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Expanding Ideologies in the Press: Feminist and LGBT-related issues in Spanish Online-Only Opinion Journalism.

This paper analyzes the ideological profile of the Spanish online-only press regarding feminist and LGBT issues. We perform a content analysis of opinion columns sampled from the most popular Spanish online-only newspapers. The analysis focuses diachronically in two moments: May 2011 and June 2016. The coding sheet includes feminist and sexual identity-related categories such as the mention of women and women's rights, abortion, traditional family, LGBT identities, or the role of Catholicism. The Spanish press' conservatism or progressiveness is measured by computing frequencies of mentions and their positive/neutral/negative valuation. Results indicate signs of change regarding the traditional conservatism of Spanish digital media, online-only opinion being less socially conservative in 2016, and paying more attention to women and non-normative sexualities. Findings are discussed and contextualized pertaining to the current wave of feminist activism in Spain, and the emergence of left-leaning online-only newspapers.

Keywords: women, feminism, LGBT, ideology, online-only newspapers

Ideology and feminist issues in the press

The journalistic representation of social and cultural issues related to women and LGBT issues is a consolidated field of study. In particular, there is a body of knowledge on the presence and depiction of women in the press from the viewpoint of Feminist Studies. Charlotte Adcock content-analyzed the presence of women in the media coverage of the 1997 UK general election, noting a "structural marginalisation of women" (2010, 142). In a similar vein, Iñaki Garcia-Blanco and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen researched the representation of female politicians on mainstream French, Italian, Spanish, and UK newspapers, and found that a majority of the news stories referring to women ministers focused mainly on "their gender, rather than on their experience, or any policy-related issues" (2012, 428). Deirdre O'Neill, Heather Savigny, and Victoria Cann (2016) focused on the image of British female MPs in the British press throughout a period of

twenty years, and they found that, by 2012, the gap between women and men was widening, with the personal focus being almost double that of male politicians.

Aside from politics, a study by Chris Patterson, Carol Emslie, Olivia Mason, Gillian Fergie and Shona Hilton (2016) pointed out that, although most drinkers in the UK are men, drinking binges are more often associated with women in the UK media. Sen Jia, Thomas Lansdall-Welfare, Saatviga Sudhahar, Cynthia Carter and Nello Cristianini's study on the representation of women on English-language online newspapers, indicated that mentions of men predominate in all thematic categories, with the exception of "Fashion" (2016, 5). In Spain, María P. Matud Aznar, Carmen Rodríguez-Wangüemert, and Inmaculada Espinosa Morales's study of mainstream newspapers *El País* and *El Mundo* (2017) revealed that only 7.8% of news pieces focused exclusively on women as protagonists. In Norway, Helle Sjøvaag and Truls Anduve Pedersen's study of the representation of female voices in the press indicate that "the only source function where female voices are overrepresented compared with male voices (51.8% women to 48.2% men) is when females appear in the news as children, or as friends or family of other sources" (2019, 223).

Other studies link the depiction of LGBT, or "Queer"—"a shorthand to refer to 'lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender'" (Rosalind Gill 2007, 69)—issues with the representation of women. Although Queer Theory's focus on gender identity is open to debate within the feminist movement (Ana de Miguel 2015, 137-138; Julia Serano 2013, 43), LGBT goals have often been related to feminism (Karen M. Booth 2019). Thus, after studying Jewish-Israeli gay men's perceptions of gays in the media, Amit Kama concluded: "Women's increased visibility in the media and the use of non-stereotypical images are both central to enhancing women's social and economic power in society. Similar arguments are now being made about gays and lesbians in the media"

(2002, 206). Adolfo Carratalá's study about same-sex domestic violence cases in the Spanish press concluded that "the news coverage of violence in gay couples exhibits similar features to those that characterized the news coverage of violence against women during the early years" (2016, 40). Other socio-cultural spheres, such as religion, have also been linked to feminist issues (Francisco Javier Crespo Sánchez 2014; Andrea Pizarro Pedraza 2015).

