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DIGITAL MEDIA, CONTENTIOUS POLITICS AND PARTY SYSTEMS IN ITALY AND SPAIN

Víctor Sampedro and Lorenzo Mosca

In this contribution, we discuss the role of the digital public sphere in social and political mobilisations in Italy and Spain since the beginning of 2000. Both countries experienced the emergence of successful parties relying heavily on digital media, linked to previous social mobilisations and protest milieu. We highlight the changing role of digital media and their shifting function from facilitating protest cycles with limited impact on party politics to becoming a tool for challenging the established political actors. Our main questions concern the extent to which digital media allowed social movements to express grievances that were later incorporated into the electoral programmes of new political parties.

KEYWORDS digital media; Italy; Spain; Movimento 5 Stelle; Podemos; connective parties; social movements

Introduction

Digital media fostered the emergence of “connective parties” defined as “organizations in which technology platforms and affordances are indistinguishable from, and replace, key components of brick and mortar organization and intra-party functions” (Bennett, Segerberg, and Knüpfer 2017, 12). By focusing on Podemos (in Spain) and the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S—Italy) as the most relevant and long-lasting examples of connective parties to date, we examine whether the new political organisations adopt digital media to provide greater opportunities for citizens’ participation in politics.

The M5S is an emblematic case of “postbureaucratic organisation” (Bimber 2003) born from the Internet and rejecting conventional organisational forms. In contrast, Podemos combines a more traditional party organisation with innovative digital participatory features. However, citizens’ participation via digital media is among the defining feature of these new parties. Both gained prominent electoral significance and altered national party systems. We argue that, although to different extents, they co-opted previous digital-based mobilisations’ repertoires and agendas replacing traditional bureaucratic structures with technology-enabled organisations.

These two national cases allow us exploring the tensions of digital politics in terms of democratic organisation in the hybrid media system (Chadwick 2013). In fact, we discuss if the two connective parties differ in their use of digital media given their different ideological tenets—clearly oriented to the Left in the case of Podemos, much more blurred in the case of the M5S. We conclude that digital media fostered “verticalisation” in both parties regardless of their varying ideological orientation. The highly personalised format and hierarchical organisation of electoral politics limit the digital promises of building horizontal,

participatory and deliberative organisations. This is not only true for traditional parties but also for the connective parties we analyse.

Our conclusions are tentative and provisional, but call for further historical and contextualised accounts of digital politics. If exclusively centred on single protest events and electoral campaigns—even considered as disconnected from each other—researchers fail to grasp processes of social innovation, collective learning and technological institutionalisation. We call for more longitudinal, comparative and empirically grounded studies that provide heuristic meaning and historical interpretation to the many existing episodic accounts of digital-based social and political action.

Italy: From Digital-Based Mobilisations to the M5S

In Italy, digital media started to play an important role since the organisation of the anti-G8 summit in Genoa in 2001. Approximately 800 groups joined the Genoa Social Forum (Gsf), the main coordinating structure of the protest (della Porta et al. 2006). While digital media facilitated the emergence of new movements, it took approximately a decade before digital-based mobilisation could really affect the realm of party politics in Italy (see Table 1).

Another important event that, shortly after, was aided by digital technologies was the European social forum (Esf), whose first edition was organised in Florence in 2002 (della Porta et al. 2006). However, the Internet was mainly used for internal communication but unable to create an alternative narrative challenging the framing of mainstream media (Mosca 2014). The organisation of anti-war demonstrations in 2003, called by the final

TABLE 1
Italian digital-based mobilisations (2001–2013)

