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## **Mediatization of public controversies: analysis of the HolaPutero campaign against prostitution**

### **Mediatización de las controversias públicas: a propósito de la campaña sobre prostitución Hola Putero**

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#### **Abstract**

A public issue needs to be discussed to reach consensus and the media are key actors and mediatization spaces in this process. The article offers a theoretical and methodological reflection about the mediatization of controversies in the public space, through an ethnographic approach to the prostitution controversy. The case study method is used to observe how the logics of virality and media silencing are fundamental when a public issue is staged. We have analyzed HolaPutero, a YouTube viral campaign published by Towanda Rebels. A social semiotic analysis is performed to explore the discursive proposal, networks dynamics and media coverage of this campaign. The objective is to explore how the media, through their focus on viral content spread on social networks, intervene in public controversies, influencing their framing, orientation and solution expectation. Prostitution is framed as a matter of morality politics in which mediatization is key to gain the support, aggregation and mobilization of publics around the systems of meaning, arguments, stories and proposals for political action that characterize the perspectives in conflict.

#### **Resumen**

Un problema público precisa ser discutido para alcanzar acuerdos y los medios de comunicación son actores y lugares de mediación claves en este proceso. Proponemos una reflexión teórico-metodológica sobre la mediatización de las controversias en el espacio público, mediante una aproximación etnográfica multisituada a la controversia sobre prostitución. Utilizamos un estudio de caso para observar cómo las lógicas de viralidad y silenciamiento mediático resultan significativas en la escenificación pública de un problema. Se selecciona la campaña viral HolaPutero publicada en Youtube por el colectivo Towanda Rebels como caso de estudio. Se aplica un análisis sociosemiótico de la campaña y de su cobertura mediática. El objetivo es indagar cómo los medios, desde su atención a los contenidos virales de redes sociales, intervienen en las polémicas públicas, incidiendo en su enmarcado, orientación y expectativas de solución. Encuadramos la prostitución como una cuestión de política moral en la que la mediatización es básica para obtener adhesiones, agregaciones y movilización de públicos en torno a los sistemas de sentido, argumentos, relatos y propuestas de acción política que caracterizan las perspectivas en conflicto.

#### **Keywords**

Journalism; Public Sphere; prostitution; virality; controversy; emotions; trafficking

#### **Palabras clave**

Periodismo; prostitución; esfera pública; mediatización; controversia; trata con fines de explotación sexual

## 1. Introduction

There is an ongoing debate around prostitution. It is a social issue intrinsic to the deliberation on the sociosexual and economic order (Justo von Lurzer, 2014; Sabsay, 2016, pp. 550-557; Zelizer, 2011) that is cyclically articulated as an agenda issue and emerges in the public space as a problem that requires institutions to adopt policies. In the recent debate on this issue, the confrontation within the feminist movement, as part of what has become known as the "sex wars", has served to articulate its highly polarized definitions and framings in the public space by the abolitionist and pro-sex work stances (Gimeno, 2012; Heim, 2012; Serughetti, 2018). Currently, the emergence of a transnational policy on trafficking in humans for the purpose of sexual exploitation has revived the debate, which reproduces to a large extent the inherited discursive frameworks, according to Sanghera, and transfers the approaches of the "sex wars" to the arena of the fight against trafficking (Kempadoo, Sanghera, & Pattanaik, 2005).

Today, prostitution is part of the public, political and media agendas at the national and international scales. However, since the mid-19th century it is usual for the authorities to try to control and regulate prostitution directly or indirectly (Wagenaar, 2017b). Elisabeth Bernstein explains that the attention paid to prostitution has increased exponentially, surpassing the scope of the feminist movement since the mid-1990s. This issue has received unprecedented attention in multiple scenarios and has produced a clear "discursive explosion" (of which this article is part). This attention has increased thanks to the participation of the media and the entertainment industry, government agencies, political and academic institutions as well as the active feminist movement, through the production of information pieces, entertainment content, reports, research studies and statements (Bernstein, 2007).

This discursive explosion has also occurred in Spain. Recent examples include the success of the film *Princesas* (2005), in the cultural sphere; the Congress' report to develop a verdict on the current situation of prostitution in Spain (2007), in the political sphere; and the increase in the media of personalities identified with the issue, such as Beatriz Gimeno (Gimeno, 2012) from the academia, Mabel Lozano from the media and spokespersons of the pro-sex work movement, such as activists Montse Neira and Paula Vip. In this context, campaigns to raise awareness against trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation have also been launched and grown exponentially.

This article approaches this phenomenon through a theoretical and methodological reflection on the media controversy surrounding prostitution as a public issue, illustrated with a case study: the *HolaPutero* ("HelloJohn") campaign, launched by the YouTube channel Towanda Rebels on 3 December 2017. We analyzed the media coverage of this campaign and of *Hola Abolicionista* ("Hello Abolitionist"), a video reply published by the YouTube channel *Trabajadoras Sexuales En Lucha* ("Female Sex Workers in Battle") on 22 December 2017.

Despite its long history as a public issue, prostitution is still an open question with no apparent answer. It is still discussed in many public arenas by a great diversity of actors: institutions, associations, religious and academic groups and the media. Although all kinds of resources have been mobilized (financial, organizational, administrative, legal, intellectual, etc.), prostitution remains a pending and highly controversial issue, further complicated by the public policies proposed by very different groups, which have turned out to be quite ineffective (Wagenaar, 2017a).

Given the nature of this phenomenon, in relation to social order, there is a lack of field studies offering reliable evidence, statistic and data to support arguments and decision making. While scientific production in this field faces the challenge of producing less ideological knowledge, the adoption of current public policies is determined by the status of prostitution as a matter of morality politics (Wagenaar, 2017a). Given the lack of empirical data and facts, a space has opened up in the public sphere for the actors involved in this controversy to project their ideology, basic moral principles and to influence the processes of public opinion and the making of particular policies.

The inherent difficulties in this issue derive from the fact that it is a political issue whose nature is inherently moral, which restricts the possibilities for a concerted action between conflicting perspectives that are perceived as unsolvable. In this context, the neo-abolitionist and regulationist proposals seem to overflow the debate spaces even when there are other proposals that combine these basic positions (Heim, 2012) or focus on the decriminalization of prostitution (Abel, 2014).

While the regulatory framework is one of the factors that most affects the shaping of public opinion regarding prostitution (Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017), to the same extent, discursive frameworks -both transnational and national- directly affect public policy models and the ways in which they are implemented in particular contexts (O'Brien, 2015). This does not mean that the discursive dimension is sufficient to determine how a public policy is carried out, but that it is a fundamental factor that will operate

at the same time as the alliances between political parties and the negotiation processes that take place in other public arenas (Altink, Amesberger & Wagenaar, 2017).

This research work is guided by the hypothesis that in Spain the transformation of prostitution into a public issue can be considered incomplete due to certain factors: the persistent high degree of vagueness of the normative framework and the lack of coherent public policies in this regard; because in recent years, public and political attention has been focused - almost exclusively - on the phenomenon of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation and because of the lack of a singular debate on the subject linked to concrete political proposals (Álvarez Valcárcel, 2016). We argue that the impact of discourses in the mediatized public space will be central in the decision-making process about the model to be implemented in the near future around prostitution. Hence the interest in contents that have been strategically produced to intervene in the debate, such as the *HolaPutero* campaign, and reach a high degree of dissemination in non-specialized public arenas, such as social networks and mainstream media.

