loader, 1999), which expands—and does not limit—traditional forms of citizen participation. Dader spoke of the existence of "scattered cyber-navigators, but thematically sensitized" (Dader, 2001, p. 40), who act as "social activists" insofar as they are co-protagonists in a process of transformation of democratic societies themselves. It is understood that these forms of contestation, participation and communication represent a privileged setting to analyze the racist and anti-racist discourse present in the social imaginaries of citizens beyond what is institutionalized. There is also a lack of research that explicitly addresses these issues in digital spaces,

specifically in networks, and that studies said research problems with a dense interpretive approach to addresses the roughness—plagued by multiple edges—of social reality and provide a reflection on their own notions of race, racism, racialization and their sociocontextual variations.

Methodological description

Nonparticipant observation was carried out on the social network Twitter during the two weeks of the "migratory crisis" in Ceuta (from May 17 to 30, 2021). Daily publications made through the official account of the Vox party (@Vox_es) were monitored. Subsequently, the publication with the most resonance (the highest number of likes and retweets) in the observed period and the conversations (comments) derived from it were identified and selected for analysis. Next, all the comments of the users who responded or questioned the identified post were retrieved through the API (application programming interface). The content of the tweet is as follows:

> Morocco is invading #Ceuta with thousands of assailants due to the cowardly and criminal inaction of the government that has surrendered our southern border. We demand the deployment of the army and the expulsion of the invaders. Tomorrow I will travel to Ceuta to support our compatriots. (@Vox_es, 05/17/21)

The tweet garnered 8 357 retweets and 21 186 likes. The publication—with an evident warlike tone—called for military action to address the situation, defining it as an "invasion" by Morocco with the collusion of the Spanish Government. The racist connotations—openly explicit—are especially evident when naming and identifying migrants who arrived at the border in conditions of extreme vulnerability as "assailants" and "invaders". The tweet received 1 481 comments. After a first round of filtering, 715 were eliminated because they were not representative of the objectives of the research (they did not question the original tweet or its subject) or because they were messages without text but with images irrelevant for the study. The sample ultimately comprised 766 tweets ($N = 766$), a very specialized data corpus focused on a message posted by the party—through the words of its president—and sufficient for quantitative and qualitatively analyses of the discourse.

The content analysis, carried out through NVivo software, allowed identifying the discursive strategies that the users employed to justify and support the racist message and the discursive strategies that the public used to confront and denounce the statements of the far-right party. The analysis was mainly argumentative, although addressing form and style to try to densify the interpretations by taking into account the context. The analysis was performed with thematic analysis template (Table 1), created from an inductive procedure after a first reading of the collected material.

Table 1. Analysis template

Type of message/ argumentation	Discursive strategy	Subject categories (content)
Support message in the tweet	Racist	1. Replica
	Racist - expansion	2. Invasion
		3. Crime/dangerousness
		4. Decreased welfare state
		5. "Spaniards first"
		6. Islamophobia-imposition by Islam
		7. Differential treatment between different "types" of migrants
		8. Aporophobia
		9. "We Spaniards migrated differently"
		10. Justification of racism because there are migrants
Reject message in the tweet	Nonracist	11. Rejection/disqualification in general
		12. Rejection/disqualification for being racist
	Nonracist - anti-racist	13. Lies about migrations
		14. Causes of migrations
		15. Contributions of migrations
		16. Respect for human rights and other laws
		17. Solidarity
		18. Other management is possible

Source: own elaboration

The analysis combined a quantitative approach (frequencies of occurrence of topics) and a qualitative approach (articulation of arguments). In the coding process, the same tweet could be classified into several categories; in such cases, the dominant topic in the text of the message was prioritized. However, these cases were very limited given the reduced length of the text in tweets, limiting the space for the elaboration of arguments with numerous points of view.

Results and analysis

In the study, there were slightly more responses in support of the tweet by the extreme right politician than responses that rejected/confronted the tweet (57.05%—437—versus 42.95%—329—of the tweets). The discursive strategies developed in each of these argumentative positions were very diverse. Below is a detailed description and analysis of it.

Discursive strategies to support the racist message

Of the messages classified in this category, 48.97% (214) contained a replica/repetition of ideas already present in Santiago Abascal's tweet, and 51.03% (223) went further in their support, expanding the racist arguments of the politician through different discursive strategies.

