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# FROM COMPLICIT JOURNALISM TO MILITANT JOURNALISM:

politicians as media critics and strategic  
news users in contested political  
scenarios



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**ABSTRACT** – In this article we identify how critical discourses about the media and journalists are articulated on social media by political actors. We also analyze how such expressions of media criticism coexist with other strategic uses of news content in politicians' social media repertoires. The argument is based on a qualitative analysis of media-related Twitter posts (N=2062), from the 50 most active politicians' Twitter accounts in the month following the Chilean social uprising of October 2019. Our findings reveal that criticism of journalism came from both ends of the political spectrum, despite news about the protests being regularly shared and used as factual support for informing followers, position-taking, criticizing adversaries, and self-promotion. We discuss how these forms of politicians' interactions with the news operate as challenges to the authority of journalistic work.

**Key words:** Media criticism. Journalistic authority. Legitimacy. News sharing. Politicians.

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## **O JORNALISMO CÚMPLICE AO JORNALISMO MILITANTE: políticos como críticos da mídia e usuários estratégicos de notícias em cenários políticos conflituosos**

**RESUMO** – Neste artigo identificamos como os atores políticos articulam discursos críticos sobre a mídia e os jornalistas nas redes sociais, e como tais expressões de crítica da mídia coexistem com usos estratégicos de conteúdos noticiosos nos repertórios de mídia social dos políticos. O argumento baseia-se numa análise qualitativa de mensagens publicadas (N=2062), pelas 50 contas mais ativas de políticos no Twitter no mês seguinte à revolta social chilena de outubro de 2019. As nossas conclusões revelam que as críticas ao jornalismo vieram de ambos os extremos do espectro político, apesar de as notícias sobre os protestos terem sido regularmente partilhadas e utilizadas como apoio factual para informar os seguidores, tomada de posição, crítica aos adversários e autopromoção. Discutimos como estas formas de interação dos políticos com as notícias operam como desafios à autoridade do trabalho jornalístico.

**Palavras-chave:** Crítica da mídia. Autoridade periódica. Legitimidade. Compartilhamento de notícias. Políticos.

## **DEL PERIODISMO CÚMPLICE AL PERIODISMO MILITANTE: los políticos como críticos de los medios y usuarios estratégicos de noticias en escenarios políticos controvertidos**

**RESUMEN** – En este artículo identificamos cómo los actores políticos articulan discursos críticos sobre los medios y los periodistas en redes sociales, y cómo estas expresiones de crítica coexisten con usos estratégicos de las noticias en sus repertorios de redes sociales. El argumento se basa en un análisis cualitativo de mensajes (N=2062), publicados por las 50 cuentas de Twitter de políticos más activas en el mes posterior al estallido social chileno de octubre de 2019. Nuestros hallazgos revelan que las críticas al periodismo provinieron de ambos extremos del espectro político, a pesar de que las noticias sobre las protestas se compartieran regularmente y se usaran como apoyo factual para informar seguidores, para la toma de posiciones, la crítica a los adversarios y la autopromoción. Discutimos cómo estas formas de interacción de los políticos con las noticias operan como desafíos a la autoridad del trabajo periodístico.

**Palabras clave:** Crítica a los medios. Autoridad periodístico. Legitimidad. Intercambio de noticias. Políticos.

### **1 Introduction**

Sustaining legitimacy and authority in contemporary media environments is a significant challenge for professional journalism. Changing news consumption patterns, declining trust in news, and increased media scrutiny (Carlson, 2017; Van Dalen, 2019; Vos & Thomas, 2018) contribute to the erosion of journalism's former monopoly on societal attention (Tong, 2017). In contested political scenarios, these dynamics have reshaped relationships between journalists, audiences, and political elites, who now communicate more independently from journalists (Eldridge et al., 2019).

Politicians are crucial gatekeepers in the distribution of political information on social media (Chadwick, 2013; Buyens et al., 2024a). Thus, understanding how these actors interact with news content is increasingly relevant, particularly in light of rising concerns about political attacks on journalism's credibility, often framed within the "fake news" discourse (Egelhofer et al., 2021; Carlson et al., 2021).

This paper explores Chilean politicians' critical discourses about journalists and media organizations on social media. We analyze how these criticisms coexist with strategic uses of news content, framing these practices as mechanisms of legitimization and delegitimization of journalistic work. Examining politicians' dual roles as media critics and news disseminators is key to understanding the relationship between politicians and journalism on social media, and to better understand how these interactions contribute to shaping public understanding of journalism (Ekström & Westlund, 2019).

