# The Slow Media Activism of the Spanish Pensioners' Movement: Imaginaries, Ecologies, and Practices

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Elderly activism has received marginal attention in communication and social movement studies. However, the pensioners have been at the forefront of one of the most stable social uprisings in Spain since its outburst in January 2018. From the perspective of media imaginaries, practices, and ecologies, this article analyzes the communicational dimension of the so-called Marea Pensionista movement, addressing different aspects of its hybrid mediated and nonmediated communication forms. Methodology relies on in-depth interviews to the communication leaders of its most representative organizational platforms and on an analysis of contents posted on its social networks. The pensioners' communication imaginaries show a low degree of systematization, while their media practices fluctuate from the ordinary to the strategic. They combine both classical repertoires and learning from recent techno-political movements. Within a sort of slow media activism, their pragmatic and demystified approach to ICT leads them to conceive communication in the long term, aiming to attract new supporters and reinforce internal emotional ties.

*Keywords: social movements, pensioners, digital media, media activism, age, slow*

"On Monday, January 15 at noon, meeting at the town hall for a 0.25%"—through this WhatsApp message, Bilbao's pensioners were called to mobilize against the loss of purchasing power in pensions after an annual increment freeze announced by the government (Redacción El Salto, 2018). In February 2018, protests spread all over Spain, shaping a social movement that has so far attracted crowds in the main Spanish capitals and permanently in the province of Vizcaya/Bizkaia (Basque Country). Like other recent

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movements, its success is partly connected to the use of media and information and communications technology (ICT), which became essential tools to organize the protests and gain influence in the political agenda.

Elderly activists do not live on the fringes, but have already appropriated a wide range of media technologies. Their media repertoires comprise a set of instruments, including older and newer media, online and offline modes, and a continuum ranging from independent and radical platforms to consolidated and still powerful mainstream media (Treré & Mattoni, 2016). Adopting "hybrid" formats (Treré, 2019), these tools have been used in both the "visible" and the "latent" stages of the movement (Melucci, 1994).

Nevertheless, the pensioners' mobilizations have received little attention in the fields of media research (Harrington, Bielby, & Bardo, 2014), social movement studies (Fillieule, 2013), and their intersection (Obregón & Tufte, 2017), especially when compared with the anti/alter-globalization uprising at the dawn of the 21st century, anti-austerity protests since 2010, and other contentious and youngsters' movements (Gerbaudo, 2016). This oversight is partly related to two factors that potentially introduce myths in media research. On the one hand, seniors are socially stereotyped as a marginal, excluded, and at risk of poverty, constituting a group that is not very active, but conservative in comparison with youngsters (Fillieule, 2013; Levy, 2017; Vincent, Patterson, & Wale, 2017). However, recent research has demonstrated that the participation decline among older people is related to deteriorating functional capacities rather than biological age (Amezcua-Aguilar & Sotomayor-Morales, 2021; Melo & Stockemer, 2014). On the other hand, media studies tend to treat age "as little more than a demographic variable," overlooking the different meanings of aging and assuming "homogeneity of older users/audiences" (Harrington et al., 2014, p. 2). Moreover, the use of concepts such as digital "natives" and "immigrants" (Prensky, 2001) leads the idea that there is an unsolvable gap among youngsters with innate technological skills, and elderly people who have difficulty adapting to ICT. Posterior studies show that this opposition is a myth, given that ICT appropriation does not directly depend on age, but on a range of factors, including sociocultural and educative dimensions (Peral-Peral, Arenas-Gaitán, & Villarejo-Ramos, 2015; Prensky, 2009; Vittadini, Siibak, Reifova, & Bilandzic, 2013). In fact, elderly people have demonstrated a strong capacity to mobilize around older methods—posters, manifestos, press releases, etc.—and new media repertoires such as the social networks.

The pensioners' movement, also known as Marea Pensionista,[2] is part of a cycle of protests from 2011 onward, whose 15M/Indignados movement stands as the milestone. 15M was defined as a "techno-political" (Treré, Jeppesen, & Mattoni, 2017), "networked" (Castells, 2015), and "rhizomatic" movement (Funke, 2014), and characterized by its intense and creative use of Web 2.0 (Fernández-Planells, Feixa Pampols, & Figueroas-Maz, 2013; Flesher Fominaya, 2020; Treré & Mattoni, 2016). These features equally apply to various recent techno-political movements that actively used ICT to organize protests and expand activist messages (Mattoni, 2013). This research aims to explore the communicational dimension of the Spanish pensioners' movement. We will analyze how this movement used the media and ICT, from either

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[2] The name is inspired by other *mareas* (tides), or social movements that emerged as a practical and sectorial applications of 15M ideals around the defense of public services such as education (*Marea Verde*/Green Tide) and health (*Marea Blanca*/White Tide) (Álvarez & Núñez, 2016).

a strategic perspective or from a more banal, mundane, and even unnoticed perspective (Treré, 2020). Moreover, we consider whether it addressed media technologies more cautiously or with the burning enthusiasm that characterized recent techno-political movements—15M, Occupy, etc.—thus reproducing myths and optimistic narratives about the deterministic contribution of technologies to social change (Gerbaudo, 2017; Morozov, 2013; Mosco, 2004; Treré, 2019).

