

CHAPTER THREE

IMPOLITENESS IN SPANISH DIGITAL MASS MEDIA¹

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1. Introduction

In a famous 1921 essay marking the centenary of the *Manchester Guardian*, its then editor, C. P. Scott, voiced his opinions on the role of the newspaper. He argued that the “primary office” of a newspaper is accurate news reporting: in his words, “comment is free, but facts are sacred”. Exactly, comment is free. Or it should be. But in traditional mass media the free public expression of opinions is, in the main, something of a myth: the only ways to exercise this right are through letters to the editor or phone calls to radio and television, although these are usually pre-filtered by the corresponding media companies (Martínez Rodríguez 2007). However, development of the Internet provides citizens with new channels of participation. Thanks to the so-called “interactive tools” (Alonso Ruiz and Martínez Rodríguez 2003), the mass media now establish new types of communication processes with their readers. In this way, users not only can express their points of view immediately, but also note how quickly their opinions are published in the media itself. These interactive tools include, for example, e-mail, chat rooms, surveys or forums. The argumentative nature of forums and the freedom of users covered by anonymity favour the presence of numerous kinds of impoliteness. In this chapter we propose to analyse how readers of Spanish online daily newspapers, able to give their opinions freely thanks to that interactive tool which is the forum, frequently express themselves in an impolite manner.

An *Internet forum*, or a *message board*, is an online discussion site where people can hold conversations in the form of posted messages. It is therefore a dialogic text, since it is based on communication between two or more people. This is done asynchronously, and thus constitutes a “deferred dialogue” (Salaverría Aliaga and Cores Fernández-Ládrada 2005: 172). Messages entering a web page will be displayed in chronological order, allowing any participant to perceive at a glance the questions and answers pertaining to different discussion topics. Each

¹ We are grateful to the reviewers for their comments and to Dr Eleanor Wake for her valuable help with the translation.

topic is proposed by the media, or even by one of its readers. Therefore, web pages of this type present both written and virtual “conversations” between members of an audience. As we will show, these conversations are full of illocutionary speech acts that could be described as aggressive or violent, or even as a violation of a person’s dignity.

2. Methodology: data and procedure

This study is based on the analysis of a total of 350 articles published between November 2006 and August 2010 in the forums of seven Spanish online media of a different nature. These include three of the best known newspapers in Spain: *20 Minutos*, which is free, and the two subscription publications, *El País* and *As*, the latter specialised in sports journalism. In addition, three further, widely read, papers, that is, *Abc*, *La Vanguardia* and *El Correo*, are reviewed. These have a national circulation, although the latter two have a wider readership in Catalonia and the Basque Country respectively. Finally, we also analysed the forums of *Libertad Digital*, an exclusively digital newspaper. According to the latest figures released by the General Media Study (EGM) for the period running from October 2009 to May 2010, *Marca* is the newspaper with the highest national readership—2875 readers per day. However, we have not included it in our analysis, because currently it has no opinion forums. Then follow *20 Minutos*, the free newspaper, —with 2347 readers—, and *El País*—with an average of 2012 readers—, which is also part of our corpus. In fourth place is *As*, the sports newspaper. *Abc*, *La Vanguardia* and *El Correo* are among the fifteen newspapers with the highest readership in Spain. Other publications—such as *El Mundo*—have a wider distribution than, for instance, *Abc*, but they have no forum available.

The particular idiosyncrasies of the seven selected Spanish newspapers analysed, which target a very heterogeneous spread of readers, could be relevant in the analysis of different displays of impoliteness. In order to make the comparison possible, it was necessary to select 50 comments of more or less the same length extracted from the forums of each newspaper. We also tried to ensure that these texts were related to similar topics—national and international politics, economy, or sports—, as the nature of the subject matter under discussion could determine a tendency towards a greater expression of verbal aggression or violence by readers. Our analysis focuses on the extent to which the authors of these texts direct insults and other types of verbal attacks towards a single forum participant, towards other participants as a group, or even towards the media host itself. In addition, we question whether anonymity favours the drive behind most of these messages and what role is played by the forum moderators to whom the responsibility of eliminating aggressive or hurtful comments apparently falls.

The study of impoliteness has deserved great attention in recent decades. Many authors (Lakoff 1989; Culpeper 1996; Kienpointner 1997; Martín Rojo 2000; Haverkate 2001; Placencia 2001, among others) have stressed the need to analyse conflicting interactions not as examples of politeness theory—that is, as “not running” a polite speech act (Bolívar 2003)—, but rather as manifestations of human interaction, this time aimed at tarnishing the image of the speaker. Attempts to hurt or vilify from a distance are seen to be favoured when communication takes place between anonymous parties, as Goffmann (1967) has highlighted. In the case of the texts analysed here, and contrary to what happens with letters from readers published in newspapers, which usually require a signature and some personal details—such as ID or passport number and an address—that would permit the newspaper to check an author’s identity, digital feedback in the forums can be made anonymously or under pseudonyms. For example, in order to send an opinion² to *La Vanguardia*, one is only required to fill in the following dialogue box with a name, sex, year of birth, post code and email, and to indicate acceptance of the terms relating to privacy:

1 Introduzca sus datos personales

e-mail * **

Contraseña *

Repita contraseña *

Nombre *

Apellidos *

Sexo ☐ Hombre ☐ Mujer

País ▼ *

Código postal *

Año de nacimiento *

* Campos obligatorios

** Se enviará un mensaje de validación

Table 3-1. Forum La Vanguardia, registration form
[http://www.lavanguardia.es/reg2006/Registro?p_action=register&urlback=http%](http://www.lavanguardia.es/reg2006/Registro?p_action=register&urlback=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.lavanguardia.es%2Freg2006%2FRegistro%3Fp_action%3Dregister&urlback=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.lavanguardia.es%2Freg2006%2FRegistro%3Fp_action%3Dregister)

² Registration in *Libertad Digital* is required in order to be able to post a comment at a cost of 30 cents/comment.