Our argument is based on a qualitative analysis of 2.062 posts from the 50 most active Chilean politicians on Twitter during the month after the 2019 protests. This period, marked by socio-political turmoil, was chosen due to heightened skepticism toward media institutions amid disputes over the portrayal of the unrest (Orchard & Fergnani, 2023). We also selected this timeframe because both political and media institutions faced intense scrutiny as legitimate mediators during the crisis.

As noted elsewhere, this cycle of protests can be problematized as a critical incident for journalistic practice, capable of reshaping public perceptions of journalism and its relationship with political actors (Orchard & Schuliaquer, 2024). At the time, trust in political institutions, media institutions (Newman et al., 2020), and journalists (Grassau et al., 2019) sharply declined, and reporters became targets of the demonstrators and the police (Lanza, 2019). Meanwhile, social media was rife with emotionally charged discourses (Beltrán et al., 2022), and perceptions of increasing polarization were on the rise, particularly among the more educated (Scherman et al., 2022).

Unlike other Latin American countries (e.g., Becerra & Wagner, 2018; Waisbord & Amado, 2017), Chilean politicians have traditionally avoided public confrontations with media organizations, opting instead to maintain close ties with mainstream media (Couso, 2012). However, the 2019 protests marked a shift in these communication dynamics, serving as a turning point for Chilean political and media institutions. While Chilean politics had long been

seen as a stable system with limited space for populist voices, this stability has eroded, giving way to greater political fragmentation and polarization of discourse (Fábrega et al., 2018). These shifts have also enabled peripheral actors to increasingly challenge traditional power structures (Somma & Donoso, 2022).

This study seeks to examine how political actors on social media mobilize and amplify critical narratives about media organizations and journalists while simultaneously engaging in strategic uses of news content. It also aims to highlight how these interactions can shape public perceptions of journalism as an authoritative practice within the Latin American context. This perspective addresses a notable gap in recent literature (see Jamil Marques, 2023) and is particularly relevant in a global context of declining public trust in journalism (Newman et al., 2023).

Our findings reveal that, despite ideological differences in interpreting the protests, most politicians across the spectrum used mainstream media content strategically. They shared news to inform followers, position themselves about the crisis, promote their media appearances, and criticize opponents, acting as key agents of news dissemination. This engagement also included vocal media criticism, particularly from both ends of the political spectrum, often using narratives that undermine journalism or call out deviations from its normative standards. Focusing on the Chilean case, we explore how these patterns of interaction with news production may impact the relationship between journalism and its broader public in a Latin American context.

## **2 Literature review**

### **2.1 Politicians as media critics**

The rise of critical narratives about journalism from politicians has prompted scholarly attention to the evolving relationship between these actors. While media criticism can serve an accountability function (Egelhofer et al., 2021), it often becomes part of a broader struggle over institutional legitimacy in an era of populist communication (Van Dalen, 2019). In this context, political actors frequently undermine journalistic legitimacy by attacking journalists' character, ethics, and their role in serving the public interest (Van Dalen, 2019).

By modifying the concept of gatekeeping and providing

a disintermediated environment, social media facilitates the spread of populist communication (Bracciale & Martella, 2017), since inflammatory populist statements tend to generate greater engagement from the audience (Heidenreich et al., 2022). One of the elements that characterize populist dynamics of media criticism is the weaponization of the fake news rhetoric, which is directed towards journalism (Van Dalen, 2019).

Donald Trump exemplifies the use of anti-journalism narratives, reflecting a fractured media landscape (Carlson et al., 2021). However, the fake news rhetoric and the antagonistic construction of the media as enemies of the people extend far beyond the former U.S. president. Hostility toward the press has become a growing concern and has been examined across various contexts, including Europe (Cushion et al., 2021; Engesser et al., 2017; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019), the United States (Carlson et al., 2021), Latin America (Goulart Massuchin et al., 2022; Kitzberger, 2016; Mazzaro, 2023; Waisbord & Amado, 2017), and Asia (Bhat & Chadha, 2020; Shin et al., 2021). These studies have mainly focused on hostile discourses coming from politicians, as well as from alternative media.

The literature suggests that hostile discourses targeting the media come from both the left and the right. Populist alt-right voices have been repeatedly linked with the public construction of the media as part of a deceitful liberal elite (Engesser et al., 2017; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Van Dalen, 2019) and left-leaning actors have also articulated political agendas against media organizations (Cushion et al., 2021).