This article aims to start filling a gap in the field of communication and social movements, where the seniors' and pensioners' media activism has not been approached yet as a phenomenon with its own specific characteristics. Even though their demonstrations can be considered part of the anti-austerity cycle, which began in 2011, this movement has a distinctive physiognomy regarding the 15M's collective identity and demands. It also differs in terms of media uses: the pensioners tend to develop long-term communication strategies that articulate indistinctively "new" and "old" media repertoires, since both repertoires are subordinated to broader political objectives.

Specifically, we will analyze the communicational dimension of the Spanish Marea Pensionista using three conceptual categories that stem from reference literature: (1) media imaginaries, that is, the set of ideas and preconceptions about information technologies as tools for contentious political action; (2) media practices, or the uses and performances of pensioners about the media and ICT; (3) and media ecology, that is, the construction of a communication environment that is contextually shaped by the convergence of a wide range of media processes and messages.

The article is organized as follows. First, we introduce and describe the roots, collective identity, and specific demands of Marea Pensionista. Second, we lay out the theoretical framework and empirical background. Third, we describe the methodology and the fieldwork. The results are theoretically analyzed and discussed from the perspectives of media imaginaries, practices, and ecologies. These categories are later problematized in light of the emergent concepts of slow media and slow activism; this helps in understanding those movements that are not exactly hyper-connected, but are less sophisticated, innovative, and technologically savvy, although still strategic when using ICT (Kaun & Treré, 2020). This article encourages rethinking the theoretical models that dominate the study of media activism, which involves examining the media idiosyncrasy of each movement to stem away from universalizing approaches and simplistic technological determinism.

**The Pensioners' Movement and Its Platforms**

According to official data, in March 2021, 9,815,728 pensioners were living in Spain. This number grows exponentially if we consider data from previous years as well as the rapid aging in the West since the mid-20th century (Justel, 1992). As the number of contributing workers for each pensioner has diminished, the debate on the sustainability of pension funds has blossomed, although stagnating between the opposite proposals of left-wing and right-wing parties (Vicente, 2018). Beyond controversies, the pensions are guaranteed by the Spanish Constitution, which states, "The public authorities shall guarantee, through adequate and periodically updated pensions, sufficient financial means for senior citizens" (Constitución Española, 1978, Art. 50).

Since the transition to democracy, the defense of pensions has been a common claim of the major Spanish trade unions. In 1995, the Congress approved the so-called Pacto de Toledo, in which the parliament parties are required to periodically suggest policies that ensure the sustainability of pensions. Even though the agreement was renewed in November 2020, it is still questioned by the pensioners' platforms (see Table 1) because of the conditions imposed for calculating the pensions, the neglect of gender inequalities, and the precarious state of the Spanish job market. Moreover, its lack of transparency, its advisory nature, and the exclusion of the pensioners' platforms have been criticized.

The voice of elders became noticeable after the austerity measures approved by the socialist government to face the 2008 economic crisis (Amezcua & Alberich, 2020). The pension cuts turned retired people into one the most impoverished groups of the crisis; they had to deal with a progressive price increase for basic food items, while sustaining family economies with unemployed members. This translated into a higher risk of poverty and exclusion (European Anti-Poverty Network-España, 2020; Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2020). In May 2011, a group of retired and elderly people started to protest, integrating themselves into the 15M. They ironically called themselves the *Yayoflautas*, a portmanteau formed from the colloquial term *yayo*, which refers to grandparents, and the word *flauta* (*flute*), used pejoratively to refer to young hippies with dogs and flutes (Candón-Mena, Montero, & Calle, 2018). *Yayoflautas* is still an active group that defends welfare rights through a wide range of (media) performances (Alonso, 2015).

Before 2018, pensioners were an atomized, hardly cohesive collective with a rather dispersed vindicative trajectory (Alejos Escarpe, 2018). Yet, since January 2018, they have articulated a movement stemming from indignation and distrust of traditional parties and unions: "Behind this rebellion there are no dark interests to bring down governments. . . . What is there, simply put, is a number of people deeply and sincerely pissed off" (Tricio, 2019, p. 68). They share characteristics with the precedent of the *Indignados*, *Las Mareas*, and *Yayoflautas*: their statewide scope, transversal orientation, and convergence with other movements focused on social rights (Amezcua & Alberich, 2020).

The mobilizations started during the liberal-conservative government, continued into two social-democrat governments, and reactivated in the aftermath of the state of emergency declared as a result of COVID-19, which hit the elderly the hardest (Zhang & Song, 2020). During the pandemic, the media reinforced "ageist" stereotypes, such as fragility, decline, and dependence (Bravo-Segal & Villar, 2020). However, as of the end of 2020, retirees have not stopped activities, but created synergies with the medical staff protests and *Marea Residencias*, a movement that denounces the neglect of Spanish nursing homes. The pensioners' movement is made up of diverse platforms that differ in their goals, scope, and organization methods. However, their main connection is the demand for "dignified pensions," as presented in Table 1.

