Citizen activism and political developments in the transformation of the digital public sphere in Spain: From the "Pass it on!" SMS to *Podemos*

Activismo ciudadano y acontecimientos políticos en la transformación de la esfera pública digital en españa: del sms "¡pásalo!" a Podemos

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Abstract

This paper discusses digital communication, activism and political system in Spain from a critical-historical perspective. The results of combined empirical and analytical research indicate that a critical digital public sphere emerged in 2004 affecting the evolution of the political sphere to this day. Traditional parties had a slow and instrumental approach to the digital realm. Conversely, cyber-activism unfolded new options of political action, both in the short and long term, transforming the bipartisan system.

Resumen

El artículo aborda la comunicación digital, el activismo y el sistema político en España desde una perspectiva crítica-histórica. Los resultados de una investigación empírica y analítica indican que en 2004 surgió una esfera pública digital crítica que afectó la evolución de la esfera política hasta hoy. Los partidos tradicionales se acercaron al entorno digital de manera lenta e instrumental. En cambio, el ciberactivismo abrió nuevas opciones de acción política, a corto y largo plazo, transformando el sistema bipartidista.

Keywords

Cyber-activism, digital communication, elections; politics, social change, social movements.

Palabras clave

Ciberactivismo, comunicación digital, elecciones, política, cambio social, movimientos sociales,

1. Introduction[1]

The evolution of the digital public sphere (DPS) in Spain contributes to understand political developments in the country in the last decade. Since the re-establishment of democracy in 1978, Spain alternated centre-right and centre-left governments, similarly to other neighbour countries. The outburst of the financial crisis in 2008 and the response through austerity policies, along with the refugee crisis aggravated in 2015, gave prominence to the extreme right in many European countries: France (Front National), Great Britain (UKIP), Greece (Golden Dawn), Germany (PEGIDA), or Italy (Lega, that had governed together with the 5 Stars Movement until August 2019 when they ended the coalition). However, in Spain, only recently the far right party VOX obtained parliamentary representation: first in the regional parliament in Andalusia in December 2018, and then in the national Congress in April 2019 with around 10% of votes in both cases. This event is the last in the context of the political developments of Spanish politics since the beginning of the 21st century. In fact, in 2014, the traditional Spanish two-party system of Partido Popular [People's Party] (PP) and Partido Socialista Obrero Español [Spanish Socialist Workers' Party] (PSOE) changed to a rainbow image in the European Elections with the appearance of new parties such as the leftist Podemos [We can] or the more centrist Ciudadanos [Citizens]. In 2015-2016, two consecutive General Elections (GE) were held given the absence of an absolute majority or consensus to build a coalition government the first time. Since then, these two new parties renewed the political agenda and governed important regional and local governments in coalition. They also conditioned national politics. First Ciudadanos supported a centre-right government of Mariano Rajoy (PP) in 2016. Two years later, Podemos with PSOE and the nationalist forces of Cataluña and the Basque Country voted a no-confidence motion that led to a socialist government of Pedro Sánchez, who has been acting President of the Government after the results of GE in April 2019.

This article discusses the evolution of this moving political public sphere in Spain with a midterm historical perspective that puts it into dialogue with the evolution of social movements in the same context, avoiding the limitations of event-centred studies, and supported by empirical research that traces certain digital activist processes on the origin and evolution of present-day political public sphere. We argue that such a profound evolution was not triggered by political parties but by grassroots politics, social movements and citizens' initiatives carried out both online and offline. Thus, we focus our discussion on the political action in the digital realm of both formal parties and citizens around the electoral periods of the last fifteen years, starting from the first GE in the new century. We review cyber-campaigns of 2004, 2008 and 2011 (Lobera & Sampedro, 2018; Sampedro, 2005, 2011; Sampedro et al., 2012; Sampedro & Martínez-Avidad, 2018), still set in the bipartisan framework. Then we relate the highlights to the outcomes of the following elections (2015 and 2016) and discuss our results from recent developments linked to the 2019 (April) GE: A new government that maintains a social focus (starting with social and gender equality perspective, and a more humanitarian response to refugees) within a European context that is turning more conservative. At the same time, the current political map indicates a double challenge that is leading to the fourth GE in four years: the difficulties to reach agreements beyond the traditional bipartisan system, and the failure of implementing a coalition government with PSOE and Podemos. In this context, our paper provides a longitudinal and contextualized overview, advancing analytical and theoretical conclusions that might be relevant for similar studies.

