

The Internet in the social mobilization: the conquest of the public sphere

The role of the Internet in the planning and development of the 15-M Movement¹

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Abstract

The 15-M Movement in Spain arose from a protest organized via the Internet for the 15th of May 2011. The initial protest arose as a result, on one hand, of the impacts of the economic crisis, and on the other, as a show of the disenchantment felt by large segments of the population towards the political classes. The 15-M Movement can be framed in an increasing cycle of protest which has been augmented by this movement itself.

The importance of the Internet in the 15-M Movement is apparent from the first announcement of the demonstration which began the movement and lent it its name. The call to action caused a large echo in the Internet-based Social Media. The movement starts a battle to conquer its space on the public agenda. Through a combined strategy of street demonstrations and online diffusion of the protests the movement forcefully burst onto the political and media agendas which had proven impervious to the first demonstration. The informative and counter-informative uses of the Internet are crucial to this achievement.

The Internet served far more than other media as a space for debate, confrontation of ideas and opinions, and interpretation of a reality perceived to be unjust. A space in which individual outrage would be, little by little, shared until it generated a climate of support for demonstration and protest.

¹A more extensive analysis can be found in the book “Orígenes y retos del the 15-M Movement” (Origins and challenges of the 15-M Movement) which will soon be published through Icaria press.

1. Introduction

The 15-M Movement in Spain arose from a protest organized via the Internet for the 15th of May 2011. In the wake of the success of this call to protest a space for the mobilization of various activist struggles was consolidated. Out of the first demonstration there arose protest-camps, assemblies, rallies, occupations, marches, workshops, blockades, the halting of evictions, and new local, national and global demonstrations (19J, 15O) which had the 15-M Movement as a point of reference.

The initial protest arose as a result, on one hand, of the impacts of the economic crisis, and on the other, as a show of the disenchantment felt by large segments of the population towards the political classes. The protest's slogan "We are not goods in the hands of politicians and bankers" points to both of these sentiments. Within the sphere of economics two factors stand out: the increased rate of unemployment², especially amongst the youth; and the increased cost of living, which in 2006 was already the motivation for a wave of protests which can be identified as one of the precedents for the 15-M Movement³. To this must be added the precariousness of the employment situation, with pay cuts and increased hours; and measures adopted by the PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers Party) government such as increasing the retirement age, tax increases and labour reforms. In the political sphere the main impacts were the corruption scandals affecting the major parties; but also revelations made by Wikileaks and the Sinde law⁴, which undermined the credibility of, and trust in, the major public institutions so that the political class became identified by the citizenry as one of the principal problems⁵. This disenchantment was also manifest towards the major unions, with the result that, in the perceived absence of guidance from the traditional political organisations and the limited means of political participation, people resorted to demonstration.

In addition to their local dissatisfactions, the Spanish youth were inspired and influenced by earlier protests such as those in France, Greece, Portugal and the UK, the Icelandic uprising and, especially, the Arab Spring. Within Spain the right-to-housing protests (Movimiento Vivienda) mentioned earlier and the student protests against the Bologna Plan⁶, as well others more recent such as the virtual actions against the Sinde law, the Estado de Malestar (State of Discomfort/Unease)⁷ protests, and Juventud sin Futuro (Youth without Future)⁸ can be considered precedents of the 15-M Movement.

In this context the call to action caused a large echo in the Internet-based Social Media. Using Facebook the conveners of the original protest created an initial event⁹ to which 430,878 people

2 Unemployment rate in the first semester of 2011, just before the protest: 21,3%, according to EPA (Working People's Survey)

3 In 2006 the right-to-housing protests arose when the number of evictions increased. In 2008 there were 250 evictions per day.

4 Sinde is the family name of the former Culture Minister who wanted to protect the authors' copy rights in the Internet. This law-project was the beginning of a big protest in the social networks.

5 Since February 2010, political class is perceived as the third main problem for the citizenship, according to CIS barometer. In 2011 political class is set as main problem by 24,7% of Spanish population.

6 University mobilizations from 2008 to 2009.

7 Citizen movement compound of "people of any age and ideologically diverse, but with something in common: we feel outraged at the political and finance system by which we have been betrayed and which are no longer working properly". See: <https://malestarmadrid.wordpress.com/sobre-nosotros/>

8 It begins in 2011 by Madrid university groups initiative' which were aware of job insecurity. This insecurity had increased, according to this platform, after Government's economic measures.