In Latin America, the “fake news” label has been used by presidents across the political spectrum to accuse the media of corruption and dishonesty, particularly in Ecuador, Argentina, and Venezuela (Waisbord & Amado, 2017). More recently, former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro exemplified this trend by bypassing journalistic intermediaries (Christofolletti & Oliveira, 2022), alleging media persecution, and portraying news organizations as adversaries (Fernandes et al., 2021).

When vocal and confrontational media criticism escalates into anti-press discourse, common rhetorical strategies include portraying the media as partisan, elite-driven, and biased against the public interest (Bhat & Chadha, 2020; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). Additional tactics include “naming and shaming” or targeting specific journalists and media outlets as irresponsible or unprofessional (Bhat & Chadha,

2020; Cushion et al., 2021; Goulart Massuchin et al., 2022; Waisbord & Amado, 2017). A particularly concerning aspect of this politicized anti-press rhetoric is its potential to influence public discourse and even incite violence against journalists (Mazzaro, 2023).

## 2.2 Strategic news sharing in politics

In addition to being potential media critics, politicians disseminate political information in social media (Chadwick, 2013; Karlsen, 2015) and are critical gatekeepers for partisan news exposure (Buyens et al., 2024a). Hence, their relationship with news in the digital sphere has become an object of increasing scrutiny.

Politicians use social media to position themselves on contingency issues (Adi et al., 2014; Heidenreich et al., 2022) to interact with journalists and to promote positions and activities (Alonso-Muñoz et al., 2016), as well as for self-promotion and branding (Farkas & Bene, 2021). Not only by criticizing but also by sharing news, politicians signal the relevance of a story, transfer credibility to news media outlets (Trilling et al., 2017), and dispute journalistic frames (Weeks et al., 2019). Such interactions provide explicit and implicit interpretative cues for other social media users.

Politicians exploit news with elements of surprise, emotionality, and proximity to audiences and are more likely to share news related to their own political parties, agendas they “own,” or news published in media outlets read by their supporters (Heidenreich et al., 2022). This instrumental approach to news sharing has been detected even among far-right voices who are active media critics. Some authors note that, when convenient, news is used and shared by these actors to reiterate their opinions and attack adversaries (Goulart Massuchin et al., 2022). These observations are confirmed by large-scale comparative research showing that politicians are more likely to share news from ideologically aligned media outlets (Buyens et al., 2024b).

The position held by politicians is also relevant to their news-sharing activities. Government members share and comment on less news than opposition politicians, and radical politicians share more news than their centrist counterparts (Buyens et al., 2024a). Political crises are associated with an increase in politicians’ social media activity (Barberá et al., 2022), although politicians’ online activities

during protests also reflect government-opposition dynamics (Staes & Wouters, 2022). Opposition politicians are better positioned to address the demands of demonstrators, while pro-government politicians tend to divert attention from the conflict by discussing other topics on social media (Barberá et al., 2022; Munger et al., 2019).

Less explored, however, is how journalistic content is criticized and disseminated by politicians in such contexts. Probing these dynamics is important to better understand this situation, especially considering that Latin American journalism faces increasing delegitimizing discourse from the political sphere.

### **3 Methods**

In this paper, we qualitatively analyze messages including news or comments regarding journalists or media organizations posted on Twitter (N=2062) by 50 politicians on Twitter (now X). We chose this elite-oriented platform because it is used by politicians and journalists, who rely on Twitter to monitor, follow, and interact with news (Shapiro & Hemphill, 2017).

#### **3.1 Sample and data collection**

We first retrieved all tweets posted by Chilean politicians from October 18 to November 15, 2019, from 200 Twitter accounts, including those of all ministers, congressional members, party leaders, and presidential candidates for the 2021 election. We downloaded tweets from this period using the Twitter API and organized them using the R platform. We identified the 50 most active accounts of this dataset based on the number of tweets posted by each actor.

To aid the analysis, the 50 selected Twitter accounts were grouped according to political positions (government coalition/opposition). Also, we identified each politician's political party to approximate an ideological classification into broad categories of left, right, and center. (See table 1 in supplementary material for full details on the selected accounts).

Following the literature on political studies (e.g., Escudero, 2021; Morales, 2024), politicians whose parties were part of the then-ruling coalition were considered right-leaning. Further to the right

were politicians associated with the emerging Republican Party, an alternative aligned with nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Díaz et al., 2023). On the left, the opposition ranged from the centrist Democracia Cristiana to left-leaning actors, including longstanding social-democratic parties<sup>1</sup>, the younger Frente Amplio coalition, and other parties like the Communist Party of Chile and the Humanist Party.