2. ICTs, digital activism and politics

The potential of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to mobilize citizens and articulate political action has received significant attention from scholars, particularly in the last decade (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Cammaerts, 2012; Castells, 2012; Della Porta, 2011; Kavada, 2016). Authors typically adopt a deterministic approach, either cyberoptimistic or cyberpessimistic, towards the political role of ICTs (Kidd & McIntosh, 2016), while we align with critical perspectives that understand ICTs as

techno-social systems that include power structures and options of agency, community and cooperation (Fuchs, 2017). This implies recognising perils of digital capitalism (Barassi, 2015), or far right and populism (Kavada, 2018; Waisbord, 2017). However, citizens are more than Internet users and can also appropriate the affordances and infuse new political significance to digitally enable social change (Earl & Kimport, 2011). Mediactive (Gillmore, 2010) and recursive (Kelty, 2008) publics can build a networked fourth power (Benkler, 2006; Sampedro, 2014), where hybrid participation (Treré, 2018) builds a DPS based on an active and digital citizenship (Coleman, 2013).

A true critical perspective considers contextual aspects and whether digital communication enhances dialogue or regulates opinion. According to Hübner (2016), political parties use social media with top-down institutional approaches, combined with controlled bottom-up techniques to predict the outcome of target groups. Political economy also matters (Poell, 2014). The most widespread platforms (Facebook and Twitter) belong to private corporations that monetize content circulation, and collude with political actors and administrations that tend to adopt an advertisement logic.

We will examine the possibilities of hybrid communicative forms, merging online and offline, as well as formal and informal politics (Chadwick, Dennis & Smith, 2016). Regarding Spain, scholarly attention has recently focused on Podemos as a pristine case of political party arising from social mobilizations (Romanos & Sádaba, 2016; Sola & Rendueles, 2017) and adopting activist strategies in the media sphere to gain visibility and mobilise support (Casero-Ripollés, Feenstra and Tormey, 2016: Sampedro, 2015; Toret, 2015).

In short, reciprocal dynamics between citizens' digital activities, social mobilizations and partisan communication strategies provide a more nuanced view on online political participation, always considered in relation to offline politics (Fenton, 2016; Robles, DeMarco & Antino, 2013).

3. Methodology

Empirical data were gathered on the cyber-campaigns of 2004, 2008 and 2011 GEs through surveys and focus groups with young voters and participant observation of the digital and political communication strategies

of the main political parties[2]. The main goal was to carry out in–depth analysis of the digital transformations of the political public sphere during such period using the following techniques:

We triangulated several methodologies and its existing synergies in order to ground, both quantitative and qualitative, a holistic and historical–diachronic view. We applied opinion polls to detect techno–political tools and practices, the fiows and content among the four main actors of political communication: publics, social activists, information professionals, and parties/candidacies. The content analysis of websites of electoral candidacies and social organisations reveals quantitative features of political discourse, social activists and journalists. Discourse analysis reveals the deep structure of messages and formats, along with its pragmatic dimension. The discussion groups allowed to identify the social implementation and re-signification of discourse regarding technologies and fiows of electoral and social campaigns in different groups of users, activists and voters.

2004 GE

■ Discussion groups with university students (18–22 years old) from the outskirts of Madrid. Dates: March 10th (the day before the terrorist attacks) and again on March 18th, after the elections. Students who could have been killed and voted for the first time were the participants. Composition: 6 voted PP; 7 PSOE; 7 IU–IV (Izquierda Unida–Izquierda Verde [United Left–Green Left]); 7 abstainers. Total of 27 youngsters, 63% women and 37% men.

■ Discussion group with left wing activists with a broad background in previous protests. Composition: 5 members (two women and three men, two below 40 years old and three students under 26). We can publish now that two of the participants in the discussion group were J. C. Monedero and Pablo Iglesias, who moved from "making the multitudes visible in the streets" (literal testimony of P. Iglesias) to

2   Only part of this empirical evidence is available in previous publications in Spanish, being the main data set presented in Sampedro (2005, 2008, 2011).

building their own symbolic capital through media projects and the political party, Podemos.