9 <http://www.facebook.com/#!/event.php?eid=170278529687744>

were invited, of which 73,382 indicated they would attend the march and 26,104 approved (clicked “like”) on the Facebook page, as did 31,979 users of the popular Spanish Social Networking site Tuenti¹⁰. A video uploaded to web channel YouTube was watched 13,557 times and the website of the campaign was visited 27,410 times on the day before the protest; all of which give an indication of the online reach of the movement. On Twitter, tags related to the call to action (#15m, #15mpasalo, #alacalle15m, #15mani; translated respectively as: #the 15-M Movement, #the 15-M Movement pass it, #take the street 15-M, #the 15-M demonstration...) were amongst the most popular in Spain during the preceding week, rising to the number one position on the day of the protest, and becoming the most popular tags in the world on the day after the protest, using the variations #acampadasol y #spanishrevolution.

According to the organizers, more than 25,000 people in Madrid and some 15,000 in Barcelona (according to police sources the figures were 20,000 and 6,000 respectively), as well as thousands of people in other cities, took to the streets in response to the call-out, exceeding expectations. According to DRY (Democracia Real Ya¹¹) some 130,000 people demonstrated across the country on the 15th of May¹². According to the estimates of the polling group IPSOS¹³, between 6 and 8.5 million people have (will have) taken part in the protests. Another study by Havas Media gave figures showing 32.97% of people had participated in or visited the protest-camps, and a survey by Metroscopia cited 20% of people as having participated in at least one event, and 8% as having participated in assemblies.

The CIS¹⁴ confirmed a considerable increase in the level of demonstrations after the 15-M protests, due specifically to the attendance at these protests. In April 2011, just before the 15th of May, 11.1% of those interviewed had participated in a demonstration in the past year. This figure reached 15.8% (an increase of 4.7%) in October 2011, and climbed another 5.4% in April 2012, reaching 21.2%. This represents a doubling of the number of people attending demonstrations after the 15-M protests¹⁵.

It must be noted that government reports had already noted an increase in public actions since the beginning of the crisis. The final figures of 2010 recorded 19,336 protests, 36% more than the report of 2007, before the outbreak of the economic crisis. Therefore the 15-M Movement can be framed in an increasing cycle of protest which has been augmented by this movement itself.

Several newspapers and national television channels covered the initial protest. The main national paper, El País, ran the news and a photograph on the front page of its online edition beneath the headline, “The demonstration of 'los indignados' musters thousands of people across Spain” (“La manifestación de 'indignados' reúne a varios miles de personas en toda España”). Despite this, the lack of media coverage of the demonstrations of the 15th of May was widely criticised by activists across the online Social Media. The demonstrations that followed, and especially the protest camps, considerably increased the mass-media coverage of the protests, which came to have a bearing on the political agenda and the local Madrid elections on the 22nd of May.

The level of interest taken by the Spanish population in this phenomenon is evident. Between June

10 Social network in the Internet, very popular among teenagers.

11 In English: Real Democracy Now, calling organization of the 15th May demonstration

12 DRY press communication: 17-05- 2011 <http://www.democraciarealya.es/prensa/>

13 http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2011/08/03/actualidad/1312388649_737959.html

14 Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (Sociological Research Center, in English), it depends on the Government

15 <http://www.ciencia-explicada.com/2011/10/analisis-estadistico-del-movimiento-15m.html>

and July 78% of Spaniards, some 30 million, were aware of the 15-M Movement, according to a survey taken by IPSOS. 21% considered themselves quite informed about the events, 26% slightly informed, and 22% were unaware of the movement. According to the June public opinion poll by CIS¹⁶, 50.2% of Spaniards had followed the news about the movement, while a study by Havas Media cited 72.41% as following the 15-M Movement across the same dates.

When it comes to sympathising with the 15-M Movement, according to CIS figures 70.3% of the population who had followed the movement with great or significant interest had a positive opinion of it. Of these 26.3% had a very positive opinion, and 44% a significantly positive opinion. Support for the movement increases to 83.37% in the study by Havas Media, in which 81.97% of people considered the movement to be positive for Spain. In a survey by Metroscopia, 54% indicated support for the movement, compared with 27% who were critical. In regards to the proposals and claims of the movement, the same survey reported that 73% of people thought the demonstrators were right. Quoting similar figures, a survey by IPSOS found 76% considered their claims reasonable, while 7% were opposed and 17% took no position.

The available information confirms significant participation in the protests (which increased during the protest-camps and in the large gatherings such as the 19J and 15O, in which attendances surpassed those of the demonstrations on the 15th May), a high level of awareness, substantial following of the news, sympathy for the protests and support for its claims.

