Beyond the "sewer": online media forums as shapers of digital public opinion in the framework of Colombian peace talks (2012)

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Abstract: Comments to online news are complex spaces for discussion of political life. Its informal, free and anonymous nature, promote participation dynamics of interest for the research on the formation of public opinion on the Internet. This paper analyzes participation dynamics among the users of these media spaces during the preparatory stage of the peace process in Colombia in September and October 2012. A sample of the forums associated to thirteen news stories from three Colombian online newspapers (*eltiempo.com*; *elespectador.com* and *elcolombiano.com.co*) was analyzed using qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative analysis considers discursive aspects of the users from the idea of "mundane citizenship" raised by Maria Bakardjieva. As for the quantitative perspective, aspects such as concentration of contributions from the commentators and the frequency of their interventions were taken into consideration. The most prolific commentators were identified and their different participation strategies were analyzed. The conclusions raise future research questions, such as the influence of the moderation strategies used by online media on the behavior of the users of the forums.

Keywords: Mundane citizenship, online discussion forums, comments, participation.

1. Introduction

Since the official introduction of Internet in Colombia (1994), its use has not stopped to grow. According to the Ministry of Technologies of information and telecommunications of Colombia (MinTIC) there were more than 8 million of Internet users (both desktop and mobile) in the second trimester of 2013 (MinTic, 2013). Of course, the real number of users is higher, since every subscription allows Internet access to one or more people, for example when a connection provides service to a family or a firm's employees. According to the Digital Consume survey conducted by MinTIC in 2014, 80% of Colombians use Internet (MinTic, 2014). The same survey states that Colombians use Internet mostly for fun, but also to have access to different information media.

The omnipresence of Internet has changed the way citizens connect to big public opinion issues. And it is precisely the direct, spontaneous and, in most cases, anonymous way in which citizens participate and discuss issues of public interest in online media, the responsible for opening open new investigative lines on the construction of public opinion and the role of digital journalism in this process. Whether from social networks, online communities, blogs or even semi-institutional and online media forums spaces, dynamics of opinion among netizens strengthen public debates because the contributions of users offer a deliberative potential as well as discursive diversity (Sindorf 2013; Freelon 2010). These interactions also reveal social contradictions and break up institutionalized monopolies of public opinion promoted through traditional channels (Bakardjieva, 2011, 2012).

Online media forums in particular can be understood as opinion micro communities or microspheres shaped around a published news. This micro community is formed by the contribution of commenters, who publish their interventions, sometimes in response to the original story, and sometimes as a reaction to previous comments posted on the forum.

From this perspective the present paper undertakes the examination and observation of Colombian online media forums in the context of the announcement by Juan Manuel Santos' government of starting peace talks with Colombian guerrillas, with the goal of finishing a more than sixty-years-old conflict. This research starts from the premise that although the dynamics of virtual participation is not consistent with the ideals of "civility" expected in traditional public debate, it creates necessary citizen opinion scenarios where users can express their more open and unorthodox political perceptions, potentiating discussion.

In order to understand this phenomenon, nothing more fitting than the news (released on August 27, 2012 to national and international media) that President Santos administration was about to initiate talks with FARC guerillas[1]. As part of the announcement, Santos also discussed the possibility of a peace process with ELN guerrillas, and stated that no part of Colombian territory would be cleared for dialogues. He also confirmed that Colombian army operations against guerillas will be working as usual.

Reactions of all nature to these presidential statements were immediate. This was no surprise, given the history of failed talks with the FARC guerrillas in 2000 and, especially the rather belligerent position by Santos when he was Defense Minister in the government of his predecessor as president, Álvaro Uribe Vélez.

Politicians took different positions. The more radical was precisely that of Álvaro Uribe, who after an eight years crusade against peace dialogues with FARC guerrillas felt betrayed by his former ally and minister[2]. But not all responses were negative, as there were some estates that supported the government's initiative.

Meanwhile mainstream press and digital media exploded in a profusion of information that was the subject of many comments from users of online forums. Websites of *El Tiempo*, *El Espectador* and *El Colombiano* newspapers published thirteen news on the subject between September 5th and 13th, 2012[3]. Every one of these news stories had an associated online forum where users participated in writing, either about the news or about other previously published comments.

Section 2 of this paper is a literature review, in which theoretical tools are mentioned for later use in the analysis of the corpus. Section 3 shows the main research hypotheses, and section 4 contains the different quantitative and qualitative methodologies to be used. Main findings from the corpus' analysis are shown in section 5. Finally, section 6 presents conclusions.

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[1] These peace negotiations are currently held in Cuba. It is the fourth peace attempt since the eighties and its main goal is to finish a more than sixty-years-old conflict. FARC guerrillas are the oldest insurgent army in the world and all previous peace processes have ended without reaching the conflict's end.

2 In Semana magazine (September 4, 2012) the former president said: "FARC guerrillas payed 1 billion pesos for the assassination attempt against Fernando Londoño, which was perpetrated by criminal gangs. ¿What is the difference between them? Today they hand over the country to FARC guerrillas; tomorrow criminal gangs will think they have the same right. This is a bad precedent".

3 Data gathered by the Research Student Group of Social Communication & Journalism Faculty of Universidad Externado de Colombia. The group had the following members: Stefanía Herrera Baquero, Sebastián Acosta Alzate, Paula Bolívar Pinilla, Susana Buitrago Betancourt, Daniel Salazar Castellanos and Elena Trujillo Calderón.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Approaches to the study of online forums

Internet discussion communities reveal new approaches to both political and civic participation. One of the main reasons for this phenomenon is that current digital media ecosystem and social networking allow alternative encounters with the world of political ideas and great debates. This fosters a kind of "personal discovery" and multiple exposures of users to these areas, a "personalized political communication" (Nielsen, 2010). In a network community, any individual can use its nickname as a cover (i.e. a virtual identity) and let know her most intimate perceptions and opinions to other individuals or even larger agents within the civil society: interest groups, state institutions, political parties, companies, media conglomerates and other macro actors present in the network. The evermore increasing naturalization of Internet fosters the circulation of ideas and direct, horizontal and non-hierarchical (unmediated) contacts among social actors. Feelings and opinions are interwoven with speeches and performances of institutional agents of this big network.

Citizenship is therefore "co-produced" by these actors not only by the existence of mundane or specialized tools to do it (Nielsen, 2010), but because ductility increases by the interweaving of perceptions, opinions and political attitudes from individuals with the speeches from traditional and institutional political actors (Bakardjieva, 2012). Social spaces to discuss public affairs are less confined and in turn netizens have not only the opportunity of highlighting and legitimizing their opinions but also to find support beyond their "private kitchen tables" (Bakardjieva, 2012: 1363). From this standpoint authors such as Bakardjieva (2012) and Nielsen (2010) support the "mundane" status of participation.

