COUNTERPUBLICS ON TWITTER: ANALYSIS OF THE #PASEDELISTA1AL43 PROTEST ABOUT THE AYOTZINAPA CASE

CONTRAPÚBLICOS EN TWITTER: ANÁLISIS DE LA PROTESTA #PASEDELISTA1AL43 SOBRE EL CASO AYOTZINAPA

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a protest carried out in Twitter about the Ayotzinapa case (the disappearance of 43 students in Mexico in 2014) that has existed for years under the hashtag #PaseDeLista1al43. The main purpose is to assess if this protest can be understood as a counterpublic. Through thematic analyses of tweets and 15 semi-structured interviews the study found out that protesters deconstruct power relations within the case and challenge the government's version about what happened to the students; seek to disrupt mainstream narratives with their messages; and developed a collective identity that helped maintain the protest alive for years. These findings point that it is possible for a long-lasting public that challenges dominant political narratives to be hosted in Twitter. A public which came together through a hashtag can go beyond short connective actions on Twitter and develop a community to discuss and solidify opinions, and then get attention from other publics.

Keywords: activism, Ayotzinapa, counterpublics, social protest, Twitter

Resumen

Esta investigación se enfoca en una protesta de Twitter sobre el caso Ayotzinapa (la desaparición de 43 estudiantes en México en el 2014), que por años ha usado el hashtag *#PasedeLista1al43. El propósito principal es evaluar si esta protesta puede ser entendida como un contrapúblico. Mediante análisis temáticos de tuits y 15 entrevistas semiestructuradas, el estudio encontró que los participantes deconstruyen relaciones de poder acerca del caso y desafían la versión oficial sobre los estudiantes; buscan irrumpir las narrativas* mainstream *con su mensaje; y desarrollan una identidad colectiva que ha ayudado a mantener la protesta viva durante años. Estos resultados apuntan a que Twitter permite albergar un público de larga duración que desafía discursos*

hegemónicos. Un público red surgido de un hashtag *puede ir más allá de acciones conectivas y desarrollar una comunidad para discutir y solidificar opiniones, y tratar de atraer atención de otros públicos.*

Introduction

This research focuses on a daily Twitter protest conducted by Mexican citizens about the Ayotzinapa case, the disappearance of 43 students on September 26th, 2014. On that day, a group of pupils was traveling to Mexico City to attend a gathering to commemorate the Tlatelolco massacre, in which the government killed students in 1968. The students traveling to Mexico City were attacked with gunfire by local police in Iguala, a town of the southern Mexican state of Guerrero. Six people died during these attacks, 40 were injured. Meanwhile, the 43 students that were detained by the police have disappeared. The case generated wide outrage among citizens in Mexico. Along with massive street protests, Mexican citizens have used social media to share their grievances about the disappearance, which has resulted in one of the most prominent and long-lasting cases of social protest in Mexico in recent years (Harlow, Salaverría, Kirgo & García-

Pérdomo, 2017). This work analyzes the daily protest known as 'Pase de Lista 1 al 43', which consists on a roll call in which every day at 10:00 pm, 43 tweets are posted with the name and illustration of the students, one for each of the missing young men. The protest is led by a famous TV producer, Epigmenio Ibarra, and has garnered a small group of regular participants since its inception on January 2015. The hashtag #PaseDeLista1al43 is used to invite Twitter users to join by retweeting the posts of the protest and to express discontent not only about this case but about other social justice causes in the country.

Mexico is a democracy that celebrates free elections to elect its political leaders. Nonetheless, social and political institutions maintain authoritarian practices that linger as a consequence of more than 70 years of non-democratic regime during the past century. Given this context, opportunities to voice criticism on digital environments have been deemed as an advantage for people who consider traditional media to be

constrained by political power, and that spaces to share their opinions are scarce. This study takes the concept of *counterpublics* to analyze the #PaseDeLista1al43 protest to elucidate how Twitter can constitute a space for the consolidation of alternative publics that seek to push messages that challenge hegemonic voices in the public sphere.

What are counterpublics?