Participation	
Havas Have you participated in or seen any of the protest-camps?	32,97%
Metroscopia Participation in assemblies or rallies.	28% (20% in rallies and 8% in assemblies)
IPSOS Participation visiting protest-camps, attending assemblies or turning up to demonstrations.	6-8.5 million (of which 0.8-1.5 million participated intensively)
Awareness	
IPSOS	78% (30 million)
Monitoring the news	
CIS	50,2%
Havas Are you following the development of this movement and of the protest-camps?	72,41%
Sympathy	
CIS	70,3%
Havas	81,37%

16 <http://imagenes.publico-estaticos.es/resources/archivos/2011/7/6/1309953070828Barometro%20junio%202011.pdf>

Do you support, or are you in general agreement with this protest movement?	
Metroscopia Sympathy compared to rejection	54%
Support for proposals	
Metroscopia “they're basically right”	73%
IPSOS “Their claims are more than reasonable”	76%

Table 1. Table comparing the studies by CIS, Metroscopia, IPSOS and Havas Media. By the authors.

The 15-M Movement arises from a critique, and from an exploration, of alternative forms of democracy. From these arise other critiques, centered on ideas of participation and social justice, and based around a solution to the financial crisis. Democratic issues will be the main concern of the movement (as indicated by the name of the convening platform: Real Democracy Now!) from which will emerge not only concrete proposals for political reform (such as electoral law reform, anti-corruption and transparency measures, etc.) and social justice (rejection of the bank bailout, a freeze on evictions, redistribution measures...) but also discourses and practices of radical democracy (direct, deliberative/discursive).

Its impact, beyond the concrete achievements in the short-term, aims at (points towards?) the consolidation of new actors, practices and political discourses in the frame of the new global movements, within which the 15-M movement is inscribed.

2. Theoretical framework and Methodology:

The theoretical framework of this text assumes the interconnectedness of social movement theories and media theories. From the perspective of social movements, the integration of the theories of Resource Mobilisation (RMT) and the approach of the New Social Movements (NSM) contributes a complex analytical framework which emphasises the relevance, for the NSMs, of the study of these movements in the context of the Information Society. With respect to the theoretical traditions of communication, we take as a reference point the critical perspectives of such groups as the Frankfurt School and the Political Economy of Communication, which establish the movements as critical subjects. In the same critical vein, we base ourselves in those theories that underline the active role of the recipient, such as Cultural Studies and Peoples' Communication. These theories are relevant for an analysis of the adaptation of the movements to the new media, in which the user acquires a renewed relevance. Despite this theoretical base, this text intends to be an empirical work. To this end, theoretical references will be used primarily to frame the declarations of the movement's protagonists, which form the basis of this analysis.

The empirical methodology of this study is based on the testimony collected through interviews undertaken in Seville during a conference on Free Culture and Technopolitics¹⁷, and in three discussion groups which took place in Seville, Madrid and Barcelona at the beginning of 2012. The groups were based on several general themes, and this text focuses on one of these: that of the role

17 <http://www.hackandalus.net/>

of virtual networks in the demonstrations.

A more extensive analysis of the information obtained from these discussion groups can be found in the book “Orígenes y retos del the 15-M Movement” (Origins and challenges of the 15-M Movement) which will soon be published through Icaria press. We would like to thank Julia Cañero, Jordi Bonet, Alessandra Caporale and Ángel Calle for the field work which they performed with us. An special mention to Pedro Ibarra and Marta Cruells for coordinating the book. We also want to thank the Betiko Foundation for its support, and to Icaria publishing house for editing this book.

3. The role of the Internet in the 15-M Movement.

The importance of the Internet in the 15-M Movement is apparent from the first announcement of the demonstration which began the movement and lent it its name. Developing the techniques of preceding movements in Spain (such as the 13-M protests organized through mobile phone text-messages (SMS) and the housing movement managed by email), on May 15th thousands of people responded to a call spread, this time, through online social networks (OSNs). The success of this method (which would later unleash a considerable round of protests) shaped a true movement or, at the very least, a space of protest beyond that of the isolated demonstration, and consolidated this practice as part of the basic repertoire of protest of a youth that has incorporated ICTs (Information and Communications Technologies) into their way of performing politics.

However, the role of the Internet and new technologies goes far beyond the evidently usefulness of these networks for the organization of the demonstrations which began the 15-M Movement. Social networks and the Internet also form part of the network of communication which has affirmed the perceived injustice of a crisis that is not only economic, but also political and cultural. Information about the social context that would become the motivation for the outrage expressed by the movement was spread through all media, as well as the Internet, but the Internet served far more than other media as a space for debate, confrontation of ideas and opinions, and interpretation of a reality perceived to be unjust. A space in which individual outrage would be, little by little, shared until it generated a climate of support for demonstration and protest. The OSNs (along with other forms of social interaction such as informal conversations with friends, families, workmates and neighbors) wove a prior consensus which was necessary for the very idea of protest which these networks would later assist in organizing.

