Digital leadership, Twitter and Pope Francis

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ABSTRACT
The Internet reproduces and strengthens our model of social dial-
log. Just as in the physical world, the online public conversation
and, above all, the ideological debate, requires leaders who can be
a point of reference to either foster values or contradict them. The
concept of leadership has drawn the attention of several studies
concerning communication management. Leaders are neither all
equal nor do they exercise leadership by means of the same tools.
This article studies both the concept of digital leadership as a
guide for online conversation and the use that microblogs, such as
Twitter, can provide for this purpose. Among several public figures
using Twitter, we have focused our study on the @Pontifex
account to have an insight into the type of leadership exercised
by the Holy Father and the impact of his teaching. The analysis
shows that the Pope uses Twitter for catechetical purposes and
that he is aware that his message can reach a large audience.
Moreover, although interaction between the Pope and his fol-
lowers on this platform is a fact already known, we have further
found that some messages arouse followers’ interest more than
others do.

1. Introduction
Thanks to social media tools that allow the creation of content on the Internet, indi-
viduals have become part of the social debate, a place until now only held by the mass
media. In the public debate, social leaders do not arouse the interest of the audience
with orders or rules, they rather share information, give advice, and increase motiv-
ation. Not surprisingly, this new style of leadership has been growing as Internet usage
increases. Public figures have increased their relevance and the range of their interven-
tions through their personal accounts in the social media; here, they can give their
personal interpretation of the reality, bring new ideas and, as a consequence,
become ‘nodes’ of communication who can carry on a conversation in the online
community.
The aim of this article is to analyze the concept of ‘digital leadership’ and how it is accomplished via Twitter within the context of the ecclesial communication; we will study how Pope Francis – who has the most influential account in the religious world – is exercising his leadership and what the impact of his tweets is. The method that will be used is the qualitative analysis of 232 tweets posted in the Pope’s main Twitter accounts – @Pontifex, @Pontifex_es and @Pontifex_it – and their classification according to the aim of the author, the audience who they are addressed and the main topic of each message. Additionally, we will take into account the degree of the impact obtained from each tweet, measuring the number of retweets.

To better understand these changes, before studying how the new communication tools influence the social debate, it is essential to analyze the concept of leadership and what relationship can be built between leaders and followers.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Leadership and society

Leadership has been defined as a process whereby a person influences a group of people to achieve a common goal (Northouse 2015). Over the past decades, the figure and the task of a leader has been studied in the field of business management. The role of leaders has not been static but it has been changing over time: within a few years, the concept of a manager who is in charge of establishing the strategy their followers must pursue, has given way to the leader who ‘gains’ his leadership by getting involved in practical tasks, achieving technical competencies and opening himself to collaboration with his subordinates (Mintzberg 2010).

The difference between managers and leaders – not only in planning but also in organization and the implementation of work – allows a better understanding of the characteristics of a leader (Kotter 1990). Whereas managers plan processes and tasks (agendas, timetable, allocation of resources), leaders create a vision (they clarify the essential ideas and develop strategies); where managers organize the staff and assign tasks (they establish governance structures and work procedures), leaders create unity (they communicate goals, seek commitment and encourage to work together); where managers monitor and solve problems (they develop incentives and take corrective actions), leaders motivate and inspire (they delegate responsibilities, encourage initiatives, welcome risks). As a result, both the manager and the leader are essential to a strategic organization management; what is more, they can also be embodied by the same person.

Each of these three tasks mentioned in the previous paragraph, that leaders and managers develop in different ways – defined by Kotter (1990) as decisional role, relational role and informative role – have the same main purpose: to generate a change process through a common goal. Thus, the leader can be defined as someone who is responsible for providing an effective direction to the organization efforts (in fact, the etymological root of the word leader is the Latin particle lis: dispute, trial and, for further extension, the person who takes initiative).

Moreover, although it can be an obvious element, we cannot neglect the fact that one of the conditions for being a leader is to receive recognition from followers.
(Beckhard, Goldsmith, and Hesselbein 1997), because, like reputation, leadership is an attribute received by others. Considering this characteristic of leadership, the scientific literature has recently given more weight to the relationship between leaders and their collaborators rather than exclusively focusing on the qualities of the first one. This approach is named ‘relational leadership’, a concept that gains more relevance if studied from the perspective of communication rather than if analyzed from other perspectives, such as management or institutional organization studies.

Therefore, leadership can be considered as ‘a relationship of influence’ (Rost 1993), namely, a non-coercive relationship where the leader influences the collaborators so that they can act in the desired manner. Both the leader and the collaborators need each other in the process of leadership because of the interaction established between both parties. In this context, the leader’s transforming ability becomes important: he is able to extend his influence when he desires a change in his audience, achieving it with his behavior, ideas and words (Robbins and Judge 1997; House and Howell 1992; Seltzer and Bass 1990). There is a great deal of literature on the theme of leadership in different fields, above all in the political one (Natera 2001; Tucker 1995; Stogdill 1974).