Among the 50 most active accounts, the majority (35) are opposition politicians in Congress, most of whom are male (37). There is a notable variation in posting frequency. An outlier in our sample, Pamela Jiles, tweeted or retweeted 527 posts, including news and media commentary. Following her is a group of nine frequent users, averaging 127 tweets including news or media commentary each, primarily from opposition candidates, representatives, and senators. A group of 30 moderate users posted an average of 39 media-related tweets each, reflecting diverse political positions. Finally, 10 occasional users posted fewer than 20 tweets each quoting news or expressing opinions about media content during the analyzed period. Most politicians in this group are government-affiliated and likely more cautious not to antagonize the media during a sensitive political period.

The 50 most active political accounts generated a total of 17.998 tweets. Within this dataset, we identified all tweets tagging, mentioning, or sharing links to media outlets, whether legacy, digital-native, or alternative media. We also searched for tweets containing media – and journalism – related terms, such as “television”, “radio”, “newspaper”, “press”, “journalists”, and relevant derivatives. After this filtering, our final sample comprised 2.062 media-related tweets, representing 11.4% of the total tweets posted by these 50 politicians during the study period. This subsample of media-related tweets, defined as posts that include links to news content and/or opinions about media organizations, news coverage, and journalists, was used for qualitative analysis.

### **3.2 Qualitative coding and analysis**

Media-related tweets were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis, a coding process well-suited for the inductive identification of discursive patterns and for comparing how these patterns vary across different groups or actors (Braun & Clarke,



2006; Gibbs, 2016). Thematic analysis is an interpretive strategy that generally involves several stages of coding oriented to the identification, analysis, organization, and reporting of themes by focusing on shared or collective meanings within a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This approach is commonly used in qualitative thematic analyses of social media posts (e.g., Engesser et al., 2017; Zompetti, 2019) to identify emerging themes in political discourse, focusing on content identification, reducing redundancy, and creating representative categories. In this study, we aim to explore the narrative strategies that help describe and understand politicians' use of news, as well as their discourse and potential criticism in response to journalistic coverage of the protests.

The coding process followed an emergent approach. In the first round, we identified two main elements in the posts: political function and topic. Drawing from similar studies (e.g., Bracciale & Martella, 2017; Heidenreich et al., 2022; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016), we first coded for the political function of each message – essentially, the strategic purpose behind its publication, regardless of content. Next, we identified the post's topic, focusing on the context of the protests, independent of the message's function. For example, the Ministry of Justice, @HernanLarrainF, posted a message with a link to a news story published by La Tercera titled *Ministry of Justice informs that [it] accepted the visit of the IACHR [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights]*. This message was coded with “information” as the function and “human rights violations” as the topic.

This analytical strategy aimed at identifying themes emergently without aiming for a standardized application of exclusionary categories or quantification. Instead, we sought to identify the distinct communicative functions assigned by politicians to news content and media commentary in their social media interventions at the time, focusing on messages containing a negative slant toward media organizations and journalists.

After this stage, a second round of analytical coding was conducted to interpretively characterize how journalistic content and media commentary were incorporated into politicians' social media interventions during the protests. We also sought to understand what these interventions reveal about the extent to which journalistic practices were either legitimized or delegitimized in politicians' social media posts.

Using this strategy, we identified several key topics in media-related posts about the protests, including protest actions, human rights violations, police brutality, decision-making by authorities, and potential solutions to the crisis. Four main political functions also emerged: information, self-promotion, position-taking, and criticism of political adversaries, including the media (see codebook in the supplementary material). Not all analyzed politicians used media-related posts in the same way. For instance, 46 out of 50 users shared posts to criticize political adversaries at least once, while 32 out of 50 expressed explicit media commentary or criticism. Although not all politicians engaged in overt media criticism, coverage of the protests emerged as a distinct topic, often accompanied by critical discourses aimed at media organizations or journalists. The categories that emerged were developed through conventional qualitative strategies, such as memo-writing (Braun & Clarke, 2006), detailed below.

#### 4 Findings

Politicians included in our sample actively disseminated and commented on the news while interacting with traditional, digital, and alternative media. Journalistic content was used, commented on, and shared to shape public discussions around the actions of demonstrators in the streets, the response of the police, how authorities responded to the protests, as well as the causes and possible solutions to the crisis. As a reference, legacy news organizations were mentioned 799 times, while digital native media 304 times. The absence of frequent alternative media mentions in the analyzed group suggests a reliance by politicians on elite media outlets for crisis-related information.

