



Communicating in 140 Characters. How Journalists in Spain use Twitter

Comunicar en 140 caracteres. Cómo usan Twitter los comunicadores en España

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of Twitter appears to be changing information practices. Hence, a great deal of recent research is based on its popularity among communicators, reaching the conclusion that it serves to increase interactivity with readers. But to what degree is it true that it contributes to a type of journalism which is more open to the public? This research aims especially to clarify two main questions: what specific uses do journalists make of Twitter and to what extent does two-way interaction with the public take place through this medium? It is based on the quantitative analysis of a sample comprising almost 5 million tweets posted by 1,504 Spanish media communicators, perhaps the largest sample studied so far. The analysis shows the existence of a two-speed Twitter (with a minority of influential communicators and a majority who have little impact), which has negligible interaction with followers. With few exceptions, the communicators establish endogamous relationships on Twitter. They respond to, mention and retweet colleagues, failing to take advantage of the multidirectional potential offered by the platform. This research expands the empirical basis which can be used to consider and discuss the scope and limits of user participation in information events. Many authors have theorized on this subject, perhaps too enthusiastically and arguably from a somewhat utopian perspective.

RESUMEN

La irrupción de Twitter parece estar cambiando las prácticas informativas. De ahí que bastantes investigaciones recientes partan de su popularidad entre los comunicadores para concluir que sirve para aumentar la interactividad con los lectores. Pero ¿hasta qué punto es cierta su contribución a un periodismo más abierto a la ciudadanía? Este trabajo busca sobre todo contribuir a clarificar dos cuestiones principales: qué usos concretos dan a Twitter los periodistas y hasta qué punto se mantiene esa interacción –de ida y vuelta– con la ciudadanía gracias a este medio. Se basa en el análisis cuantitativo de una muestra de casi cinco millones de tuits correspondientes a 1.504 comunicadores de medios españoles; probablemente, la mayor muestra estudiada hasta ahora. El análisis constata la existencia de un Twitter a dos velocidades (con una minoría de comunicadores muy influyente y una mayoría con escaso impacto), pero una interacción con los seguidores prácticamente nula. Salvo excepciones, los comunicadores establecen en Twitter relaciones muy endogámicas, respondiendo, retuiteando y mencionando a colegas, desaprovechando así las potencialidades multidireccionales que ofrece esta plataforma. Esta investigación amplía la base empírica con la que pensar y discutir el alcance y los límites de la participación de los usuarios en los fenómenos informativos, que tantos autores han teorizado, quizá, con demasiado entusiasmo y, sin duda, con una perspectiva en cierta medida utópica.

KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Communication, journalism, social networks, digital communication, interactivity, Twitter, microblogging.
Comunicación, periodismo, redes sociales, comunicación digital, interactividad, Twitter, microblogging.



1. Introduction

Twitter was born in March 2006. It was a unique voice in the polysemic concert of social networks. From that point on, although it has never been able to compete with Facebook, many consider it to be far more influential. It is said that it does not win elections, but there is not a politician in the world who does not spend some time, energy and resources on the service, especially during campaigns (Conway, Kenski, & Wang, 2015), nor any «celebrity» worth their salt, some with over 50 million followers. Its power is attested by the fact that it has even been blocked by several governments, such as Egypt, Iran and Turkey.

Its unique form of interaction has been welcomed by communicators, who feel especially at home on Twitter: due to its format, similar to headlines or short news items (Carrera, Sainz-de-Baranda, Herrero, & Limón, 2012); due to ease of interaction with sources, protagonists and even readers (Posetti, 2009); due to the fact it is useful for detecting, storing, indexing and recovering trends and news (Martínez, 2014); due to the adult profile of its users, «more serious» than that of other networks and more interested in the news (Miller, 2009; González, Fanjul, & Cabezuelo, 2015); due to its speed and brevity, ideal for informing readers of breaking news and following interesting journalists (Hermida, 2010).

In fact, the media created powerful profiles with millions of followers, with the result that little by little Twitter changed the way in which we communicate: there is not a prime time television programme which does not display the «hashtag» Twitter users can use to interact with each other, with the programme or with the sponsors; every radio chat show receives listeners' opinions via short messages on Twitter; the @ symbol appears together with the byline on columns and articles (Farhi, 2013); each communication medium has an official Twitter account on which they permanently post messages; editorial departments create jobs which did not exist before to generate contents for Twitter and other networks and to monitor everything that goes on in them.