The transforming leader (defined also charismatic or transformational) pursues the following goals (Bass and Avolio 1994): (a) vision: to influence and motivate the followers so that their intrinsic motivations are aligned with the vision; (b) emulation: to be a role model for their followers (idealized influence); (c) purpose: to communicate an appealing vision of the future (inspirational motivation) and to help increase alignment; (d) action: to stimulate creativity in their followers who can put forward specific and concrete proposals (intellectual motivation); (e) education: to provide them with opportunities of learning and self-fulfillment.

Cardona (2000) goes beyond these ideas and proposes the figure of the transcendent leader, who not only takes in all the characteristics of the transforming leader but also tries to develop the transcendent motivation of the followers; besides, he looks at the leader’s managerial work as a service to his collaborators, who are seen as individuals in their wholeness (not as employees or fans). The transcendental leader is concerned about the whole person and helps achieve personal development.

The transcendental leader, who is a leader in the classical sense, is an interesting figure in the field of religious communication due to the priority given to the accomplishment of his anthropological purpose. It is a concept already introduced by Plato who said: ‘The leader has to work in order to improve the souls of the citizens’. The same concept has been articulated by Pope Francis, pointing out that ‘there is only one path to leadership: service’ (Francis 2014a).

Those who follow a transcendental leader and establish with him a collaborative relationship want to work for somebody who is trustworthy and who merits their contribution in fighting for a purpose or project. They want to identify with a goal that is meaningful and makes a difference (Cardona 2000). Therefore, with these characteristics in mind, the transcendental leadership model seems to be the most appropriate frame for those religious or ideological leaders who call for a commitment that goes beyond immediate outcomes. The followers do not follow their leader because of personal qualities, but rather because he/she can inspire their life. Pope Francis is aware that the pastors of the Catholic Church, seen as leaders, have to commit to the
acquisition of the typical transcendental leadership qualities and act for the sake of others (Francis 2014b).

### 2.2 Digital Leadership

Different ages require different leadership styles. Throughout history, leadership has been based on different patterns, such as hierarchy, strength, authority and personal abilities; moreover, it also depends on social organizations where leaders can have influence. As previously mentioned, the technological changes of the last decades have been shaping new concepts of leadership. For example, in analyzing new movements and social revolutions, Castells (2012) claims that, nowadays, the more the leaders use new technologies, the more they can extend their influence. Thus, since this characteristic is called a ‘relationship of influence’, technology has become an essential tool for strengthening and achieving this supremacy, above all when it is expected to bring different generations together (Wisniewski 2010).

Leadership, exercised through new technologies, is an activity that has aroused considerable interest among researchers from the beginning of the World Wide Web (Cleveland 1997; Abbate 2000; Annunzio 2001) to the present day (Bennis 2013; Sheninger 2014). As noted by Chieffi (2010), within the Internet’s ‘tribal structure’ new digital tools are of great importance for the leaders; in fact, even though each user is a person even on the network, its reticular system facilitates the formation of groups, *tribus*, which need a shared point of reference. Indeed, the leader is the protagonist, the bias point and the focal point; therefore, he is closely linked not only to the structure of the group but also to its dynamic. The expression ‘digital Leadership’ stems from this context.

In recent times, many authors have pointed out the ambiguity of the term *digital leadership*. Some (Wilson 2004; Westerman, Bonnet and McAfee 2014) make a distinction between *leadership in a digital age* – that is, to become a reference in a social context that is changing because of ICT – and *digital leadership* – leadership acquired through new technologies. As both terms require each other – it is difficult for a leader to refuse to exert his influence through social-network in our knowledge and technological society – we do not think that the expression causes confusion, so we will use the term *digital leadership* to refer to the human quality of leadership exercised with digital tools in the virtual world.

Authority, the foundation of digital leadership, frequently has its origin in the role that leaders play in the offline world: a president of a country, a journalist, a singer, or an actress, as well as a religious leader, strengthens their leadership through both their supporters’ talent and the responsibilities they carry out. Not many leaders are leaders only within the virtual context. Therefore, the extension of this kind of leadership – both in its shape, expression and reception – depends on its physical/real existence: every leader is expected to have content and tone appropriate to the field where he or she is an authority.

This is the reason why leadership and digital competence are two concepts closely related to each other. One can be an authority in a particular field but, to extend one’s power in the digital environments, it is crucial to acquire competence in the use of
digital tools which enable users to enhance easily not only their online presence but also their interventions.

It can be stated that digital leadership can be achieved not only reproducing the characteristics of offline leadership, but also by observing rules imposed by new technology; some of them are highlighted below:

a. **Appropriateness**: the communication of what and how has to be consistent with the context where the leader is a reference point. For example, it would be inappropriate if either the Pope spoke about the global launch of the latest Apple product or the President of Russia expressed his opinion about the last installment of the *Star Wars* series, despite the fact that both themes are trend themes on social networks. Obviously, appropriateness is a characteristic of every communicative action (also offline) but, in this context, it seems necessary to specify how easy it is to invade areas on the social network without any competence (common mistakes: sportsmen who talk about politics, artists who talk about economy, etc.).

b. **Timeliness**: timeliness is a distinctive feature of social networks based on information: a leader must find the right words at the right moment. This is especially relevant to the present ‘society of conversation’.

