

The Digital Public Sphere: An Alternative and Counterhegemonic Space? The Case of Spain

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A historical view of social mobilizations coordinated by digital technologies shows the emergence of an alternative digital public sphere (DPS) in Spain, which has subsequently proven to be counterhegemonic. During the past decade, the DPS promoted alternative discourses to those of the official public sphere. The Indignados mobilizations in 2011 (15-M) has been the product of a long-term process of building a DPS that proved to be influential at three levels: (1) reframing the public debate, (2) expressing a nonofficial public opinion consensus, and (3) changing the electoral map. The Spanish DPS had been a key resource for subaltern publics since the 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid, Spain, when citizens, using their mobile phones and the Net, claimed that the bombings were a consequence of the country's involvement in the Iraq War. That early digitally organized mobilization meant the collapse of the political-communication system. Later, the 15-M in 2011 expressed a widespread new public opinion consensus. Gradually, the DPS allowed the bipartisan system to break into a multiparty system and to contest previous political hegemony.

Keywords: digital public sphere, alternative public sphere, counterhegemonic cyberdemocracy, citizen participation, digital networks

Focused on specific protests or electoral processes, event-centered research fails to grasp the long-term evolution of public spheres. We review recent contributions to identify empirically evaluable propositions that reveal to what extent and under what circumstances the digital public sphere (DPS) can be considered alternative or counterhegemonic. First, we discuss public sphere theories. Then, we present "substantial" academic work, some of it only available in Spanish, related to successive social mobilizations where digital ICT played a key role. This longitudinal perspective qualifies under what conditions the virtual arena might substitute or complement the "old" public sphere.

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Theoretical Framework

Academic debates have discussed whether the DPS constitutes an alternative arena for political debate. It has been argued that digital technology questions the public sphere generated by conventional media—print media, private or state-owned television and radio—resembling alternative media in fostering self-organization, open participation, and a counterhegemonic potential (Atton, 2004; Couldry & Curran, 2003). Digital devices can generate social mobilizations beyond the screens and enable citizens to exert influence on decision-making and public policy (Bennett, 2012; Castells, 2009, 2012; Dahlberg, 2007; Mason, 2012; Palczewski, 2001). This literature considers the DPS as challenging the discursive hegemony of the centers of power. In Gramscian terms, it questions their ability to create “common sense” and broaden what is thought to be politically legitimate and possible (Gramsci, 1975; Williams, 1977). This does not imply a homogenous antihegemonic DPS—neither one by itself exerts influence.

Skeptical authors question whether a large-scale DPS exists beyond groups of activists that alter the structures and balances of power. Far from being intrinsically democratic, the sheer mass of digital information leads to oversaturation; transparency becomes vigilance and accessibility and horizontality make for poorer quality debates, not to mention the authorities’ use of the Internet, control, and repression (Christensen, 2011; Fuchs, 2014; Lovink, 2011, 2016; Morozov, 2011).

Potential and Limitations of a Counterhegemonic DPS

During the Enlightenment, the public sphere was associated with the development of bourgeois literature, and by the 20th century, to mass media (Habermas, 1989). In the 21st century, the ideal of an enlightened citizen connected to digital networks has been conceived as an autonomous citizen-actor debating issues of collective interest (Iosifidis & Wheeler, 2015). The public sphere would have moved on to the Internet (Keane, 1995) or to “peripheral public spheres” as an indication of the plurality and opposition of digital arenas to the elite-dominated “central public sphere” (Sampedro, 2000).

Nancy Fraser’s (1992) seminal work questioned the democratic nature of the bourgeois public sphere as it excluded social majorities who lacked resources and legitimate discourses. “Subaltern counter publics” have used alternative public spaces to question the official consensus. Counterelites operate within the official public sphere, as leaders of public opinion, trade unions, or professional associations. But citizens use the Internet as a space for “self-communication” nowadays (Castells, 2009). Thus, the hierarchical relation between representatives and the governed tends to fade (Pecourt, 2015), while the link to a specific territory and the difference between public and private realms disappears. Subordinated groups intersect and combine in a mosaic of partially overlapping spheres that are not subject to the sovereignty of any given power (Castells, 2008; Van Dijk, 2006; Volkmer, 2014).

However, a significant number of scholars have also shown the democratic limitations of the Net. The ubiquitous, horizontal nature and permanent accessibility of the Internet has been challenged by the low levels of active participation and the irrational and fragmented digital debates among a vast array of interests (Schäfer, 2015). Although the DPS furnishes more plural political messages, public media seem to be more efficient at binding together contrasting viewpoints (Iosifidis, 2011). The Net has spawned

xenophobic and hateful political messages (Kompatsiaris & Mylonas, 2015). Power centers use it for their own extremist propaganda and for controlling the population (Morozov, 2011) as well as building a "panoptical" DPS (Stahl, 2016). A handful of Internet providers and digital companies monitor most connections in collaboration with states (Barabási, 2011). As Habermas would say, corporative algorithms "colonized" the DPS in the interests of the market and the state (Fuchs, 2014; Pariser, 2011). Technological corporations rely on robots, artificial intelligence, and big data to promote consumerism, whereas citizens tend to project their own private and narcissistic interests rather than political involvement (Iosofidis & Wheeler, 2015; Lovink, 2016).