These findings indicate that women are underrepresented in the press, and, when they appear, they tend to be depicted in banal and/or family-related contexts—thus, when women are central in news stories, "it is in stories that are at the periphery of the news" (Sue Thornham 2007, 87). However, traditional media are not the only media susceptible to examination in terms of the ideology that they convey. Today, print outlets coexist with the online-only press, that is, newspapers and magazines that are published exclusively online, and that should be differentiated from digital editions of newspapers and magazines that have a hard copy version. Even though the ideological implications of the online-only press have been analyzed with less intensity than traditional media, some studies have already approached this newer form, from the examination of the hard-right bias of sites such as the successful WorldNetDaily (known today as WND) (Brock 2005), to the analysis of Spanish-language newspapers *Hispanidad*, *Rebelión*, and *Minuto Digital* as extremist publications (Ramón Reig and Aurora Labio Bernal 2006), to the online newspaper *Malaysiakini* (Malaysia Now) revealing how an independent news portal can challenge political authoritarianism (Janet Steele 2009). More systematic analyses of online-only newspapers can be found in Núria Almiron (2006), who examined Spanish newspapers from a structural approach and revealed a lack of plurality among the most popular media. In 2013, another study concluded that the Spanish digital native press maintained a fundamentally conservative

or right-libertarian tendency (cfr. Antonio Pineda and Núria Almiron 2013: 571). The study relied on an analysis of the main online-only newspapers in May 2011, and corroborated Almiron's previous work. Further work pointed out that the appearance of new left-leaning outlets may be related to a progressive ideological shift in Spanish media discourse (cfr. Aurora Labio and Antonio Pineda 2016).

The abovementioned trends lead us to the issue of media pluralism—after all, the issue of pluralism underlies the discussion on the representation of different ideologies in the media. According to Karppinen (2013), pluralism must be understood as a normative value related to the distribution of media power. Thus, he aims to “reclaim the notion of media pluralism from complacent celebration of increasing diversity and consumer choice to the critical purpose of identifying old and new forms of power asymmetries in the contemporary media environment” (2013: 60). Karppinen (2013: 63) draws on Nancy Fraser's concept of public sphere democratization, and addresses it as a key question for media pluralism, insofar as it would reduce power asymmetries—in Fraser's words: “What institutional arrangements will best help narrow the gap in participatory parity between dominant and subordinate groups?” (1990: 76). On the other hand, and since media pluralism is a multi-dimensional concept—it can refer “to the extent that media contents reflect and serve the demands and opinions of the public, or it can refer to the general diffusion of media power in society on the level of ownership, economic structures and political influence” (Karppinen 2013: 88)—different levels have been distinguished, such as Thomas Gibbons' (1998) distinction between *external pluralism*, which refers to diversity regarding media ownership and structure, and *internal pluralism*, which pertains to plurality of media content. On the basis of the structure/content differentiation, nuances can be found as to the concept of pluralism in itself; hence, Lesley Hitchens (2006) uses the term *media pluralism* to

address media economic structure, whereas *diversity* is used pertaining to media content. Des Freedman is in line with this distinction: “While pluralism refers to the wider political context in which media operate, diversity is related to the media’s ability to acknowledge and express existing social differences through maximizing the choices offered to audiences” (2008: 72).

Notwithstanding theoretical nuances, it is clear that technological and societal factors are direct influences on pluralism. According to Beata Klimkiewicz (2016: 83): “The traditional concept of media pluralism is being challenged by the configuration of media systems and societal transformation resulting from the impact of digital revolution, convergence and multiplicity of media platforms and services”. This leads us to our subject matter—the online-only press, a new form of journalism that is developing in the context of a technological revolution. In this context, the new online press should lead to an enhanced media pluralism that broadens the ideological spectrum and, therefore, heterogeneity regarding information (Marcus, Salinas Muñoz, Yáñez Duamante & Santa Cruz Achurra 2018, p. 1831). With the online-only press, the concept of media pluralism began to be revisited and linked, not only with media ownership, which still plays a key role (Doyle, 2015), but with other indicators of media pluralism such as social news-sharing data (Dwyer & Martin 2017) or the presence of minority voices (Dwyer & Martin 2010). In this line, the digital press has contributed to media pluralism by developing “the opportunities to be heard” (Valcke, Picard & Sükösd 2015, p. 2), and, at the same time, by allowing social issues to be treated from different ideological stances, while giving voice to social groups that were not heard in conservative media contexts.

