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IN A MONTH OF DEBATES, INTEREST (AND AGGRESSION) REACHED NEW PEAKS

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IN A MONTH OF DEBATES, INTEREST (AND AGGRESSION) REACHED NEW PEAKS

Authors: *Juan Luis Suárez* | The conversation went back to drugs, FARC, the peace process,
Yadira Lizama Mué | and false positives.

SUMMARY

In April, election interest reached new heights on Twitter in terms of numbers of tweets and users involved in political discussion. Unfortunately, levels of online aggression also dramatically increased in what seems to be a reflection of the climate of violence on the ground thanks to episodes related to the arrest warrant against Santrich, one of the FARC's leaders; the killing of Ecuadorian journalists; and the murder of a witness in the case of the false positives against Uribe.

Duque's campaign has improved because of these themes and an increase in his popularity following the debates. The division of functions in his campaign between himself and the harder discourse by Uribe and Marta Lucía Ramírez has also helped. As a result, his popularity in terms of mentions (1,521,929) has increased dramatically and is now very close to Petro's (1,692,664). Fajardo (445,711), Vargas Lleras (432,765), and De La Calle (398,825) follow them in this order.

DATA FACTS

The number of tweets reached: **6,764,910** more than double the previous month **449,642** users.

TARGETS OF AGGRESSION

Among candidates, different patterns emerge when we read into the targets of their most popular tweets. These are tweets that have a great impact given that the combined degree of all candidates' top-10 tweets reaches a value higher than 229,000. For Petro and Duque, these numbers are 80,360 and 39,061, respectively. Candidates are using these targets, represented by usernames clearly identified with @ –and, in some cases, just the name of the person being targeted– in different ways.

When we count the times each of the candidates is targeted by other candidates, we find Duque is the number-one target with 10 targets, six by De la Calle, who repeatedly accuses him and Uribe of tearing

down the Peace Agreement. Both Petro and Vargas Lleras collect four targets apiece, whereas Fajardo and De la Calle seem to have fallen out of the picture as they are no longer even attacked by other candidates (Figure 1).

Interestingly, Petro has targeted the most politicians and Duque employs his named users more carefully, not addressing only candidates, but cultural celebrities like Mario Vargas Llosa (with no @) after the publication of an El País article in which the Nobel Prize winner expressed his support for Duque, while also advising about the progress made by the Peace Agreement. Duque also exploits confirmed support by the singer @SilvestreFDC.

NETWORK OF TARGETS BY CANDIDATE

The thickness of the edges is directly proportional to the number of times a candidate points to another. The continuous edges are mentions to the user accounts and the discontinuous ones in their name.