3A//www.lavanguardia.es/lv24h/20090716/53746037947-1.html. Date accessed: 08/24/2010.

Some users enter their own name, their website or their blog, and even their e-mail, as can be appreciated in these examples:

Mensaje que ha originado la charla	
no al racismo si a los derechos de los vitorianos Escrito por Ismael Gomez - 04-03-10 16.19	
<p>Ante todo disculpas por los errores o faltas gramaticales. No te das cuenta hasta que te pasa, mi marido se quedo en el paro hace un mes se le acabo el paro y pidio la ayuda famosa de los 400 euros, cual es nuestra sorpresa que se la deniegan visto que yo cobro unos 1200 dividido entre tres mi marido yo y el peque de la casa dicen que supera el 75%, pagando una hipoteca de unos 700 euros, sin contar calefaccion,luz,agua.... como estareis muchos en nuestro caso total que no llegamos ni de coña a final de mes que me expliquen como lo tenemos que hacer, bueno resulta</p>	

Table 3-2. Comment sent by a reader of El Correo. <http://servicios.elcorreo.com/alava/foros/read.php?v=t&f=379&i=4739&t=4739>. Date accessed: 08/24/2010.



Autor	Tema: POR FAVOR SI NO ME ESCRIBEN...
George W Bush Miembro Usuario # 4590 <u>Clasificación de miembro:</u> ■■■■■	Enviado el 20-08-2010 01:12 AM  <hr/> NO SE LO QUE HARE- sliberkid01@hotmail.com <hr/>
Mensajes: 262 Registrado: Jul 2002 IP: Archivada  Informe email	

Table 3-3. Comment sent by a reader of Abc. http://foros.abc.es/cgi-local/forosabc/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_profile;u=00004590. Date accessed: 05/10/2010.

However, as seen in the example that follows, most use a nickname, which reveals nothing about their true identity:

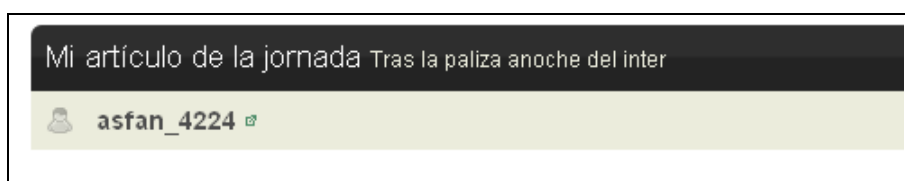


Table 3-4. Comment from the forum of As. http://foros.as.com/topic/179050-mi-articulo-de-la-jornada/page__s__8bfcf823c38f6f6883782c9033c22269. Date accessed: 08/24/2010.

Anonymity allows readers to freely express their opinion on any subject, something that otherwise they would probably not dare to do. However, anonymity conceals other “sins” such as, in so many cases, a lack of precision in both content and form. Users can provide incorrect information, either false or distorted, and often the writing style is careless. Most do not even follow the mandatory correction of a newspaper story (Gómez Escalonilla 2007: 202). In addition, as discussed below, people sometimes hide behind anonymity in order to attack the social image (Goffmann 1967) of the addressee of their messages. This is a relevant point in our study for we believe that anonymity encourages the writers of messages published in the forums under analysis to be impolite and also, as we will see, to actively practice verbal violence. If the names of the writers of such comments appeared alongside their messages, it is possible that they would moderate their verbal attacks considerably. Otherwise, and showing themselves capable of such base and direct confrontational acts through the use of coarse and disrespectful language, it would be their own social image that would suffer more. We will also analyse the extent to which the participants in the corpus of forums studied here formulate the so-named FTAs, that is, face threatening acts (Brown and Levinson, 1987). In this context, we will also attempt to establish whether FFAs, or face flattering acts, of “enhancement politeness” (Kerbrat-Oreccioni, 1996) can also be found in the type of texts under analysis.

4. Results

First, it is clear that each of the seven cybermedia studied in this analysis lay out explicitly the rules of participation by which their forums are governed. Apparently, these rules must be followed by all visitors who wish to submit comments, otherwise their texts will not be published. However, as we shall see

below, this does not always happen. The guidelines in all media tested are very similar, therefore only those of *La Vanguardia* are reproduced here by way of example:

Normas de participación: —Respetar las normas básicas de convivencia: se eliminará cualquier mensaje cuyo contenido sea difamatorio, obsceno, insultante, contenga amenazas, o incite a cometer cualquier acto no permitido por las leyes españolas. —Respetar la dignidad de la personas y el principio de no discriminación por motivos de raza, religión, opinión, nacionalidad, discapacidad o cualquier otra circunstancia personal o social.