Counterpublics, a term introduced by Fraser (1990), are defined as "critical-reflexive spaces of communicative interaction (a first meaning of 'publics' here) where alternative identities and counter-discourses are developed and subsequently can come to 'publicly' (second meaning) contest dominant discourses that frame hegemonic practices and meanings" (Dahlberg, 2011, p. 861). On these publics, members of subordinated social groups are able to articulate their needs and interests, in such a way that they can reduce their disadvantages in official public spheres, and expand the discursive space (Fraser, 1990). Hence, this perspective conceives that the public sphere is constituted by multiple (sub)spheres with unequal weight (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015). A dominant sphere coexists with alternative ones which —particularly at moments of crisis in the former— can challenge the mainstream narrative (Downey & Fenton, 2003). Thus, counterpublics should not be understood in isolation, but rather they should be analyzed in terms of how they interact with the dominant public sphere, to observe whether or not the latter can become more open to radical views as counterpublics spheres grow (Downey & Fenton, 2003). Moreover, counterpublics have an outward-looking character that seeks to persuade dominant publics, to achieve solidarity of other noncommenting mass audiences and, to change discursive structures within the public at large (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015). Besides challenges to the consensus, in order to achieve their goals, discourses by these publics are characterized by messages that aim to strengthen their group identity, and messages that point out power relations working against them (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015).

Greater independent media resources and distribution channels enhance counterpublicity purposes (Squires, 2002), thus, new media and social media have been praised for being fruitful grounds for counterpublics. On social media, commonly excluded voices are empowered to "form counter-publics and counter-discourses; to link up with other excluded voices in developing representative, strategically effective counter-discourses; and subsequently to contest the discursive boundaries of the mainstream public sphere" (Dahlberg, 2011, p. 861). In particular, prior

studies (e.g., Graham & Smith, 2016; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015) have delved into the potential of Twitter to organize, generate and promote counterpublic narratives. Using specific hashtags, members of these publics can come together for brief moments or may remain in contact for longer periods. Notably, social media protest with the hashtag #Ferguson for the shooting of Michael Brown, an African American teenager by a policeman in Ferguson, Missouri has been considered a catalyst for counterpublic discourse and strategies that generated and shaped public debate about race relations, policing and justice in the United States (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2016). Similarly, thanks to the use of the hashtag #YesAllWomen, feminist counterpublics produced feminist frames about violence against women (Jackson & Banaszczyk, 2016).

Ayotzinapa and the hashtag #PaseDelista1al43

This paper focuses on a long-lasting networked public that emerged with the use of the hashtag #PaseDelista1al43. In the aftermath of the disappearance of the 43 students, along large protests in the street of several Mexican cities, the issue led to prominent usage of social media to express outrage and concern. Prior research found that, for the Ayotzinapa case, Mexican citizens conveyed an emotional narrative of resistance to message its demands about the missing students through social media platforms like Twitter and YouTube (Meneses & Castillo-González, 2017). Social media users created several hashtags such as #Ayotzinapa, #Yamecansé, #Ayotzinapasomostodos, and #FueelEstado to discuss the issue. In fact, #Yamecansé (referring to a complaint of tiredness by the Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam during a press conference) is the most lasting hashtag ever used in Mexico, with 35 days in the Twitter trending topic list (Torres Nabel, 2015). In a study of the hashtags used simultaneously with #Ayotzinapa in the immediate three months after the event, Abascal Mena (2015) points out that these labels evolved according to the social and political context, providing new information about the issue, and keeping the #Ayotzinapa movement alive. Importantly, Abascal Mena also underscores how the creation of these hashtags was conducive to the development of communities. The hashtag #PaseDelista1al43 is one of such labels which evolved over time and has led to the emergence of a loyal community of Twitter users around it. Its study is of importance because those who use this hashtag have developed a set of practices that have taken place on the social media platform in a systematic manner for several years.

The #Pasedelista1al43 protest, organized by TV producer and activist Epigmenio Ibarra, constitutes a roll call for the missing students of Ayotzinapa, in which the name and face of each student is tweeted by Ibarra and retweeted by protest participants every night at 10 pm. Moreover, besides the Ayotzinapa disappearance, other violence and corruption issues in the country are discussed using the hashtag. The roll call has evolved over the years, but the hashtag remains in use. Thus, taking the counterpublic concept as framework, the research question that guides the study is what elements of counterpublics are reflected in the #PaseDeLista1al43 protest?