Four main political functions supported by news were identified as integrated into politicians' social media repertoires: (1) informing followers, (2) position-taking, (3) self-promotion, and (4) criticism of political adversaries. Crucially to the aims of this study, media organizations and journalists were one of the targets of the critical narratives mobilized by politicians during the protests. Therefore, we analyze this subsample of messages in greater detail. Critical appraisals of news commonly question the framing of the protests and denounce alleged media bias. In the most vitriolic

messages, this criticism is directed at individual journalists. These forms of criticism are framed and justified through accusations ranging from media complicity with political and economic power to alleged political militancy and partisanship among journalists covering the social unrest. As a result, media criticism coexists with strategic news-sharing practices, where news is used as factual support in a broader dispute over the legitimacy of the protests and the boundaries of civil disobedience.

Next, we further analyze the political functions supported by news, paying particular attention to how critical narratives toward the media were constructed in politicians' social media interventions.

## **4.1 Politicians as media critics**

### **4.1.1 From accountability to open antagonism**

Media criticism in this context primarily revolves around the portrayal of the protests – specifically whether they were described as peaceful or violent, and whether participants were labeled as demonstrators or vandals. Another source of criticism was media coverage of police brutality and human rights violations. For example, politicians sometimes posted user-generated videos to challenge journalistic portrayals, accusing them of being incomplete or biased.

Consistent with recent research (Buyens et al., 2024a), our findings indicate that media commentary, especially confrontational narratives, is primarily concentrated at the extremes of the political spectrum and among political actors outside government positions. Further analysis confirms that both opposition/government dynamics and ideological leanings influence the nature of the criticism expressed by politicians. Vocal media critics on the left, who were in the opposition, denounced journalistic bias, accusing media organizations of complicity with authorities' repressive tactics or with political and economic power. Meanwhile, vocal media critics on the right were prone to accusing journalists covering the protests of political militancy and partisanship.

Accusations of media bias vary in tone and scope. Some political actors directly targeted journalists and media organizations, claiming they proactively distorted events or shared false information. However, as noted by Egelhofer et al. (2021), media criticism is not

always an anti-journalism stance but sometimes a critique expressed with evidence rather than derogatory language.

A common line of questioning is the assumption of media bias. Opposition politicians, particularly those on the left, frequently denounced that voices sympathetic to the protests were excluded from public debate. The following examples, both from opposition congressmen, illustrate this view. One criticizes a TV station for featuring two veteran politicians rather than new voices in a debate on the protests, while the other comments on a popular TV commentator's dismissal, allegedly due to his support for the protests.

@pablovidalrojas: Gutemberg Martínez on Chilevisión and Soledad Alvear on Channel 13... the idea was to move forward, not return to the '90s. 🙄

@gabrielsilber: Everyone in the @TVN should explain in detail the editorial decision to end the participation of lawyer Stingo as a commentator! Less and less pluralistic!

Posts like the examples above cannot be described as hostile or uncivil attacks on the media, let alone journalism. However, they question and express distrust of editorial decisions.

While left-leaning politicians were wary of potential anti-demonstration biases, some on the right entered the discursive dispute over the definitions of the protests by singling out news outlets or journalists who offered more supportive perspectives on the social mobilization. This is illustrated by the following message from a right-wing Congress member who challenges a well-known journalist and TV presenter.

@Diego\_Schalper: It is an embarrassment that on TVN they say that [the demonstration] is ""peaceful"" How can it be peaceful when they open a fence by force?  
@tv\_mauricio [journalist-anchor]: I consider you a responsible person. Let" report objectively.

In addition to accusations of media bias, a second strategy observed across political sectors involved identifying and exposing news organizations or journalists described as unprofessional or as deviating from journalistic standards of objectivity and neutrality. By naming reporters or anchors, politicians assign individual responsibility for perceived lapses in objectivity, separating journalists' actions from the organizational and professional cultures in which they operate.

