

Watching and Tweeting: Youngsters' Responses to Media Representations of Resistance

Ver y tuitear: reacciones de los jóvenes ante la representación mediática de la resistencia

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ABSTRACT

There has been considerable debate about the potential of social media to promote new democratic practices and active citizenship. However, the participation of young people in social networks seems to go in a more playful than ideological direction. This article discusses youngsters' activity in Twitter simultaneously with the television viewing of two films: «V for Vendetta» and «The Hunger Games». As both films address social and political issues, we intend to identify whether youngsters referred to ideological issues in tweets generated during their viewing, and whether these tweets lead to joint reflection on the current social situation. 1,400 tweets posted during the broadcasts of the films in Spanish TV in 2014 were collected for this purpose. The encoding of messages is carried out following a «coding and counting» approach, typical of the studies of Computer-mediated communication. Then messages are classified based on their content. The results obtained indicate that messages about the social and political content of the films are almost non-existent, since young people prefer to comment on other aspects of the films or their lives. The conclusions have a bearing on the importance of considering popular culture, for its social and political implications, as a motive for reflection, and the importance of boosting a critical media education.

RESUMEN

Mucho se ha hablado del potencial de las redes sociales para fomentar nuevas prácticas democráticas y de ciudadanía activa. Sin embargo, la participación de los jóvenes parece ir en una dirección más lúdica que ideológica. Se analizan sus intervenciones en Twitter como parte de la situación de visionados de dos películas en televisión: «a Vendetta» y «Los juegos del hambre». Como en ambas se abordan temas sociales y políticos, a través del análisis de los tuits generados durante su visionado se pretende identificar si en ellos se hace referencia a cuestiones ideológicas y si estas sirven de revulsivo para la reflexión conjunta sobre la situación social y política actual. Para ello, se recogen 1.400 tuits escritos durante las emisiones en cadenas españolas de las dos películas en 2014. Se procede a la codificación de los mensajes siguiendo el enfoque «coding y counting», propio de los estudios de comunicación mediada por ordenador, y se clasifican los mensajes según su contenido. Los resultados obtenidos indican que los mensajes sobre el contenido social y político de los filmes son casi inexistentes puesto que los jóvenes prefieren comentar otros aspectos de las películas o de sus vidas. Las conclusiones alcanzadas tras este análisis inciden en la importancia de considerar la cultura popular, por sus implicaciones sociales y políticas, como motivo de reflexión, y de potenciar una educación mediática capacitadora.

KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Social networks, civil society, young viewers, active reception, multiscreen viewing, interactive television, social interaction, collective intelligence.

Redes sociales, sociedad civil, jóvenes espectadores, recepción activa, sociedad multipantalla, televisión interactiva, interacción social, inteligencia colectiva.

1. Introduction

1.1. Social media and democratic practices

In *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Henry Jenkins asks this question: «When will we be capable of participating within the democratic process with the same ease that we have come to participate in the imaginary realms constructed through popular culture?» (2008: 234). His question stems from the passion that popular culture raises in a large part of the population, feeding on amazing book or film stories to the point of appropriating them and making them part of their everyday lives (Sorrells & Sekimoto, 2015). Jenkins examines the effects that a similar response would have in the sphere of politics, leading beyond the detachment and alienation that come as people's most frequent responses to political processes.

This paper has a similar starting point: people are increasingly using the elements of popular culture to engage in conversation with fans of the same cultural products in media environments. Thus, they give rise to the emergence of affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) in which individuals who have not met are drawn together by strong shared interests. Websites and social media have contributed to the development of affinity spaces by making participation and message exchange easier. Twitter, for instance, offers users hashtags for the grouping of messages about a given topic and their differentiation from messages about other topics.

