THE 15-M MOVEMENT AND THE NEW MEDIA: A CASE STUDY OF HOW NEW THEMES WERE INTRODUCED INTO SPANISH POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Abstract

The 15-M Movement, driven by mass mobilisations calling for the regeneration of the political system in May 2011, has had a profound impact on Spanish political discourse. This article analyses the changes in news production and distribution resulting from the example set by this social movement. The introduction of news using social media outside the boundaries established by the journalistic and political elites represents an innovative strategy to bring the movement's demands on to the mainstream media agenda, and to instigate monitoring processes.

On 18 August 2011, a group of ten officers from the National Police Corps strode purposefully along a street in the centre of Madrid, on a tense day marked by the Pope’s visit and the peaceful protests of secular citizens against the drain on the public purse of this event. The protesters’ public denouncements of the treatment they had received from the police over the preceding days had met with scant attention. But a video was soon to turn the events into a news story with remarkable repercussions in the Spanish political discourse, first virtually and then in the mainstream media. The video of the ten police officers, a seventeen-year-old woman and a freelance journalist was filmed by a witness who followed the police and captured the events on a mobile telephone.

The footage, just over three minutes long, shows the determined advance of the police officers to the area where both the faithful and the secular were amassed. A young woman confronts the police, asking ‘What’s happening?’, to which one officer responds with a direct punch to her face. The woman begins to shout, and while another protester tries to pull her away, the police hit her several times with their truncheons. The police then turn on another young man who is taking photos from a few metres away. The photographer, Daniel Nuevo – a freelance journalist – is also the target of several blows that force him to the ground, at which point the police officers move off. At that moment, Carlos, the person filming the whole scene, runs over to Daniel who, upset and shocked, is left speechless. Carlos tries to calm him down and utters the key words, ‘It’s all on film’.

In a matter of hours, the news had gone viral. Daniel Nuevo wrote his account of the events on his blog. At the same time as the independent journalism website Periodismohumano.com covered the story, debates raged on Twitter, and the video – uploaded on YouTube – had over half a million views in 24 hours. Once the story had circulated through cyberspace at a dizzying rate, it finally broke into the mainstream media. The police action against secular protesters – an issue that previously had been ignored – was then given significant space on the media agenda. In this way, a new story broke into a politically inflamed context that has come to be known as the 15-M
Movement, or the Spanish Revolution: a wave of citizens’ protests that has introduced new themes into Spanish political discourse. This movement has also contributed to the spread and transnationalisation of the citizens’ protests initiated in Iceland in 2008, which solidified in Spain in 2011 and then spread across the globe through movements like Occupy Wall Street.

The aim of this article is to analyse the changes that are currently taking place in news production and distribution through the paradigmatic example of the 15-M Movement. We use case study methodology to examine how this social movement has generated news outside journalistic and political elite circles that has broken on to the mainstream media agenda and spread its demands throughout the Spanish political discourse. The citizens’ protests in Spain, and their use of the new social media, testify to the advent of a new hybrid news environment that represents an opportunity for change in shaping the public agenda, to date dominated by the mainstream media.

This article gathers information from three source types: documents produced by the 15-M Movement (such as manifestos); journalistic material on the 15-M Movement published or broadcast by the media; and user-generated content on the 15-M Movement disseminated through social media. The analysis combines these three sources in an attempt to explain how news production and distribution are changing in the digital context.

The article begins by describing the characteristics of this new news environment. It then focuses on the 15-M Movement, in particular its social bases, the demands included on its political agenda and its use of social media. The article then goes on to analyse the parameters the 15-M Movement has followed to generate news, and examines some case studies. Finally, it concludes with reflections on the contributions and scope of the 15-M Movement in the transformation process that both the information and political systems are currently undergoing.

The changing news media environment: The emergence of a hybrid system

Numerous transformations are taking place in the news media context as a result of social media and Web 2.0. One of the most significant changes is the advent of a new news environment and the ensuing profound reorganisation of news production and circulation (Chadwick, 2011; Fenton, 2010).

This new news environment is the result of two key processes: an increased number of actors involved in the news production chain and changes in information flows. These changes have manifested in three essential aspects: accelerated dissemination of news (McNair, 2003; Hermida, 2010; Karlsson and Strömbäck, 2010; Phillips, 2012); increased flexibility for news distribution through multiple platforms (Jenkins, 2006; Heinrich, 2010); and the global expansion of information (McNair, 2006; Castells, 2009).

