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# New Intermediations of the Electoral Information Flows. Changes in the Digital Public Sphere in Election Campaigns in Spain (2008-2015)

Josep Lobera <sup>1</sup> & Víctor Sampedro <sup>2</sup>

1 Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain

2 Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Spain

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## Corresponding author:

Josep Lobera, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Departamento de Sociología – Sociology, C/ Francisco Tomás y Valiente, 5 Madrid 28049, Spain

Email: [josep.lobera@uam.es](mailto:josep.lobera@uam.es)

## Abstract

In this article, we analyse the evolution of electoral information flows in Spain in the digital environment. Three post-electoral surveys (2008, 2011 and 2015) among internet users (N 4312) and a series of focus groups enable us to analyse the process of expansion of the Digital Public Sphere (DPS) in Spain. We show that, instead of disintermediation, new intermediations of the electoral information flows appear. The candidacies no longer monopolize the electoral communication, rather, they share spaces in the DPS with personal contacts and civic-social organizations. We observe that, for the first time, in the 2015 elections the influence exercised by the digital media—particularly social media—exceeded the information received directly from people they know, print media and radio. However, television remained the most influential media during the elections. We note that the use of the DPS in electoral campaigns is increasingly hybrid and dialogical. We find that, in the Spanish case, these changes are linked to the emergence of the 15M movement, which encouraged the emergence of internet-based civil organizations. The traditional political players continue to occupy a very significant role as a source of electoral information, but they share space with this new type of civil organizations and with the extensive network of digital contacts. Changes in the Spanish DPS between 2008 and 2015 evidence a greater diversity in information sources and more citizens play an increasingly active role in the creation, modification, and dissemination of political content.

## Keywords

Digital media; Digital Public Sphere; electoral information; mediation; election campaign; 15M movement.

## Résumé

Dans cet article, nous analysons, dans le cadre de l'environnement numérique espagnol, l'évolution du flux d'information électorale. Trois enquêtes post-électorales (2008, 2011 et 2015) réalisées auprès d'Internauts (N 4312) et une série de groupes de discussion nous permettent d'analyser le processus d'expansion de la sphère publique numérique (DPS) en Espagne. Nous démontrons, qu'au lieu d'une desintermédiation, apparaissent de nouveaux intermédiaires d'information électorale. Les candidatures ne monopolisent plus la communication électorale, mais au contraire, elles partagent des espaces dans la DPS avec des contacts individuels et des organisations civiques et sociales. Pour la première fois, nous observons dans les élections de 2015 que l'influence exercée par les médias numériques, en particulier les médias sociaux, a outrepassé l'information reçue directement des personnes qu'ils connaissent, de la presse écrite et de la radio. Quoique la télévision demeure le média le plus influent durant les élections ; nous remarquons que l'usage de la DPS dans les campagnes électorales est de plus en plus hybride et dialogique. Nous voyons que dans le cas espagnol, ces changements sont liés à l'émergence du mouvement des Indignés qui encourage l'apparition d'organisations civiles basées sur Internet. Les acteurs politiques traditionnels continuent d'occuper un rôle significatif comme source d'information électorale, mais ils partagent leur place avec ce nouveau type d'organisation et avec un réseau étendu de contacts numériques. Les changements de la DPS espagnole entre 2008 et 2015 prouvent une grande diversité dans les sources d'information et un nombre croissant de citoyens jouent un rôle de plus en plus actif dans la création, la modification et la diffusion du contenu politique

## Mots-clés

Média numérique, sphère publique numérique, information électorale, médiation, campagne électorale, 15M.

## Introduction

Nowadays, the increasing use of digital media has generated a more fragmented and diverse media environment (Chadwick et al., 2017), resulting in flows of information that are more fluid and harder to control (McNair, 2006). In addition, some social and political structures have been modified, which affect the press-politics interaction (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016). Political actors can bypass the mainstream media using digital platforms, launching processes of self-mediation (Cammaerts, 2012) and reducing the influence of traditional gatekeepers (Schulz, 2014). Also, citizens and social organizations find new possibilities of political communication in the digital environment, being able to produce and disseminate political contents (Castells, 2012).

These developments have led to a vibrant debate in the literature on the mediatization of politics since digital media seems to contest the rules of conventional media in the public sphere. Several authors discuss how digital tools can facilitate citizens to exert influence over public debates (Bennett, 2012; Dahlberg, 2007), and how alternative digital media is fostering self-organization and open participation (Atton, 2004; Couldry and Curran, 2003). The fragmented media environment and the increasing level of selective exposure lead Bennett and Iyengar to presage that the future of political communication will be defined by ‘minimal media consequences, at least insofar as persuasive effects is concerned’ (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008:725). However, several scholars argue that the strong-effects paradigm remains in the centre of the field (Holbert et al., 2010), underlining the role of mainstream media (mainly TV) as the key intermediaries for access to social knowledge (Hepp, 2013).

