Argentine Media and Journalists Enhancing and Polluting of Communication on Twitter

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Introduction[1]

Since the emergence of the Internet, journalism has been experiencing a radical paradigm shift. Traditional media outlets have adapted the generation and spreading of information as the digital communication proposed new demands. Technological convergence has forced the media to encompass new languages and has also given it the possibility of reusing news content in several formats.

Nowadays, there's practically no news media without an online presence or content distribution through social networking sites. However, this virtual presence of the traditional media outlets on these newly formed, opinion-exchanging digital places does not necessarily seem to involve innovating their modes of interacting with the audience. On the other hand, personal users (individuals) are communicating in several networks with each other. In fact, we are a long way from stating that the coexistence of both institutional and personal users within the same virtual space can lead to the production of authentic conversations or a culture of sharing consolidation.

In this research, we look into the behavior of Twitter users in Argentina, both corporate ones (media outlets) and personal ones (journalists), with the aim of establishing the tendency of the first group to work under the traditional ways of communication (one-way, asymmetrical, on a massive scale, underlining the act of saying), and if, on the other hand, the latter tends to adopt innovative ways to express themselves (conversational, symmetrical, personalized, balancing the act of saying and listening). We seek to stipulate how the media and its journalists use Twitter: as a suggestion to engage into a more participative way of communication or as yet another channel of massive distribution of information. An indicator of enhancing/polluting of communication (here understood as a public conversation) has been designed based on the distinction between the concepts of communication and information, and also of the conventional linguistic and pragmatic structure of conversation.

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Theoretical Framework
Social Networks: New Ways of Communicating

Concept of Social Network

Despite the fact that society has always been organized around networks, the emergence of new information technologies gave way to "the concrete foundations for its spreading to go deeper into the whole of the social structure" (Castells, 2004, p. 505) and, as a result, solidified a new logic for the construction of social bonds. In fact, the Internet brought new meaning to the term "social network."

At the dawn of this technology, content was published and managed by a sender, while the rest of the users filled in the role of passive consumers, just as they did when facing the whole of the mass media. This new virtual space, where Internet surfers were able to access information published by others, was labeled Web 1.0. After the emergence of the dotcom bubble in the year 2000, a new Web was born which allowed users to actively participate in the creation and organization of its content. This Web, known as Web 2.0, is characterized as being people-owned, in contrast to the 1.0 logic pattern under which data was the protagonist (understanding "data" as the structural part of the Web) (Fumero & Roca, 2007; O'Reilly, 2005). Web 2.0 contributed to a change of attitude among users, who began to progressively acquire new roles, until they formed a hybrid figure known as the *prosumer*, a term which refers to the simultaneous roles of both producer and consumer of information (Toffler, 1980).

Due to this, the relation among users is stronger, giving rise to this concept of social network. Boyd and Ellison (2007) point out that the main characteristic of online social networks is the chance to enable unknown people to connect and, above all, the possibility of visualizing each user network. Benevenuto, Rodrigues, Cha, and Almeida (2009) state that social networks are sites where users "connect with each other, share and find content, and disseminate information" (p. 1). The concept of an online social network is therefore related to an emerging culture of sharing, which promotes interaction through the inclusion and evaluation of the contributions to the community.

Twitter: The Conversation-based Network

Jack Dorsey, Evan Williams, and Biz Stone founded Twitter in 2006. These three American students intended to recreate on the Internet the text messaging service used for mobile phones, Short Message Service (SMS). Unlike SMS, which is designed for communication between pre-established contacts, this platform allows users to share information in an open and public way with every member of the network. In this sense, Twitter has developed under its own logic, thus becoming a conversational field in which users connect, even if they have never met in any other environment, so as to exchange information and commentary on topics they believe to be relevant.