■ Real-time participant observation by the three main national political parties through their websites: PSOE (social democrats), IU (post-communists) and PP. We sent messages to their contact channels to analyse direct communication with the party or the candidate (through email) and collective deliberation (in forums). After a preliminary observation, only the email of the PSOE candidate and the PP forums were still active. Therefore, we interchanged messages in these channels and analysed a strategic sample.

2008 GE

■ Empirical analysis of online (pre)campaign with 2 polls among Internet users and 4 discussion groups defined by age, vote, and type of activism. We addressed: a) Citizens: with 2 national polls and 6 discussion groups (2 for each dimension); b) Candidates: content and discourse analysis of the websites of all parties in Parliament and the candidates of PP and PSOE; c) Journalists/Citizens: content and discourse analysis of the 16 most visited blogs, including "progressive" and "liberal" networks, mainstream and digital media, and non-professional citizens.

2011 GE

■ 6 discussion groups held between October 13 and December 5, 2011:

– GR1: University students who participated in online networks of left political or community activity (social democracy, Christian humanism...). Place: Madrid. Age: 18-25. Gender: 4 women, 4 men.

– GR2: Youngsters with secondary education (Professional Training) who participated in networks of left political or community activity

(social democracy, Christian humanism...). Madrid. Age: 18–25. Gender: 4 women, 4 men.

- GR3: University students who participated in online networks of political right, centre–right, Christian democracy, etc. Place: Madrid. Age: 18–25. Gender: 4 women, 4 men.

- GR4: University students with ideological position 5, 6, 7, and 8 on the left–right scale, and 2, 3, and 4 on the nationalism–centralism scale. Place: Barcelona. Age: 22–30. Gender: 5 men, 3 women.

- GR5: Young employees with low wages and ideological position 2, 3, and 4 in the left–right scale, and 2, 3, and 4 on the nationalism–centralism scale. Place: Barcelona. Age: 25–35. Gender: 5 men, 3 women.

- GR6: Young employees, 4 with secondary education (Professional Training) and 4 with higher education. Ideological position: 2, 3, and 4 on the left–right scale, and 2, 3, and 4 on the nationalism–centralism scale. Place: Bilbao. Age: 25–35. Gender: 5 men, 3 women.

Hereafter we present the results structured around the citizens' digital activism and the parties' digital strategies. In the discussion section, we compare and interpret them with the 2015 and 2016 GE through mixed methods that combine content, discourse and network analysis of the parties' electoral websites, cyber-campaigns and blogs of alternative media, as well as a critical analysis from the latest political and communicative developments.

4. Citizens' digital activism

4.1. 2004: Emerging online multitudes with the 13-M

On March 11th, 2004 (11–M), four days before the GE, an Al-Qaeda attack in Madrid killed 191 people and injuv njred around 2,000 more. The attack was linked to Spain's involvement in the Iraq war, supported by the PP government who had dismissed massive peace protests in 2003. The Government and the

mainstream media defended that the terrorist attack had been perpetrated by ETA (the Basque Country terrorist group), while main international media considered it an Al-Qaeda action (as it was finally confirmed).

Official disinformation and subsequent citizens' distrust towards institutional sources re-focused the electoral campaign. On March 12th, 2004, protests to elicit the truth were convened for the next day (13-M) through the famous ¡Pásalo! [Pass it on!] SMS: "Aznar gets away with it? They call it refiection day and Urdaci is working? Today 13M, at 18. PP headquarters, Genova Street 13. Without parties. Silence for the truth. Pass it on!"[3].

This was a landmark in Spanish social mobilizations. It signified an act of civil disobedience: although illegal (demonstrations are not allowed on refiection day), it resulted from a necessary (and peaceful) reaction to a networked contrasted political fallacy. For the 13-M (similar to what happened later with the 15-M), no mainstream media explicitly supported the mobilization. When it started outside the PP headquarters, only few TV channels offered live coverage (Catalan TV3 and the cable CNN+, geographically and socially limited). All national televisions avoided or narrowed the coverage. Meanwhile, Euronews, BBC News and CNN International, among other foreign media, were broadcasting live.

