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"Only the People Save the People?": Affective Infrastructures and the Polarization of Climate Disaster in Spain

ANTONIO CAMBRA GONZÁLEZ
Open University of Catalonia, Spain

Extreme weather events are increasingly becoming polarized political battlefields on digital platforms. This article examines the 2024 Valencia flood crisis (Spain) to analyze how "affective infrastructures" shape public interpretation of climate disasters. Employing a mixed-method approach—integrating national survey data with computational analysis of social media (PLN and Social Network Analysis)—we identify a structural "affective gap." This gap represents a divergence between citizens' privately declared helplessness and the performative rage dominating the digital sphere. We trace how the viral slogan "Only the people save the people" acted as a "sticky" sign, mobilizing solidarity while delegitimizing state institutions. The findings demonstrate that digital affective economies do not merely reflect public malaise but actively restructure it. This case offers a critical blueprint for understanding how algorithmic polarization and affective politics converge to challenge institutional trust and social cohesion during climate emergencies.

Keywords: emotion, flood, crisis, computational methods, affective economy, malaise

In the digital age, climate disasters have evolved from merely meteorological events to complex communicative crises. The increasing frequency of extreme weather events has confronted societies with socio-environmental emergencies that exceed institutional management capacities (Berkhout, 2024). While sociology has often been reluctant to treat climate disruption as a central disciplinary concern (Scoville & McCumber, 2023), the field of communication studies has increasingly recognized that the social and political meaning of disaster is forged during the mediation of these events.

Serving as a critical laboratory for understanding this global phenomenon, the 2024 Valencia flood crisis—locally known as "Depresión Aislada en Niveles Altos" (DANA)—represents a paradigmatic case of how humanitarian emergencies (see Figure 1) are mediated in a hybrid media environment. Recognized by the Spanish State Meteorological Agency (AEMET, 2024) as the climatic event with the most devastating consequences in Europe in recent decades, it caused the tragic loss of more than 200 people. In such events, collective emotion becomes a central communicative force. Despair, solidarity, and rage emerge as

Antonio Cambra González: acambra@uoc.edu
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networked affects (Hillis et al., 2015; Papacharissi, 2015) that drive both community resilience and intense political contestation (Garcia & Rimé, 2019).

Figure 1. A flooded street in Paiporta [municipality], two days after cleaning, October 2024. Source: Author.

The study of these emotions, however, faces a deep analytical divide. On one hand, computational approaches provide large-scale data, but remain theoretically thin (Lazer et al., 2020), frequently reducing the complexity of human feeling to descriptive, polarized "sentiments" (positive/negative) that fail to capture the performative and political work of affect (Wetherell, 2012). On the other hand, the "affective turn" (Clough & Halley, 2007) and Sara Ahmed's (2004) framework of affective economies offer a conceptually dense understanding of how emotions "stick" to specific bodies and signs, yet these qualitative insights have proven notoriously difficult to operationalize at scale within the vast flows of digital discourse.

This article addresses this gap by proposing a novel theoretical-methodological nexus that bridges affect theory with communication-centered computational methods. We contend that the political production of malaise in the wake of a disaster cannot be understood by looking at emotions as internal states, but as effects of circulation. By integrating Ahmed's (2004) perspective with research on networked publics, we analyze how platform affordances—the technical and algorithmic features of social media—act as "affective infrastructures" (Papacharissi, 2015). Rather than being neutral conduits, these corporate-driven infrastructures restructure collective feeling by prioritizing high-arousal content, thereby facilitating the rapid "stickiness" of certain political narratives over others.

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Our analysis reveals a structural phenomenon we term the affective gap: a marked divergence between the "private" emotional landscape (captured through national survey data, dominated by helplessness and grief) and the "public" performative economy of digital platforms (dominated by rage and indignation). We argue that this gap is not accidental but a direct product of how digital infrastructures facilitate the conversion of shared pain into affective capital. Through a multi-method pipeline, we trace the "stickiness" of the viral slogan "Only the people save the people" (#SoloElPuebloSalvaAlPueblo). We demonstrate how this semiotic marker functioned as a "sticky sign" that mobilized horizontal solidarity while simultaneously being weaponized to delegitimize state institutions. This process, we contend, fundamentally reconfigures the communicative ecology of climate disasters. By contrasting our findings with the thesis on the spontaneous "paradises" of disaster solidarity (see Solnit, 2009), we reveal how contemporary affective infrastructures can fragment these organic communities, transforming a moment of mutual aid into a polarized, discursive battlefield that challenges the very foundations of democratic crisis management.

The theoretical point of departure for this article places communication of emotion at the center of understanding the dynamics of a social crisis. However, we do not conceive of emotions as purely individual psychological states, but as social, cultural, and political practices (Turner & Stets, 2005; Wetherell, 2012). Emotions shape and are shaped by communication. The "affective turn" in the social sciences is situated within these coordinates, arguing that affect is not a mere epiphenomenon, but a constitutive force of social life, capable of aligning subjects, defining collectives, and mobilizing political action. In the context of communication studies, this implies viewing emotion not just as a reaction to information, but as the medium through which political claims are authenticated and public agendas are contested.

In this vein, the most significant contribution for our purposes is Sara Ahmed's (2004) concept of "affective economies." Ahmed argues that emotions do not reside statically in people or objects but circulate between them in an exchange system that functions like an economy. Affect accumulates, aligns, and, in the process, "sticks" certain signs to certain bodies, binding subjects into collectives ("us" vs. "them"). Ahmed identifies stickiness (or adherence) as the social and historical process that makes certain signs (e.g., a hashtag, the image of a politician) appear naturally charged with anger or solidarity. The circulation of these sticky signs then generates affective capital that accumulates momentarily at "nodal points" (such as the slogan #ElPuebloSalvaAlPueblo), which can be mobilized to direct collective energy.

However, Ahmed's (2004) framework predates the rise of algorithmic social media. To operationalize this theory for communication research, we must connect it to the specific sociotechnical mechanisms that now govern affective circulation. Ahmed's notion of an abstract circulation now meets the concrete "affective infrastructures" of digital platforms. Far from being passive mirrors of society, these platforms are sociotechnical environments designed to transmit information while also modulating and capitalizing on emotion to generate engagement and profit (Gillespie, 2018), often embedding and amplifying structural inequalities (Noble, 2018). This algorithmic logic accelerates the "stickiness" Ahmed describes, facilitating the formation of what Papacharissi (2015) calls "affective publics": networked collectives that form and mobilize through the rapid digital circulation of feeling. In this ecosystem, the affective economy is literalized: Algorithms reward high-arousal emotions (rage, indignation) with visibility, effectively deciding which signs become sticky and which are silenced within the communicative ecology.

This convergence reveals a significant methodological opportunity, echoing recent calls to address the "theoretical and methodological challenges" arising at the intersection of the affective turn and computational social science (Addeo et al., 2024, para. 10). Our argument is positioned between two research traditions. On the one hand, the empirical application of affect theory has generated analyses of great interpretive richness. Work focused on discourse analysis—whether in politics (Boler & Davis, 2018) or the labor domain (Riach, 2016), as well as conceptually adjacent approaches, such as "affective communities" (Hutchison, 2016) or "communities of feeling" (Yell, 2012) often applied to disasters—has prioritized qualitative depth. Even applications of Ahmed's framework have tended to be validated through ethnographic or qualitative case studies (Wilding et al., 2020). While these studies expand our understanding of the collective nature of emotion, their methodologies present challenges for scaling up to rapidly unfolding, large-scale crises. It is precisely this need for scalability that computational social science promises to address (Lazer et al., 2020), yet this promise comes with a limitation: The most widely used computational tools, such as sentiment analysis (positive/negative), often described as "thin" in the literature, are not inherently designed to capture the theoretical "thickness" of affect (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013; Kennedy, 2018; Wetherell, 2012), including its stickiness, circulation, political dimension, or accumulation as "emotional capital" (Dal Bó et al., 2022).

To bridge this gap, this article proposes a "thick" theoretical-methodological nexus. We use computational methods derived from simplistic sentiment analysis to operationalize Ahmed's (2004) concepts in a logical sequence within a digital environment. First, to define the semantic universe of the crisis, we employ topic modeling to identify emerging discourses. Second, we measure "stickiness" through co-occurrence network analysis, tracing how specific affects (such as rage) "stick" to those themes and to political figures using hashtags as "calculated publics" (Bruns & Burgess, 2015). Finally, we map the circulation of affective capital through network centrality analysis. By doing so, we provide large-scale empirical validation of affect theory, using computational methods as tools in the service of critical communication theory.

Methodology

In a landmark review of the sociology of emotion, Bericat (2015) concluded with an invitation to "develop new or adapt existing methodologies and research techniques for the social analysis of emotions" (p. 505). To map the complex affective economy that emerged after the DANA, this study adopts a hybrid methodological approach that triangulates two fundamentally different types of data, each capturing a distinct modality of social expression.

Following sociological critiques of data ontology (Kennedy, 2018), we understand that all expression is mediated by its production context. Our design therefore does not compare "reality" with "performance," but instead contrasts two different contexts of affective articulation. We distinguish between survey-based declared affect and performative affect observed on social media. The first data source (declared affect) is based on question 14b from the December 2024 National Barometer of the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS, 2024; N = 4,621), which asked residents (n = 1,000) of the Valencian Community (i.e., the region where the catastrophe occurred) about the emotions they experienced after the disaster. These data provide a baseline of private sentiment at the population level,

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offering a snapshot of the declarative dimension in the initial postcrisis stage. The second data source (performative affect) is a small corpus of 1,279 posts. Platform selection was guided by CIS data, which indicated that Instagram—followed by Twitter and TikTok—was most commonly used by citizens to inform themselves and express opinions during the initial weeks following the floods. Technical limitations of the free-of-charge data-capture tool Apify prevented extraction from Twitter; consequently, the analysis focused on Instagram (81%) and TikTok (19%), given their centrality in emotional communication during the crisis. Following a communicative ecology perspective, these data were treated as a single integrated corpus rather than through a comparative platform-specific analysis. Although Instagram and TikTok present distinct affordances, a preliminary examination of the data revealed a high degree of affective and thematic convergence in the responses to the DANA. Therefore, aggregating the messages allowed for a more robust identification of the macro-structural patterns of the affective economy that transcended individual platform logics.

Data collection began with the hashtag #danavalencia because an initial exploration showed that it concentrated the most activity compared with other variants (e.g., #dana, #valencia). Capture extended from October 30, 2024, to late February 2025, at which point a marked decline in both the number and substance of posts suggested the closure of the peak cycle of public conversation. Only posts with usable textual content were selected for linguistic analysis. Reflecting the sociolinguistic reality of the disaster area, the corpus was open to both Spanish and Valencian—a dialect of Catalan. However, an initial review of the collected data revealed that messages were almost entirely written in Spanish, with only marginal instances of Valencian or code-mixing. The message body, hashtags, and date were retained, while all personal metadata were anonymized for privacy and confidentiality.

The digital corpus was processed in Python following a procedure aligned with the operationalization logic laid out in our theoretical framework: first, identifying discourses (signifiers); second, assigning affective charge; and finally, mapping their stickiness and circulation. To identify key discourses (the "signifiers" to which affect adheres), we used topic modeling in its BERTopic variant (Grootendorst, 2022). BERTopic is a text-oriented, transformer-based model that, unlike traditional approaches such as LDA, demonstrates superior performance in identifying coherent topics in short, noisy, and ambiguity-prone texts (Egger & Yu, 2022), such as those in our corpus. The primary purpose of this modeling phase was to establish a semantic baseline, ensuring that the subsequent affective analysis was grounded in the actual thematic landscape of the disaster rather than in isolated keywords. Next, to assign emotional charge to posts, we applied sentiment analysis using an XLM-RoBERTa-NLI model by giving a score to each post for each emotion. We used the same set of emotions as the CIS to ensure comparability, adding three additional emotions ("pride," "hope," and "optimism") to balance the initial negative emotional skew. The choice of a cross-lingual transformer is particularly relevant here; as XLM-RoBERTa is pretrained on more than 100 languages—including both Spanish and Catalan—it ensures that the affective classification is sensitive to the linguistic nuances and regional variants of the bilingual context, even if the analyzed corpus proved to be predominantly in Spanish. The model was selected after rigorous validation. To ensure technical reliability, an intra-coder consistency protocol (test-retest; Krippendorff, 2018) was applied to a sample of 200 manually annotated messages, comparing two pretrained variants: the joeddav/xlm-roberta-large-xnli model (Davison, 2020), available on the Hugging Face repository, and vicgalle/xlm-roberta-large-xnli-anli (Gallego, 2021). This validation was specifically designed to capture

the political nuances and cultural context of the disaster, which automated models often struggle with. Evaluation prioritized macro F1 because of class imbalance in the corpus and demonstrated the superiority of the joeddav model. It outperformed vicgalle across all global metrics (Accuracy: 0.407 vs. 0.380; Macro F1: 0.327 vs. 0.280) and achieved better performance in 9 of the 12 emotional classes. For the emotion "anger," central to our analysis of discontent, the joeddav model reached an F1 of 0.22, notably higher than vicgalle's 0.07. While an F1 of 0.22 for "anger" may appear modest by pure computational standards, it represents a nearly threefold improvement over a random classifier's baseline (~0.08) in a complex 12-class task. Given the short, polysemic, and highly context-dependent nature of the messages, this level of precision is robust enough to capture the macro-sociological shifts in the affective economy, which is the primary goal of this study.

Subsequently, we transitioned from latent topics to a hashtag-centered social network analysis (SNA) to map how affect "adheres" to specific public signifiers. While topic modeling captures what is being discussed (semantic clusters), hashtags represent "calculated publics" (Gillespie, 2018)—intentional communicative acts that reflect user agency and identitarian alignment (see La Rocca & Artieri, 2022, for a comprehensive review of research based on them). In the context of an affective economy, hashtags function as the primary "sticky signs" (Ahmed, 2004) that facilitate the circulation and accumulation of collective feeling. Accordingly, we constructed a co-occurrence graph using Gephi, where each hashtag extracted from post metadata constitutes a node, and edges represent joint appearance within a post, weighted by associated emotional charge as previously calculated. To interpret the hashtag communities detected by the Louvain modularity algorithm (Blondel et al., 2008), we did not rely solely on structural co-occurrence. A qualitative content analysis was performed on a random sample of 50 posts from each major cluster. This manual analysis enabled us to identify discursive frames, cited sources of information, and the general tone of the posts, thereby validating the characterization of these clusters in terms of ideological and social sensibilities and avoiding potential overinterpretation of purely structural data. Broadly speaking, the study's validation strategy is deliberately aligned with the research goals, prioritizing overall coherence over individual algorithmic precision. This approach is adopted with full recognition of the challenges inherent in classifying emotions in short, ambiguous, and context-dense texts typical of social media (Hou & Huang, 2025). In this setting, a methodology focused on perfect classification at the individual-post level is less productive than one designed to identify robust affective patterns at the aggregate level.

The methodological design therefore does not aim to achieve high precision in each individual classification—notoriously difficult in context-dense digital discourse—but rather to ensure the construct validity of the affective economy as a whole. The validation strategy is thus based on structural triangulation. First, we analyze large-scale macrotendencies where statistical noise tends to cancel out, especially when contrasted with the baseline of declarative affect provided by the CIS. Second, we emphasize sociological coherence: The reliability of our findings is not anchored in a decontextualized F1 score, but in the consistency between affective charge and communicative function. If posts classified as "anger" adhere structurally to nodes of institutional critique, and those labelled "solidarity" circulate within clusters of citizen aid, then the coherence of the network structure validates the semantic and political pertinence of the classification at the macro level. This approach shifts the validation criterion from individual algorithmic accuracy to the structural plausibility and robustness of the emerging sociopolitical pattern.

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Results and Analyses

The analysis of the data reveals a complex affective economy operating according to logics distinct from the private sphere. By triangulating survey data with social media metrics, we not only identify the prevailing emotions but also map how they adhere to specific political signifiers and circulate through the digital network. The following sections dissect this anatomy, moving from the macroscopic contrast between private and public feeling to the microscopic mechanics of affective adherence and circulation.

Contextual Divergence and Affective Expression

The community and material devastation caused by climatic phenomena such as the Valencia DANA triggered a sudden convulsion in the affective structure of the affected population. From the outset, harsh criticisms emerged about the lack of prior preparation, the absence of self-criticism from the regional government, and the delays in response and resource mobilization by the central state. The lack of coordination and leadership in the first five days was echoed in the digital sphere, eventually consolidating into street protests. The experience of the disaster—suffered both first-hand by those affected and indirectly through media by the wider citizenry—resituated subjective emotional experience, typically grounded in everyday interpersonal interactions, on a broader scale, reordering how social reality was collectively experienced and communicated through emotion.

Because this study draws on two distinct types of data (CIS and digital media), a contextual and therefore differentiated expression of affective practices emerged (see Figure 2). Given their communicative potential (multimodality, immediacy, ubiquity), digital spaces can amplify the circulation—and thus the "stickiness"—of certain publicly expressed emotions (e.g., solidarity or anger), compared with more internalized and difficult-to-express affects (e.g., helplessness or anxiety). This difference in affective practices is expected to explain the discrepancies observed between CIS data and sentiment analysis of digital media. In other words, the medium of expression—not just the specific moment of observation—enables alternative forms of emotional expression while also participating in the construction of those emotions.

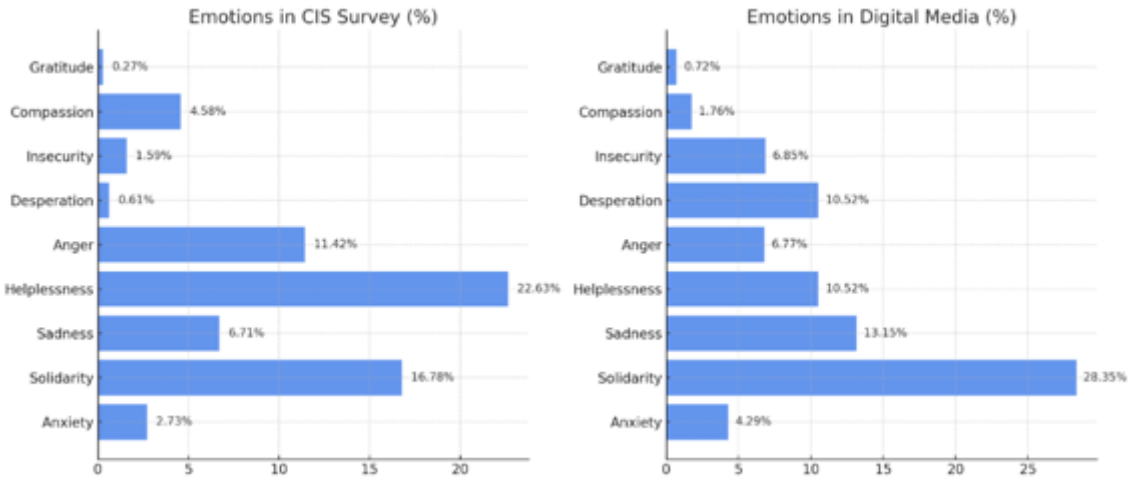

Figure 2. Declared vs. represented emotions.

As can be observed in Figure 2, both contexts feature solidarity and anger among the three most prevalent emotions. The third is helplessness in the CIS and sadness in digital media. Solidarity, despite being prominent in both cases, has a higher incidence in digital media, while helplessness, as an internalized emotion denoting a lack of agency, finds fewer channels for its performative expression and is more easily reportable in the anonymous context of a survey. Sadness, in contrast, appears to replace helplessness in the digital environment because it lends itself better to visual performance and the expression of community empathy. Unlike helplessness, sadness translates more easily into the visual and textual affective frames that dominate platforms like Instagram and TikTok (images of mourning, shared laments, melancholic music in videos). This affinity between emotion and platform affordances facilitates its circulation and makes it a more effective vehicle for performing collective empathy.

The influence of the medium through which emotion is channeled and circulated, therefore, speaks to a gap in their respective forms of expression. However, because of its quantitative bias, this approach cannot explain the reasons behind this gap or how to interpret the contextual divergence in the observed affective expression. That is, we need to understand how seemingly opposing emotions coexist and are channeled throughout the period under consideration as a multidimensional response to a situation of collective crisis. We address this next.

Affective Cartography of Distress

Once the distinct nature of the digital affective economy is established, the analysis turns to its mechanics. Drawing on Ahmed's (2004) concept of adherence (p. 119), we examine how affect "sticks" to specific discursive objects. The structuring of the post-DANA affective economy appears as a dual-level process: (a) emotions show a differential "stickiness" (Ahmed, 2014, pp. 143–148) toward certain themes and discourses that emerge in the conversation (semantic level), and (b) this thematic stickiness translates structurally, in certain cases, through the "adherence" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 119) of those same emotions to

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ideological sensitivities constituted and mobilized around such discourses (socio-structural level). Therefore, we can expect to find a significant correspondence between the themes with the highest emotional stickiness, on the one hand, and certain profiles with identitarian traits whose discourse revolves around such themes, on the other.

Figure 3 illustrates this assumption through a heat map showing the association between the 22 topics detected by BERTopic—varying in content and significance—and their associated affective accumulation across emotions, represented by average values ranging from 0 (lowest) to 1 (highest) and calculated from algorithmically assigned scores for posts related to each topic.

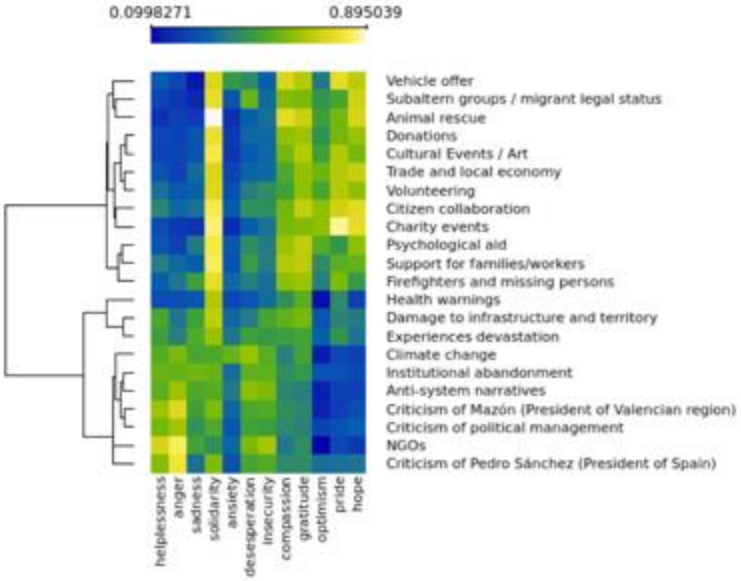

Figure 3. Association between topics and emotions.

The dendrogram in the graph reveals an apparent division of the topics into two emotional profiles. On one hand, one block comprises critically oriented topics (from "Health warnings" to "Criticism of Pedro Sánchez"), in which emotions such as helplessness, anger, or sadness are strongly expressed, coexisting to some extent with positive emotions like solidarity and gratitude. On the other hand, another block is observed (from "Vehicle offer" to "Firefighters and missing persons") with the inverse pattern, where positive emotions prevail over negative ones. It should be noted that this graph offers a "snapshot" of the post-disaster discursive-emotional landscape. As such, it lacks dynamism and is not entirely representative of an affective economy. Furthermore, this divergence is not merely statistical but represents the first evidence of an affective battleground for the legitimate emotional narrative of the crisis.

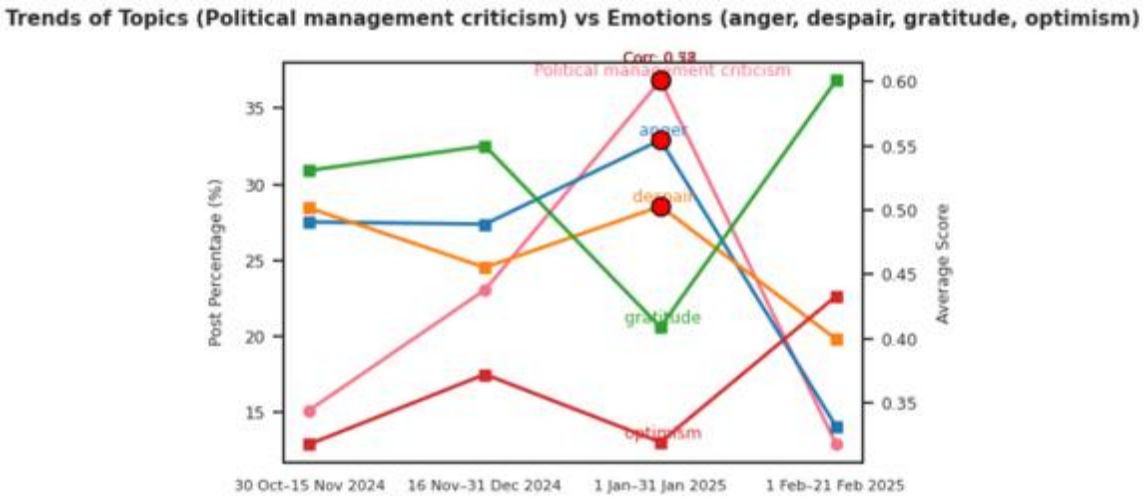

Figure 4. Growing distress surrounding institutional political management.

We now turn from topics to the emotions associated with them. Figure 4 shows the fluctuation of emotions over time, focusing on the four that showed the highest statistical variance and theoretical relevance: anger, despair, optimism, and gratitude. The pink line, representing the percentage of messages critical of political management, shows increasing activity that peaked in January 2025. This peak corresponded to a moment when public patience was wearing thin because of perceived administrative paralysis. The data reveal a clear affective economy of distress, where anger (blue line) and despair (orange line) soar in January. As Ahmed (2004) theorizes, emotion does not reside in the event itself but circulates and is displaced. It first adheres to the general theme of "political management" before sticking more intensely to the figures who personify the institution: Carlos Mazón (regional leader) and Pedro Sánchez (State prime minister).

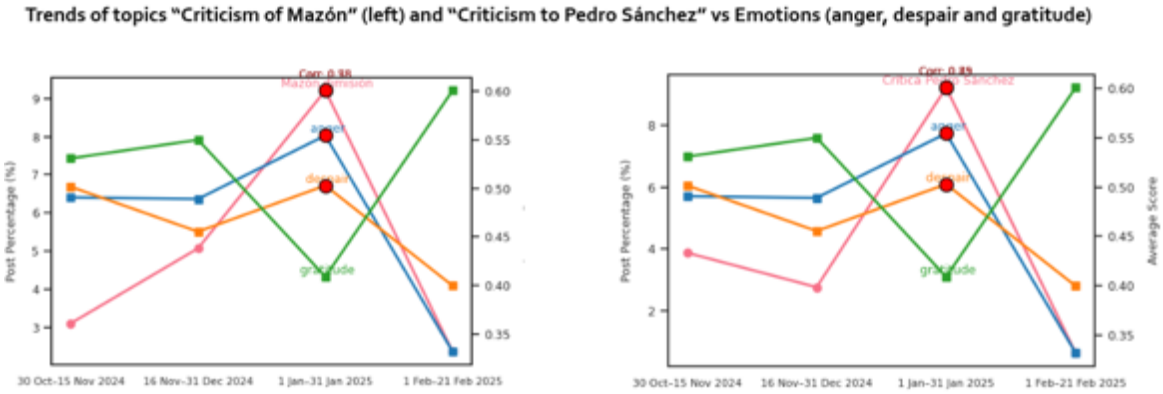

Figure 5. "Stickiness" of emotions to political figures.

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In mapping this delegitimization process, Figure 5 displays only the three most prevalent emotions (anger, helplessness, and sadness) to avoid visual noise and focus on the primary affective drivers of the interaction with political figures. The diffuse distress is clearly manifested here. We observe how anger and helplessness "stick" with similar valences to Mazón and Sánchez, who become the personification of institutional failure. These political actors function as "sticky objects": nodes where the network's negative affective capital intensifies and to which accumulated helplessness adheres.

Having analyzed the adherence of affect to specific objects, we now examine the symbolic infrastructure underlying the conversation: the network of hashtags that coheres the different collectives. Figure 6 depicts this network from two different perspectives to facilitate the transition from a descriptive semantic map to a sociopolitical analysis. The image on the left represents the semantic complexity of the conversation by coloring clusters according to topic, revealing a highly entangled discursive landscape. Conversely, the image on the right employs the Louvain clustering algorithm, which identifies cohesive "communities of practice" based on structural co-occurrence, thereby revealing the underlying political structure of the affective publics.

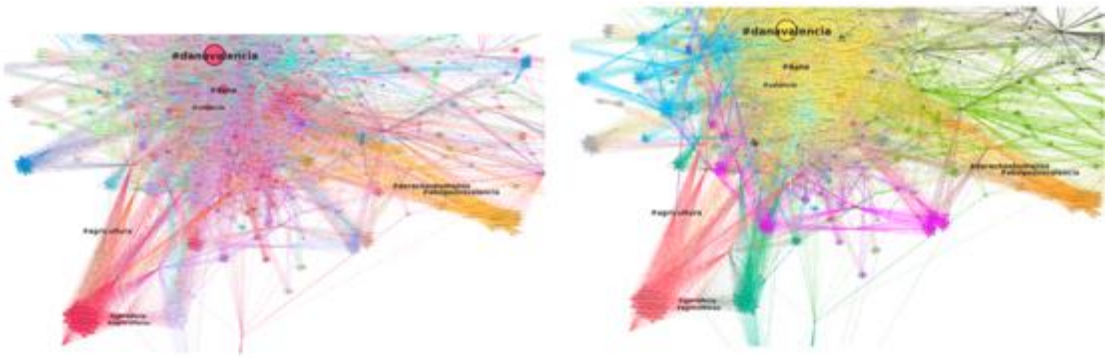

Figure 6. Representation of the hashtag network: by topic (left) and by Louvain clustering (right).

Both versions show overlapping areas. In particular, a fuchsia-colored cluster related to #ganaderos (cattle ranchers) or #agricultores (farmers) stands out, as does an orange-colored one related to #derechoshumanos (human rights) and migrant subaltern groups. Analysis of a sample of the original messages related to these hashtag groups suggests two social categories: on the one hand, users linked to ideologically conservative, populist, and/or rural positions; on the other, lawyers committed to subaltern groups announcing on their profiles legislative changes favorable to migrants in an irregular situation. However, what is relevant here is to observe the associative prevalence (or adherence, in Ahmed's terms) of certain emotions to these categories. Figure 7 shows the distribution and intensities (represented by the color gradient) of two emotions: anger (on the left) and solidarity (on the right) throughout the network.

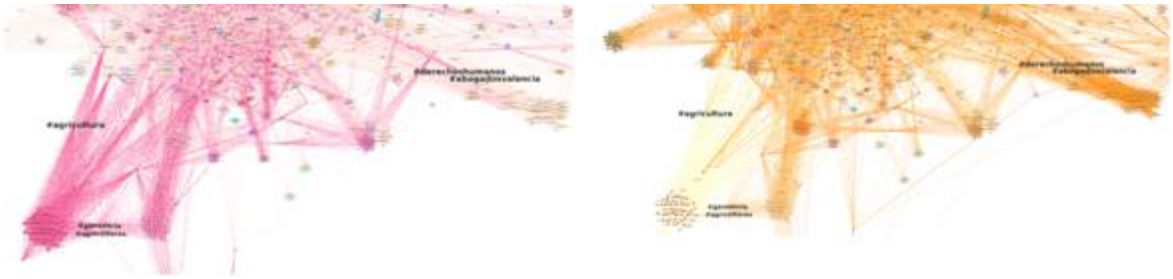

Figure 7. Intensity and distribution of affective flows: anger (left) and solidarity (right).

As can be observed, affective intensity contrasts across the network and is inverted in the two suggested clusters, making anger and solidarity distinct emotional markers of identity. On the one hand, anger characterizes a set of users who maintain a discourse akin to alt-right populist positions. On the other hand, solidarity characterizes a professional collective that mediates a subaltern one (i.e., lawyers sensitive to migrant realities). This confirms that emotional adherence underpins the representation of social and ideological identities in the digital sphere.

#Thepeoplesavethepeople: The Politicization of Solidarity

Finally, we trace the circulation of affective capital through the hashtag network. Certain nodes, because of their high betweenness centrality, act as "discursive brokers" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). We focus on #elpueblosalvaalpueblo and #bonaire as the most critical nodes of this infrastructure (percentile > 93).

The hashtag #elpueblosalvaalpueblo acted as a "sticky sign" that mobilized past literary and political associations (from 20th-century Spanish poet Antonio Machado to mutual aid) to navigate a contemporary crisis. However, its power lay in its capacity to condense ambivalent affects and facilitate their lateral slide between antagonistic figures and discourses.

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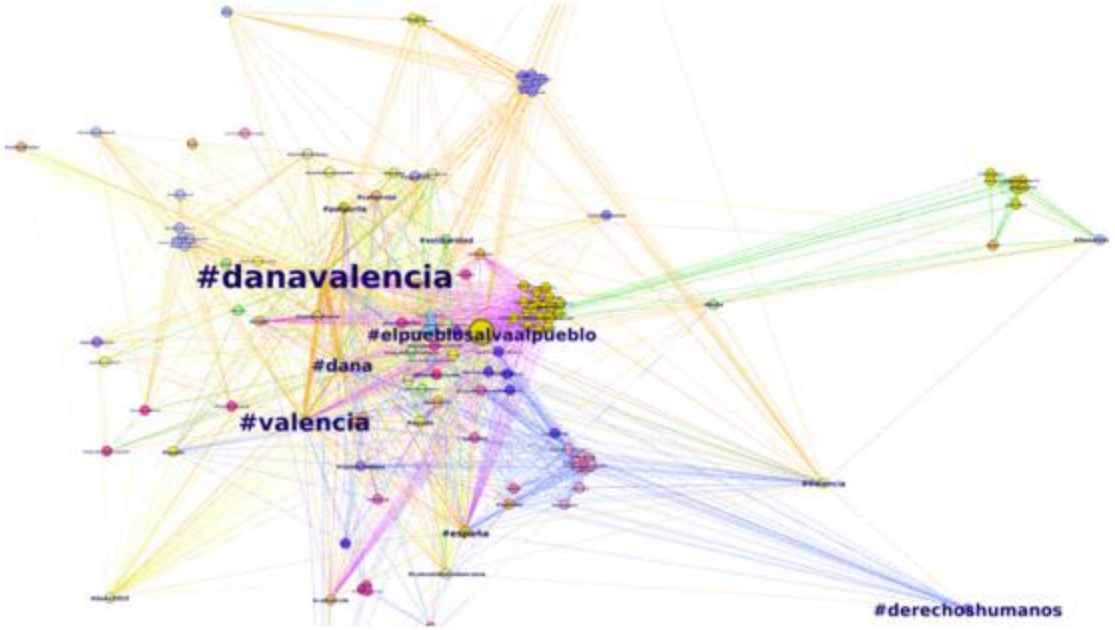

Figure 8. Relative position of #elpueblosalvaalpueblo in the network.

Figure 8 shows the ego-network of #elpueblosalvaalpueblo, revealing its crucial structural function as a link between disparate facets of the social response. The hashtag maintains a direct connection with the backbone nodes of the network (#danavalencia, #valencia, #españa), but its true explanatory power lies in its secondary connections. It bridges nodes denoting general coordination tasks (#voluntariosdana, #ayudavalencia) and groups of citizens displaced from other regions (#castillalamancha, #convoy) with the specific nodes of the affected localities (#paiporta, #catarroja, #sedavi).

As a condenser of ambivalent affects, the hashtag connects clusters dominated by solidarity (yellow) with those charged with anger (blue). According to Gephi metrics, solidarity, gratitude, and pride account for 33.3% of the connections, while despair and anger account for 44.6%. These affective flows convey profoundly different meanings: from the horizontal solidarity of the youth volunteers—the "muddy generation"—to the despair of those directly affected; from the pride of community action to the anger caused by perceived institutional abandonment. This diversity of valences confirms that the slogan functions as an "affective battleground" where different social actors struggle to fix the legitimate account of the disaster, making the signifier "sticky" for both mutual aid and anti-system narratives.

However, emotions play a crucial role because their performative power can be exploited to influence public opinion during moments of heightened anxiety and uncertainty, making alternative accounts of certain events more persuasive. This dynamic became particularly evident in the media discourse surrounding #bonaire, another hashtag with noteworthy centrality values within the symbolic infrastructure of the crisis's affective economy. As observed in Figure 9, despair (green) stands out as the predominant emotion surrounding the Bonaire shopping center. In the days following the flood, the legitimate uncertainty

about possible victims in the underground car park triggered a "speculative storm." Disinformation filled the void left by the absence of information from official sources. Users and radical-right influencers sensationally advanced unfounded figures about buried corpses, with the manifest political intention of increasing citizen distress and eroding institutional credibility.

This case illustrates what Ahmed (2014) describes as the "metonymic displacement" of fear and despair. The emotional intensity of the car park myth served to bypass rational verification: If the despair was "real," the narrative of governmental secrecy must also be "true." Emotional distress, circulating among a network of signs (#agenda2030, #estadofallido [failed state]), became a fundamental lever to construct a recognizable cognitive framework that antagonizes democratic institutions and scientific narratives of climate change. Figure 10 presents two contrasting posts that illustrate this antagonism: the woman on the left accuses the state of withholding key information from citizens, while the man on the right denounces the spread of fake news on social media.

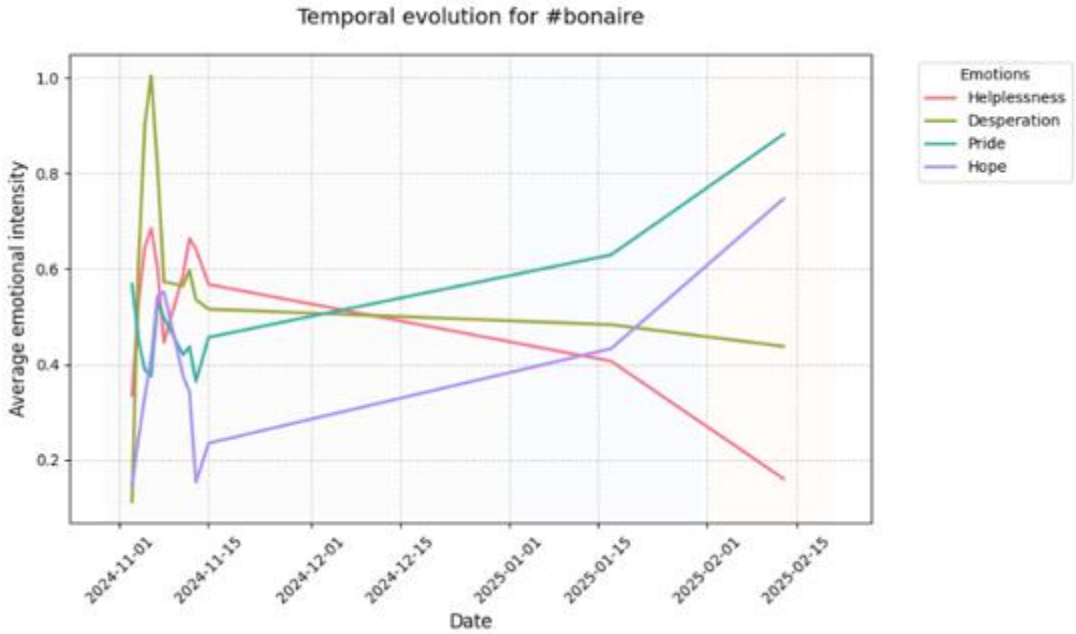

Figure 9. Affective collective response on #bonaire.

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Figure 10. Contraposition of narratives on the flood causes (personal communication, November 5, 2024; personal communication, December 7, 2024).

Thus, both #elpueblosalvaalpueblo and #bonaire can be considered symbolic containers where narratives are contested through the mobilization of affects. While the former functioned as an affective battleground where the meaning of citizen solidarity was contested, the latter became a vehicle for instrumentalizing despair for disinformation purposes. Both cases reveal how the digital symbolic infrastructure—the affective infrastructure—becomes the central terrain for politicizing catastrophe, where shared pain is converted into polarized affective capital.

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this study provide a critical map of how climate disasters are performatively restructured within digital affective infrastructures. While previous research has often treated social media as a mere mirror of public sentiment, our analysis of the Valencia DANA reveals a more complex reality: a structural "affective gap" that fundamentally reconfigures the democratic management of the crisis.

The most significant finding of this research is the divergence between privately declared emotions and publicly performed affects. As illustrated in the contrast between CIS survey data and social media metrics, there is a systematic silence surrounding "helplessness" (desamparo) in the digital sphere, while "rage" and "performative solidarity" are amplified. As we contend, this gap is not accidental, but a direct product of the communicative affordances of platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Following Papacharissi (2015), we argue that digital platforms function as affective infrastructures that "select" which emotions are viable for circulation. Helplessness, characterized by a lack of agency and a passive subjective state, does not easily translate into the high-arousal, visually driven logic of the algorithm. Conversely, rage and indignation act as high-value affective capital. They are "sticky" (Ahmed, 2004) because they invite interaction, the drawing of symbolic borders, and provide a sense of agency—however polarized—in the face of catastrophe. This suggests that the digital public sphere does not represent the "true" state of the collective psyche, but rather a filtered version optimized for visibility and engagement.

The analysis of the hashtag #elpueblosalvaalpueblo has revealed how certain signifiers function as "sticky signs" that slide between antagonistic narratives. By contextualizing this slogan, we can observe that it is not unique to Spain. Equivalent markers emerged in Puerto Rico after Hurricane María and in Mexico after the 2017 earthquakes (One Project, 2019). These are transnational discursive markers of self-organization that are reactivated in contexts of institutional distrust. However, our structural analysis shows that in the Spanish case, this "solidarity" was not a unified force, but an affective battleground. While it successfully mobilized the "muddy generation" of volunteers, its structural centrality also allowed for its appropriation by alt-right narratives. This process of re-signification illustrates Ahmed's theory: affective capital is generated through circulation. The slogan's power resided in its ambiguity, allowing shared grief to be weaponized into a tool for institutional delegitimization. This complicates the traditional understanding of "community resilience," suggesting that in mediated environments, solidarity can be easily converted into a polarized asset.

Our results invite a critical dialogue with journalist and historian Rebecca Solnit's (2009) influential thesis elaborated in her work *A Paradise Built in Hell*. Solnit argues that disasters dismantle the artificial social order, revealing a "paradise" of organic altruism and mutual aid among common people, while the elite succumb to fear and "elite panic." The Valencia DANA, however, suggests that this organic paradise is being replaced by a networked battlefield, aligning more closely with Kai Erikson's (1976) classic thesis on collective trauma. In his study of the Buffalo Creek flood, Erikson argued that disasters—particularly those exacerbated by institutional failure like the DANA's episode—do not automatically foster resilient bonds but can instead inflict a deep trauma that tears the collective fabric and erodes social trust. In the contemporary digital landscape, this institutional erosion is structurally amplified. While the "people" did indeed save the "people" on the ground, the digital mediation of that effort was far from a "unified paradise." As shown earlier, the affective infrastructure of social media introduced a logic of fragmentation. The circulation, and not the mere static presence of emotion, explains the central paradox: In a crisis that demanded unity, this affective economy produced not a unified "us," but "multiple us" in contention (Richardson et al., 2024). Digital platforms, acting as affective infrastructures, instrumentalized performative solidarity and consolidated anger as an affective-discursive practice to advance polarization agendas (Bennett & Kneuer, 2023). Instead of an organic community, we observed the emergence of polarized affective publics where solidarity was used as a lever to deepen political divisions. The "elite panic" described by Solnit (2009) was complemented by an "algorithmic panic"—a speculative storm in which emotions like despair (as seen in the #bonaire car park narrative) were instrumentalized to monetize and accelerate the destruction of community life that Erikson (1976) warned about.

Beyond this insight, the contribution of this work resides precisely in its capacity to integrate these diverse layers of analysis into a unified critical framework. By overcoming the theoretical "thinness" of traditional sentiment analysis, we have demonstrated that the "affective gap" can only be accurately mapped through a hybrid methodological triangulation. This approach not only provides a "thick" description of the emotional landscape but also proves that operationalizing Sara Ahmed's (2004) affective economies is essential for modern communication studies. We argue that disaster studies must shift their focus from an idealized "community resilience" to a more nuanced analysis of the affective infrastructures that now govern public response. Empirically, this study provides a detailed account of how a shared climatic tragedy can be systematically transformed into a site of disinformation and

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institutional erosion. However, the proposal of this mixed approach as a complement to predominantly hermeneutic perspectives faces significant limitations. Primarily, computational research remains increasingly dependent on data access, where growing restrictions imposed by digital platforms for academic purposes (Bermudez-Villalva, 2024; Chen et al., 2024) pose a structural challenge for critical communication research. Furthermore, the inherent contextual ambiguity of human emotion continues to present a challenge for automated detection techniques, necessitating the continued development of multimodal analytical strategies—integrating text, image, and audio—to capture the full communicative complexity of digital affect.

These reflections point to the need to advance toward more robust methodological integration (Lindgren, 2020) and instrumentally eclectic perspectives. As digital tools are prone to rapid obsolescence (Addeo et al., 2024), the strength of future research will not depend solely on the novelty of its instruments, but on its hermeneutic capacity to understand how emotions are configured in and through communication and inscribed in the power relations that define our digital age. Ultimately, the Valencia DANA serves as a definitive blueprint for the future of climate disasters in a hybrid media environment. As climatic emergencies intensify, the battle for meaning will no longer be fought solely on the ground of material aid, but on the shifting terrain of affect. Understanding the mechanics of these infrastructures is no longer just a sociological pursuit; it is a fundamental democratic necessity to preserve social cohesion and institutional legitimacy in an era of increasing environmental and political instability.

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