From this first latent phase of the movement the organizers moved into a phase of activity, albeit one still publicly invisible. The creation on the social network Facebook of the Plataforma de Coordinación de Grupos Pro-movilización Ciudadana (Platform for the Coordination of Pro-demonstration Citizens' Groups), precedent of Democracia Real Ya! (Real Democracy Now!), indicates the presence of activist action in which the seed of the movement was already planted. This activity would develop almost entirely on the Internet before leaping into the public sphere en the visible stage that commenced on the 15th May.

However this eruption into the physical world did not mean the abandonment of the virtual world. Even though the physical appearance in the streets of thousands of demonstrators greatly empowered the participants, the Internet continued to be essential for the coverage and spread of the protest, underlining its meaning and relevance. Through a combined strategy of street demonstrations and online diffusion of the protests the movement forcefully burst onto the political

and media agendas which had proven impervious to the first demonstration. This was reflected in the first attempted protest-camp in Sol¹⁸, the removal by police forces which followed, and the diffusion of these events through social networks which increased feelings of outrage and increased the call for new protest-camps (this time on a massive scale) in the plaza, giving rise to the spectacular images which, in a similar manner to those from Tahir Square in Cairo, inevitably attracted the attention of the media.

The Internet served to complement to the organisation firstly of the protest-camps and, later, of the neighborhood assemblies, as well as to aid the spread of new protests. But beyond this practical use we can also emphasize the way in which the culture, the language and the symbols of the Internet suffused the actions and the discourse of the movement. 'Anonymous' masks, banners which copied the language of computers ("Error 404: Democracy not found"...), "open source" demonstrations, slogans in the form of Twitter hash tags... The open possibilities of the Internet influenced not only the culture, but also the proposals of the movement, such as those of Democracy 4.0¹⁹ which intends to improve the representative system by facilitating the direct participation of voters through online voting. The Internet and new technologies are not, therefore, a simple tool of the 15-M Movement, but are rather at the very heart of the movement. They explain in part its existence, they made its blossoming possible, they constitute one of its principle organising structures, they are embedded in its culture, its language and its discourse, and they embody some of its proposals. In no uncertain terms the Internet symbolizes the "other possible world" to which the demonstrating youth contrast the establishment. Against an authoritative and scarcely representative democracy they contrast the direct and participative democracy of the plazas. To the hierarchical, bureaucratic and ultra conservative political parties and unions the present the casual freshness and horizontal hierarchy of the assemblies. Against the monopoly of corporate and unidirectional media they hold up the multiplicity of voices and conversations on the Internet.

"The Internet is Democracy" declared some of the activists. The 15-M Movement, in its demand for a "real democracy", identifies its values of horizontality, participation and liberty with the Internet, with its construction based on these same principles (Castells, 2001).

Although the idea of a public that is passive and defenseless in the face of the omnipresent power of the media (the theory of the hypodermic needle, the Frankfurt school, etc.) has been slowly ousted by communications theories which increasingly signal the active role of the audience and the limits of the influence of the media (limited effects, theory of the two stages, uses and gratifications, Cultural Studies...), the classical theory of communication has not managed even to analyse the transcendence of the change from the traditional media model to the interactive model of the new media. The reinterpretation by the public of media messages as proposed by Cultural Studies, the limitation of effects due to the filter of social structure in which recipients are embedded conceived by the theories of double flow, and the figure of the leader of opinion, and even the proposals of peoples-, or alternative-, communication which, superseding mere active-reception, are already proposing the interchangeability of the roles of receiver and transmitter, are all insufficient for tackling the magnitude of the change. It seems that, despite serving as a fundamental base for thinking about new media such as the Internet, these theoretical traditions are children of the traditional mass media defined by their unidirectionality and a more and more diluted, but still existent, general passivity of the recipient public.

18 Madrid main square, where the protest camp started

19 <http://demo4punto0.net/>

3.1. The online communication of the 15-M Movement

The majority acceptance of the 15-M Movement by the general populace, including those who least use the new media (generally older generations) indicates the pertinence of those theories cited which postulate a silent and passive, but concurrently critical reception of the dominant discourse. A critical attitude viewed with surprise by the elite, but felt individually by thousands of people. This is the point in which the Internet plays a fundamental role. In contrast to the fragmented audiences of traditional media, the Internet connects this dispersed outrage, breaking the isolation of the recipients, who begin to feel that they are not alone; that they are many and that they might do something together, according to those who were interviewed. One activist emphasised “how a consciousness had awoken in many people” now that...