In terms of political participation, the Internet also presents strengths and weaknesses. Digital communication technologies increase the potential for participating in political debate (Papacharissi, 2010), but most citizens consume rather than produce information (Curtice & Norris, 2004). The most politically active are already mobilized (Loader & Mercea, 2011, p. 5), but they can lead public opinion and influence their immediate circles (Norris & Curtice, 2008). Physical presence is no longer required, reducing time and costs involved in participation, yet it diminishes commitment and loyalty (Earl & Kimport, 2011).

Nevertheless, in light of recent events, there is little doubt that cyberspace can help to display "connective action," which is later transformed into collective action. "Personal action framing" (such as "We are the 99 per cent" of the Occupy protests) travels fast in the form of personal narratives and images, shared across the networks, and can mobilize thousands (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011, 2012). Viewed in an historical perspective and under certain conditions, DPS can change power structures.

***The DPS: A Counterhegemonic Resource in a Structure of
Political Opportunity with Structuring Effects***

Evidence shows that digital debates and mobilizations are largely ignored if they are not covered by conventional media, specifically, television (Schäfer, 2015). Literature on the Arab Spring and the Occupy movements emphasizes the DPS's capacity to help organize, mobilize, and call to collective action (Bannon, 2004; Fenton & Barassi, 2011; Tremayne, 2014; Wilson & Dunn, 2011). However, the ultimate Internet role is questionable (Markham, 2014) and depends on its positive interactions with conventional media in a "hybrid" communicative system (Chadwick, 2013). Decisive battles for social meaning construction still take place and are validated in the mainstream media (Carragee & Roefs, 2004, p. 225).

The DPS's efficacy in the mobilization of discursive resources seems to depend on the socioeconomic and political opportunity structure. This thesis blends the resource mobilization and opportunity structure approaches, which are central to the sociology of social movements, and explains the rise of the antiausterity cycle of mobilizations (Della Porta, 2016). Factors that range from civil liberties and the extent of censorship to religion and level of education account for differences in the reach of the cybermobilizations of the Arab world and in southern Europe (Christensen, 2011; Iosofidis & Wheeler, 2015).

Subjective factors also affect the DPS's counterhegemonic dynamics and potential. Hope impels people to act, yet fear paralyzes them. Only when anger and indignation prevail do citizens overcome their fears and unite in "networks of hope" (Castells, 2012). Frames that work most effectively are those that can be personalized (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011). In abstract theoretical terms, Gramsci's "significant vacuums" condense into a new "common sense," with political subjects that carry broader emancipation horizons (Laclau, 2005).

Framing processes unite individuals around shared ideas and sentiments that motivate them to act and provide the narrative that justifies social movement demands (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996). Frames can also alter public and political agendas if they successfully impose themselves on the mainstream media. Further on the DPS may result in changes of power structures. Digitally empowered citizens can influence media frames and unleash significant ramifications beyond cyberspace. The counterhegemonic vigor of DPS stems from its ability to facilitate connections and create new habits that result in higher impact collectives (Beasley-Murray, 2010).

Digital media are not intrinsically democratic but provide opportunities for challenging power. At least in Spain, the DPS seems to have promoted and articulated a critical consensus that openly questioned the political and financial centers (Subirats, 2015). As we shall discuss, Spanish social activists first and political newcomers later on became immersed in a counterhegemonic questioning of the institutional control of the "historical block" of the Transition; at least, that is how they framed their endeavors (Errejón, 2011; Iglesias, 2015).

Our main thesis is that, in the interaction between digital networks, mainstream media, and occupied physical spaces, Spanish "subaltern publics" managed to spread "connective action," which later evolved into collective action, and finally into structural changes. Digitally shared feelings and affections, as well as new repertoires of protest, gave rise to newly empowered "online multitudes" (Beasley-Murray, 2010; Sampedro, 2004). "A 'hybrid' DPS emerged in the intersections of the virtual, the media landscape, and the urban, offering an autonomous space that acted as a place for forming groups, debate, co-decision making and a laboratory for experimenting with new forms of deliberative democracy" (Castells, 2016, p. 144). Spanish DPS was also "hybrid" because it interacted successfully with "old" and offline political communication. Therefore, we embrace no technological determinism but focus on the uses of technology and contextual factors.

Case Study: The Emergence of an Alternative and Counterhegemonic Digital Public Sphere in Spain

We will review a significant body of empirical research (much of it unavailable for non-Spanish audiences) and provide an historical interpretation; that is, a long- or medium-term meaning to episodic and event-centered studies. The result is an open process of emergence and consolidation of a DPS that is still in progress and subject to feasible setbacks.

Table 1 presents, in chronological order, the main mobilizations based on digital communication tools that have taken place since the start of the 21st century in Spain.