By definition, social networks are active, a space for conversation and cooperation (López Parra, 2010). They mark the first time in which media has the possibility to enable communication and coordination simultaneously (Shirky, 2008). Twitter is self-defined as "a real-time information network that connects you to the latest stories, ideas, opinions and news about what you find interesting"

(http://twitter.com/about/). It urges the user to "simply find the accounts you find most compelling and follow the conversations" (http://twitter.com/about/). In this platform, users can publish texts no longer that 140 characters (tweets); subscribe to other users' publications, that is to say, "follow" them; repost their messages (retweets); or post responses to their messages (replies). Subscribers to an account are called followers.

The information flow on Twitter is not an overlapped one-sided act of message sending, but a message exchange in which one takes into account (retweeting or replying) what others are saying. That is because it is public, and there can be established free communicative interactions among users. More than 200 million monthly active users (https://blog.twitter.com/2013/celebrating-twitter7) can join conversations without restrictions or permissions. In fact, Twitter conversations occur from "many-to-many," but are not massive, and are about topics relevant for the users (boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010).

Some believe that once journalism reaches social networks, it ceases to be informational journalism and becomes a conversation (Ludtke, 2009; Cuen, 2012). Nevertheless, recent studies on media behavior on Twitter unveil that media outlets utilize the platform as a tool to lure traffic: 93% of the observed tweets from American media companies linked to their own site (Holcomb, Gross, & Mitchell, 2011). Following the same path, an experiment led by Spanish Twitter users and conducted in 2012 revealed that very few media outlets interact on Twitter: only 12.2% of 264 questions sent via Twitter accounts to Spanish media companies received responses (http://tuitexperimento.com).

Communication and Information Patterns

Concepts: Communication and information

The conversational structure of these Twitter-based exchange possibilities among users leads us to the conceptual difference between communication and information. According to Dominique Wolton (2010, p. 47), generating information, having access to it, and exchanging it are not enough to communicate, because communication implies a relation: "There's no message without a receiver, however, information can exist on its own, isolated. Nothing similar takes place when it comes to communication. The latter only makes sense through the existence of the other and the achieving of mutual recognition."

The act of providing information can be defined as the transmission of linguistically built messages that broaden the cognitive horizon of receivers. Informing is a one-sided act and involves, on the side of the receiver, a *state* (one may be informed or not be informed at all). Communication, instead, implies a process, basically two sided, based on exchanging information that sets up a social relation. So communication, being based on mutual recognition, is a source of events in which ideas, interpretations, and knowledge are shared. While the information is hierarchical, the communication requires equality among actors, each acknowledging the others as legitimate listeners and talkers due to their ability to provide and share data, interpretations, and relevant experiences.

In the context of the Web 2.0, the sharing aspect of communication is the public conversation. Web users feed the *public sphere* through dialogue-based contributions, which, due to their distinct political, cultural, and religious origins, allow more accurate understanding of the complexity of multi-layered events and, simultaneously, enable users to unfold an open deliberation on expected social consensus.

Conventional Pragmatic-linguistic Paradigm of Conversation

According to the *Conversation Analysis* paradigm, promoted by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974), conversation implies a social interaction system of *turn-taking*, which works in a similar way to game turns or traffic turns in intersections. For these authors, conversation is a part of the *speech exchange systems*, together with interviews, debates, and ceremonies.

Under this perspective, conversation is dialogic and is built as a "sequence of speeches alternatively produced by at least two people addressing one another" (Stati, 1982, p. 11). Some of its important features include spontaneity, a non-hierarchical position between the parts, and the freedom to jump from one subject to another. Conversation is then divided into units, or *speech acts*. The speech entails "all that a speaker says in between two of its partner's interventions, or at the beginning and at the end of a conversation" (Stati, 1982, p. 19).

Following the objectives of this study on the communicative behavior of Twitter users, the reciprocity condition is fundamental to the possibility for the conversation to take place. In a conversation, the partners interchange the roles of source (speaker) and receiver (listener) (Stati, 1982). While classical Conversation Analysis theory says that the minimum amount of partners is two, the minimum amount of speaking turns is three, to include the reply-to-the-reply stage (the third turn), which establishes the partners' speaker and listener roles. This three-turn-taking scheme implies: (1) what the speaker does at his turn, (2) what the listener does according to the speaker, and (3) what the speaker does according to what the listener is saying.