Year	Event	Description	Demands
2001	Genoa Social Forum	International protest against the G8 summit in Genoa	Globalisation from below
2002	European Social Forum	Meeting of European social movements	“Another Europe is possible”
2003	Anti-war movement	Massive demonstrations against the war on Iraq	“No to the war without ifs and buts”
2007	V-day 1	Demonstration against the “caste” of politicians	“Clean parliament”
2008	V-day 2	Demonstration against the “caste” of journalists	“Free information”
2009	No-B day	Anti-Berlusconi protest	Asking for the resignation of the then prime minister
2011	Abrogative referendums	Opposition to nuclear energy, privatisation of water and legal impediment	Defence of Common goods
2012	Electoral success of the M5S at local elections	Election of M5S mayoral candidates in 4 municipalities	“Vote for yourself”
2013	Electoral success of the M5S at general elections	25.6% of the votes in the low chamber	“No one must be left behind”

assembly of the Esf, was also enabled by the Internet but the web was still a niche medium at that time. Despite mobilisations taking place between 2004 and 2006, the role of digital media was less evident in that period. While until then the Internet was mainly served to facilitate movements' internal communication, it suddenly became the main tool for gathering citizens in huge demonstrations which were however more disconnected from one another. This could be a consequence of the "logic of aggregation" facilitated by social media vis-à-vis the "logic of networking" of the previous generation of digital technologies (Juris 2012). The former logic is based on interpersonal networks quickly mobilizing crowds of individuals potentially generating problems of sustainability over time and difficulties in forging collective identities.

Between 2007 and 2008, two protest events called V-Days ("fuck-off days")—targeting, respectively, the political class and the "caste" of journalists—were organised mostly online through a blog and the Meetup platform by the comedian Beppe Grillo. The massive participation to the V-Days shocked mainstream media and political parties as the underground work that was made almost exclusively online since 2005 became suddenly visible. These two events paved the way to the creation of the M5S in 2009.

In 2009, a national protest against the then prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, was promoted by bloggers and journalists via a Facebook page which collected 200,000 likes in a month. It was the first massive demonstration organised via Facebook in Italy. Nonetheless, in the organisation of this demonstration the control of digital resources by the page administrators resulted in a strong centralisation of decision-making power since webpage managers had control over all contents, membership, etc. (Mosca 2014). The mismatch between rhetoric of horizontality and very controlled and centralised democratic practices seems to anticipate the oligarchic development of connective parties as discussed below.

The first sign of a shift of digital-based mobilisations from the social movement arena to the institutional arena was manifest in 2011 when four abrogative referendums on privatisation of water, building of nuclear power plants and legal impediment for members of the government were passed. The referendums on common goods (*beni comuni*) were seen as a chance to practice direct democracy by many groups expressing the need for a renewal of democratic forms and procedures. At the same time, criticism was expressed against the political class. Such unexpected and invisible mobilisation was substantially facilitated by the Internet which involved new social groups in the electoral arena (Mosca 2014).

A few months later, in November 2011, the Berlusconi executive was replaced with a so-called technical, unelected, government led by a former European Commissioner, Mario Monti. His executive was supported by a large parliamentary majority formed by all main parties. Because of its large parliamentary majority, all parties supporting Monti were blamed by public opinion and considered responsible for austerity policies implemented by the new government. Surveys testify that in that period citizens' trust in institutions and parties reached the lowest scores in republican history (della Porta et al. 2017).

The mingling of economic, political and moral crisis clearly de-froze Italian voters. While after the *Tangentopoli* (bribes-ville) earthquake in the early 1990s, the Italian party system had stabilised around two main blocs (centre-left and centre-right), the 2012 local elections sound as an alarm bell to established parties. The M5S, a new party founded in 2009 by Grillo, emerged as a significant competitor electing four mayors, one in the provincial capital Parma. The new party advocated power to common citizens and campaigned to get rid of old politicians (Mosca 2014).