Method

To respond to the research question above, tweets using the hashtag #PaseDeLista1al43 were acquired from the company Follow The Hashtag; additionally, interviews with participants of the protest were conducted. A total of 166,927 tweets which contained "#PaseDeLista1al43" or "PaseDeLista1al43" were collected. To narrow down this amount, five different moments from January 2015 (origin of the hashtag) to September 2017 were selected for analysis. Each moment includes a seven-day range of tweets beginning at a specific starting point. The moments selected were either days in which there was an important development for the Ayotzinapa case, or particular markers in the history of the case or the hashtag. In total, 3,616 tweets were analyzed.

Besides the tweets collected, the analyses for this study were based on interviews with participants of the protest. Interviews have the goal of entering another person's perspective in order to understand the interviewees in their own terms, assuming that researchers cannot observe everything and that what others have to say is valuable to us (Patton, 1990). Unlike prior research that looked at the digital footprint of Twitter hashtags about Ayotzinapa (i.e., the tweets available publicly on the platform) the regular use of this hashtag by the same individuals grants the possibility to approach these Twitter users and talk directly to them to get a comprehensive understanding of their motivations. A total of 15 in-depth interviews with protest participants were conducted between 2016 and 2018, 12 of these conversations occurred via Skype and three took place via the Direct Message feature of Twitter, per the request of those participants. The interviews' length was 39 minutes in average; the shortest lasted 23 minutes and the longest lasted over one hour. Participants (six who identified as female, nine who identified as male) were promised anonymity and thus are referred as "Interviewee #" in this text.

Thematic analysis is a process for encoding qualitative information where the goal is to identify themes from the data (Boyatzis, 1998). A deductive thematic analysis approach was selected for the study: taking extant counterpublics theory as basis, the researcher identified elements of counterpublic discourse in the Twitter protest, from tweets and interviewees' responses. Elements that were considered as markers of counterpublics are as follows: 1) messages in which the protesters set their message apart from the mainstream and dominant message of the superordinate public sphere, explicitly deconstructing the latter as mainstream and dominant (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015); 2) messages that challenge the consensus of the superordinate public sphere (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015); 3) messages that seek to strengthen the collective identity of the group (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015); and 4) messages that evidence efforts to infiltrate mainstream public discourse (Graham & Smith, 2016) in two ways: 1) as a training ground to reflect and articulate reactions about the students' case and issues similar to the case; and 2) as a space to conduct disruptive agitational activities (Fraser, 1990). Themes were examined using procedures from the constant comparative method, a technique to reduce data through coding and recoding until reaching saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The use of the constant comparative method, Fram (2013) argues, allows the researcher to maintain the participant's perspective as an insider by staying close to the experience of the interviewee; meanwhile, the theoretical framework (counterpublics for this case) maintains the outside perspective to guide the analysis. Furthermore, to conduct the coding process, I followed Braun and Clark's (2006) guidelines to perform thematic analysis. First, I familiarized myself with the content of the tweets while cleaning the data set and with the interviews, while transcribing them, and by reading the transcriptions several times. Then I developed initial codes, "tagging and naming selections of text" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 19), and coding for as many patterns as possible. Afterwards, I sought broader themes, considering how the codes could be combined, and these broader themes were then refined and collapsed, identifying patterns that describe social processes as defined by counterpublics theory. In the report of this analysis, I present the stories told through these themes, including examples that capture and convey the essence of the themes. Figure 1 illustrates the main codes and organizing themes that inform the following results (Appendix).

Results

Deconstructing power relations

This element of counterpublics refers to instances in which participants of the #PaseDeLista1al43 protest explicitly addressed power relations within media, politics, and society; attempted to set themselves apart from the mainstream and dominant messages; and denounced how such power relations work against them. Contributors to the #PaseDeLista1al43 protest denounced these power dynamics by underscoring the corrupt relationship they perceived exists between media and government, as well as the attempt by the government to cover-up the involvement of the military in the disappearance of the students. Additionally, protesters described efforts by the government to combat their online protest with regulation, cyber-attacks, and through mainstream media, since protesters perceive a corrupt relationship between media and government. According to this participants' perspective, a sector of Mexican media is submissive to political elites and thus, the information the media disseminate is meant to manipulate public perception. As one informant noted: "The country's open or sold-out media are engaged in spreading lies" (Interviewee 5, 2016). Specifically, the protesters criticized the media as being a propaganda apparatus for

the Federal government. The following tweet, in which Mexican President Peña Nieto's Twitter account is tagged, shows efforts to expose such dynamics: "In front of the corrosive work of the media and attempts of @EPN to delete our memory we start Pasedelista1al43 now!" (Luis RG, 2015).