The proliferation of social spaces on the internet has provided citizens with the technological tools not only to consume news, but also to produce it. Any individual can generate messages that reach a global audience. Mass self-communication (Castells, 2009) thus emerges, offering citizens more opportunities to express their points of view autonomously and to contribute to the information flow (Stanyer, 2008; Rodrigues, 2010). Citizens share news and intervene in public debate, rolling out a polyphony of voices in the political discourse (Casero-Ripollés, 2010).

Technological innovation has empowered the public (Jenkins, 2006). Citizens are turning into active players in the information process; now they can submit news to the media, the end result of which is citizen journalism and user-generated content (Hermida and Thurman, 2008). Moreover, they can monitor and respond to mainstream media news coverage of events (Schudson, 1998; Deuze, 2008; Keane, 2009; Casero-Ripollés, 2010).
Audience intervention therefore has two dimensions: first, the public can now intervene in
the news through comments, responses and so on; and second, individuals can intervene
in the news-production process by providing news (Carpentier, 2011).

Similarly, the horizontality of Web 2.0 is spawning changes in the news production chain,
with the appearance of new information actors. News production is therefore becoming
decentralised (Heinrich, 2010) and opening up to new participants. The information
landscape is now hyper-competitive, due to the rise in the number of news-gatherers, and
is no longer restricted to news professionals.

This process is breaking down the journalistic and political elite monopoly over news
construction (Casero-Ripollés, 2010). These elites have no option but to interact with
citizens and the new information actors in producing and distributing the news (Jenkins,
2006; Deuze, 2007; Im et al., 2010), and are now abandoning the ‘iron cages’ in which
they operate (Davis, 2010). The information environment, which previously revolved
around the interactions of a small number of actors (journalists, politicians and spin
doctors), now includes numerous groups and individuals who can create news. As a result,
this environment has become more difficult to control (McNair, 2006; Hermida, 2010).

This new news environment heralds a paradigm change. The scenario of top-down
information control under the journalistic and political elites to maintain social order
has shifted to a new dynamic in which chaos prevails. Here, a surplus of information
has replaced scarcity, many-to-many news distribution channels prevail over one-to-
many, transparency prevails over opacity, accessibility over exclusivity, interactivity over
passivity and competition over monopoly (McNair, 2006). Instability and interdependence
hold sway in this new news environment, which is defined by uncertainty (Lowrey and
Gade, 2011). Journalism is heading towards modified and redefined power relations, and
the disappearance of existing dividing lines. The eradication of borders is tied in with
the process of digital convergence (Jenkins, 2006; Dupagne and Garrinson, 2007; Deuze,
2007) that is shaping the new news environment. In this context, journalism is becoming
increasingly liquid (Deuze, 2008), and operates in a more open scenario. This new news
environment has given rise to a system of hybrid news (Chadwick, 2011), based on a
blend of old and new media (Fenton, 2010).

The outstanding events of 2011 have clearly revealed the new news environment’s
potential to create new stories. The Arab uprisings, mass protests in Greece and the fast-
growing #Occupy movement are examples of this new phenomenon. In these cases, the
new media have played a prominent role in coordinating the protests, in communicating
real-time images and up-to-date information, and in the processes of contagion (Cottle,
2011; Lotan et al., 2011; Della Porta, 2011). The 15-M Movement offers a paradigmatic
example of this phenomenon, as we explore below.

The 15-M Movement and the way it uses the new media

The 15-M Movement is a civic movement that, since May 2011, has been calling for
urgent transformations in and improvements to the Spanish democratic system. This plural,
horizontal, non-party movement, with a broadly middle- and working-class base, is a clear
exponent of a civil society movement based on the principle of plurality that (to date)
complies with and defends the imperative of non-violence and is being constructed as a
political actor that, in the words of Habermas (1996: 487), mounts a continual siege on the
fortress, ‘without intending to conquer the system itself’. The wave of protests spreading
across Spain since 15 May 2011 has cemented under the name of 15-M, taken from the
date of the first protest, and presents a political agenda of reforms conceived to improve
the political system – without intending to overthrow or take control of the established
political power – and a firm commitment to bring it closer to ‘Real democracy now’, the main slogan adopted by the indignados (‘the outraged’).