From a symbolic perspective, the function of giving and reciprocating is not to benefit oneself, but to recognize in order to be recognized. Microblogging systems such as Twitter enable actions that seek reciprocity and recognition (following and being followed; retweeting and @replies) (Pelaprat & Brown, 2012). In fact, "while retweeting can simply be seen as the act of copying and broadcasting, the practice contributes to a conversational ecology in which conversations are composed of a public interplay of voices that give rise to an emotional sense of share conversational context" (boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010, p. 1).

Twitter's peculiarity is that the conversation is public and between many people (Bowman & Willis, 2003). As Honeycutt and Herring (2009) define it, Twitter is a noisy environment, with multiple participants. This means that the partners of the exchange may be different, as the replies (the second or third speaking turn) may be addressed to the previous partner, to other partners, or every other user at the same time. The conversations in this environment are surprisingly coherent in large measure "by the use of the @ sign as a marker of addressivity" (Honeycutt & Herring 2009, p. 1).

Method

Indicator of Enhancing/Polluting Communication-Conversation

Due to the characteristics of Twitter exchange, what intends to show the suggested methodology for this research is if some group of users complies with the structural conditions for conversations (understood as communicative relations based on information) to take place.

The indicator of enhancing/polluting communication, looking at the behavior of Argentine media outlets and journalists on Twitter, contains three categories that represent the basic scheme of conversation, according to the conventional pragmatic-linguistic model of the *Conversation Analysis* vision. The minimum conversation unit of the *turn-taking* model consists of three speech acts in which the parts take turns: they *say*, they *hear*, and they *reply*. Each of these categories represents one speaking turn (regardless of content) and shape the necessary conditions for conversations to take place:

- Activity: what the user does during his turn to speak
- Popularity: how the user is taken into account by the other users during their turn to speak (what the others do as a result of what the user said)
- Reciprocity: how the user takes into account the other users during his turn to speak (what he does as a result of what the other users have said, what this user does to engage in conversation)

To measure the variables for each category, we draw on public data available from online applications (Table 1). This method is based on the draft observation of the low level of replies from the media to other users, which can be understood as the use of the first turn of conversation only. Since we cannot observe the third turn from this method (which also requires the tracking of the content of conversations), we are pointing out the second turn of conversations as the necessary condition to the third turn to take place. In other words, if only the first turn occurs, a conversation cannot occur. However, if a second turn occurs, a third is made possible: the conversation is possible only if the second turn exists. This can be observed from the variables listed on Table 1.

Observation Method

The research considered: (a) corporate Twitter accounts belonging to Argentine print media and (b) personal accounts belonging to journalists. A selection criterion was narrowed to: journalism printed media founded before the year 2000 (the Internet bubble period) which provide online versions. This way, the study covers newspapers that have gone through the process of adapting to the new technology environment, marked by the Web. These newspapers have modified the traditional formats for generating and distributing content. The analyzed newspapers were *Clarín* (founded in 1945), *La Nación* (founded in 1870), *Página 12* (founded in 1987), and *Ámbito Financiero* (founded in 1976). Some newspapers were not used because they were established under newer communication demands, such as, for instance, *Perfil* (relaunched in 2005), *El Argentino* (founded in 2008), and *Tiempo Argentino* (relaunched in 2010).

The journalists' accounts were selected based on who disclosed on their Twitter profile which specific media outlet employed them. Likewise, the eligibility of journalists was also narrowed to those whose Twitter accounts were at least two years old, since 2009 marked the year Twitter became a hot topic in the media and people began signing up en masse. Under this requirement, the study targeted the observation of users embodying experience, knowledge, and consolidated skills on the platform. The selection was also narrowed by another criterion: journalists who tweeted at least weekly. Altogether, the observations included four corporate accounts (one per media outlet), and 18 personal accounts (four belonging to *Clarín*, five to *La Nación*, five from *Página 12*, and three from *Ámbito Financiero*). The selected journalists belong to the Politics, Economy, Culture, Sports, and Technology newspaper sections.