For Bakardjieva, digital citizenship is mundane because it breaks with the proposed formalities in the exercising of citizenship according to classical political theories such as liberal political thought, communitarian thought, classical republicanism and radical democracy theory, even though it borrows some of their features. The exercise of citizenship is informal because the use of the Internet has been "tamed" and acts on all levels of politics: political, sub political and sub activist (Beck, 1997). " Mundane citizenship is firmly rooted in private experiences, needs and concerns, but it sheds this shell through collective identification and movement from private to interpersonal, group and public discourse" (Bakardjieva, 2012: 1358). In this sense virtual discussion forums become, rather than sewers, carnival scenarios where everyone can hide

behind a symbolic mask because they "reproduced many of the defining features of the carnival such as suspension of hierarchical differences, not only among participants, but also with respect to the authoritative institutions and voices dominating the accession discourse" (Bakardjieva, 2012: 1358).

What matters the most of this viewpoint is that it rejects the utopian idea of the virtual political discussion and also that forums are mainly "sewers". Consequently, aggression and polarization are key factors for the proper understanding of virtual participation. Bakardjieva and others (Papacharissi, 2004; Sindorf, 2013) question the expectations of media, moderators and some academics when they hope to find "civility" in these forums, comparing virtual participation with the idea of construction of a Habermasian public opinion. Sindorf (2013), for example, questions the civilized approach because in the search for "civility" (understood as courtesy and absence of insults or rebukes) through regulation or suppression of interactive spaces or specific comments, "existing arrangements of power" and hegemonic discourses can be reinforced, and therefore a "symbolic violence" against virtual citizens can be exercised. Therefore, it cannot be expected that all virtual political discussion is developed within a civility framework. Rather, the potential of these forums to invigorate democracy in different ways must be taken into account. The problem is that this form of exercising citizenship does not necessarily imply the generation of accepted discourses and instead faces the heat of disagreement and in most cases does not reach consensus (Bakardjieva, 2012).

The case study by Sindorf (2013) shares with Bakardjieva a similar viewpoint. She analyzes the closing of discussion forums at *The Greeley Tribune* in Colorado in 2011, a decision taken by the newspaper editor because of the poverty in the discussion by the participants. She performed a textual analysis of the most offensive and insulting comments in the forums linked with the most important news during the last working week of the online section. According to her conclusion: " When looking at insults on others and inflammatory language, many of these comments might count as trolling, if trolling is defined by posts that are inflammatory. But the attacks serve other functions, notably, as a vehicle through which to make substantive political points. Focusing on the tone and character of attacks used in the discussions risks losing sight of the deliberative role such debates perform".

2.2. Coded language in Internet and the perception of the climate of opinion

Given the features of the news forums in the corpus, the focus of analysis was the use of language in the comments. We have chosen the "coded language" on the Internet (Hughey & Daniels, 2013) as a methodological tool for analysis. This category has excelled in similar studies from both the theoretical and methodological perspectives, since it allows breakpoints from the conventions of traditional participation. The theory also points out to the existence of a strategy commonly used by commentators in online news forums to circumvent the algorithms that automatically delete comments in the moderation systems build into some of the participative architectures of the forums. This is a universe of subtlety and creativity in order to hide the insults within themselves.

In their study on racism in online forums, Daniels and Hughey argue (along the lines of Mendelberg & Oleske, 2000) that from a discursive point of view "coded racial language has been used to convey subtle, yet potent, racial meanings in ways that appear well reasoned and focused on the common good "(Daniels & Hughey, 2013: 337).

Language also serves as a tool to measure the climate of opinion in the forums[4]. Taking into account that beyond collective discourses mundane citizenship is also anchored to individual perceptions and attitudes are shaped by the experiences of the individual, emulation and other factors that have little to do with collective consensus (Klineberg, 1951).

3. Research questions

The main questions this paper wants to answer can be classified in two categories, depending on the dimension of analysis, qualitative or quantitative.

The main questions on the qualitative area are:

The ideological posture of the commenters is aligned with the one proposed by the media that published the news?

The subjects proposed by the commenters are the same that the media that published the news suggest?

It is possible to have a perception of the public opinion about the beginning of peace dialogues between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas through the comments published in online forums associated to the news about the phenomenon?

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[4] As seen from the definition by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1977) who understand the climate of opinion as the points of views based on judgment values and lines of conduct that members of a society express publicly, that is to say, the public opinion of the majority.

It is possible to identify the sentiment of commenters analyzing the language they use in their comments?

On the other hand, the main questions associated with the quantitative analysis are:

Do online forums have egalitarian behavior when analyzing the concentration of comments? In other words, do the commenters participate equally in the forums, or some of them monopolize them?

Do the management policies used by the media to administer online forums have any influence on the degree of inequality of participation observed in them?

Do these policies influence the type of participation exhibit by the users in the online forums?

If some of the users monopolize the online forums, how do characterize their style of participation? Are they micro leaders of opinion or just exercise a monologue?

4. Methodology

This paper analyzes a corpus composed by 13 news published by the online versions of three of the most important Colombian newspapers, *El Tiempo*, *El Espectador* and *El Colombiano*, (with web addresses www.eltiempo.com, www.elespectador.com y www.elcolombiano.com respectively). Online forums associated to these news stories are analyzed from two perspectives, qualitative and quantitative.

Qualitative analysis of comments by the users takes into account the main discursive aspects on online forums, such as the coded language of commenters and the main topics that shape their conversation, either as a reaction to the original news or other comments in the forum. A main focus of interest is the perception of the people involved in the peace dialogues (both members of the government or FARC leaders), as well as political or institutional characters supporting or criticizing the beginning of the dialogues (former presidents, Attorney General, Procurator General of the Nation and even the Pope). The most prolific commentators were identified, in order to perform a characterization of those micro leaders of opinion.

On the other hand, some of the features of the online forums may be measured, which allows a quantitative analysis of them. This perspective may be seen as "*commentary metrics*". The present research explores these features and some relations among them. The first aspect to be analyzed is the life time of the forum; that is, how long it remains active. Secondly, two possible extremes to define the forums according to the distribution of comments written by

users are defined: egalitarian or monopolized forums. Finally, combinations of both quantitative and qualitative approaches identify some prolific users and characterize their style of participation.

5. Results

The analyzed corpus contains the comments of the online forums associated to 13 news published by the digital versions of three Colombian newspapers, *El Tiempo*, *El Espectador* and *El Colombiano* between September 5th-13th, 2012, after the announcement made by Juan Manuel Santos' administration about the beginning of peace dialogues with the FARC guerrillas. Table 1 summarizes general aspects of the simple (news were published in Spanish; translation of the title is ours).