[...] [“Normas de participación en los foros de *La Vanguardia*”, *La Vanguardia*, <http://www.lavanguardia.es/foros/normas.html>. Fecha de consulta: 24/08/2010]

[Rules for participation: Respect the basic rules of coexistence: any message whose content is defamatory, obscene, abusive, threatening, or incites the commitment of any act not permitted by Spanish law will be removed.—Respect the dignity of the individual and the principle of non discrimination on grounds of race, religion, nationality, disability or any other personal or social circumstance]. [...] [“Rules for participation in the forums of *La Vanguardia*”, *La Vanguardia*, <http://www.lavanguardia.es/foros/normas.html>. Date accessed: 08/24/2010]

One of the basic rules is the prohibition of posting insulting, humiliating, libelous or defamatory comments. However, the prohibition is rarely respected, as shown in the following examples:

Los *negros* que invaden la Argentina y posan como vendedores de joyas (basuras y cambalaches, hay que ser un chiflado para acercarse a *uno de esos simios violadores* y comprarles sus *mercaderías de excremento*. En cuanto a las blancas que salen con estos *mandriles negros*..., bueno que se puede decir ? Son *seres enfermos, dementes, asquerosos*, y verdaderamente *p...s perdidas*. Nadie sabe como estos *africanos del diablo* llegan aquí³. [...] [Comentario enviado por “El Espectador Imparcial”, *Abc*, 08/02/2010, <http://www.stormfront.org/forum/t713431-3/>. Fecha de consulta: 15/08/2010]

[These blacks who invade Argentina and pose as jewellery sellers (garbage and junk shops, you’d have to be mad off your rocker to go near one of these rapist apes and buy their shitty goods. As for the white women who go out with these black mandrills..., well, what can I say? They are sick, demented, disgusting beings and must be truly desperate w...s. Nobody knows how these devil Africans get here.

³ We reproduce all the examples as they were published in the forums, without omitting spelling errors or other sub-codes representative of some writing styles that are spreading on the Internet.

[...] [Comment sent by “El Espectador Imparcial”, *Abc*, 08/02/2010, <http://www.stormfront.org/forum/t713431-3/>. Date accessed: 08/15/2010]

This comment, on the subject of African immigrants in Argentina, employs an adjectival noun that has the intent of highlighting the colour of their skin. According to the Internet user, all of these immigrants are also criminals—are “rapists”—, and sell “shitty goods”. In addition, they are compared to animals, specifically, primates—“apes” or “black mandrills”—, and the women who have relationships with them are insulted with highly offensive adjectives such as “demented” and “disgusting”. The user even refers to them by way of an ellipsis of an easily recognisable insult: “w[hore]s (“p[uta]s”). Maybe he or she did not want to be more explicit with this insult because of the possibility that the text would be censored. A second comment to be examined here is as follows:

Disfruten del *Cerdo*, hasta que le hagan longanizas, a Chavez le van a cortar la cabeza, por ademas de *hijo su madre*, por *despreciable*, así que el lider *cocainomano*, le queda muy poco para seguir esnifando la coca que le envía su colega *Eva Morales*. [Comentario enviado por “Luis Candela”, *La Vanguardia*, 17/07/2009, <http://www.lavanguardia.es/lv24h/20020412/51270493835-2.html>. Fecha de consulta: 24/08/2010]

[Enjoy the Pig, until they make him into sausages, they’ll cut Chavez’s head off, not just because he’s a son of a bitch but despicable, so that *cocaine-hooked* ruler hasn’t got much time left to go on snorting the coke sent to him by his colleague *Eva Morales*]. [Comment sent by “Luis Candela”, *La Vanguardia*, 07/17/2009, <http://www.lavanguardia.es/lv24h/20020412/51270493835-2.html>. Date accessed: 08/24/2010]

The speaker compares the president of Venezuela with a pig, and revels in his metaphorical dismemberment. He also uses a euphemism perhaps for a more explicit insult, such as “son of a bitch”, and a qualifying adjective—“despicable”—to insult him, accusing him of a drug habit. Moreover, he modifies the first name of Bolivia’s President Morales—from the masculine Evo to the feminine Eva—possibly to question his masculinity. In this type of text it is also common to find vulgar expressions, as in this example concerning a Spanish woman who immigrates to the United Kingdom:

ahhh esta es una negra seguro con padre español y madre guineana ecuatorial o al revés.... que no se quejen los british, que en la zona turistica de la provincia donde vivo *vienen todos los veranos a dar por culo* [...]. [Comentario enviado por “Pelos públicos”, *Abc*, 13/08/2010, http://foros.abc.es/cgi-local/forosabc/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=1;t=012585. Fecha de consulta: 17/08/2010]

[ahhh this must be a black woman with a Spanish father and a Guinean mother or vice versa the British shouldn't complain, as in the tourist zone of the province where I live *they come every summer to screw around* [...]. [Comment sent by "Pelos públicos", *Abc*, 08/13/2010, http://foros.abc.es/cgi-local/forosabc/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=1;t=012585. Date accessed: 08/17/2010]

Or this one where the filthy streets of Madrid are remarked on:

Estimados todos: A continuación expongo una lista de situaciones cotidianas que *me tienen hasta LAS PELOTAS* de la ciudad de Madrid. [...]. [Comentario enviado por "El Espectador Imparcial", *Abc*, 04/08/2010, http://foros.abc.es/cgi-local/forosabc/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=print_topic;f=1;t=012571. Fecha de consulta: 17/08/2010]

[Dear all: here is a list of everyday situations in the city of Madrid that *make me sick to the BALLS*][...]. [Comment sent by "El Espectador Imparcial", *Abc*, 08/04/2010, http://foros.abc.es/cgi-local/forosabc/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=print_topic;f=1;t=012571. Date accessed: 08/17/2010]

In theory, online media have at least one member of staff to act as a filter in order to enforce the rules of the forum (López López y Bolaños Miñambres 2003). These employees moderate comments from the audience. Sometimes readers criticise their performance and threaten to leave the forum. For example, in the following text the reader complains because the *Abc*'s forum administrator does not give free access to several messages criticizing the Spanish government. He or she even asserts that if the problem is not rectified, they "will shortly be packing [their] bags" and moving to another forum "belonging to another newspaper"; here, the reader seems to be giving more weight to the threat by referring to competition between newspapers:

Al Administrador del foro no lo entiendo!.....la carpeta con más de 100 mensajes, capaz de tumbar a un gobierno y no funciona..... En fin pronto hago las maletas y me voy a otro foro, de otro diario. [...]. [Comentario enviado por "Quetzal", *Abc*, 14/03/2010, http://foros.abc.es/cgi-local/forosabc/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=10;t=000322. Fecha de consulta: 01/09/2010]

[I don't understand the Forum Administrator!..... A folder with more than 100 messages that can topple a government and it doesn't work Well then, I will shortly be packing my bags and moving to another forum, belonging to another newspaper] [...]. [Comment sent by "Quetzal", *Abc*, 03/14/2010, http://foros.abc.es/cgi-local/forosabc/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=10;t=000322. Fecha de consulta: 01/09/2010]

[local/forosabc/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=10;t=000322](http://foros.abc.es/cgi-local/forosabc/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=10;t=000322). Date accessed: 09/01/2010]

Another netizen responded to this message, refusing to believe that the barrier to gain access to certain posts was due to a technical error and openly accusing the forum administrator of deleting comments that were deliberately directed against the Spanish monarchy, that is to say, those that were against the newspaper's editorial line:

Lo más extraño es que aún se pueden leer los mensajes, pero al intentar contestar sale la leyenda " has solicitado un tema que no existe". *Mi opinión es que los últimos mensajes comentaban sobre el Rey y el heredero, y eso sabemos que es sagrado*. [Comentario enviado por "Jawier", *Abc*, 15/03/2010, http://foros.abc.es/cgi-local/forosabc/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=10;t=000322. Fecha de consulta: 01/09/2010]

[The strangest thing is that you can still read the messages, but when you try to reply a caption appears saying "you have requested a topic that does not exist". *My opinion is that the latest posts talked about the King and the Prince, and we know this is taboo*]. [Comment sent by "Jawier", *Abc*, 03/15/2010, http://foros.abc.es/cgi-local/forosabc/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=10;t=000322. Date accessed: 09/01/2010]

"Censorship" of the forum posts by the mass media is made in some cases before the release of a comment and, as a consequence, the message can take several hours to be published. Obviously, such a procedure subtracts agility from the forum. Another option is that the comments are released automatically, and then edited later. In this way, the forum gains immediacy but inappropriate comments can stay on the web for hours. The person censoring is called a *sysop*—an acronym of system operator—. He or she has the task of reviewing the obscene and insulting comments. However, in our study we found numerous texts that do not follow the principles of the forums, except in *El País*⁴. Thus, examples such as those given above frequently appear, showing that most newspapers fail to comply with their own standards of editing, publishing all kinds of slanderous accusations, discredits and insults. Some readers even use a foul and highly aggressive or degrading vocabulary. This leads us to believe that there is more than one censor in

⁴ In *El País* this type of content is usually filtered but we did not find any differences, either in the frequency or the "magnitude" of insults, between newspapers with a "conservative" editorial line—such as *Abc*, *El Correo* or *Libertad Digital*—, and the more "progressive" ones—for example, *20 Minutos*—, for these publications pick up all kinds of damaging remarks.

each media and that not all of them fulfill their duty with equal zeal. Perhaps they are afraid of losing the readers who write comments like those already mentioned, or those who are simply attracted to this type of “insulting” content. Hence, the elimination of these comments can reduce the number of forum readers. This particular point is important for we believe it reveals one of the main reasons why the existence of highly aggressive and insulting language tends to dominate this type of forum. If the rules of participation were adhered to, then in theory insulting and hurtful comments appearing on the forum should be immediately eliminated. Some may not even be published at all, especially if the *sysop* was working in accordance with established guidelines. However, as we have shown in our analysis, this does not take place. We must therefore ask why these disparaging texts are being published. We propose that it has to do directly with a fear of losing the readership of those who are attracted by the sort of polemic comments that appear.

We have already seen how making insults is a recurring practice in most of the forums studied. Let us now examine more closely other strategies that are also frequently used in such kind of texts, specifically those intended to damage the image of other readers thereby formulating *face threatening acts* (FTAs). These comments often also refer to the protagonist of a current event under discussion, sometimes using demonstratives with a pejorative sense:

Pepito, Pepito Blanco menudo veranita te espera, Ministro de Fomento [...]. Si es que tan tontos no se puede ser! reducen costes donde se crea empleos y ya de paso se termina de apuntillar al sector del que siguen presumiendo *estos MASONES* "disfrazados" y "analfabetos" de haberlo destruido: el sector de la construcción. Menudos masones que destruyen la construcción. Estáis condenados amigos, DIMITIR YA. [Comentario enviado por “Quetzal”, *Abc*, 28/07/2010, http://foros.abc.es/cgi-local/forosabc/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=recent_user_posts;u=00004430. Fecha de consulta: 18/08/2010]

[Pepito, Pepito Blanco what a sunny summer lies in wait for you, Minister of Public Works [...]. People just can't be so stupid! They reduce costs where jobs are created and while they're at it have one more stab at the sector which these “disguised” and “illiterate” MASONS profess they have destroyed: the building sector. A fine sort of mason who destroys buildings! Your time is up, friends, RESIGN NOW!]. [Comment sent by “Quetzal”, *Abc*, 07/28/2010, http://foros.abc.es/cgi-local/forosabc/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=recent_user_posts;u=00004430. Date accessed: 08/18/2010]