### 1.1. Mediatization of public issues

Our main objective is to analyze the mediatization of the prostitution controversy to understand how the media are operating, on the one hand, as actors interested on and committed to this public issue and, on the other, as spaces for the translation and intermediation of the controversy. This contribution is inserted in the research and development project titled "Public issues and controversies: diversity and participation in the media sphere" (Peñamarín, 2014 and 2017), which is a multi-sited, ethnographic work, focused on following the conflict (Marcus, 1995) and mapping it (Marres & Moats, 2015; Venturini, 2010, 2012). With this framework, this research on prostitution as a public issue, which started in 2014, aims to "examine the circulation of meanings, objects and cultural identities in a diffused time and space" where its discussion usually takes place simultaneously in the spheres of everyday life, legal institutions and the mass media (Marcus, 1995).

The theoretical-methodological approach of the project deals with the articulation between public issues and controversies, from a pragmatic perspective[1]. In the tradition of the sociology of public issues (Cefaï, 2016; Gusfield, 1991), we argue that these appear when certain actors express discontent and question the status quo, present their perspectives on the problem, expose their proposed solutions in the mediatized public sphere, demand changes and the intervention of institutions. In this process, the problem is visualized and stabilized as common and shared and, in parallel, "publics" are created and mobilized by those directly involved and by all those "indirectly and seriously affected" by the issue in question (Dewey, 2004, pp. 74-75)[2].

As Dewey put it (2004, p.74), "No two epochs or two places have the same public life. The conditions make the consequences and knowledge of organized action different. In addition, the media by which a public can get the government to serve its interests vary". Hence, the analysis has to take into account the doing and making of the public sphere as a practice, which today is determined by the processes of mediatization.

Mediatization theory explains the way in which media, culture and society interact and influence each other as interdependent entities (Peñamarín, 2008 and 2017, Hjarvard & Llano Linares, 2016). We identify these mediatization processes through the media logics, which constitute a set of informal practices and formal procedures with which the media operate and influence other areas of private and public life (ibidem). Media logics refer to rules, mediations and resources, which can be institutional (public policies and regulatory frameworks), sociocultural (professional cultures), aesthetic (norms of style, conventions) and technological (sociotechnical systems).

The logics of the media, Hjarvard (2016)[3] points out, configure the ways in which individuals, groups and organizations interact, not as determining factors, but as factors that condition, favor, limit, etc. Observing them allows us to understand how other domains of social life accommodate these media logics, and in turn how the media also accommodate the logics of other social spheres (Peñamarín, 2008, Stig Hjarvard, 2018, S. Hjarvard & Llano Linares, 2016). We aim to reflect on the combined influence of mediatization on the construction of public issues.

To address this issue, in addition to mapping the controversy in generic terms (with the objective of identifying relevant actors, conflicting positions, public arenas and ways to define the problem), the case study method is used to analyze the emergence of particular issues in the controversial context, in line with the works that make up the aforementioned R&D project (Peñamarín, 2017, Fouce, 2017, Arquembourg, 2016, Marc, 2017). Faced with the extensive and diachronic view of the medium and long term, with this intensive look at a particular issue, we seek to describe: how actors and alliances are configured between

them, what are the hegemonic and counterhegemonic discursive strategies and what kind of media logics are influencing the development of the controversy and, therefore, the closure and solution expectations of the public issue.

Before describing in detail the HolaPutero campaign and its repercussion in the public sphere, we will dwell on two significant issues to interpret the particularities of this case: first, a substantive issue that concerns the status of prostitution as a matter of "morality politics" (Mooney & Schuldt, 2008; Wagenaar & Altink, 2012), with difficulties to configure itself as an autonomous issue in the mediatized public sphere. And, second, a professional and sociotechnical issue that alludes to the hybridization of media logics and social networks as conditioning factors of media coverage.

## **2. Prostitution as a matter of morality politics**

Mediatized controversies are an important element in policy making process. Following Chantal Mouffe, policy is understood as those practices and institutions that seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflicting (Mouffe, 2001, p.14). In a democracy, the challenge is to find the balance between the administration of plurality and adherence to values that inform a particular mode of coexistence (Mouffe, 2001: 181), which is even more complicated when we deal with an issue that is framed as morality politics.

As explained by Mooney and Schuldt (2008), morality politics issues depend not on their intrinsic content but on their framing, on how the beliefs and values have been categorized by the actors involved. These issues give rise to strongly ideological debates[4], which often avoid technical issues around the design and implementation of policies (regulatory, economic, health, etc.) and privilege the discussion on principles and moral values. This open and, in a certain sense, simplified character (in political and technical terms) allows a large percentage of citizens to feel encouraged and authorized to participate, adopting a position and expressing their opinion in the public sphere, which is often limited by value dichotomies (good/bad, right/wrong). While many of the public issues are the property of certain organizations or institutions that collect data, reports on the subject, formulate diagnoses, make predictions and suggest policy solutions (Wagenaar & Altink, 2012), in these cases the issue is owned by all and, therefore, the sources of technical authority that could mediate conflicts of belief or opinion tend to be absent or silenced.

On the other hand, these issues tend to achieve high public visibility and receive intense media attention (Wagenaar & Altink, 2012), among other things, because they require a technically simple debate, affect a wide range of people and generate strong emotional attachments in relation to the universes of meaning and value in conflict. Hence, they tend to be matters in which it is difficult to reach agreements (Mooney & Schuldt, 2008).

Undoubtedly, prostitution is part of the issues framed as morality politics, and controversy is articulated around it, that is, it is a situation characterized by the uncertainty in which the cognitive, normative, representational, political, emotional and moral resources that work in a stable manner during the preceding periods cease to be useful and give way to dissent and conflicting perspectives. In addition, it is an apparently irresolvable public issue, among other reasons, due to the lack of reliable data on the phenomenon, the high degree of dissent and incompatibility between positions, the difficulty for policy making in this regard and the inefficiency demonstrated, in general, by the policies that have been implemented so far (Wagenaar, 2017b).

### **2.1. The power of inaction to block an issue**

Paradoxically, one of the effective strategies to intervene in the construction of a public issue is to block it. In the case of prostitution, this process means, mainly, to take it out of focus and subsume it in the discussion about trafficking in humans for the purpose of sexual exploitation. We will briefly explain how this censure can occur both at the institutional and media levels.

In his work on power, Lukes (2005, pp. 74-77) warns that power not only has an active dimension, i.e., that it is not always executed in an active way, but that exercising power also sometimes implies inaction. Blocking or not acting are ways to exercise power and get certain issues excluded and actively silenced in public agendas.

In this sense, it seems relevant to point out the lack of studies of public opinion on prostitution both in Spain and in the European context, since one would expect greater interest in knowing the opinion of citizens on this a controversial issue that cyclically appears on the agendas. A recent study -with data from 2014- points

out this shortage of research and uses a comparative survey to show how public opinion is determined by the regulatory framework prevailing in each country (Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017). It can be assumed that, in the absence of surveys, the mobilized actors with greater power in the public sphere -more so if alliances are made between different agencies- have a higher capacity to influence decision-making processes. In Spain, for example, during the last years the processes of legitimization of the different perspectives have not been confronted with data on the climate of public opinion, which has allowed the circulation of the different positionings without an approximation to their potential support.

In Spain, there is no abolitionist normative framework, but it is likely that the impact of anti-trafficking policies actively initiated by public institutions since 2008 (when 77.6% supported the legalization of prostitution[5]), the proliferation of prohibitionist regulation and policies at the local level, as well as the hegemony achieved by the neo-abolitionist movement in the public space have tipped the balance of public opinion in favor of the criminalization of prostitution, as shown in the following figure that compares the moral valuation of this practice across countries (Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017). This is similar to what happened in France and the United Kingdom, where the regulation of prostitution was undetermined in 2014, just like in Spain.