Data was retrieved once a week for 12 weeks from September 21 to December 14, 2011, from both corporate accounts and the personal accounts of the journalists. For the study to be conducted, publicly available and free data was retrieved from twitter.com, twitalyzer.com, and friendorfollow.com.

Table 1. Indicator's Measured Variables Logical Chart.

	Categories	Measurable data	Description	Weekly record	Sources
Indicator	Activity (what the speaker does during his turn to speak)	tweets	messages posted from an account	amount of tweets	Twitter.com
	Popularity (what others do during their turn to speak)	referenced/mentions	tweets quoting or mentioning the account, including @	number of times the account has been quoted or mentioned	Twitalyzer.com
enhancing/pollution of conversation	Reciprocity (what the speaker does so as to engage into conversation)	replies/referencing	tweets which reply or mention other account beginning with @ and the name of the account	amount of replies/references to other accounts	Twitalyzer.com Friendorfollow.com
		retweeting	tweets that repost other account's message placing before its mention rt @, rt@, rt:@, rt: @, retweet @, via @, retweet: @ or r/t	number of times the user retweets other accounts	
		friends	accounts following a user and being followed by it as well	number of accounts that follow the user and are as well followed.	

Source: Author

The measurable data can be ordered into the A (Activity), P (Popularity), and R (Reciprocity) categories. The amount of tweets shows user A level (what the user does during his turn to speak). The amount of referenced/mentions shows user P level (what the others do as a result of what the user has said, indicated by how many times a user was mentioned or someone replied to him. Replies/referencing suggests R since it indicates how many times the measured user mentioned or replied another user. Retweeting is an R data to the extent that it involves forwarding to their own followers what other users have said in their tweets. Friends disclose R as mutual recognition through following and the interest of

what other users have to say. All measurable data of R does not verify the completion of the third turn to speak (a response to a previous response), but the second turn. In this regard, R variables taken into account in this research can be considered as conditions of possibility for the emergence of conversations.

Datasets related to categories P and R were normalized by the amount of tweets or followers in each case. An analysis strategy was the consideration of account groups as a "superuser," due to retrieved values being more representative of the group behavior of each type of user (both the media and journalists) than the average of relative values. The superuser is obtained by adding the absolute values of the measurable data of every selected account according to its type (the media and journalists).

R serves as the fundamental condition for the conversational speaking and listening process to take place; it points out relational symmetry, recognition, an interest-oriented attitude, and a listening proneness to what other users say on Twitter. The enhancing of communication-conversation is obtained from the comparison of R values between the two user-groups. Higher R values indicate enhancing; close-to-zero values, polluting.

Findings

A (Activity) was calculated as a difference of the amount of tweets published within two weeks, the "measure time window" (i.e., the difference within actual-week and previous-week) for all Twitter accounts. The superuser for each type shows the activity level in the number of tweets for a given week. P (Popularity) measure is the quotient between the amount of referenced/mentions and the difference of tweets for a given week. The calculated data shows the amount of tweets that replies to/mentions the account, including the symbol "@", that is to say, how many users mention the analyzed user. This is standardized by the amount of tweets published within two weeks to maintain measuring time window.

The aggregate data obtained from A and P along the complete observation time is:

Table 2. Aggregation for Collected Records along the Whole Observation Period

Superuser profile	Activity amount of tweets	Popularity referenced/mentions
Media accounts	13711	3.28
Journalists' accounts	16244	1.52

Source: Author

The first column (*Table 2*) shows the addition of every tweet from every profile during the 12 weeks of observation. The second column shows the amount of user-mentions with regard to the amount of tweets, which unveils that for the media outlets' group profile, every tweet was mentioned more than three times. In the case of the journalists, every tweet was mentioned about one and a half times.

