Mubarak Resigns: Assessing the Quality of Readers' Comments in Online Quality Media

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"Since 2002, 'participation' has become a key idea in understanding and promoting the internet" (Salles, 2010: 8). To which extent are we in front of an ongoing new form of news discourse, "towards a model for dyadic communication" (O'Keeffe, 2006: 15) which involves a more complex, two-way flow relation between the author of a text and its reader? The comments on the news seems to not help the development of a genuine democratic dialogue, but, at the same time, there are moderation models which are forming real debate communities. In this occasion, as a continuation of our ongoing research project,[1] we present the results of both the first and of the second wave of analysis, in which comments of five online quality newspapers (The Guardian, The New York Times, El País, La Repubblica and Le Monde) are considered. In order to compare the differences, we have chosen a similar news item: how those media informed about Egypt president Hosni Mubarak's resignation, as published while it was happening in the evening of February 11, 2011.

Key words: audience participation, participatory journalism, comments in news, user-generated content, quality media.

"Des de l'any 2002 'participació' ha esdevingut una idea clau per entendre i promoure internet" (Salles, 2008: 8). Fins a quin punt ens trobem davant d'una nova forma de contacte imparable i naveguem "cap a un model per la comunicació diàdica" (O'Keeffe, 2006: 15) més complex pel flux d'una comunicació de doble sentit entre l'autor d'un text i el lector? Els comentaris sobre les notícies semblen no ajudar a desenvolupar un genuí diàleg democràtic, però també és cert que hi ha models apropiats que estan conformant autèntics debats col·lectius. En aquesta ocasió, com a continuació del nostre projecte de recerca* sostingut, presentem els resultats de les dues onades d'anàlisi en les quals estudiem cinc diaris online de qualitat (The Guardian, The New York Times, El País, La Repubblica i Le Monde). Per tal de comparar-ne les diferències, hem triat un tema informatiu comú: la manera en què aquests mitjans van informar sobre la dimissió del president egipci Hosni Mubarak, què van publicar en el decurs dels esdeveniments la tarda de l'11 de febrer del 2011.

Paraules clau: participació pública, periodisme participatiu, comentaris de notícies, continguts creats pels usuaris, mitjans de qualitat.

INTRODUCTION

In February 11, 2011, the president of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak, resigned, or was obliged to, as a consequence of the so called 'Arab Spring'. Immediately, most online media all over the world informed about it, and most of them opened their spaces for participation through readers' comments. This paper aims to explain which kind of opinion was draw through this, in our opinion, important participation tool, following the debates in five *quality media* (online newspapers) as they were produced in the first hours of that day. We try, thus, to recover the hot positions of the readers an aim to explain how different thought lines are conformed in the several traditions. In fact, how the participatory dimension of users is held and which is its democratic potential.[2] To which extent are we in front of an ongoing new form of news discourse, "towards a model for dyadic communication" (O'Keeffe, 2006: 15) which involves a more complex, two-way flow relation between the author of a text and its reader? As a research question —more than a hypothesis— we consider that the readers' opinions are coincident to the models represented by those online media corresponding to the typology of Hallin and Mancini (2004), and present clear characteristics different from each others. Quality is an increasing value, considered it as the respect shown to the other participants (exluing the presence of insults and misqualifications), mentioning valuing the ideas introduced by others, and presenting elaborate arguments to be discussed. This is much better done in those media which moderate the comments and limit the participation tho those readers who identifiy themselves, and it is much lower in those ones which open the comments to anyone and just erase those inconvenient ones after they are emitted. Also, as a research quetsion, we consider that participation to comments is an excellent tool to enforece the media ideology in context of difficulties with the government, which is the case of *LaRepubblica.it*, and it is done strengthening as well journalists' blogs as part of the medium itself.

"Occasionally, these comments present original perspectives and arguments, but many resemble the graffiti on a bathroom wall", said in 2008 Eric Alterman. Although this may be, to a some extent, true in some occasions, there are some media where communities for debate are being formed and feed by readers. As Alterman remembers, there is some difference between Walter Lippman's and John Dewey's concept of public opinion. Walter Lippman believed in knowledge-based élites, and for Dewey "the foundation of democracy was less information than conversation". As we will try to demonstrate, there are some true in both conception. Democracy is based on conversation rather than in information, or, at least, that is a claim for readers to be elevated to the status of creators, a trust in the necessity of

being a real feedback in news. But, on the other hands, in this very first stage of on-line comments in news, the media that are able to offer, moderate and create a de-bate community are the only ones that have been enriched by their users' opinions.

STATE OF THE ART

Following Clark and Carlson, Anne O'Keeffe distinguish the *participant*, part of an audience which "has a distinct role from the roles of 'addressee' or 'overhearer'", and remembers how Mikhail Bakhtin talked about the *addressivity* of a text. Are on-line news, at least the ones that are opened to readers' comment, a high-addressive type of hypertext, whose completion does not come until the readers send their comments —and are answered again by the original authors of the text? Is this qua-lity related to a personal characteristic or are we witnessing the arising of *forum* and *conversionalization* of discourse (O'Keeffe, 2006: 29; Fairclough, 1995)?

"Those who write on the internet care what they publish because they know the answer tends to be immediate. The readers' comments require the journalist to be better, be more truthful and online media are closer to reaching that objective than paper," as Spanish-Argentinean entrepreneur Martin Varsavsky said in an interview with the Spanish edition of *Esquire* magazine, in May 2009. "The Web provides a powerful platform that enables the creation of communities: distribution is fric-tionless, swift, and cheap," says Eric Alterman (Alterman, 2008). But is this really a powerful resource for the development of dialogue and democracy, or just brings much more noise to an increasingly amount of information? We agree, in this point, with Joanna Redden and Tamara Witschge when they say that "the potential for the internet to enhance democracy by increasing public engagement has been a subject of much discussion" (Redden & Witschge, 2010: 182).[3] We are talking, in terms of discourse analysis, of *public sphere persona*, "with societal, discoursal and genre identities" (O'Keeffe, 2006: 63). Discourse is a social action (Montgomery, 2007: 23). "While the established media typically operate within the consensus, displaying a clear tendency to adopt the hegemonic-official position on issues," say Carmit Wiesslitz and Tamar Ashuri, "the internet allows its users to voice controver-sial opinions that challenge conromist ideologies and to advocate for marginalized groups" (Wiesslitz & Ashuri, 2011: 5). Reality not always shows such an encoura-ging picture. While it is true that the so-called Web 2.0, theoretically, gives new pro-minence to social conservation, it is questionable whether the current state of, for example, the comments of digital media, especially those of digital media coming from prestigious print journals, draws a higher quality of debate.

The quality of argument and discussion is important. What distinguishes the conversation and discussion from the bullshit referred by Harry G. Frankfurt (Frankfurt, 2006: 9) is precisely not only what is said but how it is said. Respect and tolerance are milestones of a true democratic debate, not the mere possibility of issuing an opinion. Whether or not has been the potential of new media used is something discussed by recent works (e. g. Jones, 2009; Fenton, 2010; Dahlgren, 1996; Dahlberg, 2001). From an economic standpoint, in this so-called "attention economy", digital media, especially newspapers, have offered mechanisms of parti-

cipation as value-added (and loyalty). At the same time, audiences are increasingly fragmented and elusive, since they seek immediate stimuli and rewards, as revealed by Sonia Livingston (Livingston, 1999).

We propose to analyze comments from readers in this direction, investigating both the governing rules as well as content and the forms they are presented, in which we call Conversation 2.0. The comments of the news are the most popular tool for citizen participation through online news. It is the possibility offered by most online media to news readers to discuss after reading, allowing, in turn, both the medium itself as journalists to know what the audience thinks —or says—. A study conducted for the Information Council of Catalonia [Consell de la Informació de Catalunya] in 2009 leads us to state that reality is still far from approaching the ideal proposed for Web 2.0 journalism. In fact, some scholars (Sunstein, 2002), have challenged that the internet necessarily provoke a dialogue —especially political and more fluid—. As recalled in a paper presented at the International Symposium on Online Journalism in Austin (Texas, USA) in April 2010 (Díaz Noci *et al.*, 2010) the authors reminded the international literature that already exists about it (Jenkins, 2006; Bruns, 2005; Allan & Thorsen, 2009; Heinonen & Sundat, 2008; Singer & Ashman, 2009; Singer, 2010; Thurman, 2008; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Williams *et al.*, 2011; Bergstrom, 2009; Bakker & Pantti, 2009; Singer *et al.*, 2010; for the Brazilian case, see Holanda *et al.*, 2011). Most news editors, remember Díaz Noci *et al.* citing Reich (2010) believe that "comments are less thoughtful and more impulsive, shallow and aggressive than earlier forms of audience participation." There are two strategies about it: moderation prior to publication of the comments, and publish just those comments considered more valuable, and moderation before publishing, in which media just remove those comments considered inappropriate according to the rules of the medium. Those strategies were already identified by Mark Deuze in 2003, and our empirical research line strengthens the hypothesis posed by this Dutch scholar:

FIGURE 1
A TIPOLOGY OF ONLINE JOURNALISMS

Source: Deuze, 2003: 205
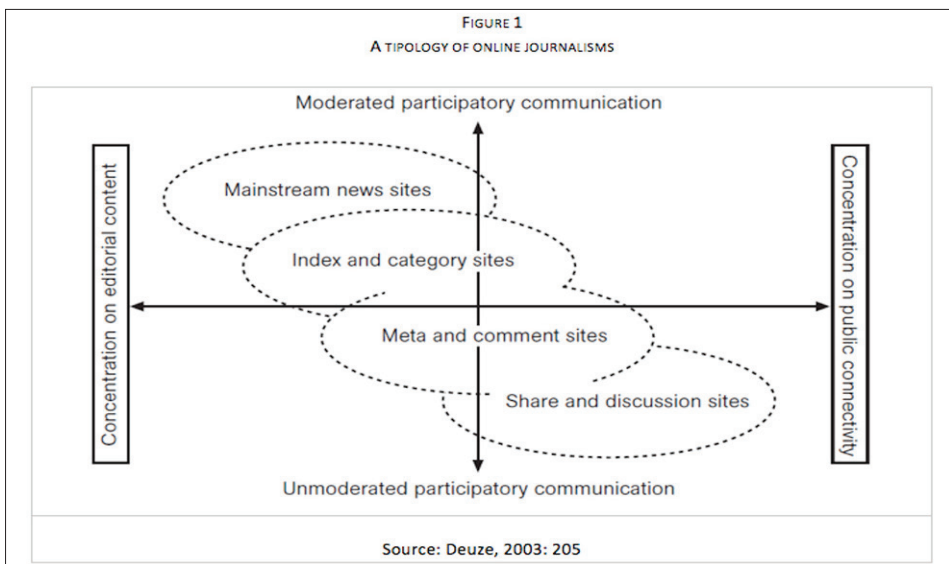
We attempt to measure to what extent there was a coherent argument in the comments of the news, i.e. if they had some of three conditions: the logic and coherence of the comments, that is, if people's arguments are about the subject of the news; if there is a cooperative search for truth, i. e., if participants take into account (mention, at least) the arguments of others; and if there is an argument based on the best reasons presented in the debate. To a great extent, it has something to do the dichotomy inclusion/exclusion posed by Karine Nahon:

> The fuzziness of boundaries of activities of users who experience inclusion/exclusion in multispheres and networks create discrepancies among norms and behavior in different spheres and networks of the represented oneself. A gated can join different networks as an individual with different collective patterns. Each one of the collective patterns maintains different rules and a narrative central to its identity (Nahon, 2011: 769).

RESEARCH DESIGN

After the research commissioned by the Consell de la Informació de Catalunya, we decided to conduct another research focusing in five quality international online newspapers, which represent both of the models proposed by Hallin & Mancini, the 'Northern Atlantic' or 'liberal' model (*NYTimes.com, Guardian.co.uk*) and the 'Mediterranean' or 'Polarized Pluralistic' model (*ElPaís.es, LeMonde.fr, Repubblica.it*) (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).[4] That second research was published in the International Journal of Press/Politics (Ruiz *et al*., 2011). In both studies, we aim to showthat the comments on the news do not help the development of a genuine democratic dialogue, but, at the same times, there are moderation models which are forming real debate communities. In this occasion, as a continuation of our ongoing research project,[5] we present the results of a particular case study which completes the perspective used in the previous ones. Then we considered the five breaking news of each medium, independently of which was the subject of them —very different in some cases, attending to the diverse interest of each medium and country—. In order to compared the differences, we have chosen, unlike we did for the first time, a similar news, the one we have already mentioned in other parts of this study: how those media informed about Egypt president Hosni Mubarak's resignation, as published while it was happening in the evening of February 11, 2011. Since it seems to be important even as a source of information for many media, we have included some data taken from the English online edition of *Al-Jazeera* in this occasion, even though if it is not a medium we consider regularly for our research project.

We intended, through content analysis —which has been improved during the successive waves of the study—, to determine to which extent a real conversation is taking shape on those concrete media. In the first study, in which the universe was composed by all the Catalan online newspapers, alongside with a qualitative methodology —the one we are going to expose now— we carried out some quantitative, word-frequency conducted. We have discarded it in this occasion, since four languages are in use in the studied media, and we have found

out a better way to fulfill our objectives to practice a direct observation of the comments. We have divided the subjects dividing the questions in four groups: logic and coherence, cooperative research of the truth, an agreement based on the best argument, and netiquette. We have confectioned a database, composed by the following fields (table 1).

TABLE 1

COMMENTS IN NEWS: DATABASE

Logic and Coherence	Does the author focuses his/her intervention in the subject of the news?	
	Does the author of the comment give any argument to enforce his/her point of view?	
Cooperative research of the truth	Do speakers show any respect and tolerance?	Libel or Defamation
		Calumnies (unjust accusation)
		Threats
	Do they introduce any nuance to the debate?	
	Do they request any further answer to the other speakers?	
	Do they try to construct an agreement?	Do they try to construct a majority?
		Do this majority coincides to the ideological point of view of the medium?
An agreement based in the best argument	Do the speakers agree and incorporate some other speaker's argument?	
	Do speakers mention any other information source? Which?	
	Are those sources near to the majority of the point of view exposed by speakers?	
Netiquette	Emoticons?	
	Exclamation signs?	
	Capital letters?	

Source: Prepared by the Author

As we can see, this is a qualitative content analysis, designed to explain to which extent a correct and enriching conversation is being held or not. Respect, tolerance, but also the search of the truth and coherence of the arguments are measured, through yes/not type of answers. In some question, a typology is also mentioned, i.e., which type of additional sources are mentioned or, when disrespectful language is used (categorized, as we will explain, through, to some extent, similar juridical categories for each country) to whom are those contemptuous expressions addressed.

As a general framework, we are also interested in which are the rules provided by the media and the general legal framework, so we can check whether the comments respect them or not, and to what extent do both parts fulfill this so-considered contractual relation.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Online newspapers state the legal framework of their relationship with their audience through texts usually available at a link at the bottom of all pages in the site, usually called "Terms & Conditions" or "Terms or Service", also in the "Copyright" section. The text is a contract with the corporate entity publishing the news portal that users implicitly accept when they access the website, both

the newspaper's one or the group's one —which is the case of *LaReppublica.it*, published by Gruppo Espresso, which general norms are the ones the user must accept. The fact that the legal rules are public, as the participation guidelines are, means that users cannot argue they were not aware of them. In the most extreme situation, *ElPaís.com* reserves the right to block the access to the website to users (IP addresses) that do not respect the rules.

Legal texts agree in setting on the users the legal responsibility of content provided by them. In most cases they are articulated by denying responsibility of the media company "in any case." For example, the one by *ElPaís.com* and the group Prisa: "In any case, Ediciones El País will not be responsible for the opinions held by users in the forums, chats, or other participation tools." This clause tries to avoid any liability for the company if despite the filters and participation rules some UGC ends up being sued by a reader. Beyond the possible legal consequences of the content of comments, users have the responsibility of assuring that the content they submit to the news website is their own, and no third party holds rights over it.

Some media, like *LeMonde.fr*, talk about "limitation of responsibility".[6] Moreover, Prisacom, the firm responsible for *ElPaís.com* and Group Prisa's other websites, explicitly "exclude any guarantee and responsibility" for any non intentional prejudices or damages caused to the user. Some other media, especially those of the Common law juridical area, used the term *Disclaimers of liability*.

All the legal terms' sections consulted are about intellectual property: authors' rights, and trademarks —that is, in continental legal words, intellectual property and industrial property, ruled separately by different codes or statutes.

Nonetheless, after stating that users are responsible for their submissions, in terms of intellectual property the online newspapers declare to own the rights to all the content published in their websites. That does not include the material produced by news agencies, but does cover UGC and grants them the right to republish the materials without economic compensation to the user. Some legal texts recognize contributors as legal subjects of intellectual property rights, but they state that users transfer all rights to the media company when they submit their comments. NYTimes.com has the most comprehensive reference to UGC in their legal texts. While other newsrooms mainly deal with participation from an ethical perspective, in their community guidelines, the US newspaper embeds many of the rules in a section of the legal text.

In Continental Europe, the transfer of intellectual property does not take away from the contributor the moral rights as an author, and therefore the media companies cannot claim full freedom to alter or edit the content of comments in news. A clear case is *LeMonde.fr*, whose legal terms say that:

> le droit de reproduire tout ou partie du contenu du site pour stockage aux fins de représentation sur écran monoposte et de reproduction, en un exemplaire, pour copie de sauvegarde ou tirage sur papier. Ce droit est consenti dans le cadre d'un usage strictement personnel, privé et non collectif, tout emise en réseau, toute rediffusion ou commercialisation totale ou partielle de ce contenu, auprès des tiers, sous quelque forme que ce soit, étant strictement interdite.

Instead, NYTimes.com users accept that their submissions "may be edited, removed, modified [...] and you waive any rights you may have in having the material altered or changed in a manner not agreeable to you". New York Times Company has its own legal division dedicated to defend those rights, both contents and logos or trademarks.

Some legal exceptions are mentioned, on the other hand: contents —a great amount of them, needless to say— coming from news agencies. Some of them, like AFP, Reuters or Associated Press are explicitly mentioned in *LeMonde.fr* or *Nytimes.com*'s legal advices. Mere data, like those provided by Dow Jones, are explicitly out of this exclusiveness right.

User Generated Contents are more and more important, and for this reason are treated extensively by *NYTimes.com*. Comments are included, as are other services like Times People or even *reader reviews*, or criticism by users. Norms that are considered ethical are treated in the US online newspaper as juridical —contractual, at least—. A non-commercial purpose is required to the user, and pornographic, abusive, xenophobe contents are forbidden. On the contrary, the firm attracts to its sphere everything the used sends to the newspapers, using an exclusiveness clause:

> You grant NYT a perpetual, nonexclusive, world-wide, royalty free, sub-licensable license to the Submissions, which includes without limitation the right for NYTimes.com or any third party *The New York Times* designates, to use, copy, transmit, excerpt, publish, distribute, publicly display, publicly perform, create derivative works of, host, index, cache, tag, encode, modify and adapt (including without limitation the right to adapt to streaming, downloading, broadcast, mobile, digital, thumbnail, scanning or other technologies) in any form or media now known or hereinafter developed, any Submission posted by you on or to NYTimes.com or any other Web site owned by NYT, including any Submission posted on NYTimes.com through a third party.

Other newsrooms reserve the right to not accept or delete (remove) a comment, with different legal implications for each of these actions. Moral rights need to be respected: integrity of the work is one of them. Those rights are especially recognized in the countries of continental law, at least *substantial* modifications of the work are forbidden, equally applicable to a comment even if it is very short. An extreme case will be the impossibility of correcting any word or spelling. Usually, however, the media observe a very different practice —even with their own workers' texts—, for instance abridging the text, so they can be published in the limited space of a printed page (is this applicable to the internet?), and this changes are considered fair use when they are *minor and not substantial*, thus, when they do not affect the meaning of the text.

Moral rights make literally impossible to unveil the real identity of a user, if he or she has decided to sign his or her work (the comment, in this case) under pseudonym. There are some limits: respect to the others, usurpation of personality, etc. Nickname system makes it, in most cases, difficult. Anyway, registration system —that of *Guardian.co.uk* is one of the most complete ones— tries to give any solution, since it requires the real name of the user before he or she can send

a comment to be published. Articles (like the talk boards until their sudden closure on 25th February, 2011) accept comments without pre-moderation, although posts on Comment is Free are moderated after the event. It was launched in 2006 by former editor Georgina Henry, based on Movable Type blog platform.

Other firms, like *NYTimes.com*, make an extensive interpretation of the norm: "You acknowledge that any submissions you make to the Service (e.g., user-generated content including but not limited to: comments, forum messages, reviews, text, shared Times People activities, video, audio and photographs, as well as computer code and applications) (each, a "Submission") may be edited, removed, modified, published, transmitted, and displayed by *The New York Times* Company and you waive any rights you may have in having the material altered or changed in a manner not agreeable to you".

Not publishing content is unproblematic, as the corporate entity can declare to do it "to our sole discretion", as is the case in *Guardian.co.uk*. The right to delete comments is less justifiable depending on regulations in each country, because it could be consider to take the work out of the market, action which is more difficult to do after and not before it has been published. The norms contained in, for instance, *Guardian.co.uk's Term of conditions* are double: those concerning publication and those referring to deleting or modifying the published work: "Publication of any material you submit to us will be at our sole discretion. We reserve the right to make additions or deletions to the text or graphics prior to publication, or to refuse publication".

Finally, the users are responsible for any problem about not being the legal copyright holder of the material he or she sends (being text, photos or videos) and for any image-derived legal problem (privacy) about the people on those pictures.

In order to prevent the problems that globalization poses to legal systems, the online newspapers mention explicitly in their legal texts what are the laws that are applicable to the contract. They try to "attract" to their own national jurisdiction any legal conflict that may arise from user participation, and users comply with this when accepting the contract.

SOME PRECISIONS ON CONTEMPTUOUS LANGUAGE AND RELATED TERMS

Since we are trying to analyze in a more subtle way which kind of dismissive behavior —sometimes, a slanging match— in very different countries, cultures and languages, we need to explain a little bit further some terms and concepts, and some false friends as well. We take into account the different legal traditions (Civil Law *vs* Common Law) of the countries in which the online media we analyze are published. Two groups appeared: on the one hand, the media published in the United Stats and the United Kingdom, which correspond to the Common Law system, and all the other, which correspond to the Civil Law system.

In Civil Law or continental legal system countries, two kind of dismissive behavior are present in the Criminal Codes of, for instance, Spain, Italy or France. Co-

ming form these juridical tradition, we will try to apply these considerations to our study. In Spain, the Criminal Code (XI Title, offense against honor), the first offense is called *injuria*, "action which makes any damage on any other person fame or dignity", but concretely those "public offenses". The particularity of the Spanish legal concept is that "offenses consisting in attributing or imputing facts will not be considered severe, unless they are done knowing that they are false or with disregard of the true." As a consequence, exception *veritatis* is permitted: there is no offense when the offender is able to prove the facts attributed to the other person.

On the other hand, a *calumnia* (art. 205 of the Spanish Criminal Code) is committed when there is an attribution or imputation of a crime, despite knowing that it is false or disregarding which is true". Some other actions are considered offenses against honor: *amenazas* (art. 169), consisting of addressing threats of harms or damages to some other people, consisting or not in crimes, individually or to a group, being it ethnic, cultural, religious, political, social or professional; and *coacciones* (coercion), defined as to "not allowing some other people, violently, to do those things that law does not forbid".

In Italy, those contemptuous behaviors are forbidden in the *Codice Penale* (XII Title, Second Book). Two kind of contemptuous behavior are mentioned: a more generic offense to snub somebody, and a more concrete one, consisting in attributing a concrete crime to somebody else —being a person or, in some cases which, for our purposes, are interesting, firms and institutions (juridical persons, in Civil Law terminology)—. The first one is called *ingiuria*, and it is necessary for the scorned person to be present. It is not clear if the person must be physically present or can be a participant in a virtual discussion, but the second paragraph of the Italian norm foresees that the offence can be done by telephone or any other electronic way, orally or in a written form, or even by drawings. When the offence is done with different people present, the important of the offence is considered to be greater, as it is the punishment.

The second form of offence is called dissamazione, and it consists on an attack against somebody's reputation while attributing him or her a concrete fact (*l'offesa consiste nell'attribuzione di un fatto determinato*), and the vexation is even more serious when it is committed by any public means, including the press or whatever public act.

In France, the *Code Penal* (Second Book, Crimes against people) foresees different offences, but especially all the Fifth Chapter (attempts or crimes against people's dignity) and Sixth Chapter (attempts or crimes against personality) are dedicated to those contemptuous behaviors. *False charges*, attempts against secrets or discrimination are some of those behaviors (art.255: *Toute distinction opérée entre les personnes physiques à raison de leur origine, sexe, etc.*). Unlike Spain or Italy, France do not distinguish two different offence types, but just one, the so called d*énonciation calomnieuse* (art. 226.10), or false accusation of a crime or a fact susceptible to cause legal consequences.

On the other hand, in the countries of the Common Law system —those which do not necessarily have codes or statutes, but follow the stare decisis doctrine and are rather a judge *made law*—, generally speaking, we are dealing

with defamation, and with different forms which include *calumny* (*injure* is a term reserved for physical, not moral ones), *slander* ("the oral act of defamation"), but also *vilification* and *traducement* (for transitory statements, as it has been sometimes explained), and *libel*, when press, broadcast or any other form of publicity is given to the offence. When a libel is committed, the accusation must be consciously false, and it can be defined as a "tort *consisting of false and malicious publication printed for the purpose of defaming a living person*".

Making a long story short, we have tried to reduce all this terms to twocategories. Even though if it is not strictly correct considering the different concepts used by the different countries, we consider that this reduction is worthy for the purposes of our work, otherwise we had to consider different concepts according to each country's act —and result won't be comparable—.
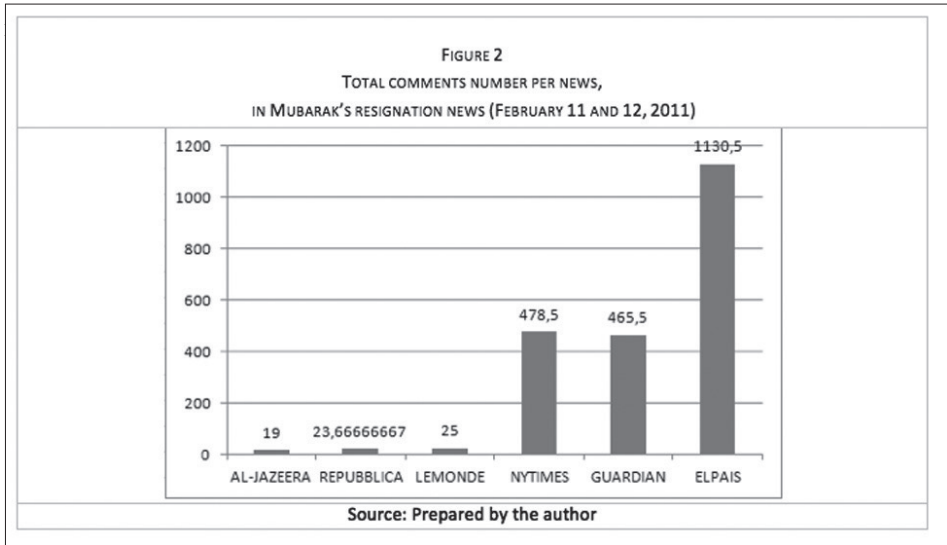
So we are dealing with *Defamation: Something said or written, or communicated in any form, to injure someone's reputation or exposing him/her to hatred, contempt or ridicule*. When this offence is done orally, it is slander; when it is done in a written form, it is libel. To our purposes, we are always dealing with *libel*, even though comments adopt sometimes a more or less conscious oral-like written form. Publicity is the difference. More concretely, we consider that there is a *serious insult or vexation* (corresponding to Spanish *injuria* and Italian *ingiuria*; there is no correspondence in French law) when we are in front of words written or pronounced with the intention of ridiculing or harming someone's honor or reputation.

And there is a *false accusation* (*It. deffamazione; Sp. calumnia; Fr. dénonciation calomnieuse*) when someone accuses someone else of crimes with false and malicious intention. Depending on which is the accusation, we could distinguish: libel on people integrity (injures, manslaughter, assassination, murder, torture), on property (robbery, against intellectual property), on national security, on honor, humanity, family (abandon), sexual crimes, freedom, etc. It is important, in order to measure whether the accusation is consciously false or not, is the comment proposes an *exceptio veritatis*. We have gathered all those different concepts under *calumnies* or *calumnious behavior or expressions*.

Finally, we must consider *threats*, defined as "address someone else a harm or damage", to a person or to a group, being the damage a crime or not.
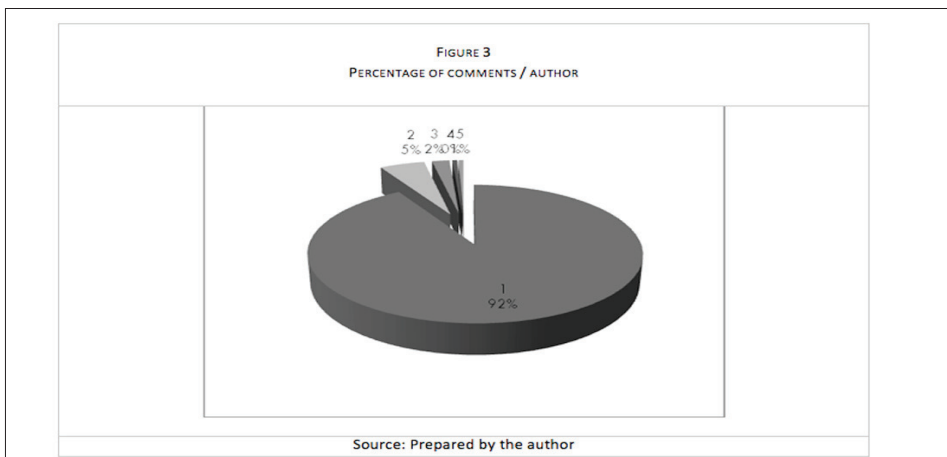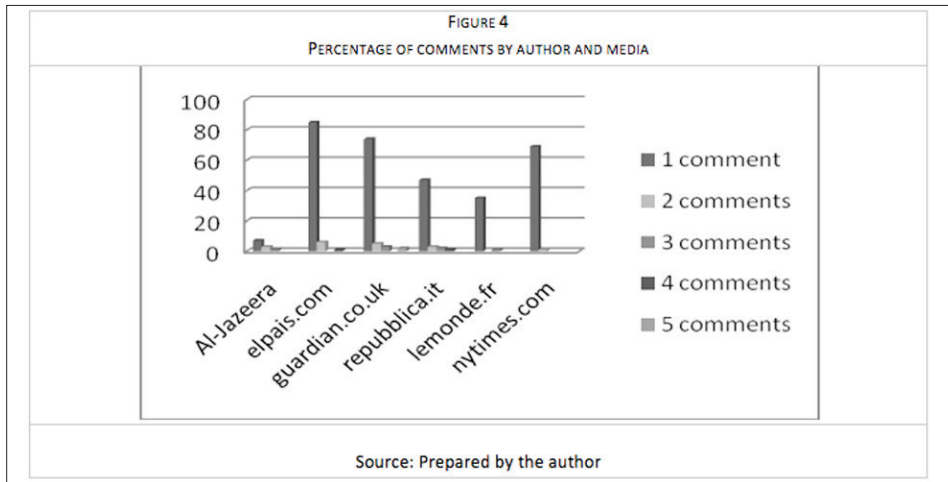
RESULTS

The comments analyzed are those corresponding to those news directly related to Hosni Mubarak's resignation during the first 24 hours after the event: two new items for each medium. A total of 4,247 comments were gathered. As we can see, the medium with most comments (average is presented) is *ElPaís.com*, followed by *The New York Times*, probably for different reasons: the huge audience in the second case, and a lax moderation system, in the first one (although not all news items can be commented, the ones which admit readers' comments receive a high quantity of them) (figure 2). It contrasts with the low average comment number of A*l-Jazeera in English*, just 19 average comments for every

FIGURE 2

TOTAL COMMENTS NUMBER PER NEWS,

IN MUBARAK'S RESIGNATION NEWS (FEBRUARY 11 AND 12, 2011)

Source: Prepared by the author

We have determined, when it was possible, how many comments are erased from the debate. It was only possible in the case of the two news items we have chosen from *The Guardian*, 'Hosni Mubarak resigns —and Egypt celebrates a new dawn' and 'US can celebrate Egyptian people's triumph', in the first one 38 comments out of 467, and in the second one 20 out of 464—. The removed comments are 8.1% in the first case, and 4.3% in the second one. The comments appeared without the original, and supposedly contemptuous or inappropriate content, and instead this formula: "This comment was removed by a moderator because it didn't abide by our community standards. Replies may also be deleted".

Even though, most of those involved in comments intervene just once, that is, do not listen to others. We find also a lack of respect for the arguments of others and a poverty of points of views. Additional information was rarely provided in comments (figures 3 and 4).

FIGURE 3

PERCENTAGE OF COMMENTS / AUTHOR

Source: Prepared by the author

FIGURE 4
PERCENTAGE OF COMMENTS BY AUTHOR AND MEDIA

Source: Prepared by the author

It is equally significant, from a qualitative point of view, that one of the sections that generates less feedback is op-ed, precisely, probably because of its conception related to printed press, presenting the form of argumentative "classic" texts, not intended to serve as an introduction to dialogue, but strongly authorial and personal, as a closed opinion that does not support subsequent rebuttals. By contrast, news on politics and economy (and society in local media) are the sections that have most comments. Somehow, the assessment of Peter Dahlgren confirms our point of view when he says:

> through its narrative, the classic journalism is presented as accurate and impartial interpreter of an existing reality external to itself and journalistic institutions. Journalism is a heterogeneous citizen ship which basically shares the same public culture (Dahlgren, 2010: 22).

So it is all a rhetoric and a conception of its role in the world that the media are forced to redefine, from the moment that the paradigm of single emitter and receiver, a sort of lowest common denominator of the interests of very diverse groups that constitute an ideal audience, is clearly in crisis.

The media, therefore, although publishing clear standards from an ethical and legal point of view, recognize that the main value of opening their news to the comments is getting popularity, especially for advertisers. Most commented news seem to be widely read and, therefore, likely to include advertising. To get a better quality of the dialogue it seems essential to use previous filter and human moderation, but not all media are disposed to do that because of economic costs or other reasons. The problem, therefore, —and that was the conclusion of our study—, it was not a lack of principles by the media, but the lack of commitment by them to ensure effective compliance in all its dimensions.

Focusing in the tone of the comments, since the most violent or illegal ones (or, it is to be thought, those which trespass the medium's legal limits) are

removed, there are few contemptuous, calumnious or threatening comments (according to the categories we have established previously), even though if we are considered them *lato sensu*. Offensive comments, totally speaking suppose around10%. (10.33%, exactly). Calumnies are just 0.22% of the total (3 appearing on *The Guardian*, 1 in *ElPaís.com*, and 1 in *Al-Jazeera*) (figure 5). One of them, published by the Spanish newspaper, is not directly contemptuous behavior (for the percentage of those kind of comments, see figure 6), but indirectly an attribution to another reader of being a fascist, using irony:

> Para Carlos 27. Y tendría que añadir, siguiendo el hilo de su comentario: No es lo mismo libertad que libertinaje. La chusma no sabe lo que quiere y por eso hay que dejar que gobiernen los que están preparados. Por eso estamos en España como estamos. Con Franco se vivía mejor. Si volviera Franco, yo no digo que para siempre, pero tres semanitas y de cabo, pondría las cosas en su sitio...

Another contemptuous comments are, in the Spanish medium, 'cortate un poquito a la hora de juzgar. Podría decirte que te culturices un poco, pero para que...', and in other media 'You are bordering on deep seated hypocricy' or apologizes for 'being rude' and mentions 'this inane crap' (*The Guardian*).

FIGURE 5
OFFENSIVE COMMENTS
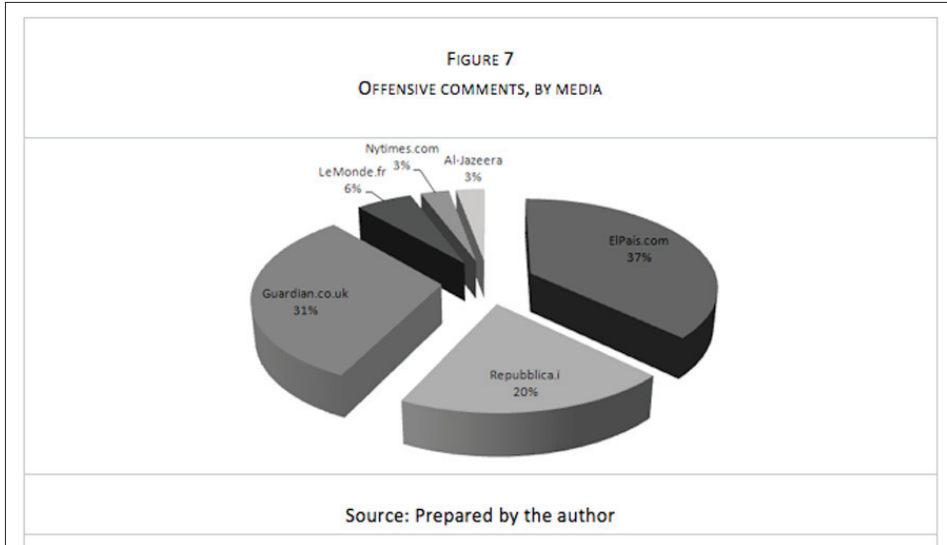
Yes 11%

No 89%

Source: Prepared by the author
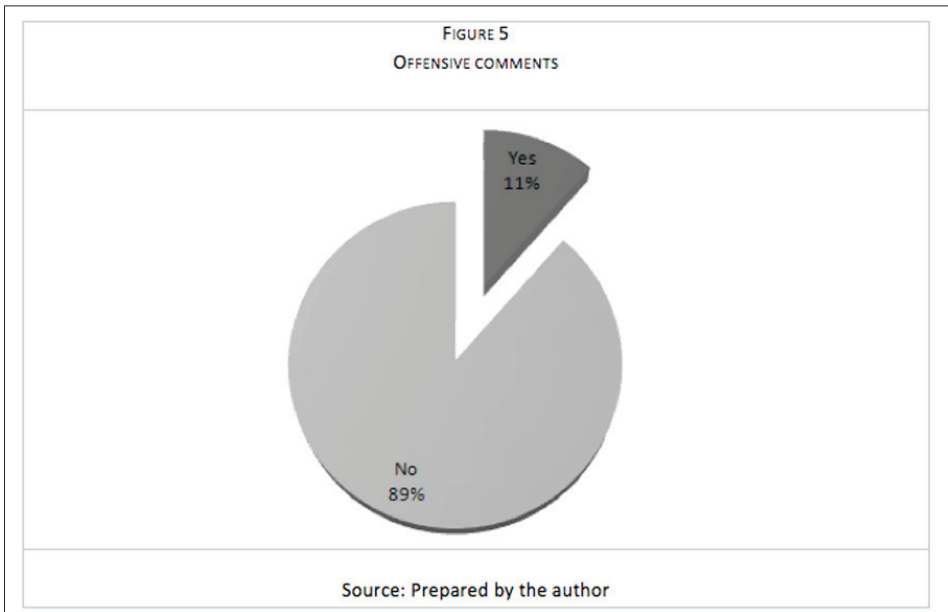
Accusations of typified crimes are usually addressed against Hosni Mubarak ('¿Todavía aquí, asesino?', *ElPaís.com*), which is called 'corrupt' and his collaborator Suleiman is called "torturer-in-chief", even though one could allege the exceptio veritatis: 'A dictator who abuses, murders and robs his people blind' (*Guardian.co.uk*). There is just one medium which publishes almost no contemptuous or calumnious comment: *The New York Times*.
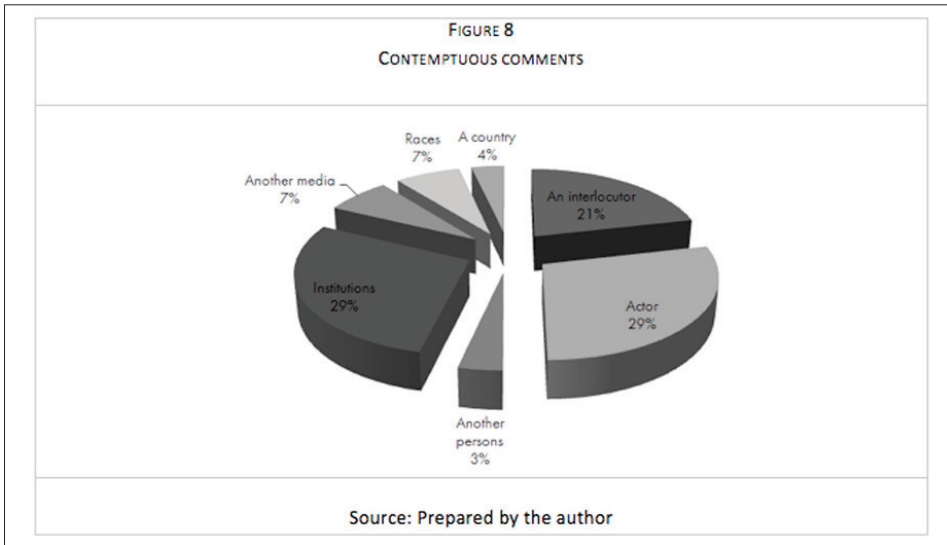
FIGURE 6
CONTEMPTUOUS COMMENTS BY MEDIA (TOTAL)

Source: Prepared by the author
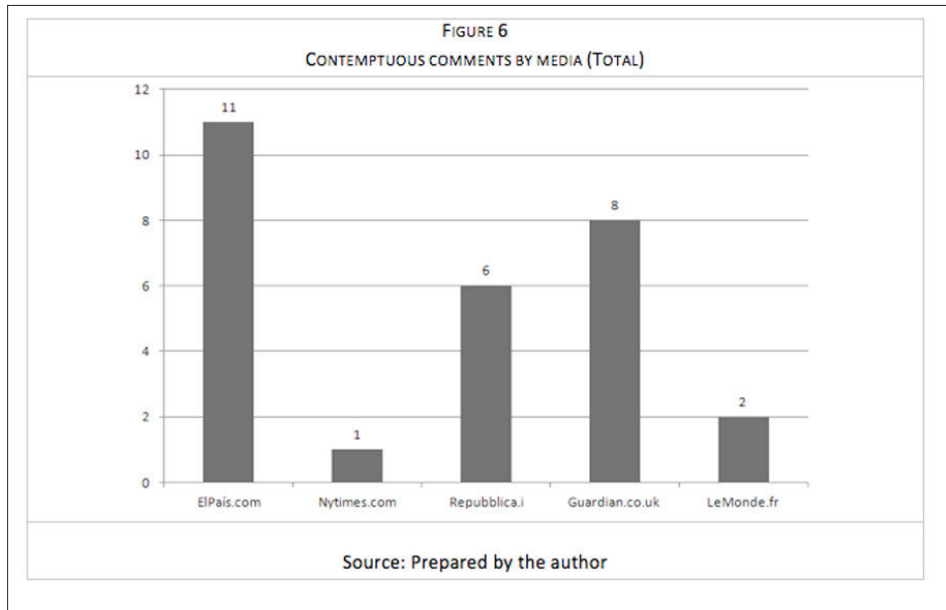
We have found just one threat, in *Repubblica.it*, written in capital letters:

> DOVREBBE TOCCARE A NOI, MA NON SARA 'COSI' SEMPLICE COME IN TUNISIA ED EGITTO NOI QUI ABBIAMO, PURTROPPO, OLTRE AL nanetto di pinto con ilc..oflaccido e daltre parti ancora piu' flaccide, il signor ratzinger ed il vaticano CHE SONO MOLTO PIU' TEMIBILI DEL nanetto DI CUI PRIMA PENSO PROPRIO CHE DOVREMO SPERARE NELLA "VEUVE" (MADAMA GHIGLIOTTINA) CHE BACI IL COLLO A TUTTI QUESTI "NON ESSERI UMANI"!! (Comment to 'Adesso a qui toca?', February 11, 2011).
>
> Percentually speaking, offensive comments (including libel or calumnies, defamation and threats) are of greater importance in three media: two of the Mediterranean area (*El País* and *La Repubblica*) and, qiite surprinsingly, in *The Guardian*. On the other extreme, *Le Monde* and *The New York Times* present a high level of respect, the same one shown, as a term of comparison, by *Al-Jazeera*'s readers (3%) (Figure 7).

FIGURE 7

OFFENSIVE COMMENTS, BY MEDIA

Nytimes.com 3% — Al-Jazeera 3%
LeMonde.fr 6%
ElPais.com 37%
Guardian.co.uk 31%
Repubblica.i 20%

Source: Prepared by the author

As previously explained, we are interested in knowing which is the target of the generally speaking contemptuous behavior in news comments. In this case, which of course is a particular one, the readers mainly address their indignation to the actors of the news (politicians are the preferred target; Mubarak and some of their ministers but, especially in France, Italy and Spain, to heir own country's politicians) and institutions. It is no surprise, since the so called 'Arab spring' removed —really to which extent, this is another question— the institutions of those country, in this precise case even the presidency.
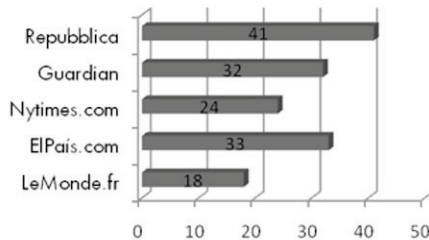
FIGURE 8

CONTEMPTUOUS COMMENTS

Races 7%   A country 4%
Another media 7%
An interlocutor 21%
Institutions 29%
Actor 29%
Another persons 3%

Source: Prepared by the author

Nuances intended to complete other readers' comments are not usual. The media which contains most comments of this type is Repubblica.it, followed by *ElPaís.com*, both of the Mediterranean area, and are *LeMonde.fr* and Nytimes.com (the media with less contemptuous comments, on the other hand) the ones in which readers do not address any nuance to their counterparts (table 2 and figure 9).

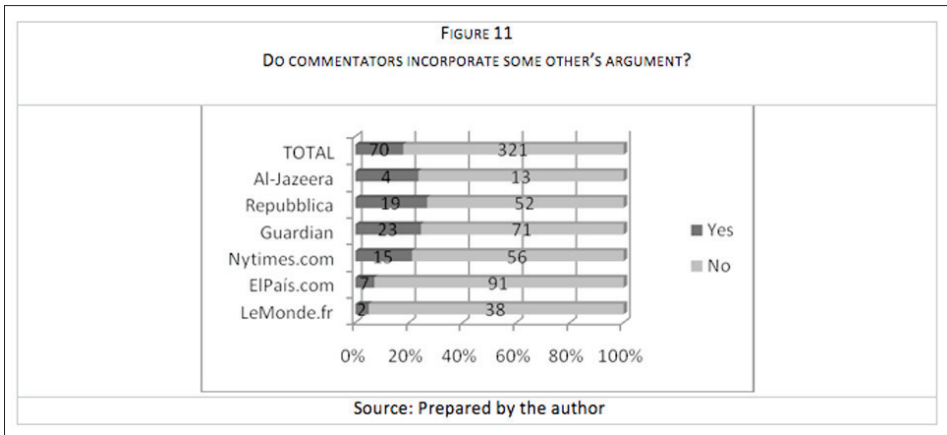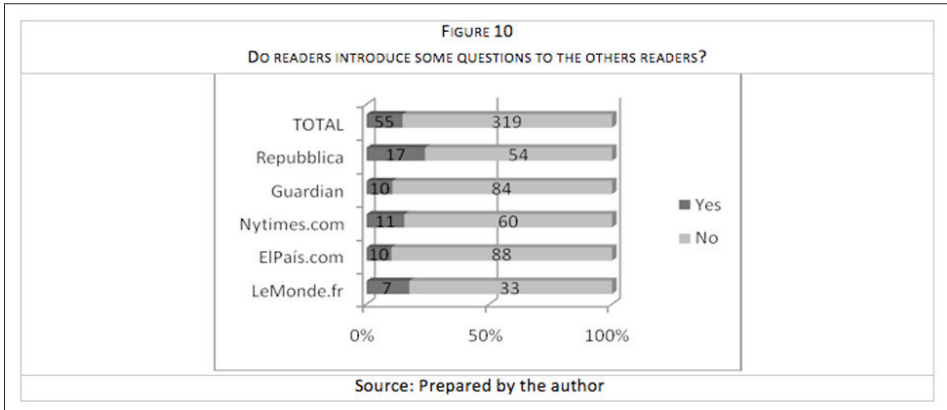| TABLE 2 NUANCES			
	Yes	No	%Yes
LeMonde.fr	7	32	18
ElPaís.com	33	66	33
Nytimes.com	17	54	24
Guardian	30	64	32
Repubblica	29	42	41
TOTAL	116	258	31

Source: Prepared by the author

FIGURE 9
NUANCES. PERCENTAGE

Source: Prepared by the author

Readers do scarcely address any question to the others; again, is *Repubblica.it* the medium with the highest percentage, but anyway it does not arrive to 20% of the comments (figure 10). The majority of the comment writers do not incorporate no one's arguments, even though the figures are growing and, in some cases, it arrives to almost 25% of the total (figure 11).

FIGURE 10

DO READERS INTRODUCE SOME QUESTIONS TO THE OTHERS READERS?

	Yes	No
TOTAL	55	319
Repubblica	17	54
Guardian	10	84
Nytimes.com	11	60
ElPaís.com	10	88
LeMonde.fr	7	33

Source: Prepared by the author

FIGURE 11

DO COMMENTATORS INCORPORATE SOME OTHER'S ARGUMENT?

	Yes	No
TOTAL	70	321
Al-Jazeera	4	13
Repubblica	19	52
Guardian	23	71
Nytimes.com	15	56
ElPaís.com	7	91
LeMonde.fr	2	38

Source: Prepared by the author

We have wondered if readers introduce some kind of mention to other sources; even when this is done, mentions are not very concrete, and just 8% of the comments are of this type (table 3). The sources are not coincidental, in most cases, with the medium's ideology, thus, they are introduced by people who criticizes the medium's message (figure 12).
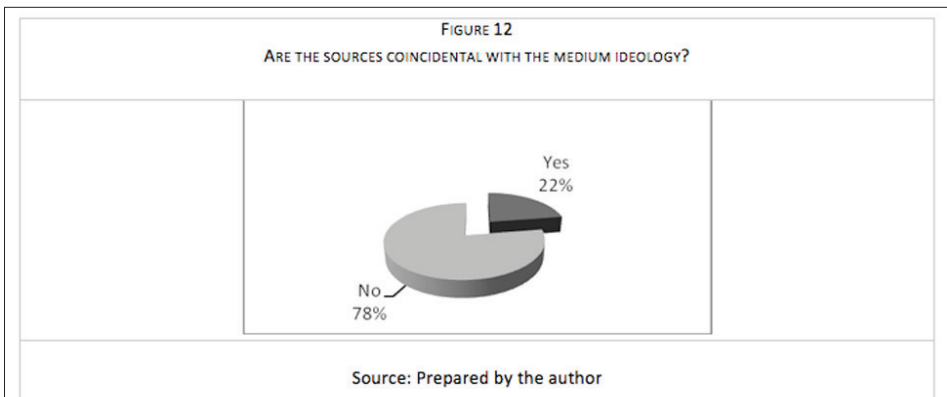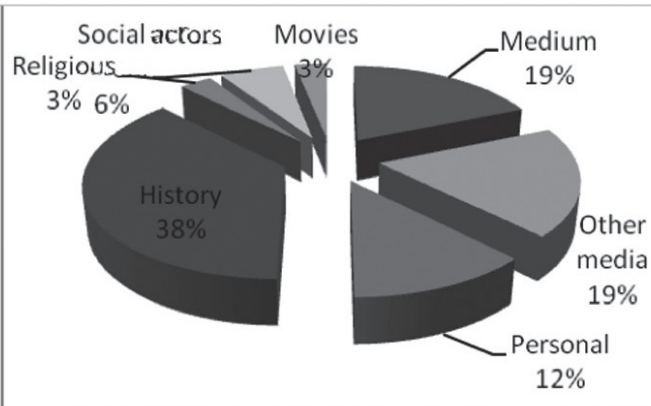
FIGURE 12

ARE THE SOURCES COINCIDENTAL WITH THE MEDIUM IDEOLOGY?

Yes 22%

No 78%

Source: Prepared by the author

	Medium	Other media	Personal	History	Religious	Social actors	Movies
LeMonde.fr	1	1		1		1	
ElPaís.com		1	2	1		1	
Nytimes.com	5	2	1				
Guardian		1		5			1
Repubblica		1	1	3			
TOTAL	6	6	4	12	1	2	1

TABLE 3
USE OF OTHER INFORMATION SOURCES

Source: Prepared by the author

Finally, we have checked if there is a creative use of emoticons. There is a very low level of usage, and it is precisely the medium used just as a reference for our research in this concrete case, *Al-Jazeera in English*, the one in which a creative use of emoticons is observed. Since written language lacks the expression resources of oral conversation, sometimes the readers use html language tags-like word to emphasize the content of their words. This is observed, for example, in the comments to the article in *The Guardian* entitled "Twenty-eight hours in Tahrir. Mark LeVine describes the sense of exhilaration among Egyptians at Cairo's Tahrir Square", in at least to readers' pieces:

> <sarcasm> Believing in supernatural beings will surely be a good foundation for a state.</sarcasm>
> before Mubarack was Sadat <war> before that was naser <war> Mubarack is the only president in Egypt who knew how to keep peace for his country and his people, think about it </war></war>

It is preferred the usage of capital letters, which in Net etiquette are considered shouts (10% of the comments) and exclamation signs (16%). Anyway, most of the comments just use plain text (figure 13).

FIGURE 13
NETIQUETTE

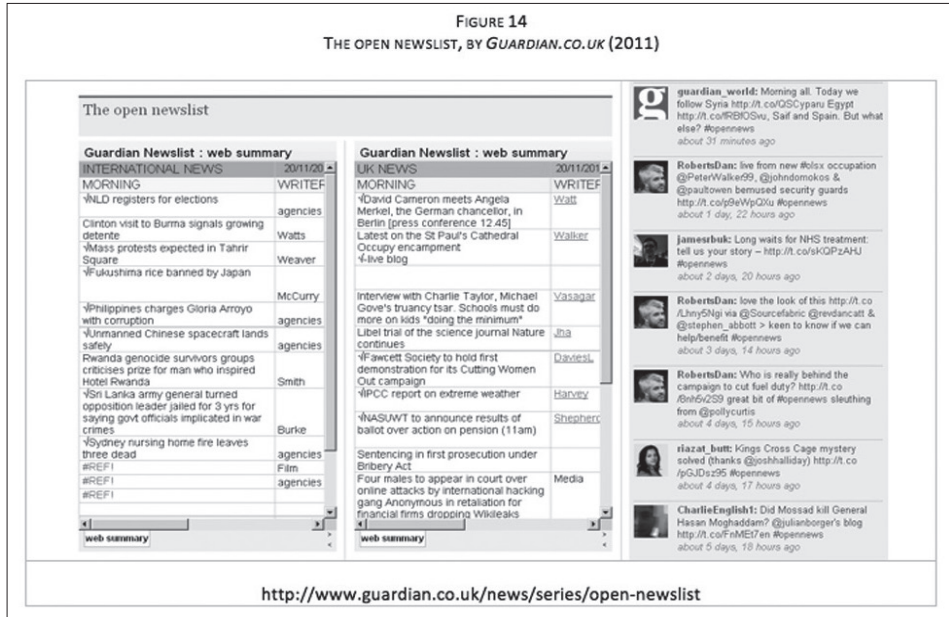Source: Prepared by the author
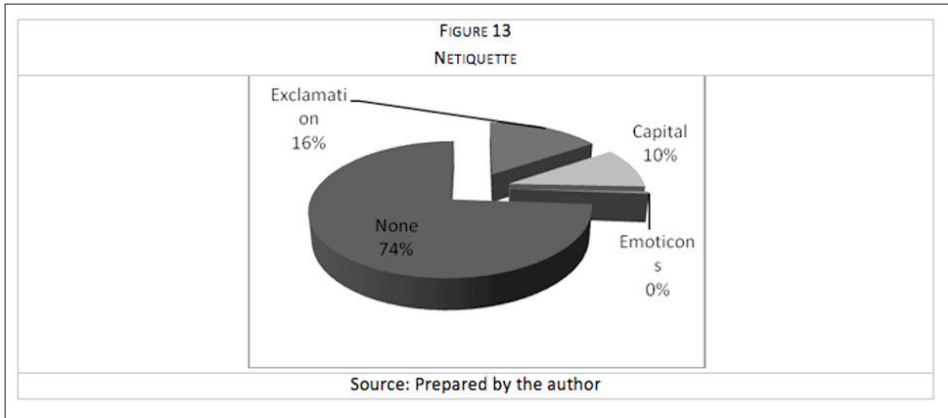
CONCLUSIONS

In our most recent article on this subject (Ruiz et al., 2011), we described two models of debate constructed around comments in news: the *communities* of debate and the *homogeneous communities*, the second one "as having a dialogue of the deaf". "In all the cases, the majority of users adhere to the ideological principles of the newsroom, but while in the first two the presence of a alternative minority perspective is tolerated and fosters debate, in the other three contributions tend to be a coherent collective reproduction of the same positions." This is confirmed to a great extent by our present research comparing the same news in all five media, but we appreciate some evolution towards a more educated, but not more much richer in terms of arguments, sources and questions, debate. The first model corresponds to the liberal or Northern Atlantic model and the second to the polarized pluralistic, in which opinions are more contrasted and people pay lesser attention to the others. But, at the same time, French online newspapers (at least, *LeMonde.fr*) are more likely than US newspapers to feature deliberative formats and more likely to make room for non-journalistic authorial voices (Benson *et al.*, 2009), and, as another finding of the latest phase of our study, it seems that Italian quality media enhance dialogism better that their Atlantic counterparts, even though if in this model individual comments, reasoning and argumentations are more elaborated.

Basically, we agree with Eric Alterman when he says that:

> the birth of the liberal blogosphere, with its ability to bypass the big media institutions and conduct conversations within a like-minded community, represents a revival of the Deweyan challenge to our Lippman-like understanding of what constitutes 'news' and, in doing so, might seem to revive the philosopher's notion of a genuinely democratic discourse (Alterman, 2008).

In sum, "the results of this study suggest that the cultural context is relevant to the democratic quality of the debates we analyzed [...]. Moderation strategies of the different newsrooms do seem to be effective in almost eradicating insults

in the comments, but the different solutions adopted (pre-/postmoderation, in-house/outsourced) do not seem to direct the quality of the debate in a clear direction" (Ruiz *et al.*, 2011: 20). The longitudinal study were are carrying on will give us more in tune results, but basically the models are quiet established. We need to compare this media with some others of different type (e.g., televisions' websites, online native media, etc.) in order to compare to which extent this is a consequence also of some other factors.

FIGURE 14
THE OPEN NEWSLIST, BY *GUARDIAN.CO.UK* (2011)

http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/series/open-newslist

As news are becoming more and more transparent and open-sourced (a clear example is *The Guardian's Open Newslist*, see figure 14) is to be thought that this will enhance readers' opinions as well, if this kind of sections are not a consequence of the willing of the audience for more presence. Further research is needed to trace these relationships, but it is relevant to point out how conversations show a greater deal of argumentation, respect amongst participants and pluralism of ideas. We need also take into consideration other forms of collaboration, different from comments —which, as we have seen, are scarcely answered by journalists; during the first research at the origin of this interest on investigate comments, the editors of the Catalan newspapers' website confessed that their newsroom showed little interest towards what people say, even though if they mentioned the author of news they commented—.

There are some other fields to explore. As we have explained previously, mainstream media like *Le Monde* have launched some new trademarks to profit from participation: *LePost.fr*, the substituted by *Le Huffington Post* in 2012 —as dis Prisa in Spain in June 2012, when launched the Spanish edition of it, called *Le Huffington Post*. Content analysis and ethnographic studies, especially observation, had to be done in order to explain how things are moving in this direction—.

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Notes

[1] The project "Evolution of online journalism in Spain in the context of convergence" funded by the Ministry of Science of Spain (code: CSO2009-13713-C05-04).

[2] "Since 2002, 'participation' has become a key idea in understanding and promoting the internet" (Salles, 2010: 8).

[3] Which is connected also to the concepts of public and civic journalism. An evolution of these two terms, their meaning and their achievements can be traced the reports by Friedland, Rosen & Austin (1994), Briand (1995), Fouhy & Schaffer (1995), Buckner (1996), Schaffer (1998, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c), Bliss Osborne (1999), Denton & Thorson [s.d] and Gyllenhaal (2000).

[4] We have not considered the third model, the so-called 'Democratic corporatist', represented by media of Finland, Germany, Austria, Switzerland or the Netherlands, for linguistic reasons.

[5] The project "Evolution of online journalism in Spain in the context of convergence" funded by the Ministry of Science of Spain (code: CSO2009-13713-C05-04).

[6] "In 1994, a new period started for the French paper: a new department was created related to telematics and electronic services (TES). It gave birth to 'Luce' in 1995, Le Monde's first online baby, publishing the daily editorials written by Jean-Marie Colombani, thenits director. The on-line paper evolved to a daily '.pdf' version produced by the TES who were also working on creating various CDROMS and programs. The TES became the Sequence Multimedia in 1996, and moved from the printing buildings where it was born to Le Monde's new location (Rue Claude Bernard). The 'electronic workers' moved again in 1999, and the department was turned into a subsidiary company called Le Monde Interactif. Fromthen on, responsibilities evolved inside Le Monde Interactif, that was growing not only to focus on the online newspaper and joint programming, but also to work on the advertising to go with it. By 2004, Le Monde.fr, the online version of Le Monde, wasn't publishing the print articles only, a new newsroom started producing exclusive papers for the internet site and technical devices such as forums, chats and blogs were introduced to let registered readers react. The internet site's growing popularity became an issue in 2006, as it started to make more money than its parent *Le Monde*. *Le Monde* and *Le Monde.fr* were both evolving and growing in different newsrooms, with different business cultures" (Salles, 2010: 7).

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