Repetition of the racist message

The following provides an example of repetition: "@Santi_ABASCAL The army and the Ceuta themselves should go out to expel the Moroccans" (Quote 1).[5] Here, the user does nothing more than repeat that he agrees with a military response to the humanitarian emergency situation that is taking place at the border, with the ultimate aim of expelling those who are arriving (whom he names—thereby reproducing connotations of a nationalist confrontation between neighboring countries—as "Moroccans", not as migrants, as underage migrants or as potential asylum seekers).

Quote 2 is another example of a reply that does not advance a new argument, where the emphasis is placed on defining the situation as an invasion (as in Santiago Abascal's tweet), stating that the Government of Spain is going to hand over the southern territory of Spain to Morocco, as if surrendering in an armed conflict:

> @Santi_ABASCAL This is extremely serious... Very very serious... This Government is a fucking traitor to Spain... It is evident what this treacherous and infamous Government intends: to deliver the South of Spain, the Canary Islands and Ceuta to Morocco and Melilla... Are we blind and deaf? THIS SITUATION IS UNSUSTAINABLE. (Quote 2)

Almost half of the tweets in support of the racist message followed logic similar to the two cited examples. These are messages that do not contribute new ideas beyond those present in the original tweet regarding the demand for militarization of the border, the request for expulsion as the only measure envisaged in immigration policies, the definition of the situation as a warlike invasion, the declaration of migrants as invaders, and so on. These arguments result in a definition of the situation in racist terms because—in short—they contribute to dehumanizing migrants through the incessant repetition of the same ideas, thereby depriving the individuals involved of their condition as vulnerable subjects in extreme necessity and obviating the structural conditions that currently motivate international migratory movements.

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[5] The tweets were originally written in Spanish, we tried to keep their sense and wording in the English translation except for some semiotic elements (hyperlinks, videos, images, and emoticons) that were eliminated in the capture process to facilitate the analysis. However, the links to the original tweets were preserved, so that once the material was categorized, the links were reinserted when necessary to contextualize and/or make sense of the data. The full text of each tweet is included in quotes, without removing typos. Despite the fact that the information analyzed is freely accessible, the personal accounts of the users are not identified.

Densification and amplification of the racist message

The second type of tweet included in the category of support for the racist message (51.03% of them, 223) uses diverse discursive strategies that densify and expand the racist arguments of the original tweet.

Most tweets (48.87%, which is equivalent to 109 tweets) added information, defining the situation being experienced on the beach of Tarajal as an "invasion". For example, in Quote 3, there is an assumption that the crisis situation is an invasion and that the people who are entering are illegal: "@Santi_ABASCAL All my support to our compatriots in Ceuta!!! That they have to endure the invasion of Morocco, while Sánchez [President of the Government] is out travelling. Enough illegals!!! Spain respects itself" (Quote 3).

The following tweet (Quote 4)—again—assumes that Spain is being invaded and defines migrants by what—he understands—they are not: "@Santi_ABASCAL A country cannot allow itself to be invaded, whether or not they are not supposed refugees" (Quote 4). In this case, the tweet states that they are not refugees, thereby assuming the differences in vulnerability implicit in the category. Both tweets are examples of the expansion of the racist arguments given by the far-right politician in his original statement, and they further define migrants beyond considering them as invaders to also construct them as illegal and false refugees, which—once again—extends their dehumanization and demonization. This nuance is important because with this strategy (demonization), extremely negative and perverse qualities are being attributed to migrants by assuming that they violate immigration law ("illegal") and international treaties on migration ("false refugees ") with intent to harm the "host" country and its inhabitants.

With regard to the tweets that expand the racist arguments of the original message, one-quarter (26.9%, 60 tweets) added information related to the "delinquency/dangerousness" attributed to the alleged behaviors of migrants as soon as they arrive on Spanish soil (in the city of Ceuta). In Quote 5, for example, the tweet affirms that the migrants in question are all over the city and are committing crimes: "@Santi_ABASCAL They are all over the city, stealing and destroying what they can" (Quote 5). A similar argument can be seen in Quote 6, when another person adds that the migrants are convicted criminals sent by the neighboring country with the aim of carrying out acts of vandalism; this tweet demonstrates the extent to which speculation was unleashed and the prejudices about migration and migrants during the crisis: "@Santi_ABASCAL You do not know anything, they have opened the jails so that they come here to commit misdeeds" (Quote 6).