Table 1. Spanish Digitally Convened Mobilizations in the 21st Century.

Year	Name	Description	Demands
2003–04	Nunca Más	("Never Again," in Galician)	Social mobilization in response to the sinking of an oil tanker that caused an environmental disaster in the coastal region of Galicia
2003–04	No a la Guerra	("No to the War")	Massive protests against Spanish participation in the war in Iraq and Afghanistan
2004	13-M	(March 13)	SMS-based mobilization against the government's attempt to distract from the jihadist authorship of terrorist attacks in Madrid
2006	V de Vivienda	("H for Housing")	Protests in favor of social housing policies, against corruption and environmental degradation due to real estate speculation and bubble
2011	15-M	(May 15)	Protests against the government's austerity policies and limits of the political system
2014–15			New political parties, Podemos and Ciudadanos, win parliamentary representation and transform the bipartisan system into a multiparty one

Spanish late 20th-century and early 21st-century digital campaigns were linked to the alter-globalization movement. These early significant mobilizations were digitally convened by the participants themselves to change geopolitics, economic structures, and global consciousness (Castells, 2012). The Indignados in 2011 were also part of citizen protests that "occupied" urban spaces and the media (Agarwal, Barthel et al., 2014; Agarwal, Bennett, Johnson, & Walker, 2014). The historical sequence and short intervals between campaigns suggest that the 15-M amalgamated previous mobilizations in a process of collective learning and accumulation of digitally coordinated protests. New ICT helped to voice dissident public opinion at critical junctures marked by successive governmental crises of public agenda control, for which the emerging DPS was in part responsible.

The DPS acquired centrality by interfering in the electoral processes to the point that mobilizations broke the law and suspended the "reflection day" during the 2004 and 2011 elections. Technopolitics enabled citizens to resist electoral hegemonic messages (Sampedro, 2004, 2008, 2011), and even managed to reverse the official discourse "cascade effect" (Martínez Avidad, 2011).

Spain witnessed the emergence of "online multitudes" when at least 100,000 activists headed to the northern Galician coast in 2003 to demand political responsibilities for the worst oil tanker spillage in the country's history (Barberena, 2015; Sampedro, 2004). *Nunca Más* merged with simultaneous pacifist demonstrations against the government's decision to send troops to fight in Afghanistan and Iraq. The *No a la Guerra* campaign reached its peak in 2004, coinciding with the Islamic terrorist attacks in Madrid on

March 11, 2004. As we shall see, the so-called 13-M crisis in 2004 also expressed the loss of confidence in the conventional media system and gave rise to an alternative critical DPS that would occupy a central stage. Two years later, the V de Vivienda campaign ("H for Housing") established some of the bases for what would become the 15-M. Unlike other Occupy movements, the Indignados crystallized into new political parties and government coalitions, thus loosening the grip of the two-party duopoly in the official public sphere (Chavero, 2015).

In 2015, Podemos (a new party that claimed to be the 15-M heir) achieved four seats at the European Parliament and significant representation in the regional parliaments. Podemos was the third most voted party and threatened the Social Democrats' hegemony of the Left after the 2016 general elections. Together with another new party, Ciudadanos, they initiated a new era in Spanish politics. Bipartisan hegemony was broken in 10 of the 17 regional administrations, and Podemos cogoverned in six out of those 10.

In the following sections, we review the empirical evidence of the Spanish DPS and operationalize its growing strength, paying attention to indicators of its influence on three levels: (1) a discursive reframing in terms of visions, interests, and values alternative to the prevailing equivalent; (2) mobilizations that expressed the nonofficial consensus of public opinion; and (3) changes in the electoral map and government. For that purpose, we focus on two key moments in Spain's recent history: The 13-M crisis arising from the March 11, 2004, terrorist attacks, and the 15-M in 2011. The continuity and linkages between these two case studies have been overlooked due, in part, to the episodic and event-centered research that we now bring together and present in historical perspective.

Crisis and Collapse of the Official Public Sphere: 13-M, 2004

The mobilizations that followed the Islamic terrorist attacks in Madrid in 2004 can be considered the first indication of the power of DPS to challenge the official discourse hegemony and to change the course of politics. This crisis revealed the first signs of obsolescence of the Spanish political-information system and influenced the electoral outcome.

Immediately following the massacre (almost 200 people were killed and more than 1,000 injured), the leaders of the governing Partido Popular (PP) blamed the Basque group ETA despite all evidence pointing towards an Al Qaeda cell. The attacks took place on March 11, three days before general elections were held. Perceiving that the government deliberately sowed confusion about the perpetrators of the attacks, citizens looked to news sources with fewer links to the PP. The most critical television channel, Tele5, experienced the highest audience increases. Viewers abandoned the state television channel (TVE), without precedent in any similar crisis situation. The audience dented its credibility, which, to this day, has not fully recovered.