#### **4.1.2 Complicit journalism and militant journalism: hostile media narratives at both ends**

While government actors were less active on social media, ideological leanings also appear relevant in shaping the arguments politicians used to criticize media coverage of the protests. The analysis suggests that anti-media discourse grew more hostile at both ends of the political spectrum, where suspicions of media bias often cast journalism as complicit with hidden powers. While not the majority, these voices were politically significant and inclined toward polarizing language. On the left, this criticism constructs two opposing poles: the people expressing grievances through protests and journalism aligned with government and corporate interests. We identify this “complicit journalism” narrative as an antagonistic discourse framing media as deceptive and concealing the truth. The examples below, all featuring the “fake news” label, illustrate this point. The first example is from a member of Congress who invokes DINACOS, a government agency responsible for disinformation during the military dictatorship (1973-1990), thus suggesting continuity between contemporary protests and the country’s history of repression, alleging that the media is complicit in abusive state tactics of control over street violence.

@Hugo\_Gutierrez\_: The only ones who seem not to understand the citizen reaction is Chilean TV. They continue at the service of power. They are tools of social control, showbiz dramas, and constantly show fake news. Chilean TV does not account for reality; it is a lie organized by its owners! #DINACOScontinues.

The next two examples are among the top ten most liked tweets in the sample analyzed. The first, posted by a congresswoman, antagonizes a journalist and TV presenter. The second, posted by a then-opposition leader with presidential aspirations, confronts TV stations by posting a user-generated video of a massive demonstration in the coastal city of Valparaíso, suggesting these events were hidden from the public.

@Pamjiles: Sleep peacefully @SoledadOnetto while Pinera's Army kills innocents, beats children, abuses teenagers. Close your eyes and see only what power orders you to look at. One day the suffering people will wake you up and ask you why you DIDN'T see it when it was your obligation.

@danieljadue: This is happening today in Valparaíso while

terrestrial TV channels broadcast movies and recorded programs  
#wearestillonthestreets <https://t.co/4UPB9auRQX>

Criticism toward news organizations and journalists articulated from the political right came from politicians who actively opposed and discredited the protests, steered most prominently by far-right leader and 2021 presidential candidate José Antonio Kast. This narrative, which we identify with the notion of “militant journalism”, was marginally echoed by other right-leaning politicians outside Kast’s immediate circle. It emphasizes the characterization of journalists as activists who allegedly conceal their affiliation with left-leaning political ideas and put their political agendas ahead of their professional practices. What is striking and unprecedented for the Chilean context is that these allegations were not directed to independent or partisan media but to mainstream news organizations, a pattern observed among right-wing voices in different contexts (Carlson et al., 2021; Cushion et al., 2021; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019).

This antagonistic form of criticism challenges the credibility of journalistic reports and often targets reporters or presenters by questioning their integrity. The following examples illustrate this. The first is from far-right leader José Antonio Kast, who urges companies to stop advertising with news organizations sympathetic to the protests. The second is from a right-wing congressman who challenges a reputed journalist and TV presenter.

@joseantoniokast: Hopefully those who sponsor @CNNChile and @CHVNoticias will react and stop funding the blind and militant journalism that some profess. They have just burned down a university, looted a church and a gas station, and they describe these as “minor incidents”.

@ivanmoreirab: What does it matter what @DMatamala, the most biased, most “lying and immoral” journalist on TV, questions? If he beats female ministers with his language. @mcubillossigall [you should] debate with people who have professional ethics. <https://t.co/KXpCMpXow9>

Both interventions not only criticize the choice of words, and the frames presented by media professionals but also expose alleged lies and distortion of the truth in accordance with the organization or the journalists’ political views. In these cases, criticism targets specific organizations or journalists rather than the media structurally. Kast repeatedly employed this personalized attack strategy, focusing on journalists who portrayed the demonstrations favorably.

## 4.2 How criticism coexists with strategic dynamics of news sharing

To contextualize media criticism, it's essential to note that politicians' interactions with journalistic content during the Chilean protests extended beyond criticism. While critical narratives were part of political repertoires at the time, journalistic content was broadly used and shared by political actors – including vocal media critics – when news supported the narratives they promoted regarding the crisis. Thus, criticism coexisted with strategic news sharing aimed at informing followers, establishing positions, critiquing adversaries, and self-promotion. What these practices share is an implicit acceptance of shared news as authoritative knowledge of current events.

Informing followers implies a form of legitimization that, though seemingly trivial, affirms the factuality of shared news. By retweeting or sharing news, often with minimal intervention, politicians communicated a wide range of topics to their followers, including updates on demonstrations and policy decisions. Position-taking also recurs within the sample, where news serves as a factual anchor enabling politicians to express views on current events. Amid the Chilean protests and ensuing political crisis, politicians used the news to support their stances, mostly to advocate for crisis management policies or address demonstrators' demands. An example is a post about responses to the crisis shared by then congressional member and opposition leader, now President Gabriel Boric:

@gabrielboric: Government announces the opening of "Constituent Congress". I am glad that it is understood that the new Constitution is a priority. But the process matters as much as the result since its legitimacy will be at stake. A referendum and election of constituents are necessary. [He shared the news: "Government confirms process for a new Constitution through a Constituent Congress," originally posted by Bio Bio Chile].