Citizen discontent with the democratic reality in Spain has its roots in a series of deficits that, when taken together, have spawned an unprecedented mobilisation in the form of varied protests, repercussion in Spanish political discourse and capacity for citizen organisation through networks. The main causes of this outrage include high rates of unemployment (above 20 per cent), political corruption, public spending cuts, the positioning of the political class as the third concern among Spanish citizens since the end of 2009, and the PSOE/PP two-party system – due to an electoral system that effectively strangles any real chance of success for smaller parties. Faced with this scenario, Spanish citizens, as civil society actors, are expressing their discontent by acting as ‘a permanent thorn in the side of political power’ (Keane, 1988), demanding democratising transformations through numerous and varied actions: street protests and marches, the prevention of evictions, online petitions, cycle protests, long-distance mass marches for democracy (the latest covering 1,500 kilometres from Madrid to Brussels), discussions with politicians on Twitter, as well as the now internationally famous encampments for democracy in the squares of over 53 Spanish cities, with the Puerta del Sol (Madrid) at its epicentre. This broad range of actions was instigated by citizens convinced of the need for reform, who have fully exploited the opportunities offered by the new news environment (García Marza, 2008).

The 15-M Movement was the first mass mobilisation organised via the internet in Spain (Dans, 2011) – a call that successfully took over the streets and the squares and, as we explain below, one that has impacted on the news-creation process and brought issues into Spanish political discourse. Some of the 15-M Movement’s main achievements are precisely its capacity to consolidate through social media – where mobilisations are organised and disseminated – along with its ability to produce news in the new media and its effective impact on the mainstream media. The platforms Democracia real, ¡ya! (‘Real democracy now!’) and Juventud sin futuro (‘Youth with no future’) expanded through social media, particularly on Facebook, where a group of citizens rapidly confirmed that their own political concerns were shared by many others. Their adoption of a plural position, open to all persuasions, meant hundreds of followers joined in and the mobilisation began to take shape in this way, first via the internet and later on the streets (Sampedro and Sánchez Duarte, 2011).

The 15-M Movement’s political agenda has been refined and defined through a complex network of mass assemblies, virtual forums and debates on social media, and includes a list of measures such as the abolition of the Spanish anti-downloading law, eradication of tax fraud and immediate reform of the electoral law. The movement’s political agenda consists of eight broad fields: elimination of certain privileges for the political class, real separation of powers, measures to combat unemployment, promotion of rights to housing, development of quality public services, regulation of the banking sector, tax reform and the implementation of mechanisms for citizen participation.

In one way or another, all these issues have entered Spanish political discourse in a context of journalistic chaos (McNair, 2006), in which the number and diversity of news providers have grown exponentially. Even international media like The Washington Post, The New York Times, the BBC, La Repubblica or Al Jazeera have covered the protests, lending an international dimension to the 15-M Movement. The movement’s expansion is also due in large part to its own channels of communication, such as Sol TV which, using live streaming over the internet, enabled viewers in more than 50 countries to follow the Puerta del Sol encampment. 
The 15-M Movement and the generation of news

The generation of news about the movement has followed a complex route in which social networks and new media have played a central role in the advent of a dynamic, chaotic communicative structure. During the first days of the protests, the 15-M Movement achieved a strong presence in social media with a range of trending topics on Twitter, which in turn led to heavy traffic on alternative media such as Periodismohumano.com, the most-cited media on Twitter between 15 and 19 May 2011. A video on YouTube showing an aerial panorama of the rally in the Puerta del Sol on 17 May 2011 also received great attention, with more than 400,000 views in the first week.

The response of the old media was somewhat slower, but no less significant. On the day of the protests, not one newspaper announced the rally on its front pages, and on the following day only three Spanish papers – El País, El Mundo and Público – led with the story. However, the 15-M Movement gained news space as the protests continued, the number of demonstrators grew and the encampments strengthened the movement, to the point where all the main newspapers devoted their front pages to the story on Thursday, 19 and Friday, 20 May 2011. Television coverage followed a similar pattern: initially timid reporting eventually gave way to live reports broadcast from the Sol protest encampment.

The movement went on to receive considerable coverage in both the Spanish and the international media. The protests and the encampments were news items, and the indignados’ political demands attracted further media attention. In this way, the debates and discussions – initially held in cyberspace – now reached different audiences and spaces. The encampments were organised into various committees: activism, legal, maintenance, organisation and media relations. The media relations spokespersons were the centre of media attention for several days, a position that was constantly rotated to avoid any one spokesperson being singled out as a ‘leader’.