Notwithstanding the abovementioned studies, there is a gap in research regarding the representation of women and LGBT issues in the online-only press. One of the few

studies in this respect is Joke D'Heer, Justine Vergotte, Sara De Vuyst and Sarah Van Leuven's analysis of the depiction of women in the Canadian digital-native outlet *Vice*. They found that female actors are underrepresented in comparison with male actors, "although the gap between both groups is less pronounced compared with traditional media" (2019, 9). Ruth Mateos de Cabo, Ricardo Gimeno, Miryam Martínez, and Luis López (2014) included an online-only outlet—the right-libertarian *Libertad Digital*—in their study of the representation of women in four Spanish digital newspapers, and concluded that "the online press is helping to perpetuate underrepresentation, gender stereotyping, and discrimination of women" (2014, 69).

Research object and aims

This paper aims to fill the research gap pertaining to the way feminist issues are represented in the Spanish online-only press. In this regard, Spain is an interesting object of study, since it is one of the Mediterranean countries defined by a polarized pluralist media model. According to this model, the news media are "characterized by a high degree of external pluralism, in which media are seen as champions of diverse political ideologies" (Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini 2004, 298). Therefore, the majority of newspapers are positioned on one side or the other of the ideological spectrum. In this context, online-only newspapers are in particular relevant for studying the relationship between journalism and ideological biases. The emergence of internet outlets has provided opinion sources for strongly partisan publics—as showed by "confidential" digital journalism, which is consumed primarily for ideological reasons (María Sánchez González 2008). Pertaining to journalistic genres, we focus on *opinion* articles, on the grounds that ideology and politics are at the core of journalism of opinion (Silvio Waisbord 2006).

Additionally, it must be noted that Spain has witnessed deep political changes in recent years that may have influenced the representation of social groups. Towards the middle of May 2011—that is, a year of global protests, revolutions, and political change—citizen movements began to flourish, which made way for the so called “15-M” (May 15) movement, a mobilization crystallized in the popular protests of May 15, 2011 (Leonarda García-Jiménez, Rocío Zamora-Medina and Rebeca Martínez-Fernández 2014) when thousands of Spaniards mobilized in 60 cities to protest against the establishment, thus predating initiatives such as Occupy London and Occupy Wall Street. Regarding feminism, 15-M helped uniting feminist movements (Carmen Galdón Corbella 2017), reacted against the alliance of neoliberalism and patriarchy, and was related to building strategies of political intersectionality in order to challenge oppressions (María José Gámez Fuentes 2015). The activity unleashed by 15-M crystallized in the rise of a new political party, Podemos. A self-regarded feminist party (Podemos n.d., 3), Podemos emerged in 2014 and widened the ideological spectrum of the political mainstream on the left. Its presence has transformed Spanish politics, to the point where in the April 2019 general election, Podemos finished fourth amongst the main national-level parties. Paradoxically, 2011 was also the year of a general election which handed victory to the conservative Popular Party (PP), the main Spanish right-wing party. Moreover, new right-wing forces have recently gained media attention, such as the pro-market, anti-Catalan nationalist Ciudadanos, and the ultraconservative Vox.

The mobilizations that emerged in Spain after 2011 were accompanied by a change in the digital mediasphere, with a discourse that offered the population alternative sources (Ashifa Kassam 2014). That discourse may be related to the appearance of some post-2011 leftist outlets, since after that year the emergence (or reconversion) of digital newspapers such as *Público.es*, *eldiario.es* and *infoLibre* is

detected. The paper version of *Público.es* was first published between 2007 and 2012; readapting to its current format, it came into being as an online-only newspaper in June 2012, in an edition that managed to maintain itself as a “proposal from the left” (Pascual Serrano 2012, 10). On the other hand, *eldiario.es*, which appeared in September 2012, defines itself as “a voice to the many citizens in Spain who are drowning in a news environment that is less and less diverse” (*eldiario.es* 2015). Finally, *infoLibre* aspires to an independent, progressive, internationally-spirited journalism, and defines itself as “an informative and civic proposal that was born at the moment the economic crisis threatened democracy and journalism alike” (*infoLibre* 2015). Nevertheless, the age of austerity measures has also spawned online-only newspapers that can be placed in the neo-liberal point of the ideological spectrum, such as the free marketeer *OkDiario*, the pro-lower taxes *El Español*, and the fiscally libertarian *El Independiente* (Bianca Sánchez-Gutiérrez and Antonia Isabel Nogales Bocio 2018).