Criticism of adversaries is often bolstered by news, presuming an implicit recognition of the authority of such coverage. A recurring theme in the analyzed context was the attribution of responsibility for the crisis and human rights violations during this period. This foundation allows politicians to criticize opponents based on facts established in journalistic reports, as illustrated in the following post by right-wing politician José Antonio Kast:

@joseantoniokast: It is to be expected that the candidate of the radical left will come out to apologize for lying so blatantly. [He shared the news: "Sergio Micco, director of the INDH, assures that in Chile there are no 'systematic violations' of human rights", La Tercera].

When news is used to criticize opponents, politicians provide politically charged interpretative frameworks for news originally presented in more neutral language. Remarks from an opposition Congress member who shared a story about a high-ranking military officer contradicting a statement made by then-President Piñera illustrate this:

@daniel\_nunez\_a) General Iturriaga: "I'm not at war with anyone". Much more appropriate words than Pinera's fascist speech. The last one who declared war on the people of Chile was Pinochet to justify his brutal dictatorship and the violations of human rights. [He shared the news: "General Iturriaga: 'I am not at war with anyone'", published by Cooperativa.cl].

Finally, when news-sharing serves self-promotion, journalistic coverage becomes a tool to amplify stories featuring political actors. Politicians in the sample often shared interviews, opinion columns, and media appearances on social media, as illustrated in the following message, posted by a government coalition Congress member promoting an upcoming media appearance:

@mjossandon: No nuances, no ideology. Today I will be on #LlegoTuHoraTVN facing your questions and sharing my vision of this social catastrophe, which we must face with concrete positions and decisions for the citizenry. I will wait for you at 22.30 [shares link to a program to be aired by TV station TVN]

Politicians share their media appearances on promotional posts to position themselves as representatives of citizens' perspectives and essential voices in the national debate. Interactions with news for this purpose are primarily instrumental, aiming to promote engagement with followers and increase reach and exposure.

## 5 Discussion: a matter of legitimacy

Analyzing politicians' interactions with journalistic content after the Chilean social uprising, we identified a typology of four uses of news content: informing, position-taking, self-promotion, and criticizing political adversaries. Notably, we examine cases where the



media itself becomes a rhetorical political adversary. These political functions of news sharing are not unique to this context, echoing roles identified by Alonso Muñoz et al. (2016) and Heidenreich et al. (2022) in partisan activities. In our study, shared news predominantly centered on demonstrations, looting, and protest-related events.

Position-taking is central to news-sharing and media commentary among actors who are eminently partisan in their public performances (Adi et al., 2014; Buyens et al., 2024a; Heidenreich et al., 2022). During polarized protests, political actors focused on defining the nature of the demonstrations, demanding accountability, and disputing responses to the crisis. In turn, self-promotion has been discussed concerning electoral campaigns (Alonso Muñoz et al., 2016) and Instagram use (Farkas & Bene, 2021). However, this use was evident even amidst public disorder, as politicians were no less interested in promoting their media appearances and amplifying their influence in public debate. Lastly, news as a tool for criticizing adversaries has been explored in election contexts (Alonso Muñoz et al., 2016), partisan news uses (Buyens et al., 2024a), and populist communication styles (Bracciale & Martella, 2017; Goulart Massuchin et al., 2022).

Media criticism was a significant part of the public discourse articulated by political voices during the social uprising. The types of criticism expressed vary significantly, though some patterns may be identified. Firstly, some forms of criticism are not strictly delegitimizing in the sense defined by Egelhofer et al. (2021), that is, lacking an argument or showing signs of incivility such as derogatory or belittling language. Instead, they were grounded in some form of argument (e.g. they denounce a lack of pluralism or dispute-specific frames used to portray the protests, providing some evidence). Others are more confrontational, although – as discussed by Figenschou & Ihlebæk (2019) – distinctions between healthy media criticism and anti-press discourses are not always easy to establish.