But Twitter also has its weaknesses. Many people question how much truth there is in its messages and if they are not merely transmitting unfounded rumours (Sutter, 2009). Some are of the opinion that looking to Twitter for significant information is like searching for medical advice in a world of quacks (Goodman, 2009), as one has to negotiate tons of rubbish among totally irrelevant tweets. Twitter's 140 character straitjacket is another important limitation together with the «timeline» structure itself: the actual effective-

ness of the tweets which are posted is not known, as it would seem that no-one goes back to read previous posts. The interface also lacks intuitiveness and many people abandon the service before they understand it. Some of the keywords, abbreviations and language used by expert Twitter users appear to be characteristic of a sect. Also, the presence of anonymous profiles who post offensive and threatening tweets drives users away. Even the continuity of service is worrying as it is not profitable and may be unviable; the company still does not know how to convert its millions of users into clients. There is also the challenge of promoting loyalty, another unresolved issue for the network: various research studies have concluded that 60% of people who open a Twitter account do not return to it in the following month.

Despite these weaknesses and a few disagreements, (Lee, 2015), Twitter and communicators, as we have mentioned, have mutual affection for each other. If we accept that the hidden agenda of the platform is not to compete with professional journalism, as some conspiracy theory lovers have ventured (Winer, 2012), it has to be admitted that current academic literature seems to agree that the benefits of Twitter for communication outweigh the threats. Twitter is one of the most powerful journalistic tools to appear in the last ten years, according to Alan Rusbridger, of «The Guardian» (Elola, 2010). Professor Orihuela (2011) is also of the opinion that Twitter is an «indispensable» tool for journalism and that communicators should be aware of conversations which affect the news, their brand, and their medium, as well as facilitating permanent contact with their sources, monitoring trends, revealing exclusives, publishing news and interacting with the audience. Some emphasize the compatibility of the service with an increasingly important type of «data journalism», in compiling, screening and observing what is going on (Lorenz, 2013), with the credibility afforded by numbers (Gillmor, 2012).

There is even a part of this literature which reflects on the skills which future communicators will have to develop in this new environment of «compulsive hyperconnection and global information overload» (Aguaded, 2014: 7). Some believe that the criteria used to check sources and information provided by prosumers will be the same as they have always been, but a significant increase in precaution will be necessary (Hernández, 2013). There is also speculation about the future of schools of journalism, concluding that they will be obliged to change their focus towards the creation of contents for all types of applications, including those for mobile devices, and to equip future

professionals with the skills required by a market which has been blown away by the speed of Twitter (Franco, 2008): how to write headlines, select contents correctly and adapt them to each platform (De-Aguilera, 2009).

Twitter, especially, is thought to offer an unbeatable capacity for interaction with the audience, generating conversations with users and conducting them intelligently (Carrera, Herrero, Limón, Sainz, & Ocaña, 2012). It is also particularly useful for confirming news with direct witnesses, contrasting perspectives, debating points of view, preparing future articles and producing stories through the very people who will receive the information (Soria, 2015; Watson, 2015).

But has Twitter really changed the practice of the profession to such an extent? Recent academic research has tried to explain the correlation.

2. Status of the issue

Over and above the large amount of research relating to how the public uses the information published on the network, a significant number of papers which directly examine the use of Twitter have been written by communication professionals. Most of this research confirms that communicators prefer to use Twitter rather than other platforms. In the United States, a study carried out by PR Week / PR Newswire (2010) among 1,300 professionals in the communication industry concluded that over 50% of professional journalists use Twitter as an investigative tool when writing news articles. According to this analysis, one out of every three journalists acknowledges having quoted a Twitter post in a news article they were writing.