*Table 1. Description of the Main Platforms That the Movement Comprises.*

| Name of the Collective | Starting Year | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Marea Pensionista de Catalunya (MPC) | 2012 | Platform created by retirees and the 15M activists to protest the RD28/2012. It is the basis for COESPE. It claims for the automatic increase of pensions in relation to the Consumer Price Index; the reestablishment of 65 as the retirement age; and the derogation of the latest labor and pensions reforms. |
| Mesa Estatal por el Blindaje de las Pensiones (MERP) | 2013 | Platform that integrates about 250 organizations, including unions, minority parties, and other social collectives. It aims to promote a constitutional reform that shields pensions and bans both its privatization and the loss of pensioners' purchasing power. Members must accept the MERP foundational manifesto. |
| Coordinadora Estatal por la Defensa del Sistema Público de Pensiones (COESPE) | 2016 | Transversal social movement characterized by nonpartisanship, assembly methods, and autonomy at a regional level. It integrates about 280 local platforms in all Comunidades Autónomas (first-level Spanish regional political division). It includes small unions, organizations, and collectives such as the Yayoflautas. The members must subscribe its claims and organization modes. Its initial core was Marea Pensionista de Catalunya and other platforms in Canarias and Galicia. |
| Movimiento de Pensionistas de Bizkaia (MPB) | 2018 | Movement that integrates the main associations and platforms at the Bizkaian level: the Bizkaia Pensioners Coordinator (that belongs to COESPE); Nagusiak, the oldest pensioners' platform (with more than 50,000 members); the 15M movement; Pentsionistak Martxan (promoted by the abertxale leftist groups), and members connected to UGT and CCOO unions. |

The pensioners' contentious repertoires are partly drawn on an intense and collective use of the media, which connects to the 15M media imaginaries and uses (Fernández-Planells et al., 2013). However, certain organization patterns and hierarchies are noticeable—for example, the existence of leaders or "digital vanguards" (Gerbaudo, 2016).

Like previous techno-political movements, the indignation of the pensioners had been growing for a few years, but it burst in February 2018, thanks to the use of social networks and a positive image in the mainstream media.

**Theoretical Framework and Empirical Background**

There is a large literature on the political participation elderly people that addresses aspects such as their electoral behavior (Binstock, 2000; Goerres, 2009), the relationship between age and institutional participation (Melo & Stockemer, 2014; Quintelier, 2007), their influence on the political and research agendas (Pratt, 1993; Yelaja, 1989), and the types of their political involvement (Binstock, 2006; Serrat, Villar, & Celdrán, 2015). This literature has proved useful in analyzing paradigmatic experiences such as the *Townsend* and *Ham and Eggs* movements in the context of the 1930s U.S. crisis (Amenta, Carruthers, & Zylan, 1992; Hanne, 1998); the U.S. *Gray Panthers* (Ciafone, 2019; Sanjek, 2009); the *Raging Grannies* in Canada (Roy, 2004; Sawchuck, 2009) and, more recently, Spanish *Yayoflautas* (Alonso, 2015; Schwarz, 2022).

Regarding Spanish pensioners, we found an incipient—albeit clearly insufficient—literature that addresses the phenomenon from the perspective of social movement studies. Alejos Escarpe (2018) described their demands, dilemmas, and conflicts, while Jiménez-Sánchez, Álvarez-Pérez, and Betancor-Nuez (2020, 2021) attributed their success to the construction of a recognizable collective identity that incorporated the 15M legacy. From an ethnographic approach, Amezcua and Alberich (2020) and Schwarz (2022) highlighted how seniority-related issues such as pension funds were also an important subject during the Indignados protests. However, Spanish pensioners' movements have not been limited to vindicating decent pensions; they have also denounced the precarious living conditions of younger generations; demanded the protection and improvement of social, health, and care services (Amezcua & Alberich, 2020); and shaped alliances with other movements, such as collectives of women, refugees, and "historical memory" (Schwarz, 2022).

As mentioned earlier, this article is aligned within communication and social movement studies (Obregón & Tufte, 2017), a research field that consolidated during the anti-globalization movement and had subsequent developments with movements in which communication technologies played a key role, such as the anti-austerity (Occupy, Arab Spring, etc.) and, more recently, global justice protests (*#BlackLivesMatter*, *#MeToo*, etc.). The most fruitful conceptual tools developed in this field focus on three key aspects. First, it inquiries how activists and collectives interpret the potentials and limitations of ICT, something that has been defined from the notion of media imaginaries (Treré, 2019; Treré et al., 2017). Second, it focuses on the social uses and appropriations of media and technologies, that is, the media practices (Couldry, 2004; Postill, 2010). These practices acquire distinctive traits in the context of protest (Mattoni, 2012) and point to mutual and interdependent relationships between imaginaries and media performances (Mattoni, 2017; Stephansen & Treré, 2020). Third, it explores the informational, media, and technological ecosystem created by social movements, not only through their own media production, but also through the activities they develop to influence the media, the political agenda, and people's thoughts and social practices (Treré, 2018, 2019; Treré & Mattoni, 2016). The information ecologies notion tackles technology from its integration into social environments emphasizing human logics over the temptation to fall into its uncritical acceptance or blanket rejection (Nardi & O'Day, 2000).