Secondly, the position of political actors emerges as a relevant variable to be further explored: in this case, opposition politicians were more active and vocal on social media, acting as key disseminators of news about the events. This is consistent with previous work analyzing political performances in social media during public demonstrations (Staes & Wouters, 2022). Additionally, although our analysis indicates strategic uses of news across the ideological spectrum, the most vocal media criticism was located at both ideological ends.

Thirdly, the rhetorical mechanisms used to discredit journalistic accounts of the protests were similar to others identified in the literature, mainly accusations of media bias (Cushion et al., 2021; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Weeks et al., 2019), individual attacks performed through strategies of “naming and shaming” (Bhat & Chadha, 2020; Egelhofer et al., 2021), in addition to the use of tropes such as “fake news” or “lying media”. Some of these rhetorical strategies, especially the latter, are regarded as derogatory (Egelhofer et al., 2021; Waisbord, 2018) and identified as part of the rhetorical weaponry of populist leaders in Latin America (Mangerotti et al., 2021; Goulart Massuchin et al., 2022) and elsewhere (Carlson et al., 2021).

In examining the particularities of the case, it is notable that the most vocal media critics during the Chilean 2019 protests were political actors at the extremes of the political spectrum who later pursued presidential aspirations. This suggests that media criticism can be politically weaponized for electoral gain, even by opposing sides. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to classify specific politicians as populists, some rhetoric in their media-related interventions reflects populist elements, such as portraying the press as unable to genuinely represent the people’s voice (Mangerotti et al., 2021), while positioning themselves outside the establishment (Van Dalen, 2019).

Conservative media criticism often stems from suspicions of liberal bias, while left-wing criticism frames the media as aligned with corporate power (Ladd, 2012). These ideological perspectives are evident in the narratives of militant journalism and complicit journalism. The former, promoted by far-right politicians, critiques journalists who fail to condemn protest disruptions, portraying them as activists lacking objectivity. Conversely, left-wing leaders criticize “the media” as a monolithic tool of social discipline, a sentiment amplified by hashtags like #apagalatele (#turnofftheTV). Both narratives construct oppositions between the media and “the people”, framing journalism as an agent of disinformation or indoctrination. In complicit journalism, “the people” are demonstrators fighting for their rights on the streets, while in militant journalism, they are honest citizens who repudiate the protests.

## 6 Final considerations and conclusions

Beyond the phenomenological interest of descriptive inquiry, this study explores whether politicians' interactions with news are connected to claims about the authority of journalism and its democratic role. Using the news to inform followers, take sides, criticize adversaries, or self-promote media appearances implies a form of acceptance of how the crisis was constructed in the media – or at least to some parts of it – even if such explicit support is rare. Leveraging news to narrate the crisis implies a recognition of the journalistic field's authority in knowledge production, albeit often for strategic agenda-setting purposes.

Politicians integrated these practices into their digital repertoire and shared news as factual evidence for political arguments of all signs. Even voices openly critical of mainstream journalism shared news or their own media appearances, readjusting their questioning position if necessary. The coexistence of critical and strategic forms of interaction with news among political actors has been noted in other national contexts (Goulart Massuchin et al., 2022), revealing that the same actors may antagonize mainstream media while simultaneously using specific journalistic content when suitable. These disparate forms of politicians' interactions with the news arguably shape public perceptions of journalistic authority. Politicians spread critical views about the media among like-minded audiences, yet they distribute and amplify content that aligns with their perspectives on current events.

Although not in most cases, some politicians did contribute to undermining trust in journalism. This occurred at a sensitive moment when audiences were confronting journalists both online and offline (Orchard & Fergnani, 2023). A question that arises for future research is to what extent such narratives permeate public understandings of journalism, and whether politicians who activate critical narratives will temper this antagonistic discourse as they enter spaces of greater power. Another open question is whether these forms of criticism prompt a degree of adjustment in journalistic content or practices.

This study has limitations. It focuses on a single episode in recent Chilean history and was conceived as an exploratory probe. Therefore, it does not claim to identify patterns that are generalizable

to other contexts. However, the study contributes to elucidating the circuits of opinion formation in the field of journalism and demonstrates how political actors can play an active role in shaping these dynamics within contested political scenarios.

## NOTES

- 1 In 2019, the ruling coalition, Chile Vamos, comprised three right-leaning parties: Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI), Renovación Nacional (RN), and Evopoli. Traditionally, left-wing parties in Chile include the Partido Socialista, Partido por la Democracia, and Partido Radical. The newer Frente Amplio, which is now a political party, included groups like Revolución Democrática and Convergencia Social in 2019.

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