To counter information control, mobilized publics used alternative resources: foreign media, trust networks of personal ties (friends, family), activated offline and/or online. Citizens reinforced their autonomy through the Internet and SMS, which allowed them to discuss and decide their vote. A networked digital public was able to a) collect information; b) check data; c) assess information; d) set an opinion; e) spread/socialise voting decisions (widening the scope of deliberation and news exchange); and f) mobilise. The route a)-b) occurred in the personal space; c)-d) in the interpersonal/private; and e)-f) in the public digital and urban context.

Internet forums, weblogs and, to a lesser extent, alternative media and counter-information websites supported the more active publics to clarify contradictory news and partisan interests regarding the terrorist

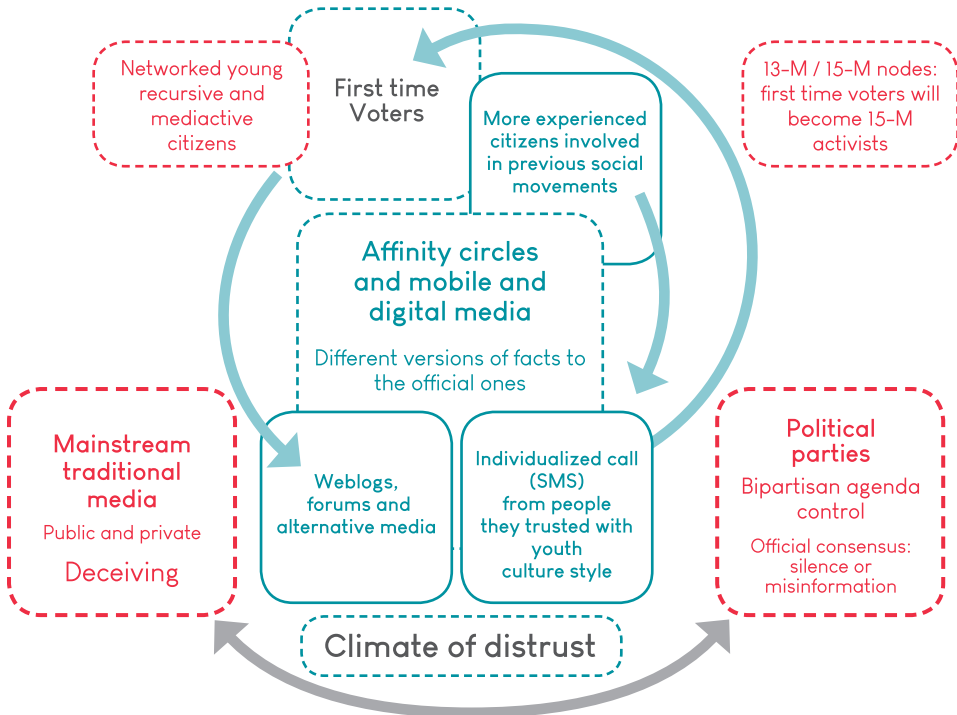---

3   Authors' translation of the original message in Spanish. Aznar was the PP president of the Government at that time and Urdaci was a journalist of TVE (Spanish Public Television) who had been criticised for overtly endorsing the PP in the national news programme. The reflection day is the day before the elections and, according to the Spanish electoral system, campaigning is forbidden.

attacks, to discuss vote decisions and organise protests. Citizens used ICTs to fracture the mainstream media blackout and facilitate the understanding and mobilisation processes, becoming an operational-organizational tool that accompanied citizens from despair to mobilisation.