Keeping in mind the recent social and political movements, the discontent facing conservative policies, and the appearance of the new progressive media, we aim to study whether the discourse of Spanish online-only journalism has become more plural after 2011 by taking into account feminist and sexual identity-related issues. Thus, the following research question can be formulated:

RQ₁. *How are feminist and LGBT issues represented and valued in Spanish online-only opinion journalism?*

RQ₁ may be deepened if we consider that previous literature has already addressed the ideological implications of the online-only press. On the one hand, some studies point out a predominance of conservative or ultra-conservative digital newspapers (Almiron 2006, Pineda and Almiron 2013). On the other hand, more recent research indicates that the hard-right panorama has become more nuanced (cfr. Labio and Pineda 2016). This

ideological veering problematizes the formulation of clear hypotheses pertaining to the predominant stance of the press in the period that witnessed the birth of a new left-leaning journalism, since this new media pluralism could have led to a general variation on social issues' addressing.

Therefore, a second research question is pertinent to ascertain possible changes in the biases with which feminist issues are addressed:

RQ2. Is the representation of feminist and LGBT issues in Spanish online-only opinion journalism more plural in 2016 compared to 2011?

Method

This paper's methodology follows previous quantitative work on the representation of ideology in online-only opinion articles (cfr. Pineda and Almiron 2013, Labio and Pineda 2016). Consequently, content analysis (Klaus Krippendorff 2004) is used as a data-gathering technique. To operationalize ideological representations, the widely debated concept of ideology (Lyman Tower Sargent 1996) has been understood as a set of ideas that provide a basis for political action, and is related to power systems (Andrew Heywood 2007). From the viewpoint of the ideological spectrum, the *progressive/conservative* axis was used. Progressivism implies advocating social change and liberal policies that lead to equality and personal development; conservatism opposes change and defends traditional values, religious faith, and the family institution (Ángel Rivero 2016, Heywood 2007). Regarding feminist issues, conservatism is characterized by the belief that "the appropriate place for women is in the home; a strong opposition to abortion; support for required prayer in schools; and opposition to the teaching of sex education and evolution, among other subjects" (Tower Sargent 1996, 111), whereas progressivism advocates freedom, gender equality, and sexual diversity.

On the basis that conservatism and progressivism imply different attitudes, we rely on a set of themes and issues that conform research categories. Some categories come from the scheme used by Rachel Gisselquist and Chapell Lawson (2006) in an analysis of political content, but we have added specific categories to adjust the analysis to our research aims. The analytical variables include the opinion column's main theme, and a set of 12 feminist and sexuality-related categories that refer broadly to women, family, non-normative sexualities, and religion (see Tables 5 and 6 for a complete listing of the items). We draw on the idea that the combination of interrelated socio-cultural categories works as a sign of construction of the image of a social group. Thus, religious beliefs, for instance, may determine media opinions about same-sex marriage (Carol Liebler, Joseph Schwartz and Todd Harper 2009). This sort of links has been recently studied by Jennifer F. Chmielewski, Deborah L. Tolman and Hunter Kincaid (2017), who relate gender, race, and class variables to draw the image of adolescent sexuality that is constructed on the press.

Frequency analysis was chosen (Krippendorff 2004), and the basic coding units were words. The coding sheet computed the mentions of words, and included an evaluative item to the journalists' general value judgment—favorable, unfavorable, or neutral (cfr. Daniel Lerner, Ithiel Pool, and Harold D. Lasswell 1951-1952, 721)—regarding the coded words. For example, when an opinion writer states that the Roman Catholic Church is “undemocratic” and “hates women”—as does Víctor Arrogante (2016) in *El Plural*—such judgment may be coded as unfavorable regarding Catholicism. In any case, the criterion is the value attributed to a term in the context of the whole article. Thus, the notion of context units (Krippendorff 2004) is relevant, since coders may consider other parts of the text—like sentences or paragraphs—to infer the value.

Four-week samples were chosen from opinion columns published in May 2011 and June 2016—the four-week sampling period has already been used in analyses of the press and news media (Doris Graber 1972, Steve Paulussen 2004). The contexts of the sampled time spans must be considered. As a regional and local election period, May 2011 was chosen on the assumption that political opinions would surface more strongly during an election season. Socialist President José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero did not announce his withdrawal until the end of the following July, but tension was already high in the spring. Pertaining to the second wave of our analysis, national elections took place on the 26th of June, a fact that made June 2016 a month characterized by an extreme politicization of public opinion—actually, it was the second national election in six months. Mid-2016 was also a period by which time the PP’s austerity measures had already been transforming Spain for years, hence presenting a scenario of social discontent.