News	Title	Newspaper	Publication Date
1	'We want to clarify we have the will to go forward': Farc	Eltiempo.com	September 8th, 2012
2	The whys of the negotiation amidst the war	Eltiempo.com	September 8th, 2012
3	The Pope supports 'important dialogue' between Colombian government and Farc	Eltiempo.com	September 9th, 2012
4	Farc says ceasefire is no condition for dialogues	Eltiempo.com	September 7th, 2012
5	"Heavyweight negotiators "	Elespectador.com	September 5th, 2012
6	"No surrender no delivery": Farc	Elespectador.com	September 6th, 2012
7	Unasur offers collaboration for peace process in Colombia	Elespectador.com	September 7th, 2012
8	Farc, to face victims	Elespectador.com	September 8th, 2012
9	Santos asks not turning the peace process into a "media circus"	Elespectador.com	September 8th, 2012
10	"Justice and Peace model would be an example for the peace process development"	Elespectador.com	September 10th, 2012
11	"Farc negotiators in the peace process have more than 300 arrest warrants"	Elespectador.com	September 13th, 2012
12	Farc includes "Simón Trinidad" in the negotiation table	Elcolombiano.com.co	September 6th, 2012
13	"Farc have the same peace discourse they had in Caguán"	Elcolombiano.com.co	September 7th, 2012

Table 1. Analyzed corpus

Table 2 show some descriptive statistics of the forums generated by each of the news included in the corpus. The information characterizes the nature of these forums and includes the number of comments, number of commentators and the life of the news, i.e. how long the forum was "kept alive", measured by the difference in time (in minutes) between the last and first comments

News	Number of comments	Number of commentators	Life of the news
1	59	35	3685
2	65	40	2793
3	67	40	2824
4	248	107	4039
5	86	43	2871
6	183	102	31615
7	15	10	811
8	396	65	1471
9	327	59	3647
10	11	10	307
11	92	38	1546
12	79	72	1510
13	84	77	2673

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the corpus

5.1. Traits of "mundane citizenship" in the peace talks: qualitative look

Following the ideas exposed by Daniels & Hughey (2013) about the use of coded language on the Internet (see section 2.2 above); the language used by commenters in the corpus can be analyzed. The sample contains many insulting epithets targeting guerrillas, either as an organization or directly to some of its representatives. The sample show expressions (originally in Spanish, translation is ours[5]) such as "Bad Colombians" (sic), "Women Traffickers ", "Pack [as in pack of animals] of terrorists", "Disposables", "Murderers who barely know how to read", "buffoon" (referring to Marcos Calarca); "Piggy" (referring to alias Gabino), "narco-guerrillas", "Shameless", "Bandits", "Criminals", "Liars", "Illiterate" (sic) (referring to Manuel Marulanda), "Camouflaged Narcos" and "FARC -santes ", the latter the most popular in social networks and forums, an untranslatable pun that plays with the name of the guerrilla and the Spanish word for

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[5] Many of the original comments have wordplays or idiomatic turns very difficult to translate. The authors have done their best in order to retain the original intention of the commenters. In some cases, a small explanation is provided.

"deceitful", with the intention of showing the guerrillas as people that never show their true intentions.

As for President Santos, he is also the target of such insults as "stupid", "fool", "Traitor", "Santos Iscariot", "Judas Manuel FARC-santos" or "Santín Farcsin" (again, an untranslatable pun with the name of the president, the name of the guerrillas and the Spanish word for "deceitful"). Many insults also target key figures of the establishment: "Humberto de la Calle, bastard" (talking about one of the leaders of the dialogues from the government side), "Alvaro Uribe Velez, piece of militiaman" or "The Pope is a rat", "The head of all idiotic Catholics" and "king of idolatry" (in all cases talking about the Pope Francis). It can be said that insults achieve a new dimension as they are built around clever wordplays. Other explicit insults, present in the sample despite all the rules of moderation applied by the forums, use animal attributes, or physical and psychological traits in order to denigrate and insult the characters they refer about.

Attitudes expressed in the comments may be classified as optimistic or skeptical towards the peace dialogues. A third coding, "not applicable", may be defined for those comments related to issues other than the published news, e.g. those posted for advertising and selling a product or service. One commenter even use the forum to publish an essay on the subject of drug trafficking (not his own), even though because of the features of the forum he broke the whole document into many pieces, one assigned to each comment.

Differences between skepticism and optimism are great. The immediate perception after reading the comments in the corpus was that of an unfavorable climate of opinion at the beginning of the peace dialogues. But, how does this unfavorable climate of opinion materialize? How do citizens express their discontent with the peace process on the Internet?

What is found in the carnival atmosphere surrounding Colombian forums discussing the peace proposal of Juan Manuel Santos is an endemic distrust, mostly directed towards the FARC guerillas, but also including State institutions and their representatives. Again, it can be argued this is correlated with a history of failed processes. That is why it is not uncommon to see phrases like "the guerrillas say bullshit"; "The guerrilla is false when it says it is not a drug dealer"; "The guerrilla is pure cynicism and cheap talk"; "These narco-terrorists are only talking shit ".

As it was argued previously, state institutions and their representatives also take their share of suspicions from the commentators. The most denigrated characters are President Juan

Manuel Santos and former President Álvaro Uribe, whose respective followers show a strong polarization that is just a reflection of the antagonism that was born between the two leaders since the election of Santos as president of Colombia. Juan Manuel Santos is considered by many commentators as a traitor who "knelt" before the guerrillas at the wrong time, when the armed group allegedly was almost defeated[6]. This belief is closely related to the public position raised by the former president Uribe, who rejects categorically any peace talks. It is relatively safe to assume that those who speak in these terms about Santos are followers of former President Uribe (or his opinions). These commentators also condemn Santos' "betrayal" for dialoguing with the guerrillas and they considered as ingratitude his emphatic ideological separation from Uribe since he took office in 2010. The word "traitor" is used directly of alluding to historical characters recognized for having sold their benefactors such as Judas Iscariot. The most telling comment of this case is: "This peace process was stillborn. Santos has no legitimacy to start it, he is President because Colombians voted to liquidate the FARC and submit them to law, as he had promised in the campaign. Now he has changed and wants to talk. Obviously Colombians did not vote for that, and that's why he lacks legitimacy to do so, because he betrayed those who voted for him. If he had proposed [peace] dialogues with the FARC when he was campaigning, he would not be President today. No more betrayal, Quit! "

On top of that, the corpus shows comments like: "I am ashamed of Santos"; "Coup to Juan Manuel Santos"; "This is a reality show staged by Santos." Of particular interest is the fact that several citizens relate the peace process with the president's strategy for obtain the re-election or even to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

Regarding Álvaro Uribe, many users praised its administration and particularly how he fought against armed groups with phrases like: "Álvaro Uribe rescued Colombia; "Uribe was the one who was able to stop them [the guerrillas]". However, other commenters express their disagreement with phrases like "Uribe will always be against any peace process"; "If Santos makes peace, this piece of militiaman will be left none the wiser" and "the enemies of Colombia are Alvaro Uribe and the 40 thieves, Londoño, José Obdulio ...[his allies]".

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[6] One of the theories defended by one of the commentators is that former president Álvaro Uribe was about to defeat the guerillas before finishing his second and last period as a president. Therefore there was no need for dialogues and the best way to deal with guerillas was to annihilate them taking advantage of their weakness.

References to armed forces are positive[7]. Only a few comments use derogatory terms or blame them for the violence in the country. Most consider that talks between Santos' government and guerrillas undermine their morale. Others consider that sentencing those militaries accused of forging alliances with paramilitary forces are unfair. These statements may be the result of many discussions raised in the country about a possible law of forgiveness for those guerrilla members that sign a peace agreement. For some users, detractors of the peace process, it seems inconceivable that there are militaries sentenced to several years in prison for exceeding their authority[8], while the guerrillas may enjoy a pardon by a future forgive-and-forget law. To illustrate these ideas the following comments may be helpful: "Why do they condemn to 40 years of prison those soldiers that defended us because of false evidence provided by AUC [Paramilitary Groups: Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia]?" or "I applaud Santos for these efforts to approach the guerrillas but without benefits for those genocides".