Although Gee analyses affinity spaces in connection with video gamers, the term has been applied to book or film fan communities, maker movement groups interested in photography, video or the digital arts (Tyner, Gutiérrez, & Torrego, 2015), or even the use of social media for social or political activism. For a few years now, social networking sites and messengers have been used to build social movements and engage in social or political activities, including consumer boycotts, protests and demonstrations (Langman, 2005; Wasserman, 2007; Martin, 2015). They are apt tools to promote collective identities and connect people involved in similar causes, restoring the voice of the silenced masses (Della-Porta & Mosca, 2005; Della-Porta, 2015). In Spain, social and digital media made possible for young people to mobilise and build the social movement known as 15M. As observed by Hernández, Robles y Martínez (2013), youngsters re-appropriated these media to participate in public communication, creating new perspectives in civic education.

According to Sunstein (2007), virtual communities are organised around political or ideological themes,

rather than cultural ones. However, although social media have often been used for political purposes – contributing to trigger major political events like the Arab Spring, protests against the Iraq War or 15M, most people engage in communities to talk about their interests or hobbies (Jenkins, 2008). As analysed by Jenkins, participation in affinity spaces to discuss works of popular culture is easier, for it requires less commitment and responsibility than political choices and appears to be removed from the world of politics. In fact, Jenkins insists that the fantasy in the worlds created in popular culture can be a pretext or a starting point to deal with political issues, or even contribute to change one's stance or overcome ideological barriers.

Furthermore, participation in social media has changed democratic practices and altered state-society relations. In the past decade, there have been countless works on the democratising potential of social media (Hindman, 2008). This has stirred debate over the advantages of social media in encouraging social or political participation. Koku, Nazer, & Wellman (2001), Díez-Rodríguez (2003), or Castells (2004) emphasise the inconclusive nature of data in connection with the potential of technology to make citizen participation a richer experience. Atton (2002) described social media as double-edged, contributing to equality while reproducing the power asymmetries in the reality of society. Díez, Fernández & Anguita (2011) wonder whether the new forms of communication through social media are empowering youngsters, or rather, failing to encourage discussion and active citizenship. The authors think social media do have a large potential for communication and participation but may be also at the service of a specific form of democracy.

1.2. Two dystopias: «V for Vendetta» and «The Hunger Games»

The two films on which this paper focuses, «V for Vendetta» (McTeigue, 2006) and «The Hunger Games» (Ross, 2012), like the books they are based on (Moore & Lloyd, 2005; Collins, 2008), have a strong political component that could invite more serious reflection on political problems and current social issues. Both are set in dystopian universes where revolution is brewing against totalitarian regimes that use terror and control mechanisms to curtail people's freedom. Both societies, which at first appear to be accepted by citizens, are in fact the result of a dictator's manoeuvring and control of the media to deprive people of their civil rights. Both V and Katniss Everdeen have been ill-treated by the system, so they decide to stand up against it, becoming leaders of a revolution as

they are joined by other citizens. Both films bring dominant capitalism under attack, having the audience witness two (somewhat tamed) revolutions as they could look like in a postmodern world (Mateos-Aparicio, 2014). Both films have lent contemporary society icons used in riots and rebellions around the globe: the Vendetta mask, worn by the members of the Anonymous group and by demonstrators and protesters against oppression, and Katniss's three finger salute, which became a form of silent resistance to the military coup in Thailand.

Discussions of these two films in affinity spaces could move youngsters to ideological or political reflection, and to subsequent action against social injustice. In the transmedia analysed here, the potential of social media for activism and social change converges with the power of mass media (particularly film and television) to create states of opinion. As pointed out by Giroux (2003) and other authors, films do more than just entertain; they can stir desires and help build or internalise ideologies that constitute the historical realities of power. Moreover, they play an educational role, raising awareness and turning spectators into critical actors who can understand and analyse the aesthetic and political meaning of images.