The literature on election campaigns and digital media may be grouped into three main approaches. The first one deals with the historical development of digital campaigns to mobilise voters (Howard, 2006; Nielsen, 2011; Bruns and Highfield, 2016). The second one looks at the level of professionalization of campaigns (Lilleker and Negrine 2002; Stromer-Gally 2014; Kreiss and Janinski 2016). The third approach is concerned with the degree of interaction with voters in digital campaigns (Stromer-Gally, 2004; Jackson and Lilleker 2011; Enli and Naper 2016). A key conclusion in this approach is that institutional political actors are more likely to offer controlled interactivity in which participation is simulated (Stromer-Galley, 2000; 2014), using digital tools principally as ‘an arena for political marketing’ (Enli, 2017: 51).

Overall, the rising interdependence of ‘conventional’ and ‘new’ media has become a widely accepted characteristic of contemporary media and election campaigns (Enli and Moe, 2013; 2016; Lilleker et al. 2015), particularly since the 2008 US campaign led by Barack Obama, which defined an inflection point (Bimber, 2014). Institutional political actors do not reject their traditional tactics; they enhance them with the new opportunities offered by the digital tools, blending their communications into a hybridized environment (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016). The majority of the studies in the field has focused on how the traditional political actors, such as parties and

candidates, have adopted digital tools for their work (Cunha et al., 2003; Ward, 2008; Mosca, 2008); but usually pay scant attention to how citizens incorporate these tools into their online practices and their political action repertoires (Vaccari, 2013).

Our work explores how citizens incorporate digital tools into their political practices in a particularly intense political context: electoral campaigns. This analyse involves a round of questions: how have the political uses of the digital environment been transformed during the election campaigns in recent years? And, consequently, have there been alterations in the flow of political information as a result of these transformations? To address these issues, we analyse primary data from three post-electoral surveys (2008, 2011 and 2015) among internet users and a series of focus groups in Spain.

This article is structured around 4 main issues. The first section explains why Spain is an analytically useful case for studying this question and its specificity. The methodology section specifies the characteristics of the research methods used in the field work. The subsequent sections present and discuss the primary data (both quantitative and qualitative) allowing us to analyse the evolution of the political uses of the Internet in election campaigns and to identify eventual new intermediations. Finally, the conclusion raises the implications of the identified changes.

## Case Selection

This article examines the case of Spain, which is analytically a useful case for several reasons. First, Spain provides a context of deep changes in the political field that has gone hand in hand with the introduction of the digital public sphere. Both a wave of particularly intense anti-austerity protests (2011-2013) and the subsequent transformation of the traditional bipartisan system have had a central aspect of communication and political organization in the Net.

Secondly, the development of political practices in the digital environment has been particularly early and intense in Spain. This fact is surprising since traditionally Spain is one of the Western countries with lower levels of political and citizen participation (Topf, 1995; Gundelach, 1995; Morales, 2005). After a period of citizen mobilisation before and in the early phases of transition to democracy, the Spanish decreased their political mobilisation during the following decades (Linz, 1981; Torcal, 1995). The 'tactical demobilisation' has been identified as one of the necessary keys enabling the elites to negotiate in the so-called 'consensus politics' (Gunther, 2010: 24) and according to authors such as Sastre García (1997: 35-41), would have been induced by the elites and prolonged for the following decades. Since the 1980's formal political participation has fallen or has been maintained at a low level –particularly affiliation to

political parties and trade unions- and consolidated a public sphere where criticism of the 'Transition culture' was practically non-existent (Martínez, 2012).

In this context, the appearance of Internet led to the development of a Digital Public Sphere (DPS) in Spain with a marked 'dissident' nature (Sampedro, 2005). The general elections of 2004 demonstrated, for the first time, the importance of the emerging DPS. On that occasion, spontaneous protests were self-organized by SMS throughout the country to contest the official versions about the Jihadist authorship of the terrorist attack in Madrid three days before the vote (Suárez, 2006; Flesher Fominaya, 2011). This autonomous use of digital media contrasted with the limited use and control that the parties tried to wield over the burgeoning Spanish DPS (Sampedro, 2005).

After the 2004 elections, the political uses of digital media and its implications have been also relevant in other election campaigns, such as the *Indignados* (Indignants) movement in 2011 (Micó y Casero-Ripollés 2014; Monterde 2015) or the emergence of new parties like Podemos in 2014 (Romanos and Sádaba, 2016; Lobera and Rogero-García, 2017). Other countries have seen similar coupling between online and offline practices, either in the occupations of public spaces, such as the mobilizations of Gezi (Hacıyakupoglu and Zhang, 2015) or the emergence of new political parties, such as the Movimento 5 Stelle (Mosca, 2015).

## Methodology

As pointed out above, the 2004 Spanish general elections showed, for the first time in this country, the increasing importance of digital tools for political communication (in a very particular situation, a terrorist attack in trains three days before the vote). Since then, we have carried out online surveys among internet users after the General Elections of 2008, 2011 and 2015 using the same design and questionnaire. In this work we analyse the data from 2015 in comparison with previous election campaigns, offering an empirical perspective of the development of the Spanish DPS in election campaigns between 2008 and 2015. Furthermore, we complement the analysis with the results of six focus groups carried out with young internet users after the general elections of 2011.