It can be said again that historical records, in this case those associated with amnesty laws applied to left wing guerrillas or right wing paramilitary groups, can play an important role in the lack of confidence perceived in the views of some commentators. Laws that in some cases were successful (because they were able to return guerilla fighters to civilian life), but boosted a political career for some of them, who later became uncomfortable companions to the Colombian right wing (as in the case of Gustavo Petro, a former guerrilla member of M-19). For other amnesty laws, such as the Justice and Peace Law, many commenters have the feeling that the real winner was impunity[9].

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[7] Despite the fact that armed forces had a good image in the comments, the survey made by Ipsos Public Affair (Colombia Opina) in 2013 and entitled The Big Survey (published on September 26th, 2013), opinions are split. 49% of the people surveyed trusted the armed forces in their efforts to make Colombia a better country, but 46% did not trust them. 5% of the people did not respond.

[8] An emblematic case is that of general Jesús Armando Arias Cabrales, found guilty of enforced disappearance while taking back the Palace of Justice. He was condemned to 35 years of prison.

[9] About this law, the jurist Rodrigo Uprimny (2011) says: "it is clear there was an important change between the initial proposal of the government in 2003 and the one finally used as a legal framework of the demobilization process, after the Constitutional Court checked the Justice and Peace Law (JPL) from a constitutional perspective and modified important elements of its reach in 2006 (...). The JPL, as it was approved by Congress (law 975 of 2005), was not the legal framework foreseen by government for negotiation with paramilitary groups. Indeed, in the first stages of the process the government, and even the paramilitary groups, opposed to any application of penal justice to atrocities perpetrated by them (...) the first project entitled Penal Alternativity Law, proposed by the government to the Congress in 2003, implied in practice an amnesty to all armed actors that demobilize, because it was based on ideas of restorative justice, which implied that penal punishment is inclined to be a kind of vengeance and can become an obstacle to achieve true reconciliation"

Those commenters showing opposition to the armed forces claim that "the hands of the minister of defense are stained with blood of peasants and even soldiers" or "Santos should not have include former generals [the commenter used the slang "chafarote", a derogatory word for a former high ranked officer] in the negotiation," referring to the participation of General Oscar Naranjo, plenipotentiary negotiator and member of the team representing the Government of Colombia in peace talks with the FARC guerillas. These comments show a positive image of soldiers and peasants sacrificed by the bad policies of the Ministry of Defense, and –on the other hand- the lack of confidence in former members of the military establishment, such as Naranjo.

Other institutions are attacked in the comments, such as the Attorney General (Luis Eduardo Montealegre), who is accused by one of the users of being accomplice of the guerrilla. These accusations may be related with the perception of a perpetual clash between the office of the Procurator General of the Nation, headed by Alejandro Ordóñez, and the Attorney General. Ordoñez represents the conservative wing and has openly opposed the peace process, so it is reasonable to expect that some users identify Montealegre as an antagonist and its actions in office may be seen as prone to the guerillas[10].

Finally, some commenters oppose the intervention of foreign actors in the peace dialogues. Thus, reacting to the news of the support from the head of the Catholic church in the dialogues, some say that "The Vatican has lost credibility, so what the Pope says or does not say, is not important", "the Pope does not know about the crimes against humanity committed by the FARC "and" Too bad the Pope is wasting his time giving his blessing to something that is already dead". The rejection of negotiations in a foreign country is also related to the fact that Cuba has been chosen as the venue of the talks. In this regard some comments express that "Cuba has no food for some many disposables'" and "Cuba is full of spies and Raul Castro is gay".

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[10] About the subject of the legal framework for peace, the Attorney General Eduardo Montealegre says to El Universal newspaper on April 24th, 2014, that "it is not a synonymous of impunity and think about it in these terms is too dangerous for the country. It cannot be said now that prison is the only way to be punished for the crimes perpetrated". With this idea, Montealegre openly opposes the Procurator General of the Nation, who has asked derogating the law approved in 2013. During the parade held as homage to the victims of conflict and to promote peace on April 9th, 2014, the Attorney General says that he misses the Procurator Ordóñez in the event and added that even though he respected his position about the legal framework for peace, he did not adhere to it: "I see that Colombia must achieve a balance between the right for peace and the right of victims to justice, truth and reparation". Additionally, he says that this balance is achieved by the legal framework, "with a base given by international standards. On this point, I believe that the Procurator´s position is deeply wrong".

At this point the position of many commentators is ambiguous. They condemn the talks are taking place in Cuba, but at the same time strongly oppose to dialogues held in Colombia. This opposition has a historical basis, the creation of the "demilitarized zone", a place where the official armed forces could not penetrate to exercise their authority, a condition imposed by the guerrillas to the government of Andrés Pastrana during the peace talks led by the former president. This condition was one of the most criticized after the failure of the process, and it seems to have been interpreted by many Colombians as handing out a vast portion of the country to the guerrillas, a territory made up of five towns and an area of 47 thousand square kilometers, despite the efforts made by the Pastrana administration to justify it[11].

5.2. Major issues discussed by the users

In the study about systems of moderation and participation and conversation within online communities, an important axis of analysis is the participation of the users around major themes. This analysis identifies those issues that raise a large amount of comments, both skeptical and optimistic. Most commented news topics match the approach presented by the chosen digital media. The major topics can be classified into three clusters: the ceasefire, the characteristics of the negotiating team that are part of the process (and coincide with the news that present more comments) and finally the user recommendations.

5.2.1. Ceasefire

Although the climate of opinion at the beginning of the peace talks questions the process and reflects a pessimistic sentiment, an interesting phenomenon is the support of many users to the institutional position of President Santos of "keeping the military offensive" during the process. This support is expressed in the analyzed forums. The preference for discussing the issue of ceasefire can also be explained by the long experience of Colombians enduring armed confrontations almost in a daily basis for over 60 years. Additionally, for an idea rooted in many

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[11] In order to silence the voices of protest about the demilitarized zone of Caguán Víctor G. Ricardo, High Commissioner for Peace, pronounced a speech at San Vicente del Caguán on November 7th, 1998, saying: "(...) the military force moves out, but the authority of the State remains, the rule of law, that will rule the whole national territory, including the five towns in the demilitarized zone [San Vicente del Caguán, Uribe, La Macarena, Mesetas and Vista Hermosa]. The town majors must be the authority that ensures, according to their sound judgement, the abiding to the Constitution and the Laws of the Republic".

Colombians that peace is synonymous with silent guns and not a sum of complex elements that lead to a state of general well-being for all citizens.

Younger generations have different memories, in particular the failed peace process based on El Caguán between 1998 and 2002. At that time many people demand to keep an appropriate no-confrontational environment during the peace talks led by Andrés Pastrana`s government with the FARC, as a sign of true desire of peace. These demands were not heard, as the guerrillas continued to carry out attacks in different parts of the country and the army also executed its usual operations[12].

Some of the comments found in the corpus show strong opposition towards a hypothetical ceasefire: "No truce or ceasefire. We must continue attacking if talks do not work "; "We have to negotiate in the midst of war"; "FARC will never keep promises" "The price of peace is to win the war"; "Best ceasefire would be not kidnapping any more"; "We must make the dialogue in the midst of war"; "The armed forces must keep hitting them while the talks continue". The main feature here is the fact that discussion is not focused on whether the guerrillas should or should not cease fire, but in the opposition of the military ceasing operations while dialogues advance. It's an interesting change of perspective that shows a total disbelief in the possibility that the guerrillas leave their violent actions and the certainty that the government must act with two strategies: dialogue and armed actions.

5.2.2. The negotiators of the peace process

Regarding this issue, comments are also polarized. Here is where more epithets directed to some of the actors mentioned in the news are found. Most users disqualify representatives of the FARC guerrillas, the same way they express disagreement with some government officials who are involved in the process. About FARC representatives commentators say: "the negotiating table has an imbalance"; "You cannot negotiate with Iván Márquez, because he has 12 arrest warrants"; "Humberto de la Calle is a bastard and he has no political representation". One of the commentators said ironically that in the table Raymundo Angulo, president of the National Beauty Pageant and Diomedes Diaz, the late vallenato singer should have participated. In three comments users say they do not feel represented at the negotiating table expressing

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[12] Along the peace process between FARC and president Pastrana, the Colombian government endured in a regular basis the dilemma of keeping on negotiating amidst the war. The most harmful incidents to the process, until the point of ending it, were the violent actions perpetrated by the FARC guerillas against the army and civilians, the disagreements about the humanitarian exchange and the development of Plan Colombia by the government.

phrases like: "who represents us?"; "There is no representation of the people on the negotiating table, only the oligarchs". At various times comments talk about an eventual political participation of guerrilla members as representatives of citizens. Opposition to this option is quite strong and is reflected in phrases like: "Do Colombians want these narco-terrorists as political representatives?".

5.2.3. Users Recommend

It is important to consider an issue which is present in each of the micro communities of news discussion and confirms the thesis of Mary Bakardjieva, and that is how the commenters' think about how the conflict should be resolved. In particular, citizens write recommendations on how the government of Juan Manuel Santos should handle the peace process or what are the best measures in order to solve the violence problems of the country, among other issues. It is as if the commentators take advantage of the network space to recommend actions that have not occurred to political leaders or even to members of armed groups and that could be the real solution to all problems of the country.

These recommendations are expressed in comments like: "We must begin to work on the problem of hatred among Colombians; "The best 'ceasefire' and self-condition that could self-administered the FARC as armed wing of the radical left would be stop kidnapping"; "Colombia needs the death penalty from the second victim. Social cleansing, whoever falls. When the country sees the actual conduct of negotiations, when the immovable conditions are met, when the military status will return to our official armed forces, then the country will breathe with ease"; "The military are the option. We should not be surprised that they use force, because that is who they are. Rojas Pinilla ruled because presidents were unfit"; "Colombia must ask from the United States a new Marshall Plan and the United States must bring staff to eradicate drug trafficking"; "Coup to Santos"; "The ELN and FARC guerrillas must compensate their victims"; "No dialogue, no negotiations, no territory clearings, no legal framework for impunity. To deal with narco-terrorists we must drop a few tons of bombs like those good times of the great Uribe".

These recommendations contain quite radical "solutions". In the case that any political leading figure of the country express a similar opinion, it would be considered scandalous or, to say the least, politically incorrect. However, they are openly expressed by ordinary citizens, taking advantage of the space available to them in the news comments forums of Colombian online newspapers.

5.3. "Commentarymetrics": analyzable aspects from the quantitative point of view

This analysis focuses on three features of the analyzed corpus. The life time of the forum, the possible concentration of participation in hands of a few users and the frequency of participation of the most prolific commentators.

5.3.1. Duration: life time of a forum

This aspect of the online news forums is intimately linked to the fact that every comment on the corpus is stamped with the precise date and time when it was written and uploaded to the forum. This allows building a time map for each forum in the corpus. This map time shows the birth of the forum (publication of the first comment), its growing dynamics (slow or high rate of participation by the users), its overall size growth (measured by the number of comments) and the death of the forum (publication of the last comment). The difference between the death and birth times can be defined as the forum life span. This quantity can also be seen as the news life span, the time during which the news was able to generate comments. This quantitative dimension has already been explored in previous research (Montaña et al, 2013), so this paper omits the publication of the time maps of the analyzed forums, and we just mention the life span of each forum in the corpus (see Table 2 above).

5.3.2. Comments concentration: ¿egalitarian or monopolized forums?

Some of the commentators contribute to the forum more than once. This comments concentration by few highly active users can be studied from multiple viewpoints. For the purposes of this research three aspects have been chosen.

First, commentators are identified by their nicknames and then their commentaries are counted. With this information is possible to create groups according the number of comments written by every single user, i.e. a group of commenters that participated just once, those who wrote twice, three times, etc. Second, the relative percentage of participation is computed for every one of the previously defined groups. Finally, with this information it is possible to compute an index of concentration of comments of each forum. The proposed measure is the Gini coefficient of the forum, an index commonly used by economists to measure the degree of wealth concentration in an economy.

Before presenting the results, it is worth to characterize the forums for each one of the three media analyzed. The most popular media was *elespectador*.com, with an average of 158 comments per forum; whereas *eltiempo.com* and *elcolombiano.com* had averages of 110 and 82

comments per forum respectively (see Table 2 above). The extreme cases of participation also belong to *elespectador.com*, having the most and least populated forums, with also exhibits the most and least popular forums, with 396 (News 8) and 11 (News 10) comments respectively.

In every forum the number of comments exceeds the number of commentators, indicating that at least one commentator participates more than once. In this paper these commentators are called prolific and some of their defining features will be analyzed in the following sections.

Monopolization of the forums by prolific commentators is one of their most prominent features and it had been explored in a previous article (Montaña et al, 2013). In this paper the Gini coefficient is proposed as a measure of inequality in the distribution of the comments in the forum. The Gini coefficient is a tool used by economists to measure the inequality in the wealth distribution for a given society. The coefficient takes values between 0 and 1. If the coefficient is equal to 0 the distribution of wealth is perfectly egalitarian, in the sense that every person in the analyzed population has the same amount of wealth. On the other hand, if the coefficient is equal to 1, the distribution of wealth is extremely uneven, since it means that one person is the owner of all the wealth, while all remaining people do not possess any wealth. Thus, coefficient values close to 0 indicate a more egalitarian wealth distribution and as values become larger the index shows an increasing wealth concentration.

In this research the Gini coefficient does not measure the wealth concentration but the comments concentration in a given news forum. A forum with Gini coefficient equal to 0 will be a perfectly egalitarian forum where each commentator contributes a single comment. A forum with Gini coefficient equal to 1 is monopolized by one commentator who is responsible for all the comments. As the Gini coefficient increases, the forum exhibit concentration by a handful of commentators.

Table 3 summarizes the Gini coefficient for each forum in the corpus. For reference purposes the ratio between number of commentators and comments is also provided. If this number is close to 1, each commentator participates just once. As this number decreases and approaches to 0, the contribution of one or more commentators will be higher with respect to other people in the forum. This measure can be seen as an opposite measure of the Gini coefficient.

News	Ratio commentators/comments	Gini Coefficient

1	0.593	0.495
2	0.615	0.548
3	0.597	0.551
4	0.431	0.69
5	0.5	0.667
6	0.557	0.632
7	0.667	0.46
8	0.164	0.904
9	0.180	0.891
10	0.909	0.164
11	0.413	0.723
12	0.912	0.16
13	0.917	0.152

Table 3. Comments concentration.

Forums belonging to *elcolombiano.com.co* are notoriously egalitarian. A more detailed examination of the prolific commentators in these forums (number 12 and 13 respectively) reveals that the most prolific commentators only contribute twice. By contrast, the most unequal and high concentrated forums belong to *elespectador.com*. In particular, in forum 8 one commentator is responsible for 98 comments (see below a deeper analysis on the most prolific commentators). The only egalitarian forum by *elespectador.com* is the 10th, which also exhibits the lower number of comments and commentators (11 and 10 respectively) in the corpus.

For each forum in the corpus the Lorenz curve was computed. This is a graphic tool to visualize (and compute) the Gini coefficient. Due to space constraints not all are included in this paper. For illustrative purposes Lorenz curves for forums 8 and 12 are shown, as examples of egalitarian and highly concentrated forums respectively. The 45 degrees straight line represents a perfectly egalitarian forum and it is shown for reference. The closer the Lorenz Curve to the reference line, the lower the Gini coefficient (more egalitarian). Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the behavior of these rather different forums.
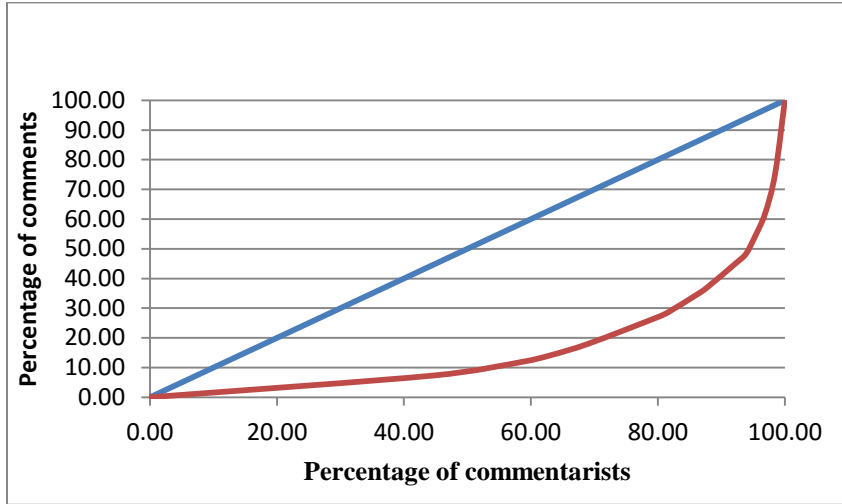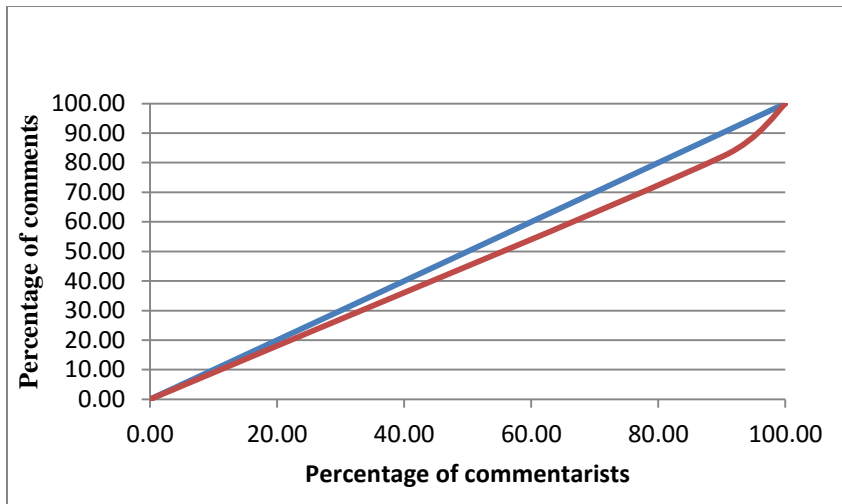
Figure 1. Lorenz Curve for news forum 8.

Figure 2. Lorenz Curve for news forum 12.

There are two other ways of visualizing the comments concentration in a forum. The first is to draw the groups constructed according to the number of comments written in the forum. The result of this exercise is illustrated in Figures 3 and 4. The vertical axis shows the number of commentators in each group, whereas the horizontal axis shows the number of comments written by a user belonging to that group. For comparative purposes news forums 8 and 12 were chosen again.
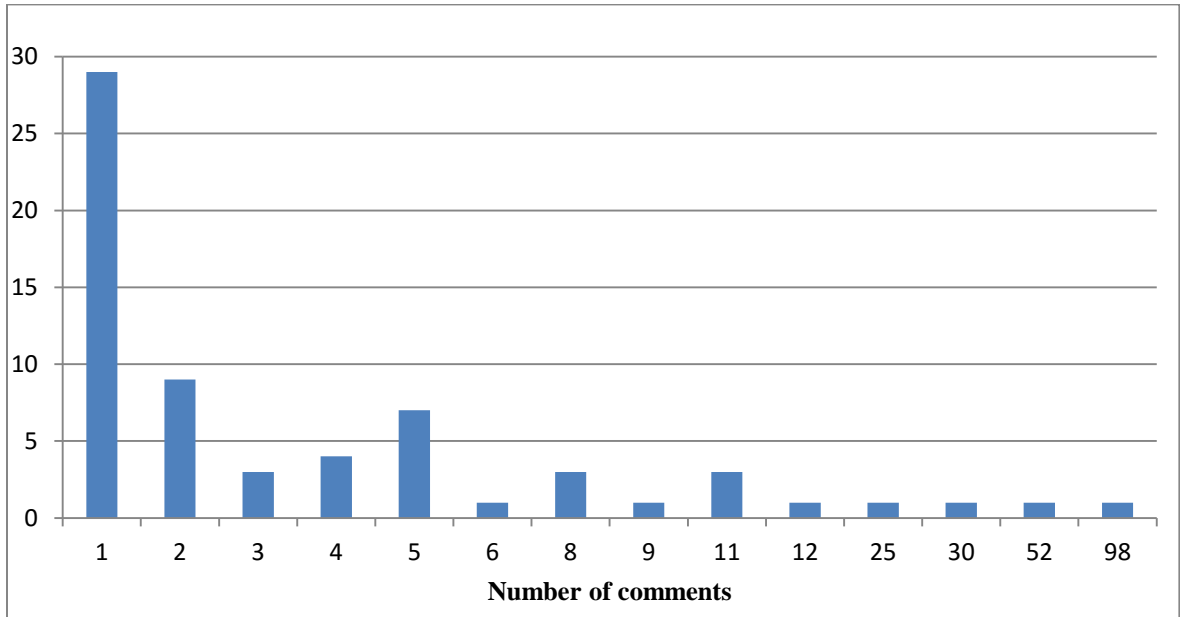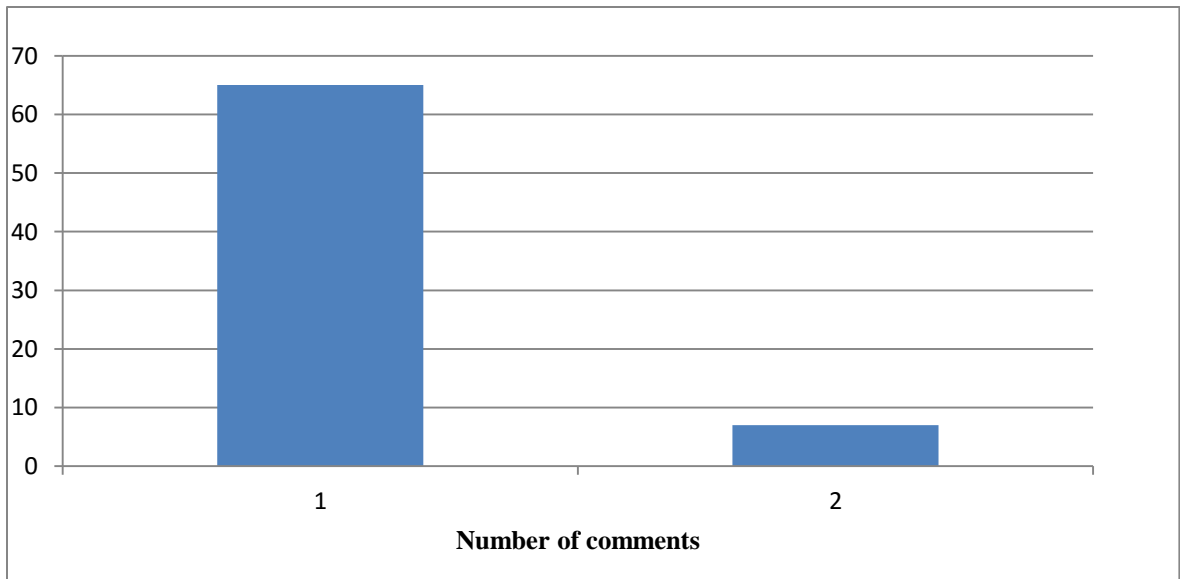
Figure 3. Comments concentration for news forum 8.

Figure 4. Comments concentration for news forum 12.

In forum 12 (egalitarian share) 7 commentators contributed twice, while 65 did it only once. By contrast, in forum 8 (high degree of comments concentration), the 5 more prolific commentators contributed with 12, 25, 30, 52 and 98 comments respectively.

A more dramatic way of illustrating the same results is to look at the percentage share of every group of commentators with respect to the total number of comments in the forum. The results of this exercise for forums 8 and 12 are illustrated in Figures 5 and 6.
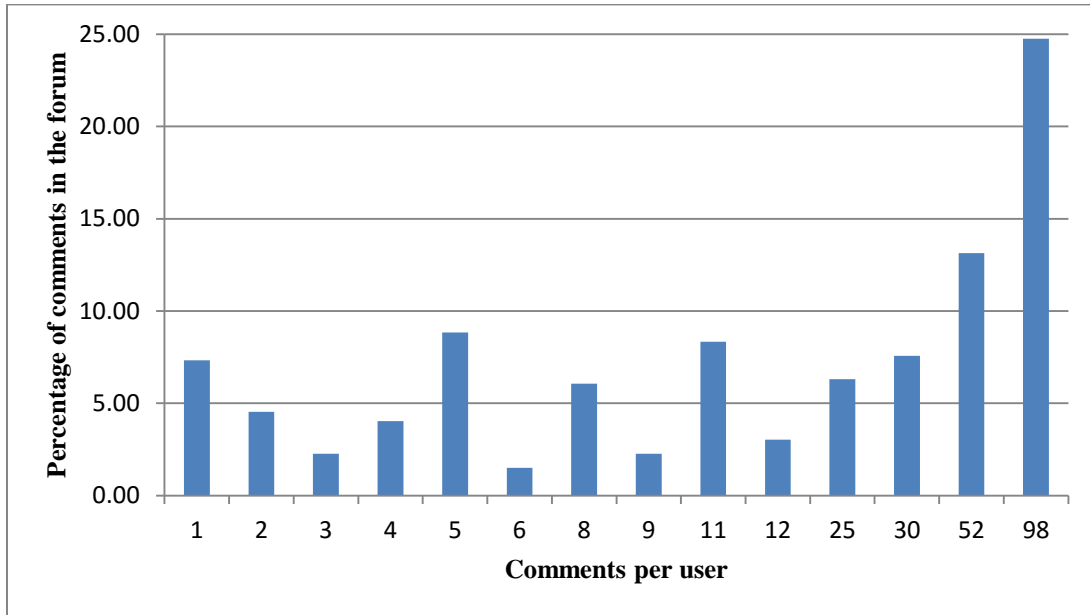
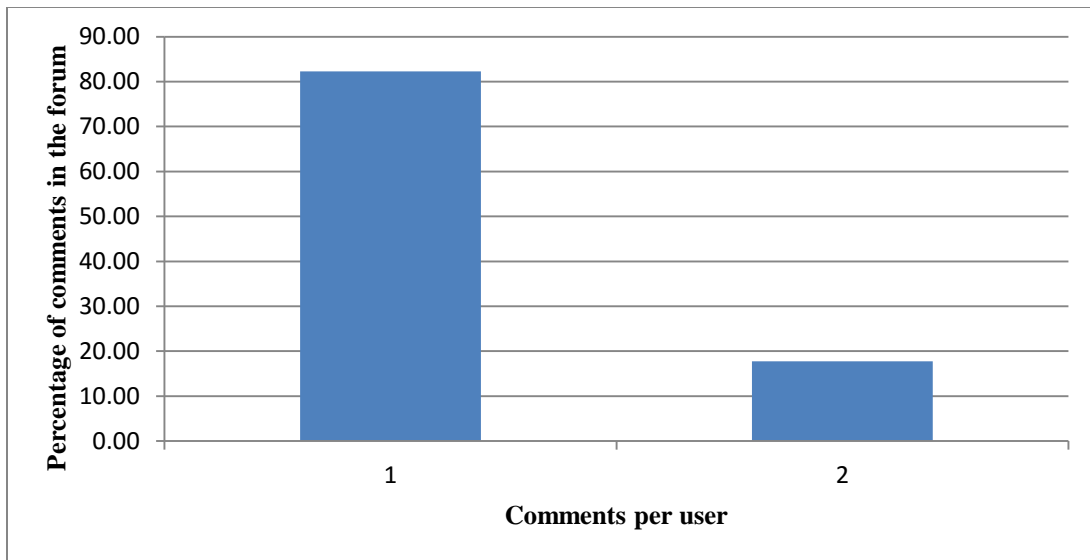Figure 5. Comments concentration (percentage) for news forum 8.

Figure 6. Comments concentration (percentage) for news forum 12.

Figure 5 shows that the commentator who participated 98 times is responsible for approximately 25% of all comments, a figure higher than that provided by the commentators who wrote 1, 2, 3 and 4 comments respectively. These, in aggregate, are responsible for approximately 18% of all comments in forum.

Figure 6 shows an entirely different phenomenon. The group of commentators who participated only once contributes with approximately 82% of forum comments, while the most prolific commentators (who contributed twice) are responsible for only the remaining 18%.

5.3.3. The most prolific commentators and their frequency of participation

Quantitative review of the comments is useful to identify the most prolific commentators according to their contributions to the forum. Although they could be thought as opinion micro leaders, a closer look shows that participation depends on how the forum is designed and managed. For example, in *eltiempo.com.co* prolific commentators are isolated and can be seen as great "monologists". Other forum participants do not necessarily adhere to some of their contributions. Prolific commentators in this online media can be more critical than others, and sometimes are more aggressive, but they do not directly replicate other users' opinions. They prefer to develop his monologue focused on a specific aspect of the story.

The behavior of commentators in *elespectador.com.co* is quite different. Interaction between users is much higher and this has a direct relation to the open way the participation in the forum is managed by the online media. The most prolific commentators show great ability to counterpoint and for his belligerence in discussing other comments in the forum. On the other hand, *elcolombiano.com.co* does not show any outstanding prolific commentator, and the reason for this behavior is the strict editorial policy that keeps a tight control on these interactive spaces.

Table 4 summarizes the nicknames of the most prolific commentators in each forum, along how many comments they wrote and their frequency of participation. This frequency is computed as the average time for producing a new comment, taking into account the times of their first and last comments.

In *eltiempo.com* there are two noteworthy commentators. User *fameletrix* has a key role in two discussions -developed in two different days- and user *argos9* leads forum number 4. Contributions by *fameletrix* no do not show aggression, and reveal an interesting and disapproving standpoint about the Minister of Defense and the Army, accusing them of protecting interests of big oil companies and agroindustry, instead of defending peasants. Interventions by *fameletrix* do not defend the guerrillas. On top of that, *fameletrix'* comments offer precise facts, with names of generals and civic activities exercised by the army. In two of his/her interventions refers to how the fertility of Colombian soil will increase due to the spill blood of all Colombians. *Fameletrix* is a user characterized by sudden bursts of comments, according to the high frequency of his/her comments.

News	Commmentator	Number of comments	Frequency
1	Kondortres	18	9 minutes approx.
2	Fameletrix	9	45 sec.
3	Fameletrix	11	54 sec.
4	Argos9	70	77 sec
5	Maquiavelo	12	22 minutes approx.
6	Hergator/ Zegalia	7	18/ 32 min. approx.
7	Edgar Vélez	3	19 minutes approx.
8	Zegalia	98	8 minutes approx.
9	Contradictor	76	16 minutes approx.
10	fernando artavia lizarazo	2	5 minutes approx.
11	zegalia	17	4 minutes approx.
12	Seven commentators	2	N/A
13	Seven commentators	2	N/A

Table 4.Most prolific commentators, frequency of participation and number commentaries

The second prolific user to be analyzed from *eltiempo.com'* forums is *argos9.* In forum 4 he/she wrote 70 comments, single handedly exceeding the number of interventions of all others users that participate just once (68). It is also a "burst" user, writing a comment every 77 seconds approximately. His/her initial intervention seems original, opposing the ceasefire, arguing that it would be as "kneeling" and it will oppose sacrifices made by the armed forces. However, all his/her remaining contributions (totaling 6921 characters) quoted a text published by the blog www.cubaeuropa.com which is an essay about narco-terrorists links between Pablo Escobar, Fidel Castro and M-19 guerrillas. The text appearing in this blog is also a reproduction of a text published as a book, "Las guerras secretas de Fidel Castro" (Benemellis, Juan 2002). Because of restrictions on the length of each comment in the forum, *argos9* broke the whole essay in sections, assigning every one of these to a comment.

The prolific commentator analyzed from *elespectador.com'* forums is *zegalia.* His/her way of participation is conspicuous for many reasons. He/she interacts and discusses with other

members of the forum and is quite aggressive. His/her comments are short, using a sententious style. The frequency of writing is low, taking time to add another comment, which is quite different to other users in the forum. Many of his/her comments are capitalized, being an openly opponent of former president Uribe. He/she answers to other user of the forum in this way: "¿INTEGRAL DEMOCRAT? YOU ARE GARBAGE, DEFENDING THE GREATEST CRIMINAL AND NARCO...ALVARO URIBE VELEZ....STOP BEING ACCOMPLICE OF THIS TACKY CRIMINAL" (sic)

Prolific commentators from *elcolombiano.com.co* are practically non-existent and participate very little, something very different when compared to the two other analyzed media. In the forums of this media seven "prolific" commentators were identified, participating twice. The reason for this behavior is the strict policy of regulation use by this digital media. It uses a *premoderation* technique in its interactive architecture, e.g. some journalists are assigned to filter comments appearing in the web version of the newspaper. This media prefers human moderation to alternatives as the use of specific software tools that perform similar tasks but are rather expensive.

6. Conclusions

Online forums news seems to become a place where users can express their opinions in an emotional or argumentative way. They are also places where ordinary citizens, outside major centers of political decision, may suggest arguments and recommendations on issues of interest to the country. Although there is multitude of topics proposed by the participants, the most talked about by users do correspond to the approach favored by the media. The theoretical horizon opened by the idea of "mundane citizenship" allows us to say that commentators in Colombian digital media seize the opportunity of online spaces to suggest "solutions" to the armed conflict. The commentators' standpoints seem to be determined by historical facts of the Colombian conflict and intersect with macro representations backed by the most representative actors in national public opinion.

Study of news forums faces a major obstacle in the fact that these commentators are protected by a pseudonym which prevents knowing truly who they are. However, the authors of this document are convinced that a judicious and intensive application of quantitative techniques can shed light on many of the answers that still hide in these virtual micro communities. This research has applied some of these techniques to verify that certain commentators tend to

monopolize the forum. But not all of these prolific commentators are equal: some prefer to write (or extract writings from other websites) very quickly and assiduously; others prefer to write their messages according to what they observe in the forum, establishing a dialogue (which sometimes becomes a monologue) with other forum members. In fact, one of the questions that must be answered is to what extent the forum members talk to each other, or if instead they see the forum as a new agora where they can present their views on current issues.

Another question that merits further research is the influence of moderation strategies (used by digital media to manage their forums) on the style and frequency of use exhibited by commentators. Corpus analysis contained in this research seems to be evidence of this, but more evidence must be gathered before giving a definite answer.

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