In the past few years, many novels and graphic novels were published narrating dystopian stories for young adults. Green (2008) associates the boom of these kind of stories with the likelihood that the future is dystopian as a result of contemporary unsustainable lifestyles. Basu, Broad, & Hintz (2013) analyse young adult dystopias, drawing attention to the dynamics between didacticism and escapism, political radicalism and conservatism, and other main discussions. In their anthology, the authors offer insight into this burgeoning genre, understanding it as a phenomenon that is political, cultural, aesthetic and commercial.

Several authors have tackled the issue of the educational element versus the successful formula in young adult dystopias. Simmons (2012) argues that «The Hunger Games» can contribute to stimulate social action in community and encourage young audiences to stand up against injustice and savagery to build a fairer world. Other thinkers (Fisher, 2012; Duane, 2014) refer to the situations of oppression and

domination described in the novel, while Latham & Hollister (2014), Ringlestein (2013) and Muller (2012) criticise the manipulation of information, comparing it to the instruments used in today's world to control the population. Ott (2010) explains that when «V for Vendetta» was premiered in the US, a debate ensued over American policies, arguing that the film stirs audiences away from political apathy and into democratic resistance and rebellion against states that attempt to hush dissidence. Call (2008) sees in the

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film's iconography an effective introduction to the symbolic language of postmodern anarchism.

Against the authors who emphasise the educational purpose of the films, others (Benson, 2013; Sloan, Sawyer, Warner & Jones, 2014) criticise the excessive use of violence in the films, which they consider to be the cause of insensitivity to oppression or abuse.

Based on the analyses found in specialised literature, this paper aims at answering the question whether the messages posted by youngsters watching the films have to do with ideological thinking that could lead to joint reflection on the current social and political situation. To do this, it examines the content of the tweets posted when the films were being aired. Twitter is both an apt tool for the development of affinity spaces and a fine example of transmedia pop culture that is combined with television in a multi-screen environment that is bound to alter the audience's creation of meaning.

2. Materials and methods

Our research approach focuses on computer-mediated communication, defined as verbal interaction in a digital environment (Herring, 2004). Empirical observations are made of a corpus of Twitter messa-

ges, framed within computer-mediated discourse analysis.

2.1. Corpus

Our corpus is made of the messages posted on Twitter when the films under study were being aired, taking the social audience into account – another key component in convergence culture (Jenkins, 2008). The combination of social media and second screens (tablets, smartphones, television) produces an audience that interacts in social media. This may lead to a

Cultural products are not mere entertainment or ideological vessels but rather complex artefacts embodying social and political discourse. As such, they should be analysed and understood within the social and political environment where they are produced, circulated and received. Being part of this environment and partly responsible for the people who should transform it, schools should take on media education among its priorities.

horizontal relationship between users who are physically apart watching the same television broadcast (Quintas & González, 2014). To make comments, users tend to use hashtags that single their messages out. In our corpus, the hashtags are #vdevendetta for «V for Vendetta» and #losjuegosdelhambre for «The Hunger Games».

The tweets in our corpus were posted when «V for Vendetta» was aired by Neox on 23 July 2014 (408,000 viewers; 2.8% shared tweets) and when «The Hunger Games» was premiered by Antena 3 (4,513,000 viewers, 24.3% share, 48,152 tweets) (source: Kantar Media, 2014). The tweets were collected with Tweet Archivist, a Twitter analytics tool to search, archive, analyse, visualise, save and export tweets based on a search term or hashtag. This software uses the API to create files with data containing a hashtag or word. Due to API constraints, not every tweet can be stored. The corpus, however, contains 2800 tweets (1,400 with the hashtag #los-

juegosdelhambre and 1,400 with #vdevendetta). Retweets were not included, as they are re-posts of messages posted earlier. Our time frame was the days on which the films were aired, until one hour after they ended.

Regarding the individuals posting the tweets in the corpus, Twitter users are not required to indicate their age in their profiles. 1,000 users tweeting about the films were chosen at random on the basis of their profile pictures, the contents of their messages (mentions of parents or siblings, of school or university, etc.) and the photos they post. These criteria helped us to select teenagers and young adults.