c. **Technical specializations**: each channel of social media has its proper language and technical needs. Some channels limit the number of characters, others are based on audiovisual format, and several others recommend the use of images, shortened links or formulas that are necessary to include a specific content within a definite frame (e.g. the hashtags). It would be counter-productive if a leader did not use hashtags on Twitter, if he/she withdrew from sociability on Facebook by refusing to answer comments, or if he/she published poor quality photos without a title on Instagram, to name some examples. Each channel has some technical determinants that need to be known and respected, a *lingua franca* that allows the members of the community to accept and to appreciate the contents that are proposed.

d. **Relationship**: a variety of network platforms help promote different ways to weave the same net. In some of them, the link depends on the content; in others, on people. In any case, the aim is to establish a relationship because without it we do not build networking but only isolated elements. As previously mentioned, a leader must have followers and stay connected with them. On the other hand, we should keep in mind that the nature of a relationship can both support one’s authority and diminish it (i.e. a well-known actor connected on the Internet with a prestigious intellectual or, on the contrary, with a corrupt politician). Besides, sometimes, the contacts that a leader establishes are those that define him/her as a leader (i.e. LinkedIn: the connections that professionals maintain there allow them to stay in touch with a specific professional context and to be connected with a high or low professional level). Leadership is confirmed when this interaction sparks the interest of the other online users who then demonstrates their support to the leader (by sharing the content, showing their approval, giving the leader ratings). In fact, most actions that users can carry out on social media are aimed at agreeing with a content or with a particular user, identifying them and making them stand out from the others (with comments, retweets, validations, likes, etc.).
2.3 Twitter, a leadership tool

The microblog is one of the most effective tools for sharing information on social networks (Kwak, Lee, Park, and Moon 2010; Zhao and Rosson 2009). In that, users connect with other users and publish or receive short texts, easily accessible on a wide variety of devices, which may be accompanied by multimedia resources. Twitter is the most widespread microblog, it embodies some of the characteristics of the new Knowledge Society: instantaneous connection, ongoing conversation, interaction between users, plurality of sources and quick diffusion of contents. The last one – word of mouth communication – turns Twitter into a powerful tool to influence followers and strengthen or gain leadership (Jansen et al. 2009; Ingerson and Bruce 2013).

The ability of this network to extend the capacity of a leader for being persuasive has been studied in various fields, such as business (Ingerson and Bruce 2013), education (Wandel 2009) or politics (Parmelee and Bichard 2013; Gainous and Wagner 2014), among others. It has been noted that leaders want to act through social media because it allows them to strengthen their relationships, to announce their commitment to a cause, or to demonstrate their capacity for reflection (Dutta 2010). Indeed, in no other information channel does the interaction depend on such reticular structures as in the case of microblogs, where users are nodes that connect to each other. In this context, socially relevant individuals – politicians, actors, religious leaders, writers, football players, etc. – become centers of influence that bring together many followers (as called in the language of Twitter).

On social media platforms, leadership comprises the features previously mentioned, but in these channels, the relationship between leaders and followers plays a primary role (Li 2010); for this reason, social media provide valuable tools for analyzing the before mentioned relational leadership. On Twitter, the leadership image is mainly built on the informative value of the messages that are shared, either originally produced or echoed by users. A leader, who is selective about what he/she posts, becomes an online reference point and a good source of information (Hwang 2015): for his/her followers, he/she is a key node in an intricate mesh of connections. In this regard, although there are studies indicating that the number of followers on a microblog do not guarantee the ability to influence (Cha et al. 2010), these data nevertheless remain one of the best indicators of leadership on Twitter. Other relevant indicators are the retweets, messages of a leader that are passed on to the followers by other users on their own initiative. Retweets have become one of the most revolutionary results in this microblog, allowing for the first time to better assess the virality of information. In the ideological field (politics, religion, culture), a message is highly effective when its recipients, expressing their approval, are personally involved in its diffusion. At the same time, the simple follow/unfollow process, that is the ability to spontaneously choose leaders, enables the users to identify themselves with a leader message more easily (Hwang 2015).

Finally, we have gathered up the variables to measure leadership, suggested by the consultant Burston Marsteller in an annual study on the use of this tool by the world leaders (Burston 2015), called Twiplomacy:

a. The number of followers: Needless to say, the more followers that users have, the more the impact their message will potentially have. Nevertheless, this is not a
definitive piece of information, because there are other factors that can be involved, such as the population of a country or the diffusion of the Internet in it (i.e. the account of the USA President compared to that of Russia, a country with a different development of network access). On the other hand, the number of followers does not always reveal the real influence of a leader, considering that a user with many followers may not exert any influence on them. According to the aforementioned study, political leaders with more followers share the same characteristics: they use Twitter as a tool for slogan diffusion, they only follow a few accounts (as shown in Table 1, we can surprisingly few following of other accounts, except for Obama), and they have turned down the conversation, as well. Thus, in conclusion, leaders usually do not need to establish many interactions with other leaders, and are not obliged to exchange messages or retweets with their followers. Although the number of followers is a good predictor for leadership, it does not require reciprocity.