The rest of the discursive strategies detected were present in the material analyzed to a much lesser degree. They continue to assume diverse forms of the racist arguments relevant to the analysis (especially because of the crudeness of some of them), but they appeared noncentrally in the material analyzed. This is the case, for example, for tweets that referred to the "decline in the welfare state" (6.27%, 14 tweets) as a result of the entry of migrants to the city of Ceuta during the crisis:

> @Santi_ABASCAL In 24h [public television station] it is a shame to listen to them. Why don't they take them home? This is always the same. We cannot continue to support immigration or so much political office. I regret what is happening in their countries, but this country cannot take anymore. (Quote 7)

Some arguments—as seen in Quote 7—are not incompatible with a paternalistic discursive line with respect to migrants from poor countries. Related to economic aspects, 14 tweets (6.27%) were found that emphasized the idea of preferential attention to Spanish citizens by the State (the topic of "Spaniards first"):

> @Santi_ABASCAL Much better than this rogue government. In Spain we have 15% unemployed, 3 M in ERTE, inditex, bbva, la Caixa and other large companies with ERES of thousands of workers, how do you plan to feed all these vermin? Are you going to host them? (Quote 8)

Some approaches, while reinforcing the positioning of Santiago Abascal's message, alluded to the unemployment situation in Spain as a way to legitimize this anti-immigration stance. These types of strategies are not considered by some to be racist; however, they are used to justify racism itself by alluding to economic issues. However, the operating logic of racism is not linear but an intersection of different oppression and discrimination dynamics. In Quote 8, allusion to the unemployment situation as an argument to reject immigration is combined with a disqualification of migrants in terms of animalization and evil when the tweeter refers to migrants as "vermin".

Finally, very localized discursive lines expanded the racist message of the original tweet, resorting to arguments of a very diverse nature, such as Islamophobic arguments: "@Santi_ABASCAL This is what is happening. Little by little, they will fulfill their mission of Islamizing the rest of the world. And we will deserve it because we are fools" (Quote 9); arguments that demanded a "differential treatment between different types of migrants": "@Santi_ABASCAL In my house, wake up. In addition, the question is not where you are from, that you do not know, the question is if you come illegally to mess it up or if you come legally as another citizen" (Quote 10); arguments of an "aporophobic" nature: "@Santi_ABASCAL Well, have them look for a livelihood in their country and fight for better conditions in their country, because Spain is not an NGO" (Quote 11); tweets that justified Santiago Abascal's position by stating that "we Spaniards migrated differently":

> @Santi_ABASCAL Many Spaniards know what it is to leave their country to look for the beans but they did it with documents and they did not go to collect subsidies these are human shields from Morocco and the effect of the call by the government where is MARLASKA [Minister of the Interior]? (Quote 12)

Or tweets that justify racism because there are migrants in the country:

> @Santi_ABASCAL This may seem super funny to you, but this, believe it or not, benefits VOX a lot, since, given the ineffectiveness of the government, this type of immigration is creating a lot of rejection in the Spanish people. You will see who laughs in two years... (Quote 13)

Such tweets accounted for less than 5% of the total tweets categorized as "support for the racist message" but expanded of arguments of the original message by Santiago Abascal.

Discursive strategies to reject the racist message

In this case, two different discursive strategies were found: the first, supported by arguments rejecting the tweet but that were not explicitly anti-racist (65.65% of the messages were of this type, 216 tweets), and the second, with lines of argument that were explicitly identified as anti-racist (34.35%, 113 tweets).

Rejection of the racist message in a generic way

Within this category, there are two types of content. Most of the tweets (81.48%, 176 tweets) rejected the racist message by "rejecting/disqualifying in general" Santiago Abascal himself or his party. Quotes 14 and 15 provide examples: "@Santi_ABASCAL Take this chance and do the mili, Santi" (Quote 14), "@Santi_ABASCAL In the way you speak, you can see your background. You had to be outlawed in a democratic country" (Quote 15).

These messages contain *ad hominen* arguments that insult or disqualify the sender of the message, Santiago Abascal, or his party (Vox), but without the main reason for that rejection being to accuse Abascal or the party of being racists. In a very recurrent way, was pointed that Santiago Abascal had not performed his mandatory military service when he was due (the mili), but—paradoxically—his main strategy of approaching the situation was precisely of a military nature. As seen in Quote 14, the writer rebukes the far-right politician, in a somewhat sarcastic way, by referring to him with the diminutive "Santi" and telling him to do "the mili".