2.2. Methods

The tweets were analysed through «coding and counting», a quantitative method used in computer-mediated communication consisting in encoding the data and then counting the occurrence of a coded item, together with content analysis. The occurrence of a topic in the corpus analysed can be used to make adequate statistical calculations for a deeper understanding of the relationship between variables in the phenomenon being analysed.

The coding and counting method requires key concepts to be operationalisable in empirically measurable terms (Herring, 2004). So we defined the concepts and developed specific codes that could be counted.

The categories used to classify the tweets were:

- A) Categories related to the content of the films:
 - A1) References to plot events or facts in the film.
 - A2) References to film characters.
 - A3) References to feelings or empathy with an aspect of the film.
 - A4) Expressions denoting like or dislike for the film.
- B) Categories unrelated to the content of the films:
 - B1) Information about the viewing environment.
 - B2) Comments about television or Twitter.
 - B3) Comments unrelated to the film.
- C) Categories related to the social and political element in the films:
 - C1) Social/political quotations from the film.
 - C2) Connections between the film and the current social/political situation.
 - C3) Other social/political reflections.

All these categories were gathered in an analysis file tested for data record accuracy with other films in order to make all the necessary coding changes before using the file for this research.

One of the disadvantages of using an original and innovative research method is the risk of reductionism vis-à-vis of the reality being studied. There are also the limitations in the analysis of the texts, as every discourse is underpinned by social factors we have no knowledge of. So, the empirical approach to text analysis, based on texts and texts alone forces the researchers to infer social and cognitive information that is far from self-evident.

3. Results

Based on the results obtained after data coding, it is striking that the categories with the smallest number of tweets are those related to the social and political element in the films (C1, C2, C3) (figure 1). Although in «V for Vendetta» they account for 27% of total messages, in «The Hunger Games», the percentage is really low (1%).

As shown in figure 2, the messages about «V for Vendetta» include 178 tweets quoting lines from the film with social or political content, e.g. «[F]airness, justice, and freedom are more than just words, they are perspectives», «An idea can still change the world» or «People should not be afraid of their governments. Government should be afraid of their people». In addition, there are 71 messages connecting the plot to elements of the current social/political situation, as in: «Watching #vdevendetta, I can't but think about

media control, misinformation and the #CanonAEDE [Spanish IP law]»; «We need a speech like that in all TV channels in this country, so that people understand #vdevendetta»; «Has V just said, #LeyMordaza [Spanish Law for Citizen Safety and Protection that is considered to curtail freedom of speech]? #vdevendetta». There are 124 messages referring to the political/social element in the film, expressing a variety of opinions. Some users praise the film for its power to invite reflection and change, and to make a deep ideological impact: «Everyone should have the principles shown in this film. #vdevendetta»; «#vdevendetta: What a film! It makes you think. We should be inspired by it in everyday life»; «What are we waiting for to make a change? If we start moving, they'll start falling. #vdevendetta». Others complain about inaction in the real world: «Sadly, the people are united only in films like #vdevendetta»; «Those who like #vdevendetta and think of themselves as revolutionaries, and then don't care about what's going on around them»; «Couch potatoes watching #vdevendetta. #BigFan». About 50% of the tweets in this category criticise the film and the ideas it conveys: «#vdevendetta is such a boring film, aimed at indoctrinating dupes into violence and communism. Be carefull!»; «C'mon, guys, we're gonna be anti-system anarchists without a clue. C'mon! #vdevendetta»; «#vdevendetta is an anti-system, anarchist 'candy' for teenagers».