Our research questions analyse how have the political uses of the Net been transformed during the electoral campaigns in recent years; and, consequently, have there been alterations in the flow of political information as a result of these transformations? To address these issues, we use a research strategy based on mixed methods, of a quantitative and qualitative nature.

The online interviews were conducted by the companies Survey Sampling International (SSI) and Netquest. Quality assurance and supervision systems were applied during the process. Sex and age quotas have been applied to the last unit (person interviewed). The stratification was carried out attending to the region

(*Comunidad Autónoma*) and the size of the town or city of residence. The distribution was proportional. The sampling on the panel has been done by randomly selecting, in each stratum, 4 records for each theoretical sample unit. The deviations of the sample distributions on the population characteristics have been corrected by weighting. The source used for the weighting has been the “2011 Survey on Equipment and Use of Information and Communication Technology in Households” from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE). In 2015, the survey comprised of 1,556 interviews, carried out between 21st and 30th December (the general elections were held on 20th December). In 2011, the survey comprised of 1,551 interviews, carried out between 23rd and 25th November 2011 (the general elections were on 20th November). In 2008, the survey comprised of 1,205 interviews carried out between 10th and 14th March (the general elections were on 9th March).

From the qualitative perspective, the focus group technique has been used, allowing to deepen the interpretation of the observed changes. Six focus groups were carried out between 13th October and 5th December 2011 in Madrid, Barcelona and Bilbao. The sample design includes the characteristic features in terms of socio demographics and ideology of the different internet user profiles according to the data provided by CIS (ES2836, 2011) and the AIMC/EGM (in the consultation made between October 2010 and May 2011) and the ‘2011 Survey on equipment and use of information and communication technology in households’ from INE. For a description of the profiles of the six focus groups, please see the appendix.

Finally, it is important to note that electoral campaigns are periods in which the political uses of the digital media particularly intensify. Later, throughout the legislatures, the effects of digital media may be somewhat different, and a series of interviews and focus groups could generate different results or discourses. Thus, we have to be cautious about extrapolating these results to other contexts outside the electoral one.

## Expansion, hybridisation and activist origins of the DPS

Empirically, we identify three key moments in the development of the DPS. Firstly, the consolidation and expansion of the use of digital communication tools, giving rise to a new electoral debate environment. Secondly, interaction and the consequent fusion of that DPS with the conventional public sphere, created by the traditional media. At last, we argue that the DPS is marked by the emergence of the *Indignants*, also known as 15M movement,<sup>1</sup> resulting in the appearance of wide distribution activist organizations –such as the anti-eviction platform PAH (*Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca*), *Democracia Real Ya* (DRY, Real Democracy Now) –and which consolidate a counter-hegemonic space in the DPS.

In the 2004 and 2008 election campaigns, the Spanish DPS occupied a small political space but with very active minority groups. In 2015, a greater volume of users meant that the active minorities had less relative weight, but achieved greater



dissemination than in previous selection processes. From a blog and digital media based DPS it became dominated by the networks. This DPS is, generally speaking, more interpersonal, dialogic and mobile. In contrast with the author features (of blogs) and editorials (of the digital media) of before, in the DPS of 2015 the electoral messages were mainly mediatically hybrid and viral.

A second key trend is the increasingly open interaction between free television and digital networks, evidenced by a symbiotic consumption of digital and conventional media and confirmed by other authors (Chadwick et al., 2017). On occasions, the DPS can exceed the political-institutional messages, which were traditionally defined as unidirectional, segmented and polarized (Sampedro and Seoane, 2009). In an electoral context, this overflow took place with the mobilizations by SMS of '*Pásalo*' in 2004 ('Forward this on') –whereby they denounced the official version that attributed the Jihadist terrorist attacks of 11M to ETA (Suárez, 2006; Flesher Fominaya, 2011)– and reached a climax seven years later with the cycle of the *Indignants* protests. According to several authors, there was a turning point in the development of the DPS with 15M when a new relationship was established with political activism and new social organizations were created (see, among others, Peña-López et al., 2014; Romanos and Sádaba, 2016). Both cases are paradigmatic of how citizens convened themselves on the Net and, by meeting on the streets and squares, were able to overtake the official election campaign in 2004 and 2011 (Flesher Fominaya, 2011; Sampedro and Lobera, 2014).

In the past decade, the actors in the Spanish DPS have increased significantly, both senders and receivers and their selective interactions intensified, based on like-minded groups or existing social media. Therefore, the traditional channels, actors and formats are relatively less important than they were. Given that the selective interaction in the DPS is more trustworthy, it has generated processes of political self-organization, characterized by horizontality and decentralization.