... suddenly through social networks and everything we have all seen that we are supported, no? They've become much more widespread and so logically the more we act, clearly the more powerful we feel ourselves to be.

The Internet let people share the frustration expressed by the information spread on it, and, moreover, by the information communicated by mass media which are still the main characters of the public agenda.

Above all, the Web is the space that made possible the encounter for the individual anger to become collective outrage, and the outrage become into action. So an activist from the discussion groups spot it out, for him was really important to discover that he “was not alone”:

(...) It came a time when the remarks about the news that you make at home to your wife, and the outrage that produce you to watch the news and so on, you can take it to the street and share it with other people. You see that you are not alone, that you are not fool, or crazy. There are more people who agree with you, so then maybe the fools and the crazies are the ones that do not have your point of view. That..that really encourage me, so to say (...).

This quote also express this feeling:

This movement take place because many not connected people are thinking at home that they are mad because they disagree with everything. Out of the blue, thanks to Internet, they realize they are not alone.

Melucci (1999) theorized about the latent and the active movement's phases. Klandermans (1988) focus on the consensus formation and mobilization. In both cases there is an evolution from the perception of injustice to the formation of the group identity. In 15-M Movement we can observe the transition from latent face to consensus formation through a definition of a shared situation. Through deliberation and social interaction, it builds an injustice frame in the on-line as well as in the off-line space. Subsequently the movement gets into action. First, on the Internet, where it organizes and do the call-for-action for the 15th demonstration. Later, it develops itself on the street, before and after the demonstration.

From 15th May the movement starts a battle to conquer its space on the public agenda, not only media but also the political and electoral ones. Initially, all were very restrictive to include 15-M

Movement's claims²⁰, but the movements wins the battle as long as it manage to take the electoral agenda by including in it many topics to debate. The informative and counter-informative uses of the Internet are crucial in this phase.

Despite the remarkable succeed of the 15th May demonstrations, “it could have come to nothing”, as an activist says. Nevertheless the participants empowerment, plus the outrage due to the lack of media coverage, give an impulse to new direct actions in the public space (protest camps, blockades, etc) that were reinforce by the Internet mobilization. Face-to-face and on-line actions were coping together until the undoubtedly become prominent in the public sphere. So explains it an activist:

We fully exploit all the media that we have at our disposal, those that we didn't have before, like Twitter or Facebook, and so on. We have the chance to call people.

Indeed, the outrage burst even more when the video of the second night eviction was spread like a virus on the Internet. It generates an “Streisand effect”²¹ that fulfilled the square of people, with thousand and thousand of protesters. From this time, neither media nor politics could ignore the movement and the images of Sol square crowded with people were spread all around the world as a copy of Tahir or Syntagma Square.

The 15-M Movement have achieved to be the main topic of the mass media agenda during several days. In that way it overcome the media news filter and obtain relevance. According to agenda-setting theory (McCombs, 2006), media do not influence on “how” people think, but on “what” they should think about it. The movement successfully included into the public and media sphere topics as: housing, bank's rescue, electoral law, corruption, etc.

Nevertheless, as the agenda-setting theory develops it establish that the power of media also focus on “how” the public opinion thinks about the issues that are part of the political agenda. Framing concept pays attention to the media treatment about public topics and social actors. Regarding to 15-M Movement, it manage to have media relevance, but it did have to face the criminalization and discredit to obtain favorable reports from the media as well as from the politics. Most of the activist have a critic point of view about the news coverage that the social movements have:

In the square they record the hippie (perroflauta²² in Spanish) rolling a cigarette, because it was a cigarette, and you know it, so do you, but not everybody does, so it looks like a drug smoker; they also record some punkies...

The use of these kind of language in the media, like “perroflauta”, exemplifies the pejorative media discourse that many activists criticized and try to turn this concepts upside down by creating new ones as “porraflauta”²³ or “papaflauta”²⁴ (respectively, police and catholics).

It is difficult to know to what extend participants' live experience communicated via social networks could have counteracted the mass media critics, or even how the audience develop a critical point of

20 See Candón Mena, J. (2011)

21 “Streisand effect” is the name for an Internet response to a censorship behaviour or information hiding. When the censor is caught, the Internet users react over-spreading the information.

22 Perroflauta: literary means “dog” and “flute”. It is a negative word for hippies and people with alternative outfit (Mohawk haircut, earrings, tatoos...)