A study carried out on «How Spanish Journalists Are Using Twitter» (Carrera, Sainz-de-Baranda, Herrero, & Limón, 2012) reached the same conclusion, confirming also that the network most used by journalists is Twitter (95% of the 50 journalists interviewed use it very frequently), not only to transmit their own news (82%), but also to transmit information from other sources and from the competition (67%). Twitter is the preferred medium due to its speed and variety, and it is also used as a means to turn something viral. This latter fact was confirmed by researchers

from ten Latin-American universities who analysed 5,010 messages from the communication media (García, Yezers'Ka, & al., 2011): the flow of information is greater on the microblogging platform, where the speed at which the news is spread and the possibility of contacting witnesses to events immediately is considered important. In this same vein, Martínez defended her doctoral thesis in 2014 on «The new media and journalism in social media» in which she concluded that, after interviewing 50 directors of

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Spanish media, Twitter was their preferred tool. The subsidiary company of PR Newswire in Brazil (2011) reached the same conclusion, establishing that it was also the preferred network for 73.4% of the almost 400 Brazilian journalists who were surveyed.

Coming back to the United States, in 2013 «The State of the News Media 2013» was published, an annual report on the state of journalism published by The Pew Research Centre's Project for Excellence in Journalism. According to this report, Twitter had consolidated its reputation in the U.S.A. as a place to which both readers and journalists turn in order to discover the latest news updates. More recent research has confirmed the same data: in 2014 Oriella published a survey of 550 journalists from 15 countries in which he underlined the increase in the number of Twitter accounts held by those surveyed.

The spirit of belonging to the media itself has also been the subject of investigation, such as the research carried out by the Chilean professors Alberto López-Hermida and Cecilia Claro (2011), as well as the relationship between information and opinion (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012).

Much research has focused on investigating the

interactivity afforded by this platform: in the field of radio, in 2012 Susana Herrera and José Luis Requejo published an interesting study on how Spanish radio stations use Twitter, concluding that they fail to exploit the potential which the service offers. However, this data is in paradoxical contrast to the majority of research, which concludes that interactivity is what communication professionals value most. Take, for example, the study «Who am I and who are you?» (Carrera, Herrero, Limón, Sainz, & Ocaña, 2012), in which 91.24% of those surveyed stated that they would retweet comments made by any user, or the

million messages. There is no evidence to date of any other research which has worked with such a large sample.

The newspapers which were included in the sample were, firstly, the eight Spanish daily newspapers with the largest readership according to the Spanish General Media Survey: «Marca», «El País», «As», «El Mundo», «La Vanguardia», «El Periódico», «Sport» and «El Mundo Deportivo». Also included were two of the most widely read national, not regional, dailies: «ABC» and «La Razón». To this were also added the two financial journals with the largest circulation:

«Expansión» and «Cinco Días», as well as the three most widely sold newspapers in Malaga, where the research was conducted: «SUR», «Málaga Hoy» and «La Opinión de Málaga». Finally, «20 Minutos», an online newspaper with over a million readers daily, was also included.

The information was encoded by means of a Microsoft for Apple Excel spreadsheet, interrelating over 166,000 cells of data. For the statistical analysis of the data, measures of central tendency (mode, mean and median), measures of dispersion (standard deviation and variance), tables (simple data distribution, frequency distribution, interval frequency distribution and percentage frequency distribution) and graphs (histogrammes, circular graphics, word clouds, frequency polygons, and frequency curves) were used.

The research analyzed the behaviour of 40 variables relating to the identity and the activity of the account, and to the text published in the press.

4. Analysis and results

4.1. Sex, length of time the account has been open and frequency

The research defined six baseline hypotheses. The first of these examined various general aspects of the profiles and it was affirmed that Spanish communicators who use Twitter were for the most part male, had held an account for over two years and posted at least three messages a day. The analysis of the profiles concluded that this hypothesis was only partly correct.

Regarding the use of Twitter, not all the communicators use it. The majority do, that is, 61% of the

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research on «What is going on? The 'twitterization' of the Columbian media» (Duque & Zúñiga, 2012), which highlights the use of Twitter as a place for debate with readers and where the news can be gone into in more depth. The conclusions reached by Noguera (2013) and Diezhandino (2012) seem to point in this same direction, confirming the self perception held by communicators that they have not lost contact with the public.