b. Degree of influence: this value is measured either by the average number of retweets or by the users who have replied in their personal account the messages posted by the leader. As mentioned earlier, a leader is the one who manages to influence as well as to motivate, causing followers to act in the same direction. In most cases, retweets are supposed to embrace others’ messages, so that their fulfillment involves, to some extent, both the content and the original author from an ideological and informative point of view (however, there are users who retweet adding a critical comment to the original tweet. In Table 2 (Burston 2015), what surprises is the degree of influence of the Holy Father compared to that of the

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**Table 1. Classification of political leaders, by number of followers on Twitter.**

| User            | Position                                      | Followers  | Following |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------|------------|-----------|
| @Barack Obama   | President of the USA                          | 56,933,515 | 639,000   |
| @Pontifex       | Supreme Pontiff of the Catholic Church        | 19,580,910 | 8         |
| @NarendraModi   | India Prime Minister                          | 10,902,510 | 1231      |
| @RT_Erdogan     | President of Turkey                           | 6,122,248  | 2         |
| @WhiteHouse     | Official Residence of the President of the US | 5,956,162  | 209       |
| @PMOIndia       | Official Residence of the Prime Minister of India | 5,384,282  | 211       |
| @HHShkMohd      | Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates     | 3,787,984  | 58        |
| @EPN            | President of Mexico                           | 3,772,413  | 243       |
| @JuanManSantos  | President of Colombia                         | 3,694,434  | 1561      |
| @CFKArgentina   | President of Argentina                        | 3,650,743  | 117       |

Source: Burston (2015).  

**Table 2. Classification of political leaders, according to the level of influence on Twitter.**

| User            | Position                                      | Retweets/tweet |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------|----------------|
| @Pontifex       | Supreme Pontiff of the Catholic Church        | 20,721         |
| @KingSalman     | King of Saudi Arabia                          | 4419           |
| @NicolasMaduro  | President of Venezuela                        | 3198           |
| @BarackObama    | President of the USA                          | 1210           |
| @NarendraModi   | Prime Minister of India                        | 1094           |
| @RT_Erdogan     | President of Turkey                           | 802            |
| @HHShkMohd      | Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates     | 678            |
| @MBuhari        | President of Nigeria                          | 544            |
| @jokowi_do2     | Prime Minister of Indonesia                    | 439            |
| @EPN            | President of Mexico                           | 427            |

Source: Burston (2015).
other leaders. Although a closer study is required, these data already suggest that spiritual values manage to involve more than the political ones and, therefore, transcendental leadership, which we have mentioned in Section 2.1, has wider impact (political leadership is more managerial).

c. **Conversational level**: In the ‘Society of Conversation’, Twitter represents a tool that helps leaders keep in touch with their followers. Each tweet can create a conversation with other users. Nevertheless, few leaders can start a two-way communication because it is impossible to maintain a dialogue with millions of followers. As a result, to measure leadership, this is not an element that deserves consideration.

In conclusion, two significant factors must be considered in order to study leadership on Twitter: the offline leader appearance in the online environment as well as the content offered in each tweet, which can be more or less supported. Being the goal to carefully analyze the activity of the Holy Father, before going in depth, we will deal with the official profile of Pope Francis on Twitter.

### 2.4 Pope Francis on Twitter

The history of the birth of the @Pontifex accounts goes back to 2010, even if the first tweet had been sent in December 2012 (Hudson 2012). It is the first time that a Pope has a personal, global and fast channel of communication. Different from the other profiles of either Heads of State or social leaders, the Twitter account @Pontifex does not belong only to Benedict XVI or Francis – the two Popes who have managed it so far – but rather it represents a figure, the Supreme Pontiff, through its ongoing history. Thus, the nature of continuity in the guide of the Church, as Successor of Peter, is respected on Twitter. As in many other activities, each Pope is personally responsible for his online activity, but all of them embody a figure, transmitted over time (Code of Canon Law 1983).

The resignation of Benedict XVI (February 11, 2013) provided an opportunity to understand how the ownership of such a unique account is conceived. After his resignation, the German Pope’s activity was stopped on nine accounts. The Pontiff Emeritus’s messages were deleted (however, they are now archived at the Vatican Website archive: www.news.va/en/twitter) and the profile name was changed to ‘Sede vacante’. Ratzinger’s papal shield was replaced with that one under ‘Sede vacante’ (an umbrella above a pair of celestial and earthly keys of Saint Peter). When Pope Francis took over the activity of @Pontifex, the account started from zero to send new tweets. That is to say, a common identity is maintained but the ordinary teachings issued by this communication channel become particular to each Pope (obviously, the continuity in the magisterium of the Church is maintained).

The account handled by the Argentinian Pope has been experiencing increasing popularity. Twitter has not been indifferent to the good response that the Holy Father’s words and actions have had by the faithful and in the media (Ballardini 2014). Only a few months after the Pope’s election, a study (Pew Research Center 2014) showed that on Twitter, where the conversation is often negative, 85% of the opinions referring to Pope Francis have been either neutral or positive. The first American Pontifex ‘inherited’ Benedict XVI’s three million followers, but soon the warm welcome
of the religious leader as well as the widespread use of Twitter in the world contributed to the growth of his followers. Only in the second semester of 2013 (Pope Francis was elected in March) was there a spike in the number of followers of +49% with 3.5 million followers (Table 3: in December 2015 he reached 25,200,000 followers). After a year from his election as Head of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis was already the world leader with more retweets as well as the fourth account in the world in terms of media mentions. In November 2013, he was mentioned in 510,000 tweets (SM Reputation Metrics 2013). Its relevance and leadership from the quantitative point of view has continued to grow.