As to «The Hunger Games», there are almost no tweets referring to the film's social/political content (only 21; cf. Figure 3). Likewise, social/political quotations (category C1.) are virtually non-existent (5), as

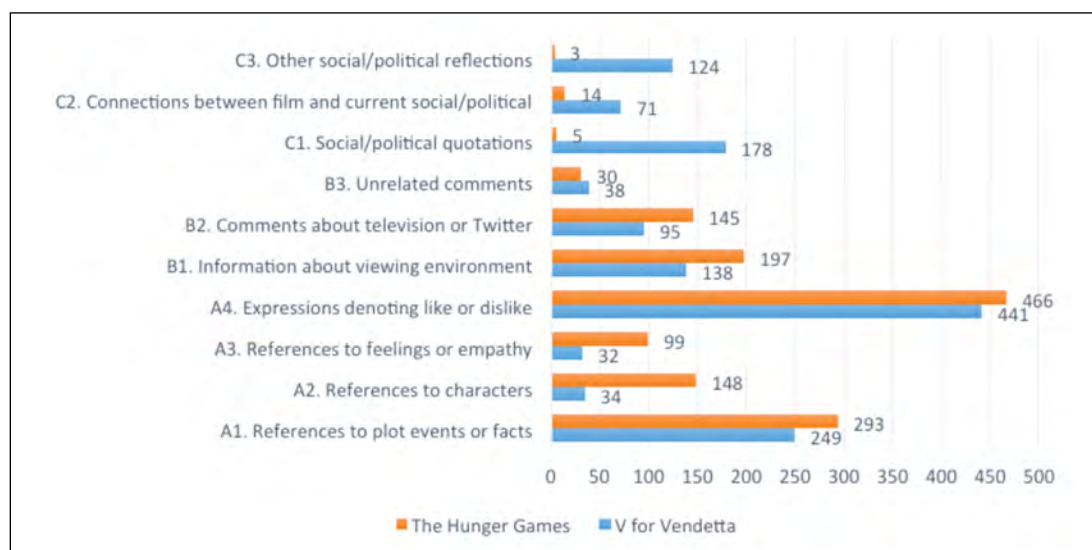


Figure 1: Number of tweets by category.

opposed to the «V for Vendetta» case; all of them are based on Katniss's line, «I'm more than just a piece in their Games». In the category of tweets comparing the film to the current situation (C2.), there are 14 messages: «In #losjuegosdelhambre, rulers change the rules whenever they want. For «cashflow» and money. If we tighten the rope, we can make it. Together»; «Sorry for being dramatic, but the society in #losjuegosdelhambre is quite similar to Spain today: submissive and servile»; «Don't you feel that in Spain we're also playing #losjuegosdelhambre?». The messages focusing on social/political aspects of the film are rare too (3): «#losjuegosdelhambre, or how to subtly tell the people that the solution lies in rebellion»; «We're actually living in #losjuegosdelhambre. There'll come a time when we stand up against unfair rules against all Capitols»; «What's really scary about this film is that it might not be so far away from the reality around us. Just think about it... #losjuegosdelhambre».

More than half of the tweets refer to film content (categories A1, A2, A3, A4; 53% in «V for Vendetta» and 73% in «The Hunger Games»). The subcategory with the largest number (a third of tweets for both films) is the group of messages of like and dislike (A4). Tweets like the following are rather frequent: «Loving #losjuegosdelhambre!»; «#losjuegosdelhambre, what a great movie!»; «I've loved #vdevendetta: I'd heartily recommend it». Some of the tweets also express dislike, but they are a small portion. The rest of the tweets in this category are about film scenes or facts (A1), feelings triggered by the films (A3) or film characters (A2). Most of them contain trivial information or use the films to make superficial comments: «I'd rather go to #losjuegosdelhambre than to school tomorrow»; «That machine I'd use to make cute guys. Trees, panthers, stupid things? Get off! #losjue-

gosdelhambre»; «#losjuegosdelhambre is when you are hungry at midnight and open the cupboard and all you have it fattening food and you still give it a go».