As for category R (Reciprocity), values coming from the replies/referencing and retweeting actions were analyzed. Those figures were standardized by the amount of tweets. And as for values coming from friends, standardization was achieved via the amount of followers. In order to represent the variables that make up the indicator of enhancing/polluting of communication, figures were designed under this scheme (APR Graphic):
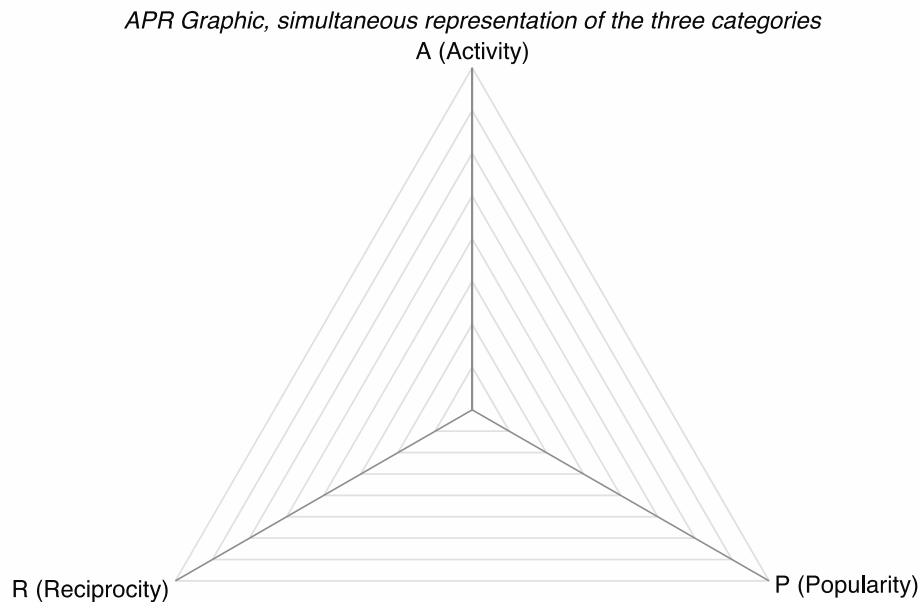

APR Graphic, simultaneous representation of the three categories
A (Activity)

R (Reciprocity)   P (Popularity)

Figure 1. APR graphic, simultaneous representation of the three categories.
Source: Author

The amount of replies/referencing is linked to R through the quotient of the addition of users' replies/referencing and amount of tweets in a given week for that group of users. Therefore, the superuser shows the amount of tweets that reply or quote other users including the symbol "@" at the beginning of the tweet. This is a relevant measure due to Twitter users' tacit rules and common practices when one user seeks to answer to another. Just as the data linked to P, this is standardized by the weekly amount of tweets in order to maintain the measuring time window. The collected variable data for superusers is shown in the chart below:

Table 3. Percentage of Replies/Referencing on the Collected Amount of Tweets
during the Observation Period.

Superuser profile	Reciprocity referenced/mentions
Media accounts	0.31%
Journalists' accounts	31.76%