The indignados thus managed to get their demands on to the media and political agendas, incorporating news that was under the mainstream media radar, and demonstrating the potential of the internet to mobilise citizens and instigate public debates. The 15-M Movement has raised many broad and varied issues, but of outstanding importance is the depth of penetration – across both old and new media – of news on public spending by certain Spanish state institutions, whose function and structure have been called into question. In a context marked by scarce resources, the 15-M Movement has forced the redefinition and justification of ‘who gets what, when and how’ (Keane, 2009: 743), scrutinising in particular one of Spain’s parliamentary chambers: the Senate. An email began to circulate at the end of May 2011, analysing public spending on the Senate – the chamber of territorial representation – the political functions of which have waned considerably over the years. This email called for the abolition of the Senate, noting that countries like Norway, Sweden and Denmark have no second chamber, while the United States has two senators per state and Germany 100 senators, compared with over 260 in the Spanish second chamber. This question was diffused through a process of mass self-communication (Castells, 2009) that shifted from a one-to-many to a many-to-many channel, with the email bouncing in and out of uncountable mailing lists. Dozens of blogs – such as blogssostenible, davidecontragoliat, alcorisa15m, wabbblalogia and algosemueveencs, cambiemosespaña – and websites – including www.change.org, www.capital.es, www.peticionpublica.es and eliminarelsenado.com – also republished the content of the email, and the issue was discussed in forums and over social media.

The subject was taken up as a central point of discussion within the movement, and on the communication spaces used by it, but it also broke through the news media ‘barrier’. In September 2011, one section of the television program Salvados – an entertainment program with a humorous slant on its analysis of current affairs – portrayed a normal day
in the Senate, with a visit to the chamber and interviews with some of its members. The program’s presenter, Jordi Évole, raised some of the issues from the 15-M Movement’s agenda, which he fused into a simple question: ‘What use is the Senate?’ Throughout his fifteen-minute visit, the report revealed the scant participation and presence of political representatives. But most remarkable were the statements from some of the senators themselves. Juan José Lucas Giménez, a PP (Popular Party) senator, claimed that ‘today the Senate needs to be changed … its institutional role does not correspond to the Spain of the 21st century’. Xosé Manuel Pérez Bouza, senator for the BNG (Galician Nationalist Bloc), went even further: ‘In its present form [the Senate] has very little or no use at all.’ He went on to say that the institution ‘is thoroughly questionable’ and that ‘no work is done here. Nothing’s done here … and most people don’t exactly know that the Senate is no use, because if they did, there would be more pressure.’

An entertainment program thus brought the subject into full public view (Harrington, 2005). The declarations came as a surprise to many of the program’s 1.2 million viewers, and the senators’ replies were discussed on social media like Twitter and Menéame. Numerous Facebook pages were created, with varying levels of success, calling for the abolition of the Senate or asking voters to spoil their ballot papers or leave them blank in the general elections on 20 November 2011, and the fifteen minutes of footage from Salvados soon exceeded 11,000 visits on YouTube. The complex dynamics between old and new media generated a new story that managed to introduce a critical vision of the political institutions and representatives in a turbulent context at both an informative and a political level.

Nor have the mainstream media and their political role escaped the criticisms of the 15-M Movement. In the Puerta del Sol encampment, an announcement of a space to consult the main newspapers called it ‘lies corner’. Among the numerous placards carried by the indignados were critical references to the media, pointing to their lack of objectivity, their political servitude and their fraudulent versions of the police treatment of protesters. It is therefore noteworthy that this social movement has set up a monitoring process that affects not only the political class, but also journalist practice and the old media. This process has also driven various mainstream media to criticise certain practices among their professional colleagues, and has led to news in which some mainstream media denounce cases of information manipulation or degeneration in other programs.

One of the clearest examples of this shift was the response to the manipulation of information in a program, El Círculo, on the regional television channel Telemadrid. The journalist presenting the program, María López, attempted to discredit the movement by showing supposed scenes of violence during the protests. She argued that the public needed to judge ‘for themselves’ the violence of the 15-M Movement, and went on to show three images of young people armed with sticks and stones. However, these images actually came from a news story about mobilisations in Greece. The outcry against this manipulation of information was immediate. On the same day, the platform Salvemos Telemadrid (Save Telemadrid) berated the ulterior motives behind the use of the images. Newspapers like El País and El Mundo reported the story, while the social media reverberated with criticisms and demands for rectification and an apology from the channel.