The digital social media, alternative digital media and the like-minded networks of friends and acquaintances were the most important dissemination of 15M (Anduiza et al., 2014) and its main tool of coordination and activism (Micó and Casero-Ripollés, 2014: 864). Monterde (2015) shows that 15M resulted in a process of political literacy of the Net, which was then extended to a significant proportion of the citizens. Not only the time spent using technologies for 15M increased, but also the repertoire of tools used. Moreover, the series of surveys carried out during the election campaigns that we present show that, from 2011, connective digital actions and identities have become universal (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). In short, the political uses of social media in Spain mainly arose from the *indignación* (indignation) and its protest in 2011 and, subsequently, spread to the rest of internet users.

Qualitative data confirm that Internet users perceive the limited use that political parties make of the DPS and which has been pointed out in the academic literature (Stromer-Galley, 2000; 2014; Bennett, 2003; Ward, Gibson and Nixon, 2003; Cunha et al., 2003;). Connected to this, quantitative data presented at the last part of this article

show that internet users validate new sources of electoral information such as citizen organizations based on internet, pointing to the emergence of new intermediations.

## More connected, mobile and interpersonal

We start by describing the number of users, the points of connection and the intensity of the electoral use of the DPS. In the three months prior to carrying out the fieldwork, almost two of every three Spaniards (68.8%) accessed Internet (Survey nº 3126, post-electoral elections 2015). The population of internet users increased by 20% from 2008, but with different intensities with regards electoral use. We established two profiles for internet users: *intensive internet users* –they connect a minimum of one hour per day– and *non intensive users* –who are below this average.

Table 1 shows that between 2008 and 2015, internet users of lower intensity fell and the intensive users increased. The latter grew from 76.4% in 2008 to 83.2% in 2011, reaching 87.5% in 2015. Furthermore, in 2015, one out of every two internet users connected to the Net at least 3 hours per day. Further analysis shows that young people (18-24 years) were the most intensive users of internet with higher education studies, students and those who live in large cities.

Table 1. Frequency and points of access to internet connection (%)

Frequency of internet connection	2015	2011	2008
Once or twice a month	0.1	0.6	1.2
Several times a week	2.3	4.7	7.3
Daily, up to one hour	10	11.5	15.1
Daily, between one to three hours	35.4	38.0	33.9
Daily, over three hours	52.3	45.2	42.5
Categories by frequency of connection			
<i>Non intensive</i> internet user	12.4	16.8	23.6
<i>Intensive</i> internet user	87.5	83.2	76.4
Most frequent internet access points			
Home	58.9	83.3	65.9

Work or educational establishment	16.2	10.5	25.1
Call shop or internet café	0.2	0.7	0.7
Any location using WiFi connection	-	1,7	2.7
Portable device (mobile, tablet, PDA)	24.3	3.7	-
Other	0,3	0.1	5.6
<i>N</i>	1,556	1,551	1,205

Table 1 also shows that home and work have decreased in importance as places to connect in favour of mobile devices. The trend is towards a more flexible and individual DPS. The digital environment is consolidated and becomes more ubiquitous and omnipresent. The connection is constant, active or in standby, rarely switched off blurring the differences between on-line and off-line election campaigns.

Between the campaigns of 2008 and 2011 the use of social media as information platforms and electoral debate went mainstream. In 2008, six out of every ten internet users used social media in some way; seven years later it was nine out of every ten. Between 2011 and 2015 its use *intensified*: in 2008 over 40% of internet users never or hardly ever used them; in 2011 this percentage was 13.7%, dropping to 11.8% in 2015. This increase in widespread and intensive use of the Net has been accompanied by the growth in digital social media.<sup>2</sup>

As indicate in Table 2, the DPS has become more interpersonal in the last stage: in 2008 only 4.8% of internet users used social media several times a day. In 2011, this figure increased to 27.3%, and in 2015 represented half of internet (49.7%). Conducting further analysis with regards age and gender, we observe that the younger females are the most intense users of social media: 56% of women use them several times a day, as compared with 43% of men. This proportion rises to 70% amongst fewer than 31 year olds, falling to 55% amongst 31 to 45 year olds and 35% amongst those over 45. In total, seven out of every ten internet users say they access social network every or almost every day.

Table 2. Frequency of use of internet activities (%)

	Use of social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter)	Visit media websites	Websites of public administrations**
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	2015	2011	2008	2015	2011*	2008*	2015	2011
Never or almost never	11.8	13.7	43.6	8.2	13.2	12.9	19.2	19.7
Once or twice a month	3.8	5.9	19.1	8.2	15.0	15.4	33.9	33.2
Once a week	7.4	9.8	13.3	13.2	17.4	19.8	22.9	20.6
Several times a week	8.6	15.3	9.8	14.5	14.5	15.7	10.9	12.4
Everyday/almost every day	18.7	27.5	6.8	29.0	25.8	19.8	6.9	10.0
Several times a day	49.7	27.3	4.8	26.6	14.2	14.9	5.2	4.0
Don't remember	-	<0.1	2.6	0.3	-	1.5	0.9	-
<i>N</i>	1556	1551	1205	1556	1551	1205	1556	1552

Notes: \* In the years 2008 to 2011 this question was worded: “Do you visit existing media websites (e.g. *elpais.com*, *elmundo.es*)?” \*\* We do not have data available for 2008.