**Table 1. Answers to the question “Is it according to you morally justified or morally wrong to pay for sex?”**



Source(Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017).

As shown in the previous figure[6], the percentage of the Spanish population that has not yet defined its valuation in morally negative or positive terms is significant, so changes in opinion are still feasible. However, although the moral assessment tends to sanction paying for sex, when asked whether it should be prohibited, 25% answered yes and the rest, 75%, rejected this option (Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017). Despite the lack of up-to-date information about practices, attitudes and opinions about prostitution, it is foreseeable that public policies on prostitution in the near future will be carried out in a scenario that is sensitive to the highly ideologized approaches of morality politics.

While the lack of surveys subtracts data and limits the deliberation scenario, other blockings, like the institutional ones, can have far-reaching consequences. In this line, Allwood (2018) has studied what happens with prostitution in relation to the political agenda of the European Union. According to this author, the most controversial and sensitive issues, including those of morality politics, are more likely to be excluded from the public political agenda due, among other issues, to prevailing consensus-building strategies and procedures in policy making processes. Although Allwood also warns that the characteristics of an issue cannot be taken by themselves as a sufficient reason to explain the blocking or silencing. A subject can be conflictive and complex, but it will be the political environment and the way in which it is framed that ultimately determines success in achieving visibility, capturing the attention of decision-makers and penetrating their agendas. For example, an issue needs to be framed within the priorities and commitments of the EU, to be interpreted within its competences and to have achieved an institutional reception by any actor with power of access and influence. We reiterate that it is not only the controversial nature of an issue that prevents it from being discussed, but rather a desire to avoid coexistence in dissent, to avoid agonistic politics (Mouffe, 2001). These are the situations that allow exercising the power of inaction.

Why does Allwood (2018) conclude that prostitution in the EU is a blocked issue? Firstly, because of its obvious controversial nature and the irreconcilable differences in the legislative frameworks and sociocultural meaning universes of the EU members, and, second, because prostitution has not been directly linked to institutional competencies. However, this is an unresolved issue because European institutions apply different criteria, ranging from its recognition as work by the European courts, to its equalization with trafficking in the statements and reports of Parliament. Therefore, the fact that it is argued that this issue is not part of the European competencies does not depend on the status of prostitution, but on how it is framed based on alliances between actors, on the institutional procedures and on the political context that can be for or against its adoption as an agenda item (Locher, 2012, pp. 77-78). Currently, this context is favoring the abolitionist stances given that, in the absence of agreements on prostitution, the consensus has been built around trafficking in humans for the purpose of sexual exploitation, an area in which the EU has managed to dictate rules of great importance for the last decade (what is known as hard policies), linked to competencies on gender inequality and violence. In part, this has allowed to displace and postpone the discussion on prostitution, to exclude it from the agenda and generate a context of opportunity that facilitates its subsumption with trafficking in humans (Altink et al., 2017).

According to Cefai (2011): "certain groups, organizations and institutions have more money, credit and connections than others and, therefore, greater power to influence and establish what is an issue and what is not. When different groups struggle around the definition of public issues, obviously some have more "material and symbolic power" to raise their voice, to put pressure on decision makers, to invest more resources in marketing or propaganda, and thus to impose their definition. But the effectiveness of that "power" also depends on the collective capacity of the public to approve or reject the version of an issue, and to propose alternatives. Material and symbolic power is not always enough".

In the decision-making processes, the advocacy action of the actors in the public sphere is fundamental (Locher, 2012) and although it is true that there is a possibility of exercising power from counterhegemonic positions and that the public proposes alternatives, in the case of prostitution there are several studies that indicate that in recent years the balance of forces has been tipping in favor of abolitionism, not only because of its hegemonic position and its priority access to resources (symbolic, economic and institutional), but also because, both in the EU (Rubio Grundell, 2015) as well as internationally (Doezema, 2001, Kempadoo, 2003), the groups that represent sex workers are usually excluded from the formation of the agenda and the formal definition of the issue. This exclusion favors the advocacy capacity of the abolitionist lobby and its framing of the issue, which seeks, in the most extreme ideological positions, to link prostitution and sexual exploitation indiscriminately. In this sense, Allwood (2018) concludes that the absence of prostitution from the agenda is not accidental, but the result of a process of active and institutionalized silencing that allows the status quo to be propped up and that this happens with the support of media silences (Freedman, 2010).

We believe that these inaction and silencing processes also take place in Spain in the light of a model that is characterized by the lack of definition and the contradictions of its legal mechanisms and by a public debate that has hardly been addressed. For example, Álvarez Valcárcel (2016, pp. 550-557) explains how the parliamentary debate on the "problem of prostitution" has not really been aimed at solving this problem, instead it has been used to stage the implementation of policies against trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation -as it was the case with the 2007 parliamentary paper on prostitution- or as an opportunity to present the moral positions of political parties and not so much to defend effective proposals. Our hypothesis is that the public debate on prostitution is being diluted in the consensual field of the fight against trafficking, an issue on which there is scarcely more consensus than support in defense of the victims. As we will see, this strategy is part of the *HolaPutero* campaign and the hegemonic reaction of the press in this regard.

All those aspects that are not directly observable in the decision-making arenas offer us a more complex picture of the political process, "not as a set of mechanical and administrative procedures, but rather as a series of spaces in which different values are celebrated, challenged or condemned" (Freedman, 2010). This is an argument that can be applied to the media field.

While it may be complex to address power through inaction (Lukes, 2005, p. 58), blocking, silencing and the absence of issues that do not access the public sphere, we believe that these procedures are key in emergence and development of public issues and controversies. In this line of thought, we also work with the hypothesis that these procedures are directly linked to mediatization processes, that is, they hardly occur without the processes of media silencing (Freedman, 2010).

## 2.2. The logic of media silencing

The media are privileged spaces for the emergence, development and potential solving of public issues. They intervene in the mediatization of the debate and participate in the mediatization of policy making processes (Stig Hjarvard, 2016). In metaphorical terms, news media can be understood as spaces and actors of controversy. In the first place, they operate as spaces of representation whose introduction of issues is supposedly governed by the values institutionally attributed to journalism, and which legitimize their public activity[7], including: selection according to criteria of common-interest newsworthiness, verification of data and statements, impartiality and consideration of conflicting perspectives (Peñamarín, 2014). Secondly, they participate as actors in two senses: they defend their particular point of view on the issue and act according to economic, political and cultural interests, that guide their own agendas and objectives, which include gaining relevance and readers

In line with the previous section, the media can exercise power through inaction, leaving out of the agenda an issue or a specific perspective on it. This strategy may be due to an explicit editorial positioning, but it may also derive from a coverage guided by corporate interests in which the dissemination of viral content is privileged, over fact-based journalistic content (we argue that this is what has happened with the *HolaPutero* campaign). We propose, as a working hypothesis, that the media abandon their functions, that is, they exert their power through blocking, silence and exclusion, be it the result of an explicit editorial strategy or an implicit inaction, even unconsciously, and whose responsibility seems to be diluted in the justification of an imitative work, which is typical of repurposing journalism (Costa-Sánchez, Rodríguez-Vázquez & López-García, 2017).