3. Material and methods

This research analysed the behaviour on Twitter of 1,504 communicators in Spain. The sample was selected at random from the written press: 16 newspapers were chosen and all regular contributors who had published an article in them were included. After three inspections on days chosen at random, with the provision that some Sundays be included, an initial figure of 1,560 communicators was reached, which, after successive eliminations in order to avoid duplications and possible errors, was reduced to 1,504 communicators, authors of 4,687,215 tweets, almost five

sample, over half of the group which was analyzed, but far fewer than would be expected in a medium which, judging by the aforementioned research, enjoys popularity with communicators. The newspapers in the sample which hold proportionally more accounts are «20 Minutos» (76.92%) and «As» (76.19%); those which had fewest, «La Opinión de Málaga» (46.88%) and «La Razón» (37.50%).

In relation to sex, the first piece of data is paradoxical and striking: without taking into consideration the use of Twitter, 73.17% of the sample, that is, the majority, are male. Out of 1,504 communicators, with or without a Twitter account, women represent only 26.83%. In other words, those who write in the printed press, the sole criterion for being included in the sample, are for the most part male. The paradox is that despite the fact that in the last few years the media has become the foremost defender of parity between the sexes, in their editorial departments, at any rate, it would seem that women are in the minority. None of the newspapers comes close to the figures given by the Active Population Survey (EPA), which calculates that women represent 46.15% of the total workforce in Spain.

However, in relation to the use of Twitter, if we look at relative values, that is, the number of Twitter accounts in relation to the number of persons of the same sex, women outnumber men, as 67.09% of women have a Twitter account compared to 61.37% of men. Although this contradicts the aforementioned hypothesis, nonetheless, the average number of tweets posted by the men in the sample since the account was opened (5,638 tweets) is greater than the average number posted by the women (3,800 tweets). This data is confirmed when we look at the average number of tweets per day: women, 4.11; men, 5.52. That is to say, although the women hold a larger number of active Twitter accounts, the men make slightly more use of the service: they are somewhat more active than the women. In this respect, the prediction of the hypothesis is true. This is also the case in relation to the length of time the account has been open: 68.81% of the accounts analyzed were opened between 2010 and 2011.

4.2. Sense of belonging

The second hypothesis of this research affirmed that communicators identify themselves on Twitter as journalists, indicating that they belong to the newspaper for which they work. Firstly, 89.77% of the accounts include a «description» or «bio», and 94.30% of these descriptions indicate that the holder's profes-

sion is related to the communication industry, as they define themselves specifically as a «journalist», «reporter», «columnist», «copywriter», etc. This figure is exceedingly high and undoubtedly reflects a strong sense of belonging to the profession, which makes them appear more trustworthy in the eyes of their followers.

In relation to references to the newspaper, noticeable differences appear in the sample: those who identify most with their publishing houses would appear to be the communicators from «Cinco Días» and «20 Minutos», who name their newspaper in over 90% of the descriptions of their accounts; those who identify least with their publishers are those from «La Razón» (40%) and «Sur» (53.33%).

4.3. Influence of the accounts

In the third hypothesis, it is affirmed that the communicators analyzed have a high degree of influence, and that this is expressed in the number of followers, the retweeting of their messages, list membership or having their messages marked as favourites.

In effect, the data shows that the communicators show influence scores which are above the average 40 points, as the average for the sample analyzed was 44.99. Although these almost 5 points may not seem enough to talk about «influential profiles», the truth is that 73.51% of the total number of accounts analyzed score well above 40, but the accounts which have little or no activity significantly lower the arithmetical average.

Furthermore, the «Klout» Score states that scores over 60 are reserved for a select group of «very influential» accounts, representing a mere 5% of Internet users; however, in the case of this sample, this percentage increases significantly as accounts with scores of over 60 make up 10.21% of the sample, in other words, double the percentage which would be present in any other group of users. Of all the accounts which were analyzed, the profiles with the highest Klout Score are those held by Risto Mejide, Elvira Lindo, Guillem Balagué, Enrique Dans and Mister Chip.

Another of the variables examined which has a direct repercussion on the influence of an account is the number of «followers». The average number of followers in the sample is 12,959 followers per account. The reality is a little lower, as the median is 991 followers, due to the fact that some accounts with a large number of followers artificially push up this average. In any case, the average number of followers is well above the average number for the typical

Twitter user, which is estimated at 61 followers. Mejide, for example, has more than two million followers; Jordi Évole, almost two million; not far behind is Alexis Martín Tamayo, Mister Chip.