13-M protests were not controlled by any institutional structure and participants showed no clear party membership, yet they expressed a need of representation for a critical discourse that they could not find in any party at that time. Alongside the activist use of ICTs, another key aspect in the 13-M was the backbone role played by veteran activists who were able to engage with the new generations. For instance, the two activists who co-authored the SMS triggering the 13-M would later on become leaders of Podemos (J. C. Monedero) and of the Historical Memory movement (E. Silva). They both questioned the 'induced amnesia' of the Transition period (after the death of the dictator Franco in 1975) and, although they were not members of any political party, they actively participated in leftists grassroots networks. Veteran activists framed themselves under the anti-globalization movement and international solidarity networks (foreign debt relief, Zapatistas, Brazil's Landless, Argentinian piqueteros [picketers] and the Social Forums) to domestic mobilizations (students' protests against the Education Law in 2001, Nunca Mais [Never Again] in 2002 after an oil leak in Galicia, and the anti-war in 2003). A core circle of social activists in Madrid, was the backbone that activated and disseminated the call of the 13-M: their previous experience and contacts were essential to spread information through a positive cascade effect of networking that reached out and engaged more citizens.

The 2004 electoral call and an emerging DPS provided a political opportunity structure with the 13-M questioning the parallelism between politics and the information system. A 'youth vote' engaged in online and offline mobilizations, aside from parties' and media endorsement, to reclaim the right to vote knowing the authorship of the terrorist attack and to protest against the attempt of informative fraud. They punished the PP Government for the mishandling of the 11-M attacks and they denounced how the few media that covered the protests live depicted them in a negative and alarmist way. The 2004 GE resulted into a victory for the PSOE, that appointed Zapatero as President of the Government, and the elections revealed the evolution of young cohorts' vote behind present-day electoral situation in Spain.

FIGURE 1. Actors and factors for emerging digital activist multitudes the 13-M

Networked young recursive and mediactive citizens

First time Voters

More experienced citizens involved in previous social movements

13-M / 15-M nodes: first time voters will become 15-M activists

Affinity circles and mobile and digital media

Different versions of facts to the official ones

Mainstream traditional media

Public and private

Deceiving

Weblogs, forums and alternative media

Individualized call (SMS) from people they trusted with youth culture style

Political parties

Bipartisan agenda control

Official consensus: silence or misinformation

Climate of distrust

Source: own elaboration

4.2. 2008: Bureaucratic and conservative turn of techno-politics

Between the 2004 and 2008 GEs, a conservative cycle of mobilisations unfolded. By triangulating street mobilizations, far-right digital media and right-wing traditional media, a conservative wave of activism emerged against the 2004 socialist Government of Zapatero. PP supporters kept alive doubts concerning the authorship of the 11-M attacks (and suspicion of an illegitimate electoral benefit for PSOE). Conservatives also obstructed ceasefire negotiations with ETA and countered some progressive proposals on education and social issues (homosexual marriage or abortion) implemented

by the Socialist Government. Mainstream media dedicated more attention to these campaigns compared to, for example, social movements (heirs of the 13-M) that struggled for affordable housing (a core demand of the future 15-M). Journalists started to develop standard mechanisms for measuring attendance at demonstrations when convened by PP, despite previous mobilisations being more crowded.

In the 2008 GE, young activists studied in focus groups perceived the Internet as part of their world, not a world apart, and they assigned ICTs a pro-democratic and revitalising effect. However, they detected that techno-politics was shaped more by partisan bureaucracies than by voters and, thus, felt that they were playing a subordinated role. In that period, digital politics was characterised by three main features. First, a low use of online resources, due to imbalances between electoral most active Internet users (who had great electoral interest and were intensive cyber-campaigners) and partisan platforms with very low interactive interfaces. Second, the classic profiles of social activism and electoral participation experienced radical changes and unexpected continuities: Intensive use of the Internet blurred generational and ideological differences between cyber-activists of social campaigns and partisan cyber-volunteers. Third, only a minor sector of the population (10% of voters) used the Internet to get information or participated in the cyber-campaign; but they displayed a very intense and wide use of activist tools and platforms.

In this setting, both PP and PSOE gained more seats in Parliament after the 2008 GE. The final coalition numbers favoured for few seats a government of centre-left headed by Zapatero for the second time.

4.3. 2011: The disruption of the 15-M's Indignados

After the 2008 GE, the burst of the real-estate bubble collapsed the financial system and Spain was suddenly affected by high rates of personal debt and unemployment. The social and economic crisis dominated the public debate and, on May 15 of 2011 (15-M), citizens' outrage occupied squares and initiated the Indignados movement with a more massive and cross-sectional profile than previous mobilizations (Sampedro & Lobera, 2014).