According to the protesters, the federal government utilizes this influence to hide information about the students' case. For instance, #PaseDeLista1al43 messages often identify issues that the government refuses to pursue, such as the possible involvement of the Army in the night of the students' disappearance:

> *[The government] has not wanted anyone approaching the military headquarters. That is a crucial issue because the barracks have crematoria and then it is something that was so precise, but the GIEI said that all the crematoria in the region had to be checked. From Iguala to Acapulco, a wide radio in all of Iguala, and obviously crematories of the barracks were included, which is a very important issue in which the government has not wanted to ventilate how it obtained some information (Interviewee 10, 2017).*

Beyond exposing power relations in Mexico and how they impact the students' case, the analysis of tweets and answers to the interviews also revealed that protesters

perceived these power relations work specifically against them. The main concern respondents manifested was that the political elite seeks to interfere with the freedom of expression that protesters enjoy via the Internet and social media. Some of these efforts at censorship and silencing opposition come in the form of attempts to change legislation to punish certain type of speech online, as explained by this interviewee:

> *They have tried to regulate social networks without success, but there have been several attempts to regulate, in quotes, because what they are trying to do is contain social protest in social networks. You see that they even wanted to sanction if you accuse an official, that is, things that are already absurd (Interviewee 4, 2016).*

Additionally, protesters bemoaned specific online attacks against #PaseDeLista1al43 protest in the form of Twitter bots that seek to diminish the power of their hashtag. Protesters particularly perceive that @epigmenioibarra's Twitter account is the target of what they call "cyber censorship": "Here we call them peñabots, is the analogy with president Peña, and it is indubitable that peñabots have attacked us and threatened us from some time, all of us" (Interviewee 11, 2018). In response to what they perceive as organized cyber-attacks, participants were motivated to counter these offenses by strengthening their support to the hashtag:

"Charge from Peñabots won't impede that we demand TruthandJustice PaseDeLista1al43 10pm For the 43+30 thousands missing" (leonabel83, 2016). Other interviewees perceive attempts to silence them as individuals:

> *When I start the roll call, the Internet shuts down. Before, I could have believed that the Internet in Mexico fails you one day, but now when you notice that exactly at 3 in the afternoon it starts to cut off, those strange things, then how can I take that? As a technical error? In this country? No! (Interviewee 5, 2016).*

Another participant describes a fear of being the target of espionage on the part of the authorities: "You always have the fear, I assure you. You always have the fear. I have felt it and I have seen in my handling of social media that they are spying on you all the time" (Interviewee 7, 2016). The two passages above, as well as the persistent idea that bots attack #PaseDeLista1al43 protests, indicate how protesters position themselves in opposition to holders of power and understand that there are forces dedicated to limit their efforts to protest injustices and abuses in the political and social system.

Challenging the mainstream consensus

On January 2015, the Mexican Attorney General, Jesús Murillo Karam, argued that

according to his office investigations, the students had been killed by the drug gang Guerreros Unidos and burned in a dump yard. When this version was questioned by the students' parents and by public opinion, he became upset and said that this conclusion was the "historical truth" about the Ayotzinapa students (*El Universal*, 2015). Protest participants perceive this statement as an attempt by the government to impose a version of the Ayotzinapa case that, for them, is not sufficiently backed by evidence, and thus is a lie. The following tweet makes reference to this distrust: "Disseminate. Today 10 pm #PaseDeLista1al43 as the creators of the Historical Lie drown, as #TZembrón" (elobrerocritico, 2016).

Just as the tweet above, in the following passage an interviewee refers to the attempts to frame the official version as the 'historical truth', which was re-framed by protesters as the 'historical lie': "The government has been so awkward that it quickly invented a story, a few weeks before GIEI [Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertas y Expertos Independientes] arrived to Mexico, which was the 'historical truth' that quickly became the historical lie" (Interviewee 4, 2016). The protesters push back on this official version, as explained below:

> *They want to uphold their 'historical truth'. And the 'historical truth' it is manifest that it is a truth without support because the experts that were*

> *here and intervened in the investigation completely destroyed that historical truth that PGR [Procuraduría General de la República {Attorney General Office}] talked about. There is no possibility that the events developed as the government wants to present them to us (Interviewee 14, 2018).*

Thus, participants of the protest demand a more thorough clarification about what happened to the 43 students, as explained by a participant: "I personally, sadly of course, I think we will not find them alive, but it is the political demand, yes? As long as there is no body, there is no dead" (Interviewee 1, 2016). Moreover, in response to the attempts of shelving the case by the government, the #PaseDeLista1al43 protesters sought to challenge the official account of the case and bring about their own versions of the situation. Among the versions that have emerged regarding what happened with the students, two stand out. First, protesters claim that the disappearance was an attempt to send a message to members of *normalistas* schools (institutions dedicated to the formation of teachers) because of their activism and left-leaning tendencies.