This article explores the place of media activism in the life course of the pensioners' movement, considering that the media imaginaries and practices of the elderly seem rather detached from the trend

toward technological determinism (Morozov, 2013; Mosco, 2004) that characterized 15M. Framed as Facebook and Twitter "revolutions," anti-austerity movements were blindly centered on the belief that activism might become more effective, engaging, and democratic by using ICT (Treré, 2019). Regarding the interactive potential of Web 2.0, Gerbaudo (2016) criticized how studies erroneously referred to the apparent self-organized and autonomous nature of social networks, while boyd and Crawford (2012) unveiled how literature emphasized their democratizing attributes and their presumable potential to create intelligence and collective knowledge. These myths, or "digital sublimes," demonstrate that the birth of every technology is always accompanied by promises and longings (Mosco, 2004), and historical and contextual factors, as well as the complex multifaceted appropriations of ICT by citizens and social movements, tend to be forgotten (Mattoni, 2017; Treré, 2019).

**Materials and Methods**

This research is based on qualitative methods (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Fieldwork has been divided into two main stages: The first is focused on conducting interviews, and the second is based on a content analysis of pensioners' social networks.

Regarding the first stage, we conducted 12 interviews with an intentional sample of key respondents who were selected according to their responsibility within the movement's communication—that is, communication representatives from the platforms that shape Marea Pensionista, from spokespersons to community managers. We approached these conversations as interviews with experts, since we understand that they are all privileged witnesses to and actors in the pensioners' protests, and they are people who, taken together, display what happens within a population affected by an event (Weiss, 1994).

Two phases of phone interviews lasting 45–60 minutes were conducted. The first took place between February and April 2019, and the second between May and November 2020. This last set of interviews aimed at "saturation" and "iteration," a mechanism used to validate and update data after the changes introduced by the Covid-19 pandemic. The age of the respondents was between 65 and 78 years, except for Joanen Cunyat, who was 43 years old and spokesperson for the MERP. The respondents consented to having their real names used in the article.

Depending on the communicational responsibility of the interviewees, the questionnaires included seven to 12 questions to gather information on three dimensions: (1) the respondent's identity as activist, perception of the movement and the platform/s, and previous political participation; (2) the respondent's involvement in the communication strategy of the movement, including questions on digital competence, (social) media uses, and imaginaries about the relation between the online and offline spheres; (3) how they evaluated the interactions between protests and media repertoires, including mainstream media, social networks, and other ICT (the last battery of questions).

Interviews were transcribed and then analyzed with NVivo following the principles of content analysis (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). More specifically, a semantic analysis of the sentences was carried out, conceptualized as a nucleus of meaning. These interview excerpts were categorized following a

deductive procedure based on three conceptual categories stemming from the literature: (1) media practices, (2) media imaginaries, (3) and media ecology.

Finally, an analysis of the content of the movement's social network posts was conducted between February 2018 and March 2021, coinciding with the movement's more active periods. This consisted of a selection of the five highest circulation posts in each network (40 publications in total), posted during the peak activity periods: the days before and after the main demonstrations. Subsequently, a classification system was established based on a typology of posts that allowed us to identify whether the post involved (a) the call for a demonstration or any other type of contentious action; (b) the dissemination of news published in the media: data, reports, or studies related to the situation of pensioners in Spain or their claims; and (c) proposing debates on the main goals and demands of the movement.

Given the purpose of contrasting and triangulating these data with the interviews, special attention was paid to three dimensions: (1) the main uses and content posted on the networks; (2) the continuities between online and offline participation; and (3) the similarities and differences as compared with other recent movements. In the same period, the researchers participated in some demonstrations to maintain informal interactions with activists. Table 2 shows the official online spaces that were also analyzed.

*Table 2. Websites and Social Networks Analyzed.*

| Platform | Social Network/Website | | Followers (April 12, 2021) |
|---|---|---|---|
| COESPE https://www.coespeweb.es | Facebook | www.facebook.com/COESPE | 19.861 |
| | Twitter | @CoespeOficial | 4.392 |
| | Telegram | 6 public channels | 902 |
| MERP www.merp.es | Facebook | www.facebook.com/merp.org | 5.301 |
| | Twitter | @merp_org | 433 |
| Marea Pensionista de Catalunya (MPC) http://mareapensionista.org | Facebook | www.facebook.com/MAREA-Pensionista-Catalunya-1135331159812043 | 2.350 |
| | Twitter | @MareaPensiones | 725 |
| Movimiento de Pensionistas de Bizkaia (MPB) | Facebook | Some webs are integrated in the Bizkaia's 15M (www.facebook.com/pg/M15MBizkaia), but mostly local accounts | 1.402 |

As already indicated, the following section present the results of our qualitative research. They are discussed in the light of the three central concepts of communication and social movement studies—media imaginaries, practices, and ecology—to which we will later put into dialogue with the notions, still under construction, of slow media and slow activism.