Finally, 20% of the tweets about «V for Vendetta» and 27% of the posts about «The Hunger Games» are not related to the films themselves. Instead, the users make comments about their own lives or related topics (like Twitter itself, television, or other cultural products; categories B1, B2, B3) based on the films. For both films, the subcategory with the largest number of tweets is that of comments about the viewing environment or experiences associated with the films (B1): «Because of #losjuegosdelhambre, I've bitten the nail of my right little finger too short!»; «So here I am, watching #losjuegosdelhambre instead of getting ready for class early tomorrow». «There's no better way of calling the day off than by watching #vdevendetta».

Remarkably, these messages trigger virtually no interactions (less than 1%). Most of the tweets are not retweeted or favoured, and they seldom get replies. There is no communication between users. Senders post their messages without expecting a response from other users.

4. Discussion and conclusions

New consumers are always connected. They are highly visible and active. The reception and consumption of media contents is an active and collective process, as shown by the large number of tweets posted during the films. Message content analysis shows that

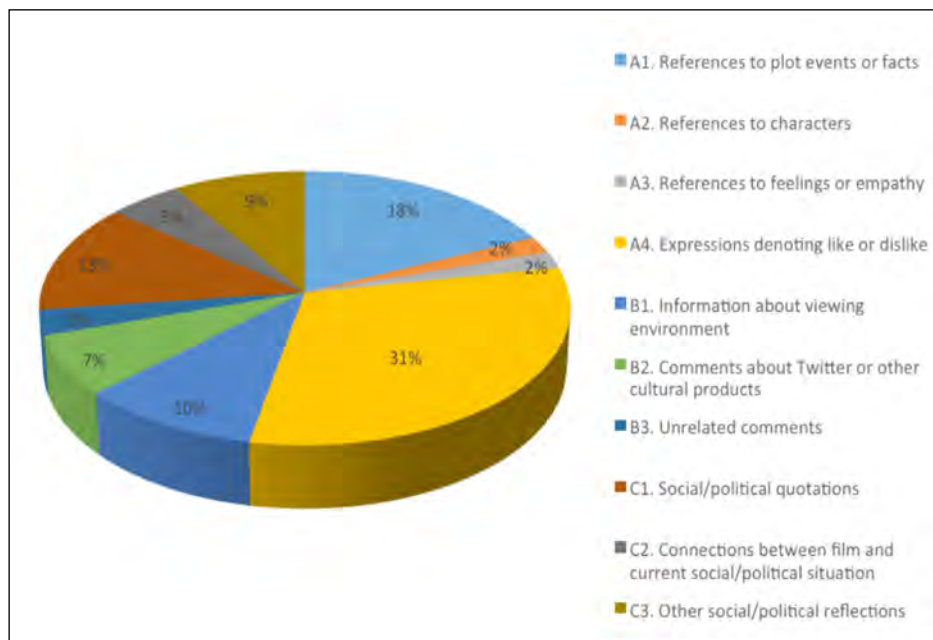


Figure 2: Percentage of messages by category for «V for Vendetta».

there is an urgent need among youngsters to identify themselves as fans of a cultural product and inform their followers of their likes and interests in cultural consumption. Moreover, they do not expect other users to reply or respond, even if they share those likes and interests. Thus, their texts can be framed within the participatory culture (Jenkins, 2008), without an emphasis on creation or mutual learning. Consequently, no affinity spaces are developed among users, given the unwillingness to share, discuss or become

attached to other users. Similarly, no knowledge communities emerge (Lévy, 1997) for the discussion and collective development of topic –or interest– sharing follower communities as an alternative to media power.

Although scholars have emphasised the ability of dystopian films or novels like «V for Vendetta» and «The Hunger Games» to encourage critical thinking and social action, tweet analysis shows that youngsters have other interests in relation with pop culture. In the case of these two films, they feel attracted to their charismatic characters and exciting plots (where adventure and intrigue are key ingredients), but that is all. They seldom go beyond the realm of entertainment.