The use of Twitter by Pope Francis enhances his capacity to influence: language is not a barrier for millions of users, because the Holy Father communicates in nine different languages, including Latin, something that helps address to the faithful of that language group; it is a gesture that emphasizes the universality of the Church, embodied in the figure of the Pope (A study shows that 9 out of 10 Europeans prefer to navigate in their native language, suggesting that language is an effective barrier on the Internet [European Commission, 2011]). The Pontiff tweets on a regular basis, almost once every day, so increasing the level of his followers’ engagement; he has occasionally used hashtags, placing his interventions in a thematic context and establishing his presence as part of a community; finally, he chooses simple language – in continuity with his homilies and public speech – and prioritizes brevity (he uses an average of 85 characters per tweet). These features, along with the impact of each message on the network, make Twitter a powerful tool for the leadership of this religious figure that we will study further below.

### Table 3. Content classification of the tweets by subject and retweets on three main languages (27/09/2014 to 28/09/2015).

| Subject             | Number of Tweets | Pontifex | Pontifex | Pontifex |
|---------------------|------------------|----------|----------|----------|
|                     |                  | Retweets | %        | Retweets | %        | Retweets | %        |
| Love of God         | 19               | 219,705  | 10.51    | 175,238  | 9.75     | 20,566   | 8.03     |
| Charity             | 14               | 195,207  | 9.34     | 155,008  | 8.62     | 21,094   | 8.23     |
| Creation            | 27               | 150,503  | 7.20     | 119,883  | 6.67     | 17,680   | 6.90     |
| Christ              | 10               | 121,882  | 5.83     | 120,366  | 6.70     | 15,366   | 6.00     |
| Dignity             | 5                | 18,398   | 0.88     | 15,246   | 0.85     | 3,124    | 1.22     |
| Family              | 13               | 160,285  | 7.67     | 97,136   | 5.40     | 15,359   | 5.99     |
| Church              | 20               | 210,115  | 10.05    | 122,790  | 6.83     | 19,131   | 7.47     |
| Mercy               | 10               | 134,701  | 6.45     | 82,747   | 4.60     | 11,576   | 4.52     |
| Prayer              | 11               | 149,609  | 7.16     | 71,655   | 3.99     | 14,114   | 5.51     |
| Other               | 36               | 228,716  | 10.94    | 230,012  | 12.80    | 32,590   | 12.72    |
| Social Problems     | 17               | 113,743  | 5.44     | 132,475  | 7.37     | 18,144   | 7.08     |
| Suffering           | 8                | 62,825   | 3.01     | 73,599   | 4.09     | 12,258   | 4.78     |
| Christian Life      | 37               | 291,361  | 13.94    | 353,037  | 19.64    | 49,342   | 19.26    |
| Virgin Mary         | 5                | 32,677   | 1.56     | 48,457   | 2.70     | 5,863    | 2.29     |
| Total               | 232              | 2,089,727| 100%     | 1,807,351| 100%     | 257,804  | 100%     |

3. Methodology

The leadership of Pope Francis stems not only from his role in the Church and his charisma but also from his language and message (Spadaro 2015). It is interesting to analyze how the Holy Father exerts and communicates his leadership through his messages and if his activities have a similar impact on different cultural and linguistic
groups. In order to study the type of leadership that the Pope exercises via Twitter, we have analyzed 232 tweets, issued in a year, from 27 September 2014 to 28 September 2015. In this case, an analysis of Big Data for a quantitative study has not been carried out, but rather a smaller number of data has been used in order to develop a qualitative study.

Firstly, a content division of the papal tweets has been performed; 13 specific topics have been selected to which it has been added a group – called ‘others’ –, which brings together messages that address isolated and sporadic issues (i.e. Respect for animals). Moreover, the survey has studied the impressions that, as retweets, the messages belonging to each of these topics in the studied languages have gathered. Therefore, all these retweets have been added up and the percentage of total retweets for each topic has been calculated. In order to obtain a weighted average, we calculated the percentage of retweets of each language depending on the total number of retweets made by the users of that language during the studied year. This study evaluates whether the same topic arouse the same emotions in all the users or if linguistic and cultural differences give different responses.