Source: Author

The amount of direct replies to the users' profile is not highly significant for the media accounts when comparing them to the amount of tweets (one reply for every 322 tweets). On the contrary, the amount of messages specifically addressed to journalists is virtually a third of the amount of tweets they post during the same period of time (one reply for every three tweets).
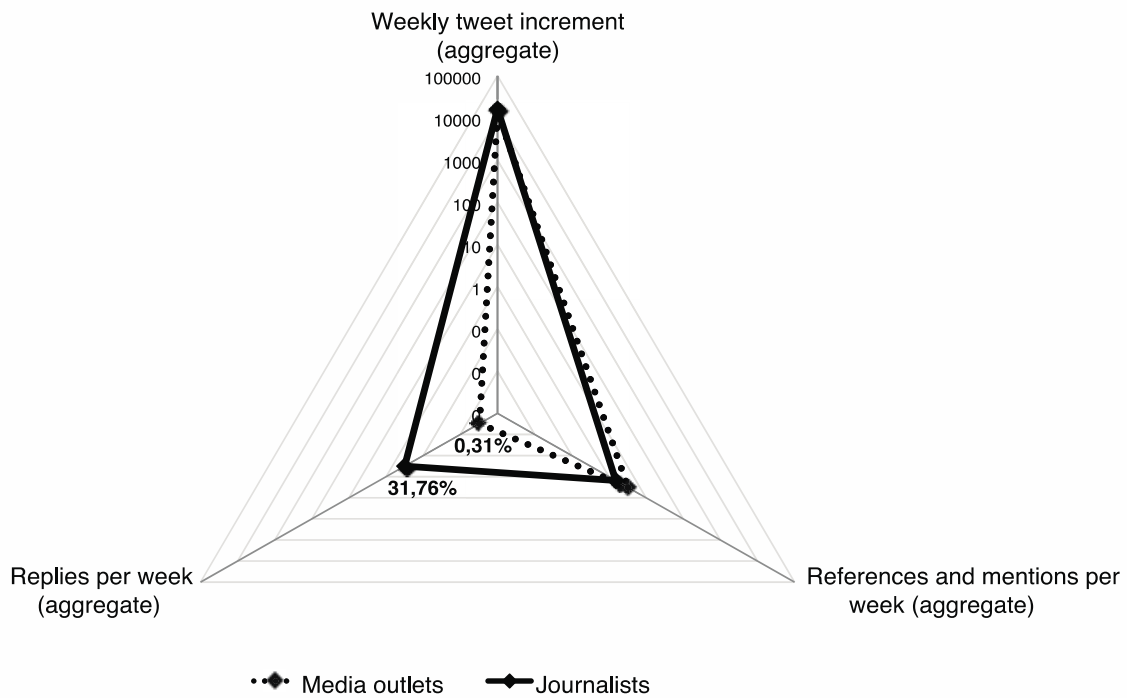

Figure 2. APR Graphic for the reciprocity variable
"weekly collected answers for media and journalists."
Source: Author

The evolution of replies/referencing along the observation shows a minimum of 20% and a maximum close to 45%; that is to say, several accounts have directly replied around a fifth and close to a half of the messages the journalists posted on their accounts.

The amount of retweeting is linked to R through the quotient between the addition of tweets coming from both the media and journalists accounts posting another account's messages during a week's time by the amount of tweets in a week for that group of users. The collected variable data for superusers is shown in Table 4:

Table 4. Percentage of Retweets on the Collected Amount of Tweets during the Observation Period.

Superuser profile	Reciprocity Retweeting
Media accounts	0.99%
Journalists' accounts	6.34%

Source: Author

The amount of messages coming from other accounts and being reposted by the media is not relevant when comparing it to the journalists: over 600% in comparison (*Figure 3*). This points out that the observed journalists are more inclined to repost messages generated by other people, a not-frequent pattern of behavior within the media.
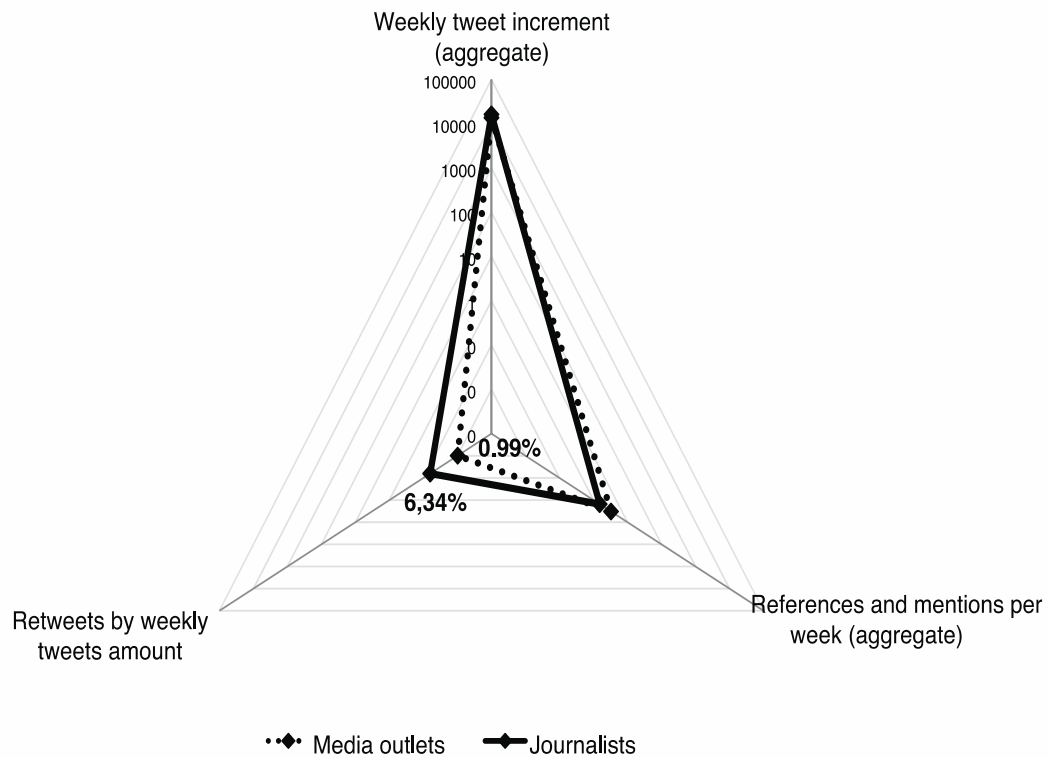
Figure 3. APR graphic for the reciprocity variable "retweets (on other messages)
on the amount of weekly tweets."
Source: Author