Two databases were used for sampling: the Oficina de la Justificación de la Difusión (Spanish Audit Bureau of Circulations, OJD), which tracks and verifies press circulation figures, and Alexa Web Service—which delivers web analytical insights. Regarding the 2011 sample, the initial count of newspapers taken from OJD and Alexa was filtered on the basis of Alexa traffic ranking in Spain (Table 1).

TABLE 1 HERE

As to the 2016 sample, Alexa provided the following rank (Table 2):

TABLE 2 HERE

The 2011 sample consists of 242 opinion articles. In the case of outlets with a strong opinion section, a systematic random sampling was performed, with different k intervals (Krippendorff 2004) that were applied to obtain similar samples throughout the newspapers whenever possible. Accordingly, 29 articles were provided by each outlet in

most of the cases. A similar method was applied to the 2016 sample, where the number of columns from each newspaper was 27, thus resulting in a final sample of 270 units.

The first coding phase was performed by four post-graduate students. On the basis of several agreement tests, the coding sheet was progressively refined until a 0.83 two-coder agreement was attained by using Krippendorff's α . Since new coders were selected regarding the 2016 sample, a new reliability test was performed in early 2017. In this case, the average agreement was even higher ($\alpha= 0.97$).

Results

Feminist and LGBT-related issues are commonly regarded as social and cultural topics. Table 3 (see Appendices) sheds light on the degree of relevance of socio-cultural issues in the context of the different topics addressed by the opinion columns. In the tumultuous political context of May 2011, cultural and social issues play a very secondary role: culture is the main focus of only one column (0.41% of the total sample), whereas social issues is the main theme of six articles (2.47%). These figures contrast sharply with the weight of the main topics of the columns: Spanish national politics, and the economy, which together amount to more than 50%. Regarding political ideology, socio-cultural issues do not seem to be distinguishing factors: as Table 3 shows, the ultra-conservative *MinutoDigital.com* focuses on social issues as much as the progressive *El Plural*. The June 2016 data (Table 4) do not indicate a substantial change in this respect: in spite of an increase in the number of columns that focuses primarily on cultural and social issues (five and ten, respectively), their frequency is still irrelevant compared to the influence of national and international politics. In any case, it is worth pointing out that a new left-leaning newspaper, *eldiario.es*, comprises 40% of the society- and culture-focused columns in 2016.

Tables 5 and 6 show data on the frequency and depiction of specific themes in 2011 and 2016, respectively. Generally speaking, progressive *El Plural* is the newspaper that addresses feminist and LGBT themes more frequently in both 2011 (33 mentions) and 2016 (39 mentions). The prevalence of progressive outlets is considerably enhanced in 2016, with *eldiario.es*, *Público.es*, *infoLibre*, and Catalanian-nationalist *Vilaweb* accounting for more than 60% of the total of mentions. Moreover, online-only opinion seems to be much more interested in sexual identity-related topics in 2016 than in 2011—in fact, the number of mentions almost doubled in these five years. Pertaining to the most-addressed issues, the main themes in May 2011 are religion and women; in June 2016, the discussion of Catholicism was still strong, and it was mentioned as much as the “Homosexuality / lesbianism” category. As to the journalists’ attitude towards the coded terms (positive/negative/neutral), the representation of themes like women and Catholicism indicates a polarization of attitudes, to the extent that neutral mentions never outnumber the sum of positive and negative mentions.

Although the attitude towards contraceptives is quantitatively irrelevant—if not inexistent—in both 2011 and 2016, the most important information about feminist themes relates to the representation of women and women’s rights; in this regard, the new picture is almost shocking. The “Women / women’s rights” category was almost invisible in 2011, when it was addressed by only two newspapers—as way of illustration, *El Plural* published a piece that advocated a longer paternity leave, so that men would take a greater share of responsibility for raising children (Beatriz Gimeno 2011)—according to the writer of the piece, “Increasing just maternity leave without increasing paternity leave, will only mean that employers will be increasingly reluctant to hire women” (Gimeno 2011). In 2016, however, the “women” category skyrocketed

to 93 cites, thus accounting for 57.76% of the total of mentions of social issues. The category is mentioned by nine different newspapers, and the valuation is overwhelmingly favorable: 73 positive mentions, 19 neutral mentions, and only one negative mention (by free-marketeer *El Confidencial*), with *Vilaweb* leading the favorable depiction of women. As way of example of such a favorable view, one *infoLibre* column mentions feminism, and links it to equality (Paloma Bravo 2016).