The digital empowerment achieved in 2004 was embodied by a cross-ideological sector of young citizens with key features in the 2011

GE. First, there was a widespread use and political appreciation of the DPS. Young voters mainly consumed mainstream media, but also gained further information online (Facebook, Twitter, blogs and forums, and to a lesser extent candidates' websites). They also considered ICTs as excellent tools to expand deliberative democracy in the long term. Second, positive views matched a general awareness about the possible limitations of digital politics. Some concerns regarded immediacy (implying unverifiable sources and facts) and anonymity (considered both a virtue –more freedom– and a problem –irresponsibility), and others to control issues and engagement. Citizens did not consider to have much power to develop Internet democratic potential against governments exerting censorship and manipulation. Moreover, there was scepticism about cyber-activists' involvement, but also the realization that the most politically active voters merged both online and offline activities.

Overall, ICTs were mainly perceived as tools for movements' mobilisation and organisation, helping to coordinate online-offline collective action and representing the gateway of political participation outside traditional parties. In 2011 GE, voters punished the ruling PSOE for its management of the crisis and the PP won both regional and general elections. Nevertheless, the young generation of Indignados created a political fissure and demanded a change in the model of democracy beyond a parties' alternation.

5. Parties' digital strategies

5.1. 2004: Underestimated tool

ICTs were not a priority for political campaigning in 2004, but just a residual tool. Parties used the Internet scarcely, inconsistently and sometimes even dishonestly: They adopted an instrumental approach through digital propaganda and disinformation (Sampedro, 2008).

Izquierda Unida [United Left], despite being the party with the lowest budget, did not campaign online. This way an opportunity to contact their constituency and overcome the mainstream media blackout was missed. Instead, the two main parties (PP and PSOE) assigned resources and teams for online campaigns. However, it was more an image strategy than a

conviction. Both parties used e-mail to pretend direct contact with voters, but they did not seem to realise the disappointment generated by their false promise of answering or the limited interactions. PSOE sent automatic replies or manifestos replicated from the Campaign Manual and PP tried to make this tool profitable with an automatic reply for subscribing to their newsletter and joining the party. Applying a promotional approach to ITCs, they offered the most classical participation options: one-way messages and conceiving citizens as propaganda receivers and campaign funders.

PSOE did not open any active online forums, whilst PP used them to overcome accusations of social isolation when governing. Conservatives displayed active discussion forums (already active before the campaign) to exchange opinions, among citizens, with and within the party. However, the most debated topics were the bulk of the partisan electoral agenda, mainly the attribution of the 11-M attacks to ETA (which they maintained as a strategic post-electoral tactic, despite evidence and court verdicts). Online discussants (similarly to guests of TV talk shows) tended to radicalise and repeated the party arguments. Lack of accountability granted by anonymity was evident in both the participants and the forum managers, who respectively gave no support to their opinions and censored critical interventions. Anonymous communication also favoured extremism and the resulting factionalism of debates.

In sum, the political parties underestimated the DPS in 2004 campaign and replicated traditional strategies online.

5.2. 2008: Instrumental hierarchy

The 2008 GE evidenced a clear dissatisfaction among Internet users with the non-interactive candidates and bloggers. This imbalance between techno-political 'demand and supply' was evidenced by user's high expectations created by cyber-democratic rhetoric and the limitations found in digital electoral platforms: Both political parties and mainstream digital journalism operated with outdated and short-term routines linked to obsolete professional and business models (Sampedro, 2011).

The most active Internet users blamed the official cyber-campaign for being instrumental: Dependency on conventional media (as amplifiers

of official messages) and lack of any contact or participation venues. This reductionist approach of electoral communication affected also format and timing. Electoral webs and blogs created by the traditional media were closed after the elections. Conversely, blogs maintained by activists or partisan supporters remained active, showing the difference between professionalised electoral information and citizens online action.