Furthermore, the study focuses on the type of leadership exercised by the Pope through this content as proposed by Bass and Avolio (1994), as mentioned before. We have classified the papal tweets from the @Pontifex account in five different areas, which correspond to the five tasks given to the leader:

a. Vision: the Holy Father transmits the vision when, for example, he recalls some fundamental truths of Christian doctrine (e.g. ‘In the Sacrament of the Eucharist we find God Who Gives himself’ 09/06/2015). They are essential to focus on concepts and ideas that embody the catholic faith, ideas that followers can join with the leader;

b. Emulation: although the Pope does not directly see himself as a role model, he invites emulation when either he includes himself in a proposal or when he suggests behaviors that he publicly accomplishes, as, for example, a plea to God, implicitly inviting his followers to join (e.g. ‘Lord, help us to live the virtue of generosity, to love without limits’ 06/04/2015);

c. Purpose: those tweets where the Pope plans a future situation that the Church and Christians are called to achieve (e.g. ‘In spite of Injustices and sufferings, the Lord’s victory is certain’ 17/09/2015);

d. Action: messages where a specific action is proposed, a mission within reach of his followers (e.g. ‘Let us ask Our Lady to help all families, especially those affected by unemployment’ 07/09/2015);

e. Education: tweets with a more pastoral aspect, where the Pope fulfills his task as pastor and guide (e.g. ‘A Christian who is too attached to riches has lost his way’ 25/08/2015). These tweets are very similar to the messages of Vision, but the first has a more pedagogical intention.

We are aware that on several occasions the same tweet could be classified in more than one intentional purpose. In these cases, tweets have been included in the prevalent category. Initially, the papal tweets have been assigned to any of these five
categories in order to understand what type of leadership the Pope exerts on the social network.

The intention of the sender, in this case the Holy Father, is the same in all languages – as tweets are the same in all the accounts, except on special occasions –, and yet there is a chance that the reception varies so, in this case a linguistic differentiation has also been done.

The audience is the third aspect of this study. As mentioned before, it has been pointed out that there is not a leader without followers; the Holy Father has very different followers because Twitter is not a space exclusively Catholic but, obviously, it is open to everybody. For this reason, the analysis has shown who @Pontifex addressed with his tweets. These are the identified groups:

a. Catholics: as main authority in the Catholic Church, the Holy Father draws a big audience among the Catholics: we have assigned to them those tweets that refer to his role as Pontiff, the Church, the sacraments and the traditional catholic devo-

ons (i.e. ‘A Synod means walking together but also praying together. I ask all the faithful to participate. #praywithus’ 02/10/2014).

b. Christians: the second group consists of those people that believe in God but they do not belong to the Catholic Church. These followers will appreciate the content that doctrinally links them to the previous group (i.e. ‘Christians are witnesses not to a theory, but to a Person: Christ risen and alive, the one Saviour of all’ 28/05/ 2015).

c. Believers: the Holy Father is also a leading figure in the world of religious author-

ities (among them the Dalai Lama, Rabbi Shmuley Boteach and the Reverend Jackson are also present on Twitter); this group of followers can be identified under the label of believers, namely, people who are open to God although they do not share the distinctive traits of the Catholic doctrine (i.e. ‘There is so much noise in the world! May we learn to be silent in our hearts and before God’ 11/18/ 2015);

d. Finally, people in general: believers and unbelievers who agree with Pope’s tweets that do not have explicit religious references (i.e. ‘We continue to tolerate some considering themselves more worthy than others’ 06/18/2015).

We clarify that a group is not excluded from the other groups; on the contrary, each of them includes the previous one (e.g. when the Pope addresses everyone, he is also talking to Catholics). Thus after grouping the tweets, we have obtained the average of retweets sent by users, to get an insight about how the messages conveyed by the leader are welcomed among each audience.

Finally, since Twitter is a global tool and since the Holy Father has an account where he tweets in several languages, it has been firstly verified that leadership is uniformly shared in social networks. The analysis covers the tweets and retweets issued in the three most popular accounts (English, Spanish and Italian) during the mentioned year. When there were marked linguistic differences, a comparison between the three accounts has been made. The quantity of retweets sent by the followers belonging to the three accounts have been analyzed chronologically. In order to make a good comparison, proportional to the number of followers, we have calculated the number of
retweets per 10,000 followers. The aim of this study is to verify whether the followers’ responses have been automatic or they were a result of a predetermined choices changing over time (depending on whether or not they consider interesting the leader’s message).

4. Results

The classification of the tweets shows that the Pope has dealt with a great variety of topics that fall into 14 (Figure 1). The recurrent theme has been about Christian life (37 tweets: pieces of advice to set a good example for others, importance of the sacraments, comments on liturgical season...); the second one about the Creation (27, tweets used to promote the message of the encyclical ‘Laudato Si’); then, the Church (20), Love of God (19), social problems (17: poverty, sick people), charity (14), family (13), prayer (11), Christ (10), mercy (10), suffering (8), Mary (5) and dignity (5). Many tweets (36) have dealt with either marginal or not repeated themes. Of all the analysed tweets, the most used writing style is mainly enunciative (174), it stands out against the exortative tweets (29) and those that acquire form of godly prayer addressed directly to God (20). The tweets with an interrogative style are 9.

In Table 3, the percentage that each of these issues has taken in the tweet proposal of the Holy Father, and the number of retweets that have been gathered in each of the three languages, can be seen. It also offers the total percentage of each group of retweets (on the dates studied when the analysis was performed – in November 2015 –, the total cumulative number of retweets on the analyzed period was: 2.089.727, in English; 1.807.351, in Spanish; and 257.804, in Italian).