The issue of abortion—one of the obsessions of Spanish conservatives—is scarcely addressed: it receives only three mentions in both 2011 and 2016. Abortion had one negative and two neutral mentions in 2011, the former in a *Libertad Digital* column: “Degradation of social health: We are not at the tail of Europe in almost everything. In drugs, alcoholism, family, marriage and school failure, abortions, criminal population, domestic violence and other social health indices, Spain ‘enjoys’ a relevant position, even among the first in the continent” (Pío Moa, 2011). Nevertheless, its valuation has changed in a progressive way, with no negative mentions and two positive depictions in 2016. In this line, *InfoLibre*, for instance, refers to the way the Catholic Church blocks abortion: “The bishop's string quartet asked for the vote for the parties that defend the subject of religion, and put obstacles to abortion” (Raquel Martos, 2016); thus showing how cultural issues are intertwined. The evolution of the attitude towards abortion must be understood in the context of another analytical category: “State intervention in personal decisions / Prohibitions”. This indicator of social libertarianism received six negative mentions in May 2011—including two mentions by *Libertad Digital*—and, interestingly, only one negative mention in 2016—by *Público.es*. This indicates that the evolution of opinion in a progressive direction does not manifest itself homogeneously in every category.

Given that Spain was ruled by a National-Catholic authoritarian dictatorship for decades, the representation of religion proves interesting. Aside from the fact that laicism is mentioned neutrally, or no mentioned at all, the representation of Catholicism is remarkably favourable in 2011 (10 positive mentions by *El Semanal Digital*), while other religions only obtain three positive mentions and are depicted negatively by *Libertad Digital* (four negative mentions) and ultra-rightist *MinutoDigital.com* (six negative mentions). Such a positive depiction is exemplified by *El Semanal Digital*'s notion of "a Catholic society that is an integral part of Europe's idiosyncrasy and reality" (Ricardo Chamorro 2011). In 2016, however, opinion has diversified, with 16 negative mentions and only three positive. For example, criticism against the Catholic Church relates to feminism and LGBT issues in an article by *El Plural*, where the Church is depicted as opposed to gender equality and critical of the "gay empire" and "certain feminist ideologies" that are instrumental in a supposed attack on the family institution, in the words of Bishop Antonio Cañizares (cited in Arrogante 2016). Arrogante (2016) adds: "The prelates, representatives of an anti-democratic 'cult', continue to meddle in public affairs, and against citizen rights". The attitude of journalists is also more open pertaining to other religions, which receive five positive mentions and no negative mentions.

Religious-traditionalist stances are historically linked to the institution of the family. The data show that the representation of this cornerstone of social conservatism underwent changes as well. In 2011, the term was not mentioned at all; in 2016, the "traditional family" category received three negative mentions. As way of example, poet Luis García Montero depicts the traditional family in these terms in *InfoLibre*: "Conservative thinking wields the idea of the family in their social debates to impose traditionalist customs: submissive women, prohibition of abortion, marital fidelity..."

(2016). Inversely, the “gay marriage” category went from being negatively mentioned in May 2011 to being no mentioned at all in June 2016. In this line, the depiction of LGBT themes changed as well: while homosexuality/lesbianism was addressed neutrally in May 2011 by libertarian and progressive newspapers alike, opinion columns depict the “homosexuality/lesbianism” category in a positive light in June 2016 (14 mentions, performed by *El Plural*, *eldiario.es*, and *infoLibre*). Moreover, bisexuality and transsexuality are added to the media agenda—they were not mentioned by any one outlet in 2011—and receive positive valuations by *eldiario.es*, *Público.es* and *El Plural*. In this regard, the title of one *eldiario.es* piece, “Queers, lesbians, bisexuals, and trans, always in the crosshairs” (Ruth Toledano 2016), summarizes the fight against homophobia that was taking place in 2016. However, it must be highlighted that right-wing papers such as *Libertad Digital*, *El Confidencial* or *MinutoDigital.com* did not address women and LGBT topics favorably in 2011; a trend that continued with the conservative opinion columns written in 2016—with the exception of the libertarian-leaning *OKDIARIO*. Thus, it can be stated that the increase in favorable opinion towards women and LGBT issues has not taken place across all ideologies; it can be attributed to the left-leaning outlets.