Figure 1 shows the viewers' fluctuations between the three main TV channels, which remain the hegemonic electoral source. Audience growth is measured in percentages comparing those of the four-day period after the attacks to those of the previous week. We can then perceive and contrast changes of TV audiences in regular days during the electoral campaign (May 4, 5, 6, and 7) and those in a crisis, marked

by the collusion of the DPS and the official public sphere (May 11, 12, 13, and 14). The most critical channel, Tele5, led the viewers' increases since May 13, the day when SMS- organized protesters gathered in front of the PP headquarters, claiming their "right to know the truth, before voting." Surprisingly enough, the day after the elections, when state officials made public the results, TVE's audience hardly increased by more than 10%, compared to a regular day of the campaign one week before.

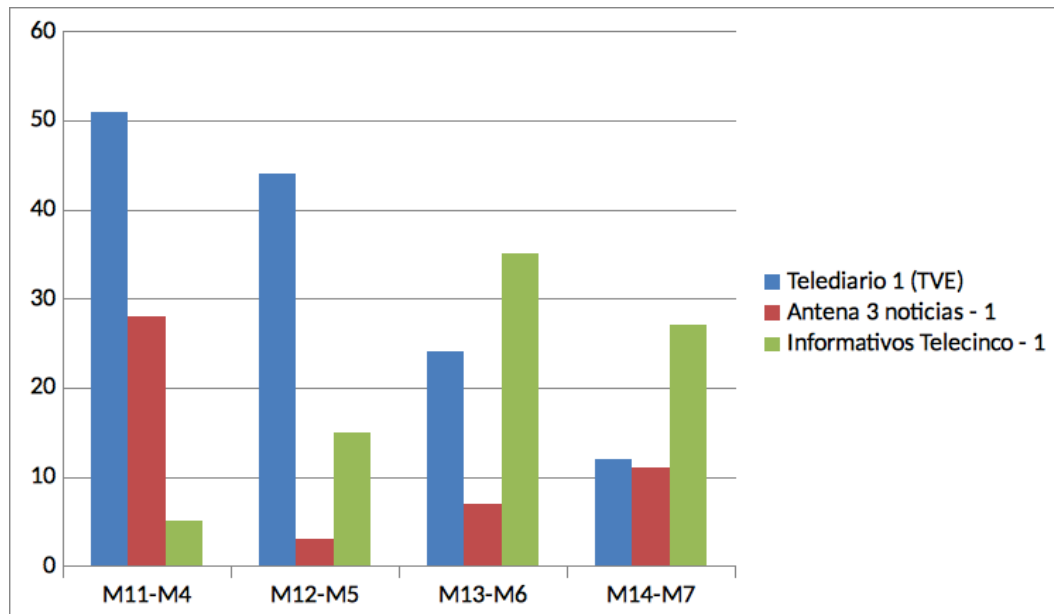


Figure 1. Increases (%) of TV news audience during the second week of the electoral campaign of the March 11 attacks. Source: Sampedro (2005, p. 93).

In contrast, the Internet experienced a considerable increase in news flows, far outstripping conventional media (Herrero, 2014). The digital versions of the most read newspapers showed high increases: elpais.es went from 3 million daily visits on a normal day to more than 30 million between March 11 and March 13, while elmundo.es doubled its users. There was a general increase of 275% in the consumption of digital media in that period (Cerezo, 2014).

The central public sphere—all mainstream public and private media—attributed the attacks to ETA before election day. But counterinformation websites were quick to question the government's version. The most prominent alternative media on the Internet framed Al Qaeda as responsible for the attacks in 76.6% of their coverage. The DPS emerged by challenging the official version with an alternative explanation, also backed by foreign media (Roíg & López, 2005).

Direct challenge to the central public sphere came from alternative counterinformation websites, especially Nodo50.org, which called for civil disobedience against the official version the day before the general elections were held. Visits to Nodo50.org rose considerably, compared to other media (see Figure 2).