Tweets "rejecting/disqualifying Santiago Abascal (or his party) for being racist" were found in a much smaller proportion (18.52%, 40 tweets), and such tweets did not develop anti-racist arguments. Quotes 16, 17 and 18 are clear examples of these rejection messages. In 16, the writer affirms that they prefer a migrant person over a racist person (referring to the politician), and in the 17th, in a scathing tweet, the individual proposed that the far-right party counterattack by invading Morocco to build a country to their liking, that is, sexist and racist: "@Santi_ABASCAL I simply prefer an immigrant than a racist. Scum" (Quote 16); "@Santi_ABASCAL Well look, there is Morocco. Walk over there and you invade them. And you stay there and you set up your country that is racist, sexist and all that you like" (Quote 17); and "@Santi_ABASCAL [Damned] xenophobes, it took them long enough to campaign" (Quote 18).

As seen, these are messages that are not explicitly anti-racist but that represent a clear and forceful rejection of the racist statements of the politician and his party—in this case—for being racist.

Rejection of the racist message from an anti-racism perspective

The second type of tweet included in the category of "rejecting the racist message" are all those that are considered to explicitly display anti-racist arguments (34.35%, 113 tweets). This type of message not only rejects the statements supported by Vox, but they confront the message of Santiago Abascal with concrete arguments, trying to dismantle and combat the lies of the politician and the racism that emerges from them. The arguments used for this are summarized as follows.

More than half of the messages of this type (53.1%, 60 tweets) contain content that indicates a broader problem than those displayed in the media during the crisis, that is, a collation of the arrival of migrants to the beaches on the border between Ceuta and Morocco, and refer to the tendency to lie and exaggerate about the migratory phenomenon in general (category "lies about immigration"):

> @Santi_ABASCAL "All propaganda must adapt its level to the least intelligent of the individuals to whom it is directed. The larger the mass to be convinced, the smaller the effort must be made. If a lie is repeated enough, it ends up becoming the truth" (Goebbels). (Quote 19)

In Quote 19, the writer quotes Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda minister, to end by outlining one of the precepts of post-truth: the fact that a lie repeated many times can become true. With this, the writer is challenging Santiago Abascal and his party, calling them liars and urging a nonpropagandistic approach to the migratory event.

There were 26 tweets (23%) of an anti-racist nature that resorted to explaining in some way "the causes of migration" as an argument with which to refute the statements of the far-right politician: "@Santi_ABASCAL Spain is in debt with all the peoples that it plundered and robbed. All thieves, pay what was stolen. Rats" (Quote 20). Quote 20 shows how the colonial past (and present coloniality) is alluded to as a fact to understand the current migratory movements and dynamics, while demanding reparation for what has been done in the past by Spain.

Eleven tweets were found (although only 9.7%) that addressed the "contributions of migration" as a strategy to delegitimize the racist message of Santiago Abascal: "@Santi_ABASCAL Well, you have not even eaten any strawberries this year picked by them" (Quote 21). In this last quote, the politician is questioned directly, ironically, alluding to the fact that the fruit that is eaten (specifically strawberries) is collected by the migrants who he is calling invaders.

Ten tweets support "respect for human rights" (8.85%) and 3 support "solidarity" (2.65%) as options to address the situation: "@Santi_ABASCAL THEY ARE CHILDREN, MINORS ARE PEOPLE, THEY ARE UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN. FOR GOD'S SAKE, PEOPLE. READ THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS THANK YOU" (Quote 22); "@Santi_ABASCAL @Vox_Ceuta For humanitarian reasons" (Quote 23).

Finally, only 2.65% (3 tweets) of the messages denounced the politicians, not the migrants, and the management of the migration phenomenon by the governments:

> @Santi_ABASCAL Why do you pick on immigrants? You aren't trying to blame them for the disastrous management of our government, are you? They should be held accountable. They should travel to Ceuta. They should deploy the necessary forces to defend sovereignty. Not the immigrants. (Quote 24)

These arguments led to the proposal that "other management is possible" in migration matters and that—as seen in Quote 24—it is not permissible to blame migrants for all the evils, while leaving the political class free of all responsibility.

Discussion and conclusions

In this paper, the logic of operation of racist and anti-racist discourses on social networks have been analyzed through a case study of a tweet by Santiago Abascal—the leader of the Spanish extreme right party Vox—during the so-called "crises migration", which occurred on the border between Spain and Morocco in Ceuta in May 2021. Two elements of an epistemic-methodological nature need to be addressed before starting the discussion of the results. The choice of the tweet that generated the analyzed conversation was motivated by its great resonance in networks and among citizens, an issue that—it is understood—is directly related to the "political incorrectness" of the message and the blatant normalization of racism (Wodak, 2020). This is not trivial because although there are methodological implications, the approach also has consequences at the epistemic level. Second, the inherent difficulty—and the challenge—of conducting research in and on digital social networks is assumed, both due to the complexity in the capture and processing of data as well as the characteristics of the language and particular communication dynamics. Thus, it is a challenge to provide descriptions that are dense, careful, deep and endowed with sufficient context to allow for cultural interpretations. Through this work, we want to contribute—despite the limitations imposed by investigations designed as case studies—to the continuation of thinking about the democratic challenges that are being presented as a result of the emergence and consolidation of social media in the public sphere and its relationship with the new extreme right-wing populism.