This evolution coincides with that of political disenchantment protest cycles. As Castells (2012: 220) indicates, social media are not the cause of social movements, but are a 'necessary condition'. The new social movements are coordinated between the digital public sphere and the urban public space, their action and organization arise at the intersection between both spaces. This coincidence between the growth in use of internet-based social media and the cycle of protest indicates that both phenomena would have been interconnected in Spain between 2010 and 2012.

The dialogic uses have increased exponentially in less than a decade and we must confirm whether this will occur in successive elections. Furthermore, the Net interacts with traditional media creating a hybrid system that is partially confirmed by Table 2. In the 2015 election campaign, the users of media portals increased compared to previous campaigns. More than one in four internet users (27%) visited them several times a day (13% more than in 2011 and 2008). Together with those who visit media websites every or almost every day, this represents more than half of internet users (56%). Additionally, digital media users do not show any significant differences according to age, although more men than women (35% vs 19% respectively) visit them several times a day (see Table 2).

## The digital public sphere during election time: hybrid and on-line

Digital and traditional media feed into one another in a more plural ecosystem than in previous decades, developing a symbiosis which Chadwick (2013) calls 'hybrid media system'. The information flows pass from the personal sphere (e.g. recordings from mobile phones) to the media sphere (broadcasted on television or on media websites). In the focus groups that we carried out among internet users after the 2011 General Elections there were many statements like this: 'Now there is spontaneous journalism disseminated by citizens' (For a description of GR6, please see Appendix).

Digital socialization has changed media consumer preferences, particularly among young people, who find in the Net opportunities for exchange and support that they do not receive in other social contexts (Lobera y Rubio 2015). Traditional media have transformed their communication style and use the Net to increase their audience through the use of hashtags, follower pages on social media, etc. Finally, certain news phenomena related to Internet (such as Wikileaks disclosures) have an impact on traditional media agendas, becoming established as one more element in the information system.

Internet users perceive that digital technologies facilitate the dissemination of contents and viewpoints that are sometimes silenced and other times distorted by conventional mass media:

*It can offer a different interpretation". The good thing is that now there is Twitter...newspapers and TV are going to show you the angle they want, however, through these social media they are going to be platforms for many things that were concealed before. (GR6).*

Internet users perceive that new technologies bring to light certain aspects of reality that were hidden or less visible in the public sphere dominated by conventional mass media. In this respect, another participant recounts:

*This summer I saw the police beating up civilians big time and they weren't doing anything to warrant that kind of violence, but in the newspapers and television they showed one or two but when I went onto Internet I watched coverage for quite a while and saw hours of blows and really excessive police actions and that's what technology offers you. (GR6).*

The 2015 General Elections stimulated particular interest since, for the first time since the Transition, as expected –and it did happen- there was a change in the party system. 65% of internet users confirmed they were very or quite interested in the election campaign: 10 percentage points higher than in 2011. In 2015, for the first time in an election campaign, the influence of digital media surpassed that of print media, radio and the circle of friends and acquaintances. Television however continued to be – by far- the preferred media for following the electoral news. In any case, television as a media platform for electoral forecasting is unavoidable to ensure that the campaign reaches the masses, but its influence is falling amongst younger voters and, in general, it has dropped by 5% since 2011. Television is more dominant in the older age groups (86% of those aged over 46 years, compared with 75% of those aged under 30 years), and among housewives (90%) and retired people (88%), precisely those social groups who use Internet less intensively.

Use of television during the election campaign is higher among traditional party supporters, almost 90% (PP and PSOE: 88%), compared with voters of certain emerging parties positioned at around 70% (Podemos 75% and IU-UP 71%), whilst Ciudadanos supporters are in between these two groups (83%). In our opinion, these differences point to two phenomena which overlap: on the one hand, the generational gap among voters –traditional party supporters are older, whereas supporters of new parties are younger– and on the other hand the progressive distancing from television as a central source of election information among voters who oppose the two-party system. This last observation is in line with the criticism that has arisen over the control that the two traditional parties exert on both public and private television channels (Serrano, 2010). Therefore, there is a certain correlation between a greater questioning of the traditional political parties and reduced television use as a source of election information.

Meanwhile, the influence of traditional press as a source of election information has fallen by 10 points in the period 2008 to 2015. Radio however has recovered and in 2015 reached the same level as in 2008. As we mentioned, the blog has almost disappeared as a space of reference identified by internet users, if it is not linked

through social media. Internet users continue consuming information from blogs, but tend to identify it as part of the ecosystem of their social media. Microblogging prevails for digital follow-up of the campaign, together with newspaper websites, television and radio. Facebook and Twitter are consolidated as privileged spaces for the creation, selection, modification, exchange and dissemination of electoral messages; not disconnected but instead linked to traditional media. These data show that the Net interacts with traditional media in a hybrid system (see Tables 2 and 3).