In 2013, electoral volatility increased fourfold compared to previous elections of 2008 and reached 39.1 per cent, an even greater value than in 1994 when an entire party system collapsed. The M5S collected 25.6 per cent of the votes in the low chamber (della Porta et al. 2017). In its genetic phase the M5S selectively appropriated frames, activists, forms of action and organisational innovations from previous waves of social conflicts (Mosca 2015). Grillo's connective party mostly relied on digital media for informing, communicating and organising (Mosca, Vaccari, and Valeriani 2015). The M5S was able to import digital media in the realm of party politics transforming the party system into a tripolar one and becoming one of the most effective *connective* party to date (Bennett, Segerberg, and Knüpfer 2017). The hybridisation of its communication strategies over the past years shows that it has been able to adapt to the changing media system mingling digital and traditional media and offering its supporters innovative participatory platforms. Such offer has been, however, combined with forms of control typical of organised parties, intended to strengthen the top of the organisation rather than producing an effective transfer of power to the base (Mosca and Vaccari 2017).

Despite continuous efforts to innovate online participatory opportunities, users have massively abandoned M5S' democratic experiments over time because of dissatisfaction with their outcomes (Mosca 2017). The very architecture and technological affordances of Rousseau—the online platform used to engage party supporters—deny debate, discussion and deliberation among users while locating voting procedures at the core of participatory processes. Hence, instead of working as a deliberative instrument for the collective elaboration of political action, the Internet merely represents a decisional mechanism generally ratifying M5S' leader decisions (Mosca 2017).

Spain: From Digital-Enabled Movements to Podemos

The *Indignados* or the 15M (15th of May Movement) helped spreading the Arab Spring to other Occupy movements of the world in 2011 (Romanos 2013) and received more widespread, cross-sectional and lasting public support in comparative perspective. Most Occupies protested against austerity policies but Spanish activists also highlighted the institutional crisis of the Transition. The 15M expressed a new consensus in the public opinion that questioned a policy style avoiding conflict and a hierarchical control of the political agenda based on the 1978 Constitution. The *Indignados* also derived into the most successful left oriented connective party. Moreover, Podemos “represents an interesting example of this persistent tension between central leadership and connective organisation, resulting in splits in party leadership and the defection of some of its movement base” (Bennett, Segerberg, and Knüpfer 2017, 3).

The 15M was widely supported by the population. Sampedro and Lobera (2014) analysed all polls of the leading newspaper *El País*. Although being a paper editorially confronted to the *Indignados*, data analysis shows an overwhelming consensus with the movement's basic message. Public support ranged from 81 per cent at the outset to 68 per cent a few days before the first anniversary. The support for the 15M's arguments was even higher: between 7 and 8 out of every 10 Spaniards basically agreed with its demands. Digital media spread the 15M in every Spanish sociodemographic group displaying a high degree of cross-sectionalism.

The continuity of cross-sectionalism along time was another distinctive trait of the 15M. When called on to *Rodear el Congreso* (Surround the Congress of Deputies in

Madrid) on 25 September 2012, activists received similar support as the 15M, although the media and bipartisan (*Partido Popular*—PP—and *Partido Socialista Obrero Español*—PSOE) master frame was that they were “anti-democratic,” “radical” and “violent” (Micó and Casero-Ripollés 2014).

Massive *in-situ* demonstrations were the result of previous mobilisations. Social movements (self-) excluded from official debate had previously used digital technologies as a resource. Digital media functioned as an alternative public arena to coordinate and articulate online multitudes by challenging the political agenda shaped by mainstream media and bipartisan alternation in power. Digital media acquired centrality by interfering in the electoral processes and finally breaking the bipartisan party system (see Table 2).

In 2003, “*Nunca Más*” mobilised more than 100,000 volunteers who called themselves using the Internet and SMS to clean the Galician coast after an oil spill aggravated by the Spanish Government. The overlapping “*No a la Guerra*” campaign gave voice to the 90 per cent of surveyed citizens opposing the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Public opinion figures and social mobilisations were only comparable to those of Italy out-reaching the social-democrat and communist parties (Sampedro 2005).