**Conclusion**

The case of the 15-M Movement shows how new actors are emerging in the new information environment and actively participating in the news-production and diffusion process. Thanks to the internet, citizens operating outside the mainstream media have successfully affected and conditioned the significance and flow of the news within the turbulent political context.
The 15-M Movement has used multiple channels, linked to new media and social media, to create news about its demands that has circulated worldwide. These issues – most notably the regeneration of the political system and the elimination of privileges for the political class – were not previously on the old media agenda. The 15-M Movement has exploited the potential of the new information environment to spread this new news, as well as influencing news coverage in the old media. In this process, the newspapers and broadcast media have had no choice but to report the protesters’ demands, thereby granting them social visibility.

The 15-M Movement’s communication strategy is based on indirect news management. By producing information in the digital environment, it has successfully shifted news related to its demands on to the traditional media agenda. Despite the success of this strategy, the old media still remain at the heart of political life in contemporary democracies. While the internet is gaining ground as an emerging information space, we are still a long way from a situation where the new media will supplant the old, and the new information actors will be fully established.

The analysis of the 15-M case also reflects the advent of new democratic dynamics. This social movement is an example of the growing strength of citizen monitoring in Spain. On one hand, it has turned a watchful, critical eye on the political actors and decision-making at a time of financial crisis. On the other, monitoring has included the media and the way they report information. The emergence of an active citizen movement, which grasps the opportunities for public scrutiny presented by the new media structure, points towards a possible direction for change. It remains to be seen whether these processes consolidate, and how the ‘rules of the game’ are redefined in the Spanish political discourse.

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Notes

1 Daniel Nuevo’s post at http://danielnuevo.com/blog/solo-por-informar (available since 19 August 2011).
2 Periodismohumano.com report on police action available at http://periodismohumano.com/sociedad/libertad-y-justicia/policia-apalea-a-fotoperiodista-testigo-de-la-agresion-por-sorpresa-a-una-joven.html (by 30 September 2012, the video had been seen 974,862 times).
3 Video of police action against secular protesters during the Pope’s visit (2011) is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JcG3u5mtE.
4 While the Facebook followers of the current governing party (Partido Popular – www.facebook.com/pp) numbered around 52,700, in July 2012, Democracia real ¡ya! (www.facebook.com/democraciarealya) had over 455,900 followers.
5 Sol TV link, www.soltv.tv/soltv2/index.html.
6 Video of the aerial panorama of the rally in the Puerta del Sol on 17 May 2011 available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=ar2nmOQZEjw.
7 The impact on Twitter of this protest campaign can be seen at http://total-impact.org.
8 Salvados’ program about the Spanish Senate (25 September 2011) available at www.lasexta.com/lasextaon/salvados/hoy_en_dia_tal_y_como_esta_constituido_el_senado_no_sirve PARA nada/268463/1061.
9 On 30 September 2012, the video had been seen 174,475 times. Among the most successful Facebook pages were www.facebook.com/eliminarelsenado (Get Rid of the Senate), with more than 4900 followers and www.facebook.com/lesvotes (Parliamentary Seats to Represent Blank Votes or Spoilt Papers), with more than 1500 followers. Many others, such as www.facebook.com/no1esvotosenblanco (No to the Spanish Senate) and www.facebook.com/no.lesvotes (Don’t Vote for Them), had dozens of followers.
Video of journalist María López using the wrong images in order to criticise the 15-M Movement is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibir-3Y9ALQ

Mainstream media reaction to Telemadrid program El Círculo can be followed in articles (in Spanish) at El Mundo, El País and Público: www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2011/06/17/television/130813623.html, http://elpais.com/elpais/2011/06/17/actualidad/1308298630_850215.html and www.publico.es/espagna/382491/telemadrid-usa-fotos-de-disturbios-en-grecia-para-atacar-al-15m

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Andreu Casero-Ripollés is a Senior Lecturer in Journalism, Universitat Jaume I de Castelló (Spain), and director of the research project ‘Journalism and Political Information Sources in Spain: Relationship and Communicative Dynamics’ (CSO2010-16313), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation. This study was undertaken as part of this research project.

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