Discussion and Conclusions

On the basis of the results, online-only newspapers emerge as a relevant research object regarding the role of the press in polarized pluralistic systems such as the one found in Spain. Online-only opinion is polarized pertaining to social and cultural topics, thus indicating that the traditional politicization of the Spanish press continues.

For the media, gender is governed by politics and hierarchies, according to a viewpoint whereby which sex, class, race, and gender are vectors of oppression (Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen 2012). In this regard, the Spanish online-only press may be

understood as a thermometer of political tendencies, as well as a space open to new viewpoints that may widen the margins of mainstream politics and give voice to oppressed groups. Such a widening must be understood in a context where people of all ages are increasingly getting their news online in Spain (ONTSI, 2019), with around 5% of Spaniards using the online-only press as their main information source (Amoedo, 2019). If we consider at the same time that it is mostly younger people in Spain who get their news online (Katerina Eva Matsa, Laura Silver, Elisa Shearer and Mason Walker 2018), online-only journalism emerges as a mediasphere that is susceptible to moving towards movements in which it is precisely the younger citizens who usually play a key role. In this context, the increase in pluralism in Spanish online-only outlets may be related to the impact of the digital revolution, which is challenging the traditional concept of media pluralism (Klimkiewicz, 2016: 83).

Regarding our first research question, the data indicate that feminist and LGBT issues are represented and debated in online-only opinion on the grounds of the newspapers' political ideologies. However, the crucial fact related to feminist issues is that the role of women is much more talked about today: the mentions of women and women's rights increased 620% between 2011 and 2016, thus challenging the traditional underrepresentation of women on the media. This relates to our second research question: to discern possible changes in the context of the rise of new movements—and new outlets. In this respect, the creation of new left-leaning media has led to a more plural online-only journalistic scenario in 2016 in comparison to 2011, as far as women and sexual freedom are concerned. In the theoretical context of media pluralism, this scenario can be understood as an example of growing *diversity* in media content (Hitchens, 2006). Such a conclusion differs from previous studies that pointed out the predominance of a marked anti-left opinion until 2011 (cfr. Almiron 2006,

Pineda and Almiron 2013). According to a tradition of right-wing journalism, in 2011 conservative or very conservative ideologies were being cherished by opinion journalism (cfr. Pineda and Almiron 2013, 571). However, in 2016 conservatism and ultra-conservatism have lessened, and progressive positions, such as the pro-abortion stance, are finding a place in online opinion. These changes may contribute to a more egalitarian representation of women—something which is consistent with previous research indicating that the representation of gender relates to the ideological biases of Spanish newspapers (Daniel Barredo Ibáñez and Martín Oller Alonso 2012). In this respect, the evolution of the Spanish online-only press regarding equality is in line with D’Heer, Vergotte, De Vuyst & Van Leuven study about *Vice* (2019) which indicated that the gap between men and women is less pronounced compared with traditional media. In any case, it must be highlighted that the changes pertaining to a more positive representation of women rely more on the emergence of new left-leaning outlets, than on a global shift affecting newspapers all across the board.

This enhancement of the ideological spectrum—which can be regarded as an example of *internal pluralism*, that is, pertaining to plurality of media content (Gibbons, 1998)—is consistent with the change pointed out by Labio and Pineda (cfr. 2016) regarding the representation of politics and economics in the online-only press. Although we must be cautious in generalising from one-month samples, the data indicate that the left-leaning newspapers that flourished (or converted into online-only) in the turbulent 2011-2016 period—such as *eldiario.es*, *infoLibre*, and *Público.es*—challenged the predominance of right-wing views about women and sexualities. This is coherent with the notion that newspapers like *infoLibre* and *eldiario.es* were created to advocate social justice and to serve people’s needs (Ana Virginia Rubio Jordán 2014). These newspapers are influencing opinion in a progressive fashion: *Público.es*

positively addresses non-Catholic religions, *infoLibre* adopts a pro-abortion stance, and *eldiario.es* stands out as a strong advocate of feminism and women's rights—actually, feminist journalist Anita Botwin (2016) addresses violence against women in *eldiario.es*.