After the 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid (almost 200 deaths and 2000 injured), the governing PP blamed the armed Basque separatist group ETA despite all evidence pointing to Al Qaeda. The bombings took place on March 11, three days before general elections were held. The “online connective action” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012) of previous environmental and pacifist mobilisations crystallised in the offline “collective action” of the 13M “*Pásalo*” (Pass On) when protesters surrounded the PP headquarters demanding “the truth before voting” all over the country. In Madrid 20,000 marched to the Puerta

TABLE 2
Spanish digital-based mobilisations (2003–2015)

Year	Name	Description	Demands
2003–2004	<i>“Nunca Más”</i>	(“Never Again,” in Galician)	Social mobilisation in response to the sinking of an oil tanker that caused an environmental disaster in the coastal region of Galicia
2003–2004	<i>“No a la Guerra”</i>	(“No to the War”)	Massive protests against Spanish participation in the war in Iraq and Afghanistan
2004	13M. “ <i>Pásalo</i> ”	(March 13th—Pass on)	SMS-based mobilisation against the government’s attempt to distract from the Jihadist authorship of terrorist attacks in Madrid
2006	<i>“V de Vivienda”</i>	(“H for Housing”)	Protests supporting social housing policies, against corruption and environmental degradation due to real estate speculation and bubble
2011	15M	(May 15th)	Protests against the government’s austerity policies and cartelised party system
2014–2015	Podemos and Ciudadanos	(“We can,” “Citizens–Party of the Citizenry”)	New parties win parliamentary representation and transform the bipartisan system into a multiparty one

Source: Sampedro and Martínez-Anivad, [forthcoming](#).

del Sol, which would become the main site of the 15M in 2011. This SMS and Internet-based mobilisation in the reflection day revealed the obsolescence of the Spanish political-information system. Digital media consumption increased 275 per cent. While viewers abandoned the public television (controlled by the government), the number of visitors to alternative political websites skyrocketed. Text message traffic raised 20 per cent and 40 per cent on the voting day (Sampedro 2005).

Since 2004, digital media became a resource to challenge the political agenda with structural demands that questioned economic orthodoxy, institutional corruption, environmental degradation and the bipartisan control of state and local administrations. All these issues merged together when social activists denounced the real estate bubble and, finally, austerity policies.

Emerging in 2009 out of the “V de Vivienda” movement (H for Housing—2006, explicitly inspired by the 13M), the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) became the most salient grassroots organisation of the 15M. It focused in fighting evictions and used digital tools intensively. Finally, prominent figures of this movement (such as Ada Colau, mayor of Barcelona since 2016) became leaders of new parties (“Barcelona en Comú”) who later gained elections at the local level. Together with Podemos (but also with internal fractures and leadership), these new parties managed to govern some relevant federal administrations.

The 15M resulted from the accumulation of previous digital-based mobilisations and a collective learning process of how to combine offline and online protests. Mobilisation was fostered by social and political actors excluded from official politics but relying on digital media. Half of the Indignados protesters and one in three young people aged 15–18 years found out about mobilisations via alternative online media and social networks.

First voters and the youngest cohorts of the electorate supported the new parties that co-opted their demands into their electoral programmes. Podemos claimed to be the 15M heir, adopted its slogans and achieved four seats in the European parliament elections of 2014 besides a significant representation in the regional parliaments. It was the third most voted party and threatened the social democrats’ hegemony of the Left after the 2016 general elections. Podemos also co-governed in 7 out of 10 regional administrations and in the main Spanish municipalities. Bipartisan monopoly was broken with the exception of national parliament and government.

Podemos opened its decision-making, and even the choice of its leaderships, to digital participation (Casero-Ripollés, Feenstra, and Tormey 2016). Applications also enabled voters to discuss electoral programmes. Podemos hegemonises the social networks, whatever measure is considered. However, recent events point to a process of digital verticalisation as the alleged deliberative use of digital media came to be plebiscitary. Besides, Twitter accounts of confronted leaders conform to a more centralised architecture of an increasingly hierarchical and factionalised organisation. These tensions were present at the origins of Podemos but became more evident after the party displaced the deliberative and mobilisation potentials of digital media for conventional electoral strategies.