The suppression of an issue on the agenda generates a double non-event (Lukes, 2005, p.53), on the one hand, giving the impression that there is nothing to talk about, in this case prostitution does not achieve the status of autonomous issue. Paradoxically, on the other hand, this failure to act directly intervenes in the way in which the silenced issue is framed because, at the same time, it encourages the discussion about trafficking in humans for the purpose of sexual exploitation and, through it, indirectly about what it is being denied as a controversy, facilitating the identification of both issues. In performative terms, this will affect not only the creation and dissemination of operational definitions and rhetorical frameworks about the issue and its possible solutions but will also determine which actors intervene and are privileged in the decision-making process, as well as which resources and objectives are considered relevant (Freedman, 2010).

The media's power through inaction (or abandonment of the ability to act) favors the public's adherence to the status quo and uncritically reinforces the hegemonic positions in the debate, as it happens with the media relevance of the neo-abolitionist stances (Ward & Wylie, 2017). The analysis of media coverage of the *HolaPutero* campaign aims to determine to what extent certain negligent silences -provoked by the lack of quality of news content- acquire the category of strategic silences, even more in strongly polarized debate contexts and situations of shared uncertainty. Silence can be actively produced and strategically selected as one of the best ways to promote hegemonic interests and to naturalize a worldview, a hierarchy of values and imaginaries, and particular affective dispositions on that matter (De Sousa Santos, 2005, pp. 151 -192), from which the transformation of normative frameworks and public policies can derive.

## 3. The media's logic of virality

This section deals with another central media logic in the mediatization of contemporary controversies: virality as a form of sociality. Hjarvard (2018) describes the way in which everyday relations interact with the logics of the media and social networks and how these overlaps and interdependencies are creating new ways of engaging and participating in public issues. Informing, tagging, linking, sharing, ranking, commenting and discussing -around common controversies, in the convergent spaces that make up the news media and social networks- are tools to bring out a public and articulate the public sphere as a social practice.

However, Hjarvard (2018) argues that the logics of social networks cannot be equated with the operation modes of the mass media logics, although he recognizes that there is a growing convergence between the two, at the technical, commercial and technical dimensions as well as in terms of uses and practices. This has consequences at various levels. For example, today, it is easy to conclude that most journalists use social networks as sources (Messner & Distaso, 2008; Paulussen & Harder, 2014). As noted by Boczkowski (2010) in his ethnography on the transition to digital journalism, more and more news selection and monitoring tasks take place online.

Other logics intrinsic to social networks, such as the relevance of strategic communication, notoriety, connectivity and data generation, have also been incorporated into the media (Hjarvard, 2018). If we observe the functioning of networks, sharing content has become a daily practice of social interaction, which produces identity brands and promotes senses of community. In line with this, for the news media producing easily shareable content has become a strategic priority (Hjarvard, 2018). The dissemination capacity and the viral potential (generating high traffic in a short time) have been internalized as criteria of newsworthiness and information quality. The media report viral news only to register the development of this form of sociality, but as an opportunity for their audience to participate in it and, thereby, to commit to the public issue. On the other hand, as business actors interested in increasing their notoriety, the media tend to transform into news those contents that have already demonstrated their potential to go viral. This practice is also reinforced by the imitative behavior and growing self-referentiality of the media ecosystem.

Digital devices play a role in the organization of a public controversy and, therefore, the latter is configured differently depending on the devices and formats used for its representation and framing (Marres, 2015). As Marres (2015) points out, the traditional model for the representation of public issues was adapted to the logic of the controversy of the argumentative type, that is, it was expected to be formed by clear points of contention or conflict, an effective interpellation to institutional actors, endowed with the capacity to produce lasting changes thanks to alliances and balance of power. Accordingly, media coverage is adapted to these expectations, for example, by paying special attention to experts or institutional sources. However, at the moment, the representation of a public issue is better adapted to the logic of the current affair, which is much more disordered, suitable for short times, immediacy and reaction dynamics, linked to promotion actions (strategic communication) and trends. In this sense, Marres (2015) suggests that with digitalization the definition and representation of public issues depends more on the precise intensification of digital interactions (tagging, linking, etc.) than on other deliberative dynamics.

Today, digital configurations affect the processes of public issue formation to the extent that they are strategic for the selection and prioritization of agenda issues. In the current media ecosystem, linked to virality, imitative behavior and repetition have been standardized. In the news media, this translates into more and more common source cycles, that is, the origin and authority of the viral content is identified and such actor, as spokesperson of a certain perspective, sees its public position reinforced by its ubiquitous presence in all types of channels, platforms and media for a certain time. These source cycles are similar to those that take place in the promotional tours of cultural products or in the election campaign logics that are already a guideline in mediatized politics.

It is therefore necessary to ask whether the registration of the intensification of the digital interaction activity around a controversial issue is a good enough criterion of newsworthiness, even more so when the sociotechnical conditions under which these records of sociality are produced are not questioned. That is to say, should the media cover a viral content just because it is so? Can one take as relevant what a specific platform dictates as such? Both in the journalistic and research work, it is preferable, beyond finding the justification in the rhetoric of virality, to take into consideration the way in which certain content connects with systems of meaning, principles, values and imaginaries that come into play in a broader framework of power struggles.

In the field of social network studies, authors such as Hjarvard (2018) suggest that social networks are not excessively useful spaces for the discussion of controversial issues, nor for long-term sociopolitical commitment and goals such as the resolution of a public issue, because their interaction dynamics -of a strong affective intensity- encourage people to take a stand and support, to a greater degree when dealing with issues of morality politics. On the other hand, the registration of digital interactions tends to reinforce the positions registered as majority, enhancing the mechanisms of the spiral of silence.

We believe that the media are institutions that could establish criteria in relation to the quality and validity of information relevant to public issues, as well as to enhance deliberation practices beyond the strategic forms that prevail in social networks. However, controversy mediatization processes are diverse and one of them is, precisely, the combination of the logic of virality with the logic of silencing or power through inaction.

#### **4. Methods**

This research work is part of the sociological tradition of public issues (Cefaï, 2011, 2016; Gusfield, 1991) and uses the controversy mapping method (Marres & Moats, 2015; Venturini, 2010, 2012). It is developed more from a discursive approach (Marres, 2015), with a social semiotic orientation, than from an approach focused on digital and computational network tracking techniques. The discursive approach of a



controversy is often used in an exploratory way to detect the relationships between the argumentative perspectives and the sociopolitical actors involved, as well as to describe how this network is made available to varied audiences for its interpretation (Marres & Moats, 2015).

We carried out an ethnographic monitoring of the conflict and debate about prostitution, through participant observation, in spaces online spaces (social networks, news media, cultural productions, etc.) as offline spaces (academic events and social movements, etc.). This careful reading of the arenas and scenarios where the actors involved in the controversy move and intervene allows us to detect situations and/or products that are significant for the development of the controversy.

Multisite ethnography and issue mapping require us to consider a plurality of scenarios, actors, discourses and practices, and not all of them can be approached with the same intensity. Hence, we identify as objects of analysis those actions, products and public arenas that are significant for the course of the debate according to diverse factors, including: the power positions of the actors involved (whether hegemonic or counterhegemonic); the argumentative quality of the discourses and their capacity to question and propose representations; the affective dispositions posed by the actors that displace the affective economies that operate in a context of uncertainty; the degree of virality of the practices, that is, their capacity to spread, circulate and promote the mobilization and support of the public and the performative force and effective incidence in the shaping of the public sphere and the production of sociocultural, political and normative changes. In this way, our objective is to combine the extensive and intensive exploration of the controversy, allowing translating and connecting the different scenarios and practices, visualizing and interpreting unforeseen and evident fractures and dissonances that emerge through the monitoring of the conflict. This previous process of diachronic identification of actors and scenarios facilitates the formation of a body of analysis and particular case studies that illuminate reflection on the medium and long term.