The number of messages retweeted by other users is a further indicator of influence. Retweeting may be interpreted in many ways, but it always involves relative adhesion to the message which is resent. 23.51% of the posts in the sample were retweeted by others. This figure is extremely high, but it is insignificant if we compare it to the 93.84% of messages posted by Mister Chip which were retweeted by other users. Moreover, if we examine not the percentage of tweets which were retweeted by others, but the number of times they were retweeted, the figures shoot up astoundingly, reaching those of «celebrities»: Mister Chip, over a million times; Tomás Roncero and Mejide, over half a million times (note: after analyzing only the 3,200 tweets which Twitter allows the recovery of from each account).

Another variable relating to influence is the number of lists created by users which include the account in question. The average figure in the sample is 217.85 lists per account, a truly extraordinary figure. The two accounts in the sample which were included in the highest number of lists are those belonging to Évole and Ignacio Escolar, which were present in over 10,000 lists. The person with the highest rate of incidence «in lists per 1,000 followers» is Professor Dans, with almost 40 lists per 1,000 followers.

Finally, the fact that a tweet is marked as «favourite» by another user is also a factor which affects the influence a user has on others, as it is an indicator of the interest which his or her messages arouses. The data repeats itself: the sample average is 288 tweets marked as favourite. 92.3% of the messages posted by Mister Chip were marked as favourite. The analyzed tweets posted by Mejide were marked as favourite 178, 198 times. These are undoubtedly spectacular figures.

4.4. Mediatic communicators

The fourth hypothesis stated that the communicators with greatest influence on Twitter are those who combine their presence in the written press with presence in other forms of media, such as radio or television.

This research interrelated several variables in order to select the profiles in the sample with the greatest influence, such as those with the highest Klout Score, the largest number of followers and the most number of times their posts were retweeted. Once the 15 most influential accounts had been identified, it

was found that the hypothesis was confirmed without exception, as all of them conduct their professional activities not only in the written press but in different audiovisual media.

4.5. Interactivity

The fifth hypothesis dealt with one of the aspects with which the latest academic research has been most concerned: it affirmed that communicators use Twitter to interact with their sources, detect new stories to report, contrast information, talk to their readers and request their cooperation in compiling news articles. In other words, Twitter encourages interactivity.

In order to verify this hypothesis, it was important to know who the communicators were retweeting, who they were answering, which posts they retweeted or who they mentioned. Bearing in mind the size of the sample and its high output, this was an especially laborious task.

The first step was to identify which accounts the communicators in the sample retweeted. To do this, the study examined the ten accounts which were retweeted most by each and every one of the profiles in the sample, without exception, and selected those accounts which had been retweeted by at least two profiles from each newspaper. The subsequent preferences produced an astonishing and unexpected piece of data: 82% of the messages originated from accounts which were found to belong to the newspaper itself or to the same business group and less than 1% of these most retweeted accounts came from outside the profession.

The second variable which was examined were mentions. These are also a significant indicator of interactivity as their purpose is to inform the user who is mentioned that they are being talked about, to agree with something they said or to post a question or comment to them. We were therefore interested in finding out who the communicators in the sample mentioned. The same procedure was followed and once again a striking discovery was made: only 2.52% of these mentions referred to accounts belonging to individuals outside the profession.

Finally, the replies were analyzed, as they are also a valuable indicator of interactivity. We were interested in finding out who the communicators replied to, so the same procedure was followed. Once again, surprisingly, it was concluded that the majority were replies to colleagues, as only 3.68% of the replies were addressed to users unrelated to the profession.

Consequently, the analysis of the indicators of interactivity did not confirm the desired bidirectionality

of the messages and contradicted the assumptions which are made in a large part of the literature on the relationship between Twitter and Journalism.

4.6. The Press and Twitter

The sixth and final hypothesis stated that communicators use Twitter to comment on the information published in the press, enhancing it with new perspectives through links to diverse sources.

The analysis of the tweets, however, would appear to negate this hypothesis, as 70% of the links lead to the pages of the group itself or to the personal blogs of the communicators. There is neither much diversity nor much enhancement.