> *If it hadn't been for this pressure on social media it is likely that the government of Mexico might have said, let's see, here this happened, they gave their 'historical truth', this happened*

and it was a group of narco dealers that caught the students by mistake, took them to a dump yard, burned them and that's it. We know it isn't so because there are several testimonies that indicate it isn't so. That here there was a political issue, especially focused toward the rural normalista schools that are the center of social protests in the country (Interviewee 11, 2018).

Additionally, another version of the events is a theory usually referred to as "the fifth bus" version, speaking of the buses that the Ayotzinapa students stole to travel to Mexico City prior to their disappearance. This version is mentioned in this tweet: "They were not incinerated in Cocula. Normalistas were in the 5th bus PeñaNieto and OsorioChong Lie! PaseDeLista1al43 10pmRT" (epigmenioibarra, 2016). This alternative account claims that the fifth bus, which wasn't originally addressed when the authorities briefed on the investigation, was —unbeknownst by the students— filled with drugs. Thus, the students would have ended up being target of violence because they took that bus. The testimonies above show that taking part of #PaseDeLista1al43 can serve the purpose of challenging mainstream ideas, and it can provide participants a space to develop and solidify their own accounts about what occurred. The potential for virality that Twitter affords and the lack of filters to post

any sort of information in the platform expedites the chances of these versions spreading and gaining traction.

Articulating a collective identity

Messages that aim to strengthen or point to a sense of collective identity among participants in #PaseDeLista1al43 were evident in their interview responses and in the tweets analyzed. On Twitter, the protesters made statements of personal identification in which they referred to each other as "we" and to others as "them," as exemplified in the following tweet: "25 Jorge Antonio Because if we forget they win #ImTired25 #AyotziLives #PaseDeLista1al43" (#GastosPendejos, 2015). This differentiation was established in respect to the group that the protesters considered as their main rival, the elites holding political power in Mexico: "The government might have power, but we have the truth. United for #Ayotzinapa @epigmenioibarra #PaseDeLista1al43 22hrs" (CarminaDiazB, 2015).

In their interviews, participants referred to themselves as a virtual family, as a team, and as a club of friends. According to the perspective of these protesters, they share similar concerns and demands. One participant explains these similarities:

I think solidarity joins us. We are united by the desire to find answers, to achieve change. We are united by pain,

we are united by the fact of having found each other, finding ourselves and knowing that no, no, it [the disappearance] is not something that happened and that is going to stay there, and it will keep happening. That's what I think unites us (Interviewee 2, 2016).

The testimony above indicates that, despite mainly communicating through Twitter, the people who take part in #PaseDeLista1al43 do not perceive themselves as being disconnected from each other. Instead, they believe themselves to be a community that is united by similar ideas and grievances about what is going on in Mexico. Participants do not have an exact estimate of how many people belong to their group, but several of them calculated that the number varies from 100 to 200 individuals. Interviewees claim that they not only communicate through tweets on Twitter, but also via Twitter's direct message feature, and sometimes even by phone with those that they consider as friends. As such, they talk about issues regarding the protest, such as hashtags to use or sharing information about a recent event, but also about their personal life as established by two participant in the next quote: "We have our group of friends that we know each other, we know each other's families, we know our lives, and that has been because of the roll call. We have a community" (Interviewee 12, 2018).