Conclusion

Both in Italy and Spain, digital media were effective at playing a disruptive role as social movements questioned the official agenda and paved the path for new parties that finally challenged the dynamic of party systems. “Connective action” was first transformed into collective action mobilising people in the streets, and in turn social protest

boosted connective parties. “Personal action framing” travelled faster as personal narratives and images spread across social networks (Bennett and Segerberg 2012) mobilising thousands of people first in the streets and finally to the ballots backing new partisan organisations (Mosca and Quaranta 2017).

The alternation of traditional parties in power (established since the late seventies in Spain and since the beginning of the nineties in Italy) was seriously affected. In this process, the main parties lost millions of votes but still control the national executive, deeply conditioning local governments administered by the new parties. In the Mediterranean tradition of political parallelism between politics and the press (Hallin and Mancini 2004) the existing institutional framework was fiercely defended by the mainstream media (Sampedro, López-Ferrández, and Carretero, *forthcoming*). Thus, the potential of digital technologies to induce radical changes remain questioned, moreover when traditional parties and mainstream media have shown enough abilities to counter the digital strategies of their new competitors.

Despite being ideologically different, both Podemos and the M5S borrowed online strategies and innovations from social movements and brought effectively digital media into party politics. Nonetheless, their electoral strategies resembled that of “controlled interactivity” (Stromer-Galley 2014) or “managed interactivity” (Kreiss 2012) of traditional parties in other nations where the Internet was used to keep citizens’ participation at the margins of the political process. As stressed by Stromer-Galley (2014, 6) “When one looks closely at the practices ... it becomes evident that such rhetoric is largely symbolic and that genuine dialogue and interaction with supporters was generally absent.”

Both the M5S and Podemos succeeded in capitalising electorally the citizens’ struggles of the last decade and in pioneering technology-enabled electoral organisations. Technological reductionism has been more radical in the M5S case that basically lacks intermediary bodies between the leader and the grassroots while digital platforms play an important role within Podemos being, however, more constrained by the presence of physical bodies and face-to-face assemblies (della Porta et al. 2017).

The emergence and success of connective parties resulted from the synergies between traditional media (TV) and digital networks in the “hybrid media system” (Chadwick 2013). Podemos’ leader, Pablo Iglesias, became a public figure whose appearances on television went viral online. Media visibility was later transformed into partisan leadership (Sampedro 2015). In Italy, a similar process took place: Grillo is a showman, a television product and an expert of its codes while Casaleggio—businessman and owner of *Casaleggio e Associati*, a consulting firm specialising in web strategies and managing Grillo’s blog—had great skills in the fields of information technologies and marketing. Thanks to this double expertise, the two leaders were able to create a particularly effective triangulation between the Internet, the squares and traditional media. The main difference between the two cases seems to be that Iglesias in his beginning lacked Grillo’s TV symbolic capital and the technical expertise (and resources) of Casaleggio but displayed political knowledge gained through his direct participation in social movements.

In both cases, however, despite significant differences, online platforms have been used for plebiscitary decisions confirming and strengthening the role of the leader at the expenses of minorities and challenging views (marginalised in the case of Podemos and always expunged in the case of the M5S). In fact, “[i]ronically, the multi-layered, flexible organisation of the connective party can in practice render the role of citizen input unclear

... The resulting fuzziness may enhance the role of the party leader instead of the grass-roots" (Bennett, Segerberg, and Knüpfer 2017, 17).

Beyond rhetorical reference to the levelling and equalising role of digital media, we showed how digital platforms have been used to support, ratify and confirm leaders' views over potential internal challengers. Instrumental uses of digital media for electoral purposes have increasingly denied the promises of direct democracy and horizontal participation which generated media attention and popular support in the early stages of the emergence of the new parties.

Our longitudinal perspective considers event-centred research in historical context, encompassing both social and partisan uses of digital media running in parallel. If applied to other national cases, comparative designs might help to qualify the role of digital media in innovating partisan formations and test if they gain prominence in the hybrid media system, relevance in the electoral arena and enable genuine forms of interactivity.

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