The political-informative system had entered the Internet without transforming the traditional communicative approach. Despite the difficulty of political parties to attract first-time voters and the challenge of media to renew their audience, they both provided scarce space to the participation of electoral Internet users. Electoral candidates used digital tools that prioritised transmission over collaborative content elaboration. They applied an advertising, hierarchic and one-way communicative model that distorted the possibilities of the Internet and manipulated cyber-activists, including the loyal cyber-volunteers of the two main political parties (PP and PSOE). Despite differences, parties' cyber-volunteers and social movements' cyber-activists shared knowledge on the use of the Internet and, therefore, they criticised the partisan bureaucracy and bipolar confrontation manifested by the two main organisations.

Cyber-electoral strategies of formal parties were virtual and deceiving. Virtual because the different screens of the campaign (by then, either computer or TV) reflected each other generating a pseudo-reality with no guarantee of accuracy. Digital campaigns were also deceiving because the cyber-volunteers of PP and PSOE denounced a clear intention of manipulation. Both political parties took advantage of the negative side of the anonymity of cyber-identities (unaccountability) and inserted cyber-volunteers in a system to manufacture and express public opinion that cut back and falsified the democratizing potential of the Internet. Cyber-volunteers denounced that both parties asked them to: a) follow specific instructions instead of internal knowledge of the campaign; and b) manipulate online surveys on the popularity of the candidates (for instance by forging their identities to simulate genuine citizen interventions). Despite their wish to connect society with the campaign, partisan cyber-volunteers felt like mere assistants of the hired staff. In fact, after the elections, parties cut all ties.

5.3_ 2011: Propaganda approach

In 2011 GE, formal parties intensified the use of ICTs, particularly social media networks. However, campaign strategists did not develop their participatory potential and showed no real intentions to open digital participation (for instance, by blocking comments on YouTube). Parties showed a reluctance for unrestricted immediacy and spontaneity that may have unveiled candidates or programs' deficiencies. Partisan techno-politics neither fostered participation among young voters.

2011 GE was characterised by a blooming DPS and the 15-M environment, while political parties curtailed the potential of the digital militancy with excessive control, and approaches of subordination to their cyber-volunteers (according to the testimonies gathered). This trend is relevant also in the subsequent political events in Spain.

6. Discussion

The review of the Spanish DPS from 2004 to this day contributes to explain part of the trends in recent political transformations in the country. Most of the political developments rely on increasingly digitally connected citizens growing from a significant activist pathway with a strong social focus and the role of hybrid media interactions for political engagement (Loader, Vromen & Xenos, 2014; Treré, 2018; Yamamoto, Kushin & Dalisay, 2015).

In the 13-M, mobilized citizens leveraged ICTs to foster social change with a techno-political approach that later was leveraged in the 15-M (Candón Mena, Montero Sánchez & Calle Collado, 2018; Toret & Calleja-López, 2014). Reluctant parties adopted ICTs slower, with an instrumental approach and the partisan agenda setting as their main electoral objective. This trend continued in the recent GEs as parties repeatedly failed to take advantage of the potential of social media to dialogue with citizens (Alonso-Muñoz et al., 2016) and kept parties in the background of the DPS compared to citizens' activism.

In 2004, after the 11-M terrorist attacks, a core trigger of 13-M mobilisation was citizens' distrust in the government and the media, which crystallised in an emerging critical DPS (Sampedro & Martínez-Avidad, 2018). Mainstream political and communicative actors displayed

'prudent lies' (Kuran, 1997), or fake news, that were overcome by citizens. SMS mobilizations undermined the central public sphere, while peripheral public spheres –complementary or even opposed to conventional media– proliferated and later consolidated around 15-M. These (mainly) digital spheres proved to be plural, less hierarchical and multi-directional. They connected communicative spaces and digitally active actors that ended up with the monopoly of mainstream media on a global scale (Boix, 2002). The origin was a direct popular deliberation (Page, 1996) made possible by ICTs in the night of the mobile phones (Francescutti et al., 2005) independently from professionals of communication.