**Table 3.** Which media have you consulted most frequently for news about the general elections? (%)

		2015	2011	2008
Television	No	20.4	14.7	26.5
	Yes	79.6	85.3	73.5
Print media	No	72.2	64.1	59.2
	Yes	27.8	35.9	40.8
Radio	No	71.4	80.0	69.1
	Yes	28.6	20.0	30.9
Newspaper websites, TV and radio channels	No	63.9	71.1	-
	Yes	36.1	28.9	-
Social media (Facebook, Tuenti, Twitter)	No	71.0	77.3	-
	Yes	29.0	22.7	-
Blogs	No	98.7	85.4	83.4
	Yes	1.3	14.6	16.6
Political party websites, candidate websites	No	97.0	87.0	80.4
	Yes	3.0	13.0	19.6
Social movement websites	No	98.6	90.5	83.4
	Yes	1.4	9.5	16.6
	No	86.9	74.0	61.6

Friends, acquaintances and personal contacts	Yes	13.1	26.0	38.4
Other	No	99.5	99.3	-
	Yes	0.5	0.7	-
N		1556	1551	1205

Other non-dialogic expression platforms, such as websites of official parties and candidates, lose relevance in the digital DPS. Just like blogs, party websites have fallen dramatically as sources of electoral information according to internet users. For parties the figure drops from 20% in 2008 to 3% in 2015 and for movements from 17% to 1% (see Table 3). This does not mean that parties and movements have lost influence in the campaign. According to the data, internet users have stopped accessing their portals of reference directly, transforming their unidirectional focus into greater interaction in the networks. It seems to confirm, therefore, the idea that digital users give priority to dialogic channels and formats during the campaign.

The unidirectional characteristics of the classic public sphere in electoral times – dominated by television, parties and other classic media of reference – would be compensated by a DPS with two basic features: populated with young internet users who use tools and formats that foster dialogic information flows. The ‘central public sphere’, generated in media and partisan bureaucracies would interact with a ‘peripheral’ DPS (Sampedro, 2000) which is more decentralised and horizontal. The former would be fed by official campaign messages and would also generate its own. In this way, the official campaign can be amplified, modified or questioned from the networks.

## A more dialogic and social DPS

Spanish DPS does not seem to have grown at the expense of traditional media, but rather a media convergence has developed. However, flows of digital information appear to grow to the expense of those offered in offline interactions, in person. The importance of the aforementioned interactions as a source of electoral information has dropped by half, falling from 26% to 13% between 2008 and 2015 (see Table 3). Our explanation is that, just like what happened with the traditional media, peer groups or like-minded groups did not become less important as agents of electoral information, but they experience new mediations in the social media.

Between 2011 and 2015 the reception of political and social messages doubled from 26% to 53% (see Table 4). Furthermore, in 2015, the sender was frequently (47%) from their close circle: friends, work colleagues or relatives. Both data underline the importance of personal intermediation when it overlaps with digital intermediation. In



the digital environment, new methods of personal interaction are established: the massification and intensification of digital networks have generated a more extensive framework of interactions and contacts outside the digital environment, often little known or unknown in the offline environment, particularly among intensive internet users. Internet users have feeling that information is more immediate and ubiquitous. As reflected in the focus groups:

*I think it makes things much easier because before you had to talk to a colleague or you subscribed to something to ensure that you received the information, but now you have it all on your mobile phone, at home, before you go to sleep, when you get up, at work, at school, you have access everywhere, Internet figures in everybody's lives (For a description of GR2, please see Appendix).*

Moreover, internet users have the feeling that in the DPS they can access more points of view:

*In order to understand things it is quite interesting to see different opinions from your own because you may be wrong and then realize, if you know what I mean? However, if you read in a newspaper a piece of news that was written by a particular person if you think like him then you will never get outside yourself in the sense that you may be wrong, since things are never black and white, you know?" "Sometimes I like to listen to people who don't have the same opinions as me so that I can also see their information because it's not good to only hear your own opinion again and again". "Since I have people around me with different opinions, if I read things from one place and then another I get the general idea (For a description of GR1, please see Appendix).*

The reach of digital social media, beyond offline personal contacts, has contributed to the inclusion of new actors into the exchange of political information. Like-minded groups filter the most significant information in a much more efficient way than conventional media. Internet users express it in these terms:

*You find out about loads of things through Twitter. For example, it surprises me how you find out (...). If you retweet a piece of information or news item that you receive your friends find out even though they haven't bought the newspaper or they're not interested. It's so much more accessible, much quicker and you find out about things you wouldn't normally hear about otherwise. (...). And people may [see it and] and they don't care but they send it on. (For a description of GR3, please see Appendix).*

The reputable networks among our contacts open the door to information from organizations that are trusted by one of our contacts. These organizations can start to

form part of our own information source –which, at the same time, we can disseminate amongst our digital contacts.