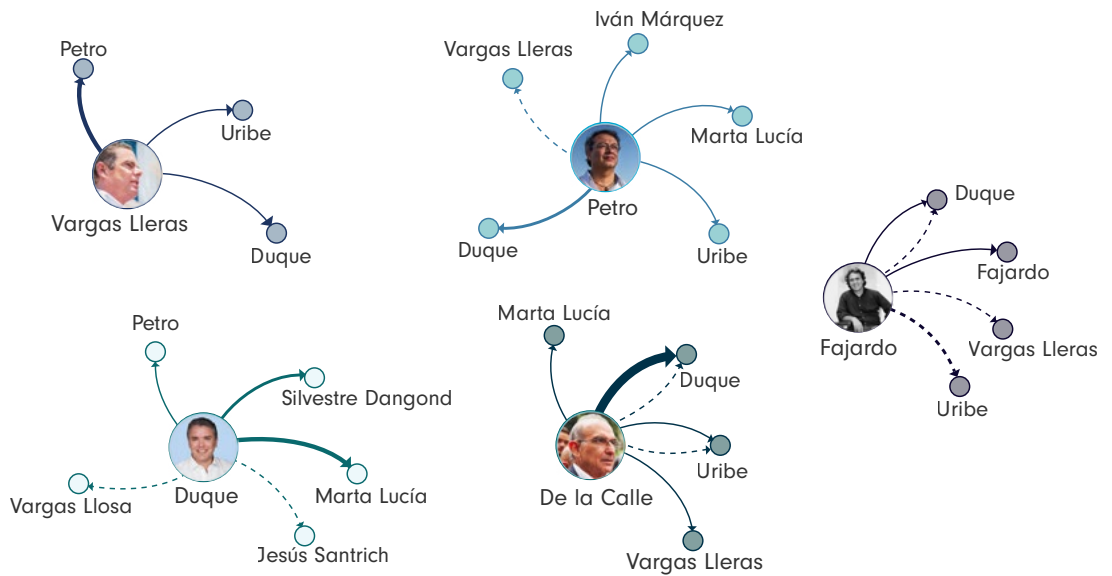


Figure 1. Shows the networks of targets by each candidate in their 10-most popular tweets.

LANGUAGE OF PEACE AND (POLITICAL) WAR

The increased level of aggression can also be detected in the language of the top-10 tweets network-wide in April.

Marta Lucía Ramírez @mluciamirez · Apr 13
 Pssssttt!!! Alguien ha oído la reacción airada de @petrogustavo ante el secuestro y posible asesinato de los periodistas ecuatorianos??
 2.6K 4.6K 5.8K

Humberto de la Calle @DeLaCalleHum · Apr 17
 El señor @IvanDuque es un salto al pasado: elimina la Corte Constitucional, castiga la dosis mínima, revive Agro Ingreso Seguro como política agraria y destruye el Acuerdo que le puso fin al conflicto. No es más que un buen muchacho.
 1.9K 10K 20K

Claudia Gurisatti @CGurisattiNTN24 · Apr 26
 Ud. @petrogustavo en plaza está diciendo mentiras y con ellas genera odio contra mi y el periodismo. Le recuerdo que los debates tienen reglas. Ud fue el último en confirmar y por eso le tocó ese lugar y Ud aceptó. Tema del embarazo adolescente TODOS hablaron. No estigmatice.
 2.8K 5.9K 8.8K

Jerónimo A. Uribe @jeronimoauribem · Apr 7
 Dos montajes en dos semanas. Va quedando clara la estrategia de @petrogustavo y la izquierda para derrotar a @IvanDuque y al @CeDemocratico. Lamentable. #PetroJuequeLimpio
 1.9K 2.7K 3.5K



HASHTAGS ►

The hashtags are used during the debates as slogans on billboards.

TOP TEN TWEETS REACTIONS ►

The number of reactions to the ten most-popular tweets of each candidate:

- Petro **80,360**
- Duque **39,061**
- DeLaCalle **53,130**
- Fajardo **28,533**
- Vargas **28,313**

Figure 2. Tweets that received most number of reactions in April.

The top tweet of the month was written by Duque’s candidate for Vice-President on April 13 – the conservative politician, Marta Lucía Ramírez – and was a direct and unsubstantiated attack against Petro for his alleged silence when it was discovered three Ecuadorian journalists had been kidnapped at the border by a dissident group of the FARC. The intention was clear: to make Petro politically complicit of the act and to unveil his connections to FARC (the previous month, they attempted to connect him to Venezuela).

Curiously, De la Calle wrote the second-most popular tweet and his target was Duque and all the political and constitutional reforms proposed by the Centro Democrático candidate. De la Calle criticizes Duque’s intention to suppress the Constitutional Court, destroy the Peace Agreement, and eliminate the right to a minimum dose of drug for personal use. He ends up describing Duque as “just a nice young man.”

After these two, all other tweets on this list are about and against Petro. The attacks come from Claudia Gurisatti, Jerónimo A. Uribe, Germán Vargas Lleras, and Luis Carlos Vélez, and cover a range of issues that make the candidate of Colombia Humana look like the devil. The rhetorically combative Petro gets three of his tweets onto the list: in one, he accuses Marta Lucía Ramírez of being at least complicit in the false positive crimes, while another is used against FARC leader Iván Márquez after he announced his decision to not occupy his seat in Congress.

From a certain perspective, the polarization of the political debate is a confirmation of a campaign that is sliding towards a match between the “establishment” and Petro: the main issues are not themes that will move Colombia’s people toward the future –socially or economically– but consist instead of political vendettas and ghosts from the past.