The 13-M affected the electoral turnout, showing to be a digitally based proto-mobilization as effective as it was disorganized. However, it was a collective learning process that evolved into cyber-multitudes in 2011 with the 15-M expressing a cross-sectional and widespread dissent (Sampedro & Lobera, 2014) around some key social issues, particularly the political-financial crisis (Monterde et al., 2015), institutional corruption, and housing emergency (Romanos, 2013). The internal plurality was a key feature of both 13-M and 15-M: heterogeneous collective mobilizations of previously disengaged individuals, affinity groups, veteran activists and social organisations that did not lose their identities when coming together. Common citizens (non-activists, but outraged) innovated the repertoires of contention, displaying symbolic and nonviolent ways to question the limits of representative democracy. 15-M opened a deliberative period without specific aims or deadlines, voicing a new discourse that connected the social with the political (Nos-Aldás et al., 2012) that was followed by anti-austerity protests on healthcare and education (Iglesias-Onofrio, Rodrigo-Cano & Benítez-Eyzaguirre, 2018).

The evolution of citizens' relationship with the central media-political sphere finally altered the party system (Peña-López et al., 2014). Arising from a constellation of interdependent factors, present-day politics generated particular electoral scenarios in Spain. In the 2015-2016 GEs, the new parties Podemos and Ciudadanos were third and fourth in votes. In 2015, grassroots politics also succeeded at the local level with hybrid forms of electoral engagement and successful alliances to run city councils in Madrid and Barcelona, among others (Sánchez-Duarte, 2016).

7. Conclusions

The social and communicative processes discussed here are the roots of a transformed political and media scenario. New parties met the proliferation of new digital media with alternative and progressive focus (López-Ferrández, 2018). This new environment has been particularly relevant in the post 2015-2016 GEs context. Along 2016 and 2017, Spanish socio-political context was characterized by two events that blocked social discourse. Firstly, Ciudadanos supported the PP to form Government with centre-right policies and little attention to welfare. Secondly, the debate about independence in Catalonia monopolised the political-media agenda. Paradoxically, the potential menace of the DPS for established politics was shown when the pro-referendum digital platforms were cut off in October 1st 2017 to impede Catalonia self-determination.

Nevertheless, the DPS is not static and it constantly evolves in relation to its context (Fenton, 2016). With this regard, 2018 has brought a new wave of citizen action, particularly led by feminist and pensioners' activism (Farné, 2018). The activist pathway of enduring struggles and critical fissures –such as the PP judicial condemnation for structural corruption– prompted the no-confidence motion in June 2018 that appointed to a new socialist Government. This would not have been possible without the precedent of the Indignados, who demanded transparency as a priority, and previous digitally based mobilizations that paved the way.

Enduring citizen activism stirred the country to a direction different from other European contexts where far right and xenophobic parties gained stronger and faster citizens' support than in Spain (Acha Ugarte, 2018; Sampedro & Mosca, 2018). It is true, though, that these results shed light to a parallel development on how between the 2004 and 2008 GEs a conservative cycle of mobilisations unfolded. By triangulating street mobilizations, far-right digital media and right-wing traditional media, a conservative wave of activism emerged against the 2004 socialist Government of Zapatero. Similarly, it seems that after the socialist government of Sánchez in June 2018, the right-wing parties have reactivated a conservative cycle of cyber-activism, particularly led by the far-right party VOX, which was already particularly active in relation to the political climate of the independentism

process claim in Catalonia. A future line of research on the dialogue between techno-politics and democracy should look at this case-study and how the Spanish political arena is pointing to a turn into a different direction. In fact, the PP and Ciudadanos are open to pact with VOX (as seen in the Andalusian Government), whereas countries such as France or Germany have explored all options to avoid extreme right to govern. Further research is also needed in order to analyse the political communication strategies by VOX in the 2019 two GE and possibly trace similarities with other right-wing populist campaigns in other countries such as the case of Trump, Brexit and others (Bonikowski, 2017; Lacatus, 2019).

In theoretical terms, the Spanish case shows a current trend in the DPS of other countries. For instance, the ongoing bureaucratisation-institutionalisation of the DPS that has increasingly been monetised and commercialised. Consequently, it faces the threat of being co-opted by the corporate concentration and colonised by marketing based on Big Data. The distributed techno-politics, which characterised the first social movements and new parties with a digital basis, is now competing with centralised techno-political strategies of traditional parties, which can rely on more resources, technical staff and editorial-partisan connections that increase the impact of their campaigns in traditional media, and, especially, in television.

8. Bibliography

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