The HolaPutero campaign became a relevant case study because it went viral; because of its ability to translate and adapt neo-abolitionist proposals to the logic of social networks; because of the media attention it received; because of the mobilization of actors with advocacy power and because it provoked a response from the perspectives in conflict with the proposal.

#### **4.1. Description of the sample and data analysis techniques**

The sample of analysis consists, first, of two videos: HolaPutero, published on 3 December 2017 by Towanda Rebels; and "Hola Abolicionista", a response video published by Trabajadoras Sexuales en Lucha, on 22 December 22 of that year. Second, the media coverage of both campaigns was analyzed between 4 December 2017 and 24 January 2018, based on keyword searching (HolaPutero) on the Google search engine, including references to professional media (online news media, radio, television and magazines). Third, we explored the incidence and evolution of both campaigns on social networks, through the quantification of the hashtags #holaputero and #holaabolicionista on Twitter and the comments on made about each video on YouTube. This contribution mainly exposes the results of the analysis of media coverage, although the reflection is nourished by a broad analysis of both the case study and the general research on the controversy.

Media coverage has been analyzed through a combination of techniques: on the one hand, content analysis was performed to quantify the following items by means of a reading card: media, title, date, journalistic genre, identification and typology of sources, patterns of visual representation, mention of videos and perspectives mentioned in relation to prostitution (abolitionist, pro-sex work, both). On the other hand, a computer-assisted analysis was carried out (with the Nvivo software) to observe the frequency of terms, separately by headlines and in the set of news texts to detect the main isotopies and framing strategies. Likewise, a social semiotic discourse analysis was performed on both videos, news texts and opinion articles, specifically focused on the presence and absence of common perspectives and voices in the prostitution controversy and in the enunciative positioning of the media in relation to the campaigns and the legitimization of the various voices involved.

### **5. Case study: HolaPutero**

#### **5.1. Description of the campaign**

The HolaPutero[8] campaign appears on the Towanda Rebels YouTube channel, which has been active since 4 October 2017 and is self-described as: "Feminism as a way of being, understanding, looking at life to change privileges for rights. Deactivating patriarchy with laughter, irony, criticism and activism for

equality". The channel achieved popularity, despite its short trajectory, thanks to the viral video "I believe in you" in support of the victim of La Manada case.

Using a medium close up and an unclear background, the two women who make up Towanda Rebels directly challenge the consumer of prostitution, using a contemptuous tone and the insult putero ("john"). They use a sarcastic and aggressive discourse that aims to reproduce the ideology and emotions of johns to denounce their degrading attitudes and practices towards women. The authoritative voice does not use expert sources rhetorically, nor visual resources as support. Their position as legitimate spokespersons is sustained with a discourse that includes the most extreme premises of the neo-abolitionist movement, in which pay sex is equated with rape. Taking advantage of the context of opportunity, at a moment still at the height of the cycle of feminist mobilizations, their credibility capitalizes on the previously obtained fame, which facilitates their access to the media space as a recognizable source. This credibility is reinforced by the use of the commonplaces of neo-abolitionism, an organized movement with advocacy capacity and a very active presence in social networks, which greatly favored the dissemination of the video. Credibility is also reinforced by their alignment with institutional discursive proposals in campaigns against trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, also focused on the figure of the client as an accomplice (Saiz-Echezarreta, Alvarado & Gomez Lorenzini, 2018), which are made explicit in the HolaPutero campaign, and which are taken for granted in the Spanish government's institutional campaign titled "Do not invest in suffering" (3 November 2017).

As for the style, it is adapted to the YouTuber aesthetic (Ardèvol & Márquez, 2017), resorting to an enunciation with a high degree of affective intensity, especially negative emotions: aggressive tone, direct interpellation and provocation to produce a polarized reaction, both support and rejection. The broadcast of the video provoked a polarized and almost perfectly divided reaction: 9, 600 thumbs up and 10,000 thumbs down.

At the beginning of the video, they say: "4 out of 10 men around us go to the brothel and the other 6 men do nothing about it", which is an unconfirmed fact that will be profusely repeated in the media. They argue that the consumer's ideology is based on a desire for power over women that is always exercised with violence and defend the characterization of prostitution as a degrading practice due to the commodification, hyper-sexualization and extreme fragmentation of the female body. Their speech reproduces with a pornographic language a harmful representation for women metaphorically converted into "holes", victims of puteros ("johns").

In relation to the controversy, the campaign declares itself indifferent and alien to other points of view. They say: "When you say 'consumers paying for a service', I say 'johns'. When you say 'sex workers', I say 'slaves', because they are the product. When you say 'the sex industry', I say 'trafficking, social stigmatization, pimping, slavery'".

These fragments contrast the two hegemonic universes of meaning in the controversy, comparing the frames as if they were excluding (consumer/john, sex worker/slave, sex industry/trafficking). By attributing this position only to the person who request prostitution denies the existence of a broader social rights movement, guided by a declared indifference that closes the possibility to dialogue with the antagonist, when considering this position as false or irrelevant.

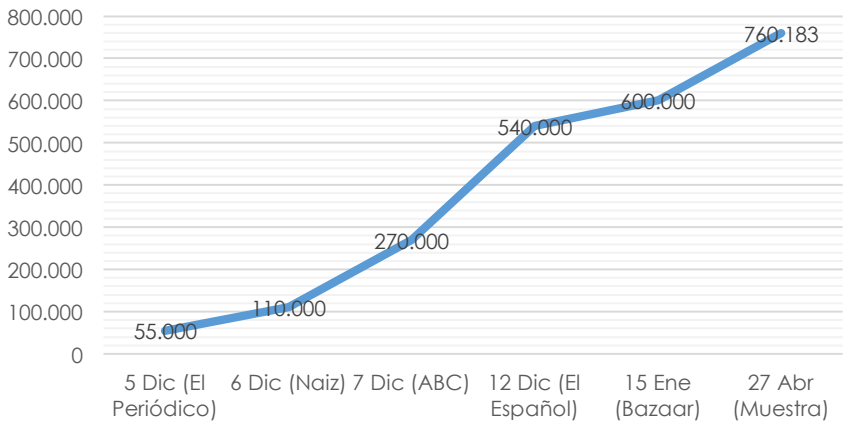
The campaign pursues the strategic objective of achieving public notoriety through a populist discourse typical of the strategies of morality politics, and deploys dichotomized and maximalist arguments, through statements that seek to be incontrovertible by focusing on the defense of basic moral principles, which presuppose the existence of a sociosexual order able to distinguish the adequate and correct normative models from the deviant, depraved and violent ones.

## 5.2. Advocacy in social networks

At the end of the fieldwork (27 April 2018), the video had reached on the official channel 760,183 views and 7,994 comments. With the hashtag #holaputero, it managed to mobilize a broad audience and become an issue of the media agenda for a few weeks, starting a source cycle (Messner & Distaso, 2008; Paulussen & Harder, 2014). In this cycle, following the logic of virality, the campaign in social networks serves as news and source; the media that operate with a strong self-referentiality replicate this content, citing each other and, finally, the content generators -Towanda Rebels- become news due to their viral success, which reinforces and legitimizes their status as sources, in the face of subsequent interventions on the matter.

The justification for the media coverage of the HolaPutero campaign does not reside in the interest or relevance of its content, but almost exclusively in its viral nature, and so the media reported the exponential increase in its dissemination in a short period (Figure 1).