In 2015, for the first time in an election campaign, organizations concerned with affairs of public interest have managed to get their messages across to internet users to a greater degree than the candidates or the political parties. Their ability to convey their message has been higher –rising from 5% to 22%- than the candidates and political parties –rising from 6% to 15% between the election campaigns of 2011 and 2015 (see Table 4). The data indicate that these organizations have become an everyday reference point for many internet users for seeking information during the election campaign. We could say that some citizen platforms have become a ‘habit’ –in the sense described by Berger and Luckmann (1967)– a source of political and social information on the Net, achieving a more significant reach of their political messages and social protest. These data are in line with that observed by Peña-López et al. (2014), when they raise the question of the gap in the use of the Net between citizens and institutions –particularly political parties and unions- facilitating the emergence of what they call citizen *parainstitutions* based on internet ‘as they are assimilated as institutions on the outside –with explicit goals and targets, consolidated messages, collective identities that act as spokesmen– while they preserve a network-like organization on the inside, as the analysis of the inner communication clearly shows’ (Peña-López et al., 2014: 213).

The emergence of new intermediations of the electoral information flows during the last electoral campaigns may be due, partly, to the vertical and unidirectional way in which party campaigns are usually presented (Ward, Gibson and Nixon, 2003), particularly with the use of the political blog (Criado and Martínez-Fuentes, 2009). Moreover, it is precisely the lesser dialogic use of the tools, such as the political blog, where we observe the largest drop in the different consumer indicators in our 2015 survey compared with that of 2011. The ‘rules of the game’ seem to penalize the strategies that are less dialogic, more centralized, more driven by the traditional political institutions. A set of rules that seem to have been understood –and set in motion- more efficiently by citizen platforms than by the traditional political institutions.

Table 4. Receipt of social and political messages during the past three months (%)

Have you received any social or political messages, via social media, WhatsApp, e-mail or any other electronic format in the past three months?		2015	2011	2008 (a)
No		46.7	74.2	86.1
Yes		53.3	25.8	13.9
Who did you receive the message from? (Base: those who answered “Yes” to the above question)		2015	2011	2008 (b)
A friend, a work colleague or a relative	No	6.9	8.1	-
	Yes	46.6	18.9	-
A political candidate or party	No	38.5	21.1	-
	Yes	15.0	5.8	-
An organization concerned with affairs of public interest	No	31.8	21.6	-
	Yes	21.8	5.4	-
Other	No	51.2	24.9	-
	Yes	2.4	2.0	-
N		1556	1551	1205

(a): The question in 2008 referred to messages with social or political content received on the mobile phone. (b): We do not have these data for the year 2008.

The growing electoral influence of platforms and citizen organizations does not mean that the influence of the traditional electoral actors –parties and candidates- has disappeared. To the contrary, between 2011 and 2015 their role as an information source in the Net increased from 6% to 15%, respectively, as a result of the appearance of new candidacies (such as Podemos and Ciudadanos) and the intensification of the digital campaign strategies.

Instead of movement or disintermediation, we should talk about new (inter)mediations of the electoral information flows. The candidacies and their

marketing machines no longer monopolize the electoral communication, as used to be the case in the offline public sphere, rather they share spaces in the DPS with personal contacts and civic-social organizations.

## Conclusions

Our research analyses primary data from three post-electoral surveys (2008, 2011 and 2015) among internet users and series of focus groups in Spain, helping to understand changes of the political mediation in an electoral context. Firstly, evidence shows that the structure of political communication in the Net has moved from a blogs based DPS to a social media based DPS, which is more day-to-day, interpersonal and mobile.

The expansion of the digital environment has profoundly altered political communication in the last years: in 2015, for the first time in an election campaign, the influence exercised by the digital media –particularly in social media– exceeded the political information received directly from people they know, print media and the radio. Television however remained the most influential media during an electoral campaign. Therefore, we do not find empirical support for the thesis that social media would have replaced media as sources of information (Westerman et al., 2014), but their complementarity and hybridization are confirmed (Chadwick et al, 2017).

Additionally, qualitative evidence shows that internet users express disaffection towards the way candidates use digital tools in the electoral campaign. This disaffection is similar to that observed, in general, towards the traditional political sphere throughout Europe and corresponds with the requests for greater interaction and participation of the electorate (Coleman, 2017). Despite the fact that there exists consensus referring to the idea that political parties have adapted digital technologies more quickly than any other previous technological advance (Ward, 2008: 1-2), in the focus groups we noted complaints about the limited and unidirectional use of these tools. Citizens in reality perceive that political parties do not develop the participative potential of the digital environment (Mosca, 2008; Stromer-Galley, 2014), particularly during the election campaign period —when parties tend to minimize the possibility of unexpected flows of information restricting users' communication options (Cunha et al., 2003) and their resources are more limited when they try to initiate a personal dialogue (Vaccari, 2014: 254).

This context of discontent seems to have encouraged the development of wide distribution activist platforms. Between 2011 and 2015 organizations concerned with public affairs, as sources of electoral messages, increased four-fold (representing 22%), and in 2015, for the first time in an electoral campaign, organizations concerned with affairs of public interest have managed to get their messages across to internet users to a greater degree than the candidates or the political parties. We find that these

organizations have become a key reference point for many internet users for seeking information during the election campaign.