In the comment above the demonstrative indirectly refers to members of the Spanish government linked, according to some rumours, with Freemasonry. The demonstrative is usually accompanied by a noun which acquires a pejorative sense:

[D]onde vivo: Hay una cantidad de sitios de internet publicados por los departamentos de policias con fotos de los pedrastras (no se si se escribe así) [...]. No solo estos "*individuos*" por regla, deben presentarse a la policia cada cierto tiempo para ser refotografiados. [...][Comentario enviado por "La hna de P", *20 Minutos*, 28/03/2008, <http://foros.20minutos.es/viewtopic.php?f=5&t=4135>. Fecha de consulta: 19/08/2010]

[Where I live: There are a lot of websites published by the Police Department with photos of paedophiles (I don't know if it's spelt like that) [...]. The rules are that from time to time these "individuals" must report to the police to be photographed again]. [...][Comment sent by "La hna de P", *20 Minutos*, 03/28/2008, <http://foros.20minutos.es/viewtopic.php?f=5&t=4135>. Date accessed: 08/19/2010]

In fact, the speaker does not hesitate to put the noun "individuals" in inverted commas. A derogatory sense is also present in the following expression which labels people as being as "unscrupulous" as the President of Venezuela:

Dar vivas a un energumeno, analfabeto y dictador, donde su palabra es ley y sin contar con nadie toma medidas, solo es defendible por *sujetos de su calaña*. [...][Comentario enviado por "Luis Candela", *La Vanguardia*, 18/08/2009, <http://www.lavanguardia.es/lv24h/20020412/51270493835-2.html>. Fecha de consulta: 17/08/2010]

[Cheering on an illiterate and dictatorial madman, where his word is law and where he decides on everything himself, is only defendable by people of his own ilk] . [...][Comment sent by "Luis Candela", *La Vanguardia*, 08/18/2009, <http://www.lavanguardia.es/lv24h/20020412/51270493835-2.html>. Date accessed: 08/17/2010]

We can also find "alterity focusers" (Portolés Lázaro y Martín Zorraquino 1999) such as *tía*:

que dulce gabana ni dulce gitana, *esa tía* es una dulce marrana. *animos chic@s*. [Comentario enviado por "Santa", *El Correo*, 26/03/2008, http://servicios.elcorreo.com/alava/foros/read.php?v=t&f=379&i=4528&t=3624#26-03-08_20:28. Fecha de consulta: 20/03/2010]

[Neither *dolce gabana* nor *dolce gipsy*, *that woman* is a *dolce pig*. Cheer up girls!]. [Comment sent by "Santa", *El Correo*, 03/26/2008, http://servicios.elcorreo.com/alava/foros/read.php?v=t&f=379&i=4528&t=3624#26-03-08_20:28. Date accessed: 08/20/2010]

And note the irony of the colloquial adjective *maja* (goodlooking) when it has a diminutive:

Asi no *majicas*. Este camino del enfrentamiento no me parece que sea lo correcto. Aunque quizas le conviene a alguien, y por eso cuelan comentarios de este tipo. [...] [Comentario enviado por “Una mas”, *El Correo*, 21/03/2008, <http://servicios.elcorreo.com/vizcaya/foros/read.php?v=t&f=379&i=4797&t=3624#> 21-03-08 18:38UNA MAS. Fecha de consulta: 20/08/2010]

[Not this way, *majicas*. This path of confrontation doesn’t seem the right one to me. Although it might suit some, and that’s why comments of this type get through the net]. [...] [Comment sent by “Una mas”, *El Correo*, 03/21/2008, <http://servicios.elcorreo.com/vizcaya/foros/read.php?v=t&f=379&i=4797&t=3624#> 21-03-08 18:38UNA MAS. Date accessed: 08/20/2010]

The diminutive can also be attached to a name, as in this comment about the [lady] president of the municipal administrative body Community of Madrid, where it acquires a pejorative sense:

El billete de 10 viajes de metro ha subido de 5,40 a 9 euros [...] (cosas de *Esperancita*) [Comentario enviado por “El Espectador Imparcial”, *Abc*, 08/04/2010, http://foros.abc.es/cgi-local/forosabc/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=print_topic;f=1;t=012571. Fecha de consulta: 22/08/2010]

[The 10-trip underground ticket has risen from 5.40 to 9 euros]. [...] (things of *Esperancita*⁵) [Comment sent by “El Espectador Imparcial”, *Abc*, 08/04/2010, http://foros.abc.es/cgi-local/forosabc/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=print_topic;f=1;t=012571. Date accessed: 08/22/2010]

Names can also appear preceded by an article. See for example the connotations of social coarseness that the name *La Cospe* —which has also been apocopated— of María Dolores de Cospedal, the Secretary General of the Popular Party—the main opposition party in Spain— carries in this further comment:

Queda claro que al líder de la “presunta” oposición al gobierno en su cabeza no está la lucha antiterrorista, ni el acercamiento a presos, ni la maniobra de Rubalcaba para presentar una foto que puede hundir al PP a tal punto que vuelva a perder las proximas elecciones generales. *La Cospe al Rajoy*: día argo Rajoy sobre ETA! [...]

⁵ *Esperancita* is the diminutive of *Esperanza*, the president’s forename. *Esperanza* means “hope”.