23 Porraflauta means “stick” and “flute”.It alludes to police.

24 Papaflauta: “The Pope” and “flute”.It alludes to catholics that joined the Pope's visit to Spain.

view to these messages. It do like clear that to have more plural and first hand information in the social networks play some role to this respect. Therefore, activists are aware of their need to use the Internet to create alternative media that spread a more positive image of the 15-M Movement to avoid the media barrier, that, from their mind, corner the movement.

15-M Movement set big changes in many aspects, changes from which there is no way back. Communication is one of these changes. 15-M Movement breaks the “monopole of the truth” that mass media have. People are moved by the movement.

Activist perceived the digital gap and the consequences that the media coverage have on the social reality perception. A feature of 15-M Movement, and other new movements as Occupy Wall Street or Yosoy132²⁵, is the prominent role of youth that is used to deal with new technology. These youth is called “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001), who have wide knowledge and to whom technology is inserted in daily life. Therefore, an activist states:

15-M Movement is a digital native moment. That means that it understands decentralization, meritocracy, on-line self-organization, formation, information and self-information.

15-M Movement activists repeatedly refers to the fact that many people, specially adults, depend on mass media to be informed and how it reflects on a negative movements perception:

15-M Movement in generating political proposals. We know because we are involved, but people cannot see it. People check tv or newspaper and see hippies (perroflautas) and the ones that have broken a phone box (...) That's what they see: advertisements.

No matter how painful it is for us, we do not reach general public. Currently many people only watch TV news; not everybody has access to the Internet. So television says something about some topics, they believe it.

In an Occidental context, digital gap is generational. That let us reflect on the future deep changes caused by Internet use. The impact of Internet on politics is clear and demographic change could soon lead to most of the population to become “digital native” and spread changes in the way we get the information and the way we take part in public issues.

3.2. the Internet as the 15-M Movement's organizational infrastructure

Apart from the communicative role that the Internet plays, allowing users to transmit as well as to seek information, the Internet is evidently so useful as an organizational tool for the indignados movement that it has become the organizational infrastructure of any movement that lacks a formal organization. In the words of one activist, the Internet:

Is the only tool we have, we do not have any other solution. I do not know how trade unions or parties work (...) but we do not have any other tools, apart from this.

the Internet is an opportune organizational tool for new social movements due to the fact that they both share similar principles. We can establish an analogy between the Internet – whose

25 Translated I am 132. Student protests in Mexico.

characteristics are horizontality (multi-directional, one-to-one or many-to-many communication, unlike the hierarchical one-to-many model that the mass media uses), interactivity, decentralization (or reticularity), and delocalization (or global reach) – and the preferences of the new movements for horizontal, participative and informal forms of organization, as well as a decentralized coordination in a collective autonomous network that can have a global reach.

The new movements such as the 15-M Movement have achieved reticular forms of organization, horizontal or participative, as a result of historical process independent of, but nevertheless concomitant to the network's development. The crisis of traditional organizations and the critiques of their hierarchical forms of organization make that many new movements organize themselves in a horizontal way. The Internet adapts to this organizational structure because of its reticularity. It determines the communicative style; one-to-one or many-to-many, promoting horizontal communication –and by extension, horizontal organization. The new movements promote active participation in the collectives. This mode of operation is linked to the critiques of representation; and it bets on more participative forms of direct democracy, the value of autonomy and direct action forms. As an interactive media, the Internet promotes the participation of individuals. With regards to informality, it is reflected within the movement's organizations which tend to be set up as informal networks of affinity. The Internet allows them to get organized and coordinate with minimum material infrastructure and an aggregation around shared interests. As a complement to this horizontal, participative and informal form of collective organization, the Internet's influence also affects the decentralized coordination between groups, i.e. at an inter-organizational level. This is confirmed by one activist, who states:

Before the movements had ideals, but did not have the appropriate tools to fulfill them; now we have the Internet as long as other tools to make into practice our horizontal, assembly, participative...ideas.

Nevertheless, the same activist warns that “the Internet can also become a non-horizontal space as a consequence of the structureless tyranny”, referring to the classical text by Jo Freeman (1972).

In any case, it is important to point out that the 15-M Movement, once it has taken to the streets, and especially after its process of decentralization into the neighborhoods, it gives itself an organizational structure based on in-person assemblies, commissions and coordinating meetings that are complemented by mailing lists, groups in social networks and other internet media. In the movement in-person profiles and organizational forms coexist with virtual ones. As an example of the first type we can look at the convening organization Democracia Real Ya (Real Democracy Now), which, from an activist's point of view: “... has an amazing communication system and internal organization (...), everything is really well organized”.