**Results and Discussion**

***Imaginaries and Media Practices***

The pensioners' communication leaders do not have a professional understanding of communication. They highlight the importance of the media and ICT to organize and disseminate the protests, and to create alliances with other movements. However, they prioritize their political and strategic objectives before any communication plan: "Intuitively the strategic action plan has always been clear, but unclear in terms of communication and its methods" (Cabello, personal communication, March 18, 2019). Their testimonies are divided among those who place greater emphasis on the role of communication in the burst of the movement and the call for massive protests, and those who highlight the digital learning acquired in the latent phases. Moreover, the pensioners' communication leaders progressively moved from amateurism to a more strategic and targeted use of the media and social networks. MERP and COESPE recommend that their activists communicate according to minimal rules, especially about posts on social media (Cunyat, personal communication, October 14, 2020; Laguna, personal communication, November 27, 2020), whereas MPB and MPC suggest that their local platforms create their own social media spaces "to reach neighbors, new actors and overcome the generational gap," although this purpose was "hardly achieved" (Alejos, personal communication, April 2, 2019).

The concepts of media imaginaries (Treré, 2019; Treré et al., 2017) and media practices (Couldry, 2004; Treré, 2019) are helpful in interpreting the ordinary media and ICT appropriations by elder activists, given that the pensioners interacted as much with "media-objects" (mobile phones, computers, printed media, etc.) as with "media-subjects" (journalists, public administrators, and other media activists; Mattoni, 2012). Both notions point to the necessity of addressing media activism from a historical and situated perspective that does not prioritize technologies over contexts, but instead analyzes them from the perceptions, meanings, and appropriations between people, movements, and technologies (Stephansen & Treré, 2020).

Although there is not a unified understanding of the complex ways through which practices and imaginaries are combined, in the media imaginaries of the elderly, technological networks are perceived as valuable resources for organizing and disseminating the protests, as well as adopting strategic decisions that cannot be made in face-to-face meetings because of lack of time (Raes, personal communication, March 28, 2019; Rojas, personal communication, April 4, 2019). Social media such as Twitter and Facebook are considered ubiquitous channels to reach the whole population—not just seniors—and their uses do not differ from those of other social movements: These channels help to coordinate events, spread content, share information about venues, and strengthen public debate. However, pensioners acknowledge that they are highly dependent on instant messaging through WhatsApp and Telegram. Treré (2019) labels these latter networks "backstage" activist spaces in which people feel less constrained and exposed when disseminating content, in comparison with "frontstage" networks: posts on Facebook, streaming live broadcasts, etc. WhatsApp also serves to "mobilize pensioners who do not usual access Facebook or Twitter, but are regular users of WhatsApp" (Cabello, personal communication, March 8, 2019). In addition, the interviews conducted in the second phase (May–November 2020) highlighted the role of video platforms in improving the mood, combatting

loneliness, and integrating activists during the most restrictive phases of the coronavirus lockdown (Rivera, personal communication, May 21, 2020). The pensioners also mentioned that video call platforms were new to them, so they felt forced to learn how to use them to communicate with each other, and even to reach elders with physical impairments (Rojas, personal communication, November 16, 2020) without facing any "unsolvable difficulty" in adapting to using these video platforms (Laguna, personal communication, November 27, 2020).

Concerning content production, the vertical and lineal uses of Web 1.0 seem to coexist with the horizontal and participatory Web 2.0 practices (Jenkins, 2008). In this sense, Facebook and Twitter show uneven media activity between pensioners who are quite active, and those who limit themselves to elaborate occasional posts and replying to other posts. Their publications are mostly made up of propagandist, unidirectional messages that do not make any reference to, or pose dialogues with, other users. Therefore, the pensioners' online narratives create a self-referential discourse made up of both pensioners' opinions—through manifestos, comments, videos, etc.—and references to the news published by mass media, as well as comments by social and political actors such as politicians, journalists, and NGOs. Figure 1 represents an example of the dissemination of unidirectional propagandist messages. Posted on Facebook, the message explains the demands of "the pensions' padlock" campaign (*#ElCandadoDelasPensiones*), calls for a demonstration, and encourages activists to spread the poster in print and digital. On the right, a poster posted on Twitter called for a protest action in front of the Congress in Madrid.



*Figure 1. Propagandist messages posted using Facebook and Twitter accounts. (Source: Coordinadora de Pensionistas Madrid, 2021; Mesa Estatal por el Blindaje de las Pensiones, 2020).*

Regarding the pensioners' imaginaries on the digital gap, communication leaders did not share a unified conception. Nonetheless, they acknowledged the regular use of e-mail, social media, and instant messaging, and very little or no use of YouTube and Instagram, which some referred to as "youngsters' media" (Rivera, personal communication, April 4, 2019). They admitted having diverse technological skills, from activists who had enormous difficulty acquiring technological competence, to elders who "almost became community managers" (Laguna, personal communication, November 27, 2020). This ability did not seem to be related to age, but to a special interest in ICT or to individuals' own sociocultural levels, and was higher among the new pensioners, who were around the age of 65. Whatever the case, they acknowledged that circumstances forced them to adapt to social media and other ICT: "When we have to face a new need, we wake up and learn" (Laguna, personal communication, November 27, 2020). These results are in line with recent studies showing that Spanish pensioners perceived themselves as able to manage complex technological devices such as computers, tablets, smartphones, apps, or social media (Obra Social La Caixa, 2017). Although members of the Spanish older population continue to be the most vulnerable to digital exclusion (Tirado-Morueta, Rodríguez-Martín, Álvarez-Arregui, Ortíz-Sobrino, & Aguaded-Gómez, 2021), they are interested in learning how to use these tools, although with certain reservations regarding security and privacy (Casado-Muñoz, Lezcano, & Rodríguez-Conde, 2015).