Moreover, another marker of the protesters' collective identity is the nickname they have adopted, calling themselves *compa,* a term historically used by left-leaning activist groups. Several of the protesters changed their Twitter names to *compa* and sometimes referred to each other with that term in their tweets or when they talk about each other in conversation. In fact, this nickname also originates as an attempt to respond to what was perceived as a form of government oppression during a street protest, according to one of the participants. She describes how the *compas* term was adopted after local police arrested about 20 young people during a protest in Mexico City:

> *[The police] said that among those kids, the 22-24 who were going to be arrested, they were all calling each other compas, as if everyone knew each other, and then, the next day [we said] "Oh yeah? they really want us to be compas?", then yes, many there took their title as Compa… We are all compas (Interviewee 5, 2016).*

The interviewee points out that the use of *compas* was conceived as a form of solidarity for those who had the misfortune of being arrested for participating in a march for the Ayotzinapa cause. She also stressed how this solidarity was communicated through social media to make sure that their cases were not forgotten until they were released.

Infiltrating mainstream public discourse

Taking into account the protesters' perception of the purpose of #PaseDeLista1al43 protest, the public emerging from this conversation reflects intentions that are consistent with counterpublics. Mainly, the tweets and protesters' responses reveal the desire to infiltrate mainstream public discourse. To achieve this goal, members of the protest developed strategies to get attention for their conversation. Yet, before developing strategies to disrupt the mainstream public, the #PaseDeLista1al43 hashtag serves as a training ground for reflecting and articulating reactions to the developments about the case and grievances about other similar problems occurring in the country.

The discussion of the Ayotzinapa issue through the roll call has sparked a point of departure for utilizing the hashtag #PaseDeLista1al43 each night to reflect on several other problems that affect the country in a "virtual assembly" (Interviewee 9, 2016). Although the main intention of the roll call is to demand justice for the Ayotzinapa students, throughout its years of existence the demonstration has evolved so that it has now become a space for discussion of several other topics in which political power in Mexico is considered to be negligent, corrupt, or abusive:

> *A little bit of the intention is to make that time from 10 to 11 pm into a space*

> *of indignation about things that happen in Mexico and that are not resolved, then there is the space where you talk about Ayotzinapa but also to talk of Tlatlaya… or if suddenly there is a journalist murdered and, well we go back to mention all the journalists who have been killed or disappeared in recent years, everything that somehow set an undesirable scenario for Mexico (Interviewee 4, 2016).*

The case of the missing students is still the main focus of the roll call and it is deemed as one of the most outrageous events in the recent history of the country. But the use of Twitter to protest about the missing students has allowed this group of people to set a specific time in which they can reflect and discuss about emerging social and political problems in Mexico. In that way, as another interviewee explained, the time from 10:00 to 11:00 pm can serve as a virtual assembly in which other injustices are denounced. In the body of tweets analyzed, the inclusion of hashtags related to other events is indicative of the interest in addressing other topics besides Ayotzinapa. For example, #FreeMirelesNow (about the imprisonment of the community leader José Manuel Mireles), and #Justice5Narvarte (about the murder of journalist Rubén Espinosa).

Being part of this protest allows protesters to process information about new

incidents that take place in Mexico and to articulate a reaction to them:

> Someone warns you *"have you seen the statements of this official on this issue? It is unacceptable". Well, or someone says, "why don't we launch a hashtag, at that time, with this issue because we cannot allow the government to continue to ignore this". And then we begin to bounce the idea there, well, let's do this, let's do the other, we launch a message with the same hashtag, all within so many minutes. It is not very different from what could happen in real life, on the street but, but what is special is that is very dynamic and very fast to solve, and has an incidence that can reach tens of thousands of people in a few minutes (Interviewee 4, 2016).*

Having this allotted time and space, and a community of members to talk about new events, helps members of this public to consolidate their opinion on the issues and strategize what do about them. Consistent with features of counterpublics, the analysis pointed out that #PaseDeLista1al43 has an outward looking character, with the purpose of intervening the mainstream public sphere. The tweets often utilize unrelated trending hashtags seeking to insert the Ayotzinapa issue into a conversation with a different topic: "PRI is an expert on crimes against humanity http://t.co/RDajf52rxX

#IAmTired31 #SuperBowl #PaseDeLista1al43 #Ayotzinapa #michoacan PRI" (Misercatule, 2015). A similar strategy was tagging a famous personality, Mexican or foreigner, as a way to inform them about the case: "WE WANT JUSTICE AYOTZINAPA One More Time, we need your help @HillaryClinton #PaseDeLista1al43 #InformeGIEI" (xmax444, 2016). A protest participant explains the logic behind this approach:

> *You already have the hashtags of the moment on a global level, which is what I intend to do. If it is now the game I do not know, Germany-France, and I put Ayotzinapa with the #Eurocup2016, suddenly someone who is watching the Eurocup will suddenly see the face of the child, will say 'and what it is this?' So, at least you make them curious, I guess (Interviewee 5, 2016).*

Showing the faces of the students to disrupt a conversation on another topic, the protest seeks to awaken interest among receivers of the message and spark an interest in learning more. Participants point out how this possibility is facilitated by the spread of use of mobile devices: "The funny thing about this roll call is that you get on people's phones, you get on the computer, and you get in their home and you make them sensitive to something that hurts another" (Interviewee 7, 2016). Several interviewees manifest pride in

spreading awareness about Ayotzinapa across borders, countering informational voids by inserting themselves in the conversation to increase public understanding of the matter.

Discussion

This study contributes to our understanding of the potential for Twitter to be a place for the expression and consolidation of counterpublics, identifying elements of this type of publics on an ongoing Twitter protest in Mexico regarding the Ayotzinapa case. Although many studies have provided valuable insight into digital counterpublics, an exclusive focus on social media data can lead to missing a more nuanced story in regards of the use of these tools to advance a social cause (Mislán & Dache Gérbino, 2018). Notably, the longevity of this digital protest allowed the identification of regular protesters to be able to talk to them about their perceptions on this demonstration and therefore present a more complete narrative about Twitter counterpublics. According to the perceptions of people interviewed for this project, #PaseDelista1al43 protesters sought to unmask power relations, mainly, in respect to the complicity of traditional media and the government. Moreover, they also denounced forces within the State that seek to diminish their efforts on Twitter with organized bot-

attacks and other technical sabotage. Media coverage of social protest in Mexico has been characterized by partial information, distortion and lack of depth about the issues that originate the demonstrations (Rovira-Sancho, 2013). In regard to Ayotzinapa and the protests that derived from the disappearance, a study by the organization Artículo 19 pointed out that the topic only started appearing in media until September 30th, even though the event occurred on September 26th (Ramírez, 2014). That study also established that although the coverage about the students' disappearance was copious on the first month since the event took place, the voices of victims were overshadowed by voices of official sources in the main print media outlets in the country. This lack of presence on conventional media explains why, for members of #PaseDeLista1al43, Twitter allowed them to base their identity as marginalized, while at the same time gaining visibility as a form of capital, that provided them social existence and dignity (Mercier, 2016).

Furthermore, an interesting usage of Twitter for counterpublic purposes in the context of this digital protest is the opportunity for members of this public to articulate their sentiments on a particular issue. Twitter users involved in the #PaseDelista1al43 protest for years had already formed an opinion about some of the main aspects of the case, such as the idea that

the government version of the events was false, as evident by the term "historical lie" ["mentira histórica"], or that the authorities were responsible in the case, as telling of the frequently used phrase "It was the State" ["Fue el Estado"]. Nonetheless, whenever new aspects of the case emerged or other similar events took place, protest participants came together using #PaseDelista1al43 to reflect on the new development and solidify their opinions and feelings on those new aspects under discussion. In that sense, the #PaseDelista1al43 messages elucidate the dynamics of premeditation about the different news coming to light. That is, the #PaseDelista1al43 messages are revealing of the form that breaking news events take before they turn into stories, often characterized by the presence of intensity and affect that can then transition into substantive reflections (Papacharissi, 2016). Thus, for this counterpublic, the space afforded by the hashtag #PaseDelista1al43 served as a place for withdrawal and regrouping in order to formulate their perspectives on new issues taking place in Mexico. The outward-looking character that is typical of counterpublics to engage and influence broader publics (Leung & Lee, 2014) was also a feature identified from the discourse manifested in interviews with #PaseDelista1al43 participants and the tweets studied. The motivations the protesters shared regarding their contribution to the online demonstration pointed to the refusal to

let go of the case and the aim to disrupt the mainstream public sphere by forcing the permanency of the topic in the public discussion. Participants in the online protest praised Twitter affordances that allowed them to have outward influence and they developed different strategies to attain this goal. In the #PaseDelista1al43 tweets, Twitter users invited more people to join their demonstration so that they could therefore reach a wider audience. They also sought attention of elite Twitter users including famous personalities and prominent media outlets. Protesters also tried to infiltrate other conversations by including the #PaseDelista1al43 hashtag in other popular, unrelated events that occurred (e.g., using their hashtag concurrently with other popular ones such as #SuperBowl or addressing Hillary Clinton's Twitter account). By taking these actions they attempted to generate awareness about the disappearance.