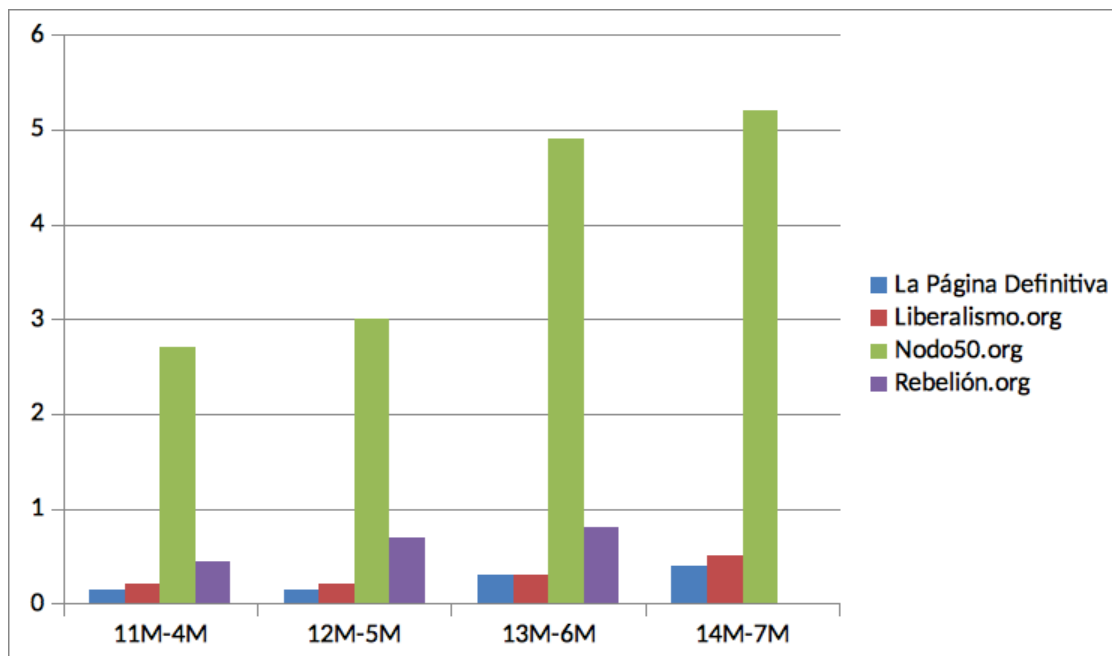


Figure 2. Increase (x N) of visitors to alternative political websites during the second week of the electoral campaign after the March 11 attacks, compared to the previous week. Source: Sampedro (2005, p. 101).

Phone mobile text messages (SMS) played a crucial role in calling out people to protest on 13-M. Online “connective action” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) crystallized in off-line collective action. Around 15,000 to 23,000 protesters gathered in front of PP headquarters in each main city of the country. According to the mainstream press (therefore, underestimated), protester numbers in Madrid and Barcelona amounted to 5,000 to 7,000, respectively (Sampedro, 2005). More than 20,000 citizens gathered in Madrid at the Puerta del Sol (which would be the main urban space for the 15-M), marching peacefully to the Atocha train station where the attacks had taken place. Text-message traffic on March 13 rose between 20% and 40% (eDemocracia.com, 2004). This was a vivid example of what Page (1996, p. 69) called “a speedy deliberation from the periphery,” and it was made possible by the new DPS.

The Spanish public and private media did not reflect the critical strands of public opinion. Peripheral public spheres consisting of forums, weblogs and—much more impactful—the counterinformation websites made the subaltern publics’ message more visible. The electoral

consequences of this discursive struggle resulted in the unexpected victory of the Social Democrats (PSOE) in the 2004 general elections, which all the pollsters had predicted would be won by the PP.

The DPS Affects the Central Public Sphere

The digital public had shaken off its peripheral status and gained influence in the media by demonstrating in the street and at the ballot box. The DPS had also been edging toward center stage, and today it interacts and influences the central public sphere by generating new trends in the production and consumption of political information in a hybrid political-information system (Chadwick, 2013). Although public television broadcasters remain in last place for audience share, private television channels have boosted their ratings by distributing their programs on the Internet. Prominent bloggers have become editors and co-owners of influential digital media, applying innovative business models and practices. Eldiario.es is published by a limited liability company whose director and certain columnists are the co-owners, holding more than 70% of the shares (González-Esteban, 2014). *Público* and *El Confidencial*—digital dailies with left- and right-wing tendencies, respectively, and with no affiliation to the two-party system—and *Infolibre*—with its paywall—are online outlets that retain their critical independence of the two-party system and the inheritance of the Transition. They have exposed cases of corruption that have affected all parliamentary political parties, the main trade unions, and even well-known editors of the conventional press. They amount to a Fourth Power on the Net, in which the public collaborates in the production of information and sustains a new business model with subscriptions (Benkler, 2006).

A decade on from 13-M, the emerging political parties began to make use of the DPS to become more visible and exert influence. The leader of Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, became a regular political talk-show commentator, with his appearances on television going viral on the Net. Podemos transformed its decision-making, and even its leadership contests, into a process that was open to digital participation (Casero-Ripollés, Feenstra, & Tormey, 2016). Applications such as Appgree or Agora Voting enabled voters to discuss electoral programs and vote directly for the candidates (Galdón, 2015). There is no question of the new parties' hegemony in the social networks, whatever measure is considered (Subirats, 2015).

Dissident Consensus in the DPS: V de Vivienda and the 15-M

The Indignados, closely linked to the Arab Spring of 2011, served as an example and a bridge for the Occupy movements in the West (Castañeda, 2012). Via the "Take the Square" campaign (an international extension of the 15-M), the digital uprisings extended to Wall Street and London (Romanos, 2013). The same Spanish cyberactivists were also the first international collaborators in the digital uprisings that took place in Brazil and Turkey in 2013 and in Hong Kong in 2014 (Toret, 2015). The 15-M was the collective expression of an angry multitude exasperated by unemployment, corruption, lack of transparency, and the revolving-door politics of government and big corporations (Castells, 2016; Romanos & Sábada, 2015). Like many online multitudes around the world, the Indignados had no formal structure or recognizable leaders. Unlike militants or activists, they felt they were "normal people," alien to the left-right ideological axis and bipartisan infighting (Calvo, 2013).