Twitter appears, then, as a tool to express one's cultural preferences and interests, particularly regarding cultural products in vogue. Even though it has been used to build networks of people interested in social movements and collective intelligence on a variety of social and political issues, in the cases analysed, it is mainly used to keep users and their followers connected to share information on cultural patterns and preferences.

It seems rather obvious that social media can be a powerful communication tool for citizen engagement in situations of conflict, oppression and resistance.

However, the inclusion of these situations in the media or as products of pop culture does not lead to similar political or social thinking or even to social outrage vented through the Internet. Social media

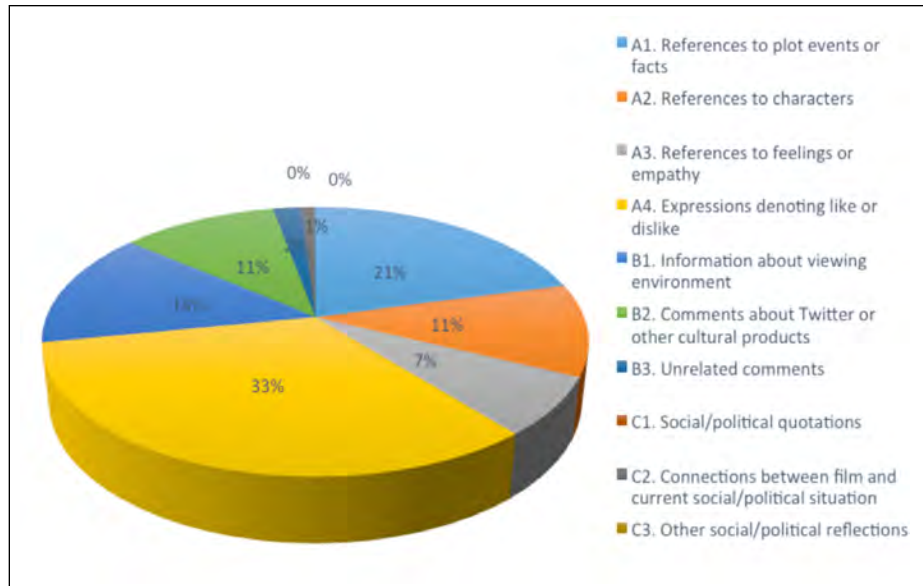


Figure 3: Percentage of messages by category for «The Hunger Games».

interventions by youngsters watching situations of injustice confine to the viewing environment itself or focus on shallow details. As a result, the social network becomes a tool for connection rather than reflection.

The tweets posted in those circumstances are spontaneous rather than being the result of brooding. This may be one of the reasons why references to the social/political element in the films are so scarce. Even when these references exist, they are superficial, only reproducing popular quotations. Some of the users note this, accusing fellow Twitter users of being «couch potatoes» daydreaming about the revolution, making frivolous complaints and being fully incapable of sponsoring change in the societies where they live.

Hindman (2008) asks a fundamental question: What kind of learning and citizenships are social media contributing to build? Are people really being empowered or is it just an illusion of power compounded by the trivialisation of public commitment? Based on the results of our study, we agree with Tilly (2004), Tarrow (2005) and Díez, Fernández & Anguita (2011) that even when social media messages can reach an amazing number of people and thus contribute to social mobilisation, in the end they tend to have a limited outcome. In the repercussions of the films studied in this paper, they include a large number of

unrelated, disconnected messages that cannot be processed and thus cannot lead to organisation and action.

Popular culture –films like «V for Vendetta» and «The Hunger Games»– affects socialisation and education processes. It should therefore be approached by media education to help consumers understand its meaning and role in society. According to Kellner (2011), cultural products are not mere entertainment or ideological vessels but rather complex artefacts embodying social and political discourse. As such, they should be analysed and understood within the social and political environment where they are produced, circulated and received.

Being part of this environment and partly responsible for the people who should transform it, schools should take on media education among its priorities.

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