In Figure 2, it can be noted that the users of different accounts have reacted to the proposed contents differently (topics are identified by letters):

Firstly, all the graphs indicate that user reactions share, to some extent, the proposed tweets: that is, there are not either subjects who are left without receiving retweets or subjects who do not receive user support based on the number of the offered messages. In the three accounts, the tweets grouped under the theme ‘Creation’ (C) have received less support, but that is because, during the days following the publication of the Encyclical ‘Laudato Si’, almost 30 tweets in three days were sent and,
consequently, a decline in support was registered (there is a logical lack of interest when the publication is issued with great frequency). @Pontifex and @Pontifex_es followers respond with many retweets to the contents on Love of God (A), Charity (B) and Christ (D); conversely, @Pontifex_it followers are more responsive to the proposals of Christian life (M). There are other differences, but they are not worth mentioning (Table 4).

The classification of the tweets according to the desired purpose of leadership reveals that 35.5% of messages have an educational purpose; then, it highlights those

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**Figure 2.** Comparison of percentages between published tweets and retweets in the accounts @Pontifex, @Pontifex_es and @Pontifex_it, arranged depending on the subject.
tweets that give Vision (20.5%); followed by Emulation and Action (both gather 14.1% of the Holy Father’s publications); the list is closed by the tweets on Purpose (13.3%).

It is undoubtedly surprising that the Pope emphasizes the educational subject; it is a sign that Twitter is another tool for continuing to carry out his pastoral work. Moreover, it is significant the balance between the other four purposes. Regarding the reactions of the different linguistic communities, there is generally consistency, but the Anglophone public support for the tweets which offered specific actions stands out against the others (tweets with this purpose gather 18.8% of retweets, compared with 15% and 15.3% of @Pontifex_es and @Pontifex_it). These last two accounts are more reactive to the messages that express Vision and Emulation. Figure 3 shows the differences expressed in %.

With regard to the audience of the Holy Father, there is a prevalence of messages open to the general public (39.6%), perhaps due to the publication of the Encyclical ‘Laudato Si’. This encyclical, dealing with the creation and preservation of the Earth, contains messages of general interest, and we can state that the Pope has managed to reach a wider audience in posting them. The second group is made up of Christians (31.9%), followed by believers (17.8%) and Catholics (10.7%). As previously mentioned,

| Purpose | Tweets | Retweets @Pontifex | Retweets @Pontifex_es | Retweets @Pontifex_it |
|---------|--------|--------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Action  | 34     | 393,640            | 260,729               | 39,611                |
| Education | 82     | 680,552            | 650,858               | 89,328                |
| Emulation | 35     | 276,505            | 271,700               | 43,373                |
| Purpose  | 31     | 330,923            | 199,194               | 29,778                |
| Vision   | 50     | 396,163            | 397,841               | 54,269                |

Figure 3. Percentages of tweets depending on the intention of the message and retweets obtained.
these groups do not exclude the others, but exclusive messages for specific interest groups (e.g. Catholics) are lower.

With regard to the retweets of each group, a greater presence of messages sent to the English-speaking general public (42.6%) is highlighted (Figure 4). For example, two tweets with more impact in the period analyzed were: ‘The Earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth’ (June 18, 2015) and ‘The family is the greatest treasure of any country. Let us all work to protect and strengthen this, the cornerstone of society’ (January 16, 2015).

The following chart shows retweets, arranged in chronological order, obtained from each tweet in the three main languages, during the period 30/09/2014–28/09/2015:

While the number of retweets varies, you can see how different languages follow a relatively uniform pattern, thus revealing a synchrony of reactions. Some peaks are attributable to messages of special impact on a linguistic community (i.e. Pope’s visit to the USA). Although this conclusion would require further investigation, we can say that belonging to one or another linguistic community influences occasionally when interacting with the messages of Pope Francis. This table shows how the messages of Pope Francis do not get a uniform reaction; on the contrary, his followers appreciate them to a different extent as well as they varyingly spread these contents in their networks (Table 5).

![Figure 4. Percentages of tweets and retweets obtained on the different accounts sent to four main audiences.](image)

**Table 5. Classification of tweets and retweets according to the audience addressed.**

| Audience     | Pontifex Tweets | Pontifex Retweets | Pontifex_es Retweets | Pontifex_it Retweets |
|--------------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Catholics    | 25 10.7         | 174,905 8.4       | 177,045 9.8         | 25,649 9.9          |
| Christians   | 41 17.8         | 591,894 28.3      | 666,260 36.9        | 90,464 35.1         |
| Believers    | 74 31.9         | 432,289 20.7      | 409,136 22.6        | 56,740 22.0         |
| All publics  | 92 39.6         | 890,639 42.6      | 554,910 30.7        | 84,951 33.0         |
Followers of the English account retweet on average more than half of the Spanish and the Italian ones: of each 10,000 @Pontifex users, each tweet has been retweeted by 11.3 of them; on the contrary, in the Spanish account that value is 8.1 and in the Italian account, 3.6. These data show that, taking into account the huge number of both the retweets and the followers, global participation is generally limited.