In fact, until the neighborhood assemblies' consolidation, the Internet was the main organizational means, as we can observe here:

the Internet was (used) during the first days and until the 15-M Movement was decentralized to the neighborhoods; because when the organization arrived in the neighborhoods, into smaller groups, it became easier.

In any case, the street and the online organization cannot be neatly separated:

The geographical space as a literal and physical confluence of the struggles was

important, but so were the social and communication networks

So the strategy of decentralization to the neighborhoods has its reflection in the online movement's media and associated collectives. DRY's website and its online profiles were complemented by Acampada Sol and other public groups and profiles, and later on the virtual spaces multiplied, for each commission or neighborhood.

Online and face-to face meetings are complementary to the 15-M Movement's organization, as an activist from the Barcelona discussion group points out: "(but) we should not get overexcited with the Internet and forget about other things", despite the fact that the Internet is "undeniably" important.

Furthermore, the transnational dimension of the 15-M Movement is made been possible due to connections made through the Internet: globalized mobilizations such as 19-J in Europe and later 15-O; the extension and influence of other countries' movements (like Iceland's revolution, the Arabic spring in Egypt or Tunez, the Occupy movement in Great Britain and the States, the Chilean students, yosoy132 in Mexico or the protests in Greece...). An activist expresses this idea:

Networking and network information systems are a breach that did not exist before, and one which is widening, and widening, and because of this the movement is international.

On the other hand, the Internet is a participation tool which complements the work of the face-to-face assemblies:

The Net is absolutely crucial. Without the Internet, I would not have caught up on what the 15-M Movement was doing. You do not always have to attend, but you can go back and forth and keep informed thanks to various networks and media. We meet once a week, I have shift work, and sometimes I can go and sometimes I cannot go, but I find out what is happening thanks to the Internet.

The participation of activists is the most important resource of the new movements, like the 15-M Movement, which do not have a formalized structure with people professionally engaged in organizational tasks. The paid and professional dedication, characteristic of more formalized organizations –such as political parties, trade unions, pressure groups, or NGOs – corresponds to an organizational type described by McCarthy and Zald (1973) as social movement organizations (SMO). In movements like the 15-M Movement this professionalization does not exist. New movements are characterized by informality and by an attitude of active participation of individuals, requiring more effort on their part since they are involved in the organization and design of collective action. Therefore its most valuable resource is "social capital" and ICTs that "play an increasingly important role in the creation and allocation of social capital through the ability to mobilize material resources, information and knowledge" (Sáez and Sierra, 2008).

The activists have to take time to work or go to school and other commitments (family, leisure, etc.). The time to participate is to some extent that leftover from these priority activities. The Internet plays an important role in this regard. Asynchronous communication (through mailing lists, forums, etc.) broadens the possibilities for participation for the time-constrained activists, easing the need to participate at any specified moment. On the other hand, face-to-face meetings and assemblies require rigid timetables, precluding the participation of some activists. Internet-based partici-

pation relaxes this requirement, giving people the opportunity to participate according to personal or professional needs. An activist from Barcelona's discussion group explains an example of how useful the Internet is to asynchronous participation:

We have a great partner in my working group (about health). She has chronic fatigue and a multi-chemical syndrome, so she cannot go out to the street because she will literally die because of polluting agents. So she is performing great work from her house via the Internet. Without her, our group would be worthless.

The debate over online vs. offline participation is one of the big issues that comes up when talking about the use of ITC's in social movements. It is a complex topic in which choosing between one participation method or another does not make sense, as reality blurs the boundaries between the two spheres.

On one side, face to face participation requires great effort and it is restricted by time, as it implies synchronized attendance, and trips. In fact, the 15-M Movement's decentralization process to the neighborhoods was a strategy that encouraged participation of the suburbs' inhabitants, especially in big cities such as Madrid or Barcelona. Protest-camps also create a participation filter because only students, old people or the unemployed have enough time to be involved.

On the other hand, there is the well-known digital gap, which refers not only to access restrictions but also to the skills and knowledge required to participate. In the Spanish context this gap is above all generational, although it is also influenced by habits and personal preferences, educational level and social class.

In general we can say that, if not everybody has Internet access; neither can everybody attend face-to-face meetings. Both participation routes are complementary; and the Internet expands the pre-existing avenues.

Therefore, the 15-M Movement is a hybrid movement that moves itself between the Internet and the street. The virtual components of other movements such as Free Culture, and the precedent of campaigns against Sinde's law, come together in the offline protest of a movement whose claims exceed the Internet's frame. Nevertheless, both spaces coexist together. The virtual sphere is used for calling, spreading, organizing and participating; and the value placed on it by activists should not be understated.