The 15-M challenged the status quo legitimized by the Spanish Constitution of 1978, considered to be the untouchable cultural pillar of the Transition (Hughes, 2011). The denial of the conflict that was leading to institutional instability, and the monopoly on power of the two main parties (PP and PSOE), had led to broad political disaffection (Montero, Gunther, & Torcal, 1997). However, it was the economic crisis that stoked interest in politics while corruption cases activated values of transparency and participation.

The harshness of daily living conditions of those who lost their homes and jobs forced the defeat of the rhetoric of intransigence, according to which things could not be changed, in favor of a rhetoric of mobilization which was symbolized by the Spanish slogan "*Sí se puede*." (Subirats, 2015, p. 127)

Originally, this was the slogan of the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH), a grassroots movement against mortgage legislation. It was quickly picked up by Podemos, which had previously adopted Barak Obama's "Yes, we can."

Emerging in 2009 out of the V de Vivienda ("H for Housing") movement, the PAH became the most relevant organization in fighting mortgages and evictions (Haro & Sampedro, 2011; Romanos, 2014). It used digital tools intensively and prevented thousands of evictions, creating its own hybrid digital space that later materialized in the occupation of urban spaces (Álvarez de Andrés, Zapata, & Zapata, 2015). The PAH deployed a five-point discourse: "the housing crisis and the undermining of the right to housing"; "the drama and social injustice meted out to those evicted"; "the governmental and banks' responsibility for the property bubble"; "widespread support, ignored, for the soliciting of a non-recourse loan and backdated payment"; and "a general lack of solutions provided by the government" (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2016, p. 37). The result was a head-on challenge to the discourse and policies of PSOE and PP. On a deeper level, it challenged the economic development model and the way the main political parties governed.

A Challenge to the Official Discourse on the Crisis

The PAH established a relationship of mutual reinforcement and support with the Indignados (Romanos, 2014) and embodied the first challenge to the official discourse that blamed the crisis on a citizenry that had lived "beyond its means." The PAH slogans *No es una crisis, es una estafa* (This is not a crisis, it's a rip-off) and *No hay pan para tanto chorizo* (There's not enough bread for so much sausage [*chorizo* has a pejorative meaning: corrupt officials or business people or, simply, thieves]) used irony to denounce elite shared links and interests (Arribas, 2015, p. 154). Indignation against a whole political and financial class arose.

The sense of deprivation and the identification of those responsible forged a perception of injustice that activated citizens' anger and indignation (Castells, 2012, 2016) and incited revolt. The Spanish DPS offered an open accessible space to initiate individual uprisings that became collective. Although conventional media framed the austerity policies as "inevitable," citizens could share via the Internet their own personal frames of action that merged into an alternative counterhegemonic discourse. The 15-M master frames emphasized discontent and became highly visible on the Net and on the street:

"*Vuestra crisis no la pagamos*" (We won't pay for your crisis), "*Esto solo lo arreglamos sin ellos*" (We can only sort this out without them), "*Que no, que no, que no nos representan*" (No, no, no, they do not represent us). They demanded socially oriented economic and political measures, and a wholesale "democratic regeneration" (Iranzo & Farné, 2013, p. 337).

The Indignados built a new political subjectivity through three frames that Gamson (1992) considers to be vital for any form of collective action. A common indignant identity with a clear antagonist, the Indignados refused to be considered, as one their slogans said, "*productos en manos de políticos y banqueros*" (products in the hands of the politicians and bankers). There was an awareness of the capacity to act, identifying the 15-M with "*La generación mejor preparada de la historia de España*" (The best educated generation in the history of Spain). Finally, the Indignados expressed a new universe of values—the common good and horizontal collaboration—coming from the digital logics of free and open knowledge (Fuster, 2012).

The Triumph of a Consensual Dissent Over the Official Discourse: The 15-M

Main political parties and media framed the Indignados as "antidemocratic," "radical," and "violent" (Micó & Casero-Ripollés, 2014), but between 7 and 8 out of 10 Spaniards agreed with the 15-M agenda (Sampedro & Lobera, 2014). Compared to other Occupy movements, support for the 15-M was more widespread, lasting, and cross-sectional. A study of 6,867 interviews held in the first two years of the movement proved that the sympathy towards the Indignados did not diminish over time, support for their demands and arguments was even higher, and no significant differences could be identified when considering sex, age, occupation, level of urbanization, or geographical area. Paradoxically, those surveys had been interpreted by the then reference newspaper *El País* with editorials and op-eds that sustained a "radicalization" and "deflation" of the movement (Sampedro & Lobera, 2014).