[Comentario enviado por “Quetzal”, *Abc*, 30/07/2010, http://foros.abc.es/cgi-local/forosabc/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=10;t=000322;p=25#000371. Fecha de consulta: 23/08/2010]

[Clearly absent from the mind of the leader of the “alleged” opposition party is the fight against terrorism, or the reconciliation of prisoners, or Rubalcaba’s attempts to present a picture of the PP that could sink the party to the point that it loses the next general elections again. *The Cospe to the Rajoy*: say something about ETA, Rajoy!] [...] [Comment sent by “Quetzal”, *Abc*, 07/30/2010, http://foros.abc.es/cgi-local/forosabc/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=10;t=000322;p=25#000371. Date accessed: 08/23/2010]

It could be said that the use of the article preceding a name corresponds to popular speech. Furthermore, it has a deictic sense, since it can often allude to someone known by the speakers. In this case, it refers to two well known politicians, Mariano Rajoy and the above mentioned María Dolores de Cospedal, leaders of the opposition party and who appear frequently in the media.

Moreover, humour is a very effective procedure for Internet users to submit their reviews. For instance, the next speaker makes a play on the Spanish word *gilipollas* (burk) by substituting part of it with the English “hippi[e]”, or feigns confusion between graphemes and *h-* and *j-* as a result of an aspirated pronunciation of the noun *marijuana*:

Los *hippilollas eco-lo-jetas* hacen arder Ibiza. Al parecer una tribu de ciruelos de estos que viven en taparrabos en una cueva dándole a la *marijuana*, anda detrás del incendio aún activo en la isla [...] [Comentario enviado por “Superfer”, *Libertad Digital*, 24/08/2010, http://www.libertaddigital.com/foros//pre_view.php?site=forosdelibertaddigital&bn=forosdelibertaddigital_nacionalforos&key=1282661967&first=1282672744&last=1282648501. Fecha de consulta: 24/08/2010]

[It’s the hippie-burk eco-mugfaces who make Ibiza burn. Apparently one of these brainless tribes, wearing loincloths and living in a cave smoking marijuana, is behind the fire still burning on the island.] [...] [Comment sent by “Superfer”, *Libertad Digital*, 08/24/2010, http://www.libertaddigital.com/foros//pre_view.php?site=forosdelibertaddigital&bn=forosdelibertaddigital_nacionalforos&key=1282661967&first=1282672744&last=1282648501. Date accessed: 08/24/2010]

And in this other comment, which follows the refrain of a popular Spanish carol, the supposed past as a spy of the most wanted terrorist in the United States is

mentioned, with his first name intentionally changed to a Russian one to make a play on meaning:

Estos "iluminados" que dirigen el mundo y lo globalizan están más vistos que un tebeo. Primero un 11 S (*ande andará un tal Ivan, Bin Laden exagente de la CIA? ande, ande ande la mari morena.....*), unos ataques con antrax "increíbles", unos atentados en Moscú, un 11 M y 7 de julio San Fermín... [...] [Comentario enviado por "Quetzal", *Abc*, 11/08/2010, http://foros.abc.es/cgi-local/forosabc/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_profile;u=00004430. Fecha de consulta: 10/08/2010]

[These "enlightened" people who run the world and globalize it are all over the place. First 9/11 (*ande andará where will a certain Ivan, Bin Laden, former CIA agent, be? ande, ande ande la mari morena...*), some "incredible" anthrax attacks, more terrorism in Moscow, then 3/11 y 7 de julio San Fermín...—the words of another popular Spanish refrain—]. [Comment sent by "Quetzal", *Abc*, 08/11/2010, http://foros.abc.es/cgi-local/forosabc/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_profile;u=00004430. Date accessed: 08/10/2010]

There are also ironic comments like the following one where a statement by the Prime Minister of Spain is reported in the manner of a folk tale. In this statement, which has been much parodied by the media, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero said that the Earth belongs to the Wind:

Les voy a contar un cuento de María Sarmiento, que como todos sabrán fue a cagar y se la llevó el viento "el dueño de la Tierra según ZP". [...] [Comentario enviado por "Quetzal", *Abc*, 05/08/2010, http://foros.abc.es/cgi-local/forosabc/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_profile;u=00004430. Fecha de consulta: 10/08/2010]

[I'm going to tell you a story about María Sarmiento who, as everyone knows, went to have a shit and was carried away by the wind "the owner of the Earth according to ZP"] [Comment sent by "Quetzal", *Abc*, 08/05/2010, http://foros.abc.es/cgi-local/forosabc/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_profile;u=00004430. Date accessed: 08/10/2010]

Apparently innocuous, the ironic assertions set out in these comments are in fact examples of a kind of impoliteness that can be much more hurtful, that is, they can cause more harm than the mere use of pejorative expressions. Irony is may be directly related to impoliteness, something already highlighted by Leech (1983) and by Brown and Levinson (1987), who warn of its utility to perform a face-

threatening indirect speech act⁶. Unlike the direct attack, which is an open threat and can therefore be quickly noticed and counteracted by the interlocutor, the intent at discredit behind an ironic assertion often goes unnoticed by that person, whose defensive posture is diminished, thereby opening up his or her vulnerability to verbal aggression⁷.