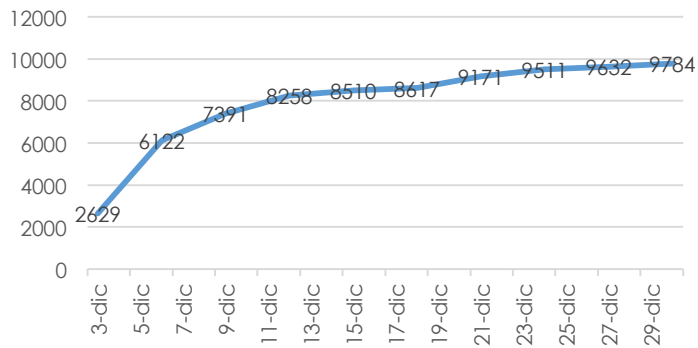
**Figure 1. Evolution of the view count of the Holaputero campaign on YouTube according to data in media**



Source: SourceAuthors' own creation

Its circulation on Twitter, measured by the hashtag #holaputero, followed a similar distribution (Figure 2), 75.54% of the monitored tweets occurred in the first 4 days.

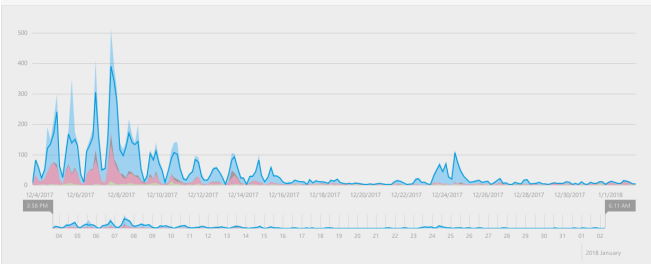
**Table 2. Evolution of tweet count with hashtag #Holaputero on Twitter (3 December-2 January), sample 9,784 tweets**



Source: SourceAuthors' own creation

The campaign received several replies through YouTube, and the most relevant one for our analysis of the controversy is the Hola Abolicionista ("Hello Abolitionist") campaign, which was published by Trabajadoras Sexuales en Lucha and received 108,248 views, 860 comments, 3,500 thumbs up and 205 thumbs down. This video received minor media coverage and only received support from those who already agreed with this perspective. In the absence of detailed analyses of the dynamics of the controversy in social networks, the hypothesis is that, in line with the explicit arguments of HolaPutero, this response was indifferent and ignored by the bases of the abolitionist movement. However, certain degree of advocacy is perceived in the evolution of the hashtag #HolaPutero on the days following its launch.

Figure 3. Timeline of the hashtag #holaputero on Twitter (3 December-2 January)

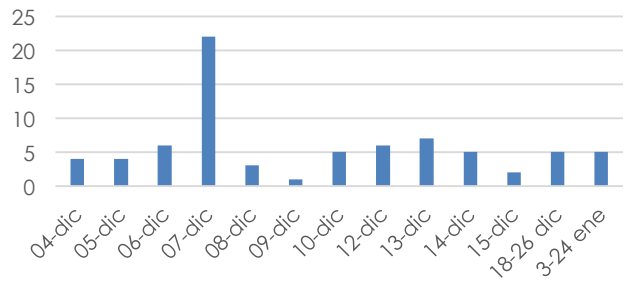


Source: Tweetbinder Report

5.3. Media coverage data

The sample of media coverage consists of 76 journalistic pieces published between 4 December and 24 January 2018: 7 pieces of television websites, 6 of radio websites and 63 of online newspapers or magazines. Most of them are simple notes that introduce the video with a paragraph referring to its viral nature but do not elaborate on the content and, at best, include tweets for or against the campaign (Figure 5). The temporary distribution of the pieces is as follows (Figure 4):

Figure 4. Time distribution of published pieces about HolaPutero (4 December-24 January)



Source: SourceAuthors' own creation

Público published the first news piece on 4 December in its Tremending section, devoted to news about social networks. The story mentions the good reception of the campaign and highlights some congratulatory tweets, like the ones posted by José Nieto, in charge of the National Police-UCRIF, and Yolanda Domínguez, a visual artist, as voices of authority. The support is reinforced by the publication of an opinion article that denounces the macho responses that the campaign is generating.

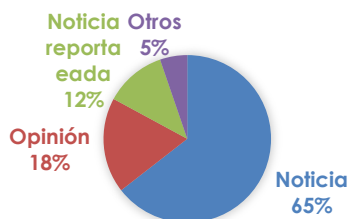


Source: Público

On 4 December, Tribuna Feminista and Tribuna de Salamanca also presented the majority frame in the entire coverage: it is a continuation of the piece titled Yo te creo ("I believe in you"), whose viral success serves to consider Towanda Rebels as "recognized feminists". From 5 to 6 December, the video was

broadcast and shared in social networks and on 7 December the campaign became an agenda issue (22 pieces), coinciding with the coverage by television channels. Opinion articles (18% of the sample) appeared mainly between 10 and 15 December.

**Figure 5. Distribution of journalistic genres present in the sample (76 pieces)**



Source: SourceAuthors' own creation

#### 5.4. Rethoric of virality

The inscription of sociality through social networks is a form of mediatization of collective actions. Leaving a trace of the action that is labeled as viral gives consistency, promotes and participates in the representation of a public that is mobilized by the issue of prostitution (either in defense of its abolition or its recognition as sex work). In one way or another, this public will demand specific actions in the socio-political sphere, especially from public institutions, as mentioned above.

The media participate in the performative creation of this public by verifying its existence and highlighting the traces left by social interactions (posting, sharing, evaluating and commenting on networks). To this end, the rhetoric of virality is deployed, which works independently in relation to the figures, since the success and relevance of the campaign is not linked to a specific threshold of interactions. In the following examples of headlines published on different dates we can see how they link success to high view counts:

- His latest video, titled #HolaPutero, achieved more than 55,000 views in just 24 hours. (El Periódico, 5 December)
- The video that the Towanda Rebels just posted on their YouTube channel already has more than 270,000 views. (ABC, 7 December)
- The video, after a week on YouTube, has more than 540,000 views. (El Español, December 12).

#### 5.5. Absence of sources

The HolaPutero campaign can be considered a good example of discursive content typical of morality politics issues that attract media attention. In addition to the simplified and dichotomized arguments mentioned when describing the piece, this condition is felt in the use of sources (or rather in their absence), since being a subject of basic moral principles anyone has a position and ability to express it. Of the 62 information pieces, 82.25% do not resort to any source other than the video of the campaign and additional statements made by Towanda Rebels. 24.19% of the information pieces (15) mention only one external source: APRAMP and the Ministry of Health as responsible for the only fact mentioned on the video; they are credited with the statement that 4 out of 10 men have paid for sex. This attribution appeared in the first piece published by Público, and later in Verne (El País), and continued to be repeated unverified in the rest of the publications. While the figure was published in a guide issued by APRAMP against sexual exploitation it is not correct[9] or is, at least, questionable.

In 17.74% of the cases other sources are mentioned. The most common alternative sources, although a minority, are sex workers and associations that represent the movement for sex work, which are mentioned in the pieces about the reaction to the campaign and in the coverage of Hola Abolicionista. Journalists and activists who have spoken in the public debate are cited only on two occasions: on La Vanguardia mentions legislative proposals put forward in Sweden and includes statements by the authorities, and a debate on Radio Euskadi has a researcher in Social Sciences as guest.

In the opinion pieces there is hardly any reference to external sources. They do not take the opportunity to delve into the debate, offer data and shed light as intermediaries and leaders in the debate. One of the exceptions is El Diario newspaper, which publishes two articles in dialogue: first, Hola Putas ("Hello whores")

by Gabriela Weiner, and the response of Beatriz Gimeno. Each one of them deploys a network of useful references that are coherent with the defended perspective.