Part of the Indignados's success lay in the intensive use of ICT to activate emotions and common experiences, which developed into a "shared awareness," a "collective mind," and "us by the thousands" (Monterde, 2015; Monterde, Calleja-López, Aguilera, Barandiaran, & Postill, 2015; Shirky, 2011). Frames of solidarity and social justice received more approval than controversial frames that could generate partisan division by blaming political figures (Cristancho, Anduiza, Congosto, Majó, & Vázquez, 2015). Most of the tweets were intended to organize protest activities or to call for action, while distributing information and discussion was one of the major purposes behind the Twitter exchanges (Theocharis, Lowe, Van Deth, & García-Albacete, 2015). Besides, social media was the main tool for gaining information about the 15-M movement beyond face-to-face communication (Fernández-Planells, Figueras-Maz, & Feixa, 2014). These results reflect the key role of social media in providing a public sphere for discussion, conversation, and information diffusion.

Empirical evidence sustains that the growth of the Spanish DPS—measured by the number of users, the repertory of uses, and digital applications—was fostered by social and political actors excluded from the central public sphere. Almost 55% of participants in the 15-M protests stated they had found out about mobilizations via alternative online media, and 49% found out through social networks. These figures are much higher than the 26% and 17% recorded for previous mobilizations (Anduiza, Cristancho,

& Sabucedo, 2014). Between May 9 and May 13, 983,744 tweets were published on the demonstrations called for 15-M (Congosto, 2011). On Facebook, followers of one of the main pages of the movement, "Democracia Real Ya," doubled (from 100,000 to 200,000) in a matter of hours (Piñeiro-Otero & Costa, 2012). According to the Report on Spanish Youth (INJUVE, 2012), one in three young people ages 15 to 18 years received information on events and/or calls to action from the 15-M via social networks. Moreover, 13.2% stated that they had personally disseminated information related to the 15-M via the Internet or SMS. This huge amount of information digitally generated and shared influenced the media agenda, which ended up giving broad coverage to the Indignados's demands (Casas, Davesa, & Congosto, 2016).

The 15-M experimented with participative, horizontal, top-down dynamics that challenged the rigid hierarchical system of the political parties characterized by the 1978 Transition constitution (Şen, 2012). Even the more established political parties reorganized their forms of organization and electoral programs, opening up their structures to greater participation (Romanos & Sádaba, 2015). The Spanish Occupy movement burst out in the 2011 electoral campaign, and altered agendas and framed the PP and PSOE as identical (Calvo, 2013; Flesher Fominaya, 2014). The movement's political influence cannot be recognized in short-term electoral outcomes. The PP won the 2011 elections whereas the PSOE lost the government, but, more importantly, the Social Democrats entered into an internal crisis, which exploded five years later and was not solved until the 2017 primaries, which gave victory to a candidate previously discarded by the party elites. The new leader of PSOE ended his first speech invoking the 15-M.

Transforming the 15-M Into Electoral Results: The End of the Two-Party System

The transformation of indignation into electoral gains began to bear fruit with the formation of Podemos, a party with numerous and appreciable links to the 15-M, both at the organizational and discursive levels (Martín, 2015). Pablo Iglesias, the party leader, openly recognized the participation of Podemos members in the 13-M and 15-M ("Pablo Iglesias Asegura," 2014). In its initial stages, the new party also assumed the horizontal and participative logics that emerged in the heat of the cybermobilizations. However, over time, the deliberative use of digital ICT came to be plebiscitary in nature, losing, according to its critics, the capacity for innovation while the party simultaneously adopted a more centralized and hierarchical architecture. Podemos is not exempt from criticism of becoming vertical and factional; in short, to have instrumentalized and capitalized on the 15-M (Mateo, 2015). Nevertheless, Podemos continues to be the only political party financed through microdonations, which it claims is a guarantee of independence from the financial elites (Tormey & Feenstra, 2015).

The repetition of general elections in June 2016—the results of which produced a similar result to those held six months earlier—consolidated Podemos as the third largest party in parliament, followed by Ciudadanos (see Figure 3). Electoral outcomes underlined the crisis of the two parties that had traditionally governed since the Transition and their difficulty in building policy agreements or governing coalitions with the new political forces at state level.