5. Conclusions and limitations

As mentioned at the beginning of the article, the objective of this study was to analyze digital leadership and how the Holy Father has exercised it through the microblog Twitter tool. Before identifying some conclusions from the study, we will point out some limitations that, in our view, are worth considering.

Firstly, it should be noted that the achieved results refer to the year that has been under study (30/09/2014 to 28/09/2015), subject to several conditioning events, such as the papal trips to Sri Lanka and the Philippines, and the publication of the encyclical ‘Laudato Si’. Accordingly, it is inevitable that such events interfere with the ordinary communicative activity of the Holy Father. Indeed, the agenda of any public figure hardly keeps an ‘ordinary’ schedule, indifferent to elements that somehow can affect the result. Nevertheless, these events affect both the activity of the leader and the response of his followers (the highest rates of retweets coincide with the messages that the Pope issued during his trips as well as with some specific messages related to the document on the conservation of the Earth). This limitation, which slightly affects the overall result, suggests that special events are – also in the digital world – a chance for the leader and should deserve a separate study.

Secondly, another limitation that should be noted refers to the analyzed elements: along with both the tweets and the retweets, the survey of leadership on Twitter would require analyzing other indicators, such as the ‘favorites’ or the ‘comments’ marks that users make to the various contents published by @Pontifex. The ‘favorite’ clearly expresses an intention to save that content which is considered interesting. At the same time, the intention and the favorable or unfavorable position of the users appear clearly and actively in the ‘comments’ because they imply the creation of new content. The retweets, however, may be motivated by a certain degree of automation (i.e. the Pope is retweeted for being who he is), or by the will to cynically share a content that is not appreciated with one’s followers. Although the favorites and comments contain a greater richness of meaning, the amount of accumulated material for a year and the difficulty to carry out an analysis of the content is such that we have not done their qualitative analysis. It may be a subject for future research.

Despite these limitations, the results obtained can help understand the style of digital leadership. Christian life, Love of God and Creation have been the subjects covered, although it is surprising the variety of topics included in more than two hundred tweets analyzed. These issues are those with the highest incidence among his followers and they are proportionally the most retweeted. We have not noticed any radical difference between the English-speaking, Italian-speaking, Spanish-speaking followers because their reaction to many themes have been very similar. There is, therefore, complete harmony between the contents that the Holy Father proposes and the warm welcome provided by his audience.
In addition, it has been found that there are slight differences between the three linguistic communities depending on the intent of the message. As stated, after analyzing the contents published by the Holy Father, it is clear that, while @Pontifex carries through the five fundamental purposes of leadership, the educational purpose comes first (35.3% of tweets). Pope Francis, being the main reference figure of the Catholic Church, uses this network to provide his pastoral mission with continuity. English-speaking readers clearly expressed their support when the content was a call to action or when it designed plans for the future of the Church.

The Holy Father seems to be aware of the global nature of the tool used because most posted messages are relevant to the global public (39.6%); few messages are specifically addressed to those users who recognize him as their Pastor and moral reference: Christians and Catholics. Again, even among English-speaking users, most retweets include messages that address a global audience, while in the other languages they are equally distributed.

Although the results – whose special features have been mentioned – show a general proportionality among the contents proposed by the Holy Father and the followers’ liking, we cannot conclude that the monitoring is automatic and the supporters agree, retweeting ‘anything’. As shown in Figure 5 retweets vary substantially depending on the content or the opportunity (i.e. depletion of the followers during a continuous series of tweets on creation is perceived).

Of the various types of leadership we dealt with, the transforming or transcendental leadership is the one that best corresponds to the activity of the Holy Father on the microblog; he wants the best for his followers and arouses their interest in proportion. Leadership on Twitter essentially depends on the number of the followers and the impact on them brought about by the messages, and is measured in retweets. In both cases, Pope Francis is progressively increasing data inherited by the previous Pope in order to confirm his digital leadership.

Notes

1. SM Reputation Metrics, 2013. 'The Pope on Twitter. 365days, 213 tweets’. 213 tweets, sent out from the official account of the Pope, generated 4.16 million of retweets and 1.84 million of favorites. He was the third most retweeted world leader.
2. In the section ‘others’, the subjects are: Virtues (4), Joy, Sin, Holy Spirit, Lifestyle, Forgiveness, Work, Consumerism (3), Cross, Economics, Pope, Peace, Faith, Youth (2), Sick people, Slavery, Hope, Eucharist, Happiness, Future, Humility, Natives, Laymen, Progress, Synod, Unity, Vocation, Sacraments, Animals and Eternal Life (1).

3. Seen on http://twiplomacy.com/blog/twiplomacy-study-2015 on 10 November 2015. The survey data date back to March 2015. The analysis focuses exclusively on political leaders, but serves as a guide to study leadership. In this survey, the different accounts of the Holy Father are presented separately, and still occupy the 1st (@Pontifex_es), 2 (Pontifex), 5 (@Pontifex_pt) and 6 (@Pontifex_it). In Table 2, however, we have added the results because they are about the same person; the content of the tweets is the same, as well. It only changes the language. We think, therefore, that the level of global influence of a person is more realistic if these data are added.

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The author reports no conflicts of interest. The author alone is responsible for the content and writing of this article.

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