Finally, some interviewees talked about the technological transfers between youngsters and seniors, which seem to be an interesting issue for further research:

> I knew nothing about communication, but I had to manage the Facebook account of my platform. A niece helped and explained everything to me. There are also young people in the movement, not many, but there are. They will become pensioners in the future and they will be even more hurt by this situation. (Rivera, personal communication, April 4, 2019)

### *Media Ecology*

The pensioners searched for permanent connections with a whole range of media outlets: public, commercial and alternative, state, regional and local, etc. The concept of media ecology helps us to understand the pensioners' media practices from a systemic perspective (Nardi & O'Day, 2000) that integrates both the political processes and the contexts in which these practices take place (Postill, 2010). The interviewees agreed on the relevant role played by "traditional" media in making the protests visible and increasing the number of participants. However, their perceptions of the media fluctuated between positive and negative. The negative testimonies considered that the ownership patterns and editorial lines of the media determined a higher or lower coverage to their demands. They also referred to a classical use of the media as lobby spaces to put pressure on the political agenda. Thus, the first battery of questions showed that the leaders had previously participated in parties, associations, or unions before the Internet, when the success of mobilizations depended exclusively on the press and broadcasting. A few respondents mentioned specific actions addressed to traditional media: The MERP lobbied *El País* newspaper to publish manifestos (Cunyat, personal communication, April 6, 2019), while COESPE created a complex structure of rotary spokespeople in charge of press releases, conferences, etc. (Alejos, personal communication, April 2, 2019).

Media ecology theories attribute a central role to sociopolitical and media contexts. In fact, the pensioners' practices interacted in hybrid physical and mediated contexts in which classic and innovating logics live side by side (Chadwick, 2013). Some technological appropriations reflect the past—such as the elaboration of manifestos and press releases—while others evoke more recent uses by techno-political movements, such as the 15M: podcasts, video streaming, posts on social media, etc. (Álvarez & Núñez, 2016; Barbas & Postill, 2017). Furthermore, it is impossible to isolate one technology from the others, and one mobilization from those that came before or went after (Treré, 2019). The examples of these hybrid media strategies are multiple, from *escraches* at politicians' homes and workplaces—coordinated through WhatsApp or Telegram—to the MERP signature campaigns combining the periodical setup of street stands and online signatures at any time (Cunyat, personal communication, April 6, 2019). Some strategies are sophisticated in terms of information technologies. Rivera (personal communication, April 4, 2019) pointed to diverse COESPE *mailbombing* campaigns addressed to politicians, or Twitter campaigns to stop the approval of the Pan-European Pension Product (*#NoPePP*) in April 2019 and to promote voting in the general elections of April 28 (*#28VotoFuturoPensiones*) and November 10, 2019 *(#PensionesPublicas10N, #NuestroVotoCuenta10N, #10NVotaPensionesPúblicasDignas*), without requesting the support of any political party.

Most respondents understand ICT from a highly instrumental perspective because they consider that technology is just a part of, and therefore dependent on, a larger political plan: "We do not sacrifice our goals to get more visibility, but instead turn our goals into news" (Cunyat, personal communication, April 6, 2019). Many retirees agree that the virtual sphere cannot be separated from face-to-face communication because personal contacts almost always precede virtual connections. Beyond social media, people tend to attend the calls "motivated for their indignation against the system or due to previous solidarity with the pensions' cause" (Rojas, personal communication, April 4, 2019). They highlight the emotional and therapeutic values of two strategies: the assemblies where decision-making processes happen, and the performative actions that aim at appropriating the public space:

> Our success is based on our symbolic presence in the streets through gatherings and demonstrations. We demonstrate every Monday and have weekly meetings to coordinate. . . . These spaces for meeting, dialogue and socialization are of enormous therapeutic value. We say that this movement helps us live longer. (Alejos, personal communication, April 2, 2019)

Face-to-face gatherings are even more important for the MPB, which does not have an official account on Facebook or Twitter. Instead, it invites local groups to create their own accounts aiming toward creating closer contact with people who are based in concrete territories. The platform insists on spreading direct messages through WhatsApp and Telegram and emphasizes the symbolic component of its gatherings, which caught media attention because of their persistence (Rojas, personal communication, April 4, 2019). Other interviewees highlighted the importance of the symbols. The iconic image of the Bizkaia retirees gathered every Monday at the entrance to the Bilbao City Council, with the river and Jorge Oteiza's sculpture in the background, "is already part of our collective imaginary and our main identity sign" (Alejos, personal communication, April 2, 2019). Figure 2 shows a photo taken during one of those gatherings. Images like this

had a wide dissemination in the main Spanish' mainstream media and became an icon of the pensioners' movement.