The questions with which this article began were the following: *1*). How do citizens react in networks to an extreme statement of racism made by a high-ranking political official? *2*). Does this type of speech generate rejection, or is it supported and/or replicated on social networks? The results of the work carried out show that most of the reactions supported the racist discourse, either repeating the ideas, without much elaboration, outlined by the far-right politician or broadening the arguments of the official in a concerning way.

There are two considerations in this regard. The first issue is the effect of the amplification of the (racist) message concomitant with communication in networks, which, with great ease, allows the same ideas to be cloned repeatedly as a result of the "echo chamber" effect. The second issue is as follows: relative to the expansion of the Overton window in terms of racist discourse (Forti, 2021) or, in the words of Wodak (2020), the "blatant normalization" of an increasingly exclusive and racist rhetoric that expands the limits of the unspeakable, which achieves that what until recently was considered unacceptable, is now taken as legitimate and reasonable. These postulates allow us to explain why there are reactions that went beyond the politician's own

statements (with an important diversity of different and new arguments), some with very radical content, which delve into racist rhetoric that is worrisome in a society that calls itself democratic.

A significant percentage of the tweets in the analyzed sample did reject the racist message, although most of these tweets cannot be considered explicitly anti-racist content, in the terms used in this study (Van Dijk, 2021), because they were not articulated through discursive strategies that tried to dismantle the racism present in the politician's words. That is, such tweets referred to lines of argument that were "nonracist" but not "anti-racist". Therefore, again, there are several interpretations. On the one hand, there was not a very high encouraging percentage of messages that rejected a discourse that is tremendously populist and openly racist, taking into account that the communicational dynamics on Twitter are characterized by "looking for anger (…) the polarization, the forcefulness in the opinions, the visceral disqualification of [what] does not fit in with what is demanded by the other side" (Vallespín, 2021, p. 11). That is, it is expected that content of this type would arouse a very high degree of rejection and disagreement reactions; however, that was not observed. Less than half of the replies rejected the statement in the original tweet, and only a third of the tweets had content that could be considered anti-racist. Additionally, we are not dealing with a socially shared (anti-racist) discourse in the context studied; it is not a dominant discourse, unlike the racist discourse (Van Dijk, 2021). This has to be addressed when studying both discourses because doing so helps to put the results into context, in a comparative way.

The results produced in this research and in other studies cannot be explained solely by the communicational characteristics presented by the media or digital social networks. Despite what has been said above, this would be a reductionist perspective. More than half of the replies to the statement by Santiago Abascal were of a racist nature, which was not the result of the fact that said conversation occurred—or rather, analyzed for this work—on Twitter. In Spain, these positions already existed (with or without Twitter and with or without social networks). However, it is true that through such network, individuals express themselves more freely, openly and anonymously.

Another issue is the "denial of racism" as a defining characteristic of the logic of operation in the context of study (Olmos Alcaraz, 2020), a problem that from the theoretical-political position of this work is solved by consciously appealing to a wide-ranging definition of racism, as processes of racialization that are mobile and contextually diverse (Fanon, 1953; Grosfoguel, 2012; Santos, 2009; Wieviorka, 2006). However, what is unique (and in a certain way explainable thanks to digital social networks) is the public visibility of the discourse itself (of all discourses, but in particular—also now and here—those of the elites). This applies equally to anti-racist discourse. In the case studied, the anti-racist discourse strategies were not conveyed by public figures; they could not be categorized as elite discourses (Van Dijk, 1997). However, they are visible—more than in the past—despite not being part of the dominant discourse, thanks to the networks in which they are now observed.

As Van Dijk recalls, like racism, anti-racism is not innate or natural, but learned, and like racist prejudices, anti-racist attitudes and ideologies are largely acquired through discourse (Van Dijk, 2021). There are possibilities yet to be explored with regard to networks and digital spaces—at least—as communicational support that are somewhat more discursively diverse than other spaces, serving as catalysts for citizen participation in ways that are still under construction.

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