Nevertheless, this growing electoral influence of platforms and citizen organizations does not mean that the influence of the traditional electoral actors – parties and candidates – has disappeared. To the contrary, between 2011 and 2015 their role as an information source in the Net increased 2.5-fold (representing 15%) mainly as a result of the appearance of new parties (such as Podemos and Ciudadanos) and the intensification of the digital campaign strategies.

In short, instead of replacement or disintermediation, new intermediations of the electoral information flows appear. Political parties and TV no longer monopolize the electoral communication, rather they increasingly share spaces with personal contacts and civic-social organizations in the DPS. Our explanatory hypothesis indicates that the evolution of the DPS in Spain has been marked by the appearance of the *Indignados* movement, facilitating the emergence of wide distribution internet-based civil organizations and that they consolidate in a counter-hegemonic space in the DPS. We understand this phenomenon as the reflection of the politicization experienced since 2011, linked to the public concerns about political corruption, financial crisis and austerity measures, in a context of expansion of the digital environment. Traditional political actors continue to occupy a very significant role as a source of electoral information, but changes in the DPS between 2008 and 2015 evidence a greater diversity in information sources, and more citizens play an increasingly active role in the creation, modification and dissemination of political content.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> 15M was a protest movement similar to other movements across the world, such as Occupy, but was characterised by having a longer duration in time, a massive and transversal support amongst the population (Lobera and Sampedro, 2014) and for

having led to transformations in the political party system (Lobera, 2015; Romanos and Sádaba, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> According to the data from the 7<sup>th</sup> Social Media Observatory compiled by The Cocktail Analysis (2015): Facebook users in Spain have increased four-fold since 2008, reaching 21 million in 2015, whilst Twitter reached 11 million users by the end of 2015, whilst in 2009 this social network only had 1.5 million active users. WhatsApp has become the preferred digital tool, above 'pure' social media: 48% of network users say that it is their favourite whilst Facebook would be their second choice (28%). Altogether the percentage of social network users among regular internet users in Spain increased from 45% to 92% between 2008 and 2012, however this proportion fell slightly between 2012 and 2015, to rest at 89% (The Cocktail Analysis, 2015).

## Appendix: Focus group profiles

**GR1.** Young adult university students who participate in social media relating to political or community activity in the field of social democracy, Christian humanism, the social, student or union left wing. Active members of these types of pages on Facebook, Twitter and other social media. Madrid residents. Aged between 18 and 25 years old. Mixed group: four men and four women. 5 students attending public universities and 3 students from private universities.

**GR2.** Young people with medium level vocational studies (*Formación Profesional II and III*) non-university studies, active participants in social media relating to political or community activity in the area relating to social democracy, Christian humanism, the social, student or union left wing. Active members of related pages on Facebook, Twitter and other social media. Madrid. Aged between 18 and 25 years old. Mixed group: four men and four women.

**GR3.** Young university students who are active participants on social and political networks in the area of the right, centre-right wing, Christian democracy, etc. Active members of related social and political pages on Facebook, Twitter and other social media. Madrid. Aged between 18 and 25 years old. Mixed group: four men and four women.

**GR4.** Barcelona. Eight participants. University students with different degrees. Aged: 22-30 years. Five men and three women. Ideological stance: positions 5, 6, 7 and 8 on the scale left-right and 2, 3 and 4 on the scale nationalism-centralism.

**GR5.** Barcelona. Eight participants. Young working people earning a modest monthly net pay of one thousand euros known in Spain as '*mileuristas*'. Aged: 25-35 years. Five men and three women. Ideological stance: positions 2, 3 and 4 on the scale left-right and 2, 3 and 4 on the scale nationalism-centralism.

**GR6.** Bilbao. Eight participants. Young working people. Four with middle level vocational studies *formación media* (FPII and FPIII) and four with higher level vocational studies. Aged: 25-35 years. Five men and three women. Ideological stance: positions 2, 3 and 4 on the scale left-right and positions 2, 3, and 4 on the scale nationalism-centralism.

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## Author biographies

*Josep Lobera* is a professor of Sociology at the Autonomous University of Madrid and the Tufts University & Skidmore College joint international program. He is currently Editor of the Spanish Journal of Sociology (RES) and the Scientific Editor of the Biennial National Report on Social Perception of Science and Technology in Spain. His research interests are focused on the analysis of public opinion, the political attitudes and the social representations of science and technology.

*Víctor Sampedro* is full Associate Professor of Political Communication at Universidad Rey Juan Carlos (Madrid). His research interests are democratic theory and the public sphere, political communication, social movements' impact on policy and media agendas, internet-based politics and social mobilizations. Most of his work is available at [www.victorsampedro.com](http://www.victorsampedro.com) and his last book project at [www.dieteticadigital.net](http://www.dieteticadigital.net).