***Figure 2. The pensioners' demonstrations at the Bilbao City Council. (Source: Marea Ciudadana, 2018).***

Other performative actions were the October 2019 mobilizations, in which two streams of pensioners arrived to the Congress of Deputies in Madrid after a walk of more than 500 km from the north (Bilbao) and the south (Rota) of Spain. Furthermore, they offer a number of hints on the permanent, mundane and demystified use of the technologies, very often qualified as simple tools. Moreover, our questions about ICT usually led to references to face-to-face interchanges: assemblies, demonstrations, etc. The testimonies usually subordinated digital actions to the wider struggles in the streets and their impact on mainstream media. This questions the "self-organizing" potential of the networks and highlights the importance of the pensioners' narratives when they randomly refer to online and offline decision-making processes.

### *The Slow Media/Slow Activism Approach of the Pensioners*

The pensioners' media uses were far from the spontaneous and "ephemeral collective action" that characterizes hybrid performative practices such as flash mobs, which have high visual impact, but lack continuity and real results (Earl, Hunt, Garrett, & Dal, 2015). On the contrary, the pensioners' movement has been reinvigorated as the COVID-19 crisis has eased; in October 2021, the movement was able to bring together masses of activists around the country to protest the government's pension reform. In fact,

the pensioners constitute a movement that has been always been conceived as long term. A number of interviewees indicated that social rights are never fully granted, and today's struggles are the prelude to tomorrow's. Furthermore, they evoked the power of group communication, the conflicting nature of assemblies, and even the talkative essence of many people at an advanced age. Asked about the uses of (social) media, their discourses usually passed over the strict limit of technologies to refer to the power of communication beyond any technology or mediation:

> We might not be the best at managing social networks, but we, the elderly, have the quality of talking a lot . . . and we have been doing it before this became a trend with the use of technology. (Tricio, 2019, p. 70)

Their orientation toward the sustainability of the pension system and public services connects them to the "slow movement," which advocates for quieter and unhurried lifestyles and methods, and champions quality of life over running faster to do multiple things, according to the hectic pace of capitalism (Honoré, 2005). Opposing the tyranny of speed and the immediacy of modern-capitalist culture (Rosa, 2010), the slow movement has diversified throughout multiple fields—food, cities, tourism, design, work, etc.—and has recently started to influence communication and media studies. Slow media activism goes beyond the individual actions that help us to limit or control the way we use technologies. On the contrary, it calls for a structural cultural and political shift to reduce the use of fast media and vindicate the "dense culture" of face-to-face communication, the quality of media content, and a rise in awareness of the uncontrolled rhythms of ICT and media production, distribution, and consumption (Barranquero-Carretero, 2013; Rauch, 2018; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020).

Limiting social media uses or approaching technologies more cautiously provides spaces for personal time and group conversations. Gladwell (2010) and others mistrust obsession with social media campaigns in favor of traditional face-to-face relationships, which have historically sustained civil rights movements. Some studies emphasize the role of digital media to bring protesters to the street, but also the necessity of face-to-face encounters and demonstrations as the main tool to keep a movement alive— given that "the most important medium of communication was actually unmediated, that is, people talking to each other" (Hammond, 2019, p. 901).
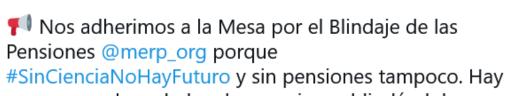
Moreover, the notion of "slow activism" was coined to allude to the substantial differences between movements that practice a spectacle-activism in the short term, and those that manage their activity quietly and focused on the long term. The second style is characteristic of movements that patiently pressure to demand their rights, even when their demands do not get constant media attention, given their low profile or peaceful character (Robins, 2014, 2015).

The pensioners do not understand their claims as something immediate or circumstantial "that can be lost," but instead aim toward "structural and irreversible" changes (Ledo, personal communication, March 8, 2019), such as constitutional pensions shielding. They also consider that their fight must be undertaken by future generations, although they admit that their activities on social networks have not yet attracted many youngsters. One of the first performative demonstrations during the creation of the MERP took place at the Reina Sofia Museum on December 12, 2013. Under the motto "Bring your own chair," the MERP expressed,

"We are here to shield the pensions and we are not moving; we are not in a hurry; we will not stop until we succeed" (Cunyat, personal communication, April 6, 2019). The pensioners' media repertories were tested according to patient work, trial and error, and the exploration of as many strategies as seem to be useful (Laguna, personal communication, May 11, 2019), characterizing slow activism (Robins, 2014, 2015).

Likewise, the pensioners considered that their movement could be characterized by slow incubation and fewer visibility periods—such as during the pandemic—because "our activities and internal meetings never stop" (Cabello, personal communication, March 18, 2019). In addition, their communication strategies address creating stable solidarity networks for the long term. The latter was exemplified also by their motto,"We are going slowly because we are going far," which was the motto of the Mexican Zapatistas movement in the mid-1990s and the 15M (Fernández-Savater, 2021). The demands of pensioners imply profound structural and cultural changes beyond the economic and political conjuncture. This is what Andrea Uña, spokesperson for the Pensioners' Movement of Bizkaia, said in an interview with Spanish public television: "What needs to be done? Equality policies, education, investing in nurseries and residences from the public sector and changing the values of this society" (Los Desayunos, 2020).