Leaving tweets by politicians aside, we have also studied the month’s most popular bi-grams. When we eliminate all bi-grams that were just part of a political slogan or tools of branding from the different campaigns, remaining themes of the month’s Twitter debates include:

BI-GRAMS	REACTIONS
periodistas ecuatorianos	45,192
jesús santrich	42,890
acuerdo paz	34,382
proceso paz	32,177
disidencias farc	26,313
tres periodistas	20,082
acuerdo farc	18,616
falsos positivos	17,666
10 toneladas	17,422
candidato farc	16,460
valle cauca	16,381
dosis mínima	16,229

Table 1. Themes extracted from top-20 bi-grams in April, after removing words related to propaganda.

The return of the old Colombia, the pre-peace agreement Colombia, and of the war on drugs made a clear indent in the campaign through multiple events and storylines: the three Ecuadorian journalists kidnapped and murdered by a dissident group of the FARC led by Guacho and now working exclusively in the drug trade; the detention of Jesús Santrich for the alleged attempt to ship 10 tonnes of cocaine to the US; and the return of the false positives incurred during the Uribe period following the murder of a witness, and a congratulatory tweet by the former President. In short, political discussion in the month prior to the first round of the election revolved around drugs, FARC, the Peace Agreement/process, and the false positives.

MOST MENTIONED THEMES ▶

The most mentioned themes in April were FARC, Ecuadorian journalists, drugs, and the peace agreement.

attention of close potential voters. In terms of candidates most mentioned, Duque has the clear lead on all others across all the debates.

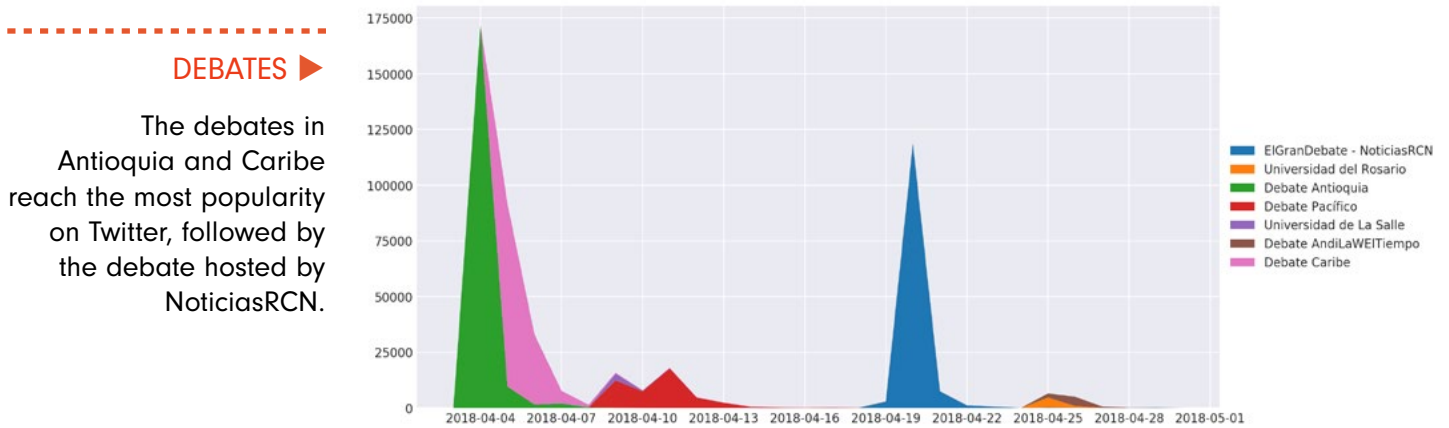


Figure 4. Timeline of tweets about presidential debates in April.

METHODOLOGY

We downloaded tweets using the Twitter's streaming API with the following query:

"IvanDuque, petrogustavo, sergio_fajardo, DeLaCalle-Hum, German_Vargas"

* Candidates' pictures and tweets were taken directly from their Twitter accounts.

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