Nor would it appear that Twitter is used to enhance articles the communicators are writing as the research failed to find any tweet in which the communicators requested information relating to the topics on which they were working. Consequently, there was no evidence of the use of Twitter as a tool which contributes to generating news.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The quantitative analysis of the 40 variables included in this research provides an overall view of how Spanish communicators use Twitter, far beyond the simple self perception of previous qualitative research. The size of the sample, unprecedented to date, means that considerably significant conclusions may be drawn.

Firstly, it can be concluded that Spanish communicators use Twitter (61%), which is perhaps less than expected, especially if we take into account some of the earlier research which claims, as we have mentioned previously, that the platform has been adopted by 95% of these professionals. Bearing in mind that the majority of this research has concentrated on profiles of directors or on profiles of communicators who are specifically related to new technologies, it could be claimed that the use of Twitter by the vast majority of journalists is lower than expected.

What is clear is that the communicators have achieved a degree of influence on Twitter which is above average, especially those whose work combines the written press with audiovisual media. This data may lead us to believe that this influence is not a result

of their activity on the networks but of their presence in the traditional media. In any event, it is true that the sample as a whole brings to light averages of influence and presence on Twitter which are slightly higher than those of the average user of the platform.

Moreover, although this above average influence is apparent, there is evidence also of the existence of two «divisions» between the communicators, something like a «two speed Twitter». The continual references the research makes to the median as a statistical measure of central tendency are justified, given that in almost all the variables the average has been perceived as a misleading indicator. This is due to the existence

Although the new tool offers unquestionable attractions as it is fast, it detects trends and is a source of information, there is no indication that it has come to be an instrument of communication for the public, in which professionals and non professionals participate in creating news. The reality is this: with some exceptions, the interactivity afforded by Twitter is not being used to full advantage.

of a leading group which produces extreme statistics which distort reality, statistics with breathtaking figures, typical of celebrities, in contrast to a majority with statistics which were only slightly above the Twitter average.

This leading group, which represents only 5% of the sample, has turned out to be especially productive, as it produced 35% of the tweets which were published daily in the sample. Moreover, if we were to narrow the spectrum even more and reduce it to 1% of the sample, we would discover that this minority absorbs 52% of the total number of times the posts in the sample were retweeted, in other words, these accounts alone produced half of the retweeted messages in the sample.

The second group of communicators, which makes up 95% of the sample, produced much more modest figures. Nevertheless, although it does not reach the rock star statistics of the first group, it is above the average for Twitter users in important variables such as the Klout Score, number of followers,

number of daily tweets, tweets which have been marked as favourite, retweets, list membership, etc.

However, there is a common denominator between both the leading group and the crowd: both the former and the latter, both the most influential tweeters and the less influential, establish endogamous relationships: they respond to colleagues, retweet colleagues and mention colleagues. Not even the majority of the most influential accounts in the sample can be excluded from this affirmation, with the exception of

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Professor Dans and, in part, that of the Onda Cero collaborator, Mister Chip.

This affirmation allows us to conclude that for the majority of communicators Twitter is just another, rather unidirectional, traditional medium. Hence, the belief that its use has modified the paradigm of communication or its practices is a fallacy, or the expression of an aspiration, no matter how much the idea abounds in the academic literature on the subject and how much communicators themselves hold this self perception, as is evident in some of the aforementioned research. Much has been written on the participation of users in the information reporting process and the effects of this participation on communication models and, in general, our life as a society, as well as other similar and undoubtedly interesting and significant phenomena; but these reflections are not always based on sufficient empirical evidence and rather frequently respond to a perspective which could be called cyber-utopian.

On the contrary, according to the data produced by our research, it could be deduced that the recent adoption of the service has seemingly affected only the medium, the mantle, the dissemination of the messages, but not the origin or the destination of the information, and far less the processes whereby it is produced.

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to be an instrument of communication for the public, in which professionals and non professionals participate in creating news. The reality is this: with some exceptions, the interactivity afforded by Twitter is not being used to full advantage.

These affirmations, obviously, should not be generalized as the research also verified that some profiles show a high degree of interactivity, although these are a minority and not statistically significant. Nor should these conclusions question the use and benefits of the service, which has adjusted very well to the practices of the profession. But the data is conclusive.

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