Rudeness is also directly related to emotions. These are essential elements of human communication and should not be considered merely as a peripheral phenomenon. Interlocutors are almost never completely indifferent, sometimes even unable to keep their cool (Kienpointner 2008: 26). Hence the frequent use of *ad hominem* attacks against the President of Venezuela, such as this example in which his mental capacity is questioned:

El *enfermo mental* que impera en Vnzla, ahora pide a Obama, haga un embargo a Hoduras[...] Nada de lo que diga el *cerdo* Chavez, tiene credibilidad a no ser que su ingestion excesiva de cocaína, le haga decir cosas y que su incontenencia verbal sea el motivo de tantas tonterías [Comentario enviado por “Luis Candela”, *La Vanguardia*, 14/07/2009, <http://www.lavanguardia.es/lv24h/20020412/51270493835-3.html>. Fecha de consulta: 01/09/2010]

[The mentally sick person who governs Vnzla is now asking Obama to place an embargo on Hoduras [...]. Nothing that the pig Chavez says is credible unless his excessive cocaine intake makes him say things and his verbal incontinence is behind so much nonsense]. [Comment sent by “Luis Candela”, *La Vanguardia*, 07/14/2009, <http://www.lavanguardia.es/lv24h/20020412/51270493835-3.html>. Date accessed: 09/01/2010]

Or this *bias ad hominem* in which the scabs that prevent participation in a strike are accused of cowardice and dishonesty:

Por favor!! un poco de respeto. Me refiero al conjunto de esquirolas del conflicto de ariznavarra. *Dejad en paz a la gente que es más valiente y honesta que vosotros* y secunda la huelga. *Dejad de amenazar, boicotear e intimidar al currela que, va a currar y secunda su DERECHO a huelga.* Aunque...no voy hablaros de derechos por que esa palabra no entra en vuestro vocabulario. Sois una especie que poco a poco aflora en la sociedad: los psicoterroristas laborales.!!! Fuera esquirolas y demás gentuza como vosotros!!! Sois la incompetencia laboral personificada!! Pobres hijos...como les estareis educando. [Comentario enviado por “Psico”, *El Correo*,

⁶ According to Igualada (2000: 263), irony, in particular, may well be a resource for impoliteness. After all, the resulting effect of what is said largely depends on its internal content and this is determined by the speaker's intention.

⁷ On irony cf. Alcaide (2004) and Ruiz Gurillo and Padilla García (2009), among others.

25/03/2008,
http://servicios.elcorreo.com/alava/foros/read.php?v=t&f=379&i=3624&t=3624#13-03-08_17:30eskiroles_resentidos. Fecha de consulta: 01/09/2010]

[A bit of respect, please! I mean you, all the scabs of the ariznavarra conflict. Leave those people alone, they're braver and more honest than you and support the strike. Stop threatening, boycotting and intimidating the worker who goes to work and endorses his RIGHT to strike. Although...I'm not going to talk to you about rights, because that word doesn't exist in your vocabulary. You're a sort of people that is gradually emerging in society: "workplace mobsters"!!! Out you scabs and other riffraff like you!!!! You are labor incompetence personified!![I pity] your poor kids...what a way to bring them up]. [Comment sent by "Psico", *El Correo*, 03/25/2008,http://servicios.elcorreo.com/alava/foros/read.php?v=t&f=379&i=3624&t=3624#13-03-08_17:30eskiroles_resentidos. Date accessed: 09/01/2010]

Here the speaker directly addresses the scabs, accusing them of infringing the right to strike of others. The noun "right" is capitalized, which shows that the speaker intends to intensify his assertion. Then, using a concessive link followed by dots, an even more stinging attack is introduced as he says that this word "doesn't exist in your vocabulary". With this assertion he is accusing them in an indirect way of systematically ignoring any rights. To make matters worse, he identifies the scabs with a typology of individuals, "a sort of people that are gradually emerging in society", that is, "workplace mobsters", a clear insult. Then the writer calls them by the derogatory noun "riffraff" also trying to show their alleged incompetence to carry out their work. Finally, the commentary concludes with another *bias ad hominem* as it challenges the scabs' ability to bring up their own children.

As we have seen, the comments posted on the forums of Spanish digital newspapers tend to be rude, and in some cases can be described as aggressive and violent. *Face threatening acts*—FTAs—(Brown and Levinson 1987) predominate in them. It is true that sometimes in these forums we also find *face flattering acts*—FFAs—. Examples of FFAs are expressions of agreement and, in general, any implied positive evaluation of statements made previously by other forum participants.

Bravo Dulce Muchachito! [...] [Comentario enviado por "Bastaya", *El País*, 09/08/2007, <http://www.elpais.com>. Fecha de consulta: 09/08/2007]

[*Well done Dulce Muchachito!*] [...] [Comment sent by "Bastaya", *El País*, 08/09/2007, <http://www.elpais.com>. Date accessed: 08/09/2007]

In addition, the speaker in this comment tries to cheer up another participant in the forum who is also a cancer patient:

Bienvenido Pegicor!! ^^ ... siempre con optimismo y tus exámenes semestrales estarán bien bien, muy bien!!! =D ... muchas gracias por tus palabras, siempre llegan al corazón y nos dan ánimos para seguir [...] [Comentario enviado por “Alejandro Cozzaglio”, *La Vanguardia*, 07/08/2009, http://www.lavanguardia.es/premium/publica/publica?COMPID=53427549089&ID_PAGINA=22045&ID_FORMATO=9&PAGINACIO=5&SUBORDRE=3&TEXT =. Fecha de consulta: 17/08/2010]

[Welcome Pegicor!! ^^ ... Always stay optimistic and your checkups will be good good, very good!!! =D ... thank you very much for your words, always reaching our hearts and giving us the courage to go on] [...] [Comment sent by “Alejandro Cozzaglio”, *La Vanguardia*, 08/07/2009, http://www.lavanguardia.es/premium/publica/publica?COMPID=53427549089&ID_PAGINA=22045&ID_FORMATO=9&PAGINACIO=5&SUBORDRE=3&TEXT =. Date accessed: 08/17/2010]

Even so, in such type of forums it is very usual to find texts in which there is a clear predominance of FTAs, as presented in the preceding pages. The following table shows the overall results of our analysis:

Comments	Predominance of FTAs	Predominance of FFAs	No FTAs or FFAs
<i>LIBERTAD DIGITAL</i>	92% (46 comments)	6% (3 comments)	2% (1 comment)
<i>LA VANGUARDIA</i>	86% (43)	8% (4)	6% (3)
<i>EL CORREO</i>	86% (43)	6% (3)	8% (4)
<i>ABC</i>	82% (41)	12% (6)	6% (3)
<i>20 MINUTOS</i>	74% (37)	18% (9)	8% (4)
<i>AS</i>	64% (32)	26% (13)	10% (5)
<i>EL PAIS</i>	58% (29)	8% (4)	34% (17)

Table 3-5: Quantitative analysis of the different forums considered

FTAs are especially abundant in newspapers with an editorial line that could be described as more “conservative”, such as *Libertad Digital* (92%), *La Vanguardia* (86%), *El Correo* (86%) and *Abc* (82%), while in *20 Minutos* (74%), *As* (64%) and *El País* (58%) the share is somewhat lower. However, examples of *enhancement politeness* are comparatively scarce overall. Thus, and with the exception of *As*⁸, the presence of FFAs does not exceed 25% in any of the forums discussed. In addition, there are texts which are predominantly informative, in which we have not been able to find any FTAs or FFAs. These are more common in *El País* (34%), where Internet users often seem to take on the role of reporters, offering free information on various news events that they can access first hand.

The present study has been based on the analysis of 350 texts published over four consecutive years—from 2006 to 2010—in the opinion forums of seven Spanish digital newspapers of a varying nature and with different editorial lines. From each of the forums we selected 50 comments of more or less the same length and carrying similar subject content. This permitted us to compare in which media a higher predominance of FTAs or FFAs existed. We have already seen in the theoretical section that FFAs belong to enhancement politeness theory, but in the type of comments we are dealing with here such FFAs are very scarce; netizens rarely direct praise towards their addressees. On the other hand, we have found examples of hurtful content of every kind. Readers who participate in these forums usually take recourse to highly offensive qualified adjectives; euphemisms designed to insult their message recipients; defamatory comparisons; derogatory demonstratives; disdainful substantives; “alterity focusers” through which some sort of inexistent familiarity with the rest of the forum’s participants is feigned; and last but not least, just plain rudeness or coarseness of expression. Furthermore, participants hide behind anonymity to launch constant *ad hominem* attacks, aimed at damaging the social image of the persons to whom their texts are directed, generally public figures, fellow netizens participating in the forum, or even the host media where the comment is published. And, as we have already seen, the administrator—or *sysop*—of this type of forum does not seem to exercise his or her censorial role with any great efficiency, for this type of message content can remain on the media’s website for weeks—even months—after publication.

⁸ Perhaps it is because in this sports newspaper it is common to find praise for forum participants’ favourite team players.

5. Conclusion

As we have been able to appreciate in the foregoing analysis, comments published in the forums of the main Spanish digital newspapers include a preponderance of FTAs. It is true that the number of FTAs largely depends on the content of news. For this reason we have chosen a corpus of comments on a series of different topics. Apart from this quantitative analysis, we found no fundamental differences in the types of “strategies of impoliteness” used by readers from each media. However, it might be interesting to carry out further research to see if a change in the political context, as for instance a change in the Spanish governing party, would affect this trend. We wonder if such a change would induce an increase in the number of readers with a “progressive” ideology—that is, the main supporters of *El País*—using insulting and offensive language to disqualify members of the new Government. This seems feasible for, as we have seen, all the texts published in forums are closely linked to the socio-political context.

This link with the socio-political context makes the forums very useful for the teaching of Pragmatics. It is also very easy to access the texts, available to all Internet users, just by browsing through the pages of every newspaper. In addition, they can be utilised for learning the most common procedures deployed by the Spanish to produce impolite texts. Therefore, these texts often dedicate *ad hominem* message attacks to their recipients, which question their mental faculties or their ability to educate their children. In addition, they use nouns and adjectives in a pejorative sense; demonstratives expressing contempt; burlesque mimicking in the form of parodies; ironic comments; personally directed appeals accompanied by insults; and so on.

Furthermore, although the seven newspapers analysed explicitly prohibit derogatory, insulting or defamatory language, the forum texts are well suited for the study of aggression and even for verbal violence, as they contain abundant dysphemistic expressions used to damage the image of their recipients. However, it is the image of the author of the texts which is most damaged, because through his or her words he or she is seen as capable of descending into a direct confrontation using the language of the gutter (Fuentes Rodríguez and Alcaide Lara 2008).

By using verbal violence the speaker expresses an alleged relationship of power over the primary target of his or her aggression, while also professing a familiarity with other forum members, a familiarity which, in fact, does not exist. As is known, communication via the Internet is conducted indirectly, that is, speakers are not communicating on a physical face-to-face or voice-to-voice basis. Speakers can even hide their identity. This determines the configuration of this specific type of message, in which Internet users are identified by pseudonyms. Thus, under anonymity and due to the immediacy of communication, readers are not only impelled to violate the most basic guidelines of spelling and grammar with

impunity but also prevailing social norms that condemn all forms of verbal aggression.

As a result of the findings in the present study, we think it might be interesting to embark on future research to try to establish—perhaps with the use of questionnaires, or interviews with heterogeneous recipients—if forum readers feel “attacked” or not by the obscene nature, or the overbearing and intimidating characteristics of this kind of comment. Moreover, and in an attempt to expose common patterns or differences in the behaviour of media readers from different cultural backgrounds, the results of our own statistical findings might be tested against the analysis of impoliteness in digital media from other countries⁹.

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⁹ As performed by Breeze (2009) on the tabloids that proliferate in the UK.

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