These results lead us to the issue of media pluralism, which pertains to the representation of different ideologies. According to Karppinen (2013), pluralism is related to the distribution of media power; the enhancement of the Spanish journalistic ideological spectrum can be understood in terms of a realignment of power relationships that is fueled by the Spanish feminist and LGBT movements, and their impact on the media. In this regard, our results can be discussed in light of the fact that pluralism refers to the extent that media content reflects and serves public demands and opinions (Karppinen, 2013: 88), hence Spanish online-only media are more plural since they may be reflecting more progressive opinions. This relates to Freedman's notion of diversity, which addresses the media's ability to acknowledge and express social differences by maximizing the choices offered to audiences (2008: 72); in this same vein, the Spanish online-only media market is expressing social differences pertaining to women and sexual freedom. If we take into account the technological variable regarding pluralism, our study illustrates how the new online press leads to an enhanced media pluralism that broadens the ideological spectrum and, therefore, heterogeneity regarding information (Marcus, Salinas Muñoz, Yáñez Duamante & Santa Cruz Achurra 2018, p. 1831). In this context, our analysis of the output of culturally progressive newspapers is in line with the notion that, with the online-only press, the concept of media pluralism has to be revisited, and linked with indicators of pluralism such as the presence of minority voices (Dwyer & Martin 2010). Thus, newspapers such as *eldiario.es*, *infoLibre*, and *Público.es* exemplify the way the digital press contributes to media pluralism by

developing opportunities to be heard (Valcke, Picard & Sükösd 2015, p. 2), and, at the same time, by allowing women-related issues to be treated from different ideological stances, while giving voice to groups that are not heard in conservative media contexts.

Actually, the fact that Spanish conservative contexts have remained the same in a five-year period leads us to think that the Spanish digital press is increasing its pluralism, instead of shifting ideologically. It is not by coincidence that women and LGBT issues are very scarcely addressed by leading right-wing newspapers such as *El Confidencial* or *Libertad Digital* in both the 2011 and 2016 periods, hence showing that conservative journalism has not changed its mind regarding these topics. At the same time, the main right-wing newspapers are not conveying a conservative counter-discourse about sex and gender. Hence Spanish right-leaning media may be behaving differently than conservative outlets from other countries. In a context where previous studies have found arguments against gay marriage in the British press (Adam Jowett 2014), the disappearance of negative views on gay marriage in Spanish newspapers indicates that the issue is losing steam amongst conservatives. In a similar vein, abortion—an issue which generates polarization in deeply religious political cultures like that of the United States—does not seem to be a great concern for Spanish rightist media. As a result, themes like abortion and homosexuality are becoming core issues of the center-left and left-wing press.

Our findings also relate to the social and political context of contemporary Spain. A fringe movement for decades, feminism became institutionalized with Rodríguez Zapatero's Socialist government in 2004—the first government formed by the same number of men and women—which passed legislation such as the Abortion Law or the pioneering Law against Gender Violence. However, the victory of the Popular Party in 2011 entailed a regression in the government's commitment regarding feminism. The

conservatives tried, for example, to make the Abortion Law more restrictive, thus generating a huge demonstration known as “El Tren de la Libertad” (The Freedom Train) in 2014, which somehow sparked contemporary feminist activism. Spanish society was moving forward and fighting for women’s rights, to the extent that a new feminist “wave” is born, according to many Spanish intellectuals (Rosa Cobo 2018). Feminist protests were also motivated by court decisions that were regarded as reactionary, as shown by the case of the survivor of multiple rapes in the 2016 San Fermines festival (Redacción Barcelona 2018). These mobilizations provided a breeding ground which culminated with the March 8, 2018 protests, which were linked to a feminist strike planned for the International Women Day—a day described as “historic” by the national and international media (EP 2018). To sum up, in the mid-2010s several Spanish left-wing online-only outlets were representing women in a more plural way, in a context which was incubating a new feminist wave. Still, it must be determined whether the rise of the political ultra-right in the late 2010s—a brand of patriotic-reactionary extremism embodied by anti-feminist and anti-LGBT party Vox—is changing the way the media react to this wave of unabashed social conservatism.

This paper has attempted to contribute to the scholarship on online-only media and the way they represent feminist and LGBT issues. Given the relevance that digital journalism is acquiring in the contemporary media landscape, more research is needed to delineate the ideological biases of newspapers that have not been included in this study, as well as comparative studies between Spanish online-only journalism and that of other countries. In this regard, additional research on online-only journalism can help us to discern whether digital-native media are raising the awareness on feminist issues and sexual freedom, or they are just echoing the notion that “the news media are still very much male-dominated” (Jia, et al. 2016, 8).

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