This type of activism can also be observed in the alliances that pensioners have woven with groups that advocate deep and far-reaching social transformations. For example, the campaign *#CandadoDeLasPensiones* (pensions' padlock), which calls for public pensions shielding in the Spanish Constitution as a fundamental right, has been supported by the platform *Marea Roja de la investigación* (red tide for science research) as part of its campaign *#SinCienciaNoHayFuturo* (there is no future without science; see Figure 3).



**Coordinadora Marea Roja de la Investigación**
**@marearojainvest**

📢 Nos adherimos a la Mesa por el Blindaje de las Pensiones @merp_org porque #SinCienciaNoHayFuturo y sin pensiones tampoco. Hay que poner el candado a las pensiones blindándolas en la constitución como derecho fundamental. Ni recortes ni privatización. #CandadoDeLasPensiones.

*Figure 3. Marea Roja de la Investigación supporting the #CandadoDeLasPensiones campaign.*
*(Source: Coordinadora Marea Roja de la Investigación, 2021).*

Finally, the stressing of collective action rather than individual "connectivism" was also observed, given that ICT aimed to promote street resistance and "cooperative struggles" because the pensioners are always planning "how to mobilize the young or reach new collectives" (Rojas, personal communication,

April 4, 2019). Even when social networks reinforce "connective" activism (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011), literature on media activism has scarcely examined the digital literacy processes that take place between the youngster and the elder, or the way social movements try to reach new protesters, as the elderly do when appealing to the youngsters.

## Conclusions

Elderly activism is a "black hole" in communication and social movements studies when compared with other research "subjects" (women, youth, civil rights movements) and "objects" (anti-globalization, anti-austerity movements, etc.). This oblivion is associated as much with the attribution of vulnerability and conservatism to seniors (Fillieule, 2013), as it is with the myths about their digital gaps. Although the concept of digital immigrants has started to be questioned (Prensky, 2009), it still shapes preconceptions and misconceptions about the relationship between the elderly and technology.

Our findings question certain persistent myths in the literature. On the one hand, overattention to ICT has prevented observation of the interplays between activists and traditional mainstream media, as well as the uses of other low-cost technologies (posters, podcasts, livestreaming, artistic productions, performances, etc.), and nondigital and nonmediated communication, such as demonstrations, group gatherings, and face-to-face communication. On the other hand, most interviewees qualified ICT and social media as "powerful" contentious repertoires. Nevertheless, they claimed that any message and ICT appropriation must be subjugated to wider political projects and aimed at encouraging street activism. Contrasting the seniors' assertions with the content analysis of social networks, their online strategies point to a nonidealized but pragmatic, strategic, and permanent use of any technological means at their disposal, from networks to the video-streaming platforms that started being used during COVID-19 confinement. Furthermore, both backstage (WhatsApp, Telegram) and front stage social networks (Facebook, Twitter) are used, but the former require special attention when analyzing the movement because the elderly are highly dependent on instant messaging. However, in contrast to other techno-political movements, such as the 15M, their strategies are very much oriented toward impact and persuading the mainstream media. This is reminiscent of the communication modes of "older" political parties and unions; many elderly activists are still enrolled in or sympathize with these entities, beyond their criticism of both.

Pensioners' complex hybrid media practices include traditional communication—assemblies, media lobbying, face-to-face interchanges, etc.—as well as "newer" and more creative technological appropriations of social media, websites, and other digital platforms. Nevertheless, the retirees place extraordinary importance on performances, struggles on the streets, and face-to-face meetings, qualified by many as the "main instruments" for shaping the movement's political identity. In the pensioners' media ecologies, mediated and face-to-face communication coexist, since they both aim to create and maintain strong emotional ties. However, their ICT appropriation relies on the cultural, cognitive, and activist idiosyncrasy of the elderly—which should be further researched—and is fundamentally aimed toward (and subordinated to) achieving long-term goals within a sort of slow media activism.

Even though the sample does not allow us to generalize results, this study constitutes an exploratory step forward for further research with a larger sample—for example, using surveys or including interviews with activists who do not have communicational responsibilities. Future studies should also review to what extent pensioner and elderly movements in other countries are examples of slow media activism and can be analyzed in connection with—or contrast to—other anti-austerity and techno-political movements. It should be investigated whether these movements are characterized by innovative or classic media imaginaries, and if their uses of ICT and social networks remain banal/ordinary or strategic. In addition, the transfer of knowledge and the interplays between younger and older generations, and among diverse techno-political movements, should be explored more deeply.

This article has, for the first time, approached topic of the relevance of pensioners' media strategies to fight for improved pensions and social welfare, unveiling that their slow media imaginaries, practices, and ecologies seem to oppose the technocratic, ephemeral, and inconsistent logic that characterizes digital society.

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