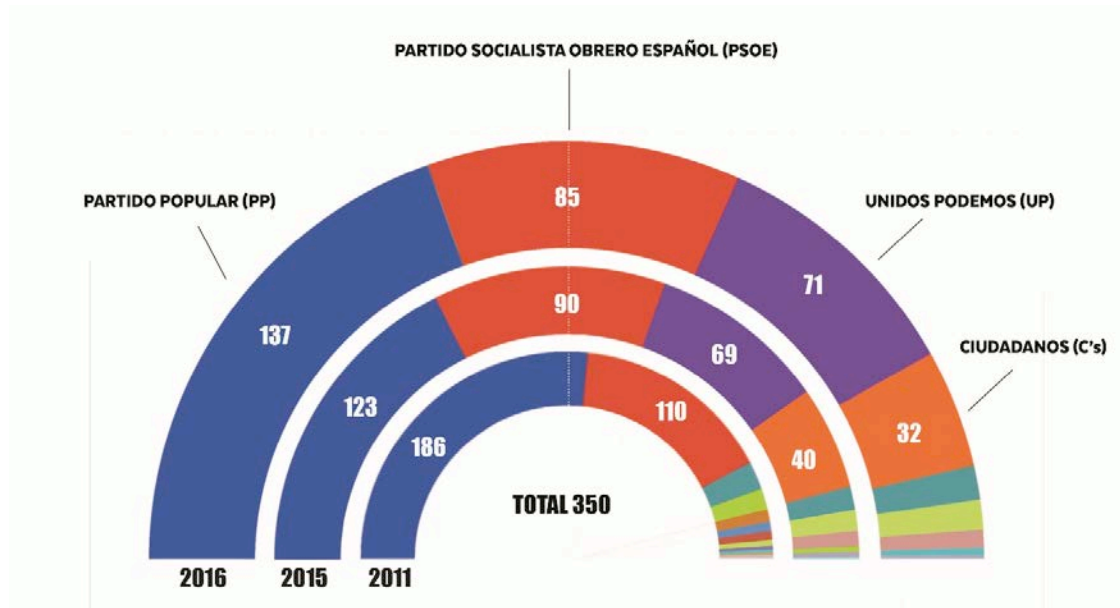


Figure 3. Parliamentary representation of political parties following elections in 2011, 2015 (December 20), and 2016 (June 26). Source: Adapted from ColumnaZero (2016).

As stated before, the party system has been altered, and new formulas of government (at least at the regional and local level) have been innovated. Our historical account relates these changes to alternative forms of communication boosted by DPS, which later acquired counterhegemonic features. In the 2015 general elections, all parties included in their programs the demands of the Indignados, in particular, measures for greater transparency and against corruption (Lobera, 2015).

Two electoral contests after the 15-M, the breakdown of the elitist control of the public agenda, and the public opinion expressions seemed incontestable. Also evidenced is the end of a bipartisan duopoly of the central public sphere. However, political and financial elites still exert considerable influence over conventional media and the two main parties, which continue to be key actors for the game of politics. One year after the last general election, the many and serious political scandals affecting the governing PP had not displaced the party from leading the voting intention. No meaningful political responsibility or structural policy line had changed, and political innovation advanced by the new parties seemed to be subordinated to the role and destiny of future alliances either with PP or PSOE.

Discussion and Conclusions

Although we have not systematically tested all the possible dimensions that may explain the success of a social movement (Giugni, 2009), evidence from over a decade of Spanish recent history shows that an alternative counterhegemonic public sphere exists. Internet and mobile technology have been keen to innovate discourse frames, articulate and express new consensus of public opinion, and, finally, generate a new political party system against elite hegemony. The DPS appears validated as a new

interactive space of meaning construction, activating citizens' frames to interpret and participate in public affairs. Even though digital tools are not necessarily more emancipatory or democratic than other resources of organization or communication, it provides a space to counter mainstream media and official discourse. Since 2004 in Spain, an emerging DPS allowed citizens to present alternative agendas to those promoted by the dominant central sphere. Even though the digital dissemination of individual opinions can lead to fragmentation, it can connect and reconnect shared interests and sentiments of dispersed and very different citizens.

The Spanish DPS was a resource developed and used by citizens and activists to create certain political opportunity structures, and it finally had structural impact. Digital technologies were first meaningfully used during the crisis of governmental control after the March 11 terrorist attacks in 2004, and a critical DPS gradually occupied the center ground. In 2011, the DPS became a multitudinous and counterhegemonic space, with the opportunity structure provided by a double-pronged economic and political crisis. The 15-M relied on digital ICT and expressed a dissident and cross-sectional consensus that had been developing in the previous decade against the institutional status quo. From 2014, this process materialized in electoral gains, with a hybrid media-political system that combined features of both the old and new (communication) politics.

Digital technology provided tools for self-organization to generate connective and collective action, with the ability to confront institutional bureaucracies, including conventional media. Nonviolent action and civil disobedience were the joint strategies of the cybermultitudes, which, over time, raised their critical voices and claimed for political innovation. Seen in historical perspective, the Spanish case suggests that DPS is more effective at playing a disruptive role (under certain circumstances) than at establishing a new hegemony.

Spain's recent history shows that digital technologies have an impact when combining off-line and online mobilizations when expressing majoritarian public opinion and through a long-term accumulation of campaigns. It also seems clear that the media and electoral impact of the DPS results from a hybrid media system taking advantage of the synergies between traditional media (TV) and digital networks.

Digital technopolitics can make a significant impact when collective online and off-line actions are mutually reinforced. Furthermore, calls to protest are heeded with greater intensity when they are linked to voting. This explains the progressive electoral impact of Spanish cybermultitudes in the general elections of 2004, 2008, and 2011—but also its limitations.

We conclude that in certain circumstances, cybermultitudes can make a difference, but that their effect on the political-information system is gradual and cumulative. When socioeconomic crises, institutional degradation, and popular indignation coincide, the DPS can become a viable alternative platform for challenging hegemonic ideas and prompting structural transformations in the political arena. Future and comparative research will qualify the counterhegemonic role of digital technologies, not in themselves, but attending to the collectives who use them and for which ends.

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