Lastly, the analysis of the #PaseDelista1al43 protest showed that members of this counterpublic articulated a collective identity, which fosters a cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community (Poletta & Jasper, 2001), and implies the development of identity signifiers such as distinctive social and cultural practices, and a common adversary (Soon & Kluver, 2014, p. 503). Protesters manifested a sense of identification with the rest of the #PaseDelista1al43 participants,

considering their community to be a team that shares similar concerns and grievances (consciousness of belonging). Members of the protest came together because of their daily contribution to the digital protest (common social practices) and adopted a shared nickname: *compa* (identity signifiers). Furthermore, protesters referred to themselves as "we" or "us," and positioned themselves in opposition to "they" or "them", constituted by the political class, and more specifically, the Mexican federal government (their common adversary). The collective identity construed within this community was instrumental for the protest to continue, as protesters conceived a sense of accountability toward each other.

This study has some limitations. First, the number of interviews conducted can be considered small (N = 15). Nonetheless, the overall #PaseDelista1al43 protesters population is potentially small, based on two considerations: 1) the number of retweets that the students' roll call get daily is about 80-100, and 2) the estimation from some participants about how many of them contribute to the protest (from 100 to 200). Additionally, the interviewed subjects represented different types of participants of the protest, for example, protesters that do a roll call of their own besides the one conducted by Ibarra, people that just retweet the original roll call, participants that create their own images to curate the content in the

protest, participants that are not Mexicans citizens, and Mexicans in another country. This diversity in the type of participation and the demographic characteristics of the protesters indicate that there is variation in the range of participants interviewed. An additional limitation of these interviews is that they were conducted in different periods of time, which could impact participants' responses. However, all the subjects interviewed in the first period were still taking part of the protest when the second round of interviews were conducted, and their responses coincided with those interviewed later during the project. Moreover, this study analyzes discourses that push against narratives on the mainstream public sphere, but it did not investigate frames or discourses in the mainstream sphere. Yet, this limitation does not diminish the findings of this study because the analysis relies on protest participants' perceptions, taken from the tweets and interviews. Future studies should examine the frames and discourses portrayed in traditional media about the Ayotzinapa case, or in other forums to share opinions about the issue such as media outlet comment sections.

Digital data are socially constructed and have impact beyond the virtual world (Lupton, 2015). Although Twitter is praised for its immediacy for delivering information and expressing opinions, findings of this study point to the possibility of Twitter to

house a long-lasting public that seeks to challenge dominant political narratives. A public that came together on Twitter joined by the hashtag #PaseDelista1al43 can go beyond short connective actions on Twitter and develop a collective identity to discuss and solidify opinions and then, try to get attention from members of other publics. The stream of tweets that include the hashtag evolved into an always-on community for expressing grievances about the case. Notably, protest participants perceived it as an extension of the fight to demand justice that occurred on the ground. This relationship is evident in the content of the #PaseDelista1al43 protest, which invites people to join the street marches and events to discuss the Ayotzinapa case, and portrays images and information about marches and events that already took place. Communication scholars must continue looking at the relationship between digital and on-the-ground protests to analyze the implications for activists and for the practice of citizenship given the current media landscape. Without over-idealizing Twitter, these findings underscore that the platform can bring together and highlight non-mainstream voices that, due to the porosity and permanence of Twitter, become harder to ignore.

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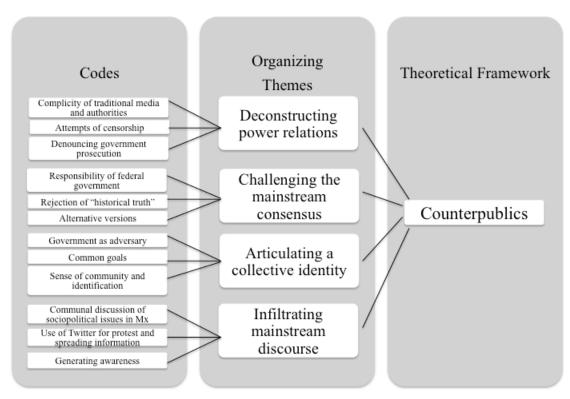
Appendix

Figure 1. Illustration of Codes and Themes Developed during Thematic Analysis

Source: Own Elaboration