The maximum and minimum values of the variable show an unsteady evolution during the 12 weeks of observation, but these values are always significantly higher in the case of the journalists when comparing them to the media. The analyzed media retweets one message coming from other users every 101 tweets, while journalists perform this action more considerably (one every 15) within the whole of the collected data from the 12 observation weeks.

The amount of friends is associated to R via the quotient obtained from dividing the amount of users from media and journalists accounts that follow each other by other accounts. The variable average for superusers during the 12 weeks of observation is shown in the Table 5.

Table 5 Percentage of Friends on the Collected Amount of Followers
during the Observation Period.

Superuser profile	Followers average	Reciprocity Friends
Media accounts	346418	0.06%
Journalists' accounts	78223	5.16%

Source: Author

The amount of accounts being followed reciprocally on the side of the media is virtually zero when comparing it to the journalists' side. This means the journalists keep, in a way, reciprocity with regard to the mutual-following of other accounts.
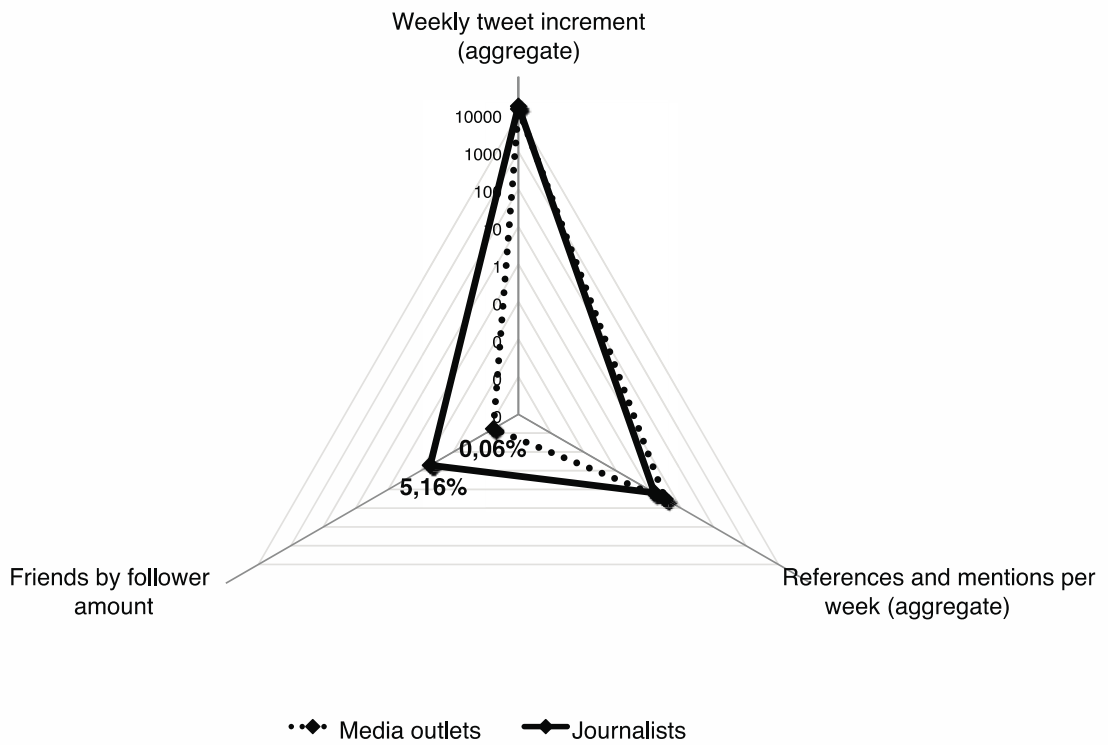