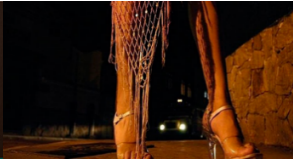
### 5.6. Homogeneous visual representations

If there is homogeneity in the sources (or in their absence) something similar happens with the visual representation. 61.84% of the pieces (47) are illustrated with screenshots of the HolaPutero video or images of its protagonists, which reinforces the authority voice of Towanda Rebels, by focusing the attention on the authors and not so much on the content. Other 18 pieces include cliché images associated with paid sex (fragmented bodies of women, mainly from the waist down, scenes of street prostitution or police raids). It is noteworthy that despite challenging the plaintiffs, male representation is absent. In fact, only two pieces are illustrated with famous men (Torbe and Antonio David Flores), who are given the status of puteros. The only image of a person representative of the movement in favor of the rights of sex workers, María Riot, appears in Los Replicantes, along with screenshots of the Abolitionist video.

#### Alternative images to photographs of Towanda Rebels in the media coverage of the HolaPutero campaign



Source: Play Ground



Source: El Español



Source: Público



Source: Los replicantes



Source: El diario



Source: Los replicantes

If we take the whole sample, we find some oppositions in the visual representation that, although a minority, allow us to notice that the controversy is not completely overlooked, as the pieces in which the photographs of the Towanda Rebels are contrasted with those of sex workers or screenshots of the videos HolaPutero and Hola Abolicionista (The Replicantes and El Español). Based on the visual representation it would have been possible to put in dialogue the different points of view, for example, the following images were used to illustrate two articles with divergent positions on the issue.

#### Images illustrating opinion articles on the HolaPutero campaign



Source: El Diario



Source: El Faradio

### 5.7. Coverage of the controversy

The HolaPutero campaign is treated as a controversial content capable of questioning practices and values, in dialogue and in opposition to other versions of paid sex, which are felt in the reactions to the Hola Abolicionista video. If the debate on prostitution is a clearly controversial cyclical issue of the media agenda, it can be assumed that the media -fulfilling their role as intermediaries and representation spaces for public issues- favor the contrasting of points of view and the dialogue between voices. In a context of uncertainty, one might expect the media to develop -and propose to audiences- an exercise of emotional fairness (Krause, 2011), that is, to put (cognitive, axiological and affective) distance into practice in order

to consider and interpret an external approach, beyond personal convictions. This exercise is even more necessary when the confrontation between positions is polarized, when the conflict has been framed as unsolvable and dialogue is hindered.

How did the media carry out the coverage of the campaign? 76.31% of the pieces contained an explicit or presupposed defense of the abolitionist perspective, legitimizing the usefulness and approaches of the campaign, while 10 pieces (13.15%) include the perspective that defends sex work, fostering empathy and adherence to the proposals put forward by sex workers and pro-rights associations, through statements as expert sources or through the *Hola Abolicionista* video, which is present in 4 pieces of the sample. With regards to opinion pieces, 13 articles were published, 5 written by males and 8 by females, mostly in defense of the campaign (10 pieces), compared to 3 articles that question it. Two of them (*Granada Hoy* and the article by Arcadi Espada in *El Mundo*) propose a defense of traditional masculinity within the framework of patriarchy and not an alternative feminist point of view on prostitution, so only one article defending sex work was published, by Gabriela Weiner in *El Diario*.

The campaign is a paradigmatic example of the logic of morality politics, with an enunciative position characterized by a strong fixation of the belief and a declared moral superiority in relation to the defended principles, which is also endorsed by a hegemonic media coverage in which the self-description of the campaign is repeated without distancing as an initiative that is uncomfortable (53 mentions), direct (32), clear (27), hard (15) and unprecedented (46). However, the arguments put forward about customers are common in institutional campaigns on trafficking, but in this campaign the tone, language and style are changed and adapted to YouTube.

The story that is reproduced in the news maintains the focus (33 mentions) on the same scheme displayed in the video, the sex pay frame as degrading due to the mediatization of money ("pay" was mentioned 110 times, "buy" 44 times, and "consume" 28 times). This frame is accompanied by the mention of intrinsic violence in prostitution, identified with rape (42), slavery (27), women as victims (24) and slaves (23) and the defense of abolitionism (25).

This discourse is linked to feminism (64) and rights (71), two objects of value that are not only mentioned in relation to the perspective of the campaign, but are also in the pieces that question it, as is the case with the mentions to sex work and sex workers (70 mentions), who appear either to deny their possibility or (as minority) to defend it.

The framing adopted by the media coincides in a high degree with the content of the campaign. First, the media uses as a theme the issue of virality (46 mentions) on YouTube (56 mentions). Secondly, the focus is put on Towanda Rebels as protagonists, celebrity style, hence the importance of isotope over speech: speak (74 mentions), denounce (35), call (32), say (32), explain (27) and the repetition of the expression "call things by their name" a dozen times. The analysis perceives the search for their legitimacy as spokespersons, who intervene in the fight for the ownership of this public issue, for the reiteration of the collective name Towanda Rebels (83 mentions) as well as individual people's names, like Teresa Lozano (64) and Zúia Mendez (51). For example: "Teresa Lozano and Zúia Mendez are the protagonists of one of the most aggressive, clear and direct campaigns against prostitution" (RTVE).

This authority is questioned and, thus, at some point, justification is sought for its place of enunciation. The known trajectory of both women gave place to doubts that, at the time of launch, they had an expert knowledge of the contexts of prostitution and/or trafficking. In her own statements, they made it clear that they do not participate actively in the organized feminist movement (*El Español*). As days pass by the pieces start to make generic allusions to their sources of knowledge. A piece in *Verne* argues that "they have been informed by the organization *femicide.net*", while *ABC* says that "they have spent months contacting organizations" and talking to former prostitutes. Towanda Rebels act as informed citizens and not as expert voices, in line with the dynamics of morality politics and the new patterns of collective action in which organizational patterns and the role of conventional spokespersons have been transformed and become more flexible. It is the media coverage, in which there are hardly other sources (institutional, personal or documentary), which gives them a position of power as authoritative sources, which is in turn felt in their subsequent interventions, for example, when starring in a new source cycle with the release of a book.

## 6. Conclusions

The unfolding of a controversy involves the operation of rhythms, variable times, and different levels of abstraction and figurativization. In the case of campaigns through social networks we observe an acceleration (due to the logic of networked dissemination and circulation); an increase in the precision of discourses and their narrative potential (due to the symbolic condensation typical of the usual discursive

genres: memes, videos, tweets, etc.), as well as an increase in the emotional burden and the mobilization capacity (due to the logic of virality as a model of networked sociality). The mediatization of a controversy through social networks, when it reaches public relevance, not only increases the degree of visibility of an issue and displaces its representation patterns, but also increases the performative capacity of the actors involved in the mobilization and support of the public, both those who were already previously connected to the issue and those who discover it through the campaign.

In the light of the case study, we argue that carrying out the media coverage of a morality politics issue by applying the logic of virality and silencing can function as an active strategy to intervene and orient an open controversy. Power is exercised through inaction when reporting as news a content just because it is circulating without verifying nor contrasting its approach, without including perspectives in conflict and without contextualizing the framework of dissent, nor respecting the situation of uncertainty. This mediatization is also reinforced by the practices of repurposing journalism that adapts to the cycle of the reiterative source, which provokes, on the one hand, a decrease in the diversity of voices and, on the other, a reinforcement of the credibility of the selected sources as a result of repetition rather than of their legitimacy of origin or their sociopolitical support. We believe that this procedure blocks *de facto* the debate and promotes adherence to a point of view. In the *HolaPutero* case, the mentions of debate (21) are, to a great extent, rhetorical, except in a minority of pieces that opt for an alternative approach.