3.3. Risks and opportunities of digital activism

Nevertheless, the Internet is a space of opportunity and risk, and activists are aware of both. High among the activists' concerns is the potential for the surveillance of their electronic communications and a resulting loss of privacy, turning the Internet into a kind of "panoptic society" (Foucault), "Big Brother" (Orwell), or "control society" (Deleuze). As an activist involved in the Seville discussion group said: "The Government knows exactly what we are doing".

The general view is that the Net, despite the fact that is partly defined as a space of control and surveillance, has been successfully appropriated by the activists. They use it strategically, turning the situation upside down.

This is a system of control, which we have been able to turn to our own ends and use,

but even so, having turned it around and used it as a tool to help us meet and take to the streets, that's the interesting point; they still have control of it, and they're interested in it, they still dominate it.

What has happened is that the tools that have united us, such as smartphones, mobile phones that connect to the Internet, were expected to become a device for tracking your location, that would send you advertisements and allow social control, but we have turned them around and are using these tools to our advantage.

An activist from Sevilla gave the example of Mumble software and the way the movement use it to an end utterly different from its original purpose: “for the meetings online we use a chat program that was created for online war games. Now we give it new possibilities”. This same activist summarizes how...

...this is a fully-fledged hacking strategy. I mean, Facebook is financed by banks and we use its platform to build campaigns against banks. We use their own platform against them.

3.4. Identification with the Internet and the 15-M Movement's role in technological innovation

For all its pros and cons, the Internet is considered to be essential for the 15-M Movement, which not only gives the Internet an instrumental role, but also influences the development of the Internet itself. According to Castells (2001), people transform technology by “appropriating, modifying and experimenting with it. It especially occurs with the Internet, as it is a communication technology”. Movements such as the 15-M Movement contribute to technological development by designing tools as Oiga.me²⁶, Propongo²⁷, Bookcamping, etc. as well as giving a boost to pre-existing projects such as Lorea/N-1. Groups like Hacksol, and later on 15Hack²⁸, work on developing applications and supplying movements with technical support. These groups create tools for activism that try to avoid the risks associated with commercial networks and services:

Inside the Internet there are alternatives as well, there are people who have been working many years on alternatives within the Internet in order to prevent it from being a tool of control and to prevent you being controlled.

Many activists are also aware of the peculiar origins of the Internet and its design in a space of autonomy and freedom, which will imbue new technologies with these values. According to an interviewed activist who quotes *"A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace"* (Perry Barlow, 1996), “the Internet was created by technicians and geeks to belong to everyone”. Others believe:

When the Internet was built all pages had an editing button. the Internet's architecture was conceived to be open and horizontal, but in the end they shut the gates.

The movement itself assumes the defense of the Internet as one of its goals. A powerful identification with the technology means it is considered something of their own that must be defended against attempts at control and surveillance.

26 Citizens mobilization platform on the Internet: <https://oiga.me/>

27 Proposals to create an electoral citizenship agenda <http://propongo.tomalaplaza.net/>

28 Federal computer group for the 15-M Movement: <https://n-1.cc/pg/groups/233499/15hack/>

In fact the Internet is democracy, they say, in the sense that you are anonymous and you can explain whatever you want, you can have your blog and that is what has united all the peoples of the world (...). There are also demonstrations on the Internet, so it is not only a tool, but also a battlefield, because there are attempts at repression on the Internet, attempting to stem freedom of expression, attempting to monopolize it.

(Discussion group, Barcelona)

As a member of DRY Sevilla explains, “this mobilization would not have been possible before the Internet”. But the Internet is more than a tool that made it possible to move from discontent into action, it is also a part of the culture of a movement that identifies itself with the medium, shares its values and assumes the defense of neutrality and freedom on the Internet. As one activist describes it:

The qualitative leap of the 15-M Movement has been the use of the Internet and the adoption of its inherent values. From this change, there's no turning back.

Hacking the media, rebooting the system, setting free the cultural codes and sharing both the material and symbolic resources are the end goals of a movement in which the virtual inspires the real. A hybrid movement that reclaims in the street the real democracy that it enjoys online.

4. A brief conclusion

The main assertion of this work is that the Internet is much more than a communications tool used by the 15-M Movement. It is also the movement's organizational infrastructure and a means for activists to participate in the debates and actions of the movement. But even beyond these instrumental uses, the Internet embodies the 15-M Movement's values, to the point where activists identify with it, are involved in its defense and influence its development. For the 15-M Movement, to quote McLuhan, “the medium is the message”, or, as one activist summed it up: “the Internet has been fundamental, without the Internet all of this would have been impossible”.

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