Figure 4. APR graphic for the reciprocity variable "amount of mutual followers (friends)."
Source: Author.

The evolution of this variable throughout the observation weeks unveils steady high and low rates. The media outlets follow a non-significant amount of accounts following them as well (one every 1,666 followers on average), while journalists perform this action at a higher rate (one every 19 on average), when considering the 12 observation weeks.

Conclusion

The R (Reciprocity) levels linked to the measures show a relatively stable behavior for every superuser profile. Altogether, the selection of observed Argentine media exhibits close-to-zero R values. In comparison, journalists show significantly higher R values, even when both profiles show similar A (Activity) levels during the observation. It can then be stated that the Twitter behavior of the observed media outlets is polluting in communicative-conversational terms. On the other hand, the analyzed Argentine journalists comply with the conditions of a possible conversation-emergence. Their behavior, hence, is enhancing the conversational exchange on Twitter.

It can be said, then, that media, due to their lack of R, do not contribute to the construction of a public deliberative-conversational sphere. They join in Twitter to spread information that may as well be retweeted by other users as a hot conversational topic, that is to say, setting up a news agenda but without performing exchanges. This can be seen in the high P (Popularity) levels. In fact, the observed media outlets seem to use Twitter as yet another platform for massive distribution of the contents they produce. Even if they develop an active networking presence, the media work under traditional patterns, practicing the act of *saying* over the act of *listening*.

This opens up a critical perspective pertaining to the media's aspiration to reach communicative legitimacy in 2.0 environments, especially if they are not willing to join conversations. In other words, should the media adjust to the networks' culture of sharing or, on the contrary, should they stop joining these platforms altogether?

A possible understanding of the virtually zero values for R, obtained from the observed media, may be found on the scale of the followers (which they perceive to be an "audience"). How do high levels of A and P influence the feasibility of conversations? This is an issue that requires further exploration, as those media outlets with a low level of tweets and followers did not show a dissimilar behavior than the one observed in the superuser. Another likely explanation is that conversations unfold under a personalized way, based on symmetry among users, but it does not take place between users and an organization, even though actual people manage these media accounts. If this were the case, a new strategic horizon would be on the rise to validate media presence on Twitter. Media companies would be able to send out messages via the personal accounts of their journalists, which would also modify ways of mediating, so that the relationship between users and organizations would be mediated by their journalists linked to their followers.

However, an advantage to the journalists' prominence, to the detriment of media outlets, is that journalists are able to connect with users who *do not read* the newspapers where they work, while conversing on Twitter. This leads us to reconsider the level of editorial autonomy journalists possess in

comparison to their media outlets, a topic currently under discussion. Many media companies have already implemented certain regulations on journalist autonomy, whether monitoring regulations or others related to editorial criteria.

With this methodology, a set of related issues can be tackled in the future: if native media outlets work under the same behavioral patterns than those migrant media in terms of enhancing/polluting of communication on Twitter; if the type of media (print, audiovisual, digital), or its size and scope, influences their communicative behavior; if the area in which journalists work or their age correlates with reciprocity; or if the normative and cultural context in different nations or regions frame different communicative attitudes between the media and journalists.

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