Although it exceeds the objectives of this article, we want to draw attention to how the inclusion of other voices takes place when it does. In the case study, we found that the alternative coverage focuses on sex workers as outraged, angry and "even" rabid women who react to the *HolaPutero* campaign, i.e. they are framed in the story and framing dictated by the campaign of origin. In this regard, it is important to point out the difference between access to mediatized public space and the capacity for advocacy and appropriation of the public issue. Hence, the logic of virality and silencing, by participating in the framing of an issue, allow the reinforcement of those contents that best adapt to the prevailing commonplaces and imaginaries. This indicates that the viral condition of *HolaPutero* would not had been enough if it were not connected with the interests of the actors who defend the same perspective, whether the media, spokespersons of institutions, social organizations, etc. In the case of the news media, the campaign received attention not only because its circulation on social networks was reported, but also because it was a tool useful to increase its notoriety and to manage to be associated to politically correct commonplaces.

By not addressing other voices or by incorporating them tangentially without questioning the frame, the media exercise power through inaction, by not considering prostitution as a theme in itself and by subsuming it, as the campaign proposes, to the issue of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. The practice of repurposing content, using identical and not very diverse sources and not verifying data led the media mostly to act as actors with interests, who defend and settle the controversy in favor of the abolitionist perspective.

One of the effects of the mediatization of controversies is that, compared to medium- and long-term coverage, the use of expert sources or the provision of verified data, it is increasingly more common to depend on information on controversial public issues related to public affairs. The issues emerge on the agenda when the logic of "it is happening" can be applied and when the immediacy of the present animates the discussion. Hence, the operationalization of digital interaction data by platforms is considered criteria of newsworthiness.

The practices of viral sociality hereby are inscribed in the public space by means of the registration of the interactions, which helps the connective actions of the publics to be perceived. The media are part of these processes by disseminating, valuing, and favoring participation in these contents and by reinforcing them through their visibility. Campaign practices in social networks are usually intended to comment and disseminate content, which promotes a rather weak and short-term commitment in relation to the public issue that is addressed. The campaign calls for support and the construction of an audience by aggregation in the defense of a perspective and the media have favored the emergence of this public by positively assessing its action and point of view, through the rhetoric of viral success. This form of calling the public to take a position is greater on issues of morality politics, which are perceived differently by everyone and are discussed in a highly ideologized way, with an emotional intensity, polarization and argument simplification. In addition, these issues are characterized by their ability to achieve public relevance, which favors their translation as media issues.

The mediatization of controversies about public issues adapts to different media logics, however, this should not be an obstacle for their coverage according to the values that legitimize the journalistic institution as mediating instance of public space, including: the monitoring of relevant information, the translation of disagreements, emotional impartiality and the contrasting of perspectives.



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## Notes

1. We analyze the mediatization of public issues and controversies and how this affects policy-making and decision-making processes. The media intervene in many ways in this processes: in the emergence of an issue in the public sphere, in its framing, in the agenda setting, in the delimitation of spaces for debate and deliberation modes, in the legitimization of voices and perspectives, in the creation of alliances or confrontations between actors, in the conformation of publics and support movements around them, in the dissemination of proposals to solve the issue, and in the articulation of affective economies linked both to the issue and the actors involved through the values and affections proposed in the stories and information pieces.

2. Dewey explains: "Those indirectly and seriously affected for good or for evil form a group distinctive enough to require recognition and a name. The name selected is The Public. This public is organized and made effective by means of representatives who, as guardians of customs, as legislators, as executives, judges, etc., care for its special interests by methods intended to regulate the conjoint actions of individuals and groups" (Dewey, 2004: 74-75).

3. "Following this perspective, the media's logics are not stable entities or fixed operational guidelines. They are a historically variable configuration of various social rules of a technological, aesthetic and institutional nature. They are product of creative work done by professionals working within the media (engineers, artists, journalists, administrators, etc.) and these professionals' attempts to adhere to these rules independently of the outside world; they are, however, also subject to negotiation with outside stakeholders (politicians, regulatory bodies, commercial markets, consumers, etc.). The logics of the media may this be contested and negotiated, with such social struggles often seeking to determine which institutional rules should be applied to the media's practice. Within institutional theory, the interaction between and overlap of institutional domains is seen as sources of tension as well as change" (Hjarvard, 2016).

4. This centrality of the ideology turns morality politics, in the most extreme cases, into opportunities for the implementation of moral crusades. The analysis of prostitution debates often points to the social context of a moral crusade (Weitzer, 2007) or its potential risk, and tends to refer to the promotion of moral panic as a strategy.

5. In Spain, the most recent survey was carried out by the CIS in January 2008, and was commented by Alberto Penadés in an article titled "Do citizens want prostitution to be legal?" This survey asked about the degree of agreement with the following statement: "Prostitution is inevitable and therefore should be

legalized". The frequencies were: strongly agree 36.7%, agree 40.9%, neither agree nor disagree 4.0%, disagree 10.7%, strongly disagree 4.8%, do not know 2.5%, did not answer 0.5%. The low percentages of people who selected the option "do not know" or did not answer coincide with the condition of morality politics in which any person has and expresses his or her position. In November 2018, a feminist survey carried out by 40dB for CTXT and sponsored by Bankia was published. This survey pointed out that 60.4% of the population were in favor of the legalization of prostitution, that 11.5% were in favor of abolishing it, and 94.6% were in favor of public administrations granting prostitutes rights, social security and the possibility of paying taxes.

6. The histograms show how the population is distributed (density) on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 corresponds to the answer "it is completely morally justified to pay for sex" and 10 implies "It is completely morally wrong". The differences between countries are statistically significant -with some exceptions- and there is a substantial difference between Sweden and Norway with respect to the rest of the countries, also in the question about the prohibition, in which these countries reach 63% and 53% in favor, respectively, compared to the rest of the countries that range from 16% to 34%. In Spain, although a high percentage of the population reject paid sex, there is another considerable percentage that has an ambivalent position in this regard.

7. "Institutions establish, stabilize and defend certain values, and contribute to making them shareable and durable" (Latour, 2012: 23). The values of journalism (objectivity or verifiability, impartiality, pluralism and inclusion of the various perspectives that concern an issue, etc.) are still necessary for the mediatization they perform. The difficulty to achieve them does not cancel them (because we do not give up on values despite the failures in their execution, as it happens with justice). Perhaps the values of journalism require, as Latour would say, a re-description: "From the moment in which objectivity is seriously questioned (...), it becomes desirable to describe the practice of researchers in a completely different way", a way to regain confidence in the scientific institution (Latour, 2012: 26), or in our case, in the journalistic institution (Peñamarín Beristain, 2017).

8. The presentation text of the piece is as follows: The question is not whether women have the right to be whores. The question is whether men have the right to buy us. ¡Hola Putero! is the uncomfortable campaign that nobody decides to do. Uncomfortable because it puts on the table the barbarism of a male model that should have no place in our world. Uncomfortable because we are all part of this society that allows it, by looking the other way. Uncomfortable because it is necessary. Let's not be accomplices. Do you dare to share it?

9. On 12 March 2018, the Twitter account @Gemagoldie, which usually carries out fact-checking projects, corroborated the information following the origin of the sources using the APRAMP guide and concludes that the argument that "4 out of 10 Spanish men have paid for sex" is at fallacious and confusing since it comes from a 1992 study and it